



The
Light

Fantastic

SARAH COMBS

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APRIL IN DELAWARE

(9:43 AM EDT)

I was born on April 19, 1995, at 10:07 in the morning eastern daylight time. Minutes before, one time zone to the west, a man named Timothy McVeigh was busy sending a bomb through the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, a metropolis long known for its livestock and vibrant arts community, but now forever haunted by the events of my birthday morning. What was I doing that morning, over on the East Coast? Howling, probably. Opening the slits of my newborn eyes to the startling brilliance of the NICU lights angled over my bassinets. I had arrived early, was impossibly tiny; my lungs were weak and underdeveloped, and it was feared that I wouldn't survive.

I did, though. Survive.

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My mother likes to say I was a miracle; that my birth and survival were proof of hope and light on an otherwise dark day for America. I was born in the exact middle of what she called a “flashbulb moment”—that is, people remember where they were or what they were doing when they first heard about what was happening in Oklahoma City: how 168 innocent people had died. Nineteen of those people were infants and young children. Three of them were women pregnant with babies who might have grown into graduates of the class of 2013.

You have a flashbulb moment like that, right? We all do. Chasing Lincoln Evans on the playground, Lincoln Evans with Pokémon on his shirt, racing him to the biggest swing, reaching it first, sailing to the tops of the trees, purple sneakers almost brushing the leaves, then leaping to the ground before the swing stops all the way, caught like that in midair, *flash*, and there’s the moment: the sky a perfect blue, only something must be wrong wrong wrong because the first-grade teacher is suddenly crying.

On that Tuesday, September 11, 2001: Miss Rosen’s cry lifted up to that dream-blue sky just as Lincoln Evans, a week away from turning seven, my next-door-but-one neighbor for all of my days since that first one under the heat lamps in the NICU, grabbed my hand, sweaty and still burning with swing-set rust, and kissed me, not on my mouth but, weirdly, on my closed eye. My very first kiss: less like a kiss than an accident of awkwardness and proximity. I

wasn't sure it had really happened, just like later—huddled on the couch with my sister in front of the TV, the towers collapsing like stacks of cards over and over again, a replay we couldn't bear to watch but strangely couldn't get enough of—I wasn't really sure any of that day had happened, either.

But it had.

Two days later, I learned that Lincoln Evans's father—in New York on business, a flukish, freakish accident of fate—had been on the ninety-eighth floor of Tower One when it was hit.

Two months later, Lincoln Evans moved away.

Just before he left, Lincoln showed up at my house with his U.S. quarter collection. The quarters were in a glass jar, and Lincoln gave it a musical shake as he explained that he had been collecting the quarters with his dad, that it was something they did together. Lincoln thought it was cool that the Delaware quarter came first, just how our state was the first to join the Union.

"Here," he said, thrusting the jar at me. He seemed in a big rush, like if he didn't hurry up, he might change his mind. "You keep it. It should stay in Delaware."

I stared at the quarters. *Thank you* seemed the wrong thing to say, but I said it anyway.

"I've got Kentucky now, so that makes all fifteen," Lincoln said. "Look for Tennessee in January, okay?"

Then he smiled at me, ran back to the Ryder van packed

full of his whole life, climbed in, and left for wherever it was his mom's parents lived, wherever their new beginning would begin.

Wednesday's child is full of woe.

I was my mother's flashbulb moment on that Wednesday morning in April of 1995. It's how I got my name: April Hope Donovan. My lungs turned out fine, just like the rest of this body, a body that maybe isn't perfect but can get the job done—I have swimming medals to prove it. I have a blush-worthy story about the back of Drew Bennett's car, and my weirdly limber body (Where'd I get it? Nobody knows) plays a starring role. Somehow I managed to escape all the things my parents worried about when I was born—cystic fibrosis, asthma, brain damage, and worse—but it wouldn't have occurred to any parent to worry about the weird thing I do have. My—what, exactly? condition? phenomenon?—isn't going to kill me. Some people might even call it a blessing, but I'm here to tell you: remembering all the days of your life—or most of them, anyway, starting with purple shoes against a blue sky, a first-ever kiss on the eye—with flashbulb-moment clarity isn't always a blessing.

Sometimes (lots of times) it's a curse.

Take now, for instance. Today. It's April again, a Friday, and my country is still reeling from the bombings that happened at the Boston Marathon four days ago—on Patriots' Day, a holiday, freedom and justice for all. But how's that old saying go? You can count on only two things in this world: death and taxes. Benjamin Franklin said that. Boston-born

Ben Franklin, that's who. On Monday—April 15—that was hellishly true.

It feels wrong that we should even be in school today, while the world is holding its breath like this. Beautiful Boston has been robbed of her heart, and the thief is still on the loose, and there's a manhunt raging across a city now closed for business, effective immediately, out like a light, the end. There's a dark piece of flashbulb history happening in our midst right this actual second, but here we are. Never mind that thing that happened four days ago, class! Business as usual, so let's turn our attention to something that happened in 19-freaking-36.

It's my eighteenth birthday.

It's also really, unbearably hot in Ms. Standish's American history class. There's a test on Roosevelt's New Deal, and if you think for one second that my brilliant memory can dredge up any of the names and dates and acts and coalitions I tried to cram into my head before school this morning, then you're wrong. Way. Rote memorization has nothing to do with how my whacked-out mind works. It works more like a bizarre game of connect-the-dots, where the dots are landmarks in my personal autobiography, and the lines are threads made of . . . what? Coincidences. Mysteries. I don't even know. I just know it's weird to have a brain that plays dot-to-dot with Boston and Ben Franklin and April 15 and taxes and killing people.

The stuff on Ms. Standish's test—I don't know it, because I didn't study, which means I didn't take the time

to ingest the reading and to connect the lines and dots as they surface, unbidden, on the page. I've got nothing, so I'm as likely to fail as the next regular person who spent last night watching the news out of Boston instead of preparing in whatever way regular people prepare for exams. This is the kind of thing that frustrates my parents: Why can't I apply myself? Make this memory thing work in my academic favor? By which they mean: You've got a photographic memory, right, so what's with all the C-minuses in math and physics? You see the material once and it's there in your brain forever, right? To which—ugh—I just want to scream. But I try (and fail every time) to explain: No, no, photographic memory is a different thing altogether, that's not how it works—"it" being *hyperthymesia*, a word that makes it sound like there's something wrong with my glands. My glands are fine. My capacity for personal memory, on the other hand, is accidentally on steroids. Sorry, Roosevelt and your New Deal: Even if I had conjured my lines and my dots, I wouldn't be able to recall all your details at the moment, because at the moment I'm in the middle of my usual split-screen life, which looks something like this:

Left Side of the Screen: The Present

- Ms. Standish is absentmindedly scratching her scalp with the capped end of her pen. Her glasses are hanging around her neck on a beaded chain.
- Ben Higgins's left leg is jiggling nonstop; it's his typical test-taking MO.

- Izzy Goff just finished her test, first as always. She exhales laboriously and flips her blue book over with a noisy slap, daring us all to catch up with her, to even *try* to mar her perfect grade point average and her inevitable role as valedictorian. She has been doing this for twelve years, and the only person likely to catch her is Pal Gakhar. Where is Pal? He needs to get in here and school Izzy Goff.
- Drew Bennett, he of the Backseat Incident, is also notably absent, but so is a fourth of the class; it is, after all, Senior Skip Day. Ms. Standish knows this, of course. Hence the test on the New Deal.

*Right Side of the Screen: The Past, or Random
Dot-to-Dots Associated with It*

It's high April, so I'm checking everybody out, making sure nobody in American History looks in the mood to lose it and open fire in the cafeteria. I get wary of this sort of thing during the month of April, because my involuntary little *condition* makes sure it is not lost on me that life is a series of checks and balances, and the following things happened on the following days:

- April 14, 1865 (Good Friday, also not lost on me): Abraham Lincoln is assassinated at Ford's Theatre, Washington, D.C. Just before he shot the president, John Wilkes Booth was heard to cry *sic semper tyrannis* ("thus always to tyrants"—but dude, who is the tyrant here?), which, in addition to being the

motto of the Commonwealth of Virginia, is the exact thing that the tyrant Brutus is said to have shouted before assassinating Julius Caesar on the Ides of March, 44 BCE.

- April 4, 1968: Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.
- April 19, 1993: FBI sets fire to cult leader David Koresh's ranch in Waco, Texas; Timothy McVeigh's attack in Oklahoma City on the day of my birth two years later was apparently designed as a nod to this freak show. And while we're connecting dots: on that day, McVeigh was wearing a shirt emblazoned with the words SIC SEMPER TYRANNIS.
- April 20, 1999: Columbine High School massacre, Littleton, Colorado. I was four years and one day old. It happened fourteen years ago tomorrow but seems, somehow, in the back of my mind, always to be happening still.
- April 16, 2007: shooting rampage at Virginia Tech University, Blacksburg, Commonwealth of Virginia, home of (*connect the dots, connect the dots*) a state motto that has proved itself to be completely devoid of good karma and needs to be changed, like, yesterday. Or fourteen years ago. Or eighteen. Or way back in 1865, as soon as it escaped the twisted lips of John Wilkes Booth.

And so on and so forth. Do you even want me to go on? I could go on for days but won't, because I'm sure you've seen pictures of what Boston looks like today: it is silent and still as a graveyard, and I'm not going to think about it. I can't think about it for another second, or I'll break apart and cry. April Is the Cruellest Month, April Is the Weirdest Girl. Welcome to my world! Just be sure not to do anything embarrassing or regrettable in my presence, because chances are I will remember it. I will connect that dot with you and with this ordinary day for the rest of *ever*, whether I want to remember it or not. Your embarrassing incident and the details associated with it will occupy space in my brain that should be reserved for things like the locker combination I can't remember to save my life, or the quadratic formula, or where I might have put my stupid keys, lost for the thousandth time this week.

Blessing, you say?

Ha.

Ask me about my own regrettable moments. The way things from years ago simmer daily at the edges of my consciousness. It's like being haunted, and here is what the ghosts like to whisper in my ear: *Checks and balances, April Donovan. Checks and balances, checks and balances, checks and balances*. Sometime when you've got a couple of spare hours or days, you should pull up a chair and ask me about that.

Meanwhile: back to Lincoln Evans, he of the September 11 Pokémon shirt and inexplicable eye kiss, and

then the state quarters and the Ryder moving van, circa the most heartbreaking day of November 2001. In my memory, the van carrying Lincoln away is yellow. It was first grade, the year the written word exploded for me and everywhere there were words I could suddenly read: R-y-d-e-r spelled out on what my memory insists was a yellow van—but that can't be, because (*Fun fact! Connect the dots!*) Ryder vans stopped being yellow after Timothy McVeigh used one to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995. After that, Ryder vans were red and white.

How do I know these things? Which parts do I actually know? What color is the truth? It is so hard to say.

What I can say is that I haven't seen Lincoln Evans since that Black Friday when he moved away, but for years after he left, I thought of him often—or at least every time I found a new quarter to add to his collection. I got kind of obsessed with collecting the quarters, and at some point my mother bought me a display—this stiff cardboard map of the United States, complete with little circular cutouts where you stick the quarters in. Just like Lincoln promised, Tennessee came next, then Ohio and Louisiana. The Hawaii quarter came very last, and by that time I was in eighth grade and so excited about completing Lincoln's collection that I walked to the bank on the day of the quarter's release: Monday, November 3, 2008. The following day, Hawaiian-born Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. The election felt huge and important and

unforgettable, and some part of me felt moved to look up Lincoln Evans, to find him and say, hey, I've got all the quarters, and, hey, look at this world we're living in now, this new president, all this hope. What does life look like for you, Lincoln Evans?

I didn't look him up, though. The urge to find him came and went, and after all fifty quarters were pressed into my cardboard map, I didn't think much about Lincoln Evans at all. The map is in our attic now, and I haven't thought of Lincoln in forever. Which is why it's strange and a little unsettling that he showed up in my dream last night.

Dreaming. It's my absolute favorite activity, hands down. When I'm asleep, dream-events unfold in beautiful, linear, start-to-finish fashion. My dreams get straight to the point; there are no dots to connect, none of that infuriating split-screen craziness that plagues my waking life. When I'm dreaming, I'm wholly, vividly there. Last night, *there* was up in the boughs of some huge tree, which I had climbed all the way to the top, where Lincoln Evans was waiting for me in this shoddily fashioned wooden tree house that looked to be the handiwork of somebody's well-meaning dad.

Dream-Lincoln wasn't seven, how my waking self remembers him. He looked eighteen like me, and he was grinning this sneaky, delicious, I-have-a-secret grin, and I recognized him right away. It was like he'd been in that tree waiting for me forever.

"What took you so long?" dream-Lincoln inquired,

grinning. He flipped a shiny quarter in the air and slapped it on the back of his palm: hedging some bet, revealing some secret fortune.

Dream-me was too happy and surprised to see him to say or do anything else, so dream-me just smiled and shrugged.

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

(8:43 AM CDT)

“Mr. Evans, are you with us?”

Ms. Heslip looks at me pointedly. A little desperately, actually, which makes me feel bad. I’ve had a lot of teachers but never one like this. Ms. Heslip knows her stuff, for one thing. For another thing, she reminds me of . . . I don’t know. Somebody’s mom, or something.

“Sure,” I say. Has Ms. Heslip asked me a question? If she has, I’ve already forgotten what it is. Under her accusatory gaze (not mad but disappointed, which is worse—did she learn that stare from *my* mom?), I can feel the tips of my ears going warm. I shift my arm to cover my notebook, on which I’ve just sketched a not-bad rendering of the back of Laura Echols’s head. Laura’s got this great hair: thick, long, smells like apples. Today she’s got it braided so it looks like a fish bone winding down her back. Adds to her mermaid

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appeal. Laura's the kind of girl you can imagine banked on a rock in the middle of the ocean somewhere, dazzling woe-begone sailors with her siren song.

Laura's out of my league, is what I'm saying, and she knows it.

She knows it as she turns in her seat and hooks me with her ice-blue stare. "Page ninety-one," she whispers.

I open my copy of *The Glass Menagerie* and flip to page ninety-one, where the words bob around meaninglessly on the page. I look to Laura for further direction, but she shrugs and turns back around.

Ms. Heslip crosses her arms across her chest. Really. She and my mom could be best friends. The I-am-disappointed-in-you twins, frowning and hoping and waiting.

"We're waiting." Ms. Heslip's words, her attitude, seem to mirror the line that rises to the surface of the page in front of me: *What is the matter with you, you silly thing?*

Good question. Who knows?

By now Ms. Heslip has registered that I'm not going to be able to answer whatever question she's asked, that I haven't done the reading, that I, like so many students before me, have failed her. At least I'm here, though. More than half the class is gone.

"Where *is* everyone?" Ms. Heslip asks, banging a piece of chalk into the little trough beneath the board. Ms. Heslip, man, still using the old-school chalk. She dusts her hands on her dark skirt; now it looks like she's been groped by a ghost. "Does anybody know?"

Laura acts like she's looking around the room, as if to take an inventory, but her eyes land on me for a second. Laura Echols, who because of the luck of the alphabet sits in front of me in English. Laura Echols, who because of her name got to read aloud the role of Laura Wingfield from the play. Laura Laura Laura.

"Um, it's Senior Skip Day?" someone ventures.

Ms. Heslip narrows her eyes and tilts her head to the side, like maybe she didn't quite catch that. "What?"

"Yeah, four-twenty," offers Bruce Franklin, who doesn't look up from the scab he's picking on his knee. Gross.

Ms. Heslip shakes her head, a quick snap of disbelief. "Isn't today the nineteenth?"

Bruce shrugs. "Guess you gotta observe on Friday if four-twenty's on the weekend, yo."

"Ah," she says. "*Guess* I didn't get that memo."

Ms. Heslip glares at us for what feels like a full minute. In that minute, I come close to saying something. What to say, though? *Stop looking at me like that. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Even though I didn't do my paper for The Odyssey, I want you to know that I read the whole thing. I loved it, and I think about it all the time. Also there's chalk all over your skirt and it's embarrassing and makes me feel sad for you. You and my mom, the sad twins. Please just go be sad at someone else for just five minutes and leave me alone.*

Finally, Ms. Heslip sweeps an arm in the direction of the door. "Well. What are you waiting for? Let's not waste one another's time."

Bruce is the first to get up. He's got this apologetic grin on his face as he lopes to the door. One by one, caught somewhere between ashamed and thrilled, not really sure what just happened, we get up and start following Bruce.

"Mr. Evans," Ms. Heslip says, blocking my exit with her voice.

I turn around. *Who, me?*

"Let me remind you that if you want to graduate, you have to pass this class."

I smile and nod and turn again toward the door.

"And Mr. Evans?"

I can't even look at her. I've heard this one so many times over the past twelve years that I can guess at what will come next, always some variation on the same theme.

"You're way too smart to fail."

Laura Echols is in the hall, pretending not to wait for me. She's got her braid wrapped around her fist: expert mermaid nonchalance. Her siren song buzzes lightly in my ears as I walk past.

"Where are you going?" Laura calls. I'm almost to the door that leads out to the parking lot, and the chances that Vassar-bound Laura will follow me are slim to none.

"I'm going to the movies," I call over my shoulder. That much I remember from today's read-aloud in Ms. Heslip's class: Bruce Franklin as Tom Wingfield, sounding bored.

The sunlight seems cranked up, dazzled by its own self. It glints like something mean on the rows of cars in the

student lot. So this is what the middle of the morning on a Friday looks like: white-bright, possibility-filled. I'm full of the urge to go somewhere, but don't know where to go. People are congregating in their cars, listening to music or sneaking a smoke before the vice principal or whoever comes out to round everybody up.

The luxury and ridiculousness of it kills me. If I had a car, I'd be halfway to California by now.

A few yards ahead of me, a white Lexus chirps and blinks, magically awake and unlocked. "Get in," Laura Echols says, brushing past. She is embarrassed of this car in the same way she's embarrassed of her beauty. It's a burden she didn't ask for, an extravagance she doesn't think she deserves.

I do what she says and get in.

Laura climbs in beside me and tosses her purse in my lap. She does a quick scan of the lot, places an arm across the back of my seat, cranes her swan-neck around, and backs out of the parking space. Then she spins the wheel in a graceful arc and gets us out of there, just like that.

When Laura Echols makes up her mind to do something, she doesn't mess around.

APRIL IN THE MORNING

(10:47 AM EDT: FIRST LUNCH)

Gina is waving at me from our table in the cafeteria. She's wearing a sparkly headband that says HAPPY NEW YEAR 2013. Sitting in front of her is a white bakery box with who-knows-what inside. Gina loves surprises almost as much as she loves other people's birthdays. I consider bolting to avoid imminent embarrassment, but I'm really happy to see Gina. One of the things I've loved best about her since practically birth is that she makes ordinary stuff—limp lunch in the cafeteria, the dull ride to school—seem novel and thrilling. As I approach our table, she's reaching out to me for a hug, launching into her trademark birthday serenade, à la the Sugarcubes.

“Love the headband,” I say.

“I know, right? I couldn't decide between this and a graduation cap.”

“ “ “

Gina likes to celebrate one occasion with random paraphernalia pertaining to another. It's this thing she does to make me and Gavin laugh, and it's never not hilarious.

"Where's Gavin?" I ask. Gina, April, and Gavin: we're a trifecta, semi-affectionately known around these parts as GAG, as in *We Make Other People*.

Gina sighs. "He skipped this morning, but *swore* he'd be here at lunch to help celebrate. Open your present!"

I hesitate. This innocuous-looking box could contain anything. The side of my mind devoted to bygones does a quick movie-reel shuffle of Scenes from Birthdays Past. Gina tries to outdo herself every year, which explains why last year on this date, Gavin and I were driving into Wilmington in search of treasure buried near the shore of Brandywine Creek. The treasure was supposed to be tickets to see the Sky Drops on the following Saturday, but Gina couldn't remember where she'd buried the tickets and all was lost.

"It's the thought that counts," Gina announces, mind reading. "Just *open* it."

Inside the box is a huge wad of tissue paper—"That's not the present," Gina cuts in—underneath which is another cardboard box. Gina's into the Russian-doll method of gift presentation, but then she gets all impatient if you don't open fast enough. The second cardboard box contains a single red-velvet cupcake—my favorite, slathered in a mountain of cream-cheese icing—with a little flag stuck in it. Printed on the flag in Gina's loopy script is a name I don't

recognize and a phone number, complete with mystery area code.

“Who’s Dr. Angel?” I ask. First I imagine someone with wings, smoking a pipe: Professor Plum in the Billiards Room of Heaven with the Lead Pipe. Or maybe it’s code for the magician Gina’s obsessed with. As soon as she turned eighteen, Gina wasted no time in getting a tattoo like his—a pair of wings with the word *believe* scrawled between them. Talk about Mindfreak: Gina’s mom almost died. This all happened on January 21 of this year—a Monday, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which means there was no school. It was also the president’s second inauguration day. The First Lady held the Bible in her purple-gloved hands.

“This guy’s a doctor,” Gina explains. “Out in California. At some university? He studies people like you, like, with your freaky memory. April. Listen. There are only like twenty-one documented cases in the whole world. You could be number twenty-two! You could be famous and maybe even be on *Ellen*. I could be your wingwoman. The requisite wacky friend.”

This is vintage Gina. She’s always looking for a way to get famous, or famous-by-proxy. She was actually the one who started noticing that my memory seemed super-charged: *What’d I wear last Thursday?* she’d quiz me. *What’s the name of that skinny kid who only went to first grade with us and then moved away after his dad died? Remember that kid?* She’d ask me stuff like that.

“There’s a name for what you have,” says Gina. “It’s

a bunch of letters, only I forget what they stand for. Mindfreak memory, basically. It's an actual thing."

This information is, of course, not new to me. I first heard about HSAM (or Highly Superior Autobiographical Memory, which has apparently replaced the outdated, bad-gland-sounding hyperthymesia) on TV—an ordinary Thursday, suffering from post-swim-practice malaise, eating Oreos one after the other out of sheer boredom, too tired to start my homework or even think about it—flipping listlessly through channels when I caught a slice of this actress talking about how she could remember what every day of her life looked like, starting at age twelve. She described the split-screen feeling and everything. She talked about how, in her memories, she was always inside her own body, looking out. Hearing her put words to what happens daily in my head was scary; tiny threads of ice went pulling at my spine, and I actually looked around the room, eerily convinced I was being watched, or that a ghost had suddenly entered through the chimney. As I listened to the actress talk, realization accumulated in my stomach. Without even thinking, I started walking toward the television, as if the woman inside were my doppelganger, recently arrived from the moon and wearing all my secrets on her skin.

The thought of calling the doctor in California was scary: Obviously this wasn't just some adorable, isolated tic I had. What if there was something badly wrong with my brain?

Then again, maybe this Dr. Angel could swoop in, be

my eponymous guardian, and save me. Maybe he could turn the split-screen off, give me a prescription for some of that elusive Eternal Sunshine.

“Gina,” I say. “Only you.”

“You love me,” Gina says. “You gotta call this guy.”

I do.

And maybe I will.

LINCOLN, NAVIGATOR

(9:47 AM CDT)

The drive-in looks different in the daylight. At night, the place is mysterious, ghostly, haunted-feeling in the best possible way. By day, it just looks sad. Forgotten, which it is. The screen is ripped in places; behind it, planks of wooden backing reveal themselves like bones. A lone paper cup skitters across the dusty ground, where monitors rise from patches of weeds. They look like half-finished grave markers, which I guess they are: *Here Lies Cool Hand Luke*. *RIP*, North by Northwest.

“What are we watching?” Laura asks.

Laura Echols is a girl of many secrets. One is that, in the only-child household in which she grew up, TV (along with computers, cell phones, alcohol, and half of all things

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normal in this world) was discouraged. So Laura came to movies late, and movies are how we accidentally became friends.

Back in the fall, when Ms. Heslip was introducing us to Keats and Shelley and Tennyson, she made us watch *Dead Poets Society* in class. We watched it in parts over the course of three days. On the third day, when it was over and Ms. Heslip flicked the lights back on (back to reality, always so hard for me), I noticed that Laura had sunk so low in her chair that she was close to sliding off. I couldn't see her face, but there was a tremor in her shoulders. Still caught in the spell of the movie, thinking stupidly *that could be me*, I reached out to touch her, but she was up and out the door before my fingers could dare. Moments later the bell rang, breaking what was left of the spell. Out in the hall—sea of people flowing around her in all directions—Laura stood tall and perfectly still, hugging her books to her chest, staring out at something I couldn't see. When I approached her, she didn't look at me until I spoke, and even then it was like her awareness of my voice—of anything in the actual world—was operating on some kind of delay. It was a feeling I understood.

"You mean you've never seen it before?" I asked her then. Laura shook her head no.

Well. Movies, man. They are my thing.

After that, I started coming to school with movies for Laura Echols. Every day a different DVD from my prized (epic, canonized, do not mess with it) collection. Laura

would watch one every night and return it the day after, not saying a thing, just looking starved for the next. Exactly like a siren, all alone on her rock.

After the poets, that was when we did *The Odyssey*. Ms. Heslip might be the only teacher in all the schools, all the towns, who has ever taught me anything I've actually wanted — *needed*, feels like — to know.

Maybe I shouldn't have walked out of her class.

It's too late to go back now, though. I'm already on the rock.

"What are we watching?" Laura repeats. She's drinking bourbon from a silver flask.

Another of Laura Echols's secrets is that she keeps a flask hidden in the glove compartment of her car. The flask is engraved with her late alcoholic grandfather's initials, and it is the real deal. Laura hated her grandfather. The flask is a shiny piece of irony; Laura drinks from it to spite the old man.

The drinking is a secret, too, and so am I.

It's a little bit thrilling, to be one of Laura Echols's secrets.

"Hitchcock?" I ask.

Laura shakes her head, wincing against the bourbon. "I'm not in the right mood. I want something quieter. And, like, outdoorsy."

I don't know when we started going to the drive-in. It just sort of happened, and this is a game we play, watching imaginary movies on what's left of the old screen. We talk

a lot about the exact sort of *feeling* we want to get from our moviegoing experience, and then we try to pick a flick to match the feeling. It's tricky business, hard to get just right.

"Bildungsroman," I say, hoping Laura will be impressed that I've remembered and employed one of Ms. Heslip's literary terms.

"Sorrow, but not *all* sorrow," Laura says, staring straight ahead. If she's impressed, she doesn't show it.

She passes me the flask, but I shake my head. I don't like bourbon unless I'm tasting it on Laura's mouth, in which case it is delicious and dangerously addictive. I scan her face for signs that she might be in the mood to kiss me today. It's not a thing I can bank on, and the ache of not knowing makes me feel drunker than the bourbon ever could.

I keep my eyes on what remains of the screen. "*Stand by Me.*"

Laura considers this. Takes another swig. "Mmm. Maybe. But maybe *Moonrise Kingdom?*"

"We'll flip for it," I say, rummaging in my pocket for a coin. "Tails is *Stand by Me.*" I thumb a quarter into the air and slap it on the back of my hand. It lands Rhode Island—side up, an image of a sailboat and a bridge. It's this built-in instinct, the way I check quarters every time. It's like I can't *not* do it. My dad, touching base. I wonder what he thinks of Laura Echols—I mean of me with her in this car right now, if he can see us. I wonder too if this girl I used to know—this girl April, my old neighbor and the first girl I ever had a crush on, the last girl who ever knew my

dad—kept up with the quarters. If maybe she's got Rhode Island somewhere.

"Tails," I say. "Pick a scene."

Laura thinks it over. "The part with the deer," she says.

We sit back and stare at the screen, and it's all there: deer, railroad tracks, woods. Wide-eyed boy, locked in this private moment, this secret he will keep from the rest of the world.

We have perfected the art.

I look over at Laura, and she closes her eyes. Beneath her lashes, tears shimmer. I have this urge to kiss her on the eye, and I'm reminded again of April from first grade, April who had my quarters. I can see her face as clear as anything, but I can't remember her last name to save my life. It's on the tip of my tongue but gets lost when Laura Echols leans over and kisses me, stealing it right out of my mouth.

GAVIN IN HIS REALM

(10:47 AM EDT)

The scene under the bleachers is out of control. Since when is there a *crowd* under the bleachers? Okay, so it's just two people, looks like from here, but still. Some kind of crazy #injustice, is what it is.

I've started to think in hashtags, #truestorybitch.

Man I do not like when my plans go awry. Under the bleachers is a ritual, like a necessary starting point of the day. Now, granted, I usually start my day way earlier than this, but you better believe that skip day means beauty sleep, bitches. I'd still be in dreamland, but Gina said I had to come for cupcakes, which, okay, cupcakes, but still! I require my morning time under the bleachers. It's where I think and ponder and whatnot, and now I can't think because there's a *crowd* under there, man. Like, who gave

“ “ “

you permission? What is this, this unauthorized elevenses-under-the-bleachers business? Come on, now.

So I'm all riled up and ready to bust on in there and lay some claim to my turf—but then I get closer and think maybe I'm seeing something I'm not supposed to see.

It's like I *feel* it before I see it, you know that feeling you sometimes get for no reason, like there's something messed up going on, like whoa, no lie, this shit is *not* right.

Been hanging around April too long, is what it is. You go to a movie with April and she's all watching the exits the whole time, waiting for some crazy mofo to stroll in with a Glock. She drives past the elementary school and it's like she can barely keep herself from busting in there and hugging every single one of those kids, like she'd sign up to be every single one of them's badass bodyguard if she could. But here's the thing about April. What it is, is that she lives in fear of all that, but also lives to look that shit right on up in its face, like #idareyoutoeffwithme, you with your Bushmaster and your outrageous rage. You with your Glock and your clown-ass face and your heart made out of nothing but evil.

During swim meets, man, April dives in like some kind of magical-ass fish; you should see her. And I don't know but it seems like she goes down *deeper* than everybody else, deeper than she's supposed to go, like she's down there for way longer than the other swimmers, like a year and a half longer, I shit you not. Gina and me will be in the stands screaming our heads off, truly decorating our pants, scared

right on out of our minds, but then April will rise on up out of that water. She'll start swimming as smooth and graceful as anything, making it look easy, man, and every time, every *single* time, she will #effingwin.

What you should know about me if we're going to be friends is that if you're me, it is not wise to hang around when there's some kind of not-right enterprise going down under the bleachers. I'm getting the eff on up out of there before something starts. Maybe they didn't even see me. I don't think they even saw me. Which is good, because if you're me and you got two mamas and one's black and the other's white and you're just now getting comfy in your brown skin and green eyes that nobody knows what to do with but you still gotta check #other in every box on the planet 'cause nobody's very smart and you're about to haul ass on up out of Shitsville, Delaware, and run track and field for Yoo-Vee-Ay *where it's Edgar Allan Poesville, hey!* if you're me and you're looking your future all up in its beautiful face and what you do *not* want to do is eff any of it up, then what you do is this:

You run away like the very first bat outta hell.

I'm sure it's nothing. Just got my brain all warped from too much April, is what it is. April, she'll get you to thinking in a certain way. Take Monday, for example. You know where I was supposed to be on Monday? That's right, bitches, running in my first Boston Marathon. Only I had this stupid sinus infection from hell, cooking with fever, couldn't hear out of either one of my ears, was all dizzy

and stuffy and whatnot, wah wah wah. I was going to race anyway—had trained forever, you know? finally I’m eighteen, you think I’m gonna miss my chance?—but April, she was all, Gavin, no. First of all, you’re sick, and second of all, I’ve got this bad feeling about it for some reason. I mean, what! April and her *bad feelings*. Please. She’s got bad feelings about everything. I tell her all the time that her “bad feelings,” that’s just her letting all those hateful effers win.

You’re better than that, I tell her. Braver than that. You gotta live your life strong, live it bright.

April shook her head, though, and was like, no, Gavin, no. This bad feeling, it is for real.

This bad feeling I’ve got right now? Beholding the scene under the bleachers? Maybe I’m just being paranoid. I mean, it’s a good day to be paranoid, right, what with all the nightmare goings-on in this effed-up world? It’s just my imagination on turbo-speed.

Or maybe, you know what? Maybe I’m just hungry. I just need one of Gina’s cupcakes, is all.

Still I’m gone like lightning, record-break fast, #licketydamnsplit.

The Light Fantastic

Sarah Combs

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