



IT LOOKS LIKE THIS

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

FIRST

It looks like this:

Pink, mostly.

Puffs of orange just below.

The fiercest yellow way ahead, far, far ahead.

Red slashed all across.

All of it fading to blue, getting deeper and deeper as you go out.

Underneath all that is the ocean, reflecting it back. All I can hear are the waves and the seagulls, all this calmness surrounded by an eruption of colors, deep strong colors.

I only saw this once in real life. We stayed up late and walked to Mill Point Beach in the middle of the night. There was no light anywhere and we sat, blind, and we said nothing. We didn't speak for the longest time, just listened to the ocean.

Then the blackness started melting.

This is what it looked like when the sun finally came up. I was so tired, we both were, but we did it anyway.

We only saw it once because there wasn't much after that, and now we can't ever go again.

This is what I see when I want to remember the good parts. This is what I see when I think of him, when I let myself think of him.

TWO

We moved to Somerdale a little before the start of the school year.

“We” means me and Mom and Dad, and my little sister, Toby, and our dog, Charlie.

Dad has a job with a textbook publisher as a sales rep. The publisher is in New York City, but Dad sells to small bookstores and colleges in our part of the country. His region used to be the Midwest but now it’s the Middle Atlantic.

Dad says they got rid of one of the sales reps to cut costs so they had to change everyone’s regions around to make up for it.

We came to Somerdale from Sheboygan Falls. I miss Wisconsin. But Dad says if we have to live in Virginia, we

might as well live near the ocean, and Somerdale's right on the edge of the beach.

We used to live near Lake Michigan, which is kind of like a small ocean. I used to stare across the lake when we went to the shore to see if I could see Michigan across the water.

I never could because the lake is so wide. It was easy to pretend it was the ocean and we were right on the edge of the country.

And now I guess we are.

Mom and Dad were happy we got to move in the summer because then me and Toby didn't have to worry about switching schools in the middle of the year.

They told us that when they first said we were moving.

Mom and Dad sat us down in the living room. They said it was a Family Meeting. Sometimes we have Family Meetings but not really that much. Toby and I sat on the small red couch that always feels kind of rough but not too bad, and Mom and Dad were standing and then Dad says, We have something to tell you.

And then they told us we were moving.

Toby said, What about Marla?

Her voice was real flat and low, which is how it sounds when she's her maddest.

Dad said, I'm sorry, Toby, but we don't have a choice. You'll make a new best friend in Virginia.

Toby raised her eyebrows.

She said, Marla's not my best friend, she's my

BFF. We're supposed to be best friends forever, not best friends till middle school.

Dad sighed.

Toby said, That's why it's called a BFF, not a BFTMS.

Dad said we might not like it much at first but it would be an adventure and we'd like it after a while. That's when Mom said we got lucky that we were moving in a good season.

I didn't say anything.

Toby said, I don't want to move in any season.

I don't remember a lot before Sheboygan Falls because we had lived there since I was three and Toby was just a baby. We moved there from Milwaukee right after Toby was born.

There's only one memory from Milwaukee:

Walking in between Mom and Dad in the park near the lake, holding both their hands so that my arms are raised over my head because I'm so small and they're so big. We are walking along the edge and it's around dusk.

The sun is really deep orange and it's coming through some of the buildings and getting in my eyes but it doesn't bother me. Next to us the water is getting blacker and blacker, but there's still a sliver of orange that is reflecting the sunset.

I look up at Dad and he's looking back at me and he's grinning so wide.

Then he and Mom lift me up together by my arms. My

feet leave the ground and it's like I'm floating, and I laugh and laugh.

That's all, though.

Everything else is just fuzzy and barely there.

Somerdale wasn't bad at first.

At first things were just new and everything felt different, and it was a bit weird.

But there was a lot that was the same. The same kind of house and the same kind of town. Just different people. Like when they used to get a new actor to play the same character on a TV show after the old actor quit or something. Different people but basically the same.

No one seemed to notice me at school on the first day, which was fine with me.

I mean we were the new kids, but it was the start of the year and there were a lot of new kids. Also it was the start of freshman year for me so a lot of the kids didn't know each other anyway if they came from different middle schools. And plus Toby was eleven and just starting middle school, so I bet it was the same with her.

So there wasn't much to notice. That was fine with me.

At first it was just like that.

I walk Toby to school every day that the weather is good. It usually is, especially at the beginning of the school year. I mean it can be hot sometimes, but there's also a lot of cool breeze coming in from the ocean.

Dad likes to talk about the cool breeze coming in from the ocean. He says it's another good reason that we moved, so we can be near the water.

Even though we were living near the water in Wisconsin.

The school is a mile from home and it takes about twenty minutes to walk there.

Toby and I leave at seven o'clock in the morning. We walk a bunch of blocks past other houses that look a lot like ours with dark red bricks and two trees each in their front lawns.

Then we turn onto this one street where the houses are bigger and different colors, with yards and gardens and horseshoe-shaped driveways.

This is where some of the richer people live, but I mean most everyone in Somerdale has money.

After that we turn onto a bridge that goes over this wide creek. The rich people's backyards face the creek.

Once we get over the bridge we are basically on school property. The school has a lot of land, though, and has a small woods on the side near the creek so we have to walk by that first.

The high school and the middle school are right next to each other on adjacent lots. Dad says this was to Save Taxpayers' Money.

He says it with this kind of approving smile, thin and short. He always has that same expression when he's talking about Saving Taxpayers' Money.

We will get to the schools with a few minutes to spare, and sometimes I give Toby a dollar for a muffin or a cookie or something. Even though we always eat breakfast at home.

Just 'cause she's kind of cool.

Then I'll squeeze her shoulder and she'll go off to the middle school and I'll go off to the high school.

That's just about every day the weather is good.

Toby and I are just turning onto that one street where the rich people live when I see Victor.

Victor's a kid in a couple of my classes, Biology and Art. I don't really know him or anything. In Biology he sits with another kid, Fuller, and they talk a lot. Mrs. Ferguson gets annoyed at them.

I don't think they've known each other long. On the first day of school, Mrs. Ferguson had us all sit in assigned seats at eight different tables. Each table has four stools around it and a sink off to the side and gas hookups for Bunsen burners. It's kind of like my seventh-grade Science class.

Victor and Fuller were put together at one of the tables. I'm at the table behind them. I watch them sometimes because I have to face them when Mrs. Ferguson is at the front of the class. They didn't talk to each other much for the first week.

I mean they would say small-talk things like Can I borrow a pen? or What page are we on?

I watched them. After a week or maybe a bit longer, Victor said, Hey.

Just like that.

When Fuller came in, I mean.

Fuller looked at him for a bit and then said, Hey.

That was it, though.

But the next day they started talking a bit more.

After a couple weeks they seemed to be friends.

This morning Victor's standing at the edge of one of the driveways and smoking a cigarette and looking at his phone. He has on black jeans and a green T-shirt too big for him. He brings the cigarette up to his mouth, holding it between his first two fingers, and then he takes a drag. And then he pulls the cigarette back down with his thumb and index finger.

He keeps doing that, switching his fingers, and then he looks up from his phone at us. His hair gets in his eyes and he brushes it away. Straight and parted and really, really dark.

I can't tell if it's his house or not, but I sort of doubt it 'cause he's smoking, and he'd probably get in trouble if his parents saw him. It's a mostly gray house with weird spires that remind me of Disneyland and a long, winding gravel driveway. There are three really wide willow trees.

I love willow trees.

I've never smoked before, except one time to try it when my friend Kris back in Sheboygan Falls got one of

his stepsister's packs of Virginia Slims. That's supposed to be a girl's cigarette but it was all he could get.

We both tried it. Kris could do it pretty easily because I think he'd done it before. He said he got a buzz going.

I tried to inhale it like he showed me, but it just made me cough a lot. Kris said that happens to everyone the first time but then it gets better.

I didn't really want to try again, though.

Anyway, Victor seems to know what he's doing, like he smokes a lot. I bet he does.

He just keeps smoking and staring at us as we turn onto the rich people's street and walk toward the bridge over Blushing Creek.

After we get past a few houses, Toby says, Who was that?

I say, Nobody, Toby.

She says, Is he in your grade?

I say, Yeah.

She doesn't say anything for a minute.

Then she says, He smokes like a damn pro.

She's always saying stuff like that. I mean stuff that normal eleven-year-old girls don't say.

I say, Don't say damn. Mom'll get mad.

She giggles a bit and says, Whatever you say, Mike.

I'm leaving the bathroom right after Biology and I hear:

You're Mike, right?

just as I open the door.

I sort of stop in my tracks because it takes me by surprise. The door starts closing and it hits the back of my heel. It hurts a bit, but not that much because I have thick sneakers on.

I look around and it's Victor. He's standing off to the side near the water fountain.

I say, Yeah.

He says, Mike Mike Mike.

Just like that. Three times really fast, kind of under his breath. He isn't smiling or anything but he isn't frowning either.

He says, What are you always looking at in class?

I say, Huh?

He says, In Ferguson's. You're always staring at me and Fuller.

I don't say anything.

He says, Why are you always staring at us?

I say, I'm not.

He still doesn't look mad or upset. He doesn't look anything, just blank.

He says, I see you staring all the time.

I say, You sit in front of me and I'm just looking that way because Mrs. Ferguson is talking.

He doesn't say anything.

For a couple moments we just look at each other. I don't know what to do because he isn't doing anything and he doesn't really have any expression on his face. He's looking at me like I'm a rock or something.

After a while he blinks and says, Don't stare at me in class.

And he walks off.

I have some friends.

I'm not like a popular kid at my school or anything but I have some friends.

These are my main friends:

- Ronald
- Jared
- Terry

Also there are some kids in my classes that I talk to sometimes, but we don't really hang out after school or anything.

Terry is a friend from church, but he goes to a different school, so I only see him every now and then. We don't have a lot in common, really. He's in my youth group and seems to like talking to me for some reason, so we became friends. But we aren't like best friends.

Jared and Ronald and I hang out after school and on weekends and stuff. Plus we eat lunch together.

I met them at freshman orientation just before the school year started. They were nice to me and I didn't know anybody.

Victor walks away, and I watch him leave, not sure what to do.

Then I go to lunch. I usually get to the cafeteria late

because Biology is kind of far away from that part of the building.

The tables are either square or circle and seat four or five kids. Sometimes kids put them together when they have big groups. They aren't supposed to, but usually the teachers don't do anything because they don't care and everyone knows it's a stupid rule anyway.

Jared and Ronald and I always sit at the same table, a square one in the far corner, near the band hall and the side entrance. We like it there because it's more open and we can watch people walk in and out of the school and around the elective classes.

Jared is already there when I show up.

I sit down and say, Hey.

He says, Hi, dude.

Sometimes Jared says dude even though it sounds weird coming from him. He's taller than me, taller than most kids, and really skinny and kind of awkward. He has a kind of nasal voice, but not like ridiculous or anything. His hair is straight and really dark brown, and it hangs down over his ears and covers his face a bit. He has a big nose, which I think he's self-conscious about. He's kind of pale and has red lips.

I asked him once why he says dude like he was a football player or something, and he rolled his eyes and said, I'm being ironic, dude.

I don't mind that he's awkward, because I know I am too.

I say, Where's Ronald?

A voice really close by says, Right behind you, dumbass.

Ronald comes around and sits down. He doesn't look anything like Jared at all. He's a bit shorter than me but not as skinny, and his hair is kind of curly and strawberry blond, and really messy. He said once it was because he was part Welsh, and that's also why he has light skin and all those freckles too. He likes to wear loose button shirts and jeans that cover the backs of his shoes.

I say, Hey, Ronald.

He says, What's going on, Mike?

Ronald frowns at his spaghetti. He looks a bit disgusted but also kind of resigned. They have spaghetti every Wednesday, and Ronald always gets it even though he complains about it and even though he could get something else if he wanted.

He picks up one of the strands of spaghetti and holds it in front of his face, pinching it between two fingers. He looks at it for a few seconds, not saying anything. Jared and I watch him.

Then Ronald leans his head back, lifts the spaghetti high over his face, and lowers it into his open mouth.

Then we hear someone approaching our table. Jared looks up. Ronald doesn't notice until he hears the girl's voice.

She says, Hey, are you using this chair?

She's older, maybe a junior or senior, dressed in shorts

that are probably too short for the dress code and a bold turquoise shirt with short sleeves. She has really bright glittery lipstick and auburn hair and she's very pretty.

Ronald brings his head level again and just looks at her. There's a tip of spaghetti hanging out of his mouth. His eyes are wide. Very slowly, he sucks the spaghetti tip into his mouth and starts chewing.

He says, Hey there.

The girl looks back at Ronald. She still has her hand on the fourth chair at our table. I can tell she doesn't know what to say.

Jared says, No, you can have it.

His voice cracks just a bit.

The girl smiles wide and says, Thank you!

And then she takes the chair and leaves.

We all watch her go for a while, and then Ronald turns to Jared and punches him in the arm.

He says, You idiot, I was talking to her.

Jared snorts and rubs his arm. He says, She didn't want you, she just wanted the chair.

Ronald turns back in the direction she went and shakes his head, slowly. He says, Man, she was smoking.

I look over. In the distance I can see her sit down at one of the big groups of two tables pushed together.

I say, She had a lot of makeup on.

Ronald says, Yeah, that's what smoking is.

* * *

We are in the middle of doing depth exercises in Art.

Mr. Kilgore has us draw two of the same objects, one near and one far away, and explains how to draw one of them smaller than the other to give the illusion of depth.

It is kind of pointless because I already know how to do all that, but Mr. Kilgore gets mad sometimes if you don't do things his way. He tells us exactly how to draw lines between the two objects to make a convergence and tells us about shading and how that can help with the illusion.

Mr. Kilgore likes to make us follow a bunch of rules when we draw. It's pretty stupid. I told Mom that once, but she said that it might look that way but maybe he knows more than he seems to.

I didn't say anything to that. Maybe she was right. But I sort of doubt it, to be honest.

I'm doing everything Mr. Kilgore says:

I draw two paddleboats, like they used to have on the Mississippi River.

I make one big and one small.

Then I draw lines for the sides of the river, going away from the viewer.

I draw some more lines to make the current and the wake from the paddles, and make all the lines look like they are converging.

It is everything Mr. Kilgore says to do.

If he didn't have us always follow his rules exactly all

the time, I probably would draw something else, but it would still have depth. It would look good.

Plus paddleboats are harder to draw than converging lines anyway.

Mr. Kilgore comes by. He bends down to look at my drawing and I can smell his aftershave. It smells like my dad's.

He pulls down his glasses to get a better look, letting them rest just on the tip of his nose.

I can see his big bushy brown mustache through the lenses. The hairs are magnified and look tangled and dense, with gray ones twisted in here and there. I try not to, but I look anyway. He has four lines going across his forehead, which make him look like he's deep in thought. Above that he's mostly bald, except for some brown hair along the sides.

One or two strands stand up on the top of his head, because of static.

He studies my drawing for a while and says, That's not bad, Mikey.

Then he sort of smiles, but not really, and walks off.

I hate it when anyone calls me Mikey and he knows it, but he still sometimes does it anyway. I keep drawing for a bit, but then I hear this sort of snickering sound.

I look up and I see Victor and Tristan and Fuller laughing about something.

Victor and Tristan have been friends for a long time,

not like Fuller. I could tell because they were talking like they were friends even on the first day of school. By this time Fuller is sitting with them in Art, so I guess now he's friends with Tristan too.

I don't like Tristan.

I see them laughing quietly to themselves, and then Victor kind of points in my direction and Tristan looks.

My ears get hot.

Then they start laughing again, and they keep glancing at me while they laugh.

I go back to my drawing and try really hard not to look up. For a while I barely move.

Then Mr. Kilgore says, Cut it out, Tristan.

Then they stop laughing. I glance up really quick and see that they still have these smiles on their faces.

I know Victor and Fuller are telling Tristan about me staring in Biology.

I look back at my drawing and realize I'd accidentally made this big black spot where I pressed the pencil too hard. I wasn't paying attention because I was concentrating on not looking at Victor.

I just look at it for a while wondering if I could erase it, and then I hear, really soft:

Hey, Mikey.

It's Tristan. I bend over my paper and pretend to keep drawing. Then he does it again:

Heeey, Mikey. You gonna stare at me too?

I just keep working on my drawing like I don't hear.

Then, super quiet this time, so that I almost don't hear
it for real,

Come on, queer.

Then Mr. Kilgore says, louder this time,

Tristan, cut it out. There's no need to talk.

Then all three get quiet for good.

I just keep drawing.

THREE

These are the classes I like: Biology, English, French.

These are the classes I hate: PE, Art, Geography.

I don't care that much about Algebra.

That's mostly going by who the teacher is and what other kids are in the class, though. It would be different if I was just talking about the subjects themselves. If it's just the subjects, I would switch Art and Biology.

Either way I don't care that much about Algebra.

It sucks because I like art a lot, I just don't like Art class. Sometimes it makes me mad that I have a teacher I don't like in a class I should like. I don't think I would mind so much if Mr. Kilgore taught Biology.

In Art class I just sit quiet and keep my head down and draw what I want to draw. Usually Mr. Kilgore doesn't care. Usually he leaves me alone, but sometimes he's in a bad mood.

Mrs. Ferguson is all right. She's sarcastic a lot and she acts tired and annoyed about stuff, but you can tell she doesn't mean it.

When Mr. Kilgore acts annoyed, he means it.

A couple weeks after Victor told me to stop staring at him, there's a new kid in my French class.

Our French teacher is Madame Girard. She makes us call her Madame instead of Mrs. because that's how they do it in France.

When I told my dad that, he sort of chuckled a bit and said, I hope she's not that kind of madam.

I didn't really know what he meant but Mom gave him a look.

Madame Girard is teaching us about verbs, about the structures of past tense and present tense and future tense. She's writing it all on the chalkboard, the same kind of sentence three times but with different tenses for the verb on each line.

Adrien ate the cake.

Adrien eats the cake.

Adrien will eat the cake.

She says it in English and then in French and then repeats it a couple more times: English then French, English then French.

She makes us say the three verbs in a row so we can hear the difference:

a mangé—mange—mangera

She makes us say it again:

a mangé—mange—mangera

In the middle of the third time, she stops and lowers her piece of chalk. She is looking at the back of the classroom. Everyone else turns around to see what she's looking at.

I stare for a second at the little white dot where her chalk had just been, right below *mangera*, and then I turn around too.

There's a kid standing just inside the classroom. I think he's been there for a little bit because the door is always open and Madame Girard wouldn't have heard him. This is what I remember:

Dark jeans, stress marks on the right pocket in an outline of his phone.

Navy blue T-shirt, kind of tight.

Black Converse shoes, white laces. Dirt smudges on the tips.

Short dark hair, tight curls.

Light brown skin. Strong jaw around thick lips.

Green eyes.

He's holding a spiral notebook in one hand and a crumpled yellow slip of paper in his other.

For a second no one says anything, and then I hear Madame Girard's voice from behind me:

Oui?

He raises the hand with the slip in it. I look at Madame

Girard. She isn't really frowning or anything, she just looks expectant. I can see the clear outline of her lipstick, where it ends and the rest of her mouth begins; I can see the plump curls in her hair, mostly bright auburn but gray just at the roots; I can see a tiny, tiny clump of mascara over one set of lashes.

Her eyes are on the slip. I can tell. I watch her watching it.

Then she walks over to him in six great strides. The end of the silk shawl that she always wears around her shoulders flutters as she walks by. I feel it tickle my cheek as I turn to watch her go.

Madame Girard says something to the kid. He nods and then she points to an empty desk a row over from mine and one seat back. He walks over to it.

Madame Girard turns back to the class and gestures airily at the kid and says,

Je vous présente Sean.

After the last bell I walk over to the big circle where the buses are.

They park there in the horseshoe waiting for all the kids to get on them, mostly freshmen and sophomores who can't drive. They sit and wait with their big engines turned on, twenty buses idling and growling at each other.

I walk through them and I can taste the exhaust, invisible but heavy and bitter, carried by warm gusts

blowing in between and under the buses and into my face and through my hair.

Diesel exhaust tastes different from regular car exhaust. It's heavier and more powerful and it stings.

I walk in between the buses and through the horseshoe and onto the lawn on the other side and across a big track field, and then I'm in front of the middle school.

Toby is waiting for me. She sees me coming and picks up her backpack, swinging it onto her shoulders. It is pink and worn at the edges, and looks huge against her small frame.

She smiles when I get near, squinting against the sun behind me, and says,

Let's go.

That's what she always says when I pick her up, every time.

The middle school lets out half an hour before the high school, but Mom doesn't want Toby to walk home alone.

I think it's dumb because it isn't ever dangerous. I mean there isn't any crime or anything. But Mom says there is lots of traffic with all the older kids driving all at once.

Toby is supposed to wait outside for me, but sometimes she just hangs out in the choir room until just before my school lets out.

She loves choir. Her teacher is supposed to be really nice. I don't know, I met her once, and she was really cheerful and everything but kind of too cheerful.

That day I walked into the choir room because Toby wasn't outside. I knew where it was because Toby had told me once. I opened the door and poked my head in and looked around. Then I saw Mrs. Deringer by the projector thingy. She had a tissue and was wiping it across a plastic sheet covered in a bunch of color-coded musical notes she had drawn. I watched on the opposite wall as a giant hand appeared and ran across the square of projected light, leaving a clean path through all the color notes and staff lines and clef marks on the sheet.

I coughed a little and she looked up.

She said, Hi there! Can I help you?

I said, Um. Is Toby in here?

She smiled even bigger and said, You must be Mike!

I nodded.

She said, I've heard a lot about you.

I didn't say anything.

She said, Toby's really fond of you!

I didn't say anything.

She said, So, you're picking her up?

I nodded.

She said, Toby just left. She wasn't outside?

I said, No. I'll just wait for her out there.

She said, Okay, sweetie! Have a good night!

I thought that was kind of weird since it was only three o'clock.

I said, Okay,

and then I closed the door and turned around, and Toby was walking toward me from the hallway. I guess she'd just gone to the bathroom.

She looked at me for a second, and then giggled and said, Let's go.

This time Toby is waiting for me outside.

We turn back toward the high school, and I walk her across the big track field, around the horseshoe of buses this time because they're already leaving.

We walk past the entrance to the high school and then alongside the student parking lot.

There's a really long line of cars trying to get out of only two exits. We're walking along the line toward the road that would take us to the bridge, and then I see Sean.

He is sitting alone in a faded blue jeep that looks pretty old. There are a couple rusted spots along the side and the back chrome bumper is sort of crooked.

I look at the insignia on the back and it says Ford Bronco. I never heard of that kind of car.

Sean glances over and sees me. He kind of stares for a second and I can't tell if he recognizes me from class since it's his first day, but then he turns back.

A minute later he gets out of the parking lot and turns left in the direction Toby and I are going, and drives off, picking up speed.

I watch the Ford Bronco go over the bridge and toward our neighborhood and then disappear as the road

curves, the sound of his engine accelerating and chasing him and then disappearing too.

Toby and I walk on.

That night it rains.

There is a little bit of it that starts coming down when Toby and I get home, but it's just small splatters here and there.

But overhead it's deep, deep gray and the sky looks so angry, and I can already smell the dust that gets disturbed and blown around when it rains.

I stop at the door when we get home and Toby walks in, but I turn back and look at everything outside. The trees are kind of waving already in no real pattern and the light is dim but raw.

I like how it looks and feels right before a rain.

Dad is in a bad mood.

He's kind of quiet through dinner and scowls most of the time. It isn't only because of the rain but the rain doesn't help.

The first real crack of thunder comes right before dinner.

Another couple come a few minutes later.

Charlie runs into the bathroom after the second crack. He always does that during a thunderstorm. He goes into the bathroom, sort of slinking in with his tail down, and crawls into the bathtub and sits there, shivering.

He's a beagle. Dad says beagles are really expressive dogs, like they get excited really easily but also get scared pretty easily too. It's true.

Plus Charlie's still young, just under two years old, so he hasn't grown out of being scared of the thunder yet.

Before Toby and I get up to clear the plates, we can hear the rain coming down in what seems like one big endless wave, beating against the roof and the door and the windows and just pouring.

It is almost completely dark even though there should have still been about an hour of sunlight left.

I always know how much sunlight is left in the day because I check the weather every morning, and then again when I get home.

Part of the reason is because I'm interested in weather and part is because I'm interested in astronomy. Mom got me a star chart a year ago for my birthday, and it shows me what stars I'll be able to see each night and when.

It's a bit different each night because of the tilt of the earth and how close the earth is to the sun on any given day.

So that's how I know there's still supposed to be an hour left of sunlight.

Dad is in a bad mood because of work.

When he got home today, he said that he would have to go to New York in a couple months, to the main office.

He said, They're having another goddamn sales conference.

He wasn't saying it to anyone, really, just saying it out loud.

Mom said, Please don't say that word, Walton.

She sounded kind of cross and I think that put Dad in an even worse mood.

Dad really hates sales conferences. They only happen a couple times a year, but he complains about them every time.

He says he has to sit around in boring meetings all day listening to editors talk about all the new books they're going to publish a year from now. Except Dad's company only publishes textbooks, so the presentations are really dull and repetitive.

But mostly it's because he hates going to New York City.

He says the hotels his company finds for him are always damp and musty and the streets are always crowded and the people are always pushy and they smell like fish.

I don't really get how an entire city of people can all smell like fish, but he says it's just a bunch of different bad smells that are always in the air and the people who live there absorb it and in the end it smells like fish.

I've never been to New York City.

So Dad is already in a bad mood because of the

conference and the rain and Mom, so then after dinner he sits down and starts watching a baseball game.

It's the Milwaukee Brewers against the St. Louis Cardinals.

He kept saying after we moved that he was going to have to learn to be a Nationals fan. He started watching their games at first, but then after a couple weeks he went back to the Brewers.

In the middle of the game, the TV makes a loud popping noise and then everything goes dark.

For a second all I can see is the streetlight coming in through the windows and all I can hear is the rain beating against the house.

Then Dad says, God —

He cuts himself off, though, either because of Mom or because the lights come back on right then.

He looks at us, at Mom and me and Toby, and then turns to the TV.

It's just a blue screen now.

He picks up the remote and flips through a few channels, but all the channels are like that, just solid blue.

Dad sighs and leans back on the couch. He looks at me.

He says, Mike, you thinking of taking up anything at school?

I don't say anything for a second.

Then I say, Like what?

Dad says, Like a sport. I dunno, you used to play basketball.

Toby says, That was in like elementary school.

I used to play basketball in fourth grade, but I never really liked it. It was just something Dad suggested I do and I thought it would be cool and gave it a try, but I didn't like it. I wasn't that good.

Dad gives Toby a look and then turns back to me.

He says, Well, do you think you'd want to give it a try again?

I say, I dunno.

He says, What about something else? Like swimming or football?

I say, I dunno. I'm already in Art.

He says, Yeah, but you need a sport.

I don't say anything.

He says, Mike, I asked you a question.

I say, I don't want to do swimming or football.

He looks at me for a while and then turns back to the TV. He picks up the remote, presses the power button, stands up, and goes to the kitchen.

I can hear the fridge door opening and then, a second later, the hiss of a bottle cap.

I get up and walk down the hallway to the back door. I open it and walk out into the garage and sit on a crate.

I just sit there and watch the rain, watch it come down in sheets, watch it cover everything and blot the sky. It drums against the houses and the mailboxes, bangs against cars parked at the curb. It pours down driveways and into the streets, building into rivers that carry leaves and twigs

and bits of trash away, swirling them down the block and into the drains. I watch the rain come down harder and harder, watch it wash the asphalt and the grass, and wonder if it will wash me away too.

Everything is still wet the next morning.

It stormed for a long time, into the night. I woke up twice from the thunder, the last time at four thirteen in the morning. I could even hear the thunder in my dreams.

When I have to get up for school, it's over, but the whole world is soggy.

Toby and I walk up the road toward school, past houses and houses that all look like mine.

Whenever we pass a block, I slow down and kind of look left and right down the side streets.

After a while Toby says, What are you looking for?

I say, Nothing, Toby.

But my face flushes a bit and I think she notices because she says, Then why do you keep looking down every block?

She always notices things.

I say, I'm just looking to see how much water's backed up. Or if any trees fell down in the storm.

Toby doesn't say anything, just keeps staring at me as we walk. I try not to look at her but I can tell she's staring, so finally I turn my head a bit and say, What?

She looks away and shrugs.

She says, Your face is all red, that's all.

I don't say anything. But I keep looking down the streets.

Toby stops bothering me about it, though.

A couple blocks before the one with all the rich people, I look down one of the streets and see an old, faded blue Ford Bronco parked in the driveway of a house.

The house is a two-story, like ours. White trim, red bricks, two trees turning orange with the fall. Like ours.

I stare at it for a bit, actually stopping this time. Right above me is the street sign: Hyacinth Court. I read over the white letters of the sign a couple times.

Then Toby and I go on.

I don't look down any more streets after that.

It Looks Like This

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