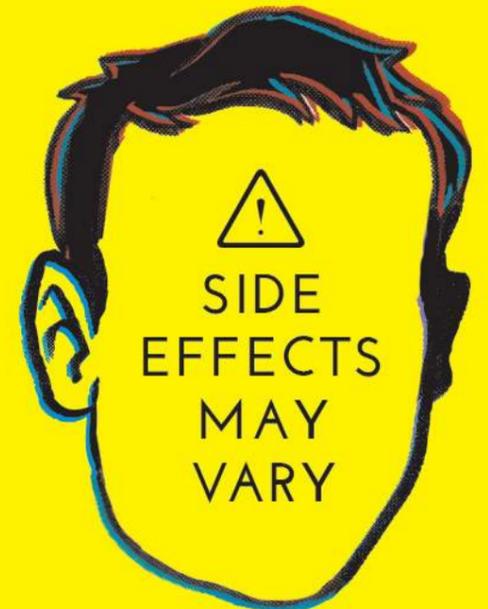




SMOOTH



Matt Burns



SMOOTH

SMOOTH

MATT BURNS



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2020 by Matt Burns

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, taping, and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

First edition 2020

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number pending
ISBN 978-1-5362-0438-4

20 21 22 23 24 25 XXX 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in City, State, U.S.A.

This book was typeset in Minion Pro.

Candlewick Press
99 Dover Street
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

visit us at www.candlewick.com



For Adrianna

1.

End of Summer 2007

Sometimes I get this weird feeling that I might be attractive.

When you have acne, it's all about the lighting. I was in the bathroom at my dermatologist's office. It has these soft, fake-candle incandescent lights on the sides of the mirror, and one of them was broken. It was so dark, I'd soak the floor if I tried to pee. It was perfect. My jawline looked sort of defined and my cheeks weren't too bumpy. But maybe it wasn't just the light. Maybe my face was actually getting better.

"Kevin?" Mom said, knocking on the door. "Sweetie, are you doing okay in there? Dr. Sharp is ready for you."

I opened the door and squinted in the harsh light of the waiting room.

“Is your stomach upset?” Mom whispered. She thought I might have ulcers. In eighth grade I used to fake being sick all the time to stay home, so she did have a lot of evidence. Someday I should probably get around to telling her that none of those stomachaches were real.

I shook my head, told her I was fine, and stared at the floor while I followed a nurse through the hallways to the exam room. I sat on the padded table with my head down, and the nurse closed the door to leave me alone in front of a huge mirror and beneath about a dozen fluorescent lights. It felt like sitting in a police interrogation room.

I tried not to look in the mirror, but I caught one accidental glance when I lay down, enough to make me realize what an optical illusion the bathroom had been. My forehead and jaw were covered in purple-red splotchy scars. The skin around my mouth was inflamed and raw and bright red, like I had just finished eating a watermelon. My nose and forehead were shiny. There was always a layer of oil on my face, no matter how many times I washed it. Under those lights I felt like a buttered lobster. My face looked as bad in the mirror as it did in my head.

Dr. Sharp knocked on the door and stepped inside. “Kevin,” she said, looking at my chart. “How are things?”

“Good,” I said, leaving out the part about wishing someone would throw me into a pot of boiling water where I could scream until I died.

“How’s your face doing?”

She always asked me that, and after two years it had never

become any less ridiculous a question. For one thing, she can see it better than I can. And my face doesn't exactly *do* anything, besides sting, leak goo, bleed, and highlight me in class photos. Her question always made me wonder if my face should be enrolling in art classes at the community college or something.

"It's, um, not any better, I guess. I mean, it's, like . . . bad." I pulled my eyes off the floor to look at her, wondering how she'd react. I'd never admitted defeat like that to her before.

"Okay," she said, setting the chart down and leaning in to stare at my face. "Have you been squeezing anything?"

"I mean, I guess. Not a ton. Sometimes."

"I know popping the whiteheads makes them go away for now, but in the long run touching your face and squeezing with your fingernails will cause scarring. I see there are some pustules around your nose and mouth."

What was I supposed to say to that? *Thank you for noticing — I grew them just for you?* I stared at the floor silently.

"May I extract them?" she said. I was a little offended she didn't get down on one knee to ask.

I shrugged. She had me lie back on the table and I saw her take two metal rods out of a drawer. "This may pinch a little," she said while poking the sticks into my zits and squeezing them dry. She did six of them and they all hurt. She wiped blood off my cheek with a napkin and I swear I saw the sides of her mouth curl up in pure delight. Of course she didn't want me popping my zits. If I did, there'd be none left for her.

She wrote a prescription on her notepad and handed me

a sheet. “I want you to stay on the Retin-A gel for a few more months to see if it starts working.”

Tenth grade was starting in a few weeks. I didn’t really have the luxury of waiting months for this gel to possibly, maybe, if it felt like it, start having any actual effect on my face other than continuing to dry it into a flaky croissant.

I stared at the prescription in my hand. *Ask her. Before it’s too late.* I’d been prepping for days to ask her one question, and now was the time, but my mouth was dry and I kicked my heels into the side of the table over and over, annoying the hell out of both of us.

Ask. Her.

“I was, um, reading online, or, like, heard about, uh, you know, about this, uh . . . this thing . . .” *Get it out.* “Accutane?”

She sat down on the stool, looking concerned. “Accutane is really a last-resort kind of treatment,” she said.

I bit my lip; heard my heart thump. After all this, was she just going to tell me no and send me home?

“You feel there hasn’t been any improvement with the previous medicines?”

I shook my head and forced my heels to be still.

She said, “There are a lot of potential side effects,” then opened a drawer and handed me the largest pamphlet I’d ever seen. It was like a full newspaper. “It’s not something you can just test out for a month. You have to commit to at least a four-month regimen, taking two pills a day, and you can’t miss any of them.”

I nodded. My eyes flicked over the massive list of side

effects in the pamphlet: *depression, joint pain, yellowing of the eyes, breathing problems, irregular heartbeat, skin rash, thoughts of self-harm, swelling of the lips, severe headaches, dark urine.* The last one sounded like the title of a Japanese horror film.

“Do you want to try one more month on the Retin-A Micro gel? And then you can come back and see me in September and we’ll see what you want to do?”

I swallowed. My instinct was to avoid this potential argument, give up, and do whatever she told me to do. Since my face had gotten bad enough to need prescriptions two years earlier, I’d always taken whatever Dr. Sharp felt like giving me, and nothing had worked. The constellations of zits on my face representing the Flaccid God of Guys Girls Don’t Acknowledge had only shone brighter. My skin was awful and I hated the thought of suffering through tenth grade with a face like a red-and-purple tie-dyed scab. “I think I want the Accutane.”

“You’re sure?”

I nodded again. The side effects seemed worth the risk. All I wanted was to be able to look at myself in the mirror again. I didn’t tell her that.

“There’s a lot of regulation with this drug. You’re going to need to sign up online for the iPLEDGE website. You won’t be able to fill the prescription before you complete that. You’ll need to go to that site every month and fill out a questionnaire in order to activate your next prescription. And you’ll need to have your blood tested once a month to make sure there aren’t any adverse internal reactions with your liver or digestive tract.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Your parents are okay with this?”

“Sure, they know,” I lied. I’d never brought it up because Mom would turn it into a big deal and freak out, but if I just got the prescription on my own and slipped it into Mom’s pile of stuff she took with her to run errands, she’d get the pills for me without even knowing what they were. I could get her to buy me a barrel of cocaine if I slipped the request into her errand pile.

“Okay. Your parents will need to sign off on this before the prescription can be activated.”

Shit.

She tore off the new prescription and traded it for the Retin-A one in my hand. “I recommend the diagnostic lab on the first floor of this building for the blood tests. You’ll need to have one done before you get this prescription filled, okay?”

I nodded.

She put her hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes. “I hope it works for you.” Then she opened the door and left. She’d never talked to me like that before. With the other prescriptions she’d just fling the paper at me and leave, cracking her knuckles in anticipation of the next kid’s pimples she’d get to pop. I figure it’s a big deal when your dermatologist touches your shoulder out of empathy and not just to scrape off a mole.

“You look happy,” Mom said when I walked back into the waiting room.

I shrugged and said it went fine. I didn’t bring up Accutane with her yet. I knew she’d have a million questions. I’d need to

do more research and figure out responses to her fears about side effects before I even mentioned it to her.

But it would be worth it. Everything would get better when the pills cleared up my face.

“Did you have any more diarrhea in the office?” Mom said, two feet in front of the receptionist.

I stared ahead blankly, pretending I had no idea who that strange lady was. Whatever happened with Accutane, it could only be uphill from there.

2.

I got on our computer in the family room that afternoon, put in my headphones, and did more research. I'd forgotten where I'd even heard about it in the first place. Accutane is just a thing kids know about. It's like herpes or Aerosmith. No one ever sits you down and gives you a lesson about these things. They just exist in the ether and float into everyone's consciousness.

I read about a study done on acne that came to this gem of a conclusion: "People with acne are at substantially higher risk for depression in the first years after the condition appears. The reason for the association is unclear." Was there supposed to be a sitcom laugh track after that punch line? The reason for the association is as clear as the slime that leaks out of my pores when my face has run out of pus, blood, and yellow

mystery wax: you walk around knowing you look like a god-damned monster, and if you're ever lucky enough to get distracted by a math worksheet and forget about your gross face for ten minutes, you're instantly reminded by people's horrified reactions to all the physical manifestations of your insecurities dotting your skin. How could anyone make it through this not depressed?

I found a bunch of blogs where people wrote about how they felt bummed out and didn't have much energy to do anything while they were on Accutane. There had been lawsuits against the company that made it, from patients who'd developed things like ulcers and Crohn's disease, and there were a few hundred official complaints from people who got depressed or had suicidal thoughts, and there were even some comments from the parents of kids who killed themselves while they were on it.

Their stories all started the same way — they'd tried every other prescription their dermatologist could think of and none of them had worked.

Under my sink in the bathroom I shared with my sister were dozens of clear-orange pill bottles and flattened tubes from prior failed attempts to clear up my face.

In ninth grade I'd been on adapalene gel, which made my face sting and shine like a glazed doughnut every night after I put it on. I'd lie in bed frozen stiff, keeping my eyes on the ceiling, paranoid that I'd roll on my side and get stuck to my pillowcase.

Before that there were minocycline pills that did nothing.

When I was taking them, I grew this marble-size lump on the corner of my left jaw that I couldn't stop fiddling with until it exploded in biology and I ran to the bathroom looking like a gunshot victim.

And then there was the Proactiv that Mom had subscribed me to back in middle school when the zits started sprouting up on missions to research if my cheeks were a good spot to colonize. I couldn't use that sting-y green juice fast enough, and still had enough full bottles piled up from the monthly deliveries to wash a car.

I researched how Accutane works, and an article explained that Accutane is just a brand name and the actual medicine is called isotretinoin. Scientists still don't know 100 percent for sure how it works, but they know it shrinks oil glands and makes them produce less oil, and it slows down how fast skin cells regenerate inside pores, so the pores don't get clogged. A lot of research suggests it works by causing apoptosis — “cell death — of the sebaceous gland cells that make faces oily. Of course it makes you think suicidal thoughts. It is killing the building blocks of *you*.

I'd read an article one time where this scientist said the cells in our bodies are naturally dying and being replaced by fresh cells constantly. He claimed the average life of a cell in the human body is seven years, which means we're technically an entirely different person when we're in tenth grade than when we were in third grade. And then we'll be another entirely new physical specimen when we're twenty-two.

There are some asterisks in the theory, and I think some

other scientists disagree with it, but the concept stuck in my head. It's not so much for the science. I like the poetry of it.

Every seven years I'll be an entirely new person. Every seven years I'll have a chance to start again.

Mom shouted from the kitchen that dinner was ready. Shit. I felt the prescription paper in my pocket and on the walk downstairs tried to cobble together some plan for convincing Mom and Dad to sign it.

When Mom says she "cooked" dinner, what she really means is she ripped open a frozen cardboard box from an international food corporation and microwaved the plastic tray inside. That night it was turkey with gravy, prepared with love in a Siberian sweatshop nine years ago.

Kate brought glasses of water to the table. She is twelve years old, and there is no conflict in her life. If she were older, she might be of some use to me, but as it stands, she has no valuable information or advice. Everything that surprises or excites her happened to me three years ago and I no longer care.

I wished I had an older sister. The kind of older sister who has sleepovers with friends who call me Kev and mess with my hair when they see me. A sister who could teach me enough about clothes or hair so I can compliment girls without seeming like a creep. She'd let me read her magazines and I'd learn key terms like *scrunchie* and *camisole* and find out the secrets to coming off as understanding and nonthreatening. She would show me what movies girls watch when they're bored and alone, and what girls eat for snacks. She'd give me conversation

topics that girls don't feel weird to talk about in school. She'd leave bras hanging off the bathroom doorknob, so I'd be used to seeing them — so when Emma's green bra strap was hanging out of her shirtsleeve in Spanish, I wouldn't have been temporarily paralyzed and unable to think about anything else for the rest of the day. Maybe after living with an older sister for fifteen years, I wouldn't think girls my age were a different species. My hypothetical older sister would be incredible. Instead I had Kate. Our main interaction was when I'd burp and she'd say I'd never have a wife.

Dad was at the kitchen table reading work emails on his BlackBerry. I stared at him for a while, watching the reflection of his in-box in his glasses. He scrolled through an endless list of charts and numbers, never looking up. He's a real estate agent, so he gets to pretend that he's working 24/7.

You know that feeling when a kid goes to your school for years but you've never talked to him and don't know anything about him but it would be weird to ask now because it would seem like you never cared? That's what it was like with Dad. I knew nothing and it was too late to show interest. I could have asked all the questions I wanted when I was eight, but I blew it.

"Put your thing down," Mom told Dad as she sat beside him and Kate sat next to me. Dad clicked off his screen and shook himself back to reality. Mom scooped hot reanimated meat onto our plates. "Do you remember junior year when Craig wanted to cook a whole turkey one night for no reason? And we drove around for hours going to different grocery stores and we finally found one in Gwinnett and by the time he

cooked it, it was two in the morning and everyone was asleep?” She laughed.

Dad thought for a second. “I thought it was a chicken.”

Mom turned to me and Kate. “You’d never know it from seeing him now, but our friend Craig used to be the wildest, most spontaneous guy we knew. One time he filled up his dorm room with little plastic balls, like the ones in a McDonald’s PlayPlace.”

Kate giggled. “That’s crazy. Like, that’s totally certifiably insane.” She had recently discovered words longer than three syllables.

Dad said, “There weren’t as many balls as he’d hoped for. Nothing really happened.”

It’s always like this with them. Mom tells a tall tale and Dad stands there next to her like some anthropomorphized Snopes.com and holds out a measuring tape and says, “Ma’am, I’m going to have to inform the audience here that this tall tale is in fact only a small story, hardly worth telling at all, that’s been radically blown out of proportion for dramatic effect.”

I’ve never been able to imagine them meeting in college. They were eighteen when they met, not that much older than me. I sat there watching them chew and thought about cells being replaced every seven years. My parents have been through, like, seven rounds of that. Were they completely different people back then? I’ve seen pictures of them in high school and they look like themselves, but I can never imagine the reality — them in 3-D, their voices, who their friends were, how much they spoke up in class, if my dad made jokes with

other guys at his lunch table about jerking off, if they ever cried alone in the bathroom.

“How was Courtney’s house?” Mom asked Kate.

“Wondrous,” Kate said. “She showed me all her old report cards. Her parents say a B is good and they give her presents when she gets Bs.”

“B stands for *bad*,” I muttered. “You should get As. School isn’t that hard.” Her conversation was even more obnoxious than usual because I had something important to bring up.

“Are you saying Courtney’s stupid? Mom, Kevin said Courtney’s stupid.”

“Kevin,” Mom said, in italics. “Be nice.”

“What? I’m giving her good advice to not be an idiot.”

Mom put on her fake smile and said her favorite catchphrase: “Positive mental attitude, sweetie.” It was her vague, catchall advice any time I didn’t have a phony Cheshire Cat smile plastered across my face. She’d been pelting me with it for most of my life, anytime I committed the sin of a neutral expression.

I sighed.

She added, “Where in your manners books does it say you can speak to your sister that way and roll your eyes?” She was talking about the dozens of books about manners she’d given me every birthday and Christmas for the last few years. I guess it was a parenting shortcut for her, to feed me printed instructions for being alive, like I was a punch-card computer from 1962. The books had titles like *Manners for Men*, *How to Be an Upstanding Gentleman*, and *Becoming the Respectable Teen*

You're Meant to Be. I'd never read any of them. They were piled up in a huge stack on a shelf in my room. Mom thought she was giving me helpful life advice, but it was more like giving me bricks, and soon I'd have enough to build my own house and move out.

I forced a smile. "Yeah. Right. Sorry." I took a breath and focused on the bullet points lined up in my head. I was going to talk about how Accutane works for most people, how it's just a supercharged form of vitamin A, and how I'd only be on it for a few months. I wasn't going to mention anything about depression and ulcers and all the stuff that would freak them out, but I had the counterarguments to those ready in case they brought them up. I was ready to debate them if they said no or tried to persuade me to try another medicine first.

Mom and Kate were talking about Courtney and I kept waiting for the right time to jump in, but there was never a gap. I finally just blurted out over them, "Dr. Sharp gave me a new prescription and I need you to sign it." I pulled the paper out of my pocket and flung it on the table.

"You didn't tell me about this earlier," Mom said, picking it up.

"How rude of him," Kate muttered, and folded her arms.

"I completely forgot about it until just now," I lied.

"It's a new medicine for your face?"

"I guess." I shrugged.

She stood up, got a pen from the kitchen, and signed it. "Okay. We can take this in to the pharmacy tomorrow."

Huh. Weird. There was no discussion. No screaming

match. She didn't seem to care, and Dad didn't seem to notice I'd said anything at all.

"Oh," I added. "I need to get a blood test before we can get the prescription. In the same building as Dr. Sharp. I have to go once a month."

"That's fine, sweetie. Whatever you need."

I nodded and ate while Mom and Kate talked about back-to-school clothes shopping or something. I looked at the prescription form on the table and wondered why it had been so easy. Mom and Dad didn't seem to know what I was getting into, or maybe they didn't care.

Now that Mom's signature was on there, it felt real. I'd been so set on getting the prescription signed that I hadn't really thought beyond that — the reality that taking this drug could seriously mess with my head. I got nervous and stopped eating. I just sat there staring at the table, telling myself I should be happy I got the signature, trying to push out all the thoughts about side effects, all the stories I'd read online about it ruining people's lives.

It'd be worth it. It'd definitely be worth it.

Probably.

3.

Most afternoons that summer, Mom dropped me off at Luke or Will's house while she went to run errands, and we'd hang out all day. Every now and then we'd do something productive like make our own short horror movies, but mostly we watched movies, played video games, and talked about why my mom could possibly need to go to the grocery store, bank, post office, and dry cleaner every single day.

It was Tuesday, two weeks before school started. I was standing in Luke's garage holding a white PVC pipe as tall as me. Luke and Will dug through bins of cords and parts, looking for a grill igniter switch so we could finish building our hair-spray-powered potato cannon.

It was about a thousand degrees in the Georgia August heat, and the humidity made me feel like I was standing in a dog's mouth. I pulled the bottom of my T-shirt up to wipe the sweat off my forehead, and the cotton stung my bumpy skin. I thought about all the bacteria I'd just transferred from my shirt directly into my pores. I'd probably seeded an entire new field of zits. Shit.

Luke stood up from the pile, holding the small plastic grill igniter, which had two frayed wires dangling from its bottom. Luke's hair is long and messy but always looks right. He's a few inches taller than me and has chest muscles that are visible through his T-shirts and two small acne scars on his cheek that look deliberate — cool, even. Two different times — once when we were in sixth grade, another when we were in ninth — girls told me they thought he was hot. I told them both “Thanks” because I didn't know what else to say, and neither of them ever spoke to me again.

Will's straight-across-the-front hairline makes him seem like an intelligent alien from a TV show. His hair says, “I don't care what anyone thinks,” and he really doesn't, whereas Luke's hair says, “I don't care what anyone thinks,” but I know he really wants more random girls to tell his friends they think he's hot. My hair says, “I did not know what to tell the barber to do.”

Our hair and my acne makes us look a little different, but you could make a Venn diagram of our interests, and it would pretty much entirely overlap: hanging out in each other's basements, horror movies, talking about testicles.

Will revved an electric drill and we walked into the dead

grass. I held the PVC pipe down while Will drilled a hole through it and Luke stuffed the igniter in. Then Luke sprayed enough hair spray into the pipe to make us all cough, and I screwed the plastic cap onto the back. Will crammed a potato down the front end and used a rake handle to jam it to the bottom of the pipe like he was a Revolutionary War soldier loading a musket.

“That it?” I said, standing with the end of the barrel in my hand, pointing it straight up.

“Yeah,” Luke said, peering into the barrel. “We press the igniter, it makes a spark, the hair spray explodes and fires the potato.”

I said, “How do we know the whole thing won’t just blow up and slice us in half with plastic shards?”

“It probably will,” Luke said, stepping back and shrugging.

“This seems like a really dumb way for us all to die,” I said.

“Dude?” Luke said, looking down at Will, who was crouched near the ground with his finger on the igniter button. “You wanna do it?”

“Yeah, sure.” He shrugged. His vote broke the tie and there was nothing I could do.

Will clicked the switch. I squeezed my eyes shut. Nothing happened. He clicked it again. And again. Nothing. I opened my eyes. He clicked it again and — *shit!* — the potato shot out with a *WHUMP* and the smell of burnt chemicals.

I let go of the pipe and ran under a tree, trying to find the potato in the sky. I couldn’t see it anywhere. I imagined it smacking me in the forehead, making my whiteheads pop and

bleed, fertilizing a giant purple bruise. I pictured it cannonballing into my penis and scrotum, mangling the whole package before I'd even gotten to really use it, like wrecking a new car before you pull it out of the dealership.

The potato plopped onto the street at the edge of Luke's driveway. Luke and Will ran after it and I followed them. We leaned over the smashed lump.

"That could've been our dicks," I said.

Luke and Will both nodded.

"That's a good idea," Luke said while I watched Mom's minivan pull up behind him. Her window was down. "You boys want to cut our peckers off with the Bowie knife and shoot 'em into the sky next?"

"Hi, guys," Mom said. She'd definitely heard him.

"Hey, what's up, Kevin's mom?" Luke said, turning around and smiling at her. I have no idea how he can recover from saying things like that. He was never taught how to properly worry.

"You've got your appointment," Mom said to me.

"Oh, sure, yeah, I'll drive." I rushed over, took the keys from her when she got out of the driver's seat, and told the guys I'd see them later, trying to get out of there before either of them could ask what my appointment was for. I didn't feel like explaining Accutane and the mandatory blood test to them. They wouldn't be mean about it or anything, but they'd bring it up and make dumb jokes about the tests finding some disease in my blood you can only get from having sex with rodents or something. They'd ignored my acne for years, but once they

thought it was acceptable to indirectly bust my balls about it, I wouldn't be able to deny to myself how obviously bad it was anymore. Plus, telling them would mean admitting not just that my skin was terrible, but that I hated how I looked badly enough to make this drastic step toward fixing it. It was too real an emotion to share with them. They wouldn't know how to handle it, and I wouldn't know how to handle however they reacted. It was just easier and more efficient to focus our conversations on our nut sacks instead.

I had my learner's permit, meaning I basically had my license as long as I could completely ignore Mom's existence. "Kevin, please. We have plenty of time," she'd say every time I eased into a stop at a red light. "You don't have to drive like a maniac."

"I'm driving ten under the speed limit."

"I feel like I'm on a roller coaster."

When I merged onto the highway, she squeezed her eyes shut, whispered a prayer, and crossed herself. Bold message from a woman who hadn't been to church in fifteen years. That was why I preferred driving with my dad when he was available. He hardly ever looked up from his work emails in the passenger seat.

When I pulled into the parking deck at the doctor's office, Mom gripped the handle above her seat and made me drive all the way to the top level, where there were no other cars I could potentially scratch. She got out of the car and guided me into a wide-open space like she worked on an airport runway.

"Can I go in by myself?" I said after shutting off the

ignition. I wanted to get it over with as fast as possible and to avoid Mom making it into a big deal.

“Oh,” she said. “Okay. Do you know which office it is?”

I had no idea. I nodded and she handed me her insurance card that had my name printed in tiny letters as a DEPENDENT.

I found the diagnostic lab on the directory and went into their waiting room, which had four fish tanks, three awful abstract paintings on the wall, and two patients.

The receptionist was college-age with flawless skin that defied the fluorescent light above her. “Hi,” she said. “Have an appointment?”

I nodded and stared at the floor. Under the overhead lights, my face probably looked like the wrapper of a melted Firecracker Popsicle. I handed her the insurance card and said to the floor, “I think the appointment’s at four.”

“Perfect. I see it right here, Kevin.” It sounded like she smiled. “Is there a co-pay?”

“What?”

“With your insurance, do you have a co-pay?”

It was like she was speaking Portuguese. My parents had made me learn about sex from a book, and I guess they were even shyer about discussing insurance co-pays.

“Can I, uh, call my mom?”

“Sure.”

I took a step away from the counter and called Mom. She told me there was no copay. She asked if everything was okay and if she needed to put down her sudoku and come inside.

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “I’m fine. I can do it by myself.”

“No co-pay,” I told the carpet in front of the receptionist.

“Great. Can you just fill out this information and get it back to me? You can have a seat wherever you like.”

On one side of the waiting room was a scrawny guy sucking on his fingertips and muttering to himself, then smelling each of his fingers. On the other side was a girl who looked about my age. Her eyes were closed and she had earbuds in. I looked back to the guy, who seemed confused by the smell of his own fingers. I decided to sit near the girl, four seats down from her.

I filled out my name and address and checked the “no” box beside the hundreds of diseases I was pretty sure I’d never had and assumed weren’t in my family’s genes. I handed the form back to the receptionist, and when I turned back around, the girl’s eyes were open.

She was looking right at me.

And as soon as my eyes made contact with hers, she looked at the wall beside me, and then the floor, and then shut her eyes again.

I sat back in my chair, leaned my head against the wall, and closed my eyes, performing indifference while I couldn’t stop thinking about that girl. What was she in there for? She was around my age, but she definitely didn’t go to my school. What school did she go to? Did she think I was weird for being there? Did she think I was a diseased freak? Was *she* a diseased freak? Wait, shit. Why did I jump to the worst-case explanation? She

could have been there for some boring test, just like me.

I tilted my head five degrees toward her and focused hard on the music coming through her earbuds. One lyric was playing over and over: “Needle in the hay.”

I lifted my right eyelid to look at her and wanted her to do the same. But not when I was leering at her. No, I wanted to look at her, and then after I’d looked away and appeared to be contemplating a deep thought while staring at a wall, I wanted her to open her eyes and look at me. Maybe she already had. Maybe while I’d had my eyes closed, she’d been secretly sneaking glances at —

Shit! She’d just opened her eyes directly into my creepy onslaught of direct eye contact. I hurled my pupils toward the floor and kept them there for a few seconds, mortified. When I dared to flick them back up, she was smiling a little at me.

Oh, shit.

I nodded back, excited and stunned stiff at the same time, a combination that likely produced the shiny-eyed-but-stoic facial expression of a remorseless serial killer. Was her look an invitation to move closer to her? Or just an acknowledgment that I existed? It was hard to tell, so the safest way to play it was to remain seated and limp and stare at the floor like I had a fetish for pale carpet.

“Alex?” the receptionist said. The girl stood up and I saw the outline of her bra through her T-shirt. I didn’t want to seem like a creep, so I looked away, but my eyes locked dead-on with Mr. Fingers, so I had to flick them away again, bouncing them all over the room like I’d been electrocuted.

She disappeared into the hallway behind the counter and I settled into an imaginary conversation with her in my head. We hit it off. Imagined conversations almost always work out in my favor. I hoped she'd get back before —

“Kevin?” said the receptionist. “We’re ready for you.”

Damn it.

The receptionist led me back into a small room with a padded chair and a table; laid out on the table were a clear vial and a rubber tube with a needle at the end. My stomach got queasy. I'd been under the impression this was going to be a pinprick-in-the-fingertip situation. A nurse stepped in, sat on a stool, pushed up my sleeve, and tied a rubber strip around my arm. I shut my eyes.

“It'll be over before you know it. Just a little pinch.”

I felt the needle go in, and then I made the mistake of opening my left eyelid. The tube turned dark red as my blood rose into the vial, which was the size of a prescription pill bottle. It filled up way faster than I thought it would, like the juice that kept me alive was rushing to evacuate my sinking ship of a body. The nurse pinched the vial off, pulled a second from her pocket, and attached it to the tube. It filled up even faster now that my blood had a running start and a clear path toward the exit. I felt like I was going to pass out and throw up at the same time. How many more vials did she have in her pockets? At the insane rate my blood was defecting from my body, it seemed liked I'd be drained to death in twenty more seconds.

“Almost,” the nurse said, staring with twisted delight as

she topped off the second vial. She pinched it closed, slid the needle out of my arm, and pushed a cotton ball into the tiny wound. She stuck on a Band-Aid, said, “We use the second vial to make soup,” and laughed.

I didn’t know how to respond, so I nodded as if I were agreeing that that was a good idea. The nurse said she’d see me in a month, and reminded me I had to go online to fill out some more forms. I stood up and was so dizzy I had to catch the doorframe to hold myself up. The nurse told me I should sit down, but I took some deep breaths, lowered my head so the overhead lights wouldn’t shine directly on my zits, and walked back into the waiting room with this childish hope that the girl — Alex — would be there.

She wasn’t, but her earbuds were on her chair. Without really thinking about it, I picked them up off the chair on my way out the door and put them in my pocket. If I ever saw her again, I could give them back to her, but I knew that would probably never happen. I just wanted some physical proof that I really had shared that moment with that girl, that it wasn’t a daydream.

“See you next month,” the receptionist said as I pushed open the door. I jumped guiltily and speed-walked toward the parking deck.

When I opened the car door, Mom asked if everything was okay. She said I looked out of breath. She was looking me over like I’d just shoplifted headphones.

“I’m fine,” I said. “It was fine.”

“You didn’t have to pay anything?”

“No?”

“When you left, did the receptionist give you any paperwork?”

“I don’t know. I just left.”

Mom laughed. “They’ll call me if there are any problems.”

I turned the car’s ignition on and backed out of the space. Mom said, “I was thinking we could go to a movie this afternoon if you want. My treat.” She always liked to add the “my treat” part even though I didn’t have any money, so it was kind of a necessary part of the deal.

“What movie?”

“Any movie,” Mom said. She was not a discerning moviegoer. She wouldn’t care if it was just two hours of a well-known celebrity poorly assembling a table. I think when she said she liked movies she actually meant she liked air-conditioning. “You can pick. You know, movies are a good thing for a guy to like. You’ll make a great boyfriend someday.”

Alex appeared in my head as I pulled onto the road. She was the first girl my age to look me in the eye. Store clerks and waitresses had looked at me, but they don’t count. Her look meant something. Out of the infinite points in space around her, she’d chosen the precise coordinates where her eyes met mine. Not at the scars on my forehead or the dry red patches around my mouth. I didn’t just like her because of how she looked; I liked her because she made me forget about my skin for a second.

“I don’t think there’s anything good out right now,” I told Mom. I was thinking about Alex again, about how all I knew

about her was her first name and that she liked a song that was probably called “Needle in the Hay.” It wasn’t much, but I’d have to try to find her online with those clues. I kept driving and pictured her back in the waiting room, trying to etch how she looked into my memory. She’d had jaggedly cut brown hair that stopped above her shoulders. She wore nonskinny jeans and a loose white T-shirt and sat with her head against the wall and her legs pulled up to her chest, flip-flops on the seat cushion. Her face was round, and it looked like she had a lot of makeup on her cheeks, but you could still tell her skin was bumpy underneath, and her forehead was shiny. She had acne scars on her jawline and temples. They didn’t make her any less pretty. I wondered if she was there for Accutane, too. But her skin wasn’t that bad, and the coincidence felt too far-fetched, even for one of my fantasies. Anyway, she looked like a girl you’d meet at a bookstore or a museum.

I have this fantasy of meeting my future girlfriend at a museum. It’s probably telling that my fantasies about my future involve being a guy who goes to museums alone. But my dream girl does that, too, apparently, so it’ll probably all work out.

4.

Mom turned on the TV in the family room and I sat at the computer behind the couch, put in my earbuds, and went to the iPLEDGE website to fill out the questionnaire so Mom could get my prescription the next morning. There was some scientific language on the site confirming how disgusting I am:

Isotretinoin is indicated for the treatment of severe recalcitrant nodular acne. Nodules are inflammatory lesions with a diameter of 5 mm or greater. The nodules may become suppurative [ripe with pus] or hemorrhagic [ready to erupt blood all over my mirror]. “Severe,” by definition, means “many” as opposed to “few or several” nodules.

I clicked to confirm that yes, indeed, I had a gross face. Next was a page where I had to click about sixty “Yes” boxes to promise I would not have sex while on Accutane. Apparently if you do and the girl gets pregnant, she’ll have a cone-headed baby. There were lots of diagrams showing this baby, like he was the mascot of Accutane. I agreed to that and all the other pledges to be a loser, too. It was like official, government-sanctioned cyberbullying. Some faceless agency was telling me, “There’s no way you’re drinking this year,” and I shouted, “Yes, sir!” “There’s no way you’re doing drugs this year.” “Yes, sir!” “And there’s definitely no way a guy like you is getting laid this year.” “Yes, sir!”

After I finished, I realized I’d been absentmindedly holding the tangled cord of Alex’s headphones in my pocket. I took my earbuds out and put hers in. I searched for “Needle in the Hay,” which led me to a clip from *The Royal Tenenbaums*, a movie that came out a few years ago, where a character cuts his wrists while the song plays. It was raw and painful and beautiful. It said a lot about who Alex was.

I started torrenting *The Royal Tenenbaums*, and while it downloaded I thought about how absurd it was to daydream about this girl I knew almost nothing about, but what the hell? Everyone needs an absurd goal to chase, right? Some idea of heaven you force yourself to believe in just to have a reason to keep moving forward. Guys at my school dream of making it to the NFL, and there’s no chance they will, but that fantasy makes them try harder at practice. She was my NFL, my goal, my reason to keep hoping I could get better so maybe someday

I'd have another moment with a girl like her, and I could actually talk to her.

I wanted to carve the misshapen stalagmite of bumpy, mumbling stone I'd become into an upstanding, normal member of society who stands with his back straight and keeps his chin up and rarely drools or stutters incomprehensible half sentences often missing verbs. I'd refine myself over the year, whittling down and smoothing over the nervous, rough edges to find some better person underneath. The statue of David started out as a dumb-ass slab of rock, too, and if I wanted it badly enough, I'd be able to do it for her.

The white pharmacy bag was waiting on the kitchen island when I woke up. I snatched it and ran back upstairs to take the first pill. The night before, I'd imagined swallowing the pill and seeing a montage of the year, like time-lapse footage of a flower sprouting from nothing into something impressive and strong. It was an important moment, and in my head, I took the first pill in a sophisticatedly decorated, softly lit room.

Kate and I share a bathroom. It's windowless, with harsh overhead lights. It's a passageway linking our rooms together, but we've never been in there at the same time. We have two sinks and an agreement that neither of us would cross onto the other's side of the counter. On the wall on my half was a poster from an anime show I'd been interested in for two weeks in sixth grade that I'd been too lazy to remove in the four intervening years. Be careful with new interests on the day your mom asks you what you want for Christmas. You may be stuck

with disturbing Japanese elves on your bathroom wall forever. On Kate's half was a poster of a horse with a smiling set of human teeth that upset me every day.

I decided to use the bathroom in my dad's office upstairs, which has no stupid decorations; a window with shades for soft, natural light; dark-blue wallpaper, and dark-blue towels no one uses. Mature and serious. I looked myself over in the mirror and took a deep breath. I scooped handfuls of water into my hair to tame it with my fingers. There was a candle beside the sink, and I found a lighter in the drawer and lit it. I set up my iPod's portable speakers and played "Needle in the Hay."

The pack of pills was covered in small silhouettes of pregnant women with red Xs over them and a bold warning: DO NOT GET PREGNANT. I tore one of the expectant mothers off, threw her in the trash, and put the pill on my tongue. I shut my eyes, took a deep breath, and swallowed.

I heard my dad sniffing on the other side of the door. "Kevin! Why do I smell smoke?" He must have thought I was badly attempting to light my first cigarette.

"Sorry, I lit a candle," I said. "For the . . . bathroom smell."

"You playing music in there?"

"To cover up the, uh, noise," I said. He definitely thought I was masturbating. "I'll be done in a second."

"All right, take your time. Didn't mean to scare you."

I shut the music off and realized what a stupid scene I'd set up. I was taking a pill, not losing my virginity. I flushed the empty toilet and snuck back into my room, telling myself that

once my skin cleared up, I'd be confident and in control and wouldn't find myself mock-shitting near my dad anymore.

That night I squinted at my stream when I peed, trying to tell if it was darker than usual. Sort of, but hard to blame that on the pill, since my water intake for the previous five hours consisted of one Mountain Dew. I looked my face over in the mirror. Maybe my cheeks were drier, but it was probably just wishful thinking. I took my second pill before I brushed my teeth, and when I was in bed, I shut my eyes, trying to feel the medicine in my bloodstream. If I focused hard enough, I could convince myself it was in there, running through my shoulders and arms like grains of sand. I felt a headache coming on, and I smiled. That was a side effect. I hoped it was real.

The night before school started, I went to my room, turned on my Xbox, put on my headset, and joined a lobby with Luke and Will to do a four-way prank call.

“George Foreman grill?” Luke said.

Will and I agreed, and Luke put his phone on speaker, set it next to his headset, and dialed the customer service number. I muted my microphone so no one would hear me laugh.

Once someone picked up, Luke said, “Hello, my name is Doug Ronald and my brothers are on the phone here, too. Chip Ronald and Kyle Ronald.”

I had no idea where he was going with that, but the best calls were the ones we didn't plan out and just agreed with whatever Luke said. I unmuted and said, “Hey, Chip here.”

“I’m Kyle,” Will said.

“Right,” Luke continued. “So this is more of a question than a complaint or anything. Honestly, our grill is working great. Doing exactly what it’s supposed to be doing. It grilled up everything we put on it. So I guess we’re looking for some advice. Essentially, my brothers and I accidentally grilled our dongs together on the Foreman. It roasted them up real good, seared them and everything. So, again, no complaints about the performance of the machine. It certainly did its job. But now our dongs are all fused together and the timing is terrible because tomorrow we each have separate business trips in Atlanta, San Francisco, and New York, and while I’d like to tell you each of us is hung well enough for that kind of cross-country stretch to pose no issue, I’ve got to be honest and own up to the fact that our gear just isn’t long enough. So I guess my question is, what advice do you have for us?”

There was a pause before the customer service woman responded. “Sir, do you want a replacement grill?”

“No, it works great. Our peckers are fat free and seared with really nice grill marks. I guess I’m asking if you offer a product designed for unsticking penises that were fused together in your roasting-hot iron grill. Surely I’m not the first person with this request.”

There was another long pause. “How old are y’all? Why is that funny to you? Grilling your . . . I don’t even . . . That’s nasty. You sound way too old for this. You boys don’t have anything better to do than . . . Shouldn’t you be talking to girls? You’re

not gonna lose your virginity calling me to tell me about your wieners.”

Luke hung up. Will and I unmuted and burst out laughing.

“Good call to end summer on,” Will said.

“Shit,” Luke said. “Is school tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well . . . huh,” Luke said. “Guess I have to fake all the summer homework tonight. Did any of us, like, do anything this summer?”

“We stood around talking in a lot of movie theater lobbies,” I said.

“My dad knocked over that giant display of apples at the grocery store, and I think it’ll be the funniest thing I ever see in my life,” Will said. “That was back in May, and nothing topped it.”

For a second I thought about bringing up Accutane and Alex. It seemed like maybe I should tell them, since they were the biggest developments to happen in my life in years. But it didn’t feel right. They probably wouldn’t care, or if they did, Luke would dominate the conversation and make me feel like I wasn’t a part of my own story. Best to end the call on a high note.

“Nope. Didn’t do shit,” I said.

On the morning of the first day of school, I woke up an hour early so I could take my pill, take a shower, wash my face, rub green salicylic acid juice all over it with a cotton ball, and then

coat my whole face with moisturizer. I'd decided to keep my external skin regimen going alongside the Accutane, so I'd flank my zits, imploding and exploding them at once. I used Q-tips around my nose and jawline to wipe off the extra shiny moisturizer goo, so I wouldn't look too buttery.

I was almost out the door when Mom held up her digital camera and said, "First-day-of-school picture?" In the one from last year, my skin didn't look too bad. At the time I thought I looked hideous, but compared to now, I was fine. I was just starting to get blackheads on my nose then, but that was when I started to hate having my picture taken. There are only, like, six photographs of me from freshman year, and in most of them I'm twisting away from the camera like I'm afraid it'll fire a bullet at me.

"Pretty please?" she said. "I can't have a gap in my collection." I smiled and she told me real smiles have teeth in them. I kind of opened my mouth a little. The flash went off. She showed me the photo on the screen and ruined my day. I had all these red splotches on my forehead and a bunch of red scabs on my temples where I'd been squeezing stuff last night. My cheeks were covered in pink sprinkles, and every inch of my face was shiny. The lighting in my bathroom had lied to me. I looked like a glazed Freddy Krueger.

Luke, Will, and I had agreed to meet at eight, and they showed up at 8:21, which wasn't surprising at all; order and structure never cross their minds.

Luke's desk in elementary school was chaos. The first time I saw it, it confused and stunned me and I've never forgotten

it; it was my first clue that the world isn't the orderly, organized place children's television had promised. His desk was a whirlwind of crumpled papers, food debris, and broken pencils, like a thief was always breaking in and not finding what he was looking for.

Will's desks were always empty. I still have no idea how he passed classes without ever having books, or why he never had them in the first place.

My desks were always neat, deliberate, and so logical that I still picture one sometimes when I get stressed out.

I wish I could have some more interesting descriptions of Luke and Will. I mean, no offense to them, but none of us is really that interesting. Neither of them has diabetes or dead parents or a tragic terminal illness. And none of us has been chosen by a prophet to go on a quest to destroy an amulet and retrieve a magical scroll. We're just three white kids from the suburbs who like watching horror movies in basements. You can go to any tenth-grade hallway in any suburb and find our clones. We are highly replaceable.

The lighting in our morning spot by our lockers was brutal, like it was designed by the guy in charge of the before photos in the Proactiv commercials: fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling and the glare of the piercing morning sun through a wall of windows. It was a greenhouse built to grow low self-esteem. I shielded my face like a vampire while Luke and Will talked about *Halloween 4: The Return of Michael Meyers*.

We looked at our schedules again and had all the same teachers except one. For math, I had Algebra 2, but they both

got put into trigonometry because they got As on the ninth grade geometry final and I got a B-plus. I wondered if those two problems I messed up were going to someday mean Luke and Will would get jobs as nuclear engineers while I worked in a factory putting corn in cans.

For an unexplained reason Luke pretended he was a wrestler bouncing off ropes and knocked his shoulder into Emma, his ex-girlfriend. Emma had dark, thick eyebrows and long brown hair, and from the look of her cheeks, she probably didn't even know what a zit was. Like, she'd seen articles in girl magazines about how to clear up zits, and she didn't know what they were talking about, so she'd just turn the page. She was a member of the God Squad, a group of ambiguously religious girls who went to a lot of events that involved free T-shirts with crosses on them. For some reason, everyone knew about the abstinence pledges they'd made the summer before ninth grade, which was ludicrous because absolutely no one our age was having sex anyway. When I'd heard about it, I thought it would be equally valid to publicly announce I'd pledged to abstain from time-traveling.

"Yo," Luke said to Emma, laughing. "Sorry."

"It's all right," she said.

Luke thought it wasn't a big deal that he and Emma had gone out for, like, three months last year and now they had to see each other every day in school. It seemed like a huge deal to me. If I were him, I'd spend the entire school year in a bathroom stall trying to avoid her and the awkwardness. They never had a fight when they broke up. They weren't in any of

the same classes, so they grew apart and decided to be friends. I still don't know how they could be so well adjusted.

"Hey, guys," Emma said to Will and me. There were a few times last year when she hung out with us on Friday nights at Luke's house. It was okay, at least until around ten o'clock when all of a sudden Luke told me and Will we should probably head out but Emma was going to stay. That was kind of weird. I never asked what they'd do after we left, and I didn't really want to know because we all sat on that same couch, and there was plenty of weird stuff two teenagers could do to exploit loopholes in an abstinence pledge.

"Did you go to the beach?" she said to me. "You look like you got some sun."

Goddamn it. I shrugged and looked at the floor and said, "Yeah . . ."

Will said, "Wait, when did you go to the beach?"

"No," I said. "I mean, I meant, 'Yeah, no, I didn't go to the beach.'"

"Oh," she said. "All right."

There was a silence just long enough to make me seem like one of the dumbest humans on the planet, and then the bell rang before I could change the subject, canonizing another episode of my confusing idiocy in everyone's heads.

5.

The first few periods were relatively normal — avoiding eye contact; racing to the backs of classrooms to secure seats; feeling my entire body tense, hoping teachers wouldn't make us stand up and introduce ourselves — until Luke, Will, and I had language arts with a new teacher, Mr. Meyer.

Mr. Meyer was this short, stubby, bald guy in khaki pants and a tie who looked like he should be plotting his suicide in a cubicle. So it was weird when he went on this long lecture — it was more of a performance, really, since he had weird tribal music playing off his computer while he spoke — about storytelling, like it was some mystical dark art. He said that most literature teachers we've had in the past have probably only talked about novels, short stories, essays, and poems. But those

are just a small piece of what counts as storytelling. He said that just about every type of communication — songs, emails, phone calls, telling your friends about what you did last night, receipts, internet browsing histories — is storytelling, and no one form is any better or worse than the others.

“This year we’ll explore, dissect, and analyze stories of all forms. It doesn’t matter if it’s a novel, a rap song, a recipe, or a shoe.”

Veronica Wesson raised her hand. “How can a shoe be a story?”

“Who made the shoe?” said Mr. Meyer. “Why did they make the shoe? Why did they decide to put the laces there and color the sole the way they did? Did the final product succeed or fail? What’s the narrative arc?”

“Oh-kay,” Veronica said. “What if I just found the shoe in a trash can?”

“Who put it in the trash can?”

“Okay, fine. I get it.”

I don’t think she did. I think she just wanted Mr. Meyer to stop talking. I think only a couple of us got what Mr. Meyer was saying. It seemed cool to me.

“Stories can help us,” he said. “They teach us how to communicate and give us examples of what to do and what not to do. I want you all to be able to identify why a story works for you, so that when you leave this classroom next May you’ll be able to seek out ones that will enrich your life. Think about it this way.” He drew a circle on the whiteboard, and then made a small pie slice in it. “I think it’s fair to say that about ninety-five

percent of stuff — movies, books, songs — is pretty bad, right? This little five percent slice is what I think is really great. But someone else's five percent would be over here." He drew a wedge opposite his. "Meaning that all the things I love and cherish, this person thinks are complete garbage. It goes on and on, with billions of people on the planet, and everyone has a different slice of what they like." He set the marker down and turned to us. "So let's talk about the books you read in school last year. Who here loved *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?"

Five kids shot their hands up.

"Who hated it?"

A few kids' hands went up. Meyer pointed to Todd Lancaster. "Why'd you hate it?"

"All that stuff about new words, like 'doubleplusgood,' is, like, legitimately a better way to talk, but whoever wrote it was talking about it like it was a dumb idea, and that made no sense to me."

"Okay, sure," Meyer said. "Someone else, name any book you love."

Heather Derington said, "*The Lord of the Rings*," and Todd Lancaster groaned.

Meyer laughed a little. "See? One person's favorite is someone else's least. Todd, is it?"

"Yeah," he grunted.

"What is it about *Lord of the Rings* you don't like?"

"Hobbits are just gross little guys, you know? Nasty freaks and everything."

“But can you understand why someone else might enjoy it?”

“No.”

“All right, let me put it this way. If you knew J.R.R. Tolkien when he was writing it, and you knew that in the future millions of people around the world would love his book and the movies based on it, even though you wouldn’t, would you tell him to stop writing?”

“Definitely,” Todd said, like a lawyer presenting the final piece of uncontestable evidence. “If I was back in time with J.R.R., or anyone, really, I’d tell them to stop whatever dumb stuff they were doing and head to the stock market to put it all on Apple.”

Meyer narrowed his eyes and nodded slowly, smirking at Todd the same way I was. “Well, I can’t argue with Todd’s investment advice. But let’s steer back to storytelling. So what’s the point, right? Seems pretty depressing to think that the vast majority of the planet thinks your favorite things are stupid. We’ve got to realize we all have different tastes, and that’s okay. It’s great. It’s liberating. It means that when you’re creating a story, or doing anything creative or productive, it just doesn’t make any sense to care what anyone else thinks. Being creative isn’t like playing in a golf tournament. It’s like playing golf by yourself, over and over, trying just to beat your own score. Figure out the story you want to tell and make it better until you love it.”

He folded his arms over his stomach and straightened his

back “I’m assigning you all a yearlong project with one goal: next May you’ll tell us a story. That’s it. You can work by yourself, or you can do it in a group, however many people in each group you want. Start thinking or talking about what kinds of stories you like and how you like them told.”

Everyone shuffled their desks around to push them into little groups. I was already sitting next to Luke and Will, so we turned our desks to face one another. This assignment wasn’t mentioned anywhere on Meyer’s syllabus. He’d thrown us a curveball, but I felt excited in a way I never did at school. It was perfect for us.

“Movie?” I said. They both nodded. We’d been making movies together since middle school, but nothing longer than ten minutes. Goofy little horror movies with bad fake-blood special effects that never worked. They all sucked, to be honest, but I always thought if we actually put in effort, we could make something good. “Let’s make this one, like, a real movie,” I said. “If we have all year to work on it, we could make an actual ninety-minute slasher movie.”

They both shrugged. Neither of them displayed the enthusiasm required to produce a feature film.

“Yeah, sure,” Will said.

“What about football tryouts?” said Luke. “They’re next week.”

“So?” I said.

“We join the football team,” Luke said. “That could be our story.”

“And then we make a movie about it?” I said.

“No, like, not a movie,” said Luke. “We actually join the team.”

“We don’t know how to play football,” I said.

“We’ve played pickup games,” said Luke. “I play with the neighbor kids all the time in the cul-de-sac. Me and Will crushed them last weekend.”

“That’s not, like, real football. Where guys who aren’t nine years old tackle you.”

“That would be hilarious. Getting tackled by football dudes who take it seriously. They’d be all intense and pissed off and we wouldn’t care. We’d just laugh at everything.”

Will shrugged. “I’m always looking for something to do.”

I said, “*Playing football sarcastically* can’t be a story.”

“He just said anything can be a story,” said Luke.

“Yeah, but not that.” I turned to Will. “It’s dumb, right?”

He shrugged again. “I’ll try out. Got nothing else to do. But the movie idea is cool, too.”

“Our story can’t be *playing high-school football* and also a horror movie.”

Mr. Meyer walked by and asked us how we were doing. “We’re fine,” I said. “We’re making a movie.”

“Excellent!” Meyer said. “You know, I volunteer as a jury member of the Goose Creek Film Festival. It’s based in South Carolina, but they accept entries from anywhere. We screen features and shorts. We could enter yours.”

“Whoa, seriously? That’s awesome.” I saw myself onstage accepting an award as Alex—the girl from the waiting room—smiles at me from the audience.

I shook myself back to reality and looked to Luke and Will. They seemed into the idea.

“Oh, and it’s not a short,” I said. “We’re gonna do a full movie. Since we have all year.”

“Even better,” Meyer said. “What genre?”

“Horror. Definitely horror.”

Meyer smiled. “Like Sam Raimi and his friends making *Evil Dead*. You guys could be next.”

Holy shit. Yeah. We totally could.

“We’re also joining the football team,” Luke butted in.

Meyer looked confused. “Anything’s a story. Can’t wait to see how it all turns out.” He moved on to the next group.

“Just come to tryouts, dude,” said Luke. “Maybe you could be a kicker or something. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Seriously?” I said. “If, through some accident, we make the team, then what? *We played football*. That’s our story? No one cares about football. It’s not interesting.”

“Okay,” said Luke.

“Okay, you want to do the slasher movie?”

Luke laughed. “Jesus. Calm down. We have a year to do this project. Football’s only in the fall. Why are you freaking out about it now?”

“Good point,” Will said.

“Do either of you realize how much work it’s gonna be to make something that isn’t a total piece of shit? If we get our movie in that festival and people see it, we could actually get jobs and, like, *make* movies for real. This could be a big deal for us.”

“Yeah, okay, cool,” Will said, clearly not understanding the gravity of what I was saying at all.

“Just . . . Fine. You guys can go waste your time not making it onto the football team. I’ll get started on the movie.”

The bell rang and I walked out before they’d packed up their stuff. I was glad they weren’t in my math class.

I took a desk in the back corner of the room. Mrs. Jenkins gave us a long worksheet to do while she sat at her computer doing a crossword puzzle. I did the first three problems to prove I could do them and then got out my notebook and worked on ideas for the movie.

I wrote down the horror ideas we’d all talked about at sleepovers and never followed through with. I mapped out a timeline over the entire year, blocking off sections for writing and editing the script, then figuring out the props and costumes and locations, making special effects that didn’t suck, finding people to be in it, filming it in the spring, when my face would be clear and I’d actually want to be in front of the camera for the first time in years, and then editing and music. It was going to be a ton of work, but if we actually stopped bullshitting for five minutes and put some effort in, we definitely had enough time to do it.

My mind drifted to Luke and Will playing football. Imagining them making the idiots on the team laugh. Finding some weird niche they’re naturals at, like being the guy who holds the ball up for the kicker. Gaining forty pounds of muscle. Chowing down on massive turkey legs all day long. Being carried off the field every Friday night on the shoulders

of their adoring teammates, who deposit them at some diner, where they don't have to pay and all the waitresses wink at them and squeeze their shoulders when they bring out the food.

I didn't make much progress on the movie outline.

The final bell rang and after I got my stuff out of my locker, I went straight to the carpool line to find Mom waiting for me. She moved to the passenger seat and I got behind the wheel.

She asked me how the first day was. I told her it was fine. Pretty standard. Many syllabi.

She said something seemed off and I was being quiet, which only made me want to talk even less. I told her everything was normal and I was just tired. There was no point in telling her about Luke and Will's stupid plan to try out for football. Nothing was going to come from it, and there was no reason to stress her out and get her involved in our meaningless argument.