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PICTURE  
US IN  
THE  
LIGHT



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KELLY LOY GILBERT

HYPERION

LOS ANGELES \* NEW YORK

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## P R O L O G U E

Years ago before there was me, while all that cosmic dust that would become my cells was still spinning and cycling through the eons of the universe, there was the image of a life. A better one, I guess, according to whatever calculations my parents were going by then, and so they let go of the world I would've been born into, the only world they knew; they held to the promise of that new life and crossed an ocean and tied our destinies to everyone we'd find on the other shores.

The three of us live in Cupertino now, in the Bay Area—six thousand miles from Shiyan, China, where my parents are from. From what I've looked up, it's pretty there: craggy green mountains rising into the sky, the city cradled between the peaks. You can take a gondola up the mountain. When my parents were growing up, there wasn't too much to do there except work in the auto factories, and they both went to Wuhan University, five hours away, and met when they were just a little older than I am now.

They moved first to Texas, where they were students, and then California, where my dad got a job in a lab for a physics professor, which is what he's always planned to become. By day, he studied indirect excitons—don't ask—but on the side, nights and weekends when the lab was a ghost town and his boss wasn't around to see, my dad was conducting a secret experiment.

The experiment was about quantum entanglement, which my dad explained to me once this way: if atoms interact with one another, then even after they separate they'll keep behaving as though they're still connected. The way they move, or decay—everything will be reflected across the entire entangled system. Once, when I was in third grade, before he'd told us anything about his experiment, my dad brought me and my mom in to show us. We went on a Sunday, after hours. On the drive to his lab my dad was animated, excited and nervous both, and he talked fast and kept looking over at my mom to see how much she was listening, and it gave me the feeling that somehow, whatever it was he was doing, it was for her.

My dad's experiment went like this: he'd bring in pairs of people who fell into three categories: people who'd never met, people who'd met a few times, and people who were close family. With each pair, he'd take a picture of one person, and then he'd separate the two people in different rooms at opposite ends of the hall. In one of the two rooms was a screen. He'd set up each person with a blood pressure cuff, a thermometer, and electrodes to measure brain waves and blood volume. When people's vital signs had stabilized, he'd take measurements, and then in the room with the screen he'd flash the photograph of the person you'd been paired up with.

The people who were in there watching the screen, the results were pretty predictable. For the strangers, there was no reaction; their bodies didn't care if they were thinking about the other stranger or

not. For the people shown photographs of their loved ones, there'd be some kind of flush—a definite physiological reaction. For the acquaintances, it was more sporadic.

But it was the other ones who mattered, the ones down the hall a hundred yards away from their partners without a photograph. Because: for the family members, their physical responses matched their partners'. If you printed out the physical reactions, side by side, they would match perfectly. If it was your mother or wife or son or brother down the hall in a soundproof room, when they were thinking of you, you knew. Your body knew, your atoms knew, you felt it somehow when they did. My dad claimed the odds that this would be a random coincidence were so staggering that you'd have an easier time trying to prove the existence of God.

That day, I told my dad I wanted to be the one who was looking at the picture. That part seemed easier, and I was afraid otherwise I'd screw it up, and I could tell how desperately he wanted this to go right. My dad took me next door to the first room, and I sat in the swiveling chair across from the TV screen and he had me lift up my shirt so he could stick the electrodes on.

“Your mom's going to understand when she sees the results,” he told me. His eyes were hopeful and bright, and maybe nervous, too, underneath that. “It's one thing to hear me talk about it, but when she sees it with the two of you, she'll understand.” He finished with the electrodes and patted me on the back. “Ready?”

I nodded. I said, “I hope I do it right.”

“You'll do fine. Just watch the screen.”

He disappeared again. My heart was thudding as I waited. The screen flashed to life, a picture of my mom appearing. It was her at their wedding reception, dressed in a long red qipao with her hair piled on top of her head; she was turning back over her shoulder to

look at the camera and she was laughing. I thought: *I love you*. I thought: *Please work*.

It was a few more minutes before my dad came and got me, removed all the electrodes, and brought me back into the main office with my mom. She was quiet the way people get when they want to be alone. My dad had two printouts, and he spread them out on the table.

“Look,” he said, and we saw it at the same time: the matching peaks and valleys in the graphs in my chart and in hers. He looked at my mom, and it took me a few seconds to identify his expression: he was shy. “Do you see?”

I saw. I saw it like there was nothing and no one else in the room at that moment. And something happened to me then, and we’ve never been religious, but that was the first time I got what it must be like, how sometimes something happens that takes you past yourself and you feel like your body’s not your own—you feel, all of a sudden, like it’s somehow much more than that. I think I have spent my life since then, with my pencils and ink and sketchbooks, trying to replicate that exact feeling to give to someone else.

“You see?” my dad said again, to my mom, and without a word she turned and walked out of the lab, her shoes clicking down the linoleum hallway like she was trying to get out as fast as she could.

Later, at home, my mom begged him to quit what he was doing. They argued about it when they thought I was sleeping, but she won, and extracted a promise from him—he’d dismantle the experiment. They never talked about it after that, and I never found out why it had pulled at her the way it did.

As for me, though, I wanted to believe him that his results proved something. I did believe him. I still believe him. Because if you’re tangled up in someone else, if your futures are tied that way, if that’s

real and if you know when it happens—then it means you know who you belong to, and you know whose fates are tied to yours, whether you like it or planned it or not, whether they still exist in the same world with you or they don't, and I think that's where everything begins and ends. I think that's everything.



# O N E

The letter from Rhode Island School of Design comes Thursday. In the moment it most likely arrives at my house in all its power to alter the course of my entire life, I'm sitting next to Harry in the Journalism Lab, trying to fake my way through the graphic Regina asked me to illustrate for Helen Yee's op-ed. I'm not checking my email, and in fact I've logged out of my account, partly because based on my obsessive stalking of old College Board forums I'm not expecting the decision just yet, but also partly because I know I'll never feel ready to find out and I can't risk getting that email at school in front of everyone.

When I get home that afternoon my dad is back from work early. He doesn't even let me get onto the property line before he's waving the letter in my face. My chest goes so tight it feels like my rib cage split right down the middle, my exposed heart pounding in open air.

"That's from—?" I start to say, and then can't say it aloud.

"Yes, yes. It's finally here from RISD." He and my mom both

pronounce it like four separate letters, R.I.S.D., instead of *ris-dee*. He's beaming. "Open it, Daniel, what does it say?"

"Okay. Um." I take a deep breath, try to calm my thudding heart. "Okay. Let's go inside first."

"It's the same outside or inside."

Except that inside we don't risk the neighbors getting a live-action shot of my every dream disintegrating. "Well—"

"Open it. Why wait?"

I applied for early decision two months and four days ago, and I've never been one of those people who can just put something so life-altering out of my mind. It's stupid how you can wait for something with every part of you, your every atom aligned toward that one moment, and then when it gets there you want more time. It's just that—if I didn't get in, I don't want to know it yet. I want the safety of hope just a little while longer.

"Here." He grabs it from me. "I'll open for you."

"Wait, Ba, I—"

He's too fast for me, though. My parents are convinced I'll get in. The day I turned in the portfolio my dad brought home sparkling cider and three mismatched champagne flutes he bought that day at Goodwill, and I haven't let myself imagine what it will do to them if I didn't make it. He's already got the letter out, is already reading it. "*Dear Daniel—*"

"Ba—"

Then he flings the letter to the grass. I've lost all vision. The world is a blur. His arms stutter toward me. Finally, I bring myself to look at his face.

He's laughing. Oh, God. My heart swells, shoving my lungs against my rib cage and ratcheting my pulse so high I'm dizzy. I did it. All this time, and I did it. It's real.



He reaches out and pats me awkwardly on the shoulder, and then—he can't contain himself—crushes me in a hug before stepping back, embarrassed, smoothing his shirt. His eyes have reddened.

“Congratulations, Daniel,” he says, fighting to keep his voice steady. “Everything is going to be all right for you now.”

It's real. I did it. I can picture it: my whole life radiating like a sunbeam out from this one point.

I got a scholarship beyond what I let myself hope for, so even if my parents can't pay a dime, I'm going. Inside, I text Harry a picture of the letter. He doesn't answer right away, and even though I know it's because he's in SAT tutoring, there's an empty space inside my excitement and relief that's waiting for him. A few minutes later—he must be hiding his phone from his tutor—his messages come flooding in:

*Holy shit Cheng!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

*You did it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

*I effing told you*

*Man you were so worried, but I told you*

*Okay draw me something and sign and date it, gonna make hella money off that someday when you're famous*

*Yo actually draw me like ten things, 10x the \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$*

That empty space fills, spills over. I can't keep the smile off my face.

Maybe I will draw him something. There's a pull of momentum that's carried over from opening the letter. I pull out a sketchbook, a

pen. Maybe muscle memory will take over and I won't have to over-think anything. I slide the pen against the page, let a tiny stream of ink spill out.

And then: nothing. Nothing comes.

Mostly, I draw portraits. From a distance, if you hold them at arm's length or tack them up on a wall, they look like fairly standard realistic renderings, but up close the forms dissolve and you see that what you thought was wavy hair or an earlobe is really a tangle of small vignettes that make up the person's life—a crumpled sheet of homework, say, a discarded candy wrapper, a plate of cupcakes that spell out *PROM*? I've always liked objects left behind.

But this is what's been haunting me the past two months: I can't draw anymore. At first I thought maybe it was that I was afraid of drawing something better than what I turned in for my applications, which would make me hate myself for doing early decision. But then it lasted, and keeps lasting, and I'm worried now that the truth is that something's empty at the core of me. That whatever well you're supposed to draw from to put anything worthwhile into the world—mine's run dry.

Once, a few years after we moved here, my dad came home with a new pack of sidewalk chalk for me. It was one of the really good packs, with twenty-four colors and sharp ends, and right away I had the idea that I'd make a gallery out of the sidewalk in front of the house. I'd use the lines in the sidewalk as frames.

I spent hours out there. I was working on a picture of my old best friend Ethan's dog, Trophy, when a man walking down the sidewalk stopped and loomed over me.

I smiled and said hi (in Texas you're friendly like that, and for a while it stuck with me). He was in his sixties, probably, white with gray hair and a gray beard and walking with a cane.

“Crawling all over our sidewalks,” he muttered. He jabbed his cane toward me and raised his voice. “You don’t own this neighborhood. It’s not yours to make a mess all over. That’s the problem with you people. You think you can come in here and take over. You tell your parents we don’t want you here. You go back where you came from.”

The world closed around me. I went inside. I never saw him again.

I never told anyone about it (what would I say?), but for days after that I tried to draw him. I probably had some vague idea that I could turn him into some kind of caricature, just some old guy frothing at the mouth who didn’t matter. Maybe you think if you can take something you’re bothered by and make it your own somehow you sap it of its power. So I worked on that sneer on his face as he looked at me, those shoulders puffed up with his own rightness. I drew pages and pages of him, and I named him Mr. X.

But he’d already moved in. Now he leers at me from several places on my wall, which I’ve been drawing on with Sharpies since we moved in, and whispers all the uglier things inside my head. I don’t know why I keep him around. I guess I think art should probe the things you’re afraid of and the things you can’t let go of, but maybe that’s just because deep down I want to believe you can conquer them, which might not actually be true.

Anyway. Lately I’m a reverse Midas, everything I touch turning to crap, and so good old Mr. X has been louder lately: *You’re a fraud, you peaked, it’s all downhill from here. The world doesn’t need your art. Get a real job.*

But now I have concrete proof I’m not a fraud, or at the very least I’m an extremely convincing one. Which should change everything, right? The fog should lift.

I just need to start producing again—prove getting in wasn’t a fluke. Prove I do have the future I’m supposed to after all. Prove I

deserve my future, at the very least. Not everyone gets one; I know that. It isn't something you can squander.

. . .

“Let's surprise her.”

“Huh?” I look up. My dad's hovering in my doorway, joy radiating off him. He's changed into khakis and a collared shirt, his hair combed. I say, “Where are you going?”

“We'll go to dinner to celebrate when your mother gets home. We'll surprise her.”

My dad has always loved surprises. Once, the summer I was eleven, he woke me up in the middle of the night and brought me, groggy, into the garage. On top of his car there was a telltale white paper sack, and he pointed to it.

“I went to Happy Donuts,” he said. “A bribe for you for after.”

“Um, for after—”

“Daniel.” He looked very serious. “On Saturday is Robin Cheung's wedding.”

My parents had been taking a ballroom dance class at the rec center for a few years; it was my mom's favorite hobby. (Weird, but: she also, every Summer Olympics, arranges her sleep schedule around the rhythmic gymnastics.) Their friends' son was getting married and my mom had at one point expressed a shy desire to show off the fox-trot they were learning at the wedding, but my dad, apparently, was having trouble with the moves.

“So fast,” he complained. The naked light bulb swayed overhead, throwing his shadow self across the bare wooden walls. I was bare-foot and in my pajamas. “The tango I can do, the cha-cha, but this one—too fast.”

“Um, so you want me to—”

“I bought you donuts,” he said quickly, seeing the look on my face. “What else do you want me to buy? I’ll buy you new pens. Do you want new pens? I’ll buy you whatever you want. And I won’t tell your friends. I promise.”

I am easily bought. I spent all night out there with him, my elbow resting on his and our hands interlaced as he led me around and around the concrete, his jaw tight with concentration. That weekend at the wedding—it was in the banquet hall at Dynasty, steamed bass and lobster noodles and pink neon uplights that made the lines of everyone’s faces look dramatic and sharp—I could see him tapping his fingers impatiently all through the dinner, all through the toasts. When the music started, he leapt up and held out a hand to my mom. I watched them on the dance floor, holding my breath, waiting to see if he’d pull it off. He did. Afterward she was beaming and out of breath, and they went to the open bar and came back with Manhattans for them and a Coke for me and they excitedly recapped all their steps, complimenting each other on their technique and form. I won’t lie: it was pretty damn cute. I want them to be that way—that sparkling, that effervescent—all the time.

“She will be so happy, Daniel,” he says now. “Can you imagine?” He pats his pocket for his phone. “Should we video her when you tell her?”

“Um—no?”

“She might never be so happy again. Maybe we’ll want it to look at later to remember.”

“That’s so fatalistic, Ba.” I get up and follow him out to the living room. “You want me to cook something for dinner instead? I think there’s pork chops in the freezer.” The one thing I can make: turn on pan, drop meat, cook.

He brushes it away. “No, no, tonight we’ll celebrate. When she gets home.”

My mom takes care of twin six-year-olds and a four-year-old for a family named the Lis up in the hills vaguely by where Harry lives. We wait for her on the couch. Usually my dad watches mostly news, scanning the screen like he can ward off disaster by watching it happen to other people, but today *Planet Earth* is on instead.

I grab a blanket from the armchair and wrap myself in it like a burrito. It’s been cold these days, and freezing, always freezing in the house, because my parents refuse to turn the heat on. I wear three layers to bed. Last year, when I drew a portrait of my mom, I made one of her eyes the thermostat, turned down all the way to fifty-five. I pull my blanket tighter and let myself imagine living in a (warm, heated) RISD dorm next year. Of all the people who applied, so many people who’ve probably been practicing their craft all their lives—they chose me.

My dad keeps glancing at the clock, and I can feel him getting restless as it traipses toward six-fifteen. It’s a minor emergency to both my parents whenever the other is late getting home, and I know my dad will take his phone from his pocket and tap his fingers against it, ready to call to check on her, right at six-sixteen.

“They were doing roadwork on Rainbow,” I say.

“Hm?”

I motion toward his phone. “If she’s late. That’s probably why.”

“Oh. Yes.” But he doesn’t look any more relaxed. Then, at six-fourteen, we hear the garage door open, and my dad jumps up, his face lighting up again. “Where’s your letter?”

“It’s on the table.”

“Where’s my phone?”

He's still patting the couch cushions looking for it when my mom comes in. He rises from the couch, smiling nervously, and then he whips out the phone to record. "Anna—Daniel has news for you."

"News? You have news?" My mom drops her purse and her bags of groceries from Marina. I watch the way their handles go flat, like a dog's ears when it's listening. "You got in?" She clutches my sleeve. "Did you get in? Did you—"

I flirt with the idea of pretending I didn't, of trying to make her think it was bad news, but in the end I can't hold back my grin. Her hands fly to her mouth, covering her smile, and her eyes fill with tears.

"He did it!" my dad yells from behind his phone like we're a hundred yards away, his voice bouncing back at us off the walls and hardwood floor. This video (which he'll watch on loop; I know him) is going to be all over the place, jiggling and blurred. He makes me show off the letter and hug my mom while he's filming. My mom cries.

We go to Santa Clara for Korean barbecue, and I drive, because for whatever reason they always have me drive when we're together. It's not far, fifteen minutes, but you always kind of feel it when you're leaving Cupertino, a bubble piercing. Cupertino's mostly residential neighborhoods and then strip malls with things like the kind of American-y diner that probably used to be big here back when it was all orchards and white people or the Asian restaurants/bakeries/tutoring centers/passport services/et cetera. It's also its own world—land of overachieving kids of tech titans, of badminton clubs and test prep empires and restaurants jockeying for Yelp reviews and volunteer corps run by freshmen who both care about the world but also care about establishing a long-term commitment to a cause they can point to on their college apps. When we first moved here from Austin, I

remember being weirded out by how Asian it was. And how everyone has money, too, but mostly in a more closet way than they do in Texas—here you can drop two million on a normal-looking three-bedroom house, so it's not something you necessarily notice right away the way you notice it when someone has a giant mansion on Lake Austin. (Harry's house is an exception—he has two sisters and both his grandfathers live with them, and all of them have their own bedroom and I think there are at least two other bedrooms no one's using.) I don't think anyone I know needs financial aid for college. I don't think anyone I know even needs loans.

It's packed inside the restaurant, but a table opens up just as we're coming in and my parents smile and smile like it's some kind of miracle. Already I'm sad for when the joy of this wears off, becomes everyday. It hasn't been like this with them in I don't even know how long.

The waitress comes and sets the laminated menus in front of us. My dad squares his shoulders and says, to my mom, "Now?" Over their menus, my parents exchange a long look. I say, "What?"

They both ignore me. Then my mom gives a nearly imperceptible nod, and my dad says, "Daniel, we have something for you."

He pulls out a plastic Ranch 99 bag with something inside it. I saw him bring it in, but it didn't register at the time. He hands it to me across the table. "Open it."

"It's for good luck," my mom says. They've taped the bag shut. My family's not the wrapping-paper type.

Inside it's a sweatshirt, the expensive embroidered kind, that says *RISD*. They forgot to take the price tag off. It cost nearly seventy dollars.

"Try it on," my dad says, beaming, so I shove my seat back far enough that I can shrug into the sweatshirt. It has that new look, the



creases still showing where it was folded, and it's at least two sizes too big—for whatever reason both my parents think bigger clothes are practical, maybe because you get more fabric for your money or something—and just enthusiastic enough to look dorky. That, or dickish, like I'm the kind of guy who's going to work it into conversation every chance he gets that I'm going to my first-choice art school. My dad says, "What do you think?"

They must have bought this when I applied, must have had it waiting all along. I feel my eyes filling.

"It's great," I say, and put on the biggest smile I can muster. I try to keep that image of the tape on the bag, those creases like he's been clutching it close, to draw later on. "Wow. Thanks. I love it."

"Good." My dad meets my mom's eyes and smiles. "This is so big, Daniel. This is—" His voice breaks, and he swipes at his eyes. "This is everything we wanted."

"You will have the future we hoped for," my mom says. Her eyes are shining at me.

My dad unfolds his napkin into his lap, then smooths it out on the table and refolds it. It looks lumpy and inexact. He glances up at us, like he's going to say something. My mom's eyes are still glittering, but it suspends a little as she looks at him, leaves open space for something like alarm to flash across her face. "What is it?"

He draws a long breath. He looks back and forth between us and starts to speak, but then he stops himself, covering it with a smile. "Nothing. It can wait."

I say, "No, what was it?"

"Another time." He raises his glass of water. "To Daniel. Our beloved son."

"To Daniel," my mom echoes after a second or two, and they clink their glasses against mine.

After that we spend nearly ten minutes settling on our order, and I keep the sweatshirt on until my mom fusses in this proud way and tells me I should take it off, that I don't want to spill anything on it. The waitress hovers by our table, impatient, and I give her an apologetic smile, but I'm not actually sorry. Because these are the best kind of moments: all of us plotting what we'll eat, that comfort you can slip into with the people who know you best, who love you with a fierceness you'll probably never understand.

I'm lucky. I've always been.

## T W O

I wake up early to get ready for the Journalism field trip to San Francisco that Regina's making us all go on, and there's a note on the kitchen table, my mom's loopy lettering scrawled on the back of a junk mail envelope saying my parents went to Costco. They always come back weekend mornings laden with cardboard flats of frozen chicken breasts and dumplings and greens.

I'm low on cash, like always, so I should bring something to the city in case I get hungry. I'm pretty sure I remember seeing packs of beef jerky in the hall closet, and so I go to look. When I open the closet door, a barely contained twelve-pack of Costco paper towels tumbles out. My parents—I'll just put this out there—are like one Great Depression away from being full-on hoarders. They keep everything. They've always been too Asian to throw away things like plastic bags, but they also keep stuff like expired coupons just in case, plastic utensils and packets of condiments that come with fast food, single socks where the other one's missing.

I start to put the paper towels back. Behind where they were stuffed is this medium-sized box labeled with just my dad's name. And something about the careful, centered way my dad's name is lettered on, like someone took the time to do it, and also the way the box is jammed in the closet like it's supposed to be out of sight, catch my attention. I pull it out to look at.

It's taped, and I peel the tape up gently so none of the box comes off with it. Inside there's a little stuffed bear I used to play with that I haven't seen in years. I named him Zhu Zhu—which at the time I thought was hilarious, a bear named *Pig*—that my dad gave me when we moved to California. I hold him a moment, finger his synthetic fur, and get that rush of nostalgia, your memories compressed into some intangible feeling mixed with the searing longing you get for a time that's lost to you now. For a long time after I outgrew Zhu Zhu, my dad kept him on his pillow. I'm kind of touched my dad saved him.

Zhu Zhu was resting on the kind of piles of clutter that steadily collect everywhere on our counters and in our drawers: a few old carbon copies of checks made out to people I haven't heard of and a handful of what look like some kind of loan documents, a sleeve of pictures that must be from China—some roads and scenes from a car trip, a high-rise apartment building, a pharmacy—and two small unsigned watercolors, good but not quite professional, one of a dark blue bird and one of a multicolored dragon, not at all the kind of art I've ever known my dad to collect. I flip the dragon one over to see if there's anything on the back, but it's blank. Underneath all that is a bulging file in a yellowed rubber band labeled, in my dad's handwriting, *Ballads*. When I slide off the rubber band, a news clipping flutters out onto my desk. It's a real estate article about a house for sale in Atherton, which is where all the venture capitalists live, thirty or so minutes north of here.

I try to lay everything out on my desk, but there are too many papers, and that's where things get—weird. Nearly everything is about a guy named Clay Ballard. There are a few dozen pictures printed off what looks like a Google images search: some headshots, him at some kind of awards banquet or something shaking hands with a balding man in a suit, a picture of him and his wife at some kind of gala. He looks like a generic white dad—mostly trim, straight white teeth, kind of weathered-looking like maybe he plays a lot of golf. There are all kinds of printouts of public records and also ones that I think you'd actually have to, like, go to some kind of city office to get—a marriage license, copies of a sale of a home in Atherton, a six-bedroom mansion with a wine cellar and a guesthouse that sold for seven million dollars. Toward the bottom there are a few printouts on Sheila Ballard, who I assume must be his wife.

I've never seen either of them or heard their names come up once. I don't know what to make of it. They aren't anyone from UT or either of the labs at San José State that my dad worked with, and the sheer volume of it all, the obsessive detail, is staggering.

In the bottom of the box there are a bunch of letters in Chinese. For all the years of Chinese school I sat through on Saturdays as a kid (and despite the fact that my parents hardly speak English at home), I still can barely read Chinese worth crap, and it isn't until I paw through them, and then in one of them there's a drawing—a child, a grubby fist grabbing a rice paddle—that I realize these must be letters from my grandfather, that probably those watercolors were his too, and this drawing is my sister. I go cold and then hot all over all in a split second, and my heart stutters against my chest. It feels like meeting ghosts.

I'm an only child now, and thought I was one for a long time, but I was supposed to have a sister. Did have a sister, actually, who came

and then died before me, a sister who exists now in her absence. I know almost nothing about her except the very fact of her.

I've spoken with my parents about this exactly once. When we moved here in kindergarten, I found drawings of her lodged in one of my parents' old books and brought it to my mom to ask who it was. My mom was in her garden, her garden gloves pulled over her sleeves and her face shielded by her giant plastic visor, when I brought the pictures out to her.

"Who drew these?" I asked.

She froze for a moment and grabbed the papers, the color pooling like watercolor in her cheeks. Her mouth worked without sound. "Where did you find this?"

"In the garage."

She closed her eyes. Her lips were trembling. "It's—that was not for you to find."

"Did you draw them?"

"No. Your grandfather."

I'd never known that any of my relatives liked to draw, too. My parents never brought it up. I'd wished they had. "Who is it? It's not me, right?"

"Another baby."

"Another—*your* baby?"

She nodded.

"And Ba's?"

"Yes."

"So I have a brother? Or—"

"No. Sister. Dead."

All my life I'd been an only child, and in that moment the person I'd been disappeared. The world tilted around me. "When?"

“In Wuhan.” She opened her eyes without looking at me. “Before you.”

She didn’t mean to tell me, and if I hadn’t caught her so completely off guard, I don’t think she ever would have. Maybe if she’d had more time she would’ve come up with a better story. She could have told me the baby was her, or my dad, or a friend. I would’ve believed her.

That was the first time I ever saw her have a panic attack: there in front of me she went clammy and pale, and she rocked forward and dropped her trowel and clutched her chest. I thought she would die. I thought it was my fault.

Afterward she felt bad about it, I think—she was brusque in that way she gets when you make too much of a fuss over her, and she told me not to tell my dad any of it. I didn’t. And I never brought up my sister again.

I’ve never stopped thinking about her, though. The question that most consumed me at first—still does a lot of the time—was what happened. Every time I heard sirens I thought about her, imagining her falling from an open window or getting struck by a car. When I learned to swim, I wondered if she’d drowned. In AP Bio this fall we studied genetic diseases and I spent the whole unit low-key worrying that my parents couldn’t bring themselves to tell me that I too had whatever degenerative and fatal disease had killed my sister. Whenever I see headlines of kidnappings or child abuse I wonder if she was old enough to realize what was happening to her, whatever it was.

And I wonder about the rest of it, too. I wonder where it happened. I wonder if they held her body. I wonder when she was born and how much older than me she would’ve been. I wonder what her name was. When we moved to California, my parents changed our

last name from Tseng to Cheng because it was easier for Americans to pronounce (I still remember my mom's tight smile every time white people mangled *Tseng*, the same way she reacted once when some of the other kids spoke nonsense syllables at me pretending it was Chinese, the same way she reacted when people spoke loudly and slowly to her like she was a child), and I think about that sometimes now, bubbling in my name on Scantrons or typing it for college forms—how my sister died with a name the rest of us gave up. Sometimes I imagine her older, nine or ten or fifteen or twenty or however old she'd be now. And I imagine her filling all the air in every room of the house.

I look at my grandfather's drawings in the letters for a long time. They're good—confident pen strokes, not a single extraneous one.

The rest of it, obviously, I understand why he'd keep—Zhu Zhu, the letters from my grandfather. But that file on the Ballards is beyond my understanding, and it makes me wonder. I guess I didn't necessarily think I knew their whole story; I knew I didn't. I just never thought there might be that much more to know.

• • •

My parents come back from Costco weighted down with bags, and I go out to help unload everything from the car. In the back seat there are three paper sample cups my mom saved me: a square inch of coffee cake, seven Jelly Bellies, a teriyaki meatball. That careful way they're balanced there—I take a picture with my phone to draw sometime later before hauling the bags inside.

They brought home frozen burritos, and I microwave one while I'm waiting for Harry. My mom goes out into her garden, and through the window I can see her kneeling to check on her kabochas. She has



six raised garden beds my dad and I helped her make, pomegranate and persimmon and citrus trees she planted when we first moved in, an herb garden that runs along the back fence, and in the front yard all her favorite flowers: hydrangeas and gardenias and tuberoses in the spring. Our house itself is old and run-down, and I remember what the yard looked like when we first moved in—hard, parched dirt and dead weeds, the yard of an old couple who drew the curtains and never looked outside. One of my bedroom windows looks out on the backyard and sometimes outside when she thinks no one’s watching I see my mom stand up with her hands on her hips and survey it all, satisfied and proud and amazed.

My dad sits down at the kitchen table with the laptop, typing what I can see from the short lines of text is some kind of list. He adores lists. Once, when I was a kid, I found a notepad on his desk with this one: *School. Friend. Sport interest. What are your favorite celebrity. Imagination and opinion.* The list was titled *Question to ask Daniel for conversation.* None of his lists, though, ever felt as obsessively gathered as what I found in the closet.

When the microwave beeps I say, “Hey, Ba, question—who are the Ballards?”

His head snaps toward me. “Excuse me?”

“I was just wondering. I, ah, found a box of yours in the closet with some files—”

His face lights up. Not in the way you say it when you mean someone’s happy, but more like an explosion in the night—a sudden flash of heat and noise.

He rises. “Were you looking through my belongings?”

“No. I saw it in the closet. I was looking for beef jerky.”

“Why did you go into that box? It was taped shut. You went into my personal things without permission.”

I put up my hands. “I didn’t know what it was. I thought—”

“Daniel, you know better. I don’t want to hear about it again. And I don’t want you to ever bring that name up with your mother. Is that clear? Don’t ever—”

My mom comes in through the sliding door then, holding a bunch of beets, and my dad stops. Did he say not to bring it up with her because it’s something she doesn’t know about, or something she does? I hear the familiar sound of Harry’s car pulling into the driveway, and hoist myself off the chair.

“I’m going,” I say. “Bye.”

They both start talking at the same time. “Where are you—” my mom says, and my dad says, “Did we say you could—”

“I’m going with Harry.” I edge toward the door. “I asked you already earlier in the week.”

“Where are you going?”

“Just to his house.”

“What for?”

“Just school stuff.”

They exchange that look that means they’re weighing something I’ve asked for against all the threats of the world—a cell network glitch that means they can’t reach me if they need to, a blind curve up in the hills by Harry’s house. “Well, all right.” My mom drops her beets in the sink. “Come back in an hour.”

I definitely can’t get to San Francisco and then back in an hour. “We have to work on some Journalism stuff, so it’s going to take all morning. Maybe until after lunch.”

“Aiya, Daniel, I don’t like you to be gone so much. If something happens, and we can’t call you—”

“I know.” I’ve long since stopped trying to argue or to promise

that nothing will ever happen, even when I'm going to be just a few minutes away. "I'll be careful."

"Well—" She makes a *tsking* sound with her tongue. "All right. Go study with Harry. Just be careful."

"Wait," my dad says. He looks around, his voice infected with false cheer, like he wasn't just mad at me. "Where's your sweatshirt? Wear it to show Harry. Show it off."

"Oh, ah, right." It's on the kitchen table (I left it there last night, and someone, probably my mom, folded it carefully with the letters facing out), and I shrug it on. "Look good?"

"Perfect." My dad smiles, a real smile; the sweatshirt's worked its magic. "Have a good time."

. . .

I make it outside just as Harry's coming up our walkway (Harry isn't the kind of person who just pulls up and honks, even if he's been your best friend four years), and I hustle him back into the car.

"I didn't want you getting all chatty with my parents," I say over his complaining.

"Aw, your parents love me."

I roll my eyes. It's true, though; all parents love him. "Well, too bad for them I'm too selfish to let you."

"You're not selfish."

"In your professional opinion."

"Don't get so sarcastic. You're, like, the opposite of a selfish person. It's a compliment."

I feel the words blooming on my cheeks. "I just didn't want them roping you into a conversation. I know you're a shitty liar."

“What would I have to lie about?”

“I told them we’re just going to your house.” Harry lives too far up in the hills to walk, so I always get a ride if I’m going up there. “You know how they are. They’d flip out if I said I wanted to go to San Francisco.” Also, it’s true: Harry lies terribly. At his core, I think, he’s too noble to have any real sense of self-preservation.

Inside, Harry unbuttons the cuffs of his sleeves and rolls them in precise, even segments before laying his hands on the steering wheel. A few times—I would die before I told him this—I’ve sketched his forearms, the map his veins traces over them, the tan he keeps even in winter. He says, “I am not a shitty liar.”

I click my seat belt on. “Um, you can’t even say that without your voice getting all weird and defensive, so I think I’ve made my case. Hey—question.” As he backs onto the street, I tell him about my dad’s files. “That’s not weird, right?”

“Uh, a stalkery box of information about some rando? It’s definitely weird.”

“You think so?” I make a face. I wanted him to tell me I was overreacting.

“Yeah, but your parents have always been weird about things.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s weird how they’ve never once taken you home to China, for one thing. Haven’t you been, like, all over the US and—”

“I think China’s probably just too sad for them now.”

“I guess I could see that, yeah.” He shrugs. “Still. They just kind of seem like people with secrets. You went years without knowing you even had a sister, right? And don’t they still never talk about her?” Check and check. “Who were the people?”

“Nobody I know. I don’t even know how my parents would know them.” It’s probably nothing. All the same the road blurs in front of

me a second, and I feel a little bit carsick. “So you’d maybe worry at least a little, then?”

“If someone explicitly told me not to? It’s like if I say don’t picture me naked—what’s the first thing you do?”

My cheeks go hot, and then the rest of me. It’s enough to pull me back from the ledge, though, back onto solid ground. I say, “I could’ve done without that visual, thanks.”

He grins. “Be nice. Don’t make me pull over.” We stop at a light on Stelling, and he skims his eyes over me. “Hey, so, uh . . . nice sweatshirt.”

“Yep.” That was definitely not a compliment. I swear if he says one word about my sweatshirt, I’ll kick his ass.

“That new?”

“Yep,” I say again. I don’t need Harry to confirm for me that in its hugeness and overenthusiastic newness it looks as dweeby as I know it does. I want the gift my parents gave me to be worth what they paid for it, worth how excited they were.

“Rocking those creases. Are you, uh, wearing that when we get there?”

I wasn’t going to, I was going to take it off once I got in the car, but as soon as he says it my plans make an abrupt U-turn. With any luck he’ll spend the car ride worrying every single person he sees today will think, *Why is Harry Wong best friends with a loser in a giant, creased sweatshirt?* I will wear this sweatshirt at him the entire day. “Yeah. Why?”

“It just looks so . . . new.”

I know this about Harry: he thinks it’s pathetic in an overeager kind of way to wear anything right after you bought it, or at least to look like you did, so every time he gets something new he washes it twice before he puts it on. “It is new.”

He takes his hands off the wheel to hold them up in defeat. “Okay, whatever. You do you.”

“You’re so generous. Has anyone ever told you that? *So* generous.”

“Says the guy getting a free ride to San Francisco.”

I roll my eyes. “You’d be going anyway.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t. Maybe I’m just going because you’d be stranded at home otherwise.”

“Okay, (a) you would definitely go because otherwise Regina would kill you, and (b) don’t pretend like you’re not glad to have an excuse. What would you be doing at home all day instead? Going to tutoring?”

He grins in that self-deprecating way of his, his eyes crinkling up. It is, I’ll admit, one of the more charming habits he has. “For *your* information, I’d be probably going hog wild studying for the SAT IIs. So hold up on your smugness there.”

He probably would be, too. There is basically nothing Harry won’t do in service of Princeton, which is the only Ivy that rejected his sister and, therefore, the only school he wants. It’s why he’s the managing editor of our school paper, second-in-command to Regina, despite being someone who has no real love of writing and who (I’ll just say it) has a crap eye for design. He’s also, this year: ASB president, treasurer of National Honor Society, and the director of the Students Reaching Out tutoring club. He got a near-perfect score on his SAT and has a 4.8 GPA and is nationally ranked (low, but still) in tennis doubles. And this is still as true as it’s been as long as I’ve known him: he’s always the most popular guy in any room he’s in. When I list it all out like that I kind of remember why I used to really hate him.

When he pulls onto Regina’s street he looks in the rearview mirror

like he's making sure no one's in the back seat listening and says, "Has Regina seemed kind of—off to you lately?"

"What do you mean off? You see her more than I do."

"Yeah, but you guys talk. Maybe I'm just imagining it."

I don't think he's imagining it. "We don't talk that much lately."

"Ah," he says. "Did you know she stopped going to her church?"

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Yeah. And, I mean—the one year's coming up, so—"

I feel that same old catch in my heart. "Right."

"On March seventh."

"I know when it is."

He glances at me in a way I can't quite read. I feel the color rise in my cheeks. He says, "Regina wants to put something in the paper."

"Yeah, no, they will definitely not let us put something in the paper."

"You don't think if—"

"No. Definitely not. Zero chance."

"Yeah, you're right." He sighs. "Such bullshit. She really wants to. You know how she is."

I do know how she is. Except maybe that isn't true; I know how she used to be.

He gets out of the car to go knock, and they come back together. Regina looks put together as always, in bright lipstick, tight dark pants, a billowy white top, and a dark floppy hat that makes her look vaguely 1920s-ish. She has a model's high, angular cheekbones and full lips—she's striking, and I've always liked drawing her. (For her part, she dislikes being drawn. I think it makes her self-conscious.) She's pretty in that way that makes people assume your life is going well.

I open the door to give her the front seat, but she waves me off. I smile hello, hold my breath a little. She slides into the back seat.

“Congratulations, Danny,” she says in a way I can’t call anything other than nice, but that also doesn’t exactly flood the car with warmth. “You’ve wanted this for so long.”

I say, “Thanks, Reg.” And I think how last year I would’ve told her right away about all those files I found, too.

Then, like she read my mind, she leans forward and touches my elbow. “I knew you’d get in.” And maybe that’s the most she has right now. Maybe I shouldn’t read into it.

“You think it’s the kind of talk where they have like donuts or anything?” Harry says. “Or you think we have time to stop somewhere?”

Regina rolls her eyes. “No and no. We can’t be late. Everyone probably hates me already for making them go to this.”

He grins at her in the rearview mirror. “Technically it’s not too late to cancel.”

“The talk sounds important, right?” Harry was teasing—he’s careful around her a lot these days—but Regina says it as if he wasn’t. “I just want to make sure we know we have the right to say what we want.”

“Pretty sure people are mostly still writing about, like, their buddies on the tennis team,” I say lightly. Harry glares at me. I must have gotten the tone wrong.

“Mostly, sure, but what about the times they’re not? It’s like that stupid story about starfish,” she says, adjusting her seat belt. “There’s hundreds stranded on the beach and you throw a few back because it makes a difference to those particular few.”

“Aw, you think that’s stupid?” Harry says. “I think it’s kind of nice.”

“It’s a parable of rampant apathy. Why is there only one guy out



there rescuing millions of suffocating starfish? It's a story about how horrible things happen because ninety-nine point nine percent of people can't be bothered."

"Not you," Harry says cheerfully. He twists around and backs out of the driveway. "There is nothing too small for you to be bothered by."

If I'm being honest, I still don't totally get the two of them, and they've been together since sophomore year. I will concede that in a way it felt weirdly inevitable, a mash-up of ambition and popularity and attractiveness, a test-tube match, all roads leading to each other. Harry asked her to homecoming—a flash mob, a bouquet of peonies because that's her favorite flower, a platter of chocolate-covered strawberries with letters that spelled *YOU + ME?*—and then after that they just kind of stayed together, swapped all their profile pictures to ones of the two of them, and in a way it felt weird that they'd ever been separate entities altogether.

But then I always wondered, always still wonder. All that time last year when they were ensconced together—what all happened between them? I can't exactly imagine her breaking down in front of him, pouring her heart out to him, and from comments he makes sometimes I don't think she ever really did. And, like—does he think of her first all the time? She's who he imagines calling first when he gets his letter from Princeton, the audience he pictures when he's collecting all the important and also the stupid insignificant parts of his day to give to someone? When he imagines disasters happening, cancer or nuclear fallout or the Big One we're supposed to get in California, at night when it's quiet and he feels all the weight of his own life pressing in on him, she's the lurch in his stomach and the hand he gropes around for in the dark?

But maybe it's just that I don't want to see it. I would do anything

for Harry—and have—and sometimes I picture what it would look like to come up against the hard wall of the limits of how far he'd be willing to go for me.

Which I know is crappy. They're together. And Regina's my friend too. At least, I think she still is.

"Anyway, no one hates you for making us go," Harry says. "It'll be interesting to hear the guy talk."

"It should be. I heard his TED talk about all the things at schools that get censored," she says. "Like banned books and dress code issues. And . . ."

She trails off. We both know what she means, though; there's not a single person in our grade who doesn't recognize that tentative pause, the guilt you always feel plunging everyone around you back into the same dark territory. You always wonder if people just want to forget.

I wait to see then if she'll trust me with what she told Harry, the story she's planning to write. She changes the subject instead, and we talk about personal statements for the next ten or twelve miles north.

We hit traffic then, a sea of red taillights, and Harry swears softly under his breath. He can give a speech in front of all two thousand people at our school, he can go months without saying anything negative about another person, but it's always been the little things that set him off—stick him in traffic, or let his phone run out of battery, and it's like his whole conception of the world collapses: how is this possibly happening to him?

It's clear and cool when we get into San Francisco, the streets swollen—brogrammers in their gym clothes, Asian grandmas carrying pink bakery bags, tourists with their fanny packs and DSLRs, white moms in yoga pants pushing bulky strollers with Philz cups in the cup holders. We park in the Portsmouth Square garage and

emerge from the rickety elevator back into the sunlight among all the kids clambering up play structures and the Chinese grandfathers playing chess. Regina, who is excellent at time management and therefore looked up walking directions while we were in the elevator, strides toward the corner so fast it takes me and Harry a few seconds to catch up.

Regina could do anything, I think, become a doctor or an engineer or the lawyer her parents want, but she's dreamed her entire life of going to Northwestern, which has the best journalism program in the nation, and becoming a reporter. She can spend literally hours reading through headlines and going down current-events rabbit holes. She told me once when she was small she knew the names of TV anchors before she did her grandparents and relatives. But reporters make, like, ten dollars, and her parents have made it abundantly clear they have no interest in sending her to major in communications or broadcast journalism. She's supposed to go into pre-law.

"I wish my parents would've moved here instead," Regina says as Google Maps steers us through a back alley, the word *DEFIANCE* tagged across the wall in a bright, arresting blue. I like the lines of the lettering, the way they reach around themselves and keep your gaze captive. "I'm so ready to be done with Cupertino."

"Really? You like this better?" Harry says, gesturing toward a clump of garbage cans. "It smells like piss."

"I don't mean I wish they'd moved *right* here to this alley. But, yes, I like it better."

"Why? It's, like, dirty here. I bet you'll miss Cupertino when you're gone."

We're walking fast still, and she's a little out of breath. "Really? I'll miss driving down the street and seeing nothing but tutoring centers? I'll miss everyone else's parents knowing exactly what I got on

my SATs and teachers having to commute from like Morgan Hill because Cupertino is full of rich NIMBYs who refuse to build more housing? I'll miss the hundred percent rule?"

Cupertino's hundred percent rule is this: if you go out in Cupertino, there's a hundred percent chance you'll see someone you know. (Its corollary is the two hundred percent rule, which is that if you're wearing pj's/haven't showered, your odds double.)

"Come on, it's not all bad. Other cities are just easy to romanticize because we don't live in them. It would be a pain to live in San Francisco. There's like zero parking."

"People should use transit more often anyway. Didn't your dad vote against high-speed—"

"Okay, yes, but that's just because the particular proposal wasn't fiscally responsible. He's working on another one." Harry always gets defensive about his dad, even though I know it's not like he agrees with him all the time anyway. (Mr. Wong retired after making a bunch of money and went into politics and is a state senator now, after a term on the school board and two as our mayor.) "But also, people like you there. You know? It feels kind of crappy to talk about how much you hate it when that's where all your friends are."

"When do Northwestern decisions come out?" I say quickly, before she has to answer him—I recognize that slight rise in his voice.

"I don't know exactly when," she says. I'm pretty sure she's lying. "Sometime in the spring. I doubt I'll get in. Even if I do my parents probably won't let me go."

"I'm sure you'll get in. I hope it all works out okay," I say. Which—I can hear how formal it sounds. I feel like that sometimes with her now, stiff and awkward and overly careful. One time in junior high Sandra told me her irrational fear was that she'd drop a diary with all her secrets in it. *You keep a diary like that?* I'd said, surprised—I

couldn't imagine her having the patience—and she laughed. *Of course not, loser. I said it was an irrational fear.* But that's how it feels with Regina sometimes now, too, that I'm worried I'll slip and just randomly blurt out everything I'm guilty of.

"You ever been to Northwestern?" Harry says to me. "It's like—rich white kid central. It's different from Cupertino, sure, but maybe it's not better. Most places aren't. Everywhere's just different."

"You've been there?" she says. She knows he hasn't.

"I've looked it up."

"You'd live here forever, wouldn't you?"

"I mean, yeah, it's a nice place to live."

"Nice like what? Nice like easy?"

"Sure." He tries to mask it with a smile, but there's a tightness in his voice. "It makes sense. You know what's expected. I like people to tell me what they want from me, sue me. It's fine here."

We're meeting everyone outside the International Hall on Larkin. I was maybe 30 percent nervous everyone would bail at the last minute, but nearly everyone's there already by the time we show up. Regina slips into what I think of as her Editor Mode—circling the crowds with a smile for everyone and this certain, ardent way of listening to people, even just in throwaway conversation, that makes you feel like she's incredibly glad you're there.

Reemu Kapoor turns around and lights up when she sees me. "Danny! You got into RISD!" She gives me a hug. "That's so awesome."

Harry grins. "I, uh, maybe told people."

And then a crush of people all surround me, jostling and high-fiving and hugging. Harry wasn't kidding. I think literally everyone comes up to me to say congratulations, weaving me into their net of goodwill. I can feel my face going all red, my smile stretching wide enough that it starts to hurt.

I still can't quite wrap my head around the fact that this whole universe we've inhabited nearly all our lives is going to dissolve itself in just six months, all of us flung to the far reaches of the world. I'm not like Regina—I love Cupertino. I love the trees and the quiet streets and the way the hills glow behind everything in the late afternoon; I love how contained it all is, how you can spend your whole life in a two- or three-mile radius and not feel like you're missing very much. I love the people at school. I even love the hundred percent rule.

Maybe Regina blames Cupertino, though. You can play what-ifs forever. Maybe everything would've been different in a different place, with different people, with different pressures. I can't fault her for wondering. I wonder too.

The talk is behind schedule; the doors still haven't opened. There are maybe a few dozen other people here, not exactly the crowd that screams *must-see event!!* Behind me Chris Young and Andrew Hatmaker are getting bored.

"This talk better blow my mind," Chris says. "It better change—"

"Why?" Harry says sharply, whirling around to stare at Chris. His eyebrows go up and stay there.

"Come on, there's nothing else you'd rather be doing with your Saturday?" Chris says. In middle school Chris was in love with Regina. He used to corner me in the locker room sometimes and demand to know whether I was dating her.

"I'm in this great city with a lot of friends, so yeah, I'd say this is pretty good."

"I wanted to sleep in."

"Sucks to your assmar, then, doesn't it?" Harry's tone is friendly, but his expression is hard. "I thought it was a really good idea Regina came up with."

Chris backs down. “Right,” he says. “Yeah, okay.” He offers Harry a smile. Harry doesn’t return it, and stares him down a few more seconds before turning back around. That’s new since March with Harry, that hair-trigger protectiveness at the slightest hint anyone might be somehow in opposition to something, anything, Regina wants.

The doors open then, and we go in. At the front of the room there’s a thirtyish white guy in a blazer writing something behind a podium. The only three sophomores in Journalism, Esther Rhee and Lori Choi and Maureen Chong, sit in front of me. Esther has a fashion blog, and every now and then I glance at it—she has a good eye, lots of clean text and white space, whimsical outfits with Bible verses Photoshopped along the borders and sale alerts and every now and then posts about fighting child trafficking. She always writes features stories, usually about people she knows going on missions trips or spearheading volunteering orgs.

I see Esther’s expression change when the first slide goes up, the ACLU logo, and she leans over and whispers something to Lori and Maureen. They’re all close friends, insular in a way that feels familiar to me. (Also, I’m like 95 percent sure they all have a thing for Harry.) The three of them squint at the screen and duck their heads together, conferring in the way you do when you don’t want anyone else to hear what you’re saying. I can’t tell if Regina notices.

The guy speaking, to put it delicately, is full of crap. Basic slides, mansplanations about legal implications of the First Amendment, and then a long, smug humblebrag about how he represented some school that challenged free speech rules and text message records. I let my mind wander to RISD instead. Regina’s watching sharply, a notebook ready, but I never see her actually write anything down.

“Great talk,” I tell her as we’re filtering out of the theater. “Did you like it?”

She looks around, then drops her voice. “I can’t believe I made everyone come watch this.”

“Yeah, maybe don’t say that in front of Chris.”

When we’re all back outside, blinking in the sunlight, everyone gathers at the corner and Regina turns on her bright public smile.

“Thanks everyone for coming,” she says. “Okay, so the guy was kind of douchey, yes?” People laugh. I see Esther whisper something to Lori and Maureen. “That aside, I thought he had some really good points about how important it is to not let your school or anyone else dictate what you can and can’t say.” I obviously have no standing to say this since I actively stopped listening, but the parts I did hear—that didn’t quite sound like his point. And she’s done controversial stories before—one about this mom who always complains to the school board about swearing in books we read, an interview with an anonymous classmate (she wouldn’t even tell me and Harry who it was) who’d had an abortion. I don’t remember getting this same speech any of the other times, even though there were people, Esther especially, who didn’t think we should publicize abortion. “I just think it’s so important that we—that we be brave in the stories we want to write. And that we remember we have this platform and this influence, and if we aren’t using it to tell people what matters, even if it’s risky, then what’s the point?”

• • •

“Every city should be laid out as a grid,” Harry says as we’re trying to find our way back to the car. “Like, seriously”—he motions to the map pulled up on his phone—“the hell is this?”



“I like San Francisco,” I say. “What kind of dull city is all straight lines?”

“New York, for one.”

“You’re just crap with directions.”

He elbows me. We find Jackson Street. I doubt where we are here in Chinatown looks anything like Shiyen; still, it’s hard not to draw comparisons to the few things I’ve heard my parents talk about. When I was a kid my mom used to tell me sometimes about the food they grew up eating there, savory donuts and sea cucumbers and shaomai. We go by clothing stores with touristy sweatshirts spilling from the storefronts, cheap blue Chinese vases and bamboo cuttings and bright plastic toys all laid out on sidewalk displays, and when we pass by a bakery, its windows steamy, Regina turns to Harry and says, “You know the way you were talking to Chris today? Don’t do that.”

Harry stiffens. “He was just being so negative.”

“People are allowed to be negative.”

“Why bother? There’s so much crap in the world already. Suck it up and find the good.”

“You’re so . . . optimistic,” she says after a little while, and it doesn’t come out sounding like a good thing.

Harry watches her a moment, then says, more mildly than I was expecting, “True.” He’d never say it, but I think he’s a little hurt. And, I mean, I get what she’s saying, because it annoys me about Harry sometimes too—in his world there’s always a right solution, always a reward waiting if you put in the work, always a pot of gold at the end of every rainbow. But it’s one of the best things about him, too. It’s nice to have someone in your life you don’t have to worry about as much, someone you know will always be okay.

It never used to be like this with her. I would never in a million years describe Regina as mellow, or laid-back, but there was always a

kind of easiness to her intensity, too. Or maybe that's the wrong word; maybe it's just that just about anything feels easy when you believe your friendship with someone is unshakeable.

And I would've said ours was. I've known Regina forever, ever since I moved here and wound up in the same kindergarten class as her and Sandra. Regina and I were both new to Cupertino that year, me from Texas and her from Taiwan, and I knew I wanted to be friends my first week of school when Mrs. Welton yelled at Jincen Wong for knocking over a stack of papers on her desk and Regina gave her a look of such disgust it would've withered my heart. "It was an *accident*," she said, and then sat glaring at her desk with her arms crossed the rest of the day. At Regnart we were always pretty segregated by gender, and I spent most of my time roaming the blacktop and the field in noisy clumps of boys. But Regina's was the friendship I'll always look back on as the most important one I had growing up, the person who always knew me best and whose opinion I always needed before I was sure how I really felt about anything.

We both went to Primary Plus for after-school care and we'd hang out at the tables and I'd draw and she'd write news stories about the people in our class. Sometimes we'd make little books together (I still have some) and we'd imagine a whole future for ourselves, bringing what we wanted to life on our stapled pages. You know people by what it is they want most. When I broke my arm in sixth grade she bought me a left-handed notebook so I could try to sketch with my left hand; she knew how restless I felt, my mind all congested, when I couldn't draw. And she used to come over sometimes when she was fighting with her parents, which was often. Nothing she did was ever good enough for them, her schoolwork or her violin or her helping around the house or her attitude, the way she looked or the things she wanted for herself. One time, I remember, sophomore year just

after she'd gotten her license, it was the middle of the night and she'd gotten into a screaming match with her mom about the future and her mom—who said a lot of awful things to her but this one always stands out for me—told her she was too ugly to be on TV. I snuck out of the house with a blanket and we lay out on my front lawn and looked up at the stars. It occurred to me to wonder if I should feel guilty (by then she was with Harry already), but lying there like that with her didn't feel like anything, so I didn't. She never liked talking about whatever was going on at home, so after we got bored of stargazing (ten seconds, probably; not much to stars when you're this far away) we watched cat videos online and laughed about stupid stuff for hours and then I woke up at dawn, damp with dew, and then I had to shake her awake and hurry inside, all clammy in my shirt, before my parents came out and saw me.

The light turns red and we stop at the corner. A pungent, earthy smell that reminds me of my mom's pantry wafts toward us from an herbal shop behind us, sandwiched between a souvenir store and a produce market. I think about what to say. Having to work this hard around them is so foreign to me, like landing in a country I've only ever heard people talk about. A taxi goes by.

"Here's the thing," Harry says abruptly, and we both turn to him. "I—"

But before he can finish, Regina says, "What's that?"

We look where she's pointing. It's a corner of a building painted all black with giant windows that've been elaborately tagged over, and there's a hanging sign labeling the place as NEIGHBORHOOD: A GALLERY.

"You want to go in?" Regina asks me.

I spend a pretty significant chunk of my time following art galleries online and browsing museums' online collections, but I hardly

ever get to go in person. I don't want to drag them, though, if they'd rather not, feel their polite impatience hovering in front of the paintings. "Oh—we don't have to if—"

"No, let's go in," Harry says. And I can feel their earlier tension evaporate; I feel both of them swivel instead toward this thing they know will make me happy. "This totally looks like your kind of thing. Let's do it."

There are more people inside than I would have expected, probably forty or fifty. It's small, not in a way that makes you feel crowded but more that makes you feel a part of the surroundings. And the installation inside—everyone has those moments, I think, that take them out of themselves, when something you come across makes you see everything around you in a new way. Maybe this is how Regina always felt in church.

Whoever the artist is paints on overhead projector sheets and then casts them all over different parts of a room so they overlap and they look different, mingling differently, depending where you're standing. I could stay in here forever, possibly, looking at the way the images layer on each other and also watching people come in and take everything in, watching the projections flash across them. It's a kind of living exhibit, all these real people sliding in and out of the projections, all these lives twined and tangled. The contrast between the physical people and the shaky, flimsy images stirs something in me—lifts from the private recesses of my heart and gives shape to what it feels like to walk with ghosts.

I can feel my mind expanding, all the possibilities filling new crevices in my consciousness. But then I also feel kind of frantic and awful in a way it takes me longer to pin down: it makes me feel desperate. He's done what I always wanted to do and he did it first, and probably better. In fact, standing here, the three of us experiencing

this together—this feels like more of me I could show Harry than anything I could ever draw myself.

Harry swivels his head around slowly, then motions toward the wall. “This is really cool.”

There’s a white guy dressed all in black opening the door for people who I assume works here, and I lean toward him. “Excuse me,” I say, “Who’s the artist?”

“Her name is Vivian Ho.” He points to the other side of the gallery. “She’s here today for the opening.”

I shouldn’t have assumed it was a guy. And I definitely did not expect her to be Asian. I know most of the prominent Asian artists these days because I collect the knowledge of them, imagine myself among them, and I’ve never heard of her. She’s in her midthirties, probably, stocky, with spiky, blue-tipped hair and black earplugs, attractive in a guyish kind of way, and she’s ducking her head toward a few women who are saying something about one of the projections.

“You should go talk to her,” Regina says.

“Nah, she looks pretty busy.”

“No, you’re into this, right?” Harry says. “How often do you get to meet actual artists? Go say hi. Oh, look, she’s coming over by here.”

“That’s all right. We should keep going.”

“Excuse me, Vivian!” he calls. I elbow him and hiss, “What are you—”

But Vivian Ho is coming over and saying, with a friendly smile, “What’s up?”

“Hi,” Harry says, “My friend is an artist, too, and he wanted to tell you how much he likes your work.”

“Oh, yeah?”

I can feel my face turning red. “Ah—it’s really—”

“He just got into RISD,” Regina adds. “On a scholarship.”

I hate them both. “Your installation is incredible,” I say.

She smiles and crosses her arms over her chest, then leans against the wall. “Hey, thanks for coming. What do you do?”

“I like to draw.”

“What do you draw?”

“Ah—portraits, mostly.”

“Yeah? The gallery’s doing this *30 Under 30* installation next month. You should apply.”

“We’re going to go find a bathroom,” Harry announces. I glare at him. He smiles and waves.

“Nah, I haven’t even been to art school yet,” I say to Vivian Ho. “Thanks, though.”

“So? I never went to art school.”

“No?”

“No. I came up in street art.” She laughs. There’s a warmth and a kind of generosity pulsing from her, which seems about right; I don’t believe you can put anything meaningful into the world without having a kind of innate generosity, something of yourself to give. “And I remember what it was like when everyone would preach you that *life experience* bullshit and I was like, fuck that, I have things to say *now*. You get a lot of that?”

“People not taking me seriously because I’m still a kid, you mean?”

“You know the story.”

“Nah, I kind of have the opposite problem, honestly.”

“You got tiger parents? Is that what this is?”

It’s the reverse that’s true, really. When I was in first grade, the Cupertino Lions Club had a district-wide art contest for elementary school kids, and I won. The *Cupertino Courier* wrote up a little article about it with a photo of me holding my picture and my mom went up and down the street asking all the neighbors for their copies to give to

her friends, and then they started researching lessons nearby, the best art programs I could go to after I graduated. On weekends we'd go to museums. My mom talked about how when she opened her hotel, she'd only have artwork in it by me.

Believe me, I don't take it for granted that my parents have always supported my dreams. I know you don't always get that lucky; I know they could've blotted out the fuzzy outlines of my art ambitions with the sharp clarity of medical school or law school or business school, things that required much less faith in me and that offered a more concrete kind of hope, the kinds of things my friends' parents push them into. And I'm also lucky, I know that, that what they want from me is what I want from myself, too—I'm just worried my talent doesn't run deep enough. And I can't fathom facing the world the rest of my life that way.

"No, they aren't like that. It's a big deal to them that I'm going next year," I say. "It's more—I'm worried I'm a fraud. Like maybe everyone thought I had all this promise but I'll go through all four years of art school and bomb and my parents will be crushed."

"Well, it's not like you go through four years of school and you're made. You can't just learn your way into it." She pauses. "And you can't do it because of your family, either. You do it in spite of your family."

"You think so? Do you wish you were doing something else?" How could you, though, when you stand in here and see what she made—how could you erase it from the world entirely, stick her behind some desk or podium somewhere instead?

"No," she says. "It's what I chose. But it takes more from you than what it gives back. I wish I'd know that when I was younger. Like, my family all lives in SoCal, and they aren't a part of my daily life. I just don't have that room. And I know I'll never have kids. Probably never

get married.” She tugs at her earlobe. “You’re going have to choose, too. You have to look at the world like—you get one shot in it, and at the end you’re going to have to look back and see whether you said all you needed to say and gave it back to the world to hear, or if you just let that shrivel up inside you to die with you. All of us have to make that choice.”

. . .

We’re all exhausted by the time we get back to Cupertino. On the way back Regina’s mood seemed to deflate. I know she thinks *are you okay?* is one of the most annoying things you can ask people, that it means you think they’re being sullen or overdramatic. So I don’t ask her. She seems subdued as she says goodbye.

The air in the car feels different with her gone, when it’s just me and Harry again. Sometimes I think your truest self is the one that emerges after the day’s been scrubbed off you, the way it feels now.

“You going to apply for that gallery thing?” Harry asks, easing around the turn onto my street. The seat belt catches against my shoulder as he taps the brakes. I will be eighty, I think, and still remember that particular sound the seat belt makes. “You should.”

“I doubt it.”

“How come?”

Someday, maybe, I won’t see other art and feel threatened by it; I’ll feel in communion with it, part of the same ecosystem. “Eh, I just doubt my odds are any good.”

He shrugs. He pulls into my driveway and turns off the engine. “That way it made you feel when you walked in—that really hit you, right? And you could give that to someone else.”

Something crackles on my skin like a fire. He felt me in that



moment; he understood what it was to me. “Maybe. I probably couldn’t.”

“Well, not with that attitude.” He grins. It’s our inside joke—he’ll toss it out when Regina says something like *You can’t put out a paper with four stories* when everyone’s missed deadlines, when I say *You can’t get to San Francisco in thirty minutes*. I wonder who he feels the most himself around—if it’s times like this, or moments like earlier today with Regina when he has to make a case for who he is. Maybe that’s what they have together, that he finds himself more sharply defined around her. Is that what people really want, though?

We sit there a few moments. I’m reluctant to get out of the car, but I can’t think of an excuse to give for why. Finally he says, “All those things Vivian Ho was telling you—you think that’s true? That you have to choose that way?”

“I hope not.”

“You think so, though?”

There’s a kind of fear I associate with truth, and I felt it when she was talking. “Probably. She’d know, I guess. What would you do?”

“If I thought I had to choose between my family and what I wanted to do?”

“Yeah.”

“Probably my family. Then they wouldn’t guilt me about it.” He kind of smiles, not in a way that makes him look happy. “Regina’s right about me, you know. I always like taking the easy way out.”

## T H R E E

It was the summer before middle school, right after Fourth of July, that my dad first started to slip away to where no one else could follow. He'd stopped working on his experiment years back and I knew he missed it, but he was still working in the lab and as far as I could see, our lives were the same they'd been for years now. Something happened, though, inside him; it was like all the color bled out from the world around him and what was left over was muted and dull. For days every time you tried to talk to him he'd mutter back monosyllabic answers in this flat tone that shamed you for thinking you had anything worth telling him, and anytime you asked for anything you could feel the weight of the burden you were being. It's a profoundly lonely feeling when someone who's supposed to love you doesn't have it in them to be around you. My mom cried sometimes in her room when she didn't think either of us could hear.

And then he'd come out of it again and he'd be sorry, I think, because he'd joke with me in this kind of desperate way or he'd bring

home my mom new plants for her garden. Or he'd help her weed, or he'd talk me into coming out there, too, and we'd eat microwaved dinners sitting on a blanket on the grass even the nights it was freezing cold, my dad chattering loudly like he was afraid of the silences, trying to pretend to each other everything was okay. And of course you couldn't talk about all those times you had to spare him your presence, you couldn't blame him for it in case it sent him spiraling again, and so those were almost worse than the times he was just withdrawn.

I'd known about my sister a long time, but that year was the first time I really started to understand what it meant for my parents, and for me, too, that she'd been there and then she'd died. I worried that that was what my dad was reacting to, some kind of delayed grief catching up to him, and that it wasn't something that could ever be fixed. All that summer I looked backward for clues, trying to remember any news stories I'd heard come on the TV that could've been what reminded him: a house fire in Los Altos Hills or a plane crash in Spain or a toddler in San Francisco falling out of a hotel window on a family vacation.

*He's just weak, Mr. X would whisper to me. He's never going to pull it back together. You're not good enough for him, you and your mom. This is it. This is the rest of your life.*

It was the first time I understood what it was like to feel hopeless, for that space you hold inside yourself for good things to close up. I lost whole days to League of Legends, which I honestly don't even really like, and had to watch Netflix to fall asleep. I hated nights, when everything felt amplified, and I got a stomachache each day at that hour when the sun went down but the leftover streaks of color were still hanging in the sky.

But: that was also the year I met Harry.

The first day of seventh grade, my backpack stuffed full of crisp notebooks and a new set of Micron pens, I was in the middle of the pavilion talking with Regina. I'd been telling her how bad things had been at home lately, and she'd put her hand on my forearm and said, "I'll pray for you."

I looked around. "Uh, like, right now?"

"No, no, not right now. I meant for your dad." She looked flustered. "Unless you want me to?"

Regina went to a Taiwanese church by school. Her parents were never religious, but when they first moved here her mom went just to meet other Taiwanese people, so Regina grew up going. A few times she's invited me to go with her, but I never have.

This, I knew, was why Regina believed in God: When she was ten years old her father had gone into his office and found one of his employees, a man named Robert, lying facedown on the floor. The hospital said he was in a stroke-induced coma, and told his family he wouldn't likely survive the night. Regina found out and felt something—a voice in her head that wasn't her own—tell her to pray. So she prayed and she kept praying, and she skipped dinner so she could pray for Robert to live. At nine she heard the same voice tell her she could stop now, and a few minutes later the phone rang. Robert had woken up. We'd never talked about religion all that much, although I knew it was important to her, and even though I wouldn't have minded—I don't think there was much I could've told Regina about myself then that she would've judged me for, and if you really believe in something, on some level it makes sense to want to convert everyone. My dad told me that once, closing the door after a Jehovah's Witness he'd spoken politely with and then offered coffee.

I'd thought back to that afternoon in his lab—my dad has always been an evangelist at heart.

And I wished sometimes my parents believed in something that way. I wished they believed my sister was in heaven, somewhere they'd see her again and I'd meet her someday, instead of just dissipated into atoms circling back into the universe; I wished my dad had something to hope for and I wished my mom had less to fear.

"That's okay," I'd told her, and then wondered if maybe it was a mistake. Maybe I wasn't in a position to be turning anything prayer-like down right now. "I'll pass."

"Okay. I—" And then she stopped talking, and her face lit up, and then there was Harry, bounding in like an aggressive puppy and pulling her in for a hug.

"Regina Chan!" he said. "Where were you all summer? You were supposed to hit me up in Taiwan, homegirl. I was there for like two months."

"I tried calling you when I was there," she said. "You never answered your phone."

"Oh, whaaaaat, that's a lie. It must not have gone through." He was grinning in that almost manic way he has sometimes—I know it now, even if I didn't recognize it then—when he's going to change the subject and just talk at someone so fast all they can really do back is laugh and (nine times out of ten) feel hopelessly charmed. And in that moment, I believed I saw him perfectly.

That was the thing, that back then I was always trying to see people for who they really were because it felt like if you were an artist, that's what you were supposed to do. I wanted to draw people stripped of their outer layers, and so I was always looking underneath for truth. (Honestly, I was probably kind of insufferable.) At any rate, in that moment it felt clear that Harry's trick to getting people to like

him was to pretend he liked them: to wield his fake enthusiasm as a kind of currency. I would've bet my life savings that Regina did call him, probably more than once, and that he hadn't given her call a second thought; I bet he hit Ignore and forgot all about it until just this second, the same way he'd forget about his conversation with her he was having right now. And I would never come up to people having a serious conversation and present myself that way, like a gift. When he was gone I said, "Who's that?"

"That's Harry Wong." She said it like she was surprised I didn't know him already, like it was my bad. Then she added, "It's his birthday pretty soon."

Birthdays in Harry's family, it turned out, were a bizarrely huge deal, and for the milestone ones, like thirteen, his parents went all out. They had (I would learn all this through social osmosis) rented out one of the private banquet rooms at Dynasty that people usually booked for weddings or red egg and ginger parties, and apparently a bunch of important people Harry's dad knew from his years in politics and business were going to be there, and apparently Harry's mother was determined to book a band with at least one radio hit, and apparently the invitations had been custom-printed and had cost eight dollars apiece. Sandra Chang referred to it as Harry's wedding to himself.

I was staying late at school as much as possible those days, stretching out the part of the afternoon where I could avoid going home for as long as I could, and we were sitting on the bleachers overlooking the blacktop. Sandra said, "I heard they're blowing like ten thousand dollars on this party."

"That's such bullshit."

"I heard it from—"

"No, I believe you. I just think it's bullshit anyone would spend that much money on a party. It's gross."

“You think it’s gross? I would one hundred percent do the same thing if I had the money. You would, too. Admit it.”

“I definitely would not.”

She laughed; she didn’t believe me, probably. She leaned back so her elbows rested on the row behind us. She tossed her hair and then carefully smoothed it back into place, her nails glinting in the sunlight. She always had elaborately painted fingernails, tiny patterns or color blocks or sometimes even scenes. One time I’d asked if she did them herself and where she got ideas from. She’d just looked at me in this way that felt condescending and also almost defensive somehow. *Is this because you’re all into art?* she’d said. *And you think this counts, or something?* And then she’d changed the subject.

“Anyway,” Sandra said, “he invited Regina.”

It is exactly how junior high works that whenever someone gets invited to a party, everyone else knows. Sandra and I had a running bet going on his unfolding guest list. I said, “Of course he did.”

“I called it.” She held out her hand. “Pay up.”

I took a dollar from my wallet and handed it over. “That means you’re next.”

She laughed. “Is that an official bet? You’ll earn your dollar back.”

“You would totally go if he invited you, wouldn’t you.”

“Of course I would. You would, too.”

“I wouldn’t.” Obviously I would have. “I don’t get why Regina likes him.”

“It’s because Regina’s a nice person,” Sandra said. “She has no standards. She likes everyone.”

It was true; Regina’s always been a nice person. In second grade—we still tease her about this—we had class pet bunnies. A couple months into the year, the one girl bunny got pregnant, and one day we came in for class and found out the mom had eaten all her babies. Regina

cried so hard she literally got sent home. Sandra had been Regina's very best friend since first grade, and if you were friends with Regina you understood that was part of the deal, that you'd always be in second place. They had this whole language built on inside jokes and do-you-remembers and vague references that meant nothing to anyone else. They had a way of talking about everything, endlessly dissecting even the smallest interactions, that made it seem like what they were talking about was something important.

I wasn't in Sandra's class until second grade, and at first I didn't like her. Sandra wasn't what you would ever describe as nice and she had a disquieting ability to hone in on the things you didn't want to talk about, didn't want anyone to notice about you (which Regina always did, too; the difference is Regina never brought them up. But maybe they talked about all those things in everyone else to each other). But she grew on me; she always said things no one else was willing to and she made me laugh, and there's something to be said for always knowing where you stand with someone. She was the only one of my friends who was an only child like I was, and she always complained that it wasn't fair for it to be just you against both your parents, although she said several times she'd trade hers for mine, or for anyone's. Once in fourth grade I saw her arguing with her mom in the parking lot—they were in the car and Sandra had just buckled her seat belt and she said something I couldn't hear, and her mom whirled around from the front seat and slapped her. I never told her I'd seen. She could find the dark streak in anything, in those cheesy inspirational posters hanging around the school or in movies everyone else loved or in people, too. Her house backed up against a creek and once, the summer we were eleven and she was home alone, she invited me over and we went down through the gap in the fence. It was almost dry in the creek bed, just standing pools of water everywhere and



crackly dead leaves, and we played with the tadpoles all afternoon. She'd said they reminded her of Mrs. Polnicek—"Tadpolniceks!" she'd said, cackling in triumph while I rolled my eyes—our teacher that year who I'd liked, actually. "Sludgy and useless," she'd said, chasing one around the water with her finger. "Sound familiar?" I liked Mrs. Polnicek, but, I mean, I could kind of see it; I laughed. Sometimes I wondered if Regina always stuck by her so closely because next to Sandra she got to feel like a better person, the nice one, the one who saw the best in people.

Anyway, at the beginning of junior high, the bulk of my friendship with Sandra was talking crap about Harry. Harry had gone to Blue Hills for elementary school so this was the first time everyone I knew had been exposed to him, and it was, to put it mildly, a strange feeling watching all the people you thought you knew flock to someone you despised, someone phony and cheaply charismatic. Of Course People Like You If You Con Them Into Thinking You Like Them: The Harry Wong Story.

But Harry was, for whatever reason, completely magnetic. He was (I had to admit it) objectively good-looking, with a strong jaw and high cheekbones and a quick, easy smile that he knew how to aim for maximum effect; he had a friendly self-deprecating way of talking and could, without warning, slip into saying things that were constantly hailed as really deep (once, when Aaron Ishido joked about Brett Lee being the most punch-worthy person in our grade, Harry was like, *Nah, man, violence is never cool*, and I once heard him argue with a straight face that all racism was rooted in misunderstanding). He was forever laughing and joking around with people, always changing the tenor of every circle he walked into. He was the kind of person conversations stopped for. Which was baffling because, to me, underneath the veneer of aggressive perfection, he seemed thoroughly

mediocre. There was nothing interesting or different about him; he was just exactly the perfect prototype of everything Cupertino wanted you to be: smart, polished, rich. He wasn't different or unique, he was just what everyone else was, only more so, like someone took the rest of us and turned us up to Technicolor.

Also, a full month into the school year (a school year in which we had not one, not two, not three, but four classes together), we were funneled into the same test review group in history and he'd turned to me with that plastered-on smile and said, "Remind me your name again?"

I know it all sounds petty. To this day I'm not entirely sure why I took such an instant dislike to him, why his very existence felt so personal to me. In my defense, I was a seventh grader, and there's no such thing as a good seventh grader; all seventh graders are assholes, even the nice ones. Maybe it was just rampant hormones, who knows. Maybe it was how sometimes he bought things at Goodwill and him doing it was somehow cool, proof of him being down-to-earth and unique and environmentally conscious, whereas I knew that if I did it because I didn't have money it would be a different story altogether. Maybe I was jealous.

But when I really think about it, I wonder if maybe it's more than that; maybe it's something that hits close to the deepest core of who I am. I'm not a religious person, but what I have with Harry is the closest thing I have—when I'm with him is when the world is at its clearest for me. I didn't understand that yet, though, sitting on the bleachers with Sandra, blazing with all those ways I hated him.

. . .

Whenever there's some kind of prize of any kind up for contention, I don't care who you are: you always imagine yourself winning it.

So I imagined Harry saying things like, *Hey, I've always thought you seemed cool. You want to come hang out at this thing I'm having Saturday?* I imagined him bringing up the party at lunchtime. I resented him for taking up so much space in my mind, and resented myself for giving it to him, but that didn't mean I stopped. I also liked a few of his posts online and then kept checking to see if he'd reciprocated in any way, nodded at him a few times in class, played four or five pickup basketball games with him and some other guys after school.

The last one was the Friday before the party. We were dispersing, sweaty and spent, when I heard someone call, "Yo, Cheng!"

I turned around and Harry was coming after me. "Wait up," he said. "I want to ask you something."

There was a spark in my chest like a lighter. Maybe I'd been wrong about him after all. I would take back all the hateful thoughts I'd had about him and all the things I'd said to Sandra; I would take back my assessment of him as fake. "Yeah, what's up?"

"Do you have the homework assignment for first period?" he said, hitching the straps on his backpack higher. "I was late."

. . .

The next morning, the morning of his party, Harry posted a selfie of him giving two thumbs up. *Celebrating my birthday at Dynasty today at noon, come on by!* he wrote. *All welcome!!*

That was it for me. My rage ballooned. Harry Wong wanted literally everything for himself, including, apparently, the credit for being friendly and inclusive and magnanimous, which—screw that. No one was going to go and feel welcomed because of some vague throwaway comment online.

*Did you see Harry's post?* I texted Sandra. *I should go just to call him on it.*

*I'm going!* she wrote back. *With Regina. You should just come. My mom can come pick you up if you want.*

*You're going? What the hell, I thought you hated him.*

*I don't have anything against him as a person. I just like watching you freak out about it.* A few seconds later she texted, again, *You should come.*

My heart plummeted through my chest like through a trapdoor. I had to put my phone down. The weekend spanned itself in front of me. My mom was at the Lis' house with the twins, who were babies then, because the parents were both out of town on business and so I'd be stuck at home with my dad, who was worse than ever on weekends, answering questions in a grayish monotone voice and staring blankly at the TV, cocooned on the couch in his ratty sweats and unwashed hair.

My dad found me in my room, furiously drawing ugly-looking caricatures of Harry. He watched me for a little while, then patted his stomach. "Want to go get donuts, Daniel?"

"No."

He watched me draw. "Who is that?"

"Just a guy at school."

"You don't like him?"

"No." He waited for me to elaborate. Finally I said, "He had this party today and everyone was acting like it was this huge important thing. I don't know. It's stupid. He's kind of full of himself."

I immediately regretted telling him—my dad can be so advice-y, and I wasn't in the mood. Instead, though, he said, "Let's go on a hike."

"I don't feel like hiking."

"Fresh air will be good for you. Put on some shoes. It'll be fun."

So we drove up into the hills and went hiking at Fremont Older. You drive up Prospect where it winds into the hills and is barely big enough for two cars to fit, park under the oak trees next to the country club, the branches gathering you away from the sunlight, and you hug the side of the hill and pass some shut-off wooden homes and then the trail spills you onto a wide dirt path in a clearing. The dusty path leads up bare grassy hills until you get to Hunter's Point and you can see the whole Bay Area sprawled out below, all gray-green and red-roofed, from so high up blurred in a way that always makes me think of an artist I like named Dashiell Manley, who makes these explosive, haunting oil on linen paintings, textured dabs of color that make your eyes feel inadequate and thirsty. I hadn't wanted to come, but my dad was right—it was nice being up here, kind of like being in another world. Literally above it all. My dad was making an obvious effort to be in a good mood, and we saw hawks and a few deer and I watched the way people looked hiking, the lines their bodies made from their tiredness and determination. Any other day it would've been fine; it wouldn't have felt like a consolation prize.

We were headed back to the parking lot, coming around a narrow switchback with a steep drop-off, when he hit a root and stumbled. My mind flashed forward. I could see the accident before it happened—him tumbling down the ravine, the search parties I'd try to flag down, the guilt I'd feel for all the times and all the ways I'd holed up in my room quarantined from his obvious sadness, what it would do to my mom to lose a daughter and then a husband, too. But I was wrong about it—he flailed his arms and grabbed at a shrub, and steadied himself. When he pulled his hand away his palm was bleeding, but he was laughing.

“That was *close*,” he said. “Hey, it's not so bad, right? You aren't at your party, but we're not lying at the bottom of a ravine.”

My heart was pounding. I was embarrassed by my own fear. “If you say so.”

“Say it’s better or I’ll throw you down this hill. Now I know the way down.”

It made me laugh in spite of myself. Afterward, we went to go get donuts at Donut Wheel. My dad ate two. My dad, who deserved a party and a celebration and happiness and instead all that went to Harry, who’d done nothing to earn any of it.

. . .

Monday was Harry’s actual birthday, a fact I learned when I showed up for school that morning and it was like a balloon store threw up all over campus and Harry’s face was plastered all over the halls. People decorated like this for their friends’ birthdays, but I’d never seen anyone take it this seriously. There were flyers with his face taped to pretty much every bank of lockers, including my own. When I went to get my books, there was his extraordinarily satisfied face, staring right at me.

I thought: *NOPE*. I pulled my Sharpie from my pocket, glanced around to see if anyone was watching, and drew over the flyer. I edited his features—I made his eyes more leering, more pleased with themselves, and then I zoomed in on his mouth, trying to shape it to make it look self-congratulatory and smug as hell.

“You didn’t like the original?”

I knew before I turned around. I turned around anyway. Harry was watching me, his arms folded across his chest.

“What is this?” he said. “Is this supposed to be me?”

Of course it was. There was no use denying it, either. It looked like him. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

He let his arms drop and then reached in front of me and tore the paper off the lockers. The expression on his face—at the time I thought it was disgust. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Uh—” I tried to grab for the paper, but he held it out of my reach. “It’s nothing. I was just screwing around.”

“Why?”

What are you supposed to say to that? Finally I said again, “I was just messing around.”

He stared at me a long time. It occurred to me to wonder if maybe he was going to hit me. He didn’t, though. He said, “Can I keep this?”

It caught me off guard—it was the last thing I expected—and I nodded before I could stop myself. Anyway, it’s not like I could’ve asked for it back.

He didn’t crumple it up, either. He folded it carefully in half, then swung his backpack around and unzipped it and slipped the drawing into his binder. Then he walked away, taking the drawing with him: tangible proof he could fold up and keep of what a petty, vindictive person I was, something that would leave me always on the hook.

My heart was still thudding as Harry rounded the corner out of sight. I had to stop walking to let it slink back into its normal patter. Which seemed like a massive overreaction, except that I think, when I try to re-create that flash of time, I’d done it on purpose for him to see—for a split second there I’d imagined the worst and then wanted it. Or brought it into being, at least, which in the end might as well be the same thing. I’d like to say I lost myself for a moment, and that’s why. But that’s the easy way out. It seems equally possible that in those moments you just let go, when you give into your impulses, that those are the moments that are most you.

Originally, my parents weren't going to let me go on the eight-grade science camp trip to Yosemite. My mom was too worried the bus would crash, or I'd get lost in the snow and freeze to death, or I'd slip off a cliff hiking and plunge to the rocky ground hundreds of feet below.

Besides that, things always felt unstable at home. My dad still wasn't himself, although it was starting to feel like this faded version we had to tiptoe around was his real self after all. It's hard living with someone who's never happy—a dark mist hovers over everything that happens in the household and you feel guilty when you want to be happy yourself. I worried about him, and I worried maybe he was going to divorce my mom or that she'd decide to divorce him. I had my cycle down pat: I'd be sullen and quiet around them, upset I had to worry about any of this, and then at night lying awake I'd be guilt-stricken and resolve to do better in the morning. It was draining, and I was pretty close to desperate to get to Yosemite even if for no other reason than to get out of the house.

It was Auntie Mabel, my mom's best friend, who talked them into it, saying science camp was good for my education and that I'd love going. I did love going. Sometimes even now it chills me to think how much of my life would've never happened if I just hadn't gone.

I stayed in a cabin with Maurice Wong and Aaron Ishido and Ahmed Kazemi, other denizens of the group of us who hung out in the middle of the pavilion at lunch—loud, visible, sending ripples into all the peripheral groups gathered around the outskirts. After that drawing I'd kind of thought Harry would muscle me out of his circle, and he could've, too, but he hadn't. Since last year we'd mostly ignored each other, and I always tried to avoid him, but middle school doesn't let you do that; once earlier that year we'd walked into



geometry at the same time (I'd seen it coming and tried to change my pace, but it hadn't worked), and he'd dipped his head in acknowledgment and held open the door and motioned for me to go ahead. I'd felt him watching me as I went past him, and sometimes in class I would've sworn I felt him watching me, too, although every time I checked he moved his head too quickly for me to see if I was right.

Daytimes in Yosemite we were assigned to hiking groups and we traipsed through practically frozen creeks and did trust falls and foraged miner's lettuce and we were all given trail books to sketch what we saw (I drew portraits of all the other people in my group and gave them to everyone at the end of the week), and ever since then I've been pretty friendly with the random collection of people who were in my group, and I still think of them—Jinson Tung and Jefferson Choy and Helena Markham and Serina Lee and Annie Chong—as a single unit.

We weren't allowed to take cell phones out on the hikes with us, and Thursday, the day we hiked Yosemite Falls, when I got back to the cabin thirsty and sore before dinner there was a message from my mom.

“Hello, Daniel, it's Ma. I'm taking your father to the doctor. Just so you know. He's all right, but he's very sad.”

*He's very sad.* It isn't fair to resent a dead baby, but in that moment I did.

I wished I didn't have to go back home; I wished I could just stay here and pretend everything was fine. I didn't see a way out of my dad just always drowning in his sadness, and I didn't see a way out of me having to carry that with me my entire life.

It was Thursday night, the night before we'd all get up and stumble bleary-eyed out of our cabins by seven the next morning to get to the dining hall and then check onto our buses, that I couldn't take

the feeling anymore. All the guys in my cabin were asleep and it was after midnight, definitely after the nine p.m. curfew, but I figured there probably weren't any chaperones wandering around outside and so I slid as quietly as I could out of my sleeping bag and grabbed my ski jacket and went out into the cold.

It was close to freezing outside, my breath puffing in front of me, the moon behind the clouds turning the whole sky a pale, glowing gray. There were small patches of snow under the eaves and on the ground where even during the day it was mostly shadow, and it was bracingly quiet—no wind rustling trees, no cars. The moon was bright enough to light the snow fairly well, and so I walked past the cabins. I had some vague idea of getting to the clearing by the dining hall, where there were some benches carved out of logs, but I'd only gotten twenty or thirty feet when, from the near-dark, someone said, "Hi, Danny."

I whirled around, my heart thudding, ready for I don't know what—and then it was Harry sitting mostly hidden in the shadows on a rock, a scarf wrapped around his neck and his beanie pulled all the way down over his ears. It caught me entirely off guard. I said, "What are you doing out here?"

"Eh, I just couldn't sleep." I could see puffs of air when he spoke. He didn't look as surprised to see me as I was to see him, which meant, probably, that he'd been watching me for a little while. "You?"

"Uh—same."

He jostled his shoulders up and down a few times. "It's freezing out here, though. I can't feel like ninety percent of my body anymore."

"How long have you been sitting out here?"

"An hour, maybe. Two."

I raised my eyebrows. "Aren't you going to get in hella trouble if you get caught?"

“Aren’t you?”

I mean, yeah, okay. “Touché.”

“Well, anyway—” To this day, what he did next surprises me: he reached into his jacket and pulled out a small metal flask and offered it to me. Harry was not—he was absolutely not—the kind of guy you found drinking alone in the snow after curfew, and I blinked at him, my eyes trying to make sense of all the pieces. “Uh—I’m not sure if—”

“You don’t drink? Don’t worry about it, it’s cool. I brought it for my cabin, and then we just—there was never a good time.”

“It’s not that, I just—” I looked at him closer. “Are you, like, okay and everything? Is something wrong?”

“No, yeah, everything’s fine.” He flashed an extremely unconvincing smile. He pocketed the flask again without drinking from it. “Everything’s cool. I just couldn’t sleep.”

I could’ve gone back inside. There were a lot of things I could’ve done, actually—I could’ve left him there, or I could’ve reported him to someone or held on to the information to dole out like currency. And he knew that, I think. It didn’t feel like arrogance that had made him say hi or ask me to drink with him; it felt more like, for whatever reason, while he was sitting there on that log knowing I wasn’t alone as I thought I was, he made some kind of choice to trust me. Or not trust me, maybe, but at least to put some small part of his fate in my hands. And I owe the past four years to that decision, honestly. I don’t think I would’ve done the same.

Anyway, it felt like I owed him, at least a little bit, for that. I said, “How come you couldn’t sleep?”

It felt like a risk. Maybe it always does talking to someone you don’t like, because they could turn it on you in any of several ways. I spent the next few seconds of his silence regretting it, picturing a

way to extricate myself from this conversation. Then finally he said, “Sometimes—” He stared out into the dark. “Do you ever get tired of all of this?”

“All of what?”

“You know. Just the always—just everything. Like school. Cupertino. You know.”

“Tired of it how?”

“Just having to do all of it all the time. Even when you’re worried you’ll never pull it off or it feels like what’s your reward in the end—you just get to do more of the same for longer? You know? And then nothing you do is ever good enough anyway. You ever feel like that?”

“Sometimes, I guess.” Then I added, “It never seems like you do.”

“Why not?”

“You’re so, like—peppy all the time.”

He cocked his head and grinned at me. He has a grin that can change the whole mood in a room; I’ve seen it happen so many times, but that was the first time it happened to me. “*Peppy?*”

“Ah—maybe that’s not the best word. I’m just surprised, that’s all. You play the game pretty well.”

“Peppy, huh.” He rubbed his hands over his arms, then tucked them under his armpits. “Regina told me you want to be an artist.”

Was he thinking of the picture I’d drawn of him? I was glad it was mostly dark. “Yeah.”

“That’s kind of cool. It’s like a big f-you to the system, right?”

“Nah, it’s just that I suck at math.”

He laughed. “Like Asian suck, or actually suck?”

“No, like actually suck. I still don’t understand how to graph a line.”

“What do you mean you don’t understand? You just take the slope—”

“I know, I know. Or, I mean—I *don’t* know. But I can recite the words like that too. Slope-intercept. Rise over run.” This was unexpected—maybe it was just the weirdness of the whole situation—but I was kind of smiling. “I can draw a line. That’s good enough.”

“No, that’s not good enough, what the hell?” He looked around. “Find me a stick or something. I’ll write it out for you in the snow. This night is going to end with you learning how to graph a line.”

“That’s not—”

“No. I’m on a mission. We’re doing this.” He propelled himself off the rock in an athletic kind of way and went for one of the trees until he found a stick to snap off. This was that same condescension, wasn’t it? But why did it feel so different all of a sudden?

He did it, too—he drew his axes in the snow and explained it about a dozen times until—small miracle—I did mostly understand. Then he tossed the stick to the ground and raised his arms in triumph. “Mission accomplished.”

And that was the first time I had the same feeling I’ve felt probably thousands of times with him since then—that small panic about the moment ending. My heart felt kind of strange, sort of galloping against my chest. It made me wonder if maybe quantum entanglement felt like a prickling extra-awareness, like all your atoms poised for action and humming with desire—like a thing between you that’d never quite lie still. I felt hyperaware of how, if I leaned a few inches closer, our arms would brush together.

I wasn’t ready to go back to my stuffy cabin and Aaron and Ahmed and Maurice passed out in their grimy sleeping bags, back to the house where my dad was slowly mummifying himself in his

sadness that I was pretty sure a doctor wouldn't be able to magic him out of. I said, "I know what you mean about being tired."

His expression changed. He toed at the stick in the snow, then stepped on it with his hiking boot until it crunched in half. "Yeah. Well."

"This week was better, though, right? Like, it was nice to be here."

"I guess. Sometimes I just don't think it's all worth it. Like maybe it would better to just go live in like, Ohio or something and just be a coal miner."

I leaned against the wall of the cabin. I could hardly feel my face. "Is that a thing? Somehow I doubt they're just waiting for some random Asian kid to show up from Cupertino ready to coal-mine."

His eyes crinkled into a smile, enmeshing me in the joke. "I'd do Taiwan proud."

"Okay, then. Represent."

He let go of the smile. "It's probably crappy there anyway. That's the worst part. This is probably all there is. So if you don't play, it's just—" He lifted his arms and then let them fall to his sides.

And I knew exactly what he meant. Any one of us standing out there with him would've, because Cupertino really gets to you. It's not like it's this friendly, squishy, huggy place where mediocrity is fine and it's cool if you fail or just aren't that good at anything, and everyone here knows it. We were all tired and stressed out all the time, all of us worried we'd never be good enough, many of us explicitly told we weren't good enough, so it wasn't like his problems were special or different or more tragic than anyone else's. We all felt it, the relentless crush of expectation, the fear of not measuring up—even me, and I like it here, and as Asian parents go mine are about as chill as they come.

So it didn't have to feel like some big moment between us; it could've felt like talking to basically anyone in my grade. I guess it was just that I knew it wasn't something he ever showed to anyone, but that night, for whatever reason, he did to me. Before I could stop myself, I said, "Hey, Harry?"

"Yep."

I could feel my frozen face turning red. "Hey, I'm, um, I'm sorry about that picture thing last year. Drawing on it."

"Oh—whatever. Don't worry about it."

"It was just kind of a dick thing to do."

"It's cool, really." He kind of laughed. "I think I still have it, actually. Somewhere on my desk. You're really talented. It looked more like me than the picture did. I always hated that picture."

"The picture was fine." I kicked at some snow. "I thought you might try to ruin my life over that."

"You thought what?" He looked legitimately startled. "Why would I do that?"

And I believed him. It was genuine, that confusion, and that was the first time I really saw him, I think—when I understood that his social persona was concealing none of what I'd always thought it was, but actual niceness instead, that there was a kind streak at his core.

It wouldn't be until a few weeks later that I'd understand about the rest of it, but that would happen, too, in History Honors when Mr. DiBono passed back our midterms. I'd see Harry turn his over without looking at it and then sit super still for a long time, his eyes trained on the teacher like he was trying to will himself into not looking. He lasted twenty minutes, and then he looked down and peeled back just the top corner of the page where the grade was written. From across the classroom I saw the way his whole body deflated,

and then I saw the way he gathered himself up and hid that, and something about it was so practiced, so automatic, that I understood for the first time how much this was a part of him. I mean, it was a small moment: it was over fast, and it wasn't something we ever talked about. But I saw everything differently after that, I think because it's hard to turn away from someone after you've really seen them. You carry that part of them with you, and it becomes your job to protect it, too.

But that was later. For the time being, in the snow, Harry clapped his hand on my shoulder. I could feel it through all the layers of jacket and glove, could feel it like there wasn't all that fabric in between us.

"We should sleep," he said, and something about the way he said it, something about that *we*—I think I knew in that moment how much I'd want to always be covered by it, how I'd always want there to be a space for me inside it, how I would maybe be willing to do things I wouldn't have imagined in order to make it so.

We walked together back to the cabins. And that was the first night.

• • •

My dad wasn't seeming very much better by the time eighth-grade graduation rolled around; it had been a rough couple months. The doctor hadn't helped because my dad didn't believe in taking the antidepressants he'd been prescribed or in going to the counseling she'd suggested, so he didn't. All through the ceremony my mom was wiping her eyes, and when I found my parents after on the lawn, all the guys roasting in dress pants and dress shirts and all the girls tottering as their heels sank into the grass, she was crying. I'd been with Harry, taking pictures with different people and all that, but when we saw



my parents Harry whacked me on the back and said he'd catch me later. And maybe it was "Pomp and Circumstance" still playing all emotionally in the background, but seeing my mom's tears I felt, for the first time, the true weight of all the dreams they held for me. Those dreams crystallized that day into something hard and heavy, came to rest on my shoulders. Because I felt it in a real way then what they'd lost, that there should've been another eighth-grade graduation before mine, another batch of pictures no one was ever going to look at, and there was never going to be any way to fix what had happened to them. I'd grow up and have my future ahead of me still and still have my dreams out there to reach for, and we'd be different, because I would have the world, I would have my whole life ahead of me, but all they'd have was me.

"Don't cry," I whispered to my mom, and patted her hand. I tried to smile. "It's just eighth grade."

At the graduation dance that night (butcher-paper palm trees taped to all the walls and the lights turned low, bottles of sparkling cider and those Costco three-flavor packs of cookies), when we were tired of dancing, a bunch of us sat on the bleachers and Harry slung his arm over my shoulders. He's always been a kind of handsy person. He leaned close to my ear so I could hear him over the music and said, "How come your mom was crying so much today?"

I held still so he didn't think I was moving to get him off me. "Long story."

"What's the story?"

Back then I never really liked talking about my family with people—it was complicated, I was worried about fitting in, school was where I got to not think about it, etc., etc. But that night—maybe it was how hard it had hit me seeing my mom crying like that, or how before the dance we'd gone to dinner and my dad had given me

a framed signed Dashiell Manley print. He'd watched my reaction eagerly, like he wanted to save it, and when he saw how pleased I was he was proud in a way that made him feel more like himself. Or maybe it was the way it felt to sit there on the bleachers with Harry and for him to have made that space for the two of us that way in that whole big sea of people.

So I told him what it had been like. My voice cracked a couple of times; luckily it was loud in there. I was nervous. I guess I've always believed that's what a relationship is, this space you keep between you where you hold each other's secrets. Or that it's how you build something together, layering the things you've never told anyone else like bricks.

After I finished he was quiet for a long time. Ahmed came over to talk to us and I could see Harry snap into motion, grinning back and laughing, and I wanted to take back everything I'd told him. But then Ahmed went off to ask Sandra to dance and Harry's grin slid off his face and he turned back to me. He put his hand on my knee.

"It'll get better," he said. Harry is an optimist, and so I might've been willing to write off what he was saying as a cheap platitude, except for the hand on my knee and also for what came next. "It always does. They'll figure things out and everything will get back to normal. Okay? And in the meantime, I mean—we'll get you through it." And there it was again—that same *we*.

That was when it all made sense to me—why I'd disliked him so ardently at first. It was because something in me recognized how much he would matter to me, all along. I'd just been wrong about the particular way.

I'm not going to try to pass the night off as in any way epic. It was hot in there and everyone was sweaty and you could feel a thousand middle schoolers' worth of hormones everywhere, and everyone had

braces and all the girls were teetering around in their heels and the teachers were skulking around in the corners trying to make sure no one was grinding on each other or otherwise getting too gross.

But still. The dance was also a retreat from the fear I'd been living in at that point. My worst fear about my family was that maybe I would never be enough to make up for what they'd lost, that I wasn't supposed to be the one who'd lived, and that they'd wind up broken in a way I couldn't put back together. Maybe they'd break apart from each other all the way. I felt that possibility heavy on my chest every morning when I woke up. By then I could see a future where my family never stopped being a grayer, paler, more trembling version of ourselves, and by then I couldn't shake the possibility that maybe my fate, all our fates, had been sealed before I was even born when my sister died. It wasn't hard to see how our future could get swallowed by the past.

And so it was the way he'd said *we* that felt significant to me. That kind of *we* is both the best thing that can happen to you and the most dangerous. Because what do you have except for the people you belong to and who belong to you? But also you can lose yourself to it; you can do things in service of those *wes* that end up haunting you.

. . .

Harry was, surprisingly, right: things did get better. Something rekindled in my dad—whether that was purpose or hope or something else, I'm not sure, but he felt like himself again. He'd go to social events again and hum in the shower or making coffee in the morning and joke around with me. And my mom seemed relieved in her quiet, nervous way—that sort of holding her breath, that sense she gives off that she doesn't quite trust the ground beneath her feet.

I've never told Harry how I feel, and daily, probably, I go back and forth about whether he knows. It's what makes me wonder, too—maybe he's more open than I am and I already know everything there is.

Or maybe not. Maybe he keeps some of that locked up, like me.

Anyway, though, since Yosemite we've been basically inseparable, but there are ways I don't let my guard down around him. Someday, maybe—I tell myself that all the time. We'll see. Sometimes, actually, he'll say something to me that feels so generous it throws me, but for the most part it's not like we ever said that kind of thing to each other aloud. We always bickered a lot and also, I mean, the things that always bugged me about him didn't necessarily stop bugging me once we got close; I just learned to contextualize them differently. They slid off to the side and allowed room for the rest of it in.