

Leah

J.M. Reep

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by J.M. Reep

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Leah

One

LEAH NELLS sat silently in the passenger seat of the car while Mrs. Nells navigated through the sleepy suburban neighborhood. With one hand on the steering wheel and a list of addresses in the other, Mrs. Nells checked the addresses against the numbers on the houses of the shady street, searching for one house in particular. This morning, mother and daughter were on a tour of local garage sales, and as their second hour of driving and shopping came to an end, Leah already felt exhausted. She wished she were back home in her bedroom, but with only one chapter left before she finished the geography book that her mother bought for her, along with several other books, at the start of the summer vacation, Leah was almost out of reading material and needed to go on this shopping trip.

She had already found four new books to read this morning. While her mother looked for the next house on her list, Leah looked at the spines of her new books and read the titles silently to herself: *The Little Book of Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, *The Biomechanics of Insect Flight*, *Attracting Birds to Your Backyard*, and *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. All of the books were hundreds of pages long. Some had pictures; others hardly had any at all. The bird book had the most pictures, and Leah was beginning to regret choosing it. Still, it was over

300 pages long, and it had only cost her mother forty cents. Leah decided she would read it first just to get it out of the way. She had found all of these books at the first garage sale that she and her mother had visited. Since that first garage sale, though, she hadn't had any luck finding books that appealed to her.

When they finally reached their destination—the next address on her mother's list—Mrs. Nells parked the car against the curb two houses down the street from the garage sale. Leah started to feel nervous. She could see a lot of people crowded on the driveway and in the garage. Book shopping was one of the very few things that could draw Leah out of her house on a Saturday morning, but she didn't like the crowds that she encountered. Mingling with so many strangers, and fearing the possibility that she might run into someone she knew—someone from school, was agony for her.

"Wow, this looks like the biggest garage sale we've seen all morning," Mrs. Nells said, excited. "I bet you'll find a book here." Leah didn't share her mother's enthusiasm. No book could compensate for the torture she was about to experience.

Still, she didn't say anything as she and her mother left the car and walked towards the house. Mrs. Nells rarely bought anything for herself at these garage sales—the only money she had spent this morning was for Leah's new books—but she did enjoy browsing. "You never know what you might find," Leah once heard her remark to Mr. Nells who sometimes teased them both for shopping at garage sales. Leah followed timidly behind her mother, her eyes searching the small crowd ahead of her to see if there were any faces that she recognized. There weren't; in fact, she could only see one other child—a small boy, six or seven years of age, holding a plastic toy gun in his hand and launching surprise attacks against imaginary foes in the front yard of the house. Leah pretended not to notice him, and rallying as much courage as she could, she followed her mother inside the garage and began looking for books.

She found some, but they weren't anything that interested her. Most were once-read romance novels, with a few horror novels thrown

in for good measure. Unwilling to believe that a garage sale of this size wouldn't have any of the books that she liked to read, she spent a moment browsing the other tables making sure she hadn't missed anything. The other tables were littered with clothing that was long out of style, old kitchen appliances that just barely still worked, and little knick-knacks of all sorts. There were no more books, so Leah stood right outside the garage and waited for her mother to finish browsing. A sale this large meant her mother might take a while, so Leah resigned herself to a long wait and turned her head, and her attention, to the sky as she stood on the driveway.

It was a sunny August day. The air was hot but breezy. The beach would be open on a day like this. The start of school was a little more than a week away, and Leah imagined that many of her classmates were at the beach, with hundreds of other people, enjoying what remained of their summer vacation. Leah was probably the only one spending her Saturday visiting garage sales. As bad as this experience was, at least she wasn't at the beach. She had been there before, and she knew how stressful it could be.

Leah's mind wandered, and she nearly forgot where she was. She didn't notice when an old woman, with a vase in her hand, approached from the right and asked, "Are you working here?" Leah snapped back into reality and before she could even begin to think of how to respond, the old woman motioned towards one of the tables in the garage and explained, "I found this vase on the table over there, but it doesn't have a price on it. Do you know how much it is?"

Leah struggled to reply, but all she could offer was an expression of confusion and alarm on her face. The old woman seemed to understand, though. "Oh, I guess you don't know," she said. "I'm sorry, I thought perhaps you lived here." The old woman turned and walked away.

Leah decided to move farther from the house so that no one else would be tempted to speak to her, but as she turned towards the street she was suddenly startled when the little boy with the toy gun jumped out from behind the hedge and attacked. Having vanquished all of his

invisible enemies, he was moving on to those with more substance. He aimed his gun at Leah and pulled the trigger twice. The gun made a rattling sound, but apparently that wasn't the sound the boy wanted to hear so he sputtered, "Thd-thd-thd-thd-krhhh!" and exclaimed, "I shot you! You're dead!"

Leah didn't know what to do. She'd almost rather be locked in conversation with the old woman than be stuck trying to convince this boy she was still very much alive and not interested in playing his game. Fortunately, before Leah could think of something to say to get away from him, she was rescued by the boy's mother who came up from behind Leah and intervened. She grabbed the toy gun and said sharply to her son, "Give me that! This doesn't belong to you! And stop bothering people!"

The woman took the gun and returned it to the nearest table. The boy ran after her, crying and begging her to buy the gun for him. Meanwhile, Leah had had enough of this awful garage sale, so she walked back to her mother's car.

She found the doors locked, so she sat down on the curb and waited. A few minutes passed and Leah spent them in a comfortable silence, her eyes glancing around at the cars parked in the street; the tall oak trees that loomed above them, shading them from the sun; and beyond the trees, the other houses. She realized that people lived in those houses—they were probably there even now. She thought she was alone, but as was usually the case, she was surrounded by people. Bashfully, her eyes drifted slowly downwards until she was staring at the pavement under her feet. There, she saw an ant, black and tiny, exploring the ground and searching for food. Leah watched it crawl past the bits of gravel, which to its perspective, must have looked like enormous boulders. She wondered if the hot asphalt ever burned its tiny feet, and she wondered if the ant was even aware of her. The poor creature's only purpose was to find food for the rest of the colony, and as far as it was concerned, Leah was probably nothing more than a feature of its landscape, like a mountain that had always been there, or a cloud drifting past—enormous but barely worth noticing. And Leah realized that if she

had not sat down here at this curb, she would never have been aware of the tiny life so close to her feet. Leah knew from books she had read in the past that the ant was searching for food in the form of crumbs or leaves or other dead bugs. Looking around, Leah didn't see anything that the ant might eat, but the ant continued searching, as it did everyday, struggling on alone.

Leah heard footsteps approaching from behind. She turned around and saw her mother, with a smile on her face but empty-handed as usual. Mrs. Nells watched as Leah stood up and waited for her mother to unlock the car doors.

"There were a lot of books in there—didn't you see anything that you liked?" Mrs. Nells asked as they got into the car.

Leah shook her head no and fastened her seatbelt.

"Well, we've got one more stop left," Mrs. Nells remarked, looking at the list of addresses she had compiled from the newspaper earlier that morning. She didn't always know where the streets were, and often she had to ask Leah to pull an old map of the city out of the glove compartment to find out where they were going—and even then their search could be difficult. This morning, they had spent as much time driving around the city as they had spent at the garage sales themselves.

But Mrs. Nells recognized the name of the last street on her list, so their trip didn't take long. When they arrived, they found a much smaller garage sale than any of the others they had visited that morning. There were two tables set up on the driveway of the house, and only a few customers were browsing. The small size of the garage sale was discouraging to Leah who wondered if it was even worth the trouble to get out of the car. Surely, there wouldn't be any books here that she'd want. But Mrs. Nells decided to look. She turned off the car and got out, and Leah followed her.

As they walked up the driveway, they passed the owner of the house: a sleepy-looking middle-aged woman sitting in a lawn chair on the driveway who quietly and indifferently examined her newest customers as they approached. Mrs. Nells said hello, but the woman just nodded her head. Leah tried to avoid eye contact.

To her surprise, Leah did find some books, and they weren't the worthless novels that she saw at the last garage sale. She was surprised to find one book that was just what she was looking for. It was an old textbook dating from the 1970s titled *Astronomy, the Evolving Universe*. There were some charts and pictures in the book, but Leah didn't understand most of them. The book looked like a good buy. She presented it to her mother, who was browsing through a rack of old clothes. Leah tapped her mother on the arm to get her attention and then showed her the title of the book.

Mrs. Nells looked at the title, and she looked at the price. She said, "Only fifty cents? OK. Do you want anything else?"

Leah shook her head no.

"All right." Mrs. Nells reached into her purse and found two quarters. She handed them to her daughter and said, "You go ahead and buy it. I'll wait for you in the car."

Mrs. Nells was gone before Leah had a chance to react. When she finally realized that her mother expected her to buy the book herself, she almost panicked. As she watched her mother walk away, she wondered what she should do. Leah looked at the woman sitting in the lawn chair. The woman was staring dully into space, obviously wishing she were elsewhere. Leah wished she were somewhere else, too. Why didn't her mother buy the book herself just as she had bought all the other books that morning? Leah wanted the book, but when she looked again at the woman in the lawn chair, she changed her mind. With one last glance at the astronomy book, she set it down on the table where she found it and started walking away. As she passed the woman in the lawn chair, Leah saw her suddenly come to life and ask, "Did you find anything you wanted?" Leah just shook her head no and hurried back to the car.

Mrs. Nells had already unlocked the doors when she saw her daughter, empty-handed, on her way back. Mrs. Nells wasn't surprised by what happened, but she was certainly disappointed. When they were both inside the car, she held out her palm without saying a word, and Leah returned the two quarters to her. Leah could sense her mother's

disappointment as Mrs. Nells placed the two quarters back in her purse.

The engine was started, but the car didn't move. Mother and daughter sat uncomfortably in their seats, staring straight ahead. At last, Mrs. Nells broke the awful silence: "It's the easiest thing in the world, Leah. You hand the woman the money, she thanks you, you take your book and go on your way. You are fourteen years old—you're about to start *high school* in less than two weeks for goodness' sake—yet you can't even buy a book at a garage sale like any other girl your age. I can't understand what's wrong with you!"

Leah didn't reply. She just stared out the window and felt ashamed. Her excitement over her new books was spoiled by this sudden failure to live up to what her mother expected of her. She regretted disappointing her mother once again, and she wished they had never gone on this shopping trip. Leah sat silently as they drove home. She didn't look at her mother, and her mother didn't look at her.

Two

THE FOLLOWING Monday afternoon found Leah in her bedroom engaged in her favorite activity: reading. She lay on her bed with soft pillows propped up behind her as she read one of the books that her mother bought for her during last weekend's garage sale trip: *Attracting Birds to Your Backyard*. It was the book with lots of pictures in it. Leah thought she could finish it quickly, but it was proving to be a much longer book than she expected. She had already devoted several hours to reading it, but she still wasn't even a quarter of the way through.

That was all right, though. She wasn't a speed-reader and she wasn't in any hurry to finish the book. She knew that the faster she read, the sooner she would have to go shopping for more books, and as Saturday morning had proved once again, that was never a pleasant experience. Visiting strange places, meeting new people, feeling the pressure that her mother placed upon her to be sociable—none of these were things that Leah enjoyed. So as she sat on her bed, she read slowly, at her own pace, taking a break once in a while to let her imagination wander randomly from one thought to the next.

Given her choice of reading material: topics in science or economics or abstract art, one might expect Leah to be smarter than other girls her age, but that wasn't the case. Sometimes she might learn

something while she read, but when that happened, it was by accident rather than by design, and many of her reading choices were a result of chance, dependent upon what books were available at a garage sale or a book fair. She was just as likely to read a book about human physiology as she was to read a book about metaphysics. Sometimes, she might even open up a volume of her parents' old encyclopedia and read at random from the Js or the Ts. But whatever Leah read, it wasn't for the sake of learning or entertainment. She read to keep herself distracted, to fill the hours that she spent in quiet isolation, whether here in her bedroom or at school.

She preferred to read non-fiction books—books that were dense, impersonal, and mostly uninteresting. She never read novels, except when assigned to read one for school, because when she read about lively characters and their exciting adventures, she couldn't help but contrast their stories with her own quiet life. Novels only reminded her of how different she was from other people. Characters in novels liked to talk, they had lots of friends, and they did things—simple things—like go shopping at a garage sale without any worries at all. Leah couldn't relate to them; their lives were not like hers. So she read books like *Attracting Birds to Your Backyard* because these books didn't remind her that she was weird. These books made her feel comfortable, normal. While the real birds in the trees outside might sing, the pictures of birds in her book were as silent as Leah herself.

She looked up for a moment and glanced at the clock sitting on her desk on the other side of the room. The red digital numbers told her the time was 4:43. It didn't feel like it was that late in the afternoon; the day had passed quickly. It was the middle of August, though, and every day passed quickly as the start of the new school year approached. Leah remembered that today she was exactly one week away from her first day of high school, and the very thought of where she would be in seven days caused a nervous tingle in her stomach. High school! Last Wednesday, Leah received her official schedule of classes for her freshman year online, but it wasn't so much the idea of new teachers and harder classes that worried her—although those things did worry her a

little—no, what really scared her were all of the new people that she would meet. Her new high school would be so much bigger than her middle school had been, and the thought of being surrounded by so many new faces was almost too much for her nerves to handle. She took a deep breath, tried to forget what the future had in store for her, and went back to reading her book, but after a few minutes she found that she had lost interest in the birds on the page. She closed her book and set it down beside her as she sat up on her bed and looked around at the blank walls of her bedroom.

Although Leah had lived in this bedroom for most of her life, there was still an unusual emptiness about it. In terms of furniture, she had the basics. There was a bed, of course, and a bureau close to her bathroom door on the wall perpendicular to her bed. On top of the bureau was a large mirror. Leah rarely made use of it, and the fact that the mirror was a part of the bureau was the only reason why it was there at all. On the opposite side of the room from Leah's bed was her desk. She used this only for homework and studying. In the past, she had tried to read her books there, but sitting at a desk felt too formal and too uncomfortable. Her bed was a much better place to read. Now that it was summer, the only objects to be found on her desk were a lamp and her alarm clock. To the right of the desk was a door that opened to the hallway, and to the left of the desk was her closet. Against the fourth wall of the room was a bookcase that Mr. Nells bought for her a year and a half ago to store Leah's ever-growing collection of books. It was made out of wood and had four shelves. Two of the shelves were filled completely, and a third was only partially filled.

The bookcase was Leah's favorite part of her room. Sometimes, instead of reading, she would just sit on the floor and stare at the books. The bookcase might not have had much significance for anyone else who saw it, but for Leah it served as a kind of record of her life with each book representing a particular span of time. Leah kept the books arranged in the order in which she had read them so that they functioned as a sort of calendar, marking the passage of time for the last two or three years. Leah measured her life in pages instead of minutes, in

chapters instead of days, and in volumes instead of months. The empty space on the third and fourth shelves of her bookcase represented the future, the unknown, the unread books that were to come. The clock on Leah's desk kept one form of time, and Leah's books kept another.

On one side of Leah's bed was a single, large window. On sunny, summer days like this, sunlight provided Leah's room with all the illumination she needed to read. The view from the window was of the front yard of her house. Since her bedroom was on the second story, she had a good view of the street and the other houses, but Leah usually didn't pay attention to what was happening outside. She was more interested in the birds in her book than those outside her window.

Besides her furniture, the only other items worth mentioning in the sparsely decorated room were a number of pictures Leah had drawn in her elementary and middle school art classes. These pictures were the sum of the decorations on the walls and they were tacked neatly above her desk. The pictures really weren't very good—Leah didn't consider herself an artist—but long ago, Leah's mother had put them there after convincing her daughter that they should be displayed. At the time, Leah felt proud of them, too, and she even helped her mother tack them to the wall, but increasingly, they were becoming a source of embarrassment. She had drawn the pictures so long ago, when she was just a child. Leah didn't think the pictures belonged on the wall of a fourteen-year-old girl. Still, Leah didn't remove them. Whether because of sentimentality or procrastination, the pictures remained tacked to the wall.

The pictures, though, didn't represent a phase of Leah's life when she was any happier or livelier than she was now. Leah had always been shy. Before she was even old enough to walk, she would enter fits of panic and tearful screams whenever a stranger came near. When she was older and her parents took her out in public, she would cling desperately to them, holding their hands and hiding behind her parents' legs when she was introduced to another child.

Her parents believed that Leah would eventually grow out of her shyness, that she would make friends and lead a normal life just like any other healthy little girl. But she didn't. Eventually, the fits of panic

stopped, but in their place came silence. Leah almost never spoke to anyone, whether children or adults, even when they spoke to her directly. Her parents weren't sure whether her silence was due to her not knowing what to say to people or if there was some sort of refusal on Leah's part to engage the world. While other children played with one another, Leah was perfectly content to be by herself. When she played with dolls, she never spoke to them and never pretended that they were speaking to each other.

Leah's parents had hoped that school and its social environment would be the thing that would draw Leah out of her shell. When Mrs. Nells dropped her daughter off for the first day of school, Leah cried and begged her mother not to leave her, and it broke Mrs. Nells' heart, but she knew that this was a necessary step in her daughter's development. School would be good for her. But while the crying and the pleading eventually stopped, so too did Leah's dependence on her parents. As she grew older, the intimacy that a child shares with her parents was lost. Leah spoke to them less and less until finally they were like strangers. Her parents didn't understand her and she didn't understand them.

Her teachers did what they could to help Leah socialize, but with thirty other students in a class to deal with, they couldn't do much. In fact, young Leah Nells was often an oasis of silence and tranquility in a sometimes noisy and chaotic elementary school class. And while Leah was never the smartest girl in her class, her grades were good enough that she didn't warrant special attention from her teachers or her school. She was just an average student with an unusual personality.

Her classmates saw it differently, though. When a teacher asked Leah a question during class, it always took Leah by surprise because she never raised her hand to volunteer an answer. When called upon, Leah would reply with a blank stare, and she would say nothing. When her classmates spoke to her, she rarely said anything in response. This gave them the impression that she was dumb in every sense of the word, and since she seemed to want to be left alone, that's what happened.

Isolated within her own little world, Leah could still compare herself to the children around her and tell that she was different from

them. She knew that she lacked the compulsion and the urge to speak that her classmates all seemed to possess. She didn't feel any need to speak to anyone, to tell them about herself, or to share her ideas and feelings. She didn't have any desire to make friends or enter into the complex web of relationships within which the rest of her classmates entangled themselves. But she knew that she was different, and she quickly learned that being different was not something to be proud of. It was a reason to feel ashamed. It was something that needed to be fixed because it meant that she was defective in some way, that she wasn't as good as the other children and could never be as successful as them. And she knew, as her parents often reminded her, that the day was coming when she would be an adult and would have to face challenges and assume responsibilities that she wasn't yet ready for.

Leah's daydreaming was interrupted by the sound of rumbling downstairs. She looked at the clock across the room and saw that the time was now 5:15. She got up from the bed and looked out the window to see her mother's car on the driveway as the driver waited for the garage door to open.

Leah wasn't sure what she should do. Often, when her parents came home from work, she would go downstairs to greet them in her own silent way. She wanted to do that today, but she was hesitant. Ever since their garage sale trip last Saturday, her mother had been testy. Last week, Leah overheard her mother complain to her father about "too much stress at work," but Leah also knew that her mother was still upset about Leah's failure at the garage sale. Failure like that always put her mother in a bad mood. Leah decided to stay in her bedroom unless her mother called her to come downstairs. When she heard Mrs. Nells enter the house, Leah stood still and listened, but her mother did not call her name. After a few minutes of waiting, Leah sat back down on her bed and continued reading. Only three pages remained in the chapter she was reading, so she read those pages and then set her book aside.

As she finished the chapter, she heard the sound of her father's car pulling into the garage. A moment later, a car door was shut and the garage door was closed. She heard Mr. Nells enter the house and she

could just barely hear the muted voices of her parents as they greeted each other. Leah was still curious to know what her mother's mood was, but from her bedroom, upstairs, she couldn't hear what her parents were saying. She got up from her bed, placed her book on the top of the bookcase, and went to the door of her room. She opened it quietly and went out into the hall, standing on the landing at the top of the stairs. From here, she could listen to her parents' conversation, and right away she could hear the hostility in one of the voices. She sat down on the top step and listened.

"—but Scott said he wasn't sure," Mrs. Nells said bitterly. "All he knew was that they weren't pleased with it. It really makes me mad. Scott and I worked hard on that report for two months, but just because the numbers weren't what the idiots in the boardroom wanted, we get the blame. 'Kill the messenger'—isn't that the expression? You know, if they don't fire me, I'll probably quit."

"Well," Mr. Nells said sympathetically, "if they fire you, it will be their loss. If those people don't have the courage to face the reality of their situation, then maybe you shouldn't be working for them—but I don't think they'll fire you."

"I know, but it just makes me so mad!" Mrs. Nells said. "And you know what else? Remember last month when I told you they gave a five percent raise to all the senior executives?"

"Yeah."

"Well, according to our figures, the company couldn't afford those raises to so many people. But of course nobody wants their raise yanked away from them, so they're planning to solve the problem by eliminating a few low-level positions. They're gonna fire hardworking people—the very people who are keeping the company in business—just so they can make a few more thousands of dollars a year. It's insane!"

"Well, you'll be safe," Mr. Nells said, trying his best to comfort his wife. "If they fire you, they'll be firing the only person in the company with any common sense. That's a valuable commodity nowadays."

"Not in *that* company," Mrs. Nells grumbled.

There was a momentary silence; then Mrs. Nells said something

that Leah couldn't quite make out. Mr. Nells replied, "Why don't you go lie down and let me and Leah fix dinner. Where is she anyway?" He called out, "Leah!"

At the mention of her name, Leah stood up and started to go downstairs, but she stopped when her mother said, "No, I'm OK. Cooking helps me take my mind off things, and that's what I need right now. And leave Leah in her room. I don't want to see her right now."

"Why not?"

"I'm still upset with her."

Leah sat back down on the stairs.

"Because of what happened on Saturday?" Mr. Nells asked.

"Partly. I know it's not the first time she's behaved like that, and it sure won't be the last time, but I just hate it when she's so difficult in public. I can't help but wonder what other people must think. Like I told her, she's fourteen already, but she still doesn't even have the courage to buy a book unless I'm standing right there holding her hand."

"She'll learn. It'll take time, but she'll learn. She just needs some help."

"Well," Mrs. Nells said with conviction, "I don't know who's gonna help her, but it's not gonna be me! I've had it with her. If she wants to hide in her bedroom forever, then that's fine with me. We've done all we can for her—it's up to her now."

Leah stared at her hands as they rested on her knees. She had heard her parents say things like this before—sometimes they even said them to her face, but that didn't lessen the feelings of shame that she felt. She felt bad that she wasn't more like them. They had both grown up perfectly normal in every respect. They always knew what to say and they never had any trouble talking to people. Neither of them had ever experienced shyness for themselves, so Leah imagined that she must be a source of great frustration and confusion for them. Leah felt bad that she couldn't live up to their expectations and just be normal like everyone else.

Mr. and Mrs. Nells soon changed the subject to something less upsetting. Since neither was likely to call Leah downstairs until dinner

was served, she stood up and returned to her bedroom as quietly as she had left it. She sat back down on her bed and stared at the wall across from her. She thought about what she might do to relieve some of the shame that her parents felt. The most obvious answer was to overcome her shyness, talk more, and make friends—but how?

As she thought about it, she lay down on her side and watched the clock across the room on her desk. Minute by minute in the quiet, almost empty room, she watched the numbers change.

Three

THE FINAL days before the first day of school passed quickly, and each day found Leah even more anxious than the last. She was worried because she was always nervous about the first day of school, but she was also worried because she believed that high school would be an awful experience for her, if only because the other option—that it would be wonderful—seemed so unlikely. Late Sunday night, before the start of school, Leah lay in her bed, restless, as her imagination terrorized her with all sorts of crazy scenarios. Suppose she were to get lost, or lose her schedule of classes? What if the room number of one of her classes was switched, but no one notified her and she found herself in the wrong class? Would the teachers be friendly or mean? And what about the other students? Her ninth grade class would be almost three times the size of her eighth grade class, which meant she would be surrounded by unfamiliar faces everywhere she looked. What would her new classmates be like? Would she make a friend? Anything was possible, but everything still seemed frightening.

She didn't sleep well, and when her alarm clock went off at six in the morning—two hours before the start of her first class, Leah was already awake and sitting on the edge of her bed in her darkened bedroom, trying to summon all her strength and courage. She would

need it to face this day. She wondered if any of her classmates had suffered through the same sleepless night that she had.

Not wanting to waste any time, and too nervous to sit still anyway, Leah stood up from the bed and began her morning routine. She spent a lot more time than usual getting dressed and ready to leave because she wanted to look nice on the first day of school and make a good impression. She didn't always care about looking pretty, but today was a special day. At 7:15, when she left her bedroom, all traces of sleepiness had vanished and she was wide awake, but a sick, nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach accompanied her as she opened her bedroom door. Before she went downstairs, she noticed the door to her parents' bedroom was still closed and there didn't seem to be any signs of life coming from the other side. Leah wondered if her parents were awake yet, and she worried that they weren't. Her father had agreed to drive her to school this morning so it was crucial that he, at least, be awake. Leah quietly approached the bedroom door, and she put an ear against it and listened. She could hear the sound of water running which meant that there was someone in her parents' bathroom using the shower, most likely her father, for he was always the first to leave the house in the morning. Breathing a sigh of relief that her parents were awake and getting ready for work, Leah turned and went downstairs.

She went straight to the kitchen, which was quite dark, even though, outside, the sun had been up for almost an hour. Leah flipped the light switch and was blinded for an instant by the flood of light. Her stomach was still queasy, but she decided she should try to eat something before she left for school. She poured a small glass of milk and carried it to the kitchen table. She sat down and enjoyed the stillness and silence of the kitchen as she took a few cautious sips from her glass. She knew there wouldn't be very many moments of peace like this for her today, so she had to seize them when she could. After a moment, she glanced at the clock on the wall on the other side of the kitchen. The time was 7:22; the first school bell rang at eight o'clock sharp. Leah tried to ease her sense of urgency and anxiety by imagining how silly this would all seem later that afternoon when the first day of school was over

and she could finally relax. Certainly that time would come, but it seemed so far away. There were so many dreadful events to endure before then. Today was going to feel like the longest day of the year.

She turned her attention away from the clock and inspected her pile of belongings that she had stacked on the kitchen table last night before she went to bed. At the base of the stack was her three ring notebook, brand new and purple. Inside of it were five subject dividers, plenty of notebook paper, and a plastic zipper pouch which contained two pens and two sharpened pencils. Also inside the notebook was her all-important class schedule and a map of her new school. A few days ago, she used a pencil to lightly shade the squares on the map that represented her classrooms.

Sitting on top of the notebook was one of the books Mrs. Nells had bought for her daughter at the garage sales the week before. It was titled *The Little Book of Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, and it was just that—a little book, not even 200 pages, that would be easy for her to carry on her first day of school, but it was still long enough that it would provide several days' worth of reading. Leah didn't know whether she would find time to read her book today since she didn't know how busy her classes would be, but knowing that the book would be with her was a comfort. It represented a link to her home: a reminder of the security of her bedroom—something familiar in an unfamiliar place. For now, though, the book sat idle on top of her notebook.

The top layer of the pyramid consisted of a small purse. Her mother had bought it for her two years ago when Leah noticed the other girls in her middle school class had started bringing their own purses to school. Leah wanted to fit in, so she got one too. It remained in good condition, but that was because Leah had little use for it. Its only contents were some loose change, a small mirror that her mother had given her, a small hair brush, some pens and pencils, a library card from her middle school that had never been used, and a few other personal necessities.

She remembered that she needed to fix herself a lunch to take to school, but before she could get started on that task, she heard the sound

of someone coming down the stairs. She hoped it would be her father, but she realized he couldn't possibly be ready to leave yet. Instead, it was her mother. Mrs. Nells strolled into the kitchen still wearing her morning robe, but she was clearly wide awake, as though it were the middle of the day. She took one look at her anxious daughter sitting at the table and said with a smile, "You sure look nervous."

Leah wondered if her nervousness was really that obvious. Sometimes her parents would assume that she was anxious or scared about something when that wasn't necessarily the case. Most of the time, at home, she was at ease with herself. It was only when she faced the prospect of going out and meeting new people that she really became anxious. When she felt this way, she did her best to conceal her feelings, but this morning Mrs. Nells could read Leah's emotions clearly. Mrs. Nells didn't blame her for feeling nervous, though. She could still remember her own first day of high school and how nervous she had been, but she had been excited, too—and ready to start the next phase of her life.

During those times when Leah felt really nervous, like now, she was a little more willing than usual to communicate with her parents. After forcing down two gulps of milk, she said to her mother, "I need to leave by 7:40." Although school didn't begin until eight, Leah wanted to arrive early so she could get used to her new campus before the first bell rang.

Mrs. Nells nodded and replied, "I know. Your father hasn't forgotten—he'll drive you to school. He's upstairs getting dressed right now."

Leah looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. The time was 7:25. She usually trusted her father, but this morning, she needed everything to go perfectly. She didn't know what she'd do if she were tardy. How could she walk into her first class with all of her new classmates already there, watching her, laughing at her as she arrived late? The very idea made Leah feel like she was going to throw up.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Nells put two slices of bread in the toaster and then left the kitchen to go back upstairs and take her turn in the shower.

Before she left, however, she said, "Don't worry, Leah. You're gonna have fun today." When her mother was gone, Leah sat and stared at the toaster, wondering if what her mother said was true, and again her mind tormented her with vivid images of all the things that could possibly go wrong today. A moment later, two slices of toast popped up, cooling quickly, and waiting to be grabbed by hungry fingers. Mrs. Nells would eat them later, when she returned downstairs before she left for work.

The toast reminded Leah that she still needed to fix her lunch for school, so she got up from the kitchen table, walked to the counter next to the refrigerator, and opened a drawer that contained all sorts of bags, both paper and plastic ones. She pulled out a brown paper bag from a bundle of about fifty. Leah always brought her own lunch to school because she didn't like standing in a long lunch line. She opened the refrigerator door and removed a small carton of fruit punch. She placed the carton in her sack and then proceeded to make her sandwich. She spread some peanut butter between two slices of white bread and then cut the sandwich into halves. She took a small plastic bag from the drawer and put the sandwich halves into it. She placed the sandwiches, along with an apple, into the brown bag, then she folded the mouth of the bag over twice and carried it with her back to the kitchen table, placing it on top of her books next to her purse. She sat down again and waited, desperately trying to remember if there was anything else that she needed to do before she left for school. She couldn't think of anything; she was ready to go.

The time was now 7:32, and the house was silent. Somewhere upstairs, her father was still getting dressed. Leah wished he would hurry. Despite her mother's assurance, she feared that her father had forgotten about the importance of this day, and as irrational as it was, she couldn't get that fear out of her mind. Leah recalled speaking to him the night before, and she recalled his promise to drive her to school this morning—but perhaps he had forgotten overnight. What would she do then? If she left right now, she could walk to school and get there on time, but she would have to leave *now*. She was tempted. After this morning, she would walk to school most days, just as she had always walked to her

middle school, but today she wanted her father to drive her to school, just so that she would feel safe. Worried, she continued to wait.

7:35 came and went, and as 7:40—the minute that Leah had decided she needed to leave—approached, and Mr. Nells still hadn't appeared in the kitchen, Leah began to panic. At 7:39 she heard the sound of her father coming down the stairs. She immediately stood up and gathered her pile of books, her purse, and her lunch in her trembling hands. Mr. Nells appeared in the kitchen, still looking a little sleepy. Like his wife, he noticed immediately how nervous his daughter was. He smiled and teased, "Are you ready to go?"

Leah replied by bolting out the door to the garage and climbing into her father's car. Mr. Nells followed her out of the house, opened the garage door, and took his place behind the steering wheel of his car. At 7:42, they were on their way.

Mr. Nells was 38 years old, but he looked much younger than his age suggested. There were some wrinkles on his face, but Leah only noticed them when she saw his face close up. Mr. Nells was aware that his body was slow to age, and he often joked about how he sometimes felt like an old man even if his body didn't show it. His good humor for his condition was lost on his wife, also 38, whose face was starting to show its age more profoundly than her husband's.

Mr. Nells drove with the radio turned off as he took his daughter to school. He never listened to the radio, for reasons that Leah never asked about, except when the weather was poor and he needed to hear the traffic reports. The absence of an annoying morning DJ's voice was not a problem for Leah who welcomed the silence. Her father spoke to her a little, and Leah spoke even less. Her thoughts were focused on what would happen when this ride reached its destination rather than on the journey itself.

"I hope you remember the directions to your school," Mr. Nells teased, "because I don't!" He glanced at his daughter who didn't say anything. She knew he was joking. Her high school was less than a mile away from their home—about the same distance as her middle school had been, only in the opposite direction. She had a lot of things to worry

about this morning, but her father's knowledge of their neighborhood was not one of them.

"There's a lot of traffic this morning," Mr. Nells said as he steered his car northbound onto the busy avenue that led them to the school. "I guess I'm gonna have to get used to sharing the road with teenagers again." Leah looked out the passenger side window at the trees and houses and businesses slowly crawl past and then stop altogether as they came to a red light.

"Are you nervous?" Mr. Nells asked, already knowing the answer. "I can't remember if I was nervous on my first day of high school. I guess I was, but I can't remember it . . . it feels like such a long time ago. But I liked high school—I made a lot of good friends."

The light turned green and as the car started moving again, Leah caught her first glimpse of the high school just down the road. The main building loomed large and intimidating. She found it hard to believe that, in less than half an hour, she would be inside that building, attending her first class of her freshman year of high school.

The campus was very busy. Mr. Nells joined the line of cars driven by parents who were dropping their teenage children off. A few school buses were already parked in the bus depot, and Leah could see students descending from them. She couldn't imagine riding the school bus on the first day of school—or any other day. Sitting in a crowded bus with a lot of noisy, overactive teenagers, having to wait for her stop before she could get off—it must be a truly miserable experience. Older students were driving their own cars and parking in the students' lot, which was filling up fast. With so many vehicles trying to squeeze onto the campus at once, some for the first time, a pair of police officers had been assigned to the campus to help direct traffic.

As they drew closer to the school, Leah's nervousness reached its peak. Her heart beat wildly, she was out of breath, and she felt weak all over. She didn't want to go to school today! She wished she could be anywhere else other than here, right now. If only this were some terrible nightmare from which she could awaken, and find that it was still summer and she was free to spend the day however she wished! But it

wasn't a dream, and she didn't wake up. The fear that she felt right now was real, and there was no escaping it.

Mr. Nells' car was now close enough to the front of the school so that Leah could get out. Already, the cars ahead and behind them had stopped, and their teenage passengers were exiting. Mr. Nells stopped too and said to his daughter with a proud smile, "Good luck today! Have fun! I know you'll do fine!" Leah barely heard him over the sound of her pounding heart and the blood singing in her ears. With a shaky hand, she opened the car door. She gathered her belongings in her arms and with every last bit of strength she could rally, she climbed out of the car. She closed the door behind her and turned to face the school. She was here.

Four

LEAH didn't notice her father drive away because her senses were assaulted by all of the activity around her. There were so many students, and most of them looked a lot older than she was. She heard their cries of laughter, their shouts, and snippets of their conversations. She could smell the exhaust from the school buses, and she could feel a light breeze on her skin and the warmth of the morning sun, rising in the east, ready to begin this late August day.

A car horn honked, and Leah realized she hadn't moved a step since she left her father's car. She was still standing in the road and creating an obstacle for the cars behind her. She quickly moved to the sidewalk and started towards the front of the school, looking for a place to wait. The time was 7:54, so she had a few minutes before the first bell rang. As she reached the flagpole, she marveled at how many students were here already—so many more than had gone to her middle school. She searched the crowd for familiar faces, people whose names she knew, but so far she didn't see anyone she recognized. The area around the flagpole was very crowded, and other students had already claimed all of the concrete benches surrounding it, so she made her way towards the front doors of the main school building. It was even more crowded here. Many students were clustered together with their friends, but just as

many people were standing by themselves, waiting silently. The air was filled with groans, with laughter, and with stories of summer adventures. Acquaintances and friendships were being reaffirmed, and everywhere there was a comparison of class schedules, as friends hoped to find other friends in their classes. Leah tried to navigate through the maze of people, towards some place where they weren't packed so close together; the dense crowd was beginning to make her feel claustrophobic.

Leah made her way past the auditorium and towards the phys. ed. building. Again, she found a lot of people waiting, but it was less crowded here. She found an empty spot next to the metal railing on one side of the concrete walkway and leaned against it. Here she stood, wearing her purse on her shoulder and clutching her books and her lunch bag. As her attention jumped from one thing to another, trying to absorb all of the sights and sounds around her, she was amazed that she was *here*, in *high school*. She watched her new classmates and observed that a lot of them wore backpacks, which freed their hands to gesture as they spoke or allowed their hands to hide in the pockets of their jeans. Almost no one was carrying their books and lunches in their hands like Leah was. She would try to remember to ask her mother to purchase a backpack for her when she got home from school today.

If she could have a few minutes to wait here, by herself in this crowd, her nerves might have settled down, but all too soon, she heard the first bell of the day ring. The bell startled her, and at first she thought it must be a mistake. But the crowd of students, groaning and wearing unhappy expressions on their faces, turned towards the main building and started indoors. Leah quickly pulled her class schedule out of her notebook. She had already memorized the room numbers for all of her classes and she knew that her first class was in room 212, which was upstairs and to the rear of the main building. In her nervous state of mind, though, she needed to have her schedule in her hand so she could glance at it again and again every few steps in order to confirm the number.

Last night, she had prepared for her first day by studying her map of the school. She knew the shortest route from the main doors to her

first classroom, but the interior of the school itself bore little resemblance to the two-dimensional floor plan that she had memorized. To see the school for real was a very different experience, and the crowded hallways made her journey feel a lot longer than it really was. At last, she found the room, and after confirming the room number on her schedule one last time, she went inside.

The class was biology, a required course for freshman students. The room was large, and it was definitely a science classroom. In the back of the class, behind several rows of desks, were lab stations. Upon entering, Leah found a few other wide-eyed students sitting silently in desks around the room. She recognized a couple of faces as classmates from eighth grade. The familiar faces made her feel a little better, so she sat down in a desk, not too close to the front of the class but not too close to the back, either. She also noticed, once she sat down, that the teacher was nowhere to be seen. How strange would it be if all the students arrived on time, but they didn't have a teacher to teach them?

That didn't happen, though; once the bell rang and all of Leah's classmates had taken their seats, an older woman entered and introduced herself as Mrs. Safley. It was the same name that appeared on Leah's class schedule—a connection which helped Leah relax, confident that she was in the right place. Almost immediately, the PA system was turned on and she heard the voice of the school's principal welcoming everyone back for a new year. The class stood to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and then another voice took over and began reading the day's announcements. Meanwhile, Leah looked around at her new classmates. Every desk in the room was occupied, and Leah thought it would be an impossible task to learn the names of so many new people.

When the morning announcements were finished, Mrs. Safley got down to the business of calling roll, handing out textbooks, and assigning lockers. As Leah sat at her desk staring at the heavy biology book that threatened to crush her almost-empty notebook beneath it, she was again reminded that she needed to get a backpack. She didn't want to have to carry an enormous book like this in her arms when she walked to and from school.

The hour felt like it passed quickly, probably because there was so much to do. At 9:05, the next bell rang and the class ended, and Leah set out to find her locker. The lockers for her class were grouped together, and before they had left the room, Mrs. Safley had given the class some vague directions about where they could find their lockers. Leah followed some students from her class through the crowded hallways until they made their way to their wall of lockers. Leah found hers and opened it on the first try. She placed her biology textbook, her volcanoes and earthquakes book, and her lunch in the locker and then began searching for her second class of the morning.

Her second class was algebra. In middle school, math had been one of her stronger subjects because math wasn't like social studies or English where she had to read about people and the things they did. Math was just numbers—abstract, impersonal. As Leah sat and browsed her algebra textbook, though, she noticed how strange the new equations looked, and she wondered how well she would do in this class.

Following algebra was phys. ed. Leah hated this class in middle school. All the emphasis on teamwork and physical and social interaction with other girls only made Leah feel miserable. She was terrible at sports, and like so many other things in her life, she preferred to stay on the sidelines as a spectator. Besides, she didn't think she needed the chance for exercise that the class offered because she walked almost a mile to and from school everyday.

With the end of phys. ed. at 11:15 came lunch—the halfway point of the day. Leah returned to her locker, picked up her lunch, her purse, and *The Little Book of Earthquakes and Volcanoes*, and walked to the cafeteria. When she arrived, she didn't know where to sit. Only a few tables were occupied, but those that were free were filling up fast as more students hurried to start their lunch. Leah stood against a wall and surveyed the room. She needed to claim a table, or at least a seat at a table, and make it hers for the rest of the school year, but few choices appealed to her. She began to worry, but then she noticed some students exiting the cafeteria and going outside. Through the cafeteria windows she could see tables on the patio outside the building. Hoping there

might be better choices out there, she made her way across the cafeteria and out the doors.

She found several empty tables available. Leah chose one that was located some distance from the other tables and shaded by one of the campus's enormous oak trees. Here, at least, was one new experience that high school offered that she liked: the freedom to sit outside and eat lunch in the open air. In her middle school, students hadn't been allowed to leave the cafeteria until the lunch hour was over. As a result, the cafeteria had always been a confining, almost suffocating place, and because of the lack of space, she always had to share a table with strangers, and she never enjoyed that. Here, she might be able to sit at a table all by herself. She sat down with her back to the tree and her eyes watching as other students came outside to eat. No one challenged her claim to this table, so she opened her lunch bag and pulled out her food.

She was still a little nervous (there were three more classes that she still had to attend before the end of the day), but this lunchtime seclusion gave her shaky nerves a chance to rest. Her stomach wasn't quite in a mood to eat, though, so she took her bites slowly at first, swallowing only what her unsettled stomach would allow. She didn't finish her sandwich and only took a couple of bites out of her apple, which seemed like a waste, but she did drink all of her fruit juice. She stored her trash in the brown paper sack and set it aside. She found she still had almost thirty minutes remaining before the next bell.

She killed some of that time by exploring the sights and sounds of her surroundings. The sky, which had looked pale and bleak only a few hours before when she traveled to school, was now a rich blue. The sun was nearing its highest point in the sky, but the tree behind her protected her from the sun's heat. The warm air was filled with the voices of her fellow students at the other tables as they talked and ate. Birds were singing in the trees that punctuated the campus lawn; Leah listened to them for a moment and decided that their whistling and singing sounded pretty.

After a few minutes, she remembered her book, so she opened it and tried to read. Her eyes glided over the words and although she

appeared to be making progress by occasionally turning pages, her mind had trouble focusing on what she was reading. As the minutes passed, she kept returning to the present, to her first day of school and the classes that were to come. At last, she closed her book and gave up, deciding, instead, to do something more productive with her time. She removed her class schedule from her purse and examined it. The schedule had aged rapidly in the last few hours. The smooth, crisp paper had succumbed to the effects of nervous fingers folding and unfolding it. It had become worn and flimsy, two creases divided it into fourths, and some of the black print was starting to fade. Leah memorized the room number for her next class, and she didn't take her eyes off of the schedule until she heard the bell ring. As she stood up to leave, the queasiness in her stomach returned, reminding her that this day wasn't over yet.

The last three classes of the day were consumer economics, English, and world history. Consumer economics was her elective for this school year, and although it wasn't a class that particularly interested her, freshmen had so few electives to choose from that this was the best choice available. English and history, she suspected, were going to be her most difficult classes of the year. They weren't classes that she enjoyed in middle school, and now that she was in high school, she only expected them to be harder.

Today, there was no real schoolwork for Leah to do in any of her classes, just the tedious process of accumulating textbooks and adding them to the collection in her locker. Her final three classes passed quickly and before she knew it, it was 3:00 and the school day was over. She exited the school through the very same doors she entered earlier that morning. The most noticeable difference in the scene was that everything seemed brighter and happier. Of course the sun was shining and the birds were singing, but there was something more. She could hear laughter and the excited shouts of her schoolmates who were celebrating the end of their first day of school. Leah quietly shared in their enthusiasm. She was happy to be going home.

With every step Leah took away from the school and the

swarming mass of students, the more her anxiety diminished. She knew it would return later that night and tomorrow morning when she prepared to face the second day of school, but for now she could enjoy a respite. She could go home to her empty house and spend some much needed time reading alone.

As she walked home, she retraced in reverse the route her father had taken that morning when he drove her to school. The first part of her journey took her along the busy avenue that led from the high school to her neighborhood. The traffic wasn't quite as heavy as it had been in the morning, but there were still a lot of cars. Her middle school had been in a strictly residential setting, with houses surrounding the campus on all sides. Leah preferred the lonelier, quieter route to and from her old middle school over walking home through the busy commercial district that surrounded her new high school. Walking along this busy avenue made her feel like she was in yet another kind of crowd. She felt uncomfortable and wondered if she would ever get used to this.

Other students who lived close to the high school were walking home too. She could see some of them walking ahead of her, and although she didn't turn her head around to look, she knew that there were many more behind her, following her on the sidewalk. Once in a while, someone, usually a boy in an even bigger hurry than Leah to get home, would overtake her and pass her on the left or the right. They always took Leah by surprise; she couldn't hear their approaching footsteps over the sound of the cars driving past. Startled, she would tense up, slow down a little, and let the other person pass, at the same time trying to pretend like she wasn't aware of the person at all.

She had to cross two busy intersections before she reached her neighborhood. At the first intersection, one block south of the campus, Leah waited among a group of fifteen other students. When the light changed, they crossed together, with Leah bringing up the rear. On the other side, she walked slowly, allowing the rest of the group to go on ahead of her, but she still managed to catch up to them again at the next intersection.

At last, she arrived at the street that led into her own

neighborhood. She and three other students broke away from the rest of the group and started down the quieter, tree-lined suburban street. The other three students stayed on the sidewalk on one side of the street while Leah crossed over to the other side as soon as she had a chance.

Turning another corner put her on her street and she could see her house just a few doors away. It had never looked as welcoming or as safe as it did now. Neither of her parents would be home before five, and it wasn't even 3:30 yet, so she had almost two hours all to herself. Stepping up onto the porch, she removed her key from her purse and unlocked the door. With a sigh, she went inside and closed the door behind her, shutting herself off from the world.

Her first stop was the kitchen—she had barely eaten anything at lunch that day and now she was starving. She put her books and purse down on the kitchen table and went to the refrigerator. She found some ice cream in the freezer so she scooped some into a small bowl and carried it to the table.

She ate her ice cream slowly and silently. When her spoon cut through the dessert, and was stopped by the bottom of the bowl, she didn't let her spoon make a clinking sound. Leah lifted it carefully to her mouth, savored the taste of the ice cream, and then sent the spoon back to the bowl for another bite. As she ate, Leah stared out the window and looked at the trees and grass, still green in the late summer heat, and she watched the clouds floating far above in the blue sky.

As she finished her ice cream, her body reacted to the cold dessert. Goose pimples appeared on her arms and she started to tremble. She stood up and took the bowl and spoon to the sink where she rinsed them off and placed them in the dishwasher. Then she returned to the table, picked up her belongings and carried them upstairs to her room. The time was 3:45.

Here in her bedroom, she felt completely safe and calm. For the rest of the afternoon she planned to lie on her bed with her book and read. Unlike her failed attempt at lunch, this time she didn't have any trouble reading and losing herself in the text. The minutes passed and she forgot all about the world outside her bedroom. She sank deeper into her

own private world, which, at the moment, was at the mercy of the forces of plate tectonics.

At a few minutes past five, Leah heard the sound of the garage door opening. She knew her mother was home. Sighing as she closed her book, she sat up and listened as she heard her mother's car drive into the garage. Leah wasn't looking forward to seeing her parents this evening because she knew they would bombard her with questions about her first day of high school. As she heard her mother enter through the kitchen door downstairs, she prepared answers to the questions that she knew her mother would ask: her classes were fine; her teachers were fine; the other students were fine; no, she hadn't made any new friends. These were the same answers she gave every year, turning their first-day-of-school conversation into a sort of ritual that had to be observed rather than a spontaneous chat between a mother and her daughter.

Leah sat cross-legged on her bed as she listened to her mother climb the stairs. Her bedroom door wasn't closed so both mother and daughter saw each other at the same time when Mrs. Nells peeked into the room. Leah's mother had a smile on her face, and when she saw her daughter, sitting up and apparently waiting for her, she interpreted this to mean that Leah was also eager to see her and possibly willing to talk. Mrs. Nells imagined that today had been a wonderful day for her daughter. All day while she was at work, she kept flashing back to her own high school experiences—experiences which the passage of time had rendered happier than perhaps they really had been. High school had been such an important time in her own life, and she hoped it would be the same for her daughter. She wanted Leah to meet people, learn to drive, get a part-time job, prepare for college, make friends, and maybe even find a boyfriend. Mrs. Nells believed that Leah's shyness was always something that was almost about to be overcome. All that was needed was a little bit of encouragement, a little nudge in the direction of a happier life.

Mrs. Nells sat down on the bed next to her daughter and began the interrogation. "So, how was your first day in *high school*?" she asked cheerfully. "Did everything go all right?"

Leah wanted to get these questions over with as soon as possible so she cooperated by providing quick, short answers. She answered her mother's question by simply nodding her head in the affirmative.

"Did you have any trouble finding your classes? That school is an enormous place. I remember my first day of high school—or maybe it was middle school—I'm not sure. Anyway, I once got lost on my first day of school and found myself in a class full of juniors and seniors when I was only . . . when I was only a *sophomore*. Yeah—now I remember: it was high school. I didn't realize I was in the wrong class until the roll was called. I was so embarrassed!" Mrs. Nells giggled. "I hope you didn't have any trouble like that?"

"No."

"How about your teachers? Do they seem nice?"

"They're fine," Leah answered as she always did when the question was put to her year after year. Leah knew what her mother's next two questions would be before Mrs. Nells even uttered them.

"Do the other kids seem nice? Have you made any friends yet?"

It was the second question that Mrs. Nells really wanted an answer to. Who cared what the other kids were like so long as Leah made at least one friend? Leah hated this question most of all because she knew that the answer would be disappointing to her mother, and like so many times before, Mrs. Nells' hopes and dreams for her daughter would be crushed. Leah didn't want to hurt her mother, and anything other than a "Yes" response would hurt her. But Leah couldn't lie and that's why she didn't have the courage to look at her mother when, after a brief pause, she shook her head no.

"That's all right," Mrs. Nells replied, but the smile had vanished from her face, her voice had lost much of its cheer, and Leah knew it was not all right. "It's only the first day and it's a big school. I'll bet everyone there was just as nervous as you were this morning. Tomorrow will be better! Most new friendships are made on the second day of school anyway!" Mrs. Nells tried to force herself to smile again, but it only made her face appear even more melancholy. The disappointed mother tried to convince herself that tomorrow would be a better day, because every day

can't be like today. Yet Leah knew that every day of her life had been just like this day, and there was nothing to suggest that it would change.

There were a few more questions asked, but neither mother nor daughter was in the mood to talk. Mrs. Nells learned what she needed to know. A moment later she stood up and left the room, presumably to start dinner. Leah wasn't recruited to help, and she figured her mother didn't want her presence in the kitchen this evening, so she stayed in her room, read her book, and waited for her father to come home so that he could ask her the exact same questions her mother had asked.

Five

MRS. NELLS was wrong about the second day of school always being the day when friendships are made, or at least she was wrong in Leah's case. Tuesday was just like Monday, except that Leah experienced a lot less anxiety having already been through one full day of high school. Wednesday proved easier still, and Leah quickly settled into a routine. She left home at exactly 7:35 every morning and walked the same route to school. All of her teachers assigned desks for their students so Leah always knew where to sit. She continued to sit at the same table on the patio at lunch. Although more and more students were choosing to sit outside at lunchtime, Leah was left to sit by herself at the table underneath the great oak tree. Her routine might have seemed boring to someone unfamiliar to her, but it was exactly what she wanted. As the first week of school came to a close, she felt comfortable in her new identity as a ninth grader in high school.

When Leah arrived at school on Thursday morning, she wore a backpack like everyone else. Hers was lavender—not necessarily the color she would have preferred, but because it was the first week of school, the selection of backpacks at the store had been very limited. Inside the backpack was Leah's notebook, her volcanoes book (she was almost halfway finished with it), two textbooks that Leah had taken

home for homework last night, and her sack lunch. Now that she had a backpack, she felt like she fit in, at least a little.

Later that same morning, Leah started third period in the locker room of the girls' gym by tying the laces of her sneakers after changing into her gym uniform for the second day in a row. The uniforms consisted of a pair of black shorts and a white T-shirt with her school's name and mascot emblazoned on it. She privately agreed with the other girls who complained that the uniforms were ugly, but rules were rules so she put her uniform on.

The third period girls' phys. ed. class actually consisted of two classes. Leah was assigned to the freshman class with about sixty other girls while the second class was made up of mostly sophomore girls, with a sprinkling of juniors and seniors. The boys, of course, were segregated into their own classes in the other gym. Although phys. ed. was certainly not Leah's favorite class, it did have a routine to it that made it a lot easier to anticipate what was going to happen every day. That made Leah feel safe, even though playing sports wasn't something that she enjoyed doing. She tolerated the class, but she also looked forward to the day when she would be a junior and wouldn't be required to take phys. ed. any more.

So far, not much had happened in her phys. ed. class during this first week of school. On Monday, the coaches merely called roll, introduced themselves, and then left the girls to sit and wait for their next class. On Tuesday, the coaches assigned gym lockers and distributed the uniforms: two pairs of shirts and two pairs of shorts for each girl. On Wednesday, the girls wore their new uniforms for the first time, listened to their coach spell out the basic rules and procedures of the class, and were led through some light calisthenics drills—mostly just stretching and jumping—that would begin every class. Yesterday, the sophomore girls left the gymnasium after their warm-up exercises, and Leah wondered if the freshmen would go outside today as well. The gymnasium was chilly, and Leah preferred to go outside where it was warm and the sun was shining.

When Leah had finished suiting up, she left the noisy locker

room and went into the girls' gym. The gym was empty except for one other freshman girl who was sitting on the floor. On Wednesday, all of the girls had been assigned specific points on the floor (the freshmen at one end of the gym and the sophomores at the other) for the convenience of roll call and to give everyone space during calisthenics. The other girl didn't say anything as Leah, on her way to her own spot on the cold, hard floor, walked past, but Leah did notice that the other girl, who was blonde and a little chubby, glanced back in the shy girl's direction a couple of times as they waited for the rest of their classmates to join them. Leah didn't know the girl's name. She was one of her many new classmates who had gone to a different middle school.

The rest of the class slowly began to file in, and when everybody was in their assigned places, the coaches entered and called roll. Leah didn't like roll call because each girl had to shout "Here!" when her name was called, and Leah, naturally, didn't shout very well. Shouting was necessary, though, because of the gym's sheer size and because the sophomores at the other end were shouting too as they answered their own roll call. The coach called the names alphabetically, never looking up from her grade book. Leah held her breath and waited for her name.

"Nells!?" the coach eventually shouted. Leah thought it was silly that she had to go by her last name in phys. ed. while in every other class, her teachers simply called her "Leah."

"Here!" Leah squeaked, as loudly as her voice would allow. The coach didn't look up from her grade book as she made a mark next to Leah's name.

After roll, and after the girls completed their calisthenics routine, the freshmen's coach, in her usual authoritarian manner, declared, "OK, we're going outside today and you girls are gonna do some running!" The announcement was met with a chorus of moans and groans from the class. "And don't whine," the coach shouted, annoyed. "This is easy. Everybody out the door! We're going to the football field!"

The more experienced sophomores, who had already completed their warm-up exercises, were exiting through the gymnasium's side door. The freshmen stood up and followed them. Most of the freshman girls,

including Leah, had no idea where the football field was, but the sophomores were apparently heading in that direction too, so they followed them. As they approached the field, Leah saw that it was ringed by a running track. The girls assembled on the track, and immediately took the opportunity to split up into their own little cliques so they could talk to their friends. Leah stood off to the side by herself and waited for the coach who was trailing slowly behind them. The sophomore girls had already started running around the track. Leah watched them and saw that a few of them weren't really running but were instead just jogging very slowly. She wondered how long they were supposed to run. She knew that she wouldn't be able to run—or even jog—for the entire class period.

When their coach finally caught up with her class, her aggressive voice pulled Leah's attention away from the sophomores. "OK, girls, listen up!" she yelled. "We're gonna do a twenty minute run-walk! Now, I don't care if you walk most of the time, but I don't want to see anyone standing still, is that understood? Go!"

All the girls began with a moderate jog, but it wasn't long before a few of the more athletic sophomores, who were still running at a brisk pace, overtook them. Leah wondered how those girls could keep running like that for so long. The freshmen continued jogging until they were halfway around the track, the farthest point from their coach, and then they slowed to a walk. Leah was thankful for the chance to slow down because she was already out of breath. Once again, the girls broke up into their cliques and talked to their friends as they walked. Leah made sure to walk just a little bit faster than the rest of them so that she could be by herself. A couple of minutes later, as she completed her first lap around the track, she saw both of the girls' coaches standing off to the side talking. Every now and then one of them would validate her presence by urging the girls on. "Come on girls, walk faster! And stop talking—this isn't social hour!" they would yell, before they themselves went back to their own conversation. Even though their comments weren't addressed to her specifically, Leah always obeyed and quickened her pace for a moment before slowing down again.

After a few minutes, the freshman and sophomore girls had formed a thin circle around the circumference of the track, and the two classes intermingled with one another. Leah's faster pace brought her closer to a clique of seven sophomores who were walking very slowly and chatting amongst themselves. Leah moved to the outside lane of the track in order to pass them. As she did, she could hear them talk, and it seemed their attention was drawn to an event on the other side of the field.

"Where is he?" one of the girls asked. "I can't see him."

"I don't know, maybe those are the freshmen," a second girl said.

"Oh! There he is!" exclaimed a third.

Curious, Leah turned her head so she could see what the other girls were looking at. She saw a line of boys running from their gymnasium towards the soccer field just beyond the football field. They seemed as eager to run as Leah and her classmates were on this day, and they had to be spurred on by their own coach, who was barking orders to the boys to run faster. At last, they reached their destination and clustered together in the center of the soccer field.

"I still can't see him," the first girl whined.

"You can't see him now," explained the girl who had spotted the elusive boy. "He's in the middle of the group." She was squinting hard and held her hand above her forehead to block out the sun.

"Who are you talking about?" asked one of the girls who had been quiet until now. Leah had been wondering the same thing and was glad there was someone to ask the question for her.

"Rob. Who do you think?" replied the second girl.

"Oh." The answer was apparently sufficient for the other girls, but it didn't give Leah much information. Leah looked into the crowd of boys, which was starting to disperse and divide into teams for whatever game it was they were going to play. She wondered which one was Rob and why he was so special.

The first girl spoke again. "He's got phys. ed. this period too. He told me that he'd say hi if he could."

"Do you think he will?" another girl asked.

"He's gotta see us first," said the second girl. "They're not even looking in our direction."

"You know what we oughtta do?" suggested a girl who had been walking just three steps behind Leah. Leah hadn't noticed her and she was startled when she heard the voice behind her. "When we reach the other side of the track, we should all yell 'Hi Rob!' and embarrass him!"

The girls giggled. "That would be great!"

None of the girls actually had the courage to go through with their plan, but Leah didn't know this. All she knew was that she didn't want to be around when they started yelling, so once again she quickened her pace until they were far behind her. For the next few minutes, Leah walked in relative silence, sometimes kicking the loose gravel on the track or looking up at the big, blue sky. There were a few scattered clouds, but they weren't enough to block the sun's rays. Leah was getting hot; the sun and the physical activity were almost enough to make her sweat. She didn't want that to happen, though, so she slowed down again and tried to take it easy. She looked at her watch and saw that there was still at least ten minutes before the coach would tell them it was time to go back indoors. She was thinking about how nice the air conditioning would feel once they returned to the gym and the locker room when she heard footsteps approaching from behind. Seconds later, she heard a nervous voice say, "Hello!"

Unaware that the voice was speaking to her, Leah didn't respond. But when she didn't hear anyone else reply, she turned her head around and saw the chubby, blonde girl who had been watching her earlier in the gymnasium. The girl was following a few steps behind her, trying to catch up. Leah didn't know what to say as she slowed down even more until the girl was walking beside her. She offered a feeble, "Hi."

"I wish the class had stayed inside today," the other girl said, cautiously. "I mean, it's too hot out here. I guess the coach just wants us to suffer." She smiled. Leah nodded and smiled too; she didn't know what else to do.

"My name's Megan."

"I'm Leah," the shy girl replied in barely more than a whisper. She

cleared her throat so she could speak clearly the next time Megan asked her something. Leah felt nervous and confused. She wasn't sure what she should say or do. She realized Megan was trying to be friendly, and that Megan expected her to reciprocate that friendliness, but she didn't have a clue about how to make small talk with a stranger. She had to rely on Megan's cautious remarks as a guide for where the conversation should go.

But Megan wasn't prepared to do all of the talking either, especially not with a girl who was still just a stranger. She hadn't made any friends yet in phys. ed. class, and when she saw that Leah was by herself too, she thought she might introduce herself and see what happened. That sounded so easy, but it had taken her the entire class period so far to work up the courage just to speak to Leah. Megan wondered why Leah had nothing more to say to her than a simple greeting and her name. Megan guessed that maybe Leah was shy. Megan had no idea.

"What middle school did you go to?" Megan began again. "I went to Jefferson."

It wasn't the same school Leah had attended, which gave them even less in common. Leah replied by telling Megan where she went to school. There was a pause in the conversation. Leah's mind raced to think of something to say, but she drew a blank.

Megan continued, hoping to hit upon something that might spark more than a few whispered words from Leah's lips. "I've got an older sister who goes to school here. She told me she had the same gym teacher we have now. My sister says that she yells a lot but really doesn't care how much we get involved. The only stuff we'll probably do in this class is walk this track or play softball or volleyball or something. I guess that's not too bad."

Megan waited for the other girl to say something that would continue to propel the conversation forward, but the only words that came out of Leah's mouth were, "Yeah, I hope so." It was the best the shy girl could do. Silence returned, and the two girls walked for another half of a lap before either one said another word. Megan continued to

walk alongside Leah, hoping her quiet acquaintance would open up. Leah, meanwhile, was content to simply enjoy Megan's company in silence. During these rare occasions in Leah's life when she was confronted with a possible new friend, Leah would, at first, be wary and suspicious of the stranger. But once she realized that the person was simply trying to be friendly, Leah would relax and allow the person to get close. With each step she took, Leah felt increasingly comfortable in Megan's presence. This feeling of companionship wasn't something Leah was used to, but in a way it made her feel "normal" and she thought she might be able to get used to it if it continued.

But Megan, being somewhat more sophisticated socially, required more from a friend than a mere presence. She needed Leah to speak to her—about anything at all—in that eager tone of voice that people always used when they begin to establish new friendships. Megan tried a few more times to break through Leah's shell, asking her about her other classes and her other teachers, but her attempts were futile. Megan began to interpret Leah's silence as a kind of disinterest, and she wondered if Leah even wanted her around. After all, if someone really desired to be your friend, why would they behave so coldly? Perhaps Leah was just stuck-up. Megan didn't know because Leah wouldn't tell her. She started to think that it had been a mistake to even talk to Leah in the first place.

Megan kept at it, though, and even when their coach blew her whistle and ordered the girls to return to the locker room as class came to an end, Megan still tried to break through Leah's barriers. Because Megan kept talking to her, Leah didn't realize that her silence was causing a problem. After the girls returned to the locker room and had changed back into their school clothes, Leah expected to "talk" to Megan again on Friday. She would, but only briefly—just to say hello, and offer Leah one last chance for friendship, a chance that Leah missed. During the following week, Leah watched as Megan started talking to other girls in the class, looking for friends among their more sociable classmates. She found some, and very soon, Megan ceased to acknowledge Leah at all. Eventually, Leah realized her failure, even though she didn't fully understand what had happened. All she knew was that the same thing

had happened many times before, and in spite of the efforts she put forth, she was still alone.

Six

THE MORNING that she spent with Megan in phys. ed. class proved to be Leah's one and only chance to make a friend during the first month of the school year. The rest of her classmates, however, didn't seem to have the same difficulty. With so many new people thrown together in a new school, everyone was making new friends, and the shy girl who sat quietly in class with her nose buried in a book, barely replying when anyone spoke to her, got lost in the crowd. Although Leah was left out, she wasn't oblivious to what was happening all around her. Sometimes she watched and listened to her classmates as they introduced themselves and made new friends. The way that other people could start up conversations with complete strangers seemed magical to Leah. Sure, she could imagine herself saying, "Hello, I'm Leah," to a girl sitting in the desk next to her, but then what? What should she say after that? Leah had no idea, but the ease with which her classmates did know what to say next only emphasized how different from them she really was. "Why don't you ever talk?" was the only question that most of her classmates ever asked her. Leah started to believe that maybe the answer was that she didn't have any ideas worth sharing.

So another year started and once again Leah found herself isolated socially from her classmates. It happened every year, and while

Leah knew that her isolation was something to be ashamed of, she sometimes wondered if she even wanted a friend. The thought of spending lunch with someone else, for example, almost made her lose her appetite. She felt more comfortable when she was by herself, even if the other students thought she was weird. Sometimes, though, being by herself presented challenges which no one else had to face.

On the Monday of the last week of September, Leah awoke to the sound of rain crashing against her bedroom window. She rose from bed and looked outside. It was dark out, almost as if it were still night, but although she couldn't see very far, she could see the sheets of rain falling from the sky, and she could see the trees in the front yard swaying back and forth, rocked by the storm. Leah sighed. She knew she wouldn't be able to walk to school in this weather. She wasn't worried, though. After three years of middle school, she knew that when the weather was bad, like this morning, her father would meet her in the kitchen when it was time to leave and drive her to school. Just like he had on the first day of school, Mr. Nells would be there for his daughter.

But unlike that first day of school, Leah didn't care how long it took her father to get ready. She wasn't nervous at all, and whether she left at exactly 7:40 or as late as 7:50 made little difference to her. She had faith that she would get to school on time. Today, though, Mr. Nells was running earlier than usual, and when he appeared in the kitchen, dressed and ready to go, at 7:38, Leah was still sitting at the kitchen table drinking a glass of milk. She quickly swallowed what remained in the glass, grabbed her backpack and her purse, and followed her father to the garage.

Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled as they drove to school. The storm seemed to have intensified in the last hour, and the traffic was heavy on the busy avenue that led to the high school. Mr. Nells turned the radio on and father and daughter listened to the peppy DJs broadcast the locations of the car accidents that the storm had caused.

Even in this weather, there were still a few students walking to school. Leah watched them as she and her father drove past, and she felt sorry for them, struggling through the rain with only their umbrellas for

protection. Suddenly, Leah remembered she didn't bring an umbrella with her when she left the house; she worried about what she might do if the rain was still falling in the afternoon when her parents wouldn't be available to pick her up from school. Her father, as he steered his car onto the school campus, must have read Leah's mind. "Did you remember to bring an umbrella today?" Leah shook her head no. Mr. Nells pulled his own umbrella out from the backseat and handed it to her. "Here," he said, "you can use mine." Leah took it with a grateful smile, and when the car came to a stop, she got out, opened the umbrella to shield herself from the rain, and grabbed her other belongings. There was no time to say farewell to her father. The rain was coming down hard, and Leah was getting wet in spite of the umbrella. When she shut the car door, her father's car sped away, and Leah wondered what he would do to protect himself from the rain when he got to work.

The time was 7:53 with a few minutes to go before the students were allowed inside the building and out of the rain. Leah realized she couldn't rely on the umbrella to protect her from this downpour for very long so she sought better shelter. Most of the rest of the student population had crowded underneath a covered walkway that connected the main building to the gymnasium complex, and Leah joined them. Some people huddled close to their friends while others, like Leah, stood alone and listened to the rain bounce off the aluminum roof. The sound of the storm drowned out all but the loudest conversations around her. She kind of liked how the rain seemed to isolate her from the other students, but when the bell finally rang, Leah was glad to get inside where it was bright and dry and warm.

Leah's five indoor classes weren't affected by the weather, but her phys. ed. class was. She was glad, though, because for the last few days her class had been playing softball outside, and Leah hated softball. When she was at bat, she felt uncomfortable being the center of attention so she usually let herself strike out, sometimes by swinging wildly at the ball when it was pitched to her, sometimes by simply standing there and watching it fly past. And when she stood by herself in the outfield and a ball was hit towards her, she always let the ball hit the ground before she

picked it up and threw it back—much to her teammates' frustration. Today, though, her class stayed in the gym and spent the hour doing exercises set to music.

By lunchtime, the downpour had ceased, and some of the clouds had parted just enough to let some sunshine through. But if the sun and its heat were to dry the dampened earth, it would take at least the rest of the day. Leah hadn't considered the effect the morning showers would have on her plans for lunch until she walked outside and found the patio and all the tables covered with a thin layer of water. Eating lunch outside would be impossible. What was she going to do now? Leah's mind raced to find a solution as she stared stupidly at the tables. Seconds passed and Leah found her feet bringing her slowly back into the cafeteria.

She surveyed the big room; the lunch period was only a few minutes old but already the cafeteria was swarming with students. Every table was occupied by at least one person, and their friends were hurrying to join them. Leah felt pressure to act quickly. Every new student that entered the cafeteria meant one less place for Leah to sit.

Leah paced back and forth the length of the room, her eyes searching and her mind scrambling. Just when she began to fear she might be doomed to stand or lean against a wall for the entire lunch period, she saw a pair of boys sitting at a small table in the corner. She recognized the boys as two members of a group who usually ate lunch outside. Like her, they had been forced indoors too. There were eight chairs at the boys' new table, and they occupied two seats at one end, for they weren't certain whether they were trespassing in someone else's space.

If they could sit at that table, Leah thought, then why couldn't she? She knew she would have to act fast if she were to take advantage of this opportunity. Before long, those six empty chairs at the table would be taken too. Leah didn't have time to hesitate; she simply started towards the table. Her heart began to beat a little faster, and her hands clutched her book and her lunch a little tighter.

As she approached, she wondered if she should get the boys' permission before sitting down. Although this wasn't their usual table,

they were here first, and asking their permission seemed like the right thing to do. But even though she saw them nearly every day, they were still strangers to her, so she was reluctant to talk to them. Leah stood beside the table and waited. She decided that if either of them looked up at her, she would ask if she could sit down. Her heart pounded inside her chest, and it felt like it would come up her throat. To add to this torture, the two boys didn't notice Leah at all. They were too involved in their own meals and their own conversation to see the girl standing and staring at them a few feet away. Leah grew impatient, and desperate to claim a seat, she quickly moved to other end of the table, set her lunch and book down, and took a seat.

When she sat down, the two boys finally noticed her, and they recognized her as the girl who always sat alone outside. Leah glanced in their direction, but when her eyes met theirs, they all looked away from each other awkwardly. The boys didn't say anything to her; instead, they continued talking to each other—a sign that they didn't have a problem with her if she wanted to sit at this table.

Leah opened her brown paper bag and pulled out her food. But before she could even take two bites out of her sandwich, a new source of worry appeared in the form of four boys, probably the ones who sat at this table every day. They arrived as a group, carrying trays of food fresh from the cafeteria kitchen. They were obviously confused by the three strangers sitting at their table. Leah noticed them before the two boys at the other end of the table did, and she feared they might demand that they all leave. But the boys were more tolerant than perhaps they had a right to be. Since there were four chairs still available in the middle of the table, there was a place for everyone to sit, but Leah acknowledged their right to be here by moving her purse and her book closer to the edge of the table, giving the boys plenty of space. The two at the other end of the table did the same thing and the four boys sat down without saying a word to their new tablemates.

Leah, not wanting to be a distraction, hoped to blend into the background by eating quietly and avoiding all eye contact with her neighbors. Such a humble attitude made her enjoyment of her lunch

difficult. Sitting so close to these strangers and listening to them as they talked was a very weird experience. And it certainly didn't help that they were all *boys*. Leah would have preferred to sit at a table with a group of girls. She didn't always understand everything that other girls did and said, but boys were a complete mystery. In fact, her father was the only "boy" (if she could call him that) around whom she had ever spent any time.

When she had forced down the last of her meal, she placed the trash back into her paper sack and set it to her left on the edge of the table. Then she opened her book, which she was thankful to have because it gave her something to do while she waited for this awful lunch period to end. She found the page in the book where she had last read and started from there, but just as her food had been difficult to swallow with so many distractions around her, so were the words on the page difficult for her mind to digest. Reading in front of the boys made her feel very self-conscious. She wondered how she looked in their eyes, sitting alone and reading, but for now none of them seemed to care about her. At one point, someone at the table made a joke, and all of them, even the two boys at the far end of the table, laughed loudly. Leah missed the joke, because she was trying to read, so she didn't laugh with them. Instead, her eyes darted to each of the boys' laughing faces, and then she took a quick glance out the window at her table on the patio. She quietly sighed and wished it had never rained.

For the next few minutes, the boys' conversations became quieter and more serious. Leah had almost succeeded in shutting them out of her mind completely and was starting to enjoy her book when she was suddenly interrupted by the voice of the boy sitting next to her. He asked, "What are you reading?" Leah looked up and found four boys staring at her with smiles on their faces. She couldn't tell if they were going to make fun of her or if they were just curious. She didn't want to answer them, but since this table was *theirs*, she thought they had a right to ask, and she felt obligated to respond.

Leah replied without speaking. She simply lifted up her book so they could read for themselves the title that was printed on the cover. All

four of the boys turned to look, and as they read, their smiles collapsed into expressions of confusion.

"*The Biomechanics of Insect Flight?*" one of them asked. "What are you reading that for, a science class?"

Embarrassed, she shook her head no and mumbled, "I'm just reading it." She looked towards the other end of the table for help. The two boys who sat outside were probably familiar with her lunchtime reading habit. Maybe they could explain for her what she was doing. But to her terror, she found that they had disappeared. They must have left while Leah was reading, and she hadn't noticed it. Leah didn't know what else to do or say, so she shrank back into her shell. She put her book back down on the table and blushed with embarrassment as she pretended to continue reading.

The boys also seemed embarrassed. For a few seconds they didn't say anything. Then, one of them said, "Well, keep reading—we won't bother you." And they didn't; for the rest of the period, not a word was spoken to her. The boys even scooted their chairs towards the other end of the table to give the strange girl some space. Leah, however, found it impossible to read. She was so afraid that the boys would speak to her again that all she could do was stare blankly at the book in front of her, but the words on the page no longer made sense. She sat wishing that it hadn't rained and that she could go back outside. Most of all, she wished this lunch period would come to an end. When the bell finally rang, she sprang from her seat, grabbed her things, and quickly left the table. An uneventful consumer economics class followed. Leah used the class to calm herself down and try to forget about the awful experience of the previous hour. By the time that class was over and she was on her way to English, she had settled down and felt better.

When English class started, the teacher, Mrs. Meyer, an amiable, veteran teacher who prided herself on her impeccable grammar—even when she spoke, took roll and distributed a ten-question pop quiz over a short story the class was supposed to have read for homework over the weekend. Leah had read her assignment, and she found the quiz relatively easy. When the quiz was over and Mrs. Meyer collected the papers, she

walked to the front of the class and Leah expected a class discussion (which, in Mrs. Meyer's class, was usually nothing more than a lecture with the occasional question from one of the students), but instead of a discussion, Mrs. Meyer had an announcement: "Before we talk about the story, I want to talk to you about your first book report."

The class groaned when they heard the words "book report." For them, this was the worst assignment an English class had to offer. Not only did they have to *read* a book, they had to *write* about it too—it was horrible! Leah, though, wasn't bothered by the idea of a book report, but she did want to know what kind of a report it would have to be. Sometimes teachers made students present their reports to the rest of the class, an activity that Leah, naturally, hated. Sometimes, there might be extra things that would accompany a book report, such as drawing posters, making shadow boxes, or—most humiliating of all—students would have to dress up or act like a character from the book they read. Such projects were rare, but she was new to high school, and she didn't know what to expect.

After the moans and groans of the class had died down, Mrs. Meyer continued, "Come now, let's not be like that. Every year my students complain about their book report assignments, but every year several students discover that they enjoy reading. Last year, a boy who was in my class read a book by, oh, what was the author's name? I can't remember, but after he read the book, he discovered how great reading can be. I'm sure he's still reading for fun." Mrs. Meyer's tale was met with skepticism. Everyone in class doubted the existence of such a boy—everyone, that is, except Leah, who knew the value of books. She tried to picture this boy as he discovered what she had known for years. Maybe this boy was like her in some ways. She wondered if—

But Leah's imagination was cut short by her teacher, "We don't have time to go to the school library during class, but it's open for an hour after school every day. That's when I suggest you look for your book. Your report will be written on a worksheet that I'll give you tomorrow . . ."

A written book report! Leah breathed a quiet sigh of relief. A

written book report didn't require standing in front of the class and speaking; it didn't require dressing in a silly costume and making a fool of herself; it only required writing. She could write the report in the privacy of her own bedroom and then turn it in to her teacher—easy! Leah looked down at her backpack sitting on the floor next to her desk. She could see *The Biomechanics of Insect Flight* waiting inside, and she decided it would be as good a book as any for her report. She had already started reading it and could probably finish it in about a week if she needed to, but when was the report due? Leah realized she hadn't been paying attention to Mrs. Meyer who was still talking. Leah looked up and listened. Seconds later, a boy who sat on the other side of the classroom asked Leah's question for her: "When is this due?"

"The book report will be due on October 21st, in about three weeks," the teacher replied. The class released their own sigh of relief. Three weeks gave them plenty of time to procrastinate, so they accepted the assignment without any further complaint. Leah felt better too; the report would be written down on paper, it wasn't due for a long while, and she already knew which book she would read for her report.

Ninety minutes later, Leah left the school building to find that the sun was still shining and most traces of this morning's storm had evaporated. As she walked home, she didn't need to use her father's umbrella, and when she arrived, she left it in the kitchen where her father would find it. Then, she went upstairs to her room where she removed her insect book from her backpack and continued reading from where she left off at lunch. She read with renewed energy, for now there was a purpose to her reading: it would contribute to her grade in English class, and she found it was easier to lose herself in the act of reading than ever before. Totally oblivious to the world, she didn't even hear the sound of the garage door opening when her mother arrived home some two hours later.

On Tuesday, Mrs. Meyer gave each student in her class a worksheet that they would use to complete their book reports. It looked simple enough to Leah: she had to provide the title, author, and publishing information of the book and then write a long summary of it. Leah had been assigned the same kind of book report in middle school, so it was easy for her. With the book report assigned, Mrs. Meyer said nothing more about it.

It took Leah less than a week to finish reading her book, and then it was just a matter of writing the report. For many of Leah's classmates, the report itself was the final task in a grueling and time-consuming obstacle course, and the faster it was completed, the better. But Leah took the report seriously because this time she was writing about one of *her* books, and she wanted to put her best effort into the assignment. Since she didn't have to do anything hard like present her report to the class, she saw this assignment as an opportunity to boost her grade in a subject she usually didn't do very well in. Now that she was in high school, she thought it was more important than ever to try to earn good grades.

Even though she read a lot, Leah didn't write very well. Communicating with pen and paper was almost as hard as communicating with spoken words. Writing was sometimes better than speaking because she could take her time constructing sentences and paragraphs, but she often found herself struggling for just the right words and she didn't always know how to phrase those words in the best possible way. The act of writing was a more personal, solitary activity, but even though she wasn't speaking directly to another person, she still knew that a writing assignment like this book report would have an audience—Mrs. Meyer—and that placed added pressure on her to write well. Leah tried to do the best she could, but communication is communication, no matter what the means of expression, and Leah knew that she simply could not communicate well.

The summary portion of the report required her to write at least three paragraphs. Leah spent an entire evening composing her summary. She wrote and rewrote sentences. She used a dictionary to check the

spelling of longer words. She even borrowed an old thesaurus that her father had used when he was in college. She wrote a rough draft of her essay on notebook paper and then recopied it onto the book report worksheet in the best handwriting she could produce.

When she finally finished her assignment late one night about a week before the report was due, she took a few moments to admire her work. As she stared at the page with a sense of pride, she decided that it was the best book report she had ever written, and she was sure it would earn an A. Certainly, other students in her class might read books that were more exciting, but after reading Leah's report, Mrs. Meyer would have no choice but to decide that Leah's book was the best.

She stored her report safely in her notebook, and there it remained until she was ready to turn it in on October 21st. On that day, Leah sat in her desk in English class and listened to the other students as they took their seats before the bell rang. Some of them were talking about their reports. A few of them were proud of their work while others confessed that they hadn't tried very hard. One guy even whispered that he had tricked the teacher by writing a report on a book he had read a year ago. Some hadn't even read a book at all but had merely read a summary of a book that they found on the Internet and wrote a report based on that. They all complained, however, that the report had been hard work, and they were glad the assignment was finished.

In the midst of all this activity, Leah sat quietly in her desk, her report resting in front of her. She still felt proud of it and couldn't wait to turn it in, but despite her sense of pride, she didn't feel any desire to brag or to share her sense of accomplishment with her classmates. It was enough for her to know that she had written a great report. She sat patiently, exhibiting an outward appearance of modesty while underneath the surface her ego was as inflated as anyone else's.

After the bell rang and Mrs. Meyer finally got her excited class's attention, she asked them to pass their book reports forward. Once she collected them, she then surprised the class by asking them to open their vocabulary books. No one had expected to do anything other than turn in their book reports. As Leah pulled her vocabulary book from her

backpack and opened it to the new list of words, her teacher announced that there would be a test over the new words exactly one week from that day. The class groaned, but Leah still felt happy. Her book report had put her in a good mood and she couldn't wait to learn her grade. For now, though, she tried to focus on her new vocabulary list. "The first word on the list," Mrs. Meyer said, "is *aggrandize*. Can anyone tell me what that word means?"

Seven

BECAUSE she read it for a book report, Leah finished *The Biomechanics of Insect Flight* earlier than she had expected. Soon after she finished writing the report, Leah began reading the final book purchased from August's garage sale odyssey: the book titled, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*. Leah hoped to squeeze at least a couple weeks' worth of reading out of it, but instead she found herself sailing through the chapters faster than expected, and the day after she turned in her book report, Leah was reading the last page of her ocean book. She needed new books.

She went to her mother and briefly, but directly, explained her problem. Mrs. Nells reluctantly agreed to take her daughter shopping for some new books. She had mixed feelings about her daughter's unusual pastime. From her point of view, Leah's reading was one of the things preventing her from socializing and making friends. Why bother meeting people and engaging with the world when you can bury your nose in a book? On the other hand, it didn't feel right to openly discourage Leah's apparent love for books. She wanted Leah to do well in school, and all of the extra reading that her daughter did certainly couldn't hurt. So while Mrs. Nells hated buying books for her daughter, she never denied Leah's requests for more. Instead, she tried to discourage Leah through less

direct means. Mrs. Nells demanded that Leah accompany her when she went shopping for books; going out and spending an hour among strangers was the price Leah had to pay for the chance to stock up on fresh reading material. Leah would have preferred to stay home and let her mother do all the shopping, but Mrs. Nells wouldn't stand for that. "I never know what it is you like to read," she argued. Mrs. Nells also refused to pay for brand new books so Leah's entire collection consisted of used books bought from garage sales, used book stores, and book fairs put on by the city's public libraries.

Leah talked to her mother on Thursday, but Mrs. Nells didn't have time to take Leah shopping until the weekend. This meant Leah needed to find a substitute book to fill the time while she waited. She went to her bookshelf and found a book on ancient Greek architecture that she read last December. As she recalled, she enjoyed the book, and as she began to reread the first chapter, she felt transported back through time to last year, two weeks before Christmas. Leah fostered the illusion by pretending that it was the year before, and she found that she enjoyed that experience far more than the book itself.

Leah's feelings of nostalgia, though, were replaced Saturday afternoon by the more familiar feeling of anxiety as she prepared to go shopping with her mother. Leah dressed in her usual school clothes while Mrs. Nells, free from the stress of her career and the demands that her job placed upon her, simply wore an old T-shirt and blue jeans. She invited her husband to come along, but he declined, saying there was some work that needed to be done around the house. What he really meant was that a football game was on TV that afternoon. So the women of the family climbed into Mrs. Nells' car and went shopping.

This time, their destination was not a local garage sale, for there weren't many at this time of the year. Instead, Mrs. Nells drove to a nearby used book store which Leah and her mother had visited a few times before. Leah didn't really like the store because of its owner: an older man with white hair who was as cheerful and sociable as Leah was quiet and reserved. He spoiled her idea of reading as a solitary activity. The old man seemed to prefer spending his time wandering the aisles of

his small store, chatting with the customers, while one of the teenagers who worked part time for him manned the cash register. Leah didn't know the man's name, and she was sure that he didn't know hers, but she still believed—though maybe she was just being paranoid—that the old man always remembered her from past visits. The last time Leah visited the store the old man spoke to her and remarked how good it was to see a reader Leah's age come in every now and then. Although she tried to avoid him when she shopped at the store, the old man inevitably found her and talked to her. He always wanted to know what books she was looking for or what she had chosen. Shopping for books should have been an enjoyable experience for her, but the old man robbed her of whatever pleasure she might have enjoyed.

The bookstore was part of a mini-mall less than a mile from Leah's home. When she and her mother arrived early in the afternoon, they found that the parking lot was almost full, but Leah didn't know how many of those cars represented customers in the bookstore. The last time she shopped here, there were several customers inside. She hoped that wouldn't be the case this time.

Mrs. Nells parked the car and they got out. Leah let her mother lead the way while she followed closely behind. They went inside the store and the first thing Leah did was look for the old man, but she saw only a pimply, red-headed teenage boy just a couple years older than herself standing behind the cash register and taking money from a middle-aged woman who was buying a stack of horror novels. Also in the front of the store was a display of brand new books; apparently, used books were no longer the only thing the store was selling. Leah's eyes were attracted to the glossy, colorful dust jackets and the big, bold titles of the books, but she found they were mostly hardbound editions of popular novels. Uninterested in the novels, she moved on. The rest of the small store consisted of five long aisles of shelves that were crammed full of used books. Without a word between them, Mrs. Nells went in the direction of the fiction aisle while Leah started browsing the nonfiction books. Her mother never bothered her while Leah shopped; she just browsed alone until her daughter was ready to leave. Mrs. Nells usually

didn't buy anything for herself, but she still liked to browse. As she parted from her mother, Leah wondered what kinds of books her mother would choose if she ever decided to start reading.

Alone in one of the aisles, surrounded on both sides by hundreds of books, Leah finally felt at ease. The bookshelves loomed higher than she could reach, and each shelf was crammed full of books. They overwhelmed her, and for a moment, they were her entire world. She took a deep breath and enjoyed their smell. With her fingers, she explored their spines and found that some felt smooth, others rough. Some were glossy, almost like they were new, while others were shredded and torn around the edges, having been subject to a lot of use. But they were all wonderful. If only she could stay here, by herself, with only these books for company, Leah thought that she might be truly happy. These books didn't judge her; they didn't demand that she live up to any unreasonable expectations. They only wanted to be held in her hands and read. In a sense, they needed her, and she felt an obligation to them, as if she belonged to them as much as they might one day belong to her.

After a few minutes, having picked up a book that looked promising, she noticed out of the corner of her eye someone enter her aisle from the rear of the store. Alarmed, she turned her head quickly but was relieved to see that it was only one of the other customers and not the old man who owned the store. She hadn't seen the old man yet, but she knew he was here, somewhere. Leah continued browsing and after a minute, the other customer disappeared back towards the fiction aisles. A moment later, she saw another figure appear from the same direction. Leah thought it might be another customer, or perhaps even her mother coming to check on her. But when she looked she saw the old man wearing a long-sleeved dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and he carried in his arms a small box full of books. The white hair on top of his head was a tangled mess, and he wore reading glasses that sat on the very tip of his thick, stubby nose. Behind the glasses, his green eyes gave no indication that they had seen the girl at the other end of the aisle.

Leah's stomach turned and she grew pale. She wanted to leave the store, but she had just arrived and she knew the single book she held

in her hands wouldn't last her very long. She hoped the old man wouldn't say anything to her, but deep down, she knew that he would. She stood absolutely still as he walked past her, whistling a tune that she didn't recognize. He set his box of books down on the floor a few feet to Leah's right. He didn't say a word to her; he just kept whistling, seemingly oblivious to everything and everyone around him except for his box of books that he started stocking on the shelves. Leah held her breath and watched him out of the corner of her eye. Maybe today would be different, she thought. Maybe he wouldn't say anything to her at all like he did every time she visited this store. Just in case, though, she began slowly inching her way down the aisle away from him. Perhaps she could go to another part of the store before he had a chance to speak.

The old man continued to work, and he continued his happy whistling until he finished unloading his box. Then he picked it up off the floor, turned to Leah, and asked in a friendly tone of voice, "Are you finding everything all right?"

Leah nodded, staring straight ahead at the books on the shelf in front of her although she wasn't really looking at any of them. Maybe now that he had spoken to her, he'd go away and leave her alone.

He didn't. "Is there anything in particular you're looking for? Anything I can help you find?"

Leah shook her head no.

"I don't see a lot of young people come into this store," he remarked. It was the same thing he said to her the last time she was here. Maybe he didn't really remember her after all. Maybe he said that to every teenager who came in. But if what he said about young people was true, he probably didn't say it very often. "Nope, I sure don't. What kinds of books do kids your age like to read?"

Leah shrugged. To be honest, she wasn't even sure what kinds of books *she* liked to read. She read so many books on so many different subjects that she couldn't even begin to classify her own reading interests, much less those of her peers.

The old man saw that she held a book in her hands and he chuckled. "Well, it looks like *something* interests you. Let me see what

you've got in your hands there."

Reluctantly, Leah held up her book and showed him the title. The book was called, *The Interstate Commerce Commission and the Railroad Industry*. The old man pondered the title for a moment with a frown. For a brief instant he was dumbfounded, and Leah hoped maybe now he'd leave her alone.

"That is . . . a very unusual book for a girl your age to be reading," the old man said at last. Then, in a quieter voice, almost a whisper, he said, "In the next aisle we've got some fiction books. Don't you like mysteries? Or how about romance novels? I've got a daughter in Illinois who loves to read romance novels—although I've never much cared for them myself."

Leah replied by shaking her head no. She certainly did *not* want to read a romance novel. Leah grew impatient with the old man and with the store itself. She wanted to leave both as soon as possible. The old man must have finally sensed her discomfort because he quickly wrapped up their conversation. "Well, suit yourself," and he carried his empty box with him to the front of the store.

Glad that he was gone but worried that he might return, Leah quickly grabbed a few more books and then found her mother in the next aisle. Leah whispered that she was ready to leave. Mrs. Nells was ready too, and they walked together to the front of the store where Leah found the old man was now operating the cash register. He exchanged a few friendly words with Mrs. Nells but said nothing to Leah. Altogether, the books cost \$18.26. Mrs. Nells paid in cash and then they left. Leah was the first one out the door and the first one back to the car. She was eager to leave, and she was thankful that experience was over.

The following Monday, Leah got a surprise in her English class. Mrs. Meyer had finished grading the book reports for the entire class in only five days—less time than some students took to write their reports.

The five days had passed quickly for Leah, and that made her even more impressed at the speed of Mrs. Meyer's grading. She was excited by this news and eager to learn what grade her book report had earned; she hoped it would be an A. The rest of the class also seemed eager to learn their grades, even those who admitted to doing a poor job.

Before she began returning the book reports, Mrs. Meyer stood in front of the class and remarked how pleased she was with the reports overall. "Many of you read some very interesting books," she said, "and most of you did very well." Leah's excitement increased. Mrs. Meyer began calling out names of students who went to the front of the class to pick up their reports. Leah sat in her desk impatiently, and when her name was called, she sprang from her seat and hurried to the front of the class, her excitement canceling out any trepidation about getting up in front so many people. She picked up her report but didn't look at the grade on the paper until she sat down again. The grade was written in red ink at the top right-hand corner of the page. Leah made a D.

She was stunned. For a moment she could do nothing but stare at the grade. Her mind was reeling and her body was paralyzed, save for her jaw which dropped slightly, leaving a gap between her lips which, had they belonged to anyone else, would have uttered a groan or some sort of rude exclamation. Instead, Leah remained silent.

Why? That was the only word that echoed in her mind. Why had she earned only a D? Her eyes broke away from the grade and scanned the paper. On the second page, at the end of the summary she had written and spent so much time on, she found the explanation in the teacher's red ink: "*A well-written report, Leah, and I'm sure this is a nice book, but the assignment was to read a work of fiction—preferably a novel.*"

Eight

SHE quickly slid the book report into her notebook where no one else could see her grade. Looking around at her classmates, Leah found that most of them appeared satisfied with their scores. Did they all know the assignment was to read a novel? It seemed that they did. Mrs. Meyer must have said something about it when she gave them their assignment, but Leah couldn't recall her teacher ever saying anything like that. She concluded that she simply hadn't been paying attention and had missed that part of the assignment. Leah silently scolded herself; her inattentiveness had earned her a D.

But Leah also felt angry. What difference did it make if she read a novel or not? Her teachers in middle school usually allowed her to write book reports on whatever books she wanted to read; why couldn't Mrs. Meyer be more like them? Leah had put forth the same amount of effort—in some cases more—for this assignment than the other students in the class, so why couldn't she earn a good grade, too? She looked at Mrs. Meyer and realized the teacher was speaking to the class, but Leah wasn't listening. Now she felt angry with herself. Once again, she wasn't paying attention! Leah tried to focus and listen to what her teacher was saying, but apparently, Mrs. Meyer was finished speaking. The teacher went back to her desk and sat down.

Leah looked around and saw the other students had opened their literature books and were starting to read a short story. Leah quietly and inconspicuously opened her own textbook and found the story she was supposed to be reading. Instead of reading, however, she stared at the page and nursed her anger. She decided she hated Mrs. Meyer; the woman was always talking and she always acted like she was more important than anyone else. At least she wasn't saying anything now. She should take a lesson from her shy student and keep her mouth shut! Leah also decided that she hated English class. She hated reading these stupid stories written by stupid authors about stupid people. There was nothing in her literature book that she could relate to, nothing here that she wanted to read. The characters in these stories talked and talked and talked just like Mrs. Meyer and everyone else in the world. Leah couldn't stand it. The books that she read were so much better!

A long time seemed to pass before the bell rang and released her from the misery of English class. Leah couldn't exit the class fast enough. Although her fury had diminished, she still felt depressed and disappointed. Leah would have liked to go home, but there still remained a fifty-five-minute obstacle she had to overcome—world history. Usually, Leah didn't mind the class; it wasn't her favorite subject, but she didn't hate it either—at least there were no book reports to do. Still, she couldn't wait to go home where she could lose herself in the pages of one of her books and forget all about this awful day.

Leah made a quick stop at her locker where she exchanged her literature book for her history book. Then she hurried on to class where she was the first student there. Even the teacher, Mr. Simmons, had left the classroom, probably to stretch his legs or use the restroom. Leah went to her assigned desk and sat down. The clock on the wall behind her showed the time to be only 2:01. She had a few minutes of free time available to her so she opened her backpack and removed a book titled *5087 Trivia Questions & Answers*—one of the books that she selected at the used book store the other day. She opened the book to page 49 and began reading where she left off at the end of lunch. She didn't expect to read very far, maybe only one or two pages, but that didn't matter. At

times like this, reading offered the kind of escape that she needed. She read her book and ignored the other students as they filed into class. Suddenly, she sensed a shadow looming over her, and she heard a husky voice ask, "What are you reading?"

Startled, Leah looked up and found a boy named Kyle standing over her. He was a tall, slightly overweight, aggressive guy who was destined to become a varsity football player in his later years of high school. Leah didn't like him. He was loud, rude, and intimidating, but what she didn't understand was why he was standing here beside her when his desk was on the other side of the room.

Leah, still shocked by Kyle's intrusion, hadn't answered the boy's question. Annoyed by her silence, Kyle pried the book out of the girl's hands and read the title himself. "*5087 Trivia Questions & Answers*," he declared, loudly, so that anyone in the classroom who might be watching could hear him. "What's this for? Are you trying out for a game show or something?" He laughed and added, "If you do, you'll have to talk, you know. You can't just stand there and not say anything." Still holding the book, he turned around. "Hey Jake!" he shouted across the room to another boy. "Jake! Check this out!" Kyle wanted to show the book to his friend, but the boy named Jake was engaged in a serious conversation with a couple of giggling girls and so Kyle was the last thing on his mind. Meanwhile, Leah was beginning to feel embarrassed as Kyle was determined to make her the center of attention, even though he wasn't having much success. She wanted to stop him and get her book back, but she didn't know what to do. Kyle was a lot bigger than she was, and if he wanted to keep her book away from her, he could. She looked in vain for Mr. Simmons, but he was nowhere to be found. She felt helpless.

Frustrated by his failure to attract Jake's attention, Kyle turned to Leah again. He saw the alarm and desperation on the girl's face and teased, "What? Do you really want this book back?"

"Give it back to her, Kyle," said the voice of a boy sitting in a desk somewhere behind Leah.

Kyle, thinking he had finally found an audience, turned in the direction of the voice and said, "Hey, David, check out this book! This

girl thinks she's gonna be on a game show or something." He opened the book to a random page and asked, "Hey, can you answer this? 'What did the philosopher Soccerts drink when he committed suicide?'"

"You're an idiot," the voice laughed. "It's pronounced 'Socrates,' not 'Soccerts'. Simmons talked about him just last week. Weren't you paying attention?"

Kyle stared at the book in his hands. "Oh yeah," he said flatly. A few of their classmates, who were now—at last—paying attention to Kyle, started laughing.

"Now give her back her book," the voice commanded.

Kyle hesitated for a moment, but then he handed the book to Leah without saying another word. He left her desk and returned to the other side of the room just as the bell rang and Mr. Simmons, unaware of what just happened, entered the room and asked everyone to take a seat so he could take roll. Leah turned around to face the voice that had rescued her book from Kyle's grasp. In the row to her right, sitting two seats back, was the boy named David—she didn't know his last name. He was another new face for Leah; he had gone to a different middle school so she didn't know much about him. What she did know was what was obvious to everyone: David was very popular, probably one of the most popular students in the whole freshman class; everyone liked him. Sometimes he might make a joke in class, but he wasn't the class clown. Other times he would raise his hand during Mr. Simmons' lecture to ask a question or to try to answer one of Mr. Simmons' questions. He didn't always get the answers right, but that didn't stop him from trying. He didn't pick on other people the way Kyle did. And, Leah noticed for the first time, he was kind of cute.

David's brown eyes caught Leah looking at him, and he gave her a friendly smile. Leah quickly turned and faced forward before she had a chance to blush. After a moment, she wanted to turn around and look at him again, to see if he would smile at her once more, but she fought the urge. Instead, she remained seated as she was, facing forward and trying to pay attention to her teacher as he lectured about the birth of the ancient Roman civilization. Now that the incident with Kyle had ended

happily, Leah was feeling a little better about herself.

When the final bell of the day rang, dismissing the school and interrupting Mr. Simmons who was in the middle of a sentence, Leah joined the rest of the class in gathering together her belongings so she could leave. As she stuffed her notebook into her backpack, she heard a voice say, "Hey." She looked up and saw David, wearing the same friendly smile that he had on earlier. Leah's heart began to pound. David leaned in close and whispered, "Don't let Kyle bother you. He should be reading your books instead of making fun of them. It would probably do him some good!"

As usual, Leah was speechless. All she could do was smile gratefully and nod. David turned and started to leave the classroom. Leah watched as another girl caught up to him from behind. The girl was a thin, well-tanned brunette named Heather, and she had seen the quick exchange between David and Leah. Heather asked, "What were you talking to *her* for?" David offered an explanation, but they were already on their way out of the classroom and Leah couldn't hear what he said.

Leah fumbled with her backpack and purse as she got up to leave. She noticed her hands were trembling, although she didn't quite understand why. She hurried out of the classroom, hoping to see David again, but he was already lost in the crowd. She went to her locker, opened it, and stared at the books inside, wondering if she had homework in any of her classes. She couldn't remember; her mind was still occupied with what had happened in history class. She actually had no memory of her other classes. Even the bad grade on her book report for English was completely forgotten. She stood at her locker for a minute before she finally decided she didn't need any books other than what was in her backpack. She closed her locker and followed the crowd out of the building.

Outside, Leah didn't expect to see David again, but she did. He was walking towards the buses and Heather was no longer by his side. Leah paused to watch him. When he reached his bus, number 128, he met two other boys, one of whom Leah knew from algebra class. The three boys stood outside the bus and exchanged some friendly words.

Other boys would join them before they scattered to their own buses, but no matter how many other boys came and went, David always seemed to be the center of attention; he was the one that everybody wanted to talk to. Leah agreed that there was definitely something magnetic about him. She stood there watching him for a few moments until he and three of his friends boarded bus 128 and disappeared from her sight.

The spell broken, Leah left the bus depot and started walking home. The sky was cloudy and the air was humid, but Leah didn't mind. She felt happy. For the first time in a very long time, an encounter with another person had a truly positive effect on her.

As Leah walked down the busy avenue, she paid attention to the three school buses that passed her as they left the campus. Usually, Leah ignored the buses, just as she didn't pay any attention to any of the other cars in the street, but today she looked at the number of each bus hoping to see 128. She didn't, which was disappointing but not altogether surprising. It made sense that David's bus wouldn't be going in her direction since he had attended a different middle school than she had. She turned around and looked back towards the high school, hoping to see David's bus and the direction it was going, but the other buses were out of sight by now and all Leah could see were the faces of her fellow pedestrians, all of whom appeared to be looking at her as they walked in her direction. Slightly embarrassed, she quickly faced forward again and continued on her way. For an instant she had forgotten there were other people on the sidewalk, too.

Leah decided it was just as well that David's bus wasn't going in her direction. She didn't like the idea of him looking out the window and seeing her walking home. That wouldn't be fair if he could see her but she couldn't see him. The buses drove past so quickly that she wouldn't have time to search the windows for David's smiling face.

When Leah got home, she had a snack and then went to her room to read for a while. As always, she sat on her bed, with her pillows supporting her, and her trivia book in her lap. Her eyes slowly drifted up and down the pages of her book, reading the random questions and

answers, but after a few pages, Leah realized she wasn't really paying attention to what she was reading. Her body might have been here in her bedroom, but her mind was still at school, re-playing those brief moments in history class with David over and over again. She tried to recreate, in her mind, every detail of what transpired: everything she saw, everything David said, and most of all, the emotions she felt. But everything happened so suddenly and so unexpectedly that her memory hadn't had a chance to remember everything properly. She felt like she was trying to remember a wonderful dream, but the details of the dream kept slipping away from her. She was most distressed about not being able to remember *exactly* what David said to her. What was that he had said about her books? That he liked them? No, that wasn't right; Leah didn't think he'd be interested in reading any of her books (*but what if?*). No, he said Kyle should read her books—that was it. "He should be reading your books." She remembered now. She recalled the tone and texture of David's voice as he said the words, and she let his voice echo in her mind.

Leah snapped out of her fantasy and tried to apply his suggestion to herself by turning her attention back to her book, but after only a few seconds, David's face and voice captured her imagination again. It was hopeless to try to read. Frustrated, Leah closed her book, and sat up straight on her bed. She breathed a deep sigh and stared at the blank wall on the other side of the room. She knew was being silly. Why was she getting all worked up over David anyway? Surely, he wasn't sitting at home right now thinking about her. Why would he? Surely, she didn't think that David *liked* her. Surely, she didn't think that he might even become her first boyfriend. Surely, she didn't believe that, did she? Finding a boyfriend had always seemed even less likely than making a friend among the girls in her classes. Why would David be interested in her at all? What did she have to offer someone popular like him? Restless, Leah got up from her bed and walked over to the bureau and the large mirror that sat on top of it. Leah stood in front of the mirror and stared at the reflection of herself, hoping to see some reason for why David might be interested in her, but instead she found reality staring

back at her.

Leah certainly wasn't ugly—at least she didn't think she was. Her parents often told her that she was pretty, but then they were always telling her things like that to try to boost her self-confidence, so she didn't know if she could really trust them. Of course, she knew she wasn't the most beautiful girl at school, but certainly she wasn't the ugliest—right? Blonde hair: she at least had that going for her. Isn't it true that boys like blondes better than brunettes? That's what she had always heard. The sexiest actresses and models in Hollywood were blonde weren't they? Leah watched the reflection of her right hand in the mirror as it floated up to the reflection of her head and touched the reflection of her hair. She had noticed that some of the other girls at school styled their hair according to the latest fashions, but she usually just wore hers in a ponytail—if she did anything with it at all. When it wasn't tied up, her hair fell below her shoulders. Leah wondered if maybe she should try to do something different with her hair. A ponytail seemed so *middle school*. She released her hair from the tail and let it fall naturally.

Her daily walks to and from school kept her body in shape. She remembered Heather, the girl who had followed David when the last bell rang and he left history class. Was Heather thinner than she was? It seemed like it, but Leah wasn't sure. She was fourteen, so pimples appeared on her face from time to time, but her face wasn't ravaged by zits and oily skin. She always tried to stay clean; she showered everyday and washed her face—except maybe on weekends when she didn't have to leave her house. She always tried to dress nicely. No, she didn't wear the trendy clothes that a lot of the other girls wore, but she thought she dressed well nevertheless.

She almost never wore make-up. In her bathroom she had a supply of basic cosmetics that her mother had given her, but she rarely made use of them. She had noticed, though, that some of the more popular girls at school wore a lot of make-up—perhaps that was their secret. Would David pay more attention to her if she did too?

But Leah knew that the real reason why she wasn't attractive to boys really had nothing to do with her physical appearance. Everybody

knew what she looked like, but it wasn't her looks that drove people away. Leah knew the greatest obstacle between herself and David, or between herself and anyone else, was her shyness. Leah looked deep into the mirror, past the hair and the face and the clothes, and saw what she hated most about herself, what frustrated her parents, and what prevented her from making friends. The image in the mirror was silent, and so was she. The image stood there, like a mute, unwilling or unable to speak to anyone—even David. For as much as Leah liked him, she knew that if he were to try to be her friend, her silence would probably scare him away. It had happened with Megan, it had happened many times in the past, why wouldn't it happen again this time? Leah looked into the mirror and saw a girl who spent her free time in a quiet, empty bedroom with bland, boring books instead of outside with the rest of the world. If David were here, now, watching her, he wouldn't give her words of encouragement. He would say that her life was dull. Leah never thought of her life that way, but wasn't it? It was always the same routine: the same path to school, the same table at lunchtime, the same route to each of her classes—with never any variety. Leah thought she must look silly to the rest of her classmates. There were probably a lot of people like Kyle ready to make fun of her but who didn't have the courage.

The hand that a moment earlier had let her hair down was now reaching out slowly towards the mirror. The girl in the glass was so different from what Leah suddenly wished she could be, and for a moment, Leah believed it really was a different girl. Maybe if she reached out with her fingers and touched the girl in the reflection, she might feel the warmth of another living being and know that the girl she saw there wasn't really Leah Nells at all. If it were this *other* girl who was shy, who didn't have any friends, then maybe Leah could be free to forge a new identity for herself. Tentatively, she held out her hand, but when her fingers touched the mirror, she didn't feel any warmth. She felt only the coldness and the flatness of the glass, and the sensation startled her. Leah turned away from the mirror and returned to her bed. She knew now what other people saw when they looked at her—they only saw her shyness. Leah hated it and herself more than ever. She picked up her

book and tried to continue reading; she didn't want to think about herself or David any more. Later on, when Leah's mother came home from work and asked if anything interesting had happened at school that day (in other words, had she met anyone), Leah would answer no.

Nine

THE NEXT morning, when the mirror was a friendlier object, and Leah's eyes were not quite the keen observers they had been the day before, Leah again had David in her thoughts. Deep down, Leah knew she was being foolish, and she didn't really believe that anything like the brief encounter that she had yesterday would happen today. But the chance remained that *something*—even something small and otherwise insignificant—might happen, and that made her hopeful about the day to come. Even if David did nothing else but smile at her, just once, it might be enough to make this new day as exciting as yesterday.

Leah spent a little extra time on her appearance as she got ready for school. She wore her hair down, applied a trace of plain red lipstick to her lips, and put on her best school clothes. She tried to fool herself into thinking that she wasn't doing this for any particular reason, but that she simply wanted to look good today. Surely there was no harm in that! But to look at her, one would think that Leah was anticipating something very important. The unexpected change in her appearance caught the attention of Mrs. Nells whom Leah met in the kitchen that morning before she went to school. Mrs. Nells sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and trying to wake up, but it wasn't until her droopy eyes caught sight of Leah's sparkling new look that they really widened.

"You're wearing your hair differently today," Mrs. Nells observed, "and why are you wearing *that* dress? What's going on? Is the school taking yearbook pictures today? Do I need to write a check or something?"

Leah smiled and shook her head no. She certainly couldn't tell her mother that a boy was the reason for the change in her look this morning. Leah didn't want to get her mother's hopes—not to mention her own hopes—up without good reason. There really wasn't anything to tell her mother about David. Not yet, anyway.

As Leah moved about the kitchen, preparing her lunch, she could feel Mrs. Nells' stare. Her mother was examining her face and dress with a suspicious eye. Mrs. Nells could sense her daughter was hiding a secret.

"Are you wearing *lipstick*?!" Mrs. Nells asked when Leah came close enough for her to see that her daughter's lips were redder than usual. Now she knew for sure that something was happening.

"I like to wear lipstick sometimes," Leah replied while avoiding eye contact with her mother. She didn't understand why her mother was making such a big deal about a few little changes in her appearance.

"You do? Since when?" Mrs. Nells wished Leah would tell her more, but Leah wouldn't talk. Mrs. Nells didn't press her daughter any further; she knew Leah could keep a secret better than just about anybody, and with Leah the truth was usually disappointing anyway. Mrs. Nells found it more exciting to guess what her daughter was being so coy about. Besides, it was too early in the morning for an interrogation, and Leah's rapid movements around the kitchen made it easy for the girl to dodge her mother's questions. After watching Leah for a moment more, Mrs. Nells finished her coffee and started to leave the kitchen, her voice conveying her pride as she said, knowingly, "Well, smile for the camera today. You always look pretty when you smile."

A moment later, Leah was out the door and on her way to school. The sky threatened rain, so Leah brought along an umbrella just in case. She didn't want to get caught in a rain shower that might mess up her new look, so she walked quickly.

Leah arrived on campus a few minutes earlier than usual. Her

watch told her she had ten minutes to wait before the school doors opened, so she waited outside with everyone else. A lot of students had already arrived at school, but Leah had observed that since the first day of class, the other students were never quite as eager to get to school on time in the morning as they were on the first day almost two months ago.

She scanned the crowd of mostly unfamiliar faces for David, but he was nowhere in sight. If he rode the bus to school in the mornings—and there was no reason to think that he didn't since she saw him get on a bus yesterday afternoon—then his bus probably hadn't arrived yet. From where Leah was standing, she could see that only one bus was in the depot and it wasn't number 128. Except for a few students who just got off the bus or who preferred to wait for school to begin from a more remote location, the depot was empty. Without anything better to do, Leah kept watch over that area of campus and beyond, past the trees and the grass and the students and towards the busy avenue as she waited for David's bus to arrive.

She didn't have to wait too long. The next bus to arrive was number 213. A minute later, four more school buses pulled in, one right after the other, and each one emptied its contents of drowsy teenagers. The third of these buses was number 128. Leah watched with great anticipation as the students on this bus filed off. It looked as if there were more students on board that bus than Leah thought could safely fit. With every new face that appeared, her heart beat a little faster. *Where was he?* Leah couldn't wait to see David, and at last, she did—but then she lost him again. His face disappeared in the crowd of students that now swarmed in front of the buses. She searched frantically for another glimpse of David's face, but he was gone. Suddenly, the bell rang, but Leah didn't want to move, not until she saw David again and gave him a chance to see her.

As the crowd of students streamed past her, Leah tried to resist the flow. She held her ground and waited for David. She hoped that when he saw her, he might say something to her like "Good morning!" or "How are you today!" Leah wasn't sure what she would say in reply, but just his acknowledgment of her would be wonderful. When she

spotted David, he was walking with three other boys. They didn't seem to be in any hurry to get to class; all four of them were joking and laughing. As they passed Leah, David was just a few feet away from her—close enough to see her if only he would turn his head and look in her direction. He didn't, though. David and his friends entered the main building and disappeared again. Reluctantly, Leah joined the crowd and started to go inside. When she reached the door, she could see her reflection in the glass. She still looked pretty, but there was disappointment in her face as well.

During the day, Leah found it hard to balance her time between concentrating on her schoolwork and thinking about David. She would have preferred to devote all of her time to the latter activity and forget all about the former. In between classes, Leah kept watch for David as she made her way through the crowded corridors, but she didn't see him at all during the passing periods. She also searched for David in her other classes. Before Monday, David had been just another guy in her history class, no more and no less special than any other boy. David could have been in every one of Leah's classes and she might not have noticed him at all. At the start of each class, she made a point to look around and see if David was sitting among her classmates, but he wasn't in any of her other classes. She even tried to look for him during phys. ed. class. The cloudy sky had cleared enough so that the girls' classes could go outside for another day of "running." The boys were outside, too, playing touch football. For the first time, Leah had someone to look for, and it made her feel like she fit in with the other girls. As with her other classes, she didn't have any luck finding David. The boys were too far away and in their uniforms they all looked alike.

When Leah went to lunch, she imagined what might happen if David came outside today and sat with her. She knew he ate lunch in the cafeteria because she had become familiar with the faces of the students who sat outside for lunch everyday, and she knew David was never among them. She imagined him seeing her sitting by herself and deciding to join her. She ate her meal while at the same time dreaming and hoping, but David never came outside. As usual, she sat by herself.

When she finished eating, she opened her trivia book to the last page she had read. Much like the previous afternoon, however, concentration was a problem. Her thoughts weren't necessarily on David, but they definitely weren't on the random questions and answers listed on the page either. She folded her arms on top of her book and then rested her chin on her arms. Her eyes, needing something to read, roamed the scratchy, uneven surface of the table and focused on the graffiti etched there. Mostly, the writing consisted of first names of former students carved into the wood, punctuated occasionally by a lewd expression here and there. Leah had noticed the graffiti before, of course, but she never really thought about it. Today she realized that *people* had carved their names into the table, and that these names didn't just come into existence when the table was manufactured. There was a time—probably a long time ago, considering how old the table appeared to be—when there was no graffiti on the surface. And, over time, *people*, one after another, sat at this table, and on a whim or a dare, added their names to this collage of identity. Some of the names were probably written by students who graduated from this school several years ago; other names might belong to people who still went to this school. Perhaps they were here right now, outside but sitting at another table. Leah looked around and examined her neighbors, trying to figure out who was a vandal and who was not.

Since the first day of school, she had noticed a steady increase of students choosing to sit outside for lunch. At every table, except for her own, others had come to sit and eat—a natural consequence of people making new friends. Only Leah still sat by herself, and she almost felt guilty that she wasn't sharing this big table with anyone else. Again, she imagined David sitting across from her, but she felt pessimistic now that he would ever really become a friend. If he were here and she had a chance to talk to him, what would she say? What could she tell him that was interesting, that would give him a reason to want to spend every day with her? Leah couldn't think of anything, and that only made her feel depressed.

Her mood didn't brighten again until later that day when she

went to history class. Finally, she would be able to see David again, and she felt excited and nervous about what might happen in the hour ahead. Would he finally notice her? Would he speak to her again? She hurried to class and discovered that she was the first to arrive, save for Mr. Simmons, who was sitting at his desk today as she entered. He looked tired as he stared at a piece of paper in his hands. He often looked that way, and Leah wondered if he had more pep in the mornings.

But her teacher's lack of energy contrasted with Leah's enthusiasm. She sat straight and tall in her desk with her notebook and pen sitting out in front of her. *5087 Trivia Questions & Answers* was also resting on her desk. She didn't plan to read from it, but she did hope that its presence might attract the attention of Kyle or some other would-be bully whom David could chase away—or maybe David, when he came into class, would see the book and say something else to her about it. Leah turned her head towards the door and eagerly watched her classmates arrive. She wanted to see David as soon as he entered the room. She knew he usually sat near the back of the class, and her opportunity to look at him would not last long. When David did finally walk through the door, Leah's heart began to race. This was the moment she had been waiting for all day.

In order for David to reach his desk, he needed to walk down the aisle on Leah's right. She decided that she would look him right in the eye as he walked past her. It took all of her strength and courage to do it, but as David approached her, her head was raised and her eyes looked up into his. She sat paralyzed in this position, waiting for him to make eye contact with her and say something. Instead, David didn't say a word to her, nor did he even glance at her as he walked past. Behind her, Leah heard him sit down in his desk, open his backpack, and take out his books.

Leah was disappointed, but there was still hope: there was Kyle. He entered the room a few seconds after David. Perhaps he could pick on her again today. This wasn't the kind of thing that Leah ever hoped for, but she was desperate for David's attention, and if this was the only way she could get it, then she was willing to put up with someone as

loathsome as Kyle. But even Kyle let her down. When he came in, he sat down in his desk and only bothered his neighbors. Leah didn't realize that it was the presence of Mr. Simmons in the classroom, as unconscious to what was going on as he was, that kept the behavior of the class in line.

Leah continued to hope for something to happen. With her ears, she tried to keep track of David's movements and actions behind her. When Heather, the girl with whom David had left the class yesterday, entered and took a seat in Leah's row to the immediate left of David, they began to talk in whispers. Leah didn't like the idea that Heather could monopolize David's attention when Leah wished that he would talk to her instead. She was almost thankful when a pair of boys to David's right interjected themselves into the conversation and talked to David about the football game on TV last night. Leah couldn't relate to that discussion, since she didn't care about sports, but she enjoyed listening to David's voice. He sounded pleased with the outcome of the game as he and the other two boys proceeded to recap the big plays like applicants for a broadcasting job. At last, the bell rang and Mr. Simmons called everyone to their seats and to silence.

Leah assumed nothing important would happen between her and David while class was in session, and she was right. Mr. Simmons handed out worksheets and gave his lecture just as he usually did. The class was relatively quiet, save for the usual interruptions in the form of wisecracks or private conversations. Some students asked questions, but David said nothing. Leah waited to hear his voice again, but she never did. It wasn't until class ended and school was dismissed that Leah could hope for another encounter with him.

Leah took her time gathering her belongings. She wanted to give David a chance to speak to her as he made his way down the aisle and out of the room. Leah hoped he would say something to her—anything at all. When she heard him approach, she held her breath and waited, but her patience was rewarded with the awful sight of David talking to Heather as they passed her and left the classroom. Once they were gone, Leah gathered her belongings and started to leave, doubting whether she

would see him again that afternoon.

But she did—much sooner than she could have expected. David, Heather, two boys, and another girl were right outside the classroom door, standing in a circle, and talking. Leah narrowly avoided bumping into David as she made her way around the small crowd. One of the boys (the same one whom Leah recognized yesterday from her algebra class) was telling the others about something funny that happened to him in his sixth period class. David, Heather, and the rest wore smiles on their faces and none of them noticed Leah as she passed by. She didn't stay to hear the story; to do so would have made her look too conspicuous. Instead, she went straight to her locker. She had homework that night, and she needed to get some books. Outside, she saw bus number 128 parked in the depot, but David was nowhere in sight, and she wasn't close enough to look for David's face through the bus windows. Leah finally gave up and started walking home.

She was disappointed by how the day had turned out, but deep down she wasn't really surprised. Leah wasn't blind to what was so obvious: David was simply being kind when he chased Kyle away from her; he didn't do it out of any emotional interest; and it seemed he had a crush of his own on the girl named Heather. David didn't see in Leah what she saw in him. She had done her best to try to get his attention today, but he never even noticed her.

Twice, in the eighth grade, Leah had developed a crush on boys in her classes. Neither crush had lasted very long—only a couple of weeks—because Leah was unable to do or say anything to the boys to make her feelings known. Eventually, her feelings for them subsided and her life returned to normal. As Leah walked home that day, she guessed that the same thing would happen with David, too. She decided that she wouldn't get dressed up again tomorrow. Never mind the lipstick and the nice dress; they just proved to be a hassle anyway. Eventually, she would forget about David, and in a few weeks' time, there would probably be another boy she liked. And then another—and then another. But every crush would end the same way.

When she got home, she stretched out on her bed and continued

reading her trivia book. This time, she didn't have any trouble concentrating on the words in front of her.

Ten

LEAH tried to forget about David. It would have been easy for her to continue to admire David from afar and pray for tiny bits of acknowledgement from him such as a smile or a hello, but what would be the point? If she were going to wait for David to notice her again, she might find herself waiting forever. David was much too popular a person, had too many friends, and knew too many girls to be interested in someone like her. And she knew that if she wanted to become a close friend of his, then she would have to talk to him. She would have to join his circle of friends and fend off advances from other girls, like Heather, who also sought David's attention. In order for Leah to have any chance at all with David, she would have to undergo a complete overhaul of her personality, and that seemed impossible. Besides, from what Leah had observed, it appeared that Heather had already beaten her in the contest for David's affection.

Wednesday morning passed quickly and uneventfully. The only excitement came when Leah received an A on an algebra quiz. Lunchtime was productive; she read thirty-two pages from her trivia book, which put her nearly halfway through. After lunch, her next two classes also passed quickly. In English, Mrs. Meyer gave the class most of the hour to study for a test they had on Thursday. The test would cover

all of the short stories they had read during the last three weeks. Leah thought she felt confident about the upcoming test, but she remembered she also felt confident about her book report, and she knew how badly that had gone. She decided it would be wise to use the time and review the stories. The rest of the class, though, didn't seem too worried about the test, and they chose to talk amongst themselves. Their conversations began in whispers, but the volume level increased gradually as Mrs. Meyer said nothing to them about keeping the noise level down. She was busy at her desk grading papers and seemed undisturbed by the action around her. If someone yelled or if the noise became too loud, she would raise her head and order the class to be quiet, and they would be—for a moment—but in just a few minutes their voices would reach another crescendo. In this environment, Leah found it difficult to study. Eventually, she closed her book and gave up. She stared at the clock on the wall and watched the second hand glide along the clock face. Soon she would be sitting in history class, and David would be there too. She had repressed her crush all day long, but now, as fifth period came to a close, it was starting to return. Maybe *today* he would talk to her, she hoped. It was possible.

When the bell rang and Leah left for her final class of the day, Tuesday's failure was forgotten and she was filled with a renewed sense of hope. Her mind tried to rationalize some other explanation for why David had ignored her yesterday. Maybe he just couldn't think of anything to say to her? No, that was crazy; he was the kind of person who always knew what to say. Maybe he just didn't have an opportunity to speak to her? But that wasn't true either; even when Mr. Simmons was in the room, David could have spoken to her, or at least smiled at her, if he wanted to. As Leah walked to class, her mind suggested one possible reason after another for why David had ignored her on Tuesday, but the most likely reason, that he didn't share the same feelings for her that she felt for him, no longer occurred to her.

When she reached the classroom and took her seat at her desk, she decided today would determine whether David really cared about her or not. When he walked into the classroom and passed by Leah's desk,

whatever he said—or didn't say—would resolve the issue. If he said something, there was hope; if he didn't, then she would try even harder to forget about him. She waited and watched the door. When he arrived, Leah kept her eyes on him as he made his way towards her. She steadied herself, and again she summoned the courage to look up at him as he approached. But once again, when David walked down the aisle towards his desk and passed Leah, he said nothing to her, and all of the lies and rationalizations that she had thought of to try to fool herself into believing that there was still hope now suddenly wilted away. Leah felt stupid and a little angry with herself. Wasn't it obvious that David had no interest in her? Why did she continue to torture herself like this? Heather entered the classroom and took her seat, which Leah now knew was two desks behind her own, and the quiet girl could hear David and Heather whispering to each other. Heather was the girl who David really liked. He was just being nice to Leah the other day, like he was nice to everyone. She felt so disappointed. She almost wished he had never spoken to her in the first place.

The bell rang and Mr. Simmons began class with a pop quiz. "I told you to read the chapter," Mr. Simmons chided. "Now we'll see who did." The class groaned, but Leah took this as an opportunity to put David out of her mind—at least for a moment. Desks were cleared off and the quizzes were passed down the rows. Leah received her copy and immediately signed her name at the top of the page. It was a short quiz—ten questions covering what they should have learned by now about the Roman civilization. Leah knew most of the answers, but as usual, she had problems remembering details about the people she read about in her textbook. She couldn't remember the name of the Carthaginian general who invaded Italy with elephants. Frustrated, she guessed "Aeneas." Why was learning about dead kings and generals so important anyway? she wondered. They had nothing to do with her life. After a few minutes, some of her classmates began turning in their quizzes to Mr. Simmons who stood patiently at the front of the classroom. Leah finished her quiz and got up from her desk. She walked to the front of the class and turned her quiz in.

"Thank you," her teacher said flatly.

Leah returned to her desk, but as she did, she could see David who was still working on the quiz, although he wasn't looking at it. Instead, his head was resting on his fist and his eyes were staring out into space. He was deep in thought, and Leah wondered if he was thinking about the elephant question, too. Just as she was about to take her seat, she saw David's eyes flash towards her, and for an instant their eyes met. Leah quickly looked away and sat down.

Moments later, when all the quizzes were turned in, Mr. Simmons told the class the answers to the questions. "Aeneas" was wrong, but she got all of the other questions right. Leah heard a voice from the back of the class ask, "Are you gonna take these for grades?" It was David's voice.

"Do you think I should?" Mr. Simmons asked with a smile.

"No!" several students exclaimed. Leah, who had done well on the quiz, silently hoped he would, though.

"I don't know—I'll think about it," was Mr. Simmons' evasive answer. "But right now, I've got an important announcement to make. I've been putting it off all week, but it can't wait any longer. Three weeks from now, right before the Thanksgiving holidays, everyone in this class will have to deliver a presentation on one of the ancient civilizations of the world that we've studied . . ."

When Leah heard the word "presentation," her heart stopped and she felt queasy. Of all the things Leah had to endure in school—essay tests, phys. ed. class, book reports, bullies like Kyle—by far the worst thing was the dreaded class presentation. In Leah's opinion, nothing was more awful than getting up in front of the class and speaking. But for the moment, Leah tried to suspend her feelings of alarm and concentrate on what Mr. Simmons was saying. She didn't want to miss anything important like she had when her book report in English was assigned.

Leah listened and quickly discovered that the assignment was not as bad as it first seemed. Mr. Simmons said that the class would be divided into groups of four or five; however, each group's presentation had to be at least fifteen minutes long. This wasn't so terrible. In middle

school, Leah had participated in group presentations on a few occasions, and she preferred them to individual reports in which she stood all alone in front of the class. Sometimes there was strength and confidence in numbers. But how would the class be divided into groups?

Leah hoped Mr. Simmons would assign her to her partners, but instead, he said he had enough faith in the class to form their own teams. "You're in high school now," he declared, "and not kindergarten. I'll let you work together with your friends, but I want you to work responsibly." Mr. Simmons did try to place one restriction on them: "If you can, try to keep the number of people in your group limited to only four—or maybe five," he said. "I'll let you break up into groups now. In a few minutes, send a representative to my desk, and I'll give you your assignments."

Mr. Simmons returned to his desk and immediately the class began to disintegrate into smaller groups. Leah sat helplessly as she watched groups form around her. She waited for someone to ask her to join them, but no one did. After a minute, she wondered if she should ask to join one of the teams nearby, but all of them had met their quota of four, and she was afraid that they would tell her they didn't want her. Was she going to be the odd one out? What would she do if she were the only one in the class by herself? Leah imagined the worst possible scenario: standing in front of the class and delivering a fifteen minute presentation all by herself. Or maybe she wouldn't even do the assignment and take a zero for her grade. She felt panicked and humiliated at the same time. Now everyone would see that she had absolutely no friends. There was no one she could turn to.

And then, a hand tapped her on the shoulder from behind.

She turned and found David standing right behind her. "Hi," he said in a friendly voice. "Do you want to join our group?"

Leah looked past him and saw three other students watching her and also waiting for a reply. Heather was there, as was another girl and a second boy. Heather was smiling, as if she thought something about Leah was amusing.

Leah jumped at the opportunity not only to save herself from

humiliation, but to join David's group. "Sure!" she answered.

"C'mon," David said. Leah grabbed her books, backpack, and purse and got up from her desk. She was too far away to join the group from where she sat, so she would have to sit in another desk. She found an empty desk at the back of the room, right behind where David's group was sitting. The five of them arranged their desks in a circle. Leah sat down, with her back facing the wall, in between a boy named Alex, one of David's friends in the class, on her right, and a short, dark-haired girl named Melanie on her left. Leah only knew their first names and little else; none of them had attended Leah's middle school. Alex asked his partners, "Are you sure we can have five people in a group?"

David, who was sitting to Alex's right and on Heather's left, replied, "I think Simmons said it's OK, didn't he? Besides," David said looking around and finding that all the other groups in the class had four people, "who else is she gonna sit with?"

Alex shrugged, and no one else objected to Leah's presence.

Heather turned to the newest member of the group and asked, "What's your name again?"

"Leah," she replied, without looking anyone directly in the eye. She still couldn't believe where she was and the company she was with. She didn't want to do anything that might give them an excuse to kick her out of their group.

Heather smiled at her again and then said to Melanie, as if her friend didn't yet know, "She doesn't talk very much." Melanie smiled too.

David looked around and saw the other groups were sending representatives to Mr. Simmons' desk as the teacher had instructed. David said, "Well, I guess I'll go get our assignment." He got up and navigated through the maze of desks that had formed when everyone rearranged the furniture so they could face their friends. Leah and her partners waited patiently and quietly for David as he joined the seven other students who surrounded Mr. Simmons' desk. They stood in a huddle as the teacher talked to them and it didn't appear that David would be returning anytime soon. Melanie shifted her attention to her notebook. Alex glanced around casually and leaned back in his seat. Leah

and Heather were the only ones who kept their eyes on David.

A few minutes passed and then, one by one, the small group of students who were gathered around Mr. Simmons' desk returned to their respective groups. Each held a small piece of paper in his or her hand; Leah guessed that those were the groups' assignments. David was the last to receive a piece of paper, but when he did, he stopped off at Kyle's group and joked with the guys there for a moment. Kyle had been one of the representatives and Leah noticed he was quite pleased when he looked at his slip of paper. David stayed on the other side of the class and seemed to have forgotten about his group.

Heather sighed impatiently and said, "What is he doing over there? We're waiting!"

Alex raised his voice and shouted across the classroom, "Hey David! Get over here, man!"

David said goodbye to Kyle and the other boys and returned to his group. He looked at his slip of paper again, but Leah couldn't tell from the expression on his face whether their assignment was an easy one or not.

David handed the piece of paper to Heather and said, as he sat down, "I hope somebody here knows something about the Egyptians."

In fact, they all should have known something about the Egyptians, since the class had studied them last month, but they were all doubtful that they could fill a fifteen-minute presentation. That was a lot of time. Heather and Melanie groaned, and Alex rolled his eyes.

"Well, they built the pyramids," Heather joked.

"And they sailed the Nile," Melanie added, smiling.

"And they lived in Egypt!" David laughed. "Guess who Kyle's group got—the *Romans*! Some people have all the luck."

"Maybe they'll trade with us," Alex hoped.

"No—I asked, but they said no," David replied. "We could have done worse though—Kimberly's group got the Indians."

"The American Indians?" Alex asked.

"No, the Indians from *India*," David said.

Heather and Melanie laughed and turned around in their seats.

Kimberly, a popular blonde girl who was another friend of Heather's was sitting in a circle of girls just a few feet away. Heather taunted, "Hey, Kim—good luck on your report!"

Kimberly turned around with a look of despair on her face. "What are we supposed to do?!" she whined. "We don't know anything about the Indians! What a stupid assignment!"

Heather seemed to take delight in her classmate's misery and continued to tease her. Leah didn't think that was very nice, so she ignored the girls and turned her attention to David. He and Alex were staring at the piece of paper that David had gotten from Mr. Simmons as if they were waiting for the paper to tell them what to do next. Suddenly, David raised his head and looked into Leah's eyes. Leah had been watching him too closely and was caught off guard by the sudden return of her stare. Surprised, her eyes tried to hide from David's gaze by quickly looking elsewhere—her hands, her notebook, her desk. David asked her, "Do you know anything about the Egyptians?"

Leah couldn't help but marvel at the fact that David was talking to her. She wished she could pluck every word that he said out of the air and save each one—his words seemed so precious. Leah was so absorbed in listening to the sound of David's words that she almost lost the meaning of them. It took her a few seconds to process his question and form a reply. She finally shook her head no and added in little more than a faint mumble, "Only what we've learned in class."

Alex looked inspired and pulled out his history textbook and began to flip through the pages. David didn't seem to notice. He asked Leah, "What about those books you like to read? Do you have any that are about Egypt?"

Leah didn't even have to think; she knew she didn't. She didn't care for history, and although she did have a few history books in her collection at home, there was nothing that concerned the Egyptians exclusively. She did have a book about rivers, and she remembered that it had a chapter about the Nile, but she didn't recall it saying anything about the historical value of the river or the ancient Egyptian civilization; it only discussed the wildlife that lived along the river's banks. She shook

her head no and regretted she couldn't be of more help. She wished she could come to David's aid the way he had twice come to hers.

By now, Alex had found what he was looking for in his textbook; it was the chapter on the Egyptians and other early Middle Eastern civilizations. "Here's the chapter in the book," Alex reported. David turned his attention to it and so did Leah. Heather and Melanie, tired of teasing Kimberly and hearing conversation and activity behind them, turned back around and rejoined the group. They watched the two boys in silence.

"There's not much here," Alex said. "Just a lot of pictures and not much information. There's no way we can write a fifteen-minute report from the material here. It looks like we'll be spending some time on the Internet."

"That was probably the idea," David said. He saw he had Heather and Melanie's attention again so he announced, "When I was at Simmons's desk, he told us that we can do the presentation in any style we want, so long as it's fifteen minutes long and has all the information he wants."

"Well, what kind of information does he want?" Heather asked.

"I don't know. He said he'd give us a handout outlining all that tomorrow."

"So what are we supposed to do today?" Melanie asked.

David shrugged. "Nothing, I guess—just form our groups and get our assignments."

Alex was still browsing through his textbook, and Leah was looking at the pictures as Alex turned the pages. There was one photograph of the pyramids with a line of camels walking in the foreground. The camels looked so tiny and insignificant compared to the mountain of stones behind them. Leah couldn't take her eyes off them until Alex turned the page. He looked up at David and asked, "When did he say the report is due?"

"The week of Thanksgiving," David answered.

"That's about three weeks away," Melanie said.

Alex didn't seem to be comforted by that, but Heather certainly

was. "Three weeks?! Jeez! Well never mind then. We've got plenty of time!"

"Yeah," David agreed, "but I don't think we should waste too much time. A fifteen minute report isn't something we can just blow off and do at the last minute."

"I know, I know," Heather said smiling, "but look, we've already got some information. We know that they built the pyramids and lived in Egypt."

"And they sailed the Nile," Melanie giggled.

"Exactly. If we just elaborate on that a little, then there's at least five minutes. See, we're on our way!"

David smiled, and with that, the group ceased their discussion of the report and began talking about things that had nothing to do with history or the Egyptians. The rest of the class had already forgotten why the desks had been so sloppily rearranged and everyone was talking to their friends with an ease and convenience they could have only dreamed of before. The time was 2:43; seventeen minutes remained in the school day, and apparently it was all free time. Mr. Simmons sat at his desk, recorded the quiz grades in his grade book, and ignored the chatter around him. Obviously, there would be no lecture today, just a quiz and the assignment of their presentations. Heather and Melanie turned around and talked to Kimberly and the girls in the other group some more. David and Alex talked to each other and were soon joined by a pair of boys from a nearby group.

There was nothing for Leah to do except sit and wait for the bell to ring. She considered reading her book, but decided not to. Instead, she sat patiently and eavesdropped on the conversations around her. She listened to David and Alex, but they started talking about sports again, so Leah listened to Heather and her friends. Their conversation was a bit more interesting than David's but not by very much. Leah listened to the girls, but she continued to watch David. He really was quite handsome, confident, and surprisingly smart. He treated Leah with respect and had come to her rescue twice already, once from Kyle and now from her own isolation. He had been kind and polite to her when it seemed no one else

would be. He paid attention to her—asked her questions and cared about her answers—something no other boy had ever done, and he didn't make fun of her books. Leah's infatuation for him had returned with its previous intensity, only this time Leah didn't try to deny it.

Eleven

AT HOME, Leah double-checked her collection of books for any information about the ancient Egyptians that she could use in her report. She had told David that she didn't have any books about Egypt, but she felt a duty to her new team—and especially to David himself—to make sure. She spent nearly an hour flipping through the pages of some of her books, but all she found were a few articles in the encyclopedia which didn't offer any more information than what was in her history textbook. She felt disappointed; she wished that she and her books could contribute more to the project.

Still, despite that disappointment, Leah found herself in a very good mood Thursday morning. Although she was eager to see David again, she knew she didn't have to get dressed up or go out of her way to attract him like she had tried to do on Tuesday because she knew that she was guaranteed to spend time with him in history class. Their presentation would be a complex, long-term project and that meant she would have lots of chances to get to know him well. Leah spent her morning classes on Thursday daydreaming about history class and David and all the things that might happen today. She knew that if she wanted to make a good impression on him, she would have to say more when he talked to her, so Leah spent her free time that morning trying to imagine

questions that David might ask her and then trying to formulate interesting, impressive responses to those questions. In her imagination, it was only David and Leah who were speaking. Leah didn't think about the three other members of her team because she barely knew Melanie and Alex, and as for Heather, Leah preferred not to think about her at all. Whether or not Leah would actually have been able to say any of things she planned in her head was uncertain, but it made Leah feel good to think that she might finally be taking steps towards a more sociable—and more normal—life.

Leah's daydreaming distracted her throughout the day, especially during her English test. She had studied the night before—after browsing her books for information about Egypt—and she understood the stories that her class had read, but during the test, her concentration just wasn't there and so she didn't do very well. While the rest of the class finished their tests quickly, Leah spent forty minutes working on it, and she was one of the last to finish. Her mind wandered so much during the test that she felt like she was only semi-conscious of the answers she was writing. Afterwards, as she sat and waited for the bell to ring, she found she couldn't remember any of the questions. She wished she hadn't had a test on a day when it felt like there were things going on which were so much more important. Leah spent the rest of the period staring at the clock on the wall and wishing the class would end so she could go to history.

As exciting as the opportunity to spend time with David was, however, Leah couldn't forget the real purpose behind their partnership: to prepare a big presentation and deliver it to her history class. Leah preferred to think about how wonderful and exciting it was to be so near David and to be a part of his life, but when she remembered that eventually she would be standing in front of her whole class and reporting to them about the ancient Egyptian civilization, she felt sick with dread. David would be standing there beside her, and that made her feel a little better, but a presentation was still a presentation. When the time came for her to stand up and speak, she might as well be all alone.

So Leah tried to assume the attitude the rest of her group seemed to share, especially Heather: because the report was three weeks away,

relax, and don't worry about it. Leah tried to push the presentation out of her mind and focus instead on the fact that she was closer to David than she ever dreamed she could be. Today was happy and hopeful, and the future offered little except anxiety and fear.

When the bell rang, ending English class, Leah raced to world history. She was in such a good mood that she almost forgot history class was still a *class* and not a free period in which teams could meet and socialize at their leisure. Leah didn't even bother to open her backpack and take out her notebook and history book when she sat down in her desk because she expected to move to the back of the class with David after Mr. Simmons took roll. So when the bell rang and Mr. Simmons introduced the day's lecture, Leah was left feeling confused. As she hurried to pull her notebook and a pen from her backpack, she wondered why the class wasn't breaking up into groups. Had Mr. Simmons forgotten about the projects? Of course not. He of all people would certainly remember. But if they didn't break up into groups, how were they supposed to work on their presentations? Leah didn't understand what was going on, and for the first five minutes of Mr. Simmons' lecture, she barely paid attention to what her teacher said. Finally, she focused her thoughts on the lesson for the day and not the confusing way in which her teacher was handling this project.

Mr. Simmons talked and answered questions for a little more than forty minutes. When he finished his lecture, he began distributing handouts to the class. On these sheets of paper was the information about their projects that he had promised the class yesterday. Both sides of the page were filled with guidelines that the groups were required to follow.

"I think it's pretty self-explanatory," he said. "If your team has any questions then come and talk to me, but this should tell you everything you need to know." He looked at the clock to see how much time remained in the school day. He said, "There's—what?—almost ten minutes left? If you want to get together with your groups and plan how you're going to conduct your research, then feel free."

Of course, everyone did, not because they were eager to work,

but so they could have an opportunity to talk to their friends. As the class began rearranging their desks, Leah turned around to see what David and her other partners were doing. She tried not to look too eager, but when she saw that Heather, Alex, and Melanie were gathering around David, she smiled and quickly carried her belongings to the back of the class so she could join them. They sat in the exact same places as yesterday—Leah with her back to the wall, Alex on her right, Melanie on her left, and Heather and David sitting together opposite her. There were no welcoming hellos or amused stares cast in Leah's direction today. Instead, the other four were reading the handouts they had received. Leah set hers on her desk in front of her and started reading too.

"Look at this!" Alex said after a moment of silence. "We can't use our textbooks or the Internet at all for this report! Everything has to come from the library *and* we have to compile a bibliography."

"Oh, but look," Heather said. "It says here we can record our report on video and present that to the class."

"Yeah, but only ten minutes worth," David said. Leah, although listening to what her partners were saying, kept her eyes on David.

"So what?" Heather replied. "That's ten less minutes that we have to stand in front of the class. I say we do it!"

"I agree," Melanie said.

As they were discussing their plans, Mr. Simmons was walking around with his grade book and recording who was in which group. He approached Leah's team and asked, "So which civilization is this group working on? The Babylonians?"

A sour expression came over Heather's face. "Ew! There's another crappy civilization we could have been stuck with." She looked up at Mr. Simmons and said, "No, we're the Egyptians."

Mr. Simmons simply nodded as he began scribbling names into his notebook. He also mumbled their names as he wrote them down. Leah listened closely and learned that David's last name was "Parks." She committed the name to memory. She had been wondering what his last name was, and it was exciting to finally hear it. She felt like she had learned something personal about him, something that had been kept a

secret. The truth was, Leah had been the only one among these five students who didn't know David's last name.

It was also exciting to hear Mr. Simmons say "Leah Nells" when recording their names. She was now officially a member of the team. She actually felt like she *belonged*. She belonged to this group, every bit as much as Heather or Alex or Melanie. She felt like she was on an equal footing with David Parks, for they were both members of the team and if either of them were missing, the group would be incomplete. She looked at her partners to see their reaction to the mention of her name, but no one seemed to care. Or perhaps they had already accepted Leah as one of them.

Before Mr. Simmons moved on, he asked, "Do you have any questions about the assignment?" Four of their heads shook no, indicating they didn't, while Leah just sat quietly, with a satisfied smile on her face. Mr. Simmons left and went on to the next group. The five of them could hear their teacher ask, "Which civilization is this group working on? The Babylonians?"

There was silence for a few more seconds, and then David said, "You know, if we're gonna do this presentation right, we should get started researching right away."

His partners agreed—in principle, but research meant work and that wasn't any fun. Heather said, "OK, but who's gonna stay after school and take notes in the library?" She looked at Leah who was staring at David. "How about you?" she asked. "I'll bet you spend a lot of time in the library."

Melanie suppressed a chuckle, and Leah turned her attention away from David to find the two girls smiling at her. She assumed the worst and guessed they were making fun of her, and so she responded with cold silence. No, she didn't spend a lot of time in the library. In fact, the only time she had visited the school library was back in the second week of September when her English class went there as a group and listened to the librarian deliver a lecture on how to use the electronic catalog, search for periodicals, and check out books.

Leah's silence in the face of Heather's teasing might have proved

awkward had it lasted for very long, but David quickly intervened and said, "I think we should all spend time in the library, just to be fair."

"Well I can't," Heather objected. "The only time I could possibly go would be in the afternoons, but I have a bus to catch. So do you, David." Heather smiled at him and David smiled in return, as though they were both thinking of some secret joke between them.

But David's seriousness returned and he said, "Not necessarily. I can catch a ride home with my brother."

"Did your brother finally get his truck?" Heather asked, eagerly changing the subject away from their assignment.

David nodded. "Yeah, it's that used black pickup truck he was talking about the other day."

"Oh yeah . . ." Heather recalled.

"It's a little beat up, but it runs well—and it only cost him \$3000."

"Man, that's a lot," Alex said, joining the conversation. "Did he pay for it himself?"

"Yeah. He spent all summer flipping burgers full time to pay for it. He drove it to school for the first time on Tuesday."

"Why didn't you tell me about that?" Heather demanded. "And why are you still riding the bus to school if your brother has a truck?"

"He doesn't want me to ride with him," David replied. "When I ask him to give me a lift somewhere, he just gives me this long speech about how he earned his truck, and so he decides who gets to ride in it. He's starting to sound like our dad—it's scary. Anyway, I think I can talk him into picking me up from school for a couple of afternoons if I slip him some money to help pay for the gas."

"Do you think he'll give me a ride home too?" Heather asked.

"Probably."

"Well, there you go. Whenever you stay after school to do research, so will I."

"And what about the rest of you? Can you stay after school too?" David asked his three partners. Alex and Melanie both said that they would be able to. David repeated his query to Leah. "And how about you?" he asked.

Leah couldn't believe what she was hearing. A moment ago, she thought it was remarkable just learning David's last name. Now she had access to a treasure of information about David and his life. She could almost imagine David talking to his brother and asking for a ride just as he had described it. This was the *real* David Parks: he might be popular at school and have a lot of influence among his classmates, but he was also a boy who had trouble persuading his older brother to give him a ride home. This David Parks was different from the semi-divine savior Leah imagined him to be earlier in the week. This David wasn't perfect, but that only made him more attractive. There were things he couldn't do, just as there were things Leah couldn't do. Having learned so much about David on this day, she felt it was only fair to reciprocate and share something about herself, and his question gave her the opportunity. Leah cleared her throat and declared, "Yeah, I can stay after school. I—I usually walk home anyway."

The other four were almost surprised to hear the quiet girl say so much at once. For a brief moment, Leah's presence was more than just a silent image in the background, like a shadow or a poster on the wall; she was now something physical, something with a bit more substance. Leah hoped David would linger on the subject a little longer and ask her something else, but before anyone could speak, the bell interrupted them and class was dismissed.

"Time to go," David said, stating the obvious. As they reached for their belongings and moved their desks back into neat rows, he added, "We'll figure out who's going to the library and when tomorrow, if Mr. Simmons gives us some more time to work in our groups, OK?"

Everyone agreed, and they left the class. Leah let David and Heather, who were walking together, leave the room first while she followed a few paces behind them. Leah disliked Heather, partly because the brunette seemed to poke fun at her, but mostly because of the intimacy Heather shared with David. The two of them were clearly much more than a couple of teenagers who were attracted to each other—they were friends as well. How could Leah possibly compete with someone whom David considered a friend? If Leah wanted David to fall in love

with her (and she believed she did), then joining his team for this history project and contributing a few words now and then was a start, but it wouldn't be enough. Ahead of her, in the crowded hallway, Leah watched as Heather whispered something to David that made him laugh. Leah knew that if she could do something like that—share an emotional connection with him—then that might be just as fulfilling as becoming his girlfriend. If she could make him laugh, make him happy, then that would make her happy, too.

Leah separated from David and Heather and let them go. She went to her locker, retrieved her homework, and then she walked home. On the way, she thought about the task ahead of her.

Twelve

IT APPEARED that the only class time Mr. Simmons was ever going to allow for groups to work on their projects—if he allowed them any class time at all—would come during the last few minutes of the hour. Friday afternoon, Mr. Simmons once again lectured for forty minutes and then stopped and allowed the class to break up into their groups. Leah realized now that Mr. Simmons couldn't let the class spend the *entire* hour discussing their projects, but it still didn't seem fair that she should only be allowed ten or fifteen minutes, at most, to spend with David when really he was the only reason why history had become her favorite class of the day. Those final minutes felt all the more precious when there were so few of them.

The rest of the class seemed content to squander their time and were more interested in joking and gossiping than planning their projects. Leah's group might have descended into that same chaos had David's leadership not kept them on track. He worried that time was slipping away, and his group had barely begun working on their reports. None of the other teams had made much progress either, but David didn't know that. Unlike Leah and Heather and the others, he wanted to treat those few minutes at the end of class as an opportunity to work. He already had plenty of time throughout the day when he could talk to his friends

and Heather.

On Friday, when Leah and her partners had gathered together, David asked if anyone was available to work in the library after school that day. Heather said it all depended on whether David could stay after school and if his brother could drive her home. David confessed he hadn't yet talked to his brother about that yet. He seemed embarrassed about not doing his part for the group. "I promise I'll ask him this weekend," he said to Heather, "and I'll call you when I find out." Melanie had an appointment with her orthodontist after school that prevented her from staying on campus that afternoon, but she promised to go to the library Monday. Alex volunteered to stay, but "only for about half an hour." Finally, the question was put to Leah. She whispered that she too could stay after school, but she didn't mention that it was because she didn't have anywhere else that she needed to be.

"Maybe we should take turns, just to be fair," David suggested. "We don't all have to go to the library together. Alex and Leah will go today, but they won't have to go on Monday. That's when Heather, Melanie, and I will go. Does that sound all right?"

Everyone agreed that it did, although Leah silently objected that it prevented her from seeing David outside of class. She wanted to go to the library with him, but now she couldn't. She was very disappointed but said nothing as she tried to hide how she felt.

"What exactly should I be taking notes on?" Alex asked, already forgetting that Leah would be in the library with him. "I mean, ancient Egypt is a pretty big subject, what should I focus on?"

David thought for a moment and then replied, "I don't know— just take notes on whatever you think looks important. You can give them to me on Monday, and when I go to the library I'll work around what you and Leah get, OK?"

With their plans for the afternoon made, all that was left to do was wait for the bell to ring. Leah spent the time wishing that David would be in the library with her instead of Alex. Maybe there would be other opportunities, she hoped. They still had a couple of weeks before their presentation was due.

When school was dismissed, Leah left the classroom and went straight to her locker to collect the books she'd need for her weekend homework. She was starting to feel a little nervous about going to the library. She knew it was open for an hour after school every weekday for anyone who chose to use it, but who chose to use it? Would it be crowded or deserted? She remembered from her English class's tour of the library in early September that there were plenty of tables where students could work. She guessed that if the library was going to be crowded the best thing to do would be to get there quickly so she could secure a place to sit and work. She worried that she might have to fight for a table the way that students had to fight for places to sit in the cafeteria during lunch. On the other hand, the library didn't seem like it would be a very popular place for students to hang out, especially on a Friday afternoon. Leah didn't know what she would find when she got there, and that made her nervous.

While she lingered at her locker, the rest of the student population hurried to leave so they could get home and start the weekend. When she closed her locker and turned around, she noticed a big, colorful poster on the wall opposite her. She had noticed, earlier that morning, a lot of new posters in the hallways advertising the varsity football game that was scheduled for that night. She had no interest in attending a football game, so she didn't pay too much attention to the posters, but the poster in front of her was different. This one advertised the Homecoming Dance, which, according to the information on the poster, was a week away. Leah wondered why anyone would place that poster here. It was almost a kind of mockery to advertise one of the biggest social events of the year right across from the locker of the shyest girl in school. She knew she could never go to the dance. Just the very idea of going terrified her. Leah couldn't dance; she didn't even like to listen to music. And there would be so many people at the dance—hundreds of them—all dressed up, talking to each other, laughing, having fun—it would be overwhelming.

Still, as she stared at the poster, she wondered. The poster said that the dance was open to all students—even freshmen. Leah supposed

that David would be there—why wouldn't he? He was so popular that it was probably expected of him. For an instant, she imagined going to the dance as David's date, but that vision, as pleasurable as it was, was completely ridiculous. She could never do that. Bitterly, Leah imagined Heather would be his date.

Leah finally tore herself away from the poster and found that the hallway, which was bustling with students only a minute ago, was now almost deserted. The library was downstairs, across from the cafeteria, so that's where she went. When she arrived, she found a sign posted on the door that listed the library's hours of operation. It was open now, and would remain open for the next hour. The library was also open before school and during the lunch hour. Entering through the heavy, swinging doors, Leah found the library almost completely deserted except for the librarian working by herself at the circulation desk and five students spread out among the many empty tables. She found Alex sitting at a circular table with six chairs around it. He had opened his backpack and was pulling out his notebook. Leah thought it would be a good idea to sit with him at his table just in case he wanted to coordinate their research. Leah approached the table and set her backpack and purse down on the table opposite Alex. He noticed her and said in a whisper, "Wow, you actually showed up." Leah wasn't sure what he meant by that comment but it didn't sound very nice, so she pretended to ignore it.

The first thing they did was visit the online catalog. Alex sat down at a computer terminal and began searching. Leah sat beside him and watched silently. It turned out that there were dozens of books about Egypt and the ancient Egyptians in the library's collection. Alex studied the search results for a minute and then he abruptly logged off and started for a row of bookshelves on the other side of the room. Leah followed him.

She kind of liked it here, in the library. It was quiet, almost deserted, and there were lots and lots of books. She wondered if she hadn't made a mistake in avoiding this place for so long. It looked like a perfect place to sit and read for an hour every day. She wouldn't have to check out a book if she didn't want to. All she had to do was return it to

the circulation desk when she was finished with it. And if this afternoon was any indication, there was hardly anyone ever here. Maybe she'd come back again sometime—when she wasn't working on a history report.

Alex found the right bookshelf and began browsing. Here were most of the library's books about Egypt, and Alex grabbed the first two books that looked promising and then returned to his seat. Leah spent a little more time in front of the shelf and put a little more thought into her selection. Ultimately, she also chose only two books: one was a textbook devoted exclusively to ancient Egyptian history, and the other was a collection of short biographies of all of the Egyptian pharaohs. With these in hand, she returned to the table. She looked at the clock on the wall above the librarian's desk. The time was ten minutes past three; the library closed at four. She didn't feel pressured, but she knew she had to work fast if she wanted to get much done. Back at the table, she found Alex busy reading and taking notes.

The next thirty minutes passed quickly and for Leah it was very productive. She compiled two-thirds of a page worth of notes from the pharaoh book, and she was so absorbed in her work that she totally forgot about Alex, even though he was sitting directly across from her, until he started packing his things to leave. Leah looked up at the clock on the wall. There was still twenty minutes left before the library closed. She stared at Alex quizzically who explained in a whisper, "I know the hour's not up yet, but I have to leave early—I'm going to the game tonight. Will you put my books back on the shelf before you leave?" Leah nodded, and Alex left his books on the table. As he got up from his chair and slung his backpack over his shoulder, he added politely, "See you Monday." He was gone before Leah could offer a goodbye of her own.

Not until he was through the library doors and gone from her sight could Leah return to work, but she didn't feel as dedicated to the task as she had been. She found herself easily distracted, looking up when two other students left the library a few minutes later. And when a teacher entered and began to talk to the librarian, Leah sat and stared as the two women spoke freely and didn't bother to whisper. Either they

didn't notice there were still students trying to work, or more likely, they didn't care. In any case, Leah thought they were very rude. After a few minutes, the teacher said goodbye to the librarian and left. The room returned to its previous state of silence, and Leah was finally able to concentrate on her work again.

She wasn't interrupted until she heard the librarian announce that the library was closing. Leah looked up and saw the librarian staring directly at her; no one else was in the room. Leah packed up her things, returned Alex's and her books to the librarian, and left. The hallway outside was deserted and eerily quiet. She exited the building and found the campus was mostly empty, too. The bus depot was abandoned and only a few cars remained in the students' parking lot.

Leah took her time walking home. There were no crowds of students to share the sidewalk with, no feeling of countless eyes staring at her back. The traffic on the avenue was also lighter than when she usually walked home. Everything made it feel like she was all alone—and it was a feeling that she liked.

Thirteen

"HEY, you know that girl named Stacey—you know, from English class?" Heather asked Melanie the following Monday. Once again, the two girls, David, Alex, and Leah were sitting in the back of the class, spending the last ten minutes of the school day meeting to discuss their presentation.

"Yeah, why?"

"You didn't hear?!" Heather asked. "Emily told me all about it at lunch."

"Told you what?"

"You'll *never* believe this, but Emily swears it's true . . ." Heather said with a giggle, but as the two girls gossiped, Leah wasn't paying attention. She and Alex had just handed their notes over to David, and she was much more interested in hearing what David had to say.

He hadn't expected much from either Alex or Leah. If, between the two of them, they had amassed a single page of notes, then he would have been pleased. He knew that his friend Alex wasn't the kind of person who would want to sit in a library for a long time and work, and he had no idea what the shy girl was capable of. So as he examined Alex's and Leah's notes, he was very impressed by what he saw.

"Hey, look at this!" David said, holding up the full page of notes

that Leah's hour in the library last Friday had produced. Heather and Melanie stopped whispering and giggling long enough to look, and even Alex, who hadn't paid much attention to what Leah was doing when the two of them were in the library together, seemed impressed. Heather shared David's surprise and added, "Hey, way to go, Leah. It looks like this report's gonna be a breeze."

Leah smiled bashfully at this unexpected attention and praise. It felt wonderful to make a good impression at last. Leah really felt like she was a part of the group now and not someone who was just tagging along for a grade.

"I was thinking," David said. "We ought to make a poster or two diagramming the inside of a pyramid. I remember seeing a show on TV once about pyramids and I remember that the show had a cross-sectioned view of a pyramid—you know, so you could see all the tunnels and rooms that are inside those things. One of us could draw a picture like that and present it to the class."

"I'll do it," Alex volunteered. Having had his fill of note taking in the library, drawing a poster of a pyramid sounded like a lot less work.

"OK, so during the presentation, you'll talk about the pyramids," David said.

"Hey, that's not fair!" Heather objected. "If he's gonna talk about the pyramids, what are the rest of us gonna do?" As far as she was concerned, pyramids were all there was to know about the ancient Egyptian civilization.

David attempted to answer her question by examining Leah's notes further. Because one of the books Leah used dealt exclusively with the pharaohs, most of her notes focused on that topic. David noticed this and he said, "Well, Leah can talk about the pharaohs during her part of the report." He returned Leah's notes to the still-smiling girl. "And the rest of us," David continued, referring to himself, Heather and Melanie, "will decide what we're gonna report on when we go to the library this afternoon. We also need to decide who's gonna write the reports once we've collected all this information. Who here is a good writer?"

All were silent.

"That's what I thought," David said with a smile. "I guess maybe we'll each write our own reports, but if we do that, then our reports might not have any flow between them."

When class was dismissed, Leah watched Heather and Melanie follow David to the library. Again, Leah wished she could join them, or better still, take one of their places—particularly Heather's. She wanted to be close to him. The few minutes of physical closeness that she shared with him in history class wasn't enough any more. She wanted the emotional closeness, too. She felt like she was on the verge of making a friend in David, and it was very exciting.

Unfortunately, Leah didn't get to hear about what happened when her three partners went to the library that Monday afternoon because on Tuesday and Wednesday, Mr. Simmons didn't give the class a chance to meet with their groups. Instead, he lectured and reviewed material for the full hour on Tuesday, and on Wednesday, the class had a test. Although David was still in her class, the fact that she didn't have a chance to sit near him almost made it feel like he wasn't in the room at all.

On Thursday, they did get a chance to meet, but Leah didn't like the topic of conversation.

"Who's going to Homecoming this weekend?" Heather wanted to know. Her eyes glanced quickly between Alex, Leah, and Melanie. She said to Melanie, "I already know *you're* going."

Melanie smiled, and Alex asked her, "Who are you going with?"

"Jeremy Praeter," she replied proudly. "He wasn't even planning to go to the dance, but me and Heather talked him into it."

The two girls giggled as if they were sharing a joke. David looked on with a smile, but he didn't say anything. His eyes met Leah's, but his shy admirer looked away. When Heather stopped giggling, she asked Alex, "How about you? Are you going?"

Alex shook his head with remorse and said, "I can't."

"What?! Why not?" Heather and Melanie asked in unison. They wondered what could prevent someone from going to the dance. The very idea was crazy.

"My family and I are going out of town that weekend to visit my grandmother and my aunt," Alex explained. "They can't come here for Thanksgiving, but they still want to see us this time of year anyway, so we're gonna visit them. I won't even be able to go to the Homecoming game."

"That sucks," Heather said, suppressing her joy for a moment in order to feign sympathy.

"It's no big deal," Alex shrugged. "I'll go next year."

David finally broke his silence with, "Hey, at least you don't have to get all dressed up and spend all your money on your date."

Heather was insulted. "What's that supposed to mean? Would you rather not go to the dance with me?"

Leah jumped slightly, as though she had suffered an electric shock. She wasn't surprised that David and Heather would be going to the dance together, but hearing confirmation of that fact didn't make it hurt any less. She stared down at her desk and slumped a little bit in her seat.

David realized he had misspoken and tried to repair the damage. "Oh—but you know you're the one person I'd spend any amount of money on."

Heather was satisfied with that remark, but Melanie laughed and Alex saw it for the kiss-up that it was. Leah wished that the bell would ring and end this torture.

"And what about you?" Heather asked Leah. "Are you going to the dance?" Heather smiled and gave her other partners a knowing glance.

Leah looked up and saw that the focus of the conversation had shifted to her. She didn't say anything; she just shook her head no. That was enough to satisfy Heather's curiosity. There was no need for Leah to explain why she wasn't going. Everyone knew.

David had noticed that Leah suddenly appeared ill and uncomfortable. He was about to ask her if she was feeling all right, but Alex interrupted him, "So are you guys gonna go out to eat before the dance?"

"Of course!" Heather exclaimed. "We're gonna go with some other couples to Alfredo's. We already made reservations."

"Are you gonna rent a limo?" Alex asked.

David laughed out loud. "What am I, a billionaire? No, when I'm a senior maybe I'll rent a limo, or something, for the prom, but right now I'm gonna spend every penny I have on clothes and that dinner at Alfredo's. By this time next week I'll be flat broke."

"Oh, but it'll be worth it. We'll have fun—I promise!" Heather assured David as she reached out and took his hand.

The bell rang, and for once, Leah was the first one out of her seat. She got up, quickly gathered her belongings, and headed for the exit. She didn't want to see David and Heather any more. She hated Heather, and she wondered how David could stand her. She was so needy and rude and mean, and Leah thought she treated David badly. Leah would never be like that; she'd be a lot nicer. She wouldn't make him do anything that he didn't want to do. He wouldn't have to take her to an expensive restaurant or get all dressed up for a dance. None of that mattered to her. All she wanted was to spend some time with him, be near him, and maybe even talk to him. But all of that was impossible now. David and Heather were going to the dance together and there was nothing she could do about it.

Leah left school feeling miserable. As she walked home, she thought about the past two weeks and tried to remember if there had been even one moment when David had given her any indication that he liked her better than Heather. Nothing came to mind. Leah only talked to him when he asked her a question first. Occasionally, he looked at her, but she was sitting across from him in a circle of desks, so it made sense that he would look in her direction from time to time. The glances that he gave her didn't mean anything. He also talked to Heather more than he talked to anyone else, and he never resisted when Heather flirted with him. The difference was clear: David definitely liked Heather more, and today's revelation that they were going to the Homecoming Dance together would only strengthen their bond.

These gloomy thoughts followed Leah home, and later that

afternoon, when Mrs. Nells came home from work, she found her daughter in an even more pensive mood than usual. Leah was upstairs in her bedroom, but instead of reading, Mrs. Nells found her daughter just sitting on the bed and staring into space. Something important was on her mind, and Mrs. Nells hoped that maybe her daughter would want to talk about it.

She came into the bedroom and asked, "How was school today?"

Leah hesitated, not because she was assessing her day in order to give an honest answer, but because she didn't know if she *should* be honest. Part of her wanted to tell her mother everything about David and the last couple of weeks, but what could she say? That she had a crush on a boy in her history class who wasn't interested in her? When she thought about it that way, the whole situation just seemed embarrassing. And if she did mention David, she knew she would only get her mother's hopes up. Leah answered the question with a simple, "OK."

"You don't look well. Are you feeling all right? Are you getting sick?" Mrs. Nells asked, searching for some explanation for her daughter's behavior. She tried to place her hand on Leah's forehead to check for a fever, but Leah shook her head no in response to her mother's questions. There was nothing wrong with her health.

Mrs. Nells then got straight to the point. "So how come you're just sitting here, not reading? You almost look strange without a book in your lap," she teased.

Leah didn't reply to her mother's questions. Instead, she sat still and stiff and stared at her feet. A moment passed as Mrs. Nells hoped Leah would confide in her, but Leah remained as silent and immovable as the earth itself. Finally, Mrs. Nells decided upon a less intrusive means of breathing some life into her daughter.

"Well," Mrs. Nells said, standing up, "your father will be home soon, so I'd better start fixing dinner. If you're feeling all right, why don't you come help me?"

Leah knew from past experience that her mother's question was less of an invitation than an order, so she lifted herself off the bed and followed her mother downstairs to the kitchen. For once, Leah didn't

mind helping her mother cook. It was something to do, and it was sure to help her take her mind off David and all the depressing feelings that the thought of him inspired.

Leah didn't want to go to school Friday morning. For the last two weeks, the only class that she had been interested in was world history, but now it offered nothing for her but heartache. She didn't want to sit in class and listen to David and Heather discuss their plans for Homecoming. The last thing she needed was to hear them talk about how happy they were going to be at the dance. Before she rose from her bed Friday morning, she considered faking an illness so that she could stay home from school, but then she remembered that her mother had asked her yesterday if she felt sick, and Leah had insisted that she was well. She had no choice but to pull herself out of bed and face the day, no matter how miserable it might be.

School was boring, and it felt like a meaningless chore. Without history to look forward to, she simply went through the motions of attending class and pretending to be interested in the lessons. She sat through most of her classes with her head propped up lazily by her hand; she read during lunch, although she didn't care about what she was reading; and she wandered through the halls between classes as though in a daze. As she walked, she kept an eye out for either David or Heather. She decided that if she saw either of them she would turn around and go in the other direction, but she never saw them. When the final period of the day arrived, Leah sat down at her desk in history class and waited for the happy couple.

One by one, her classmates entered and took their seats, but when the bell rang and Mr. Simmons began taking roll, neither David nor Heather had arrived. As Mr. Simmons began his lecture, Leah waited for David and Heather to come in late, but they never did. Eventually, Leah gave up waiting for them and concentrated on listening to the lesson and

taking notes. In a way, she was glad they were gone, but in the back of her mind, she wondered where David was.

Mr. Simmons, aware that it was Friday and that the Homecoming game was later that evening, knew that his class was only barely paying attention to him, so he cut his lecture short. Leah turned around in her desk and watched to see what Alex and Melanie, who had shown up for class, were going to do. But since David and Heather, the nucleus of their team, was gone, they didn't sit together, either. Instead, they talked to their other friends in the class as they waited for the hour to end. Leah took out a book and spent the remainder of the school day reading.

Even though nothing particularly depressing happened during school that day, Leah was in another melancholy mood when she came home. She read for a little while, but mostly she just moped around the house. When her mother came home, Leah volunteered to help fix dinner, which her mother appreciated, but she wasn't in much of a mood to eat. After Leah's father came home and the family sat down to dinner, Mr. Nells turned on the small TV in the kitchen and tuned to the local news. He always did this during dinner. The news sometimes served as a conversation starter between himself and his wife, or if no one had anything they wanted to talk about, it was something to fill the awkward moments of silence.

Mr. Nells and his family had already missed the news portion of the program, and the weather segment was just starting. Mrs. Nells remarked to no one in particular how it was very warm for this time of the year. Leah silently agreed, but she didn't mind because it meant that she could sit outside for lunch more often.

As the newscast went to a commercial, the sports anchor appeared on the screen and teased the audience: "And after the break, tonight's a big night for high school football!" he exclaimed. "A number of teams are playing their homecoming games tonight, including . . ." and he proceeded to list the names of a few schools, including Leah's.

When she heard the name of her high school, Leah accidentally bit her tongue instead of the food that was in her mouth, and the sharp pain made her wince. Her parents, though, had known nothing about

why this weekend was so important until now. Mr. Nells asked his daughter, "Is this your school's Homecoming weekend?"

Leah nodded and continued to chew. She stared down at her plate and didn't look at her parents. She didn't want to answer the flood of questions that she could sense was coming.

"Why didn't you go to the game tonight?" her father asked. "I could take you if you wanted to go. Jeez, I haven't been to a high school football game since I was a senior in high school. I'd love to go to one again." Mr. Nells' memories of high school, romanticized after almost twenty years, came rushing back to him. "I can still remember my high school's Homecoming games. Those were always the best, especially when our team won—which, luckily, happened most of the time!" Leah didn't look up, but she knew he was smiling. "I know you're not a fan of football," Mr. Nells continued, "but that doesn't matter. I'm sure there will be a lot of girls at the game, girls who don't like football any more than you do"—Leah thought about Heather and wondered if she and David were going to be at the game together tonight—"but that's not why you go to something like that. It's fun just to attend the event, to be part of a big crowd, to hear them cheer when a touchdown is scored, to hear them chant the school song, or to listen to the marching band play." The visions his words conjured excited Leah's imagination. In her mind, she could see the boys in their crimson and white uniforms running up and down the field; she could hear the excitement of the crowd as the team scored a touchdown; she could feel the suffocating press of several hundred other spectators all around her; and she imagined David and Heather, standing together in the bleachers cheering for the team and celebrating when they scored. Her father said, "I'll bet you're the only one who's gonna stay home tonight. You really don't want to go?"

Leah shook her head no.

"Well, *I* personally never cared much for football games," Mrs. Nells said, trying to take Leah's side. "But I hated to miss a dance. I think I only missed two dances during all my years in high school."

"I'll bet you were quite the socialite back then," Mr. Nells teased.

His wife laughed, "That's right, I was!" There was a pause, and

Leah shut her eyes, fearing her mother would start reminiscing too. Instead, Mrs. Nells asked, "So when is the dance? Saturday night?"

Leah opened her eyes and nodded. Her fork played with the food in front of her, gently coaxing it towards the edge of her plate, as if she were encouraging it to get up and run away.

"How come you aren't going then?" Mrs. Nells asked, pretending not to know the true reason why Leah would be home alone tomorrow night and on every future dance night. "Aren't freshmen allowed to go?"

"We're allowed," Leah replied.

"Well, you never know," Mrs. Nells said to her husband. "When I was in high school, freshmen weren't allowed to attend the Homecoming Dance, but I think that was because they held the dance in the school gym and there wasn't enough room for everybody."

"I don't think most schools do that any more," Mr. Nells said. "I think most of them hold dances at convention centers or public auditoriums instead of the school gym."

"Really? That would have been so great if my school had done that. A gym is no place for a dance. Where is your school gonna have its dance, Leah?"

Leah honestly didn't know. She shrugged her shoulders.

"You should have gone," Mrs. Nells said wistfully. "Didn't anyone ask you to go to the dance?"

That was what Leah had been dreading. It was the most humiliating question they could possibly ask her. Leah didn't reply. Instead, she stuffed a forkful of food into her mouth and chewed vigorously. She just wanted to finish her meal so she could excuse herself from the table and retreat to her bedroom.

Her silence gave her father a chance to lie to himself. "I'll bet somebody did. What boy would pass up an opportunity to date a pretty girl like this?"

"He'd have to be blind," Mrs. Nells agreed, "or maybe just stupid. I'll bet she had several offers to go to the dance."

Leah didn't try to tell them that the reason why she wasn't going to the dance was because no boy had asked, especially not the boy she

wished would have asked her; she let them believe what they wanted to believe. If they wanted to think their shy daughter had been asked to go to the dance, then she'd let them. If, on Saturday night, they wanted to sit by the windows and wait for some Romeo to show up and carry Leah off to a fairy tale land where she wouldn't be afraid to talk and where she would be surrounded by friends, then that was their choice. Leah, however, had no such illusions. She knew that tomorrow night, while David and Heather and the rest of her class would be dancing and laughing and living, she would spend it the same way she spent every Saturday night—alone in her bedroom with a book. While she sat in her room, staring at the blank walls as the minutes passed, David and Heather would be staring into each others' eyes, hoping that their evening would last forever. They would dance, they would hold each other, and they would kiss. The distance between herself and David would grow wider and more hopeless. Leah looked at her parents, lost in their own fantasies, and decided that the three of them were a pretty pathetic family—but she wasn't sure who was more pathetic: the dateless girl spending the night of the big dance by herself in her bedroom, or the parents who foolishly believed a boy would arrive on their doorstep with flowers, a limo, and a promise to rescue their daughter from her solitude.

Fourteen

LEAH learned over the weekend that her school lost their Homecoming game—by 21 points. She was shocked. Shouldn't her school's team have won the game? Wasn't that what they were supposed to do? She wondered, did the loss affect the mood of the Homecoming Dance? And how did David feel about the loss—was he upset?

David so dominated her thoughts that weekend that on Sunday night she dreamed about him. She dreamed that she and David were sitting together at lunch, only it wasn't the patio outside their high school cafeteria where they sat but Leah's old middle school cafeteria. The cafeteria was as crowded as it had always been, but David and Leah had a table all to themselves. The two of them ate their lunches and talked to each other while they ate. Then, the scene changed, and suddenly she and David were standing on the sidewalk that separated the high school campus from the busy avenue that led to Leah's neighborhood. School must have just ended because there were other students walking past, leaving the school and going home, but she and David didn't seem to be in any hurry to leave. They stood on the sidewalk together and continued their conversation from the cafeteria. Standing there with David gave Leah a feeling of safety and comfort, but it didn't last long.

Her alarm clock buzzed and she awoke. It was Monday morning,

and she had another day of school ahead of her, but for a few moments she lay in bed, thinking about her dream and trying to remember all of the details. One detail that she couldn't remember, much to her frustration, was what, exactly, she and David talked about. Not a single word of their conversations survived her mind's transition back to consciousness. As she got up out of bed to get ready for school, she smiled anyway. Even without the words, it had been one of the best dreams she'd had in a long time.

Although the dream put Leah in a good mood for the day, she still wasn't eager to return to history class. She was afraid of what she would see once she got there. She expected to see David and Heather together. She assumed that the dance had solidified their relationship as a couple, and if David and Heather weren't already in love with each other last week, then they definitely would be now. She didn't know how she would be able to stand seeing them so happy, perhaps holding hands, maybe even kissing! She expected that she would be very, very miserable today, yet when sixth period arrived, and Leah entered the classroom and took her seat in her desk, she found that her attention was fixed to the classroom door. No matter how much she dreaded the idea of seeing David and Heather together as a happy couple, she couldn't look away.

But when they did arrive, what Leah saw was not at all what she expected. David and Heather weren't holding hands or smiling—in fact, they didn't even enter the room together. David arrived first, looking uneasy and distracted. On the way to his seat, he bumped into the desk at the front of Leah's row and almost tripped over the legs of the boy who was sitting there. David apologized to his classmate and carefully made his way down the row to his own desk. Leah looked straight at him as he passed, but he didn't look at her at all. After he sat down, Alex, who was already in the room, started towards David, hoping to talk to him, but when he saw that David wasn't in the mood to speak, Alex sat back down in his own desk.

When Heather arrived, Melanie was with her. Both girls were whispering to each other, but as soon as they saw David sitting in his desk, they stopped talking and quietly took their seats. David and

Heather's assigned seats were right next to each other, but from the way they were acting, they might as well have been in totally different schools. They ignored each other completely and didn't even say hello. Leah thought all of this was very strange behavior for a couple who had gone to the Homecoming Dance together. She wanted to watch them and try to figure out what was wrong, but because they sat behind her in the classroom, Leah couldn't sit and stare at them for very long. The bell rang, so she faced forward in her desk.

Class began and Mr. Simmons welcomed his students back from their weekend by reminding them that their reports were due in exactly one week. Leah felt a nervous tingle in the pit of her stomach as she realized the project deadline was so close. Mr. Simmons told the class that not everyone would be presenting their projects on Monday. There wasn't enough time in one day for every team to deliver their reports, so the presentations would be spread out over the three days of classes before the Thanksgiving holiday. Jake asked whether Mr. Simmons would tell the class in advance who would be giving their reports on Monday, who on Tuesday, and who on Wednesday, but Mr. Simmons refused.

"I won't tell you which group will present first," he explained, "because I want everyone to come to class prepared on Monday. It wouldn't be fair to assign days in advance because then whoever is scheduled for Tuesday would have an extra day to work on their projects. As far as all of you should be concerned, your presentations are due next Monday." Leah didn't like that plan. She wanted to know exactly which day she would be presenting her report, even if it were Monday. Giving a presentation was bad enough, but not knowing *when* she must present her report was added misery. Next week was going to be a very awful week.

At the end of the class period, with a few minutes left before the bell, the class was free to work on their projects, if they chose to. As the class broke up, Leah could finally turn around and look at David and Heather. Both had remained silent during class, and Leah was dying to know what had caused their strange behavior. When she turned around,

she saw that her four partners were making no effort at all to form a circle with their desks as they always did when Mr. Simmons gave the class time to work on their projects. Apparently, whatever happened over the weekend was even enough to prevent David and Heather from cooperating on their history project. Leah resigned herself to the fact that whatever had happened to them, she wouldn't learn about it today. She turned back around and waited for the bell to ring.

That night, Leah wondered if David and Heather had broken up. It seemed so unlikely—how could you break up with someone after you went to the Homecoming Dance together? It didn't make sense. But as strange as it seemed, it was the only explanation for the way David and Heather were acting. Leah found herself hoping that it was true. She felt like a terrible person hoping for something like that, but she couldn't deny her feelings. If David broke up with Heather, maybe he would start to notice Leah.

On Tuesday, David and Heather again arrived to history class separately, but at the end of class, they, along with Alex and Melanie, moved their desks into a circle. Leah joined them. For once, she seemed to be the only one who was at ease sitting with the group. The other four looked uncomfortable, and there was a clear division between the boys and the girls. Alex was on David's side and Melanie supported Heather. Leah guessed that Alex and Melanie knew all about what happened last weekend. She hoped they would talk about it so she could learn what happened, too, but no one mentioned it even though it was clearly on everyone's mind. David led the group discussion, as usual, but he wasn't in a good mood.

"We haven't met for a while, have we?" David asked, trying to get things started. No one replied. "Well, let's figure out where we stand—the presentation is due next week, you know. Alex, have you finished drawing your posters?"

"I've got one of them finished," the other boy answered meekly, "and two more that are almost done." He had boasted all along about how his job was the easiest, but he had been procrastinating.

Alex expected David to get upset, but instead, David asked calmly, "Which poster have you finished?"

"The pyramid cross-section. I can have the other two posters that I'm working on finished by tomorrow," Alex replied.

"OK. What about the rest of you? Who's finished writing their reports?"

The three girls lowered their eyes and pretended not to have heard the question. Leah silently scolded herself for not finishing her report sooner. She had already gathered all of the notes and research that she needed. Surely it would have impressed David if she had been the only member of the group to be finished with her share of the work. It was an opportunity missed.

David sighed. "Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't written my report either, so let's all get our work done soon, OK?" Everyone nodded. "The next thing we need to talk about is whether we're still gonna record our report on video. Are we?"

"Absolutely," Heather said, speaking for the first time. Alex and Melanie nodded in agreement.

"OK, so when are we gonna do this? How about after school on Thursday?"

That comment broke the ice once and for all. Immediately, everyone, except Leah, began to speak. Melanie said that Thursday was no good for her. Alex was busy Friday afternoon, and Heather was busy Friday and Saturday.

Growing irritated, David asked, "Well, the only day left is Sunday, is anyone busy *then*?"

Sunday was fine for everyone. Leah hadn't said a word yet so David asked her specifically. "Is Sunday all right for you, too?"

Leah, entranced by the drama she was witnessing, had almost forgotten that she was their partner, and not just a spectator to what appeared to be the end of David and Heather's relationship. She answered David's question with a quick nod of her head and a "Yes" that she forced from her lips.

"Great," David muttered. "Sunday afternoon it is—we'll finish our project at the very last minute. Now, where are we gonna meet?"

Silence again returned to the group.

Frustrated, David said, "Fine, we'll meet at *my* house!" Leah could see that he was annoyed, and that made her nervous. She wished the bell would ring before he got any more upset, but there was still a couple of minutes left. "I talked to my dad the other day about using his video camera, but he didn't sound too happy with the idea, so does anyone else have a camera we can use?"

Leah was afraid that no one would answer and that David would finally lose his temper, but luckily Alex rescued the situation by volunteering. "My dad's got one. I'll ask him if we can use it, and I'll bring it when I come over."

They agreed to meet at David's house at one o'clock on Sunday. Melanie would get a ride with Heather, and Alex already knew where David lived. That left Leah. David knew that she didn't know where he lived so he scribbled his address down on a piece of paper and handed it to her just as the bell rang, dismissing school for the day. Leah stared at the piece of paper with David's address written on it, holding it as if it were something priceless. "Do you think you can find it?" he asked. Leah nodded eagerly.

Fifteen

BY THE END of the week, the hostility between David and Heather had faded enough so that on Friday, Leah could watch as David and Heather sat in the back of the class together, whispering and smiling. Whatever it was that had happened during the Homecoming weekend seemed to have been forgotten.

Leah was disappointed, although she knew she had no right to feel that way. She had hoped that a rift in David and Heather's relationship might be an opportunity for her, but the fact that Leah had not been told anything about what happened last weekend, while Alex and Melanie apparently knew all of the details, only proved that she was still considered an outsider and not counted among David's circle of friends. Leah had thought that she had found a place of her own in David's personal life, but she hadn't. Their history project was the only thing that they had in common, and when it was over, she would probably never spend any time with David again.

At home, Leah worked hard to make her report the best it could be. She labored at her desk in her bedroom, rewriting her report on the pharaohs twice before she was satisfied with it and timing herself as she read it out loud to see how long it was. Leah still remembered her book report failure, and she didn't want to make a mistake like that on this

project, not when David and the others relied on her for their own grades. At least this time David was in charge of their project, and that made her feel better that she was on the right track.

She put off telling her parents anything about the project, or David, or about how David had invited her to his house Sunday afternoon. By Friday evening, though, she knew she couldn't wait any longer. Leah had never been invited to a boy's house before in her life—even visits to other girls' houses were extremely rare—but she had a feeling that she knew what her parents' reaction would be. The last time she had been invited over to a classmate's house was last year in the eighth grade when she and another girl were assigned to work on a project that wasn't too different from the presentation she was working on now. Their teacher had paired them together, but Mrs. Nells, when she learned of this other girl, believed that her daughter had finally made a friend. Mrs. Nells turned what would have been a completely unremarkable event in the life of any other teenager—visiting the home of a classmate—into one of the Most Significant Moments in her daughter's life. For at least a month after the report, Mrs. Nells would ask her daughter every day whether she saw the other girl in class, if they had talked, or ate lunch together. But Leah and the other girl didn't become friends at all—they didn't even speak to each other again after they completed the assignment. Once again, Mrs. Nells was left feeling disappointed, and Leah was left feeling ashamed.

So Leah had reason to be wary of telling her parents about David Parks. David was a boy, and Leah knew that would lead her mother and father to think that she had not only made a friend, but that she had a *boyfriend*. Leah imagined her parents overreacting and celebrating the news, and she dreaded the thought. The worst part of it all was that Leah really did wish that her parents could have a reason to celebrate.

Leah also knew there would be questions, most of them embarrassing, about this boy named David. Leah couldn't simply give her mother David's address and expect to be driven there without first satisfying her mother's curiosity. Maybe her mother would even want to meet this boy—and his parents, too. Leah couldn't imagine anything

more humiliating than showing up at David's front door with her mother standing beside her. Leah was truly excited about visiting David's home, but she had to face so many obstacles in her own home first.

Leah decided to tell her parents about her Sunday appointment with David during dinner Friday evening. When the family sat down together, Leah was as quiet as usual, but tonight she was distracted as she tried to think of the best way to break the news to her parents. Mr. and Mrs. Nells were relaxed that evening, glad that the weekend was upon them. With the pressure of their jobs temporarily lifted from their shoulders, their conversation was happy and full of humor. If Leah had been paying careful attention to what they were saying, she might have even smiled and been amused by her parents' laughter and lightheartedness. But Leah only half listened to her mother and father talk. Instead, she stared at her plate and played with the chicken breast by cutting it up into tiny pieces without eating any of it as she waited for the right moment to speak. In her lap, hidden from her parents' view, was the piece of paper on which David had written his home address. After several minutes of joking, her parents experienced a lull in their conversation. With smiles on their faces, they both turned their attention to the neglected food on their plates.

This was Leah's opportunity. Her eyes darted back and forth from her mother to her father and back again. Finally, she opened her mouth and asked, "Can one of you drive me to somebody's house on Sunday?"

Mr. Nells had been in the process of swallowing a bite of food, but the sound of his daughter's voice and the question that she asked almost caused him to choke. Mrs. Nells had been reaching for her drink, but her arm froze in mid-air when she heard Leah's question.

"Wait—what?" Mr. Nells asked, surprised.

Leah repeated her question, word for word. She found it easier to ask the second time, now that the tension was broken.

By her parents' reactions alone, one would have thought Leah was announcing that she was engaged to be married or had won the lottery or some other such thing. Mr. Nells exclaimed, "Hey, that's

wonderful!" Mrs. Nells was grinning broadly and she looked like she was about to start crying. She tried to speak, but for the moment, she was at a loss for words.

"Is this a classmate of yours?" Mr. Nells asked.

Leah nodded.

"What's her name?"

"Y-yes," Mrs. Nells stuttered. "Who is it?"

Here it came, the moment Leah had been dreading all week. Leah knew her reply was sure to bring the house down, but for all the trouble she knew her answer would cause, Leah couldn't help smiling when she said, "*His* name is David Parks."

"It's a boy?!" her mother asked. She looked at her husband who wore the same stunned expression as she.

"A boy invited you over to his house?" Mr. Nells asked, trying to wrap his mind around this news.

Leah could sense where this was heading. Already they thought that David was her boyfriend. Leah wanted to put a stop to that idea as quickly as possible so she explained, clearly but concisely, the reason for her invitation to David's house: that she and three others were going there to work on a presentation for history class. These details brought Leah's parents back down to earth—but only for a moment. The fact remained that their daughter was, for the first time in her life, going to visit a boy at his house. Mr. Nells glowed with enthusiasm and fatherly pride while Mrs. Nells was trying hard to hold back the tears of joy that wanted to come out. Despite their embarrassing display, Leah still hadn't received an answer to her original query: who was going to drive her to David's house? She set David's address on the table where they could see it, and she asked her question again. Both Mr. and Mrs. Nells were eager to do it, but the honor finally fell to her mother. With that question resolved, Leah tried to drop the discussion and pretend that it had never taken place, but it was foolish of her to think that her parents would just forget about it.

Mr. and Mrs. Nells pestered Leah throughout dinner, asking her all the questions that she didn't want to answer:

"What is David's last name?"

"How long have you known him?"

"Is he in any of your other classes?"

"Did he go to your middle school?"

"What do his parents do for a living?"

"What does he look like?"

"Is he a nice boy?"

"Do you think he might want to be your boyfriend?"

It was absolute torture. At last, she finished her dinner, pried herself away from the table and her parents, and escaped to her room, shutting the door behind her. But even her bedroom couldn't provide her with sanctuary on this night. Her giddy parents interrupted her several times by knocking on her door and taking a quick peek inside with the explanation "Just seeing how you're doing!" and smiling. Leah wasn't used to this much attention and she found she hated it. She could sense their pride in her, and that made her feel good, but before long it started to bother her. Most of all, she hated how they implied a romantic interest between herself and David. If he really was nothing more than a classmate, then it wouldn't have bothered Leah so much, but he meant much more to her, and that made her sensitive.

On Saturday, Leah did her best to avoid her parents, but it was difficult since the whole family was at home. She stayed in her room almost the entire day, only leaving her isolation for lunch and dinner. Her parents continued to check up on her, but not nearly as often as the night before. Leah spent the day reading, doing homework, and putting the final touches on her Egyptian report.

When Sunday morning came, Leah awoke at 9:42—much earlier than usual for a weekend. At one o'clock she was supposed to be at David's house. She sat in her bed, feeling nervous—almost as nervous as she was on the first day of school. Indeed, the situation was similar: she was going to go to an unfamiliar place, and she didn't know for sure what was going to happen. This time, at least, she knew who was going to be there, but that didn't calm her nerves. She only knew David, Heather, Alex, and Melanie from school and not in a casual situation. It was

difficult to imagine the five of them together in a comfortable living room rather than sitting in desks in a cold, sterile classroom. Today they wouldn't have to worry about teachers or bells. Without the authority of a teacher, they had the freedom to do whatever they wanted, and that made Leah a little nervous. The only place where she had observed other teenagers outside of class was during lunch. There, she noticed how their behavior changed compared to how they behaved in the classroom: they became louder, wilder, and at times almost uncontrollable. Would David and the others act like that, too, if there wasn't a teacher around? She hoped not.

Leah got up, showered, dressed, and tried to make herself look as nice as possible, not just for David, but because she knew she would be spending time in front of a camera today, and so she wanted to look her best. As the hour of departure approached, Leah became very nervous, and there were several moments when she changed her mind and decided not to go. If she wanted to, she could simply tell her parents that what she told them Friday evening was just a joke—that she didn't know anyone named David and she didn't have a report due Monday. Maybe Mr. and Mrs. Nells might have believed such a lie, but there was evidence that what Leah had said Friday was true, namely, the piece of paper with an address written in handwriting that wasn't Leah's. And besides, Leah never made up such elaborate hoaxes as this, so why should she suddenly spring one on them now? No, Leah had to keep this appointment, not just for her sake, but for the sake of her four partners. Without her report on the pharaohs, their analysis of the Egyptian civilization would be incomplete, and their grades would suffer for it. She would evoke the anger and disappointment of the others in the group—particularly David, and she didn't want to disappoint him. Leah had no choice. She had to go; she would go.

At half past twelve, Leah was ready. She found her mother, who was busy with the laundry, and asked if they might leave now. But Mrs. Nells smiled and assured her daughter that she had a very good idea where her friend David lived and that it wouldn't take them more than ten minutes to get there. "You have to be at his house at one o'clock,

right? Well, we've got plenty of time. If you want to get to his house early, that's fine with me, but I promise you we won't be late." Leah decided to wait.

At a quarter till one, Leah went to her mother again. Mrs. Nells looked at her watch and insisted that it was still too early to leave, but the expression of anxiety on her daughter's face argued otherwise. Leah, with her notebook and a pen in one hand and David's address in the other, led the way to the garage. She was already in the car with her seatbelt fastened before Mrs. Nells even opened the garage door.

When they were on their way, Mrs. Nells remarked happily, "You certainly look pretty today; we might as well be going to church. Are you sure all you're gonna do over there is work on a report?"

Leah didn't quite know what her mother meant by that question. It made her feel self-conscious though, and she wondered if maybe she had tried to look *too* nice. As they drove, Leah glanced at her mother and saw the big smile on her face. This was obviously a big day for Leah, but it was a very important moment for her parents too. For them, this day gave them hope that their daughter might soon start to lead a normal social life, even if those hopes were just that—hope. Leah's trip to David's house allowed them to believe the illusion that Leah was at last coming out of her shell and was ready to join the rest of the world. Leah felt guilty because she feared her parents would be disappointed if nothing more than a decent grade on a history report came from all this. Leah would be disappointed, too.

She was distressed to discover her mother's knowledge of David's neighborhood was not what Mrs. Nells claimed it to be. They spent a lot of time driving up one street and down another, apparently lost. After several minutes of this, Mrs. Nells asked to see the paper with David's address on it. Leah handed it to her, and Mrs. Nells studied the address as she drove, as if the size and shape of the numbers and letters on the piece of paper might provide some clue as to which direction they needed to go. Leah, meanwhile, kept her eyes on the car's clock and grew worried as one o'clock approached. It probably wouldn't have mattered to David and the others if she showed up five or ten minutes late, but it

mattered a great deal to Leah; she wanted to make a good impression on David, and showing up late, she feared, would leave a very bad impression. At last, when the car's clock read 12:58, Mrs. Nells found the street she had been looking for and from there it was just a matter of checking the house numbers to find David's home.

Leah didn't need to pay attention to the address numbers to know which house was David's, though. Parked in the driveway of a white and gray bricked two-story house was an old black pickup—the one that belonged to David's brother. Leah was relieved to finally be at David's house, but what bothered her now was that the truck was the *only* vehicle in the driveway. There was no other sign that any of her partners had arrived yet. When she had imagined her trip to David's house, she thought there would be some sort of indication that other people were there, such as several cars parked out front—even though none of her partners could drive. Leah hoped she wasn't the first to arrive; she thought that would be almost as bad as arriving late.

Mrs. Nells parked next to the curb and asked, "Do you want me to walk you to the door?" Leah could hear the excitement in her mother's voice, and Mrs. Nells wanted to savor every moment of this wonderful day in her daughter's life. Under different circumstances, Leah would have liked someone to accompany her to the door. But this was David's house, and she didn't want him to think that she needed her mother to ring the doorbell for her. It was bad enough that Mrs. Nells had to drive her here. Leah shook her head no; she would go alone. Clutching her notebook with trembling hands, Leah stepped out of the car and shut the door behind her. Mrs. Nells didn't drive away immediately, but rather, she stayed and watched her daughter climb the porch steps. Leah felt very nervous, almost as if she were going to present her report to her class right now. Her legs were weak but they still managed to bring her body to the front door. And when her unsteady finger pressed the doorbell, and she heard it ring inside the house, it suddenly occurred to her that she didn't know what she was going to say if some other member of the Parks family opened the door and asked what she wanted. She had expected that either David, or one of her group partners who

arrived before her would open the door, but there was no guarantee that would happen. And if she were indeed the first to arrive, maybe David hadn't yet told his family that he had invited some of his classmates over to work on a class project. She also had a frightening thought that perhaps this wasn't David's house, in spite of all the evidence to prove that it was. Wouldn't it be terrible to ring the doorbell of the wrong house? Leah prayed that a familiar face would answer the door.

For a few seconds after Leah pressed the doorbell, it seemed as if she wasn't going to have to say anything to anybody because no one came to the door. Surely, there was *someone* home because she could hear muffled voices from within. Finally, the door unlocked and Leah watched it open. She saw David's face and all her worries vanished.

Sixteen

"HEY! You made it! Come on in." He opened the door all the way and stood aside so Leah could enter. As the door closed behind her, she could hear her mother's car driving away. "I wasn't sure if you'd be able to find the house," David continued. "Did you bring your report?"

She raised her notebook slightly so David could see it and she nodded. She realized she had a wide grin on her face, but she couldn't help smiling, no matter how funny she must have looked. *She was in David's home.* It was so incredible. David said, "Everybody's already here so we'll get started in a few minutes." He gestured towards the rear of the house, "The living room is back there—just make yourself at home."

Before Leah could follow his direction, she heard someone coming down the stairs behind her. She turned and saw another boy, apparently David's older brother, heading straight for her. She got out of his way and let him pass. He didn't seem to notice Leah at all and said to David, "I'm outta here. Keep your kindergarten friends outta my room. If mom and dad ask, I've gone over to Logan's house." David nodded in reply and said, "Yeah, OK." Leah noticed that even though David was almost as tall as his older brother, David lacked the same confidence and command in his brother's presence that he had in history class when he was among his friends. When his brother was out the front door, David

went upstairs without saying another word to Leah. She watched him climb the stairs, and when he was out of her sight, she started for the living room.

Leah passed a short hallway that led into the kitchen. From that direction she heard a familiar voice chatting to someone whose replies could not be heard. Leah took a couple of steps down the hallway until she saw Heather talking on a cordless kitchen phone. Melanie was standing beside her and listening with a smile and occasional giggle to Heather's half of the conversation.

"*Yes!*" Heather said to the person on the phone, "I really am at David's house! . . . We're working on a report for world history . . . No, I'm not by myself. Melanie is here and so is Alex—you know, that guy from algebra class? . . . Yeah, that's the one . . . What? . . . Why do you want to talk to Melanie? . . . All right, hold on . . ." Heather handed the receiver to Melanie, who, with a voice filled with laughter, confirmed all that Heather had just said to the skeptical person on the other end of the line.

Leah backed away from the kitchen and went to the living room. There she found Alex sitting quietly and looking bored. Alex sat on one of the two small blue sofas in the room. The sofas were facing each other and there was a coffee table in between them. On the table were two notebooks, some loose papers, the posters that Alex had been assigned to draw (these were turned face down so no one could see them), and a digital camcorder, presumably the one Alex promised he'd bring.

Leah sat down on the sofa opposite Alex and tried to make herself comfortable. She was still feeling a little nervous, although seeing the familiar faces of her partners did help to alleviate much of the anxiety aroused by being in a strange home. She held her notebook in her lap and looked around, trying to take in her surroundings. Everything was so different from her own house, even the air smelled different. Behind her was a sliding glass door that opened to the backyard deck. To her right was a large television set, but it was turned off. In the corner next to the television and behind Alex was a large fireplace constructed of the same white and gray bricks which were used on the outside of the house. On

the mantle above the fireplace there was a clock. The time was six minutes past one. Leah was pleased to see there really wasn't any reason to worry about arriving a few minutes late. To the left of the fireplace stood a set of enormous bookcases filled with books and pictures and knick-knacks of all sorts. Leah was curious to read the titles of the books, just to see what kind of books the Parks family liked to read, but she was sitting too far away to see the titles. To Leah's left there was another entrance to the kitchen, and from where she sat, she could see Heather and Melanie still talking on the phone. Apparently, Melanie's conversation with the person on the other end didn't last long and now Heather was back on the phone again.

Leah was watching the girls in the kitchen when she heard David return downstairs. He had changed his shirt, and his hair was ruffled. Finding only Leah and Alex in the living room ready to begin work, David went to the threshold of the kitchen and said to Heather and Melanie, "C'mon you two—let's get started!"

"Just a minute," Heather replied, and she continued to talk. Melanie, although somewhat reluctant to part from Heather, emerged from the kitchen. She held a roll of papers in her hand, probably her report, and sat down at the other end of Leah's sofa.

"*Now*, Heather!" David called.

"*Wait!*" the girl stubbornly replied.

"She's been on the phone the whole time she's been here," Alex said, with some irritation in his voice. David, who still stood on the threshold between the kitchen and the living room, as if he were uncertain about which room he wanted to be in, nodded wearily.

"Yeah, I know," David replied. "Last time she came over, she spent most of her time on the phone." A silence followed his remark and those in the living room could hear Heather say, although her voice had been reduced to almost a whisper, "—and tomorrow I want to. . ."

David had had enough. He crossed the threshold and marched into the kitchen. He disappeared from Alex and Melanie's sight, but Leah, from where she was sitting, could still see him. David pried the phone receiver out of Heather's hand and turned off the phone. Heather

let out a squeal and declared, "How *rude!*" David whispered a reply that no one outside the kitchen could hear. Heather started giggling and then David chased her into the living room. Both of them were smiling. Leah turned her eyes away.

Heather crashed onto Leah's sofa and sat in between the other two girls. The boys sat across from them on the other sofa and began to set up Alex's camcorder. Alex had brought the instruction manual with him and the boys referred to it several times. They seemed to be having trouble. The girls sat quietly and watched. Heather was still smiling.

As the boys worked, they spoke to each other in hushed tones. "Are you sure you checked this last night?" David asked as he rotated the camera in his hands.

Alex, who was flipping through the pages of the manual, replied, "Of course. My dad and I took it out last night and got it ready. Maybe we should try the other battery pack."

They turned their attention to the camera box that Alex had brought with him. Alex emptied its contents onto the table. There were wires, some small plastic bags, bubble wrap, warranty slips, and the extra battery pack. While the boys were exchanging batteries, Heather asked, "Are we gonna film this outside or inside the house?"

David looked around him, considering the question. "Well, I don't think there's enough light in here. We should probably go out to the deck in the backyard. It looks like a nice day out." He turned to Alex who finished inserting the extra battery pack. "Does it work?" David asked.

Alex turned the camera on. They heard a soft hum and the boys grinned in triumph. Alex put the viewer up to his eye and his smile disappeared. "I can't see anything."

"Maybe you just need light," David suggested. "Point the camera towards the window." Alex rotated his head and the camera until they were both aimed at the window to his left. Alex reported that he still couldn't see anything.

"Maybe you should take the lens cap off," Heather giggled. Melanie started laughing too.

"It doesn't have a lens cap!" Alex snapped.

"Let me see it," David said, and Alex handed the camera to him. Alex leaned back on the sofa but continued to stare at the camera, trying to figure out what was wrong.

David didn't have any success getting the camera to work either. "It says 'Stop' at the bottom of the screen," David reported. "Maybe we need to press Play or Record to see something?"

"No, no," Alex grumbled, "that doesn't matter. Even when the camera isn't playing or recording we should still get an image on the viewer." David proceeded to press Play and Record anyway, but Alex was right and the problem remained.

"I wonder if it even recognizes the hard drive," David said. His comment wasn't supposed to be funny, but it caused Heather and Melanie to burst out laughing again.

"You guys have no idea what you're doing!" Melanie teased.

David didn't look at the girls. "You're not making it any easier with your giggling."

Leah had been watching this scene with the same sort of amusement as the other two girls, but she held her laughter in and simply smiled. However, when she saw that David didn't like the girls' laughter, and that he really was frustrated and not putting on a show, she stopped smiling and tried to look more serious.

Heather also noticed David's frustration and she said, "Fine, then. I'll go talk on the phone, and you can let me know if and when you two ever figure out how to work that thing." She quickly got up and went to the kitchen. David looked up and was about to say something to stop her, but instead he let her go. Leah watched her go into the kitchen and turn on the phone, but instead of dialing a number, Heather spoke into the phone. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Parks," she said, and then she hung up. She returned to the living room, slightly embarrassed, and said to David, "Your mom's on the line. You don't have another phone line in this house, do you?"

"No," David answered as he and Alex fumbled with the camera.

"Well, you should get one," Heather said. She sat down on the

sofa again and said to Melanie, "I've already asked my parents to get me my own cell phone for Christmas."

"Do you think you'll get one?" Melanie asked.

"I hope so. I'm like the only person at school who doesn't have one yet. It's so embarrassing. And when I'm at home, there's always somebody else on the line, so I never get a chance to talk. That's why I like to use the phone when I come over here."

David and Alex showed no interest in what the girls were saying. Leah watched as they continued to try to figure out what was wrong with the camera. Alex picked up the instruction manual again to see if there was something he missed. David was installing the original battery pack to give that one more try.

"I just don't know," Alex said. "Maybe the battery packs aren't fully charged."

"You told me you'd have them charged and ready to use," David complained.

"And I did—or at least my dad did—or I thought he did," Alex stuttered as he picked up the second battery pack and held it in his hand. "But that one definitely doesn't have any juice, and I don't know what's wrong with this one."

David put the camera down and leaned back against the sofa. He muttered a swear word, and Leah was shocked to hear him use that kind of language. Still, she tried to keep a sympathetic attitude because she knew he was frustrated. Leah looked at the camera and wanted to help find a solution, but she knew nothing about electronics and was as much at a loss for ideas as David.

"Does this mean we aren't gonna put our report on video?" Melanie asked, her voice now serious.

"Maybe," Alex replied.

"Don't you have another video camera around here somewhere?" Heather asked David.

"Yeah, my dad's got one, but I don't know if it will work. I think it uses battery packs too, and I don't know if they're charged." David got up and started to leave the room. "I'll go upstairs and ask my dad if we

can try his camera. If it has batteries that work, we might be in luck."

"And what do *we* do in the meantime?" Heather asked.

"Umm, I don't know," David answered. "Why don't you guys read your reports and see how long they are." He left the room and went upstairs; Leah could hear him shout, "Hey, dad!" and then all was silent.

With David out of the room, Heather took charge of the group. "OK, let's read our reports," she declared. "I've got a watch so I'll keep time. You read first, Melanie."

Melanie pulled her report out from underneath the mess on the coffee table. She started to read, but Heather stopped her and said, "Wait." She looked at her watch and they both waited silently for a few seconds. Finally, Heather exclaimed, "Go!"

Melanie began to read. She was a little self-conscious, knowing that she had an audience listening to her, and this caused her to giggle a couple of times as she read her report. She spoke quickly—probably too quickly—according to Heather the timekeeper.

"One minute and thirty-one seconds," Heather reported when Melanie had finished. "I think you need to slow down, Melanie. Each of us should try to get about three minutes out of our speeches. And if it turns out we have to read our reports during class, then we'll really have to slow it down."

Melanie promised to read slower next time, and Heather asked Alex to go next. Alex's report consisted solely of his explanation of the posters he made. Since he didn't have anything to read like Melanie did, his time was even less. Heather clocked him at one minute and twenty-five seconds.

"You're a little fast," Heather warned.

"Yeah, but I'm not gonna talk in the video, remember? I'm gonna present the posters in class," Alex defended himself. "It'll be longer than—you'll see."

They were interrupted by the sound of someone coming downstairs. Everyone turned their heads and expected to see David with a solution to their worries in the form of a video camera that worked. Instead, they saw Mrs. Parks enter the living room, wearing sweat pants

and a T-shirt. Her dark hair was pulled up, and she looked like someone who was glad that it was the weekend because it meant she didn't have to get dressed up. She smiled and said, "Hello, Heather! How's your project going?"

"Not very good," Heather answered. "We've been having trouble getting Alex's camera to work. Right now we're just reading our reports to see how long everything will take. Each person should have a three minute report, but that's not going very good either."

"Oh? Do you mind if I listen? I'll just sit over here out of the way." Mrs. Parks took a seat in a chair in the far corner of the room.

"Leah?" Heather said. "You're next."

Leah pulled her report out of her notebook, taking a deep breath as she did. She didn't like the idea of reading her report in front of David's mother as well as her three partners, but she had no choice.

"Ready . . . go!"

Leah began reading. She mumbled a lot at first, but she tried to correct that by forcing herself to speak loudly and clearly. She stuttered through some words and realized she was reading faster than she had the other day when she practiced. She tried to slow down, but it was hard. Even though her small audience was polite and attentive as Leah read, she was always conscious of them, and they made her too nervous to read her report as well as she would have liked.

When Leah finished, Heather announced her time: "One minute and fifty seconds."

"Uh-oh," Mrs. Parks said.

Heather turned to David's mother and explained, "Actually, that's the best time so far."

Heather read her report next and she let Melanie keep time. Heather's time was ten seconds behind Leah's. Heather was clearly distressed by the brevity of everyone's reports. "We're really gonna have to concentrate on speaking slowly," she declared.

Mrs. Parks got up and asked, "Would anyone like a snack?" Mrs. Parks looked directly at Leah, but the quiet girl turned her eyes to the floor. Leah couldn't help feeling intimidated by Mrs. Parks. Partly, this

was due to the fact that Mrs. Parks was both an adult and a stranger—two qualities that always made Leah feel uneasy. But Leah was especially intimidated by *who* this woman was: David's mother. Leah also learned that Heather had yet another advantage in their undeclared rivalry for David: Heather and Mrs. Parks were on familiar terms with each other. No doubt this was due to the other disturbing fact that Heather had visited David's house before. Heather wasn't just friends with David, she seemed to be familiar with the entire Parks family.

Everyone politely declined Mrs. Parks' offer for refreshment, and the woman went into the kitchen by herself. Seconds later, they heard someone else coming down the stairs. All heads turned and saw David carrying a camera in one hand and with the other he held a tripod above his head as if it were some sort of trophy. He entered the living room and declared victoriously, "It works!"

"Cool!" Melanie said.

"I think we ought to go outside, just so we'll have plenty of light," David said. "Everybody grab your reports and let's set up on the deck out back. Can you get my report, Heather?"

She did, and the five of them left the house through the back door. Outside, Leah found a large wooden deck covering about half of the space of the small backyard. Although David's house was about the same size as Leah's, his backyard was much smaller. His neighbors didn't have large backyards either, and one could see the other homes in spite of the tall fences and shady trees strategically planted on the borders of the properties. The air outside was cool but not cold, and the sun was shining. Leah took a seat on one of the plastic lawn chairs on the deck and watched as David and Alex set the camera up by mounting it on the tripod. The camera was much larger than Alex's camcorder and probably older too.

As the boys worked, Heather, sitting in a chair a few feet to Leah's right, said, "I hope you can slow the DVD when it plays tomorrow, 'cause I don't think we'll be able to fill our time—even with Alex's posters. I just timed our reports and Melanie, Leah, and me only have about six minutes worth of material."

"Six minutes?" David marveled. "Jeez, I guess I'll have to make up some of that time with *my* excellent report." He smiled and so did Leah.

When the camera was mounted and ready, Alex turned it on and looked through the viewer. "How are we gonna film this?" he asked. "Is everyone gonna be in the shot?"

"Probably. I think that would be the best way," David said. He took a look through the viewer and said to the girls, "You three put some chairs together and make a row facing the camera. I think we can fit everyone in."

The girls stood up and brought chairs from elsewhere on the deck together until they had five chairs in a row. Alex helped them arrange the chairs about fifteen feet in front of the camera.

"This makes us look like we're on a talk show!" Melanie chuckled.

"Hey, that's a great idea!" Heather exclaimed. Leah could see her eyes light up with a flash of inspiration. "We can pretend like this is a talk show and all the guests are discussing Egypt!"

"A talk show?" Alex asked skeptically. "About Egypt?"

"Sure, why not? And David could play the host—or maybe I could. It would be cool!"

"It would be goofy," David said. "I'm not doing that."

"Oh, come on!"

"No."

Heather looked imploringly at Alex and Melanie, but both of them shook their heads no. Heather sat down next to Leah and started to sulk. Leah ignored her and watched David.

The back door opened and Mrs. Parks stuck her head out. She said to David "Are you sure your father said you could take his camera outside?"

"Yeah, he knows what we're doing."

"OK. Are you all sure you don't want anything to eat?"

David answered for the group, "No, not right now—we've got to get started. It's almost 2:00."

Leah was surprised by how much time had passed. She felt like

she had just arrived.

Mrs. Parks disappeared back into the house and didn't bother them again. When she was gone, Heather, still upset that everyone had rejected her talk show idea, asked, "So how do you want us to do this?"

David looked into the viewer of the camera to make sure everyone was in the shot. He shrugged and said, "I guess we'll just read our reports to the camera."

"But that'll be so *boring!*" Heather whined. "We'll put the class to sleep when they watch it."

"Good," Alex chuckled.

David looked at his partners who were now seated in their chairs. Leah sat on one end with Alex beside her. On Alex's right was Melanie, then Heather, and an empty chair next to her was reserved for David. "I've got an idea," David said, stepping away from the camera. "We can create some intermissions during the video by using sheets of paper with titles and pictures."

"What?" Heather, Melanie, and Alex asked in unison. Leah didn't understand either, but she didn't say anything.

David looked about frantically, and then he disappeared back into the house. While he was gone, Heather said to Melanie, "The talk show idea was better." Melanie smiled and shrugged.

When David reappeared at the door he beckoned for his partners to come back in. The four of them groaned as they got up, but they went back inside while David turned off the camera. Leah carried her notebook and her report with her while everyone else left theirs behind on the deck. Once inside, they returned to the sofas, sitting in the same places as before. David handed everyone a blank sheet of paper and set a box of markers on the coffee table. Leah and the other three still didn't understand what they were supposed to be doing, so David explained.

"On your sheet of paper, write the title of your report topic and draw a picture that has something to do with your topic. Later, when I'm editing the film, I'll scan your pictures into the computer and use them to introduce everybody's reports. It will look cool and waste some time—trust me." David was the only one who seemed convinced that it was a

good idea, but only Alex voiced an objection.

"Do I have to draw a picture?" he asked. "Remember, I drew all those posters—and I'll talk about them in class."

David thought for a moment and then answered, "Well, why don't you draw the title image—you know, something to introduce the whole project? Call it something like, 'The World of Ancient Egypt'—or something."

Alex agreed and the five of them got to work. Leah stared at her blank sheet of paper for a moment and wondered what she should draw. Her report covered the important pharaohs of ancient Egypt, but she didn't know what they looked like—and even if she did, she wasn't skilled enough to draw a portrait of any of them. Finally, she took a yellow marker and drew a picture of a golden crown, which was supposed to symbolize royalty. Above it, in large, purple letters, she wrote, "THE PHARAOHS." She was the first to finish her drawing, and when she was done, she turned the picture face down on the table.

When the others were finished too, David asked to see his partners' pictures. Alex wrote David's suggested title for the presentation in bold, black letters and added a yellow and orange drawing of a pyramid beneath it. Melanie, whose report was about the process of mummification, drew a crude picture of a sarcophagus that featured a happy face where the head should be. David laughed, "Why is he smiling like that?"

"He's happy to be dead," Melanie replied. "When the pharaohs died, they believed that they became gods and lived in a wonderful afterlife." At least Melanie had learned something during her research. David nodded in approval and asked Heather to show them hers.

Heather's topic was a general history of Egypt, but her picture was of a sailboat crossing what was supposed to be the Nile River.

"What does that have to do with anything?" David asked. Alex looked at it and started laughing.

Heather looked distraught. "I don't know!" she shouted. "Why couldn't we have done a talk show? This whole thing is so stupid!" She tried to fling her picture at the boys, but the air caught it and sent it back

towards her where it landed gently at her feet.

"Come on—don't get upset," David said.

It was too late. Heather felt humiliated and furious, and she sought to take her anger out on someone else. Her eyes searched for a victim and found Leah, who was now holding her drawing face up in her lap, in anticipation of showing it to the group.

"Well, if you think my picture is stupid, look at hers!" Heather said, pointing at Leah's drawing. Everyone looked and Leah stiffened under their gaze. "What *is* that? A *crown*?! The Egyptians never wore crowns like that!"

David jumped in: "I never said your picture was stupid, Heather. Just relax. We'll use it—it's fine." Meanwhile, Leah's feelings were hurt, and she turned her picture face down again. She would have liked to have torn it up, but she didn't know what else to draw. She hoped for some comfort from David, but the best she got from him was "There's nothing wrong with anybody's picture." Leah still felt ashamed and Heather continued to sulk.

"Fine," Heather muttered, "we'll just do whatever *you* want."

Unhappy and irritable, the group left their pictures indoors and went back outside to start filming their reports. Alex and David turned the camera back on and got it ready to record. The girls sat down and waited quietly.

"Are we ready?" David asked Alex after a moment.

"Yeah."

To the girls, David said, "OK, I guess we'll sit in the order in which we'll be giving our reports. I'll introduce our project and then give the first report, so I'll sit there on the end. Heather, you'll go second, then Melanie, then Leah. Alex, since you're not saying anything, you can just sit at the other end. And everyone remember to speak up!"

"And speak slowly," Melanie added.

Everyone took their places and got ready. David checked the camera one last time, pressed the record button, and sat down in his chair. A red light started flashing on top of the camera to signify it was recording. Leah watched it, and cleared her throat. She was nervous.

David sat down and, after a brief pause, said, "Hi, today, we're going to tell you about ancient Egypt—" He was suddenly interrupted by Heather and Melanie who started laughing and giggling. "What?!" David demanded.

"You sound like some stupid news reporter," Heather laughed. "*Today we're going to tell you about ancient Egypt!*" she mocked, and the two girls laughed harder. Alex started laughing too, and even Leah had to smile.

"OK, come on, grow up," David said. He waited until they calmed down, and then he began again. "Hi, today we're—"

More laughter, this time from everybody.

David stood up and walked over to the camera. He turned it off and faced his partners. He was smiling, but he was angry, too. Leah didn't want him to be angry with her so she stopped laughing and put on a serious expression. She pinched her hand in an attempt to try to keep her giggling in check. It worked. Clearly annoyed, David said, "Go ahead and laugh—just get it out of your systems." After a moment, the giggles subsided, and everyone, including Heather and Melanie, promised they wouldn't laugh any more. David didn't seem to believe them, but he wanted to get back to work so he accepted their word. He started recording, sat down in his chair, and tried to begin again.

David read his report straight through this time without any interruption. But although everyone was quiet, they weren't exactly sober and serious either. Leah didn't look at the faces of Heather and Melanie, because she was staring directly at the camera and trying to concentrate, but if she had looked at either of the two girls, she would have seen their faces contort as they struggled to keep their laughter within. In fact, their facial expressions looked so ridiculous that if Leah had looked at them, she would have started giggling herself. It didn't occur to Heather and Melanie that the camera was capturing on video their heroic battle against laughter, and had the video ever been shown in class, it would have caused them a great deal of embarrassment.

When David finished reading his report, they took a short break. David's partners remarked on how well he had delivered his speech. No

one kept time, but everyone agreed that David's report must have taken up four minutes—*at least*. He spoke slowly, sometimes straying from what he had written so that he could explain a point differently. Alex suggested that if everyone could read their reports just as well, they wouldn't have to worry about the length of their presentation at all.

Heather was next. David started the camera again and Heather began reading. She wasn't even two sentences into it when the laughter returned, but this time it came from David.

"And you thought *we* were being immature!" Heather scolded.

"I know—I know," David said, trying to control himself. He cleared his throat and apologized, "I'm sorry—I won't do it again—don't worry about me."

He didn't laugh again, but his laughter only rekindled what the others had tried hard to extinguish. Alex and Melanie continued to laugh and giggle, and on more than one occasion, Heather interrupted herself when laughter escaped from her lips instead of information about Egyptian history. Leah laughed the least, but she was smiling the whole time.

Almost twenty minutes passed before Heather was able to read through her report without any interruptions. Heather's report wasn't as long as David's, but Heather said she believed it had taken longer to read than it had earlier when she read her report in the house. Melanie was next. By this time, everyone had grown tired of laughing; even Leah didn't have to pinch her hand any more. But Melanie's laughter was just getting its second wind. She couldn't even read the first word of her report without cracking up. "I feel like an idiot talking to a camera!" she cried.

David stood up and decided it was time to take up his mother's earlier offer for a snack—they all needed a break. He led his partners back into the house, and Leah was thankful for the opportunity to stand up and stretch. It seemed as if all she had done since she had been at the house was sit and listen to the other four. And besides, she felt drained after devoting so much energy to preventing herself from laughing that she needed to recharge. Mrs. Parks had long since returned to the second

floor of the house so the five teenagers went into the kitchen and helped themselves. David poured soft drinks for everyone and opened a bag of cookies. Leah had a drink but she declined the cookie. As the five of them snacked, they continued to talk and argue about the report.

"Now isn't this better than a talk show?" David asked Heather.

"No, it's stupid and boring," his girlfriend replied. "Everyone else in the class is gonna have a better video than ours."

"How do you know?"

"Well . . . it's not hard to come up with a better idea than what you're having us do out there," she answered. Then her face brightened and she said with a sneer, "Kim told me that her group is gonna dress up in Indian costumes and give their report in the form of a skit—all on video of course."

Alex, already biting into his second cookie, was skeptical. "Where are they gonna get their costumes?"

"I don't know. Maybe they'll make them."

David laughed, "I can't wait to see that video! Kim and her friends never once worked on their project during class."

Heather agreed, "I know! I talked to her at Homecoming and she said her group hadn't even gone to the library to do research."

The mention of Homecoming seemed to alter the other teenagers' moods. Everyone turned silent and serious for a moment. Leah, although listening with interest to their conversation, didn't understand what was happening. She was still ignorant about the mysterious events that had surrounded the Homecoming Dance and the fight between David and Heather that it had sparked. But then, suddenly, everything was revealed.

"When did you see Kim?" David asked. "I don't remember seeing her at all last Saturday."

"Oh, I saw her later in the evening," Heather said as her eyes avoided David's stare. Alex and Melanie each took a step away from David and Heather, as if they sensed something was about to happen. Leah, still unaware of what was going on, stood where she was.

"Was this before or after you danced with Dylan?" David asked.

Heather shot him an angry look and said, "I only danced with Dylan because you were dancing with Brittany Kaufman!"

"Are we back to that again?" David asked, all the friendliness and warmth had vanished from his face and his voice. Leah looked at him and barely recognized the boy she secretly had a crush on. "I danced with her once—only once—just to be nice, and when I came back for you, you were gone."

"What did you expect me to do? Just stand there and wait for you like some doormat? You didn't even say when or if you'd be back! You just took off with her without saying anything to me!"

"You knew I'd only be gone for one song," David argued.

"It didn't look that way to me," Heather said, as she set her empty glass down on the kitchen counter. She stared at it and said scornfully, "You never give me any clue about what you're gonna do. Am I supposed to just guess?"

"I didn't think you'd get all upset over one dance," David said. "It wasn't a big deal."

"It was to me! You were supposed to be *my* date!" Heather said, raising her voice. Her back had been turned to Leah, Alex, and Melanie, and she seemed to have completely forgotten they were still in the room, listening. But David was facing them, and his eyes glanced uncomfortably from Heather, to his partners, and then back to Heather. He seemed to be delivering his side of the argument to suit not only Heather, but his silent and stunned audience as well.

"I was embarrassed!" Heather continued, without lowering her voice. "I wasn't gonna just stand next to the punch bowl all night while my date was dancing with someone else!"

"So you decided to go dance with every other guy there?"

Heather threw a fist at David and struck him in the chest. "I hate you!" she shouted. She whirled around and saw three pairs of eyes staring at her, but when her eyes focused on them, they turned away and pretended not to have seen or heard anything. Leah, wearing an expression of patience on her face, looked down at her half-full glass of soda. She wondered if they had yelled at each other like this last week, or

if this was something new.

Heather, in a rage, stormed out of the kitchen. "I'm leaving!" she declared. "You've got my report on video; I don't need to stay here any longer!"

David went after her, "Wait," he said in a more conciliatory tone, "where are you going?"

"Home! I can't stand to be around you any more!" Leah heard the front door open and then slam shut. A second later, the door opened again as David followed her outside. He shut the door almost as hard as Heather, and then there was silence.

Leah and her two companions in the kitchen were left stunned. The anger and emotion expressed a moment ago remained in the room as something palpable even though David and Heather were gone. Instead of speaking, the three teenagers simply stared at each other. Alex and Melanie even looked at Leah to see what her reaction was. For the first time, Leah felt like they were actually including her in something. Alex wore a bewildered smile, and Melanie started giggling again. Leah, though, was shocked; she couldn't ever remember seeing a fight as intense as that. Her parents fought sometimes, but they never screamed at each other or stormed out of the house. She tried to force a smile, in order to fit in with her two classmates, but she didn't understand what was so funny.

"Man, she really blew up!" Alex exclaimed.

"I've never seen Heather get that angry before!" Melanie added. "*Never.*"

"I don't even know where that came from," Alex said. "I mean, one minute we're having a snack and talking normally, and the next thing you know they're arguing about Homecoming again."

Melanie shook her head in disbelief and suggested, "I don't know, maybe David should have let her do her talk show!"

Alex and Melanie started laughing again. Leah laughed a little too, although she was laughing at what Alex and Melanie said, not David and Heather's situation.

"C'mon," Melanie urged, heading towards the front door, "let's

go see if they're still fighting out there." The comment was directed to Leah as well as to Alex. Melanie led them out of the kitchen and towards a window which allowed them to see the front yard and driveway of the house. They saw David and Heather sitting next to each other on the curb beside the Parks' mailbox. Their backs were turned towards the house so it was difficult to see their faces. They didn't appear to be fighting.

"I wish I could hear what they're saying," Melanie said; it was Leah's wish, too.

"Looks like Heather's not going home after all," Alex observed.

"Nah, Heather lives, like, a mile away—it's too far for her to walk."

The three of them continued to watch David and Heather sit on the curb and talk. Leah wondered what might happen if David and Heather didn't forgive each other. Might David then start to notice Leah? That was the shy girl's hope. She had waited for so long and put up with so many contradictory emotions during the last few weeks. But when she saw David and Heather stand up from the curb and hug each other so the whole world could see how they felt, Leah's heart fell. If those two could fight and argue and then be able to forgive each other, and draw strength from their forgiveness, then what chance did Leah have? She watched David kiss Heather on the cheek, and she knew David would never be hers.

David and Heather started back towards the house and the three who were watching from the window quickly scattered and hurried into the living room where they all sat down and pretended like nothing had happened. Leah looked at the clock above the fireplace and saw that it was 3:30. They heard the front door open, and they heard David and Heather close the door gently behind them. The couple found their partners in the living room, and David said, "Sorry about that, you guys. Let's get back to work, OK?" Everyone agreed. Heather seemed calm and composed, a sharp contrast to when she stormed out of the house, but her presence still made the three students on the sofas feel uncomfortable.

The five of them went back outside and Alex stopped to examine the camera. "Hey David," he said, "I think you left the camera on while we were taking a break."

"Oh crap—did I?" David asked, disappointed with himself. "Well, the battery is still good." As he checked the camera, everyone else returned to their seats. Melanie had her report in her hands and she was silently reading it, practicing her speech. When David got the camera ready, he started recording again, and Melanie took another shot at reading her report. She didn't start giggling like she had earlier, but she did stumble through the first paragraph of her report so she started over. Everyone's patience was running thin, and although no one said anything, there was a lot of tension in the air. They were tired and wanted this to be over so they could go home. When Melanie was halfway through her next attempt to read her report, she abruptly stopped in the middle of a sentence for no apparent reason. Her four partners turned to her and found her peering at the camera.

"Now what's wrong?" David asked.

"I don't think the camera is recording," Melanie replied. "The red light on the camera just blinked and then it went out."

The others looked at the camera and saw that Melanie was right. David and Alex both jumped from their chairs and ran to find out what was wrong. David looked into the viewer and said, "Oh, no."

"What's the matter?" Heather asked. Her voice came as a surprise since she hadn't said a word since she returned to the house after storming off.

"I think the battery just died," David said wearily. "I was afraid that might happen." Alex let out a deep sigh.

"What are we gonna do now?" Melanie asked.

David removed the camera from the tripod and looked at his watch. "Well, it's almost four o'clock. There's no time to recharge the battery unless all of you have four more hours to kill."

"No way!" Alex said.

David shrugged. "I guess we're just gonna have to bring our reports to school tomorrow and read them in front of the class."

No one liked that idea, but there wasn't another option. They had gone through two cameras and still hadn't been able to record their speeches.

Heather, who was as tired as everyone else, resigned herself to her fate. "Yeah, let's do that. We'll be the only group to stand in front of the class the whole time, but who cares?"

Leah cared, but she didn't say anything.

"What a waste of time this has been!" Melanie whined.

David ignored her and said, "OK, we'll read our reports to the class, but we'll keep this same format. I'll still introduce the project and we'll present in the same order."

"Are we still gonna use those dumb pictures we drew to illustrate our reports?" Heather teased.

David replied, "No, we'll just use yours. In fact, that can be your report. Just stand in front of the class and say, 'Here's a picture I drew of a sailboat on the Nile.' You'll get an A for sure!"

Everyone laughed except Leah who was surprised that the antagonism she had witnessed a few minutes earlier between David and Heather had evaporated so quickly. There was definitely a resiliency to their relationship that only confirmed what Leah suspected: David and Heather might always have fights and arguments for as long as their relationship lasted, but however much they yelled and screamed at each other, they were willing to hug and make up afterwards.

David picked up the tripod in one hand and held the camera in the other. He carried them both into the house and the rest of his team followed him inside. David said to them, "I'm sorry we didn't get anything accomplished today. If you guys wanna call your rides, you can." He started to carry the tripod and the camera upstairs by himself, but Heather said, "Let me help you," and she followed him upstairs.

"Should I call your mom?" Melanie shouted after Heather.

"Yeah," was the reply she received as David and Heather disappeared from sight. Melanie went into the kitchen so she could use the phone.

Alex called home next, and when he was finished, it was Leah's

turn. As she dialed her phone number, she heard David and Heather, along with Mrs. Parks, come back down the stairs and join Alex and Melanie in the living room. Mrs. Nells answered the call, and Leah quickly identified herself and asked for a ride home. Mrs. Nells promised to pick her up in a few minutes.

Leah hung up the phone and returned to the living room. She found Mrs. Parks apologizing to the teenagers that their afternoon had not turned out as they had planned, as if she were in some way responsible for their problems. "I feel so terrible that you weren't able to make your movie," she said. "But you can never depend on those video cameras. Just when you need them the most, something goes wrong. We took a different camera with us when we went on vacation last summer and everything we recorded came out looking weird and distorted. Do you remember that, David? I still have no idea what happened."

Mrs. Parks apologized to them again and then went into the kitchen. Heather, Melanie, Alex, and Leah gathered their notebooks and belongings and went to the front door of the house where they waited for their rides. Leah listened as the other four talked about school, movies, their mutual friends, and whatever else came to mind. Once again, Leah suddenly felt like an outsider as she stood by silently and listened to the others talk, her eyes peering out the window watching for her mother's car. David and Heather were now in the same good mood that they had been in a few hours ago. Leah silently hoped that maybe they would start fighting again, and this time not forgive each other, but they were all smiles and laughter.

Heather and Melanie were the first to leave. A gray car pulled up to the house. Leah, the only person looking out the window when the car arrived, was the first to see it, but she didn't say anything to the others. After half a minute, Melanie noticed the car and said, "C'mon Heather, there's your mom." Heather looked out the window and then said goodbye to David. She yelled a thank you to Mrs. Parks in the kitchen for allowing them to use the house that afternoon. Mrs. Parks emerged from the kitchen and said goodbye. Melanie and Heather, with their reports in hand, walked out the door. Leah watched them through the window and

felt relieved to see Heather go. When their car drove away, Mrs. Parks said to her son, "David, I want you to go into the kitchen and clean up your mess."

"OK," he said reluctantly, and he marched off to the kitchen. Leah stood there, disappointed, for she hoped she might have a chance to talk with David alone, but now she wouldn't.

A minute later, Alex's ride arrived. He shouted a goodbye to David who responded in kind. As Alex gathered his posters and the box with his camcorder inside, Mrs. Parks helped him by holding the front door open. When he was gone, she closed the door.

Left alone in the foyer with Leah, David's mother stared at the silent girl for a moment and then asked, "What's your name again?"

"Leah."

"Are you one of Heather's friends?"

Leah shook her head no.

"Just a classmate then?"

She nodded.

"That's what I thought. I didn't think I remembered David ever mentioning a girl named Leah."

Silence.

"What was all that yelling I heard down here a while ago?" Mrs. Parks asked. "My husband and I could hear it all the way upstairs."

Leah shrugged. "David and Heather had an argument."

"Oh," the woman said. "You certainly weren't yelling, though. You don't say much, do you?"

Leah shrugged again.

Mrs. Parks glanced at something out the window. "Is that your ride?" she asked.

Leah looked and saw her mother's car. "Yes." She opened the door and started to leave.

David must have heard the door open because he shouted, "Bye, Leah," from the kitchen.

"Goodbye," Leah replied, but her voice wasn't very strong, and she didn't know if David heard her. She exited the house and quietly shut

the door behind her.

Leah hurried down the driveway to her mother's waiting car. When she climbed inside, she found her mother was happy and smiling. The hopeful expression on her face hadn't changed at all since she dropped Leah off at the house earlier that afternoon, except that it now reflected the orange light from the November sun descending in the sky.

"So," Mrs. Nells asked, "did you get a lot accomplished today?"

"Not really," was all Leah could say.

Seventeen

A COLD front was waiting for her early the next morning when she stepped out of her house and started for school. It was windy, and the temperature was just above the freezing point—another reminder that the frigid days of winter would be upon her soon. The sky was cloudy, but instead of dark clouds that threatened rain, Leah noticed that the sky looked white. She couldn't see individual clouds; it was all just one great, enormous mass, obscuring the sun completely and reinforcing the uneasy feelings that Leah felt about this day.

Before she left for school, Leah pulled her heavy, powder blue coat out from the back of her closet. It was the same coat that she had worn for the last two winters, and she found, when she put it on, that it didn't fit her as well as it had last year. She might have to ask her mother for a new coat for Christmas. Although her coat protected her from the cold, Leah still shivered as she walked to school because she was worried about history. Today was the day that their presentations were due, and there was a good chance that her team would be chosen to present their reports to the rest of the class. As she struggled against the wind on her way to school, her imagination frightened her with visions of what might happen later that afternoon. She imagined standing in front of her class and trying to read her report. Looking out at all those faces and seeing all

those eyes staring back at her was going to be absolutely terrifying. Leah wished that Alex's and David's cameras had worked like they were supposed to yesterday. Seeing herself on TV wouldn't be so bad because at least *she* wouldn't really be talking to the class; the image of her on the screen would be giving the report for her. It would have been embarrassing to see and hear herself on TV, but it wouldn't have been as awful as standing in front of the class and facing a room full of people.

The only thing that eased her mind was the idea that if she did present her report today, David and her other three partners would be standing with her. Leah especially needed David's support, and when she imagined him standing beside her while she read, she felt a little bit better. She decided that when the time came to speak, she would pretend that David was her only audience. He was, after all, the only person to whom she wanted to talk.

At school, when the first bell of the day rang, Leah went to her locker to get her books for her first two classes. As she opened her locker and took off her coat, she was still thinking about what it would be like to stand in front of her history class, so she was startled when she heard a voice behind her say, "Hey, Leah?"

The voice belonged to David; Leah recognized it instantly. She quickly turned around, her eyes bright with surprise. She blushed and wondered what David was doing at her locker. He told her.

"Hey! Listen, me and the rest of the group are gonna meet at lunch and do some last minute work on our presentation. You wanna join us?"

With all of the anxiety surrounding history class today, Leah hadn't given any thought about what she was going to do for lunch. It was cold outside, and she knew if she tried to sit at her usual table on the patio, it would be very uncomfortable—and she might even catch a cold. Spending lunch with David sounded like a much better plan. Leah nodded eagerly and forced a "Sure!" from her lips.

"Cool. We'll be at one of the tables in the cafeteria in between the stairs and the windows that face the teachers' parking lot. Do you know where that is?"

She wasn't certain, but she nodded her head anyway.

"OK, well, I'll see you then. I gotta go to class. Bye."

Leah smiled her goodbye and watched him disappear into the crowded hallway. She spent the rest of the morning looking forward to her lunch hour. After phys. ed., she rushed to her locker, grabbed her lunch and her notebook with her report inside, and hurried to the cafeteria. Only a few students were sitting at tables when she arrived, and David wasn't anywhere in sight. Most students in the cafeteria were standing in line to buy their lunches. Leah looked for him in the line, but she couldn't see him, nor did she see Heather, Alex, or Melanie. She walked towards the area of the cafeteria where David said he would be. Leah found that there were several tables between the stairs and the windows, but Leah didn't know which table belonged to David.

Not knowing what else to do, Leah simply stood where she was and waited. Through the windows she could see the oak trees swaying gently in the cold wind. She wondered if she should look for another place to sit and eat lunch just in case she wasn't able to find David or if David were to appear and cancel their plans to work on their project. She knew she would have to claim a chair soon because everywhere she looked she saw students sitting down. Leah noticed that boys now occupied all the chairs surrounding the table where she had sat a few weeks ago when the rain had forced her inside. She certainly couldn't sit there again. And even if she did find some other place to sit and eat her lunch, what would she do when she was finished eating? She hadn't brought a book to read—only her notebook with her report inside.

She looked back in the direction of the lunch line, and it was then that she finally saw David. He was leaving the kitchen with two other boys, neither of whom Leah knew. They were walking in her direction, each one carrying a tray of cafeteria food. Leah stood frozen in place as they approached. She expected David to recognize her and say something, but she must have been standing *too* still because when the three boys passed, not one of them looked at her. They sat down at a long table, with their backs to the windows.

Uncertain whether David simply hadn't seen her, or hadn't

wanted to see her, Leah timidly approached their table. The other two boys were talking to each other and David sat to the left of them, opening his small carton of fruit juice. As he took a sip, his eyes looked up and found Leah standing a few feet away staring at him. David thought she looked funny standing there with a worried expression on her face, hugging her notebook with her left arm while her right hand clutched her sack lunch as if she were holding onto it for dear life. He might have laughed, but instead he settled for a smile as he put down his juice and said to her, "Hey! Have a seat."

His smile made Leah feel a little better. She set her lunch and notebook down on the table and then took a seat across from David and one chair to the right. David's two friends watched her sit down and one of them asked, "Who's this?"

"Leah Nells," David replied, matter-of-factly. "Our project for Simmons' class is due today, and we need to hammer out some last minute details." He turned to Leah and said, "This is Stephen and Josh."

The boys, slightly disappointed, both said hello to the girl, who just smiled and nodded in return.

"Does this mean that Melanie chick is gonna sit with us again today?" Stephen, the boy sitting on David's far right, asked.

"Yeah, probably—if she remembers to show up," David laughed. "Why?"

"I don't like her."

"Why not?" asked Josh.

"I just don't—she's annoying."

"Well, here she comes," David said, nodding in the direction of the lunch line.

Leah turned her head around as the other two boys looked up to see Heather and Melanie with food trays in their hands and backpacks slung over their shoulders. They sat down on Leah's side of the table. Heather sat next to Leah so that David was directly in front of her and Melanie sat to Heather's left. Melanie said hello to David's two friends and both boys politely returned the greeting, even the one who had said he didn't like her.

Other people began to arrive as well, and very soon, the table became crowded. Leah looked around and recognized several faces. She realized she was sitting with some of the most popular students in the entire freshman class. She started to feel self-conscious because she knew that she didn't belong here with them. A few of them looked at her and must have wondered why this shy girl, of all people, was suddenly sitting with them at their table, but nobody said anything to her and no one asked her to leave.

Hoping to appear less conspicuous to the curious eyes around her, Leah kept her own eyes lowered and stared at her lunch while she ate. She wondered what her parents would say if they were to walk into the cafeteria right now and see their daughter sitting among this group of people. For Leah, this experience was at once exciting and very awkward, and she started to wonder which was worse: sitting outside in the cold or sitting here at this table surrounded by people whom she barely knew. She realized that if what she hoped for came true—if David became her boyfriend—then she would have to spend all of her lunch hours here at this table. Before, Leah fantasized that maybe David would want to sit with her at her table outside—just the two of them together, but as she watched David and saw how well he fit in with this popular crowd and how happy he seemed to be, she knew he wouldn't want to give this up. Leah would have to join his world, not the other way around.

Alex was the last to arrive. He sat on David's left and had nothing, not even a lunch, with him. He explained that Mr. Simmons had allowed him to store his posters in the classroom so he wouldn't have to carry them around all day. The group spent the first part of the lunch hour eating and gossiping. Although Alex and Melanie talked to their neighbors and certainly weren't strangers to this group of students like Leah was, Leah still got the impression that this table was not where Alex and Melanie usually spent their lunch hours. Leah just sat quietly and ate her lunch, pretending not to listen to what those around her were saying, but she couldn't help but eavesdrop. She especially listened to David and Heather. As they joked and talked, no one who hadn't been at David's house yesterday would have guessed that they had had a fight. Focused

on her lunch, Leah ate quickly, but when she finished she noticed that her partners didn't seem to be in any hurry to finish eating and start working. So to help pass the time while she waited, Leah opened her notebook, took out her report, and read through it.

At last, when David, Heather, and Melanie had finished eating and set their trays aside, the conversation shifted to their presentation. Leah perked up and made a show of listening to what her partners were saying. David said that he wanted to make sure everyone knew their roles and the order in which they would speak. "We'll present our reports in the same order as we tried to read them on Sunday. Before you read, though, I'll introduce each of you to the class."

Alex laughed, "But everybody already knows who we are!"

David shrugged, "It'll kill time. We might as well do it."

David also told Alex that they would present his posters last. "That way, we'll be able to use your posters to stall for time, if we need to."

Heather again reminded her partners that the best way to stall for time was to read their reports as slowly as possible. David agreed. "We won't make an A if we hurry through our reports," he said.

None of this advice was news to Leah or her partners, but David said it was important to keep it all in mind so Leah made sure she did.

The rest of the time was spent making changes to Melanie's report. She had worked on it some more last night, but she thought it was still too short so David and Heather helped her add a few sentences to make it longer. Soon, Alex got up and left; Leah wondered if he felt uncomfortable sitting at this table, too. Leah was also tempted to leave, but she had nowhere else to go so she stayed and watched her other three partners rewrite Melanie's report. Leah pretended to be involved so she could validate her presence at this table in the eyes of those around her, but Leah was actually very bored. Spending lunch with David hadn't turned out to be as exciting as she hoped it would be.

It wasn't until the bell rang, ending lunch, that Leah decided the discomfort that she felt sitting at David's table wasn't so bad after all, for when the bell rang, her sense of discomfort was replaced with a sense of

fear. History class was only two hours away now, and over those next two hours, Leah felt increasingly uneasy and sick. She tried to ignore the steady march of minutes that brought the moment she was dreading ever closer, but her eyes kept glancing at the clock and she kept counting the seconds. Her anxiety grew until she felt like she might panic. She wanted to run away—to just drop everything and leave the school so she wouldn't have to face the last class of the day, but she couldn't do that. There was only one cure for her anxiety, only one thing could end the fear and the queasy feeling in her stomach, and that was to deliver her report—to simply get it over with. But that cure seemed worse than the disease itself.

After her English class, she visited her locker for one last time. She had no homework today in any of her classes since her teachers were hesitant to assign homework during these three days before the Thanksgiving holiday when so many students would be leaving town to visit relatives. Also, she knew she wouldn't have to bring her history textbook to class because the only thing on the agenda that day was the presentations, but when Leah had everything she needed from her locker, she still lingered for a little longer, because to shut the locker door meant that she would have to go to history class. If she didn't shut the door then she could remain here, safe for just one moment more. This was the threshold between safety and fear, between silence and speaking. She listened to the voices of the students around her as they too stood at their lockers and talked to their friends. How could they be so calm? Leah wondered. Other people always seemed so relaxed, even when they had to present reports. How did they do it? Perhaps it was because they knew how to speak to people; perhaps there was some secret that they had learned that she, because of her shyness, had not. The crowded hallway began to thin out and Leah knew if she waited any longer she would be tardy. She closed her locker and carried her lightened backpack to class.

Leah arrived to find most of her classmates were already in the room, including Heather and Melanie. The two girls sat together in the back of the class where their group had traditionally met for the past

month. Leah didn't know if she should join them or not so she was about to take a seat in her assigned desk. When Heather saw Leah place her backpack and purse down, though, Heather beckoned to the shy girl and said, "Leah, come sit back here." Leah picked up her things and joined them. She noticed everyone else in the class was also moving to sit with their teams.

David and Alex arrived together seconds later and joined their partners in the back of the classroom. Alex set his books down and then went to Mr. Simmons' desk to retrieve his posters. Meanwhile, Mr. Simmons was standing at the front of the class checking the TV and DVD player which he had set up for those groups who had recorded their presentations. Apparently, it had not been used at all during the last class period. The room was buzzing with activity; nobody knew who was going to be the first group chosen to speak and so everyone was on edge.

"I wonder how many people made movies," Melanie said, trying to make idle conversation. No one provided her with an answer, or even a guess.

"How are you doing?" Heather asked David.

"Nervous," the boy confessed. "Real nervous. I've always hated presentations."

"I'm nervous too," Heather sympathized. Alex and Melanie agreed.

Leah sat stunned. They were nervous? Even David? About public speaking? How was that possible? David, especially, was so popular, and he talked to people all the time. Wasn't giving a speech natural for him? Leah was the shy one, and she thought she was the only one who was worried about speaking to the entire class.

The bell rang and class officially started, but the room was still filled with voices and shouting as the students worked down to the last minute in their hastily assembled groups. When Mr. Simmons had the TV ready to go, he got everyone's attention and said, "OK, let's get started. Three groups will give their presentations today. Does anyone want to volunteer to go first?"

The room suddenly turned deathly silent, and no hands were

raised.

Mr. Simmons smiled and said, "Funny, every class today has been like this. Doesn't anybody want to get it over with quickly? If nobody volunteers I'll just have to pick a group at random. At least I'm giving you an opportunity to decide your own destiny."

There were still no volunteers. "Suit yourselves," their teacher said. He took his grade book out of his desk and opened it. "I'll just choose a name at random and whichever name I choose, that individual's group will go first, agreed?" Everyone in the class held their breath as Mr. Simmons, making his choice as suspenseful as possible, closed his eyes, ran his index finger up and down the class roster and finally settled on a name. He opened his eyes, looked at the name, and announced, "Andrea Gates, you're our lucky winner!"

Seven teams breathed a heavy sigh of relief, while the eighth—Andrea's team—bemoaned their rotten luck. Leah, who had been sitting on the edge of her seat, noticed that her heart was pounding loudly in her chest, her palms were sweaty, and she felt like she was going to throw up—but at least her group wasn't going first! She watched Andrea's unfortunate group sluggishly make their way to the front of the classroom. There were only four people in Andrea's group, and Leah suddenly realized that if Mr. Simmons randomly chose a name next time, then her group, with five people in it, was more likely to be chosen.

Andrea and her partners had a video to play, but first, each person in the group offered a brief, thirty-second, well-rehearsed speech while Mr. Simmons loaded the DVD into the player. Once the movie started, they returned to their desks and watched it with the rest of the class.

As Leah watched the poorly recorded video, she tried to relax. She managed to calm herself down a little, but when the video reached its end, Leah's worry and all of the sick feelings inside her returned with their former strength. When the first group's presentation concluded, Heather turned to her partners and whispered, "That was barely twelve minutes! Maybe we don't have to worry about how much time we take!" Indeed, Mr. Simmons said nothing to Andrea and her group about their

presentation's brevity, but he did scribble a few notes down on a pad of paper. When he finished recording his impressions of the report he looked up and asked if there were now any volunteers. No one responded so Mr. Simmons chose another name from his grade book. Again, Leah and her group were spared.

The next presentation was also on video. When it was over, Heather, who had become an unofficial timekeeper, reported that the second presentation was sixteen and a half minutes long. Leah anxiously awaited Mr. Simmons' third pick of the day, knowing that it would be the last. She felt tremendous relief when her group was not chosen. The final presentation was on the ancient Greeks. This presentation, like the two before it, was yet *another* video. Leah looked at the clock on the wall as the DVD was inserted into the player. Almost twenty minutes remained in the class period—enough time for this report, but not enough time for another. For the first time that day, Leah felt safe and secure. No matter what happened, she knew her group would not be giving their report today. She could finally relax.

When the Greek civilization had been successfully covered (Heather reported it took only fourteen minutes), Mr. Simmons warned the groups who hadn't presented today to be ready to go tomorrow, and then he allowed the class to talk quietly amongst themselves until the final bell rang. Celebrating their reprieve, Leah's partners split up and mingled with their other classmates. Leah sat by herself for the rest of the hour with her head in her hands as she closed her eyes and tried to soothe her rattled nerves. When the bell rang, she was more than ready to go home.

Without any homework to keep her busy that evening, Leah found herself with a lot of free time on her hands. After dinner, she retired to her bedroom and spent the evening as she normally liked to spend it: sitting on the bed and reading a book. The other day, she had started reading the book she got at the used book store titled, *The Interstate Commerce Commission and the Railroad Industry*, but it was a book Leah didn't particularly like. When she had first browsed through it at the bookstore a few weeks ago, she found it had no pictures and a lot

of text—the kind of book that she preferred to spend her time reading, but although it was dry and technical in places, it was, ultimately, a history book. It still dealt with real people and real events. It didn't offer her the kind of escape from the real world that she hoped for from the other books that she read.

And because the book dealt with history, she couldn't help but be reminded of her history class, although this book had nothing to do with the ancient Egyptians. As she read, her imagination kept drifting back to the events of that day, and she thought about what might happen tomorrow. Would her group be chosen to present their report? She started to wish that her group had been chosen today, because if that had happened, her assignment would now be finished, and she wouldn't have to worry about it any more.

But she also knew that the end of her project would also mark the end of her relationship with David. Once her group presented their reports, there wouldn't be any reason for him to talk to her or spend time with her. She still had hope that David might finally notice her and realize that she liked him, but Leah knew that probably wasn't going to happen. David was in love with Heather, and that wasn't going to change for a long time, if ever. The only thing that he would ever share with Leah would be this brief acquaintance during which they had worked on a history project together. She decided that all she wanted from David now was an acknowledgment that her role in the group had been important. She didn't want pity; she wanted praise. Leah just wanted to know that David *did* notice her, that he *did* care about her in some small way. If all David said to her tomorrow or Wednesday were a few words to that effect, then maybe Leah would be happy, and all the fear and heartache and frustration that she had experienced might have been worth it.

Leah thought about David for a long time before she returned to her book and lost herself in the world of railroads, big corporations, and nineteenth century government regulations. She let the book smother her beneath a pile of statistics and abstract charts and numbers—anything to take her mind off of the world outside her bedroom and the unpleasant

possibilities that tomorrow might bring.

Eighteen

LEAH spent her lunch hour alone on Tuesday. David didn't invite her to sit at his table, and she didn't wait in the cafeteria hoping that he would. She sat outside, at her usual table, where the weather wasn't quite as cold as it had been on Monday. She had still worn her coat to school, and while it was a little chilly, the sun was shining in a cloudless sky and there wasn't any wind. A few other people were eating outside, too, but Leah could see through the windows of the cafeteria that the tables inside were packed. Leah imagined the students looking outside and seeing her sitting all by herself and shivering in the chilly air. She was just glad that David couldn't see her. She noticed yesterday that David's table in the cafeteria didn't offer a clear view of her table outside. It would have embarrassed her to know that David, who enjoyed lunch with so many friends, might see her sitting alone like some pathetic loser.

Leah tried to enjoy her lunch, but the cold air against her skin and the butterflies in her stomach ruined any appetite she had. Setting aside what remained of her lunch, Leah tried to take her mind off of the future by reading her book. She found it difficult to read in the cold, though, and after losing her concentration a few times, she finally gave up. She sat and stared at the empty tables around her while she shivered and worried.

When the last period of the day arrived, Leah marched slowly into Mr. Simmons' classroom with a sense of doom, like a condemned prisoner on her way to die. She just knew that today was the day that she and her partners would be called upon to give their presentation. She didn't know how she knew, but she could feel it. Like yesterday, several of her classmates were already in the room, but today they were fewer in number and no one from her group was among them. She guessed they would want to sit in their usual places at the back of the classroom so that's where she sat down. She had a feeling this would be the last time she ever sat in this desk at the back of the class, and that made her feel sad. She had felt so secure here when David sat across from her.

Within a couple of minutes, the rest of her group arrived. They each sat down in a desk near Leah, but although they had their reports out, and Alex had retrieved his posters from the pile next to Mr. Simmons' desk, Leah found that her partners weren't as nervous today as they had been yesterday. "I bet we won't be called on today!" David said, without explaining why he believed that. The others agreed with him. Heather said, "Somebody has to be the last group to present their reports, so why can't it be us?" Leah wished she could feel as confident as they appeared to be. She was still just as nervous as she had been yesterday.

The bell rang and class got underway. Mr. Simmons again asked for volunteers. He held his grade book in his hand, ready to choose a name at random if no one volunteered. Leah held her breath and wished someone would speak up. Her wish came true when a hand on the other side of the class went up and a girl volunteered for her team, which was presenting on ancient China. The girl explained that she and another girl in her group wouldn't be in class tomorrow since they were both leaving town with their families for the Thanksgiving holiday. Mr. Simmons commended them for thinking ahead and told the class if anyone else didn't expect to be in class tomorrow then they should also volunteer. David turned to his partners and whispered, "Can everyone be here tomorrow?" Everyone said yes, and for the first time, Leah started to think that maybe they were right: maybe they wouldn't have to present

their reports today.

The group who volunteered went to the front of the class and began their presentation. To no one's surprise, the bulk of their presentation was on video. After the ten-minute long video, one of the members of the group returned to the front of the room and displayed some souvenirs his parents had brought back from a recent vacation to China. Leah, for one, wasn't totally convinced that the boy's souvenirs were really genuine artifacts from ancient China, but she would happily accept anything the boy said so long as it killed time. Their report ended at 2:21.

Mr. Simmons asked for another volunteer, and for a second time, he got one. It was Kim's group, reporting on the Indians from India. Like the first group, someone on their team wouldn't be in class tomorrow either, so they had to present now. Surely, Leah thought, *somebody* on one of the remaining teams wouldn't be in class tomorrow. There had to be at least *one* person who would have to miss school, and Leah felt safe knowing that whoever that person was, she was not in her group. Naturally, Kim and her friends had recorded a portion of their project on video, but it took them a few minutes, and some help from the teacher, to get the DVD player running. At 2:26, the movie, which was poorly edited, started, and at 2:34 it came to an end. Then the team returned to the front of the class carrying posters. Each member of the team had made a poster and all four of them took turns showing them to the class. This part of the report seemed to take a lot of time, but really, it was just a little more than three minutes. When their report was complete, they returned to their desks. The time was 2:38 when Mr. Simmons asked, "Who's next?"

Leah expected to see someone else volunteer, but to her alarm, no one did. Only an awkward silence filled the room, and in that silence, Leah started to panic. She didn't want to go next!—she wasn't ready!—she needed to wait until tomorrow! As Mr. Simmons opened his grade book to select a name, Leah prayed for someone in the class to raise a hand and volunteer. Instead, she heard Mr. Simmons say cheerfully, "David Parks, your group is up!"

David and his group sat stunned in their desks. Only moments earlier they had been so sure that they would not be chosen. It wasn't possible that they would present today, but as David stood up, slowly and reluctantly, the other four rose to their feet too. All at once, a wave of anxiety and fear swept over Leah. Her limbs trembled; her face turned pale; her palms moistened; she found it hard to breathe; and she felt an odd tingling sensation throughout her body, as if her blood had stopped flowing despite how desperately her heart was pounding.

Leah followed her partners to the front of the room where they took their places. Staring out at the classroom full of faces staring back at her, she wanted to just drop everything and run from the room, but her legs had only enough strength in them to remain planted where they were; running was impossible. She was thankful when David began to speak and the attention of the class turned to him: he delivered the same introductory speech that he gave during the failed attempt to record their report on Sunday. Leah didn't listen to every word David said because she was far too nervous, but she did hear him stumble over his words once or twice, which made his introduction far from perfect.

Before, when Leah imagined what this day would be like, and how she would handle herself in front of the class, she believed she would be able to draw strength from her four partners, especially David. Now that she was here, however, she felt very much alone. Sure, there were four other people standing with her, but their presence wasn't really a comfort at all. There was no strength in numbers, company did nothing to dissolve her misery, and the horror of the situation was as intense as anything she had ever experienced.

Since she wasn't paying close attention to David's report, she was surprised when he finished reading and introduced Heather and her report topic to the class. After a brief pause, Heather began reading. Her voice was a little shaky when she began, but it grew stronger as she went on. Leah noticed that Heather wasn't reading as slowly as she should be. Leah quickly reminded herself that even though she desperately wanted to get this report over with and return to the safety of her desk, it was important to read her own report clearly and slowly to take up time and

prevent her group from being penalized for having too short a presentation. Leah wondered if Heather was even aware that she was reading too fast. The answer was probably yes because at the end of her report Heather added a few remarks about Egypt's influence on the ancient world and on world history in general. Leah didn't know if Heather had added this portion to her report since Sunday, or if she was just making it up on the spot. Wherever the additional information came from, it made up for her previous haste.

Melanie's report came next. She was standing right next to Leah so when she spoke, many of the eyes that were looking at her also appeared to be looking at Leah. The shy girl's anxiety began to mount again, so she tried to ignore the faces staring at her by watching the clock on the opposite wall. The time was 2:46. The end of the school day was only a few minutes away, yet it might as well be a few million years. She tried to listen to what Melanie was saying because she didn't want to be caught off guard when she finished, but it was a struggle to focus on the other girl's words. Melanie was able to read slowly and without the giggling that plagued her last Sunday. Unfortunately, Melanie didn't have anything to add in order to stall for time as Heather had done, so even though her report was longer than it had been when Heather timed her on Sunday, it was still the shortest report so far. Melanie didn't seem to care, though. When she finished reading, she let out a small sigh of relief that only the shy girl standing beside her could hear.

It was now Leah's turn, but first she waited for David to introduce her. "And next," David said, "Leah Nells will tell us about some of the important pharaohs of ancient Egypt. Leah?"

On weakening knees, Leah took a small step forward and held up her report so she could read from it. Her fingers trembled, but she tried to hold them steady so she could read the page. She took a breath and said, "I am going to talk about the Egyptian Pharaohs." She realized that her voice was barely more than a whisper, so she cleared her throat and tried to speak up. "The pharaohs were the kings of Egypt and they ruled in families called 'dynasties'. The pharaohs were not the only—*were not only* the political rulers of Egypt, but they were also the religious rulers as

well. Were—*they were* treated like gods by their people and it was believed that when they died they went to live with their gods in the afterlife. Most pharaohs were men, but there were some women who were pharaohs too." There was a sound of rustling in the classroom. In spite of her attempt to speak up, Leah's voice could only be heard by those students sitting in desks close to the front of the class. Mr. Simmons, leaning against his own desk several feet away, stood up and took a step closer so he could hear what the girl was saying.

Leah didn't notice any of this, though, because all of her attention was focused on the paper she was holding. She continued: "Three of the most famous pharaohs were Ramesses the Second, Tu—Tuten—*Tutenkhamun*, and Cleopatra. Ramesses the Second, also known as Ramesses the Great, was Egypt's most power—*famous* and powerful pharaoh. He was the pharaoh for sixty-six years and he is the pharaoh who Moses fled from in the Bible. He . . . constructed a lot of famous buildings and monuments that still stand today."

Behind her, Heather and Melanie were trying hard not to laugh. Although Leah's voice was barely audible, her nervousness came through loud and clear. The two girls stole glances at each other and smiled but otherwise they controlled themselves. "Tuten—*Tutenkhamun*, who is also known as King Tut, wasn't really that important, but we know a lot about him because his tomb was discovered in 1922 with the mummy . . . and other objects still inside. Some people say that his tomb was cursed because a lot of people who helped discover it died mysteriously. He became the pharaoh when he was only eight years old and he died when he was only eight—*eighteen*. He might have been murdered, but no one knows for sure."

Until now, Leah hadn't dared to take her eyes off of her report, but she felt like she had been reading it forever, and she was curious to know how her audience was responding. She paused and took a quick glance at her classmates. She mostly saw a lot of bored faces. A few people in the back, having given up trying to hear what she was saying, had put their heads down on their desks and weren't even pretending to pay attention. She knew she was almost finished, but she made a

concerted effort to try to read slowly, so that she could fill her time. "Cleopatra was not the first female pharaoh to rule Egypt but she is the most famous. She became pharaoh when she was only seventeen. She fell in love with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. When she—*she died when* she was bit by a snake. She was trying to commit suicide."

All this time, David had been listening carefully. Since it was his responsibility to transition between and introduce each new speaker in the group, he was trying to listen for the end of Leah's speech, but the girl was speaking so softly that it was difficult for him to follow what she was saying. He hadn't heard her practice when they were at his house last Sunday, so he wasn't sure when she was going to stop. "When a pharaoh died, he or she was buried with all of their belongings. Sometimes they were buried in pyramids and sometimes they were buried underground. The pharaohs believed they became gods after they died. When they buried—*when they were buried*—they were buried as mummies. They were buried with food and gold and even some of their servants and workers were buried with them. The pharaohs were a very important part of Egyptian society."

She was finished. She dropped her arms and looked up at the class. She felt dizzy and out of breath. Her heart was still racing, but at least she knew her report was over—and that realization offered her a tremendous sense of relief. The audience now turned their attention to Alex, who, with David's help, was showing his posters to the class and commenting on each one. Leah didn't pay any attention to the boys. She was too busy congratulating herself on what she thought had been a good presentation of her report. She hadn't stumbled over too many words; she spoke loudly and clearly (or so she thought), and she had taken up plenty of time. She felt good about her performance, and now, more than anything else in the world, she wanted to sit down at her desk. But Alex took his time discussing his posters, and David started asking him some silly questions which Alex answered by referring to the pictures that he had drawn. It looked and sounded goofy, but it was eating time and that was all that mattered to them. Unexpectedly, Leah was thrust back into the spotlight when David suddenly asked, "Isn't that

right, Leah?" The girl looked up and saw David, her other partners, their teacher, and the whole class staring at her. Leah had no idea what he had asked her, but she knew she had to give an answer so she just nodded her head. That seemed to be the correct response and David asked Alex another silly question. Leah could feel herself start to blush and again she wished that she could leave the front of the class. At last, David and Alex finished talking and the five teammates returned to their seats. Earlier, Leah had been the last one to walk from her desk to the front of the class, but now she was the first one to sit back down.

Mr. Simmons said, "I'm glad to see at least *one* group chose not to put their presentation on video." He went on to say that none of his other classes had made as much use of the DVD player as sixth period had.

Five minutes remained in the hour, and Mr. Simmons let the class spend it however they wished. Heather immediately began talking. She said to her partners, "I watched the clock on the wall while we gave our report. We started at 2:39 and ended at 2:55. That's sixteen minutes—we did it!"

"Thank God," Alex said, and the rest of the group celebrated their ability to stall for time.

Leah waited for someone to say something to her. She wanted a compliment of some sort, she believed her role in the presentation, with the exception of her answer to David's query, was fantastic, but she needed to hear praise from someone else. She looked expectantly towards David, wishing he would say something to her, but he didn't. The bell rang, and class was dismissed.

"It's all over!" Heather said with a grin as she and David stood up. "There's nothing standing between us and Thanksgiving now!"

"I think I'll burn my posters when I get home," Alex laughed, "and put this whole thing behind me!"

"I'm definitely gonna burn my report," Melanie agreed. "Goodbye and good riddance!"

Leah remained sitting in her desk, still waiting for David to say something to her. She wanted him to congratulate her, to thank her for

being a part of the group. She wanted him to appreciate and understand her. She wanted him to tell her that she had been an important part of his life for the last three weeks. But, instead, David, Heather, Melanie and Alex left the room together, with smiles on their faces and without Leah. Their presentation was over, and now they were acting like they had never known her. Perhaps they never really had.

Leah, left behind in the quickly emptying classroom, finally stood up, collected her things, and walked out, alone.

Nineteen

LEAH cried as she walked home from school that afternoon. On the busy sidewalk, she did her best to hide her tears from the other students who passed her or walked beside her. Whenever she felt a new tear begin to slide down her cheek, she quickly brought her hand up to brush it away.

She wasn't completely sure *why* she was crying. Maybe it was her body's way of releasing the stress that she felt these last few days in anticipation of presenting her report—just another way in which she experienced the great relief she was now feeling. Perhaps her tears were the result of all the conflicting emotions she had stored up over the past few weeks: love, jealousy, hope, disappointment, joy, and despair. Surely, she needed some kind of release after a roller coaster like that. Maybe the tears meant that she knew David Parks was out of her life now, possibly forever. Whatever relationship—or chance for a relationship—that she had with him disappeared when the final bell rang that day. He didn't love her. He would never love her.

Depressed, Leah wondered whether or not anyone really liked her. If she didn't mean anything to David—someone who had at least talked to her and tried to help her—did she mean anything to anybody? She wondered if she would ever make a friend or find a boyfriend. It all

seemed so hopeless, so pointless. Another tear started to roll down her cheek. Leah's hand quickly brushed it aside.

When she got home, she went upstairs to her room, lay down on her bed, and released the rest of her tears. She didn't have to try to hide them any more—these four walls knew the many hours she had spent here, alone, in silence, with only a book or her own thoughts for company. Leah curled up into a ball and stared across the room at the clock on her desk and watched the minutes slowly pass. For a long time she lay there, motionless, thinking about David. She counted all the things she had done wrong, all the times she remained silent when she should have spoken, and all the things she wanted to express but had been either too afraid or didn't know how. She accepted that she had herself to blame more than anyone else for her disappointment and heartbreak. She couldn't blame David for not reading her mind or interpreting a weak smile or a glance in his direction as a sign of how she felt. She had been given many opportunities, but she let them slip away because she was too *shy* to speak. Her shyness had cost her her chance with David. Leah wished her shyness was something physical, something she could show a doctor and have amputated. It always seemed to get in the way; it always prevented her from doing what everyone in the world told her she ought to be doing: talking to people, making friends, falling in love. She couldn't amputate it though. Her shyness was buried deep inside, and there was no way to take hold of it and get rid of it. All she could do was hate her shyness, hate what it had done to her life, and hate herself for being shy.

She rolled over onto her stomach, closing her eyes and burying her face in her pillow. So many questions filled her mind. Why did *she* have to be the only girl at school who was shy? No one else had any trouble talking to people or making friends. It didn't seem fair. *Why me?* she asked herself. Was this what her life would always be like? Was this moment, alone in her bedroom, unhappy, not only her present and her past but her future as well? She had so many questions, but here in the isolation of her room, there were no answers. Only silence surrounded her and offered itself—the same silence that had been her lone

companion throughout her life. *Only silence; always silence.*

In the darkness of her pillow and in the silence of her room, she made a wish. She wished that she wouldn't be shy any more. She wished she could make friends. She wished that she knew what to say whenever someone spoke to her. She wished she could talk and laugh as easily as her classmates. She wished that her parents wouldn't have to worry about her any more. She wished she could belong to this noisy world. She wished she could be normal. She wished hard, as hard as she could, but when she lifted her head from her pillow, took a deep breath and looked around, she found that nothing had changed. The right words did not spring into her head, she still had no friends, and David Parks was not in love with her.

When her mother came home, Leah collected herself, put on a smile, and went downstairs to greet her. Leah had a request to make, a request inspired by the tears of that afternoon. In the kitchen, she found her mother in a good mood. Mrs. Nells told her daughter that she had the day off from work tomorrow, since it was the day before Thanksgiving. "There's nothing better than a five day weekend!" she said with a big smile. Her mother's announcement corresponded perfectly with Leah's own request, which was, "Can I stay home from school tomorrow?" It was a request Leah rarely made, unless she felt sick. It was also unusual for Leah to be so eager to talk to her when she came home from work, so Mrs. Nells thought that there *must* be something wrong with her daughter.

"Why do you want to stay home tomorrow? You're not ill are you?" Mrs. Nells placed her hand on Leah's forehead, but Leah pushed her mother's hand away and shook her head no. She felt fine.

"I just don't want to go to school tomorrow."

"Well, I don't know," Mrs. Nells said. "You won't be missing anything important, will you? What about that project that you and

David are working on?" Mrs. Nells was already calling David by his first name, as if she had met him and he had been Leah's friend for years. But Mrs. Nells had never met him and never would. Little did her mother know that David was the reason why Leah didn't want to go to school Wednesday. It would be too heartbreaking to see him again so soon; she'd rather put a long weekend between today and next Monday when she'd have no choice but to face him again. But Leah didn't tell her mother any of this. She simply replied that her group had presented their history project in class that day.

"Really? How did that go?" Mrs. Nells asked with genuine curiosity. "Do you think you made an A?"

Leah shrugged. "Can I stay home?"

Mrs. Nells thought about it for a moment and then revealed a devilish smile. "*I* know why you want to stay home tomorrow. It's because your grandmother is arriving tomorrow afternoon. That's it, isn't it?"

In all the excitement and stress of this week, Leah had completely forgotten about her grandmother's visit. Her mother had mentioned it during dinner one evening last week, but Leah, with so much to worry about, hadn't really thought about it until now. This news cheered her up, though. She liked her grandmother and hadn't seen her since last Christmas. Leah was now more determined than ever to stay home from school. She asked again, "Can I?"

"You don't have any tests or anything like that tomorrow?"

Leah shook her head no.

"Well, OK. I'll let you stay home, but you're gonna have to help me clean the house for your grandmother's arrival."

Leah agreed and returned to her room. Already she was feeling better. Thanksgiving would give her a chance to forget all about school, her classmates, and especially David Parks.

Twenty

SHE didn't bother to set her alarm clock Tuesday night, so when she did finally wake up and come downstairs Wednesday morning, Leah found her mother sitting at the kitchen table browsing through the newspaper. Mr. Nells had already left for work—he didn't get the day off—so Leah and her mother ate breakfast together before they set about the task of preparing the house for their visitor who would be arriving in the afternoon. Mrs. Nells assigned her daughter the duties of cleaning the dishes in the sink, mopping the kitchen floor, and vacuuming all of the carpeted rooms in the house. Leah took to her chores without a word of complaint because she knew it was a small price to pay for being allowed to stay home. It was a strange feeling, staying home from school when she wasn't sick, knowing that most of her classmates were in school right now.

Shortly after noon, Mrs. Nells got in her car and went to the supermarket to buy food and supplies for tomorrow's Thanksgiving feast. Meanwhile, Leah got herself ready for her grandmother's arrival. She showered, put on a nice dress, and brushed her hair. She was excited to see her grandmother and wanted to look her best when she arrived.

When Mrs. Nells came home and saw her daughter, she said, "You look pretty," and then she told her to help bring in the food,

including a big, heavy, frozen turkey. She told Leah that Grandma's plane would arrive at the airport at 2:30, so they spent the remainder of their time doing some last minute house cleaning. Leah helped her mother prepare the guest bedroom by changing the sheets on the bed and dusting the furniture in the rarely used room. At a few minutes before 2:30, Mrs. Nells got back in her car to drive to the airport. She asked Leah if she wanted to come along, too, but Leah chose to stay home and wait. After her mother left, Leah wandered around the house one last time to make sure everything looked clean and nice, and then she sat down on the living room sofa to continue reading *The Interstate Commerce Commission and the Railroad Industry* which she still hadn't finished. She wondered if the book would ever end. She only had fifty pages left to go, but each page was like a vast desert that had to be crossed before she could find relief in another book.

As she tried to read, her mind wandered. She couldn't help thinking about David. Had he shown up to school today? She looked at the clock and realized that history class was in session right now; was he there wondering where Leah was? Probably not, Leah decided pessimistically, and she tried to put him out of her mind.

Only the sound of her mother's car returning home banished David from her thoughts completely. Her mother and grandmother were back from the airport. Excited, Leah stood up from the sofa, but she didn't know what to do or where to go so she sat back down again. She hoped her grandmother wouldn't interrogate her with a bunch of awkward questions like her parents often did. She just wanted to give her grandmother a hug and say hello. That would be enough.

A moment of silence passed, and then the door to the garage opened. Leah, no longer able to contain her excitement, jumped up from the sofa and hurried into the kitchen just in time to see her mother enter. Mrs. Nells was followed by Leah's grandmother, a thin woman in her early sixties with silver hair and a big smile. Mrs. Nells said to Leah, "Your grandmother's suitcase is in the trunk, can you go get it and bring it in?" Without a word, the girl obeyed, but before she could get out the door, Grandma said, "Hold on a minute! Let me give my only

granddaughter a hug!"

Leah embraced her grandmother, and the older woman whispered, "How are you?" Leah, too shy to say anything, didn't answer, but her smile spoke for her.

Leah went out into the garage and pulled the heavy suitcase from the trunk of the car. She struggled to carry it into the kitchen where she found her grandmother seated at the kitchen table while Mrs. Nells stood nearby. Setting the suitcase down, Leah stood and listened with a nervous smile on her face as the two women talked for a few minutes. She wasn't sure what to do or if she should say something, so she just stood there and listened to Mrs. Nells and Grandma catch up on everything that had happened to them since they last saw each other in person. After a while, Leah began to think that she had been forgotten, but then Grandma turned to her and said with a smile, "I think I'll make some pumpkin pies while I'm here. Does that sound good?"

Leah nodded, returning her grandmother's smile. Mrs. Nells said, "Leah, why don't you help Grandma and carry her things up to her bedroom?" Leah didn't voice a reply; she simply picked up the big suitcase again and staggered out of the kitchen. Grandma watched her struggle and said, "I'll give her a hand." She got up, gathered the rest of her belongings, and silently followed her granddaughter upstairs.

Leah and her mother had done a thorough job preparing the guest room for Grandma's arrival. Any other visitor to the Nells' home might have supposed, based on how differently Leah's room and the guest room were decorated, that the guest room belonged to Leah and that Leah's bedroom was the guest room. While Leah's bedroom was almost austere in its lack of decoration and furniture, the guest room was, perhaps, *too* decorated. There was a queen-sized bed that had received a new mattress three years ago, and since almost no one ever slept in the bed, the mattress still felt like it was brand new. It was topped with bright quilts and comforters and pillows that Mrs. Nells had added earlier that morning. Most of the rest of the furniture in the room was older than Leah, dating back to when Mr. and Mrs. Nells had first gotten married and before they had a daughter. The furniture no longer fit in any other

room in the house, having been replaced over the years with better, newer furniture, but for sentimental reasons, Leah's parents decided to keep the older pieces. Among them was a large chest-of-drawers, a fancy wooden desk with a creaky wooden chair and a couple of large, cushioned chairs on either side of it. The apparent comfort of the chairs was merely an illusion, however, for the old cushions in both of the chairs felt lumpy. Beside the bed was an old nightstand, dented and chipped in several places, with a faded stain finish, and on top of the nightstand was a ceramic table lamp and a digital alarm clock. The chest-of-drawers supported a large mirror on top of it just like the bureau in Leah's room. The walls were decorated with painted pictures, most of which offered scenes of generic landscapes of forests or run-down farmhouses, but there were also some family pictures, including a set of Leah's baby pictures which the fourteen-year-old always felt embarrassed to look at. Various knick-knacks and a vase with plastic flowers rested on the desk and the chest-of-drawers. All of these miscellaneous items tended to clash, but they also made the room feel very quaint and cozy. And after some time, when one had lived in the room for a few days, or had lived in the house for several years like Leah had, all the different styles started to coalesce into a unified whole.

"Just set the suitcase on the bed, Leah—I'll unpack later," Grandma said as she set the two travel bags that she had carried upstairs with her onto one of the lumpy chairs. She looked around her and released a little sigh, "The same old room. I guess this is like my home away from home, isn't it?"

Leah simply shrugged and smiled. She was aware that she hadn't stopped smiling since Grandma arrived, and although she was a little embarrassed by her uncontrolled display of happiness, she was powerless to stop it.

Grandma cast one last look around the room and said, "Well, enough of this. Let's go have a look at your room. Has it changed much?"

Leah shook her head no but led her grandmother to her room anyway. Once there, Leah almost felt like a stranger and stood self-

consciously near the door as she watched Grandma study and examine the bedroom and its meager furnishings.

"Nope, still the same," Grandma said after a moment, but she didn't speak with a tone of disappointment, nor did she seem confused by the lack of decoration. Leah's parents had always been puzzled by their daughter's preference to leave her bedroom walls mostly bare and empty, and they often encouraged her to decorate it, to make it look like someone lived here. "But I think this is new," she said, referring to the bookcase next to Leah's bed. She stepped closer to it and asked, "This wasn't here last year was it?"

It was, but Leah wasn't sure what to say to correct her grandmother. Would it be rude to suggest that she was wrong? Surely it wouldn't be nice to let her think the bookcase was new when it really wasn't. If Leah told her it was here last year, then she might be asked when her parents bought it for her, and Leah couldn't remember when, precisely, that had happened.

As Leah's mind scrambled to think of an appropriate response to Grandma's question, the older woman finally remembered, "Yes, I guess it was here last time I visited, but you didn't have this many books on your shelves, did you?" Grandma stooped over to read the titles of some of the books, and Leah began to worry. No one ever understood Leah's choice in books. They usually assumed that her books were a reflection of who Leah really was, and when they saw what Leah read, they assumed she was boring or weird, like Kyle did, or like those boys in the cafeteria did that day when it rained during lunch. But Leah didn't want to be an accountant or an abstract artist or a biologist, even though she read books written about those topics. The books that she read were strange and dull, so people concluded that Leah must be strange and dull, too. She didn't want her grandmother to think that.

"When your mother was your age, I couldn't ever get her to read a book—not even her schoolbooks," Grandma said with a chuckle. "She always spent her time on the telephone talking to her friends, which of course drove her father and me crazy. I think she would have been better off spending her time reading!"

Leah didn't know what to say. She found it impossible to imagine her mother at fourteen, even when her mother herself reminisced about her past. Her mother had always been her mother, never a teenage girl. She tried to picture her mother living in Grandma's house, perhaps in the room that Leah stayed in when she and her parents came for a visit, but the only vision that her imagination conjured was a vision of herself.

Grandma stood up straight and took one last look around the room. At last she declared, "I like it!" Leah was shocked. Grandma liked her room? Really? Didn't she think this room was strange—that Leah was strange? "Well, your mother's probably wondering what's taking us so long. Why don't we go back downstairs?"

Leah would have preferred to stay here in her room by herself, but she guessed the polite thing to do would be to accompany her grandmother back downstairs. They found Mrs. Nells waiting for them in the living room, sitting on the sofa and holding some newspaper clippings. When she saw her mother and daughter return, Mrs. Nells beckoned to them and said, "Come here, Mother. Sit down and take a look at this." Grandma sat on the sofa next to Mrs. Nells who showed her the clippings. Leah sat in a chair a few feet away from the women. She noticed that her book, *The Interstate Commerce Commission and the Railroad Industry*, was resting on the coffee table in front of Mrs. Nells and Grandma. Leah had an urge to pick it up and start reading, but she decided to wait.

Instead, she listened while Mrs. Nells explained the newspaper clippings to her mother. "Last July, my company was profiled in a series of newspaper articles. Look, they even mentioned my name a few times . . ." She paused to point out her name in the article although that wasn't necessary because she had marked every appearance of her name with a yellow highlighter some months before. "And, look at this . . ." in another clipping, from the same newspaper but on a different page, there was a picture of Mrs. Nells, along with some of the other executives from the company. All of this was old news to Leah who had seen the article—and the repeated appearance of her mother's name—when the article was published. Grandma didn't seem to be too impressed either,

although she nodded her head approvingly. "That's wonderful, Rebecca," Grandma said. "I'm proud that you're doing so well." Mrs. Nells was the one glowing with pride, however, like a child showing her mother an A on her report card. She stared at the newspaper clippings in her lap with a self-satisfied smile.

After they looked at the article for a moment, Grandma proceeded to tell her daughter (and her granddaughter who, though sitting silently, was clearly paying attention to them) a story about how she and her late husband had once appeared on the front page of a newspaper after they stopped to help injured drivers after a big car wreck that they happened to witness. They clipped that article from the newspaper too, but, as Grandma admitted, "I don't know what happened to it. I haven't seen it in years. Your father might have accidentally thrown it away before he died. I guess that was our fifteen minutes of fame, as they say." There was a pause, and then Mrs. Nells continued talking about her job.

Before long, Leah found herself feeling very bored. She tried listening to Grandma and Mrs. Nells talk, but they were talking about people and places foreign to Leah's tiny world, and so none of it was very interesting. Again, she fought the urge to pick up her book and start reading. She imagined that if she did, her grandmother might ask her what she was reading—and when she saw the title, ask *why* she was reading it. She imagined that her mother would then try to explain, perhaps with some disappointment in her voice, how Leah insisted on reading these books that no one else in the world cared to read. Leah didn't want to become the center of attention. Perhaps she could have just grabbed her book and left the room, retreating upstairs where she could read in private, but she thought her mother might accuse her of behaving rudely. She was stuck where she was, so while she listened to the women talk, she frequently peeked at the clock hanging on the wall on the other side of the room or stared out the window at the yard.

At 4:20, Leah heard the rumble of the garage door opening. It had to be her father, who, apparently, was getting an early start on the holiday. Mrs. Nells and Grandma heard the garage door open too, so

they got up to meet Mr. Nells in the kitchen when he came in. Leah followed them.

Leah's father was all smiles when he entered. "Hey, look who showed up for Thanksgiving!" he said, referring to Grandma.

"Hello, Robert," Grandma said as they greeted each other. "I hope I'm not intruding on your Thanksgiving weekend."

"Absolutely not," he replied. "You're always welcome. Were you guys getting ready to fix dinner?"

"Maybe," his wife said. "Are you hungry?"

He nodded. "I skipped lunch today. I'll tell you what, let me go change my clothes, and then I'll give you ladies a hand."

Leah was willing to help out, too, but with three other cooks in the kitchen, there wasn't much for her to do. Instead, she set the kitchen table, this time setting places for four people rather than the usual three. That done, she took a seat at the table and watched and listened to the three adults talk and gossip while they cooked. Every once in a while, Grandma would see Leah watching her from the other side of the room and she would give her a wink. Leah just smiled in reply.

The girl was amazed by how freely and openly the adults were able to communicate with each other even though, except for an occasional phone call or email, they hadn't really kept in touch with each other at all for several months. It was the same ability to talk that everyone else in the world seemed to share—everyone except Leah. As she sat by herself at the kitchen table, watching her parents and grandmother work and talk, she felt left out of the great mystery of conversation. They all knew when a discussion began to drag and when it was time to change the subject—and they always knew what to change the subject to. Leah was also impressed by how well the two women knew each other. Mrs. Nells' relationship with her mother seemed to be so much closer than her relationship with Leah. The fourteen-year-old had lived with her mother all her life, but listening to the things that her mother talked about with Grandma made Leah wonder if she even really knew her mother at all. She might as well be a complete stranger. Leah wondered if her mother longed to have the same relationship with her

that she had with Grandma, and Leah wondered if she would ever be able to offer it.

After dinner, the adults went back to the living room to talk some more. Leah took the opportunity to sneak away from them and return to her room upstairs. Once there, she lay down on her bed, feeling drained. The excitement of her grandmother's arrival, the physical labor of cleaning the house and carrying Grandma's suitcase upstairs, and the conversations that she had listened to all afternoon and evening had left her completely worn out. She spent half an hour simply lying on her bed staring up at the ceiling until she finally felt at ease. In the quiet of her bedroom, she could still hear the muffled voices of her family downstairs. Their voices sounded distant, far away, and although they were together downstairs and she was by herself upstairs, she actually felt safer alone in her room than if she were in their company. She was with them in the house, but not quite *with them*. She was a part of the family yet still *apart* from it.

But soon she began to feel bored. Sitting up, she looked around for something to read but remembered that her book was still downstairs in the living room where her parents and her grandmother were. She didn't want to go back downstairs and disturb them or get drawn into another conversation so she went to her bookshelf and pulled a single-volume encyclopedia off the shelf and opened the book at random. Coincidentally, the first article that she saw was "Genetics." She began reading.

Later that evening, when the rest of Leah's family was heading off to bed, Leah heard a gentle knock at the door. The door opened and Leah saw Grandma peeking in. "Goodnight Leah," she said softly and with a smile. "Make sure you have enough blankets on your bed—it looks like it's going to be a very cold night tonight."

Leah smiled in return as Grandma closed the door. The night might be cold, but it wouldn't be a bad night at all, Leah was sure—at least not with her grandmother in the next room.

Twenty-One

SHE awoke early Thursday morning to the smell of bread baking. Still drowsy as she opened her eyes, she almost forgot what day it was. As she lifted her head from her pillow to check the time, she remembered that today was Thanksgiving Day, and her grandmother had come to visit. Those, Leah thought, were two good reasons to get out of bed.

When she was clean and dressed, she left her room and found that the door to the guest bedroom was open, too. She looked inside but found the bed made and the room empty. Her grandmother must have gotten up very early. She crept downstairs and went to the kitchen where she found a pan of freshly baked rolls cooling on the counter. In the oven, she could see that two pumpkin pies were baking. The room was otherwise empty, so Leah went into the living room and it was there that she found her grandmother sitting by herself on the sofa. The woman was reading something, but Leah couldn't tell what until she stepped closer. Grandma was slowly thumbing through the pages of *The Interstate Commerce Commission* that Leah had left on the coffee table last night.

Leah felt alarmed and embarrassed. She wished she could just grab the book, run back to her room, lock the door, and stay hidden for the rest of the weekend. Instead, she just stood there, watching and

worrying until Grandma finally noticed her and said, "Oh, good morning! The pies still need to bake for another fifteen minutes. I wanted to make sure the pies and the rolls were done before your mother puts the turkey in the oven. That turkey is so big it'll take most of the day to cook." She smiled and said, "Why don't you come over here and sit down?"

Leah hesitated, but then she moved towards the sofa. When she sat down, Grandma closed the book in her lap, looked at the cover for a moment, and said, "When I was a little girl, my family and I took a ride on a train. I don't remember why we took a train instead of a car or a plane, and I don't even remember where we were going—on vacation maybe. My brother and I were so excited to ride a train, though—for us it was the sort of thing you only see in movies—but once the trip started, we hated it! I guess when you're a lot older—like I am—you can appreciate the scenery and the length of the trip, but when you're nine years old every tree and every hill starts to look exactly alike after the first hundred miles—I guess that's why people prefer to fly!" She laughed and handed the book to Leah without saying another word about it.

"So, do you want any breakfast? Better say so now before your mother commandeers the kitchen."

Leah nodded her head, and the two of them got up from the sofa and went into the kitchen. Leah left her book behind on the coffee table.

She was eating a bowl of cereal when Mrs. Nells came downstairs, dressed and ready for the day. She helped Grandma take the pies out of the oven, and then the two women got to work on the turkey. Mr. Nells appeared a few minutes later and asked if there was anything he could do to help, but Mrs. Nells deftly shooed him out of the kitchen. He went into the living room, turned on the TV, and opened up the newspaper. Leah made herself available to help prepare the meal, but there wasn't much for her to do. Occasionally, Leah was asked to peel some potatoes or chop some fruit, but mostly she found herself sitting in the living room with her father. Once, when Grandma and Mrs. Nells took a break from their cooking, all the adults sat down in the living room and talked some more. Leah listened for a few minutes, but then she picked up her book and retreated upstairs.

In the afternoon, with the smells of Thanksgiving growing stronger, Leah was called back downstairs and assigned the duty of setting the dining room table. Mrs. Nells told Leah to use some of the nicer, more expensive dishes and silverware. When the table was set, Leah was tasked with placing some of the food, like the vegetables, rolls, and potatoes, on the table while her mother and grandmother carved the turkey. Mr. Nells, drawn by his stomach, had wandered back into the kitchen and was once again getting in his wife's way. Mrs. Nells sent him into the dining room, where he and Leah sat down and waited for the rest of the meal.

Leah never really felt comfortable eating in the dining room. Even with the lights on, the room seemed gloomy and much too formal. Her family only ate here on special holidays or when relatives like Grandma visited. Eating in this room always made her feel like she was having dinner at a stranger's house, but the awkwardness of eating in the dining room didn't spoil Leah's appetite. She eagerly filled her plate and couldn't wait to start eating.

When everything was set, Mr. Nells led the family in a brief prayer. Afterwards, they began eating and the adults began talking again. Leah didn't pay much attention to them because most of the conversation was the same trivial stuff about neighbors and distant relatives and current events that Grandma and Leah's parents had been discussing ever since Grandma's arrival yesterday afternoon. Every once in a while, Leah's name would be mentioned and only then did Leah pretend to be interested in the conversation. Mrs. Nells reminded her mother that Leah was in high school now and apparently doing well. There really wasn't much else to be said; Leah's life was so uneventful that when she was mentioned, she created a lull in the conversation and a different topic had to be started. However, there was one recent event in Leah's life that did make for interesting conversation—at least for the adults.

"Leah was invited to a boy's house last weekend!" Mrs. Nells boasted. Leah sighed wearily and wanted to cover her head with her napkin. The way her mother made it sound, she might as well be engaged

to be married or something. She knew Grandma would misinterpret Leah's visit to David's house as something social, like a party. Leah blushed and prepared herself to answer the questions that she guessed were coming. Leah swallowed the food in her mouth and looked up at the three adults sitting at the table. They were all looking at her and grinning. She felt cornered.

"Oh? What's this boy's name?" Grandma asked Leah.

Before Leah had a chance to answer, Mrs. Nells proudly answered for her: "His name is David, I think. Isn't that right?"

Leah nodded, embarrassed.

"Did he throw a party or something?" Grandma asked.

"No, I think they worked together on a report for school," Mrs. Nells replied, reluctantly, "but she was over at his house all afternoon." Mrs. Nells didn't want to give too many details away because that destroyed the illusion she was trying to create: that Leah had a boyfriend.

To further shatter her mother's fantasy, Leah could have added that there were three other classmates at David's house, a point which Mrs. Nells never seemed to remember, but Leah kept her mouth shut. She wanted this subject to end. Talking about it only brought back the memories of David and Heather and how their relationship proved to be far stronger than she hoped. It was a kind of mockery that Leah's parents continued to pretend that Leah and David were in love with each other when that was precisely what Leah wanted. But Leah knew it wouldn't happen, and her parents' innuendos made it difficult for her broken heart to heal.

Grandma's reaction to Mrs. Nells' answer was to say, "Oh, I see." But the tone of her voice indicated she was being sympathetic to Leah and not playing along with Mrs. Nells' teasing. Leah looked at Grandma's face, trying to discern whether she understood Leah's embarrassment or not. Leah wasn't sure so instead she stared down at her plate and took another bite of her turkey.

After dinner, and after the family ate slices of Grandma's pumpkin pies for dessert, Leah went to the kitchen to help her mother wash the dishes, but before they even started, Grandma intervened and

asked Mrs. Nells to go sit in the living room with her husband. "You've done enough for today, Rebecca. The dinner was wonderful. I'll help Leah wash the dishes." Tired, Mrs. Nells gladly joined her husband in the other room. Grandmother and granddaughter worked in silence for a few minutes, and then Grandma said quietly, without looking away from the pot she was scrubbing, "Don't let your mother and father pressure you into doing anything you don't want to do. There will be plenty of time for love and boyfriends later on."

Leah glanced at the older woman for a few seconds and then went back to rinsing plates. She smiled. Maybe Grandma really did understand.

Twenty-Two

MRS. NELLS and Grandma were up early the next morning with plans to go shopping at the local mall. After all their hard work the day before, they were eager to get out of the house. Mrs. Nells tried to talk her husband into going with them, but there was a full day of college football on TV that needed to be watched, and, he added, "I'm still digesting that enormous dinner I ate yesterday."

If Mr. Nells wasn't going to go, then Mrs. Nells thought it was unlikely that Leah, who hated leaving the house, even during holidays, would want to go, but Grandma insisted that they ask Leah to accompany them. Grandma and Mrs. Nells crept into Leah's bedroom at 9:30 that Friday morning and found Leah still sound asleep in her bed. Again, she hadn't set her alarm clock, so her body took advantage of the sleep that it had been deprived of after weeks of waking up early every morning for school.

Leah looked so peaceful that Mrs. Nells was reluctant to wake her, but she placed a hand on her daughter's shoulder and gently shook her awake. Leah opened her eyes and found the two women looming over her bed. Right away, she felt self-conscious and pulled the sheets up closer to her chin. She wondered what her mother and grandmother wanted.

The answer came from Mrs. Nells: "We're going to the mall today. Do you want to tag along?"

Leah's instinctive response was a definite no. She knew that the mall, especially the day after Thanksgiving, was going to be packed with people. It would be like going to school, except worse because most of the people were strangers, and instead of moving from one classroom to another every hour, she would be visiting one store after another every few minutes. She didn't know who she might meet or when she might leave. The mall was chaotic, unpredictable, and the very idea of going there made Leah uneasy. She answered her mother's invitation by shaking her head no.

"Oh, come on," Grandma pleaded. "It'll just be the three of us going. Your father is going to stay home and watch sports on TV all day long. If you stay here you'll just have to watch football with him!"

Leah knew that wasn't true. If she stayed at home today she would probably spend the day sitting in her room reading. And if, for some incomprehensible reason, she was forced to sit and watch football with her father, that still seemed a lot better than going to the mall. At least the crowds of people she saw on TV were hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away.

"Do it for me," Grandma said, trying a different tack. "I'll be leaving in a couple of days, and I won't be able to spend any time with my granddaughter for who knows how long!"

Even that wasn't a convincing argument, although it did make Leah feel a little guilty. Mrs. Nells, however, knew what it would take to get her daughter out of bed and into the mall. It had been a while since she had taken Leah shopping for books, and she guessed that Leah was running low on fresh reading material. "They've got a bookstore in the mall," Mrs. Nells said. "I might buy you something—but only if you come with us."

Leah weighed her options. She really didn't want to go to the mall, but if her mother was willing to purchase a book for her, then maybe it would be worth the trip. After a little more hesitation, she agreed to go. "OK," she said.

Mrs. Nells and Grandma left Leah alone so she could get ready to leave. An hour later, she came downstairs and found the two women in the living room. They were sitting on the sofa and talking to Mr. Nells who already had the TV on and tuned to the pre-game show for a college football game. Leah, who decided to bring her purse even though she didn't have any money, made herself visible to her family, silently indicating that she was ready to leave, but another ten minutes passed before the women stood up. As they did, Mrs. Nells sighed, "I guess we should go, are you sure you won't come along Robert?"

"I'm sure. The mall is always so crowded the day after Thanksgiving. I don't understand why the whole world has to go shopping *today*. Why not wait until next weekend?"

"It's because people's relatives are in town—it's a tradition," Mrs. Nells replied.

"And that's why I'm staying here: everyone and his relative will be at the mall today."

Grandma laughed politely and Mrs. Nells said goodbye. They went outside to the garage with Leah at their heels. Mrs. Nells opened the garage door and a gust of chilly air blew in. Leah wondered whether she should wear her coat. She considered going back into the house and getting it, but because she was going to be inside the mall the entire day, and since neither her mother nor her grandmother expressed any concern about the cold wind, Leah simply got into the backseat of her mother's car. Mrs. Nells drove and Grandma sat up front in the passenger's seat.

During the short trip to the mall, Leah looked anxiously out the window at the other cars on the streets. A *lot* of people were on the roads today. It seemed like the entire city, after spending Thursday indoors, decided to spend Friday on the road, even though the weather wasn't agreeable. The heavy traffic made their journey to the mall, which under normal circumstances would take only fifteen minutes, twice as long. Leah expected to see lots of people today, but she wasn't prepared for the sheer numbers that she saw. The time was 11:15, and already the mall's parking lot was almost filled to capacity. Mrs. Nells mumbled, "It

looks like everyone and his relative really *is* here!" and she spent the next ten minutes looking for a parking space that wasn't so far from the mall's entrance. Leah looked at all of the cars with a sense of awe. If this was what the parking lot looked like, what must it look like inside? She imagined that the mall was so packed with people that they wouldn't even be able to move. There was probably a lot of noise, too, with so many voices speaking and exclaiming all at once. Leah imagined a scene that was so claustrophobic that she began to regret her decision to come along. If her mother, out of frustration for failing to find a good parking space, decided to just give up and go home, Leah wouldn't utter a word of complaint.

Mrs. Nells searched hopelessly for a decent parking space close to one of the mall's entrances. She navigated her car up and down the rows, but there were at least a couple dozen other cars doing the same thing, and no one was having any luck. At last, Mrs. Nells gave up and parked the car in one of the few empty spaces that remained—in a spot that was about a hundred yards from the closest entrance and about as far away as they could be. It was the best she could do.

Leah grabbed her purse, got out of the car, and accompanied her family through the busy parking lot and the chilly air to the mall entrance. Once inside, Leah's fears were confirmed. Although the mall wasn't quite as packed as she imagined, it was still very, very crowded. The stores overflowed with shoppers, and outside the stores, the crowd moved slowly. Leah felt like a tiny fish lost in an enormous school. She hated being here already; no book was worth putting up with this for a few hours.

Even Mrs. Nells was surprised. "I can't believe how many people are here! Let's make sure to stick together so we don't get lost. If we accidentally separate, we may never find each other again!" Leah took the warning literally and stayed close to her mother's side.

She glanced nervously at the other shoppers and felt very uncomfortable. The other shoppers were mostly women out with their families—mothers and grandmothers, sisters and daughters, aunts and nieces. There weren't as many men and boys in the crowd as she

expected. Leah wondered if the guys were all at home watching football like her father was. In a crowd of this size, she was likely to run into someone she recognized from school, but at least it wasn't likely that she would run into David.

Besides women, Leah also saw many children in the crowd. Some were very young and clinging to their mothers' hands. These little ones were not used to crowds of this size and many of them wore the same frightened expression as Leah. Still others were already bored and tired, and they demanded to be carried. Leah also saw shoppers her own age, mostly teenage girls who roamed the mall with their friends and apparently without any adult supervision. They bothered Leah the most, partly because she felt embarrassed to be seen with her mother and grandmother while all these other girls roamed free and partly because it would be awkward to run into girls she knew from school. So far, she didn't recognize anyone, but Leah kept watch for familiar faces in the crowd.

As Mrs. Nells and Grandma browsed, they talked to each other and hardly seemed to be aware of Leah's presence at all. Occasionally, Mrs. Nells would remember that her daughter was with her, and she would say a word or two to her. When they were shopping for clothes, Mrs. Nells would ask Leah if she needed a new pair of jeans or new shoes. Leah always answered "No" even though, after a while, she stopped paying attention to what her mother was looking at as they shopped. She felt bored and wondered how long it would be before they reached the bookstore.

For all their "shopping," neither Mrs. Nells nor Grandma was doing any buying. Usually, it wouldn't bother Leah that they were looking at clothes, but it angered her when they would spend as much as half an hour in a particular store, look at what seemed like every piece of merchandise, ask each other repeatedly, "Should I get this? What do you think?" and then leave the store without buying anything. After nearly two hours, they had only visited ten stores—a fraction of the total number of stores in the mall (they hadn't even visited the upper level yet!). At this rate, it might take them days to make their way through the

mall. It wasn't long before Leah was brought to the brink of despair.

When they did finally reach the bookstore it was a little after three o'clock. Like every other store they had visited, the bookstore was crowded with people, but the crowd in here was a little more stagnant since many people were thumbing through, and reading passages from, books.

Had Leah's mother not promised to buy her daughter a book, Mrs. Nells and Grandma would probably have just skipped this store and moved on to the next one. While Leah searched for a book, it was their turn to feel bored. It wasn't long before Leah separated from them, and for once, she explored a store on her own.

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of books, Leah didn't know where to begin or what she should get. She marveled at their attractive, glossy covers, and how, when she picked up a book, it was being opened for the very first time. And while a garage sale might only have two or three books devoted to science or art, here she found entire aisles devoted to such topics. She decided that she wasn't interested in a science book, though. She had been reading too many science books lately, and she wanted a change. Art and architecture was sometimes interesting, but all the books she browsed had too many pictures in them. She explored the history aisle, but her recent unpleasant experience with *The Interstate Commerce Commission* (not to mention her experience with David) left her feeling repulsed by history. She passed the philosophy and religion section without stopping. She knew that there wouldn't be pictures in philosophy books, but she wasn't interested in philosophy. There were already enough people telling her how she should live her life. She didn't need to read about it from a book, too.

Occasionally, she would accidentally bump into another customer, or someone would stand in her way as she tried to walk down an aisle. She wished that everyone else in the store would just vanish so she could stay in here all afternoon by herself, shopping and reading. As she browsed, she sometimes checked the prices of the books that she picked up. Since nearly all of the books in her collection were from garage sales or the used book store where books sometimes cost less

than a dollar, she was shocked to see books priced at twenty or thirty dollars—or more. Who would be dumb enough to pay that kind of money? she wondered. How could this place stay in business? Leah was fortunate that she wouldn't have to pay for a book out of her own pocket, but because she didn't want to ask her mother to spend too much on her, she decided that she should find a book that wasn't very expensive.

While her mother browsed romance novels, and her grandmother was flipping through some travel books, Leah began searching the Economics and Public Policy aisle. These books had promise, and within minutes she found a thick, 500-page book titled, *The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century*. The book looked as if it had been sitting on the shelf for a long time. Best of all, the price was marked down to \$12.99. Leah decided that this would be her book, but Leah didn't bring it to her mother just yet. She knew that once her mother bought the book, they would leave the store, and Leah wasn't eager to leave the only place in the entire mall where she felt at home. Eventually, though, her mother and grandmother approached her.

"Have you found a book?" Grandma asked.

Leah nodded, holding the book up so that the women could see that she had made a choice.

"It looks like a big book—what is it about?" Mrs. Nells asked. She and Grandma read the title.

"*The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century*," Grandma read aloud. "That could be . . . interesting."

Mrs. Nells was skeptical. "Are you absolutely sure that's what you want? Really, *really* sure?"

Leah nodded.

"OK," her mother sighed. "How much is it?"

Leah told them the price and Mrs. Nells shook her head and said to Grandma, "That's why I prefer taking her to used book stores instead of stores like this. Otherwise I'd be spending way too much money."

"Well, I think it's money well spent," Grandma said. "There are worse things a girl her age could be spending money on than books."

Mrs. Nells ignored the remark, and she asked her daughter once more, "Are you *sure* this is what you want?"

"Yes," Leah replied, absolutely certain.

Mrs. Nells opened her purse and pulled out a \$20 bill. She handed it to Leah and said, "Here—take this. The register is over there. You can pay for it."

Leah, holding the money in one hand and the book in the other, heard what her mother said and understood the words, but she didn't respond. Her feet were planted on the floor, and there was an expression of confusion and terror on her face. She watched as her mother and grandmother started to leave. Leah followed them, hoping—praying—that this was just a joke, that her mother would come to her senses and offer to go to the cashier and buy the book for her. As Leah made her way towards the exit, Mrs. Nells looked back and saw her daughter following her.

"You can't walk out of the store with that book unless you pay for it, Leah," Mrs. Nells said condescendingly. "The cashier is over there, where that line is. Go get in line, pay for it, and your grandmother and I will be waiting for you in that jewelry store across the way." Mrs. Nells turned to leave. Grandma, seeing the anxiety on her granddaughter's face, gave Leah a sympathetic smile and said, "Here, I'll buy the book for you."

Mrs. Nells overheard and turned around quickly. "No, Mother! If Leah wants the book, she can buy it herself. She's fourteen years old—she's not a baby. Leave her alone."

Reluctantly, Grandma followed her daughter out of the store and the two women silently made their way through the crowd of shoppers to the other side of the concourse. Leah, left all by herself turned and looked at the line of strangers who were standing with books they wished to purchase. She couldn't really do it herself, could she? When her turn came at the front of the line would she have to say something to the cashier? Would the cashier say something to her? What if someone in line started talking to her? What if they asked what book she was buying and why? What would she say? Leah's hands fidgeted nervously. Her stomach felt queasy and knees were like rubber. At last, she turned away from the

line, set the book randomly on a display table near the front of the store, and hurried out.

A moment later, Leah was in the jewelry store, standing by her mother and grandmother. Mrs. Nells looked at her daughter and noticed she didn't have the book with her. She asked in a calm, cold voice, "What's the matter, did you change your mind about the book?" Humiliated, Leah gave no reply. Instead, she handed her mother the twenty-dollar bill that was now crumpled and warm after spending just a few minutes in Leah's nervous palm. Grandma looked at her but didn't say a word. Leah, ashamed, turned away from them both.

There was an awkward silence among the three generations for the next half hour. They went on to visit a few more stores, but Mrs. Nells and Grandma were no longer in a very good mood, their spirits depressed by Leah's failure to buy the book. Leah was still her quiet self but now that the opportunity to buy a book—the only reason Leah had for joining her mother and grandmother on this day of shopping—had come and gone, she seemed even more quiet and distant. Before, she had at least sometimes pretended to feign an interest in the stores they were visiting and the items they were browsing, but now Leah didn't care; all she wanted to do now was go home. She also stood apart from her mother when before she had stayed by her side. Or, if the store they were in wasn't very large, Leah would simply stand near the exit and wait for her mother and grandmother to finish browsing.

At 3:30, Mrs. Nells and Leah were leaving a store when they noticed Grandma was no longer with them. Mrs. Nells stopped and looked around at the mass of people but could not find her mother anywhere. "Did you see which way your grandmother went?" she asked Leah.

Leah, who wasn't paying attention to anything, didn't know when Grandma had disappeared or where she went. She shook her head and tried to help her mother search, but she couldn't see very far through the crowd.

"Oh well," Mrs. Nells said. "Maybe she went back to look at something. She'll catch up with us in a minute." They started for the next

store.

The next store sold handbags and accessories. Leah, who was now looking around for any sign of Grandma noticed another familiar face leaving the very store they were entering. When Leah saw the girl's face, she recognized it immediately, but because she didn't expect to see it here, in the mall, she couldn't immediately place a name to the face. The girl was walking with another girl who Leah didn't recognize. As they all passed each other, the first girl smiled and said, "Hi, Leah!" As soon as the girl spoke, Leah at last remembered that this was Melanie, from history class.

Had she seen Melanie a moment earlier, it might have been an easy thing to duck into the crowd and hide where Melanie couldn't see her, but now it was too late. Leah, feeling embarrassed and surprised, didn't know what to say, so all she did was smile and offer a timid wave of her hand. Luckily, Melanie and her friend didn't want to stop and chat, and they walked past her and disappeared into the crowd. Leah decided she should try to be more alert for any other classmates who might be here at the mall. Surely Melanie wasn't the only one.

Mrs. Nells, of course, had witnessed the quick exchange between the two girls. She was almost as surprised by the encounter as Leah was, and for the moment, it made her forget Leah's failure at the bookstore a little while ago. She asked her daughter, "Who was that?"

"Melanie, a girl from school," Leah replied in a hushed voice as if Melanie were still near enough to hear them talk about her. Leah didn't want to say anything more than that, but she knew her mother wouldn't be satisfied with just a name. Of course, she would also want to know . . .

"Is she a friend of yours?"

Leah frowned, annoyed. She resented her mother for even asking the question. If her mother had any idea what Leah had gone through these last few weeks, then she would know better than to ask such a thing. But Mrs. Nells didn't know what had happened, and Leah, still upset about her humiliation at the bookstore, wasn't about to start sharing now. Leah decided to just offer her mother the facts, and leave it at that. "No, she's only a classmate," Leah replied. No, Melanie wasn't a

friend, and neither was Heather, nor Alex, nor even David. Disappointed in her daughter for the second time that day, Mrs. Nells didn't ask her any further questions.

A few minutes later, as Mrs. Nells and Leah were browsing through a rack of purses, Grandma reappeared. She carried a small paper bag with her, indicating that after almost five hours of shopping she had finally bought something. When Mrs. Nells saw her, she exclaimed, "Oh, there you are, Mother! I thought we'd lost you! What did you buy?"

She handed the bag to Leah and with a wide grin said, "Here, take a look!"

Leah took the bag cautiously, wondering what could possibly be inside. She opened it, looked, and recognized the item immediately. With a smile as large as her grandmother's, Leah pulled a book out of the bag. It was *The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century*. Leah was delighted; Mrs. Nells was furious.

"*Mother . . .*" Mrs. Nells growled, but she didn't say anything more. For now, it was enough to just give her mother a very angry look.

Grandma noticed Mrs. Nells' disapproval, but she didn't let it bother her. She said to Leah, "Consider it a Thanksgiving Day present."

Still glaring at Grandma, Mrs. Nells said in a low voice, "What do you say, Leah?"

For once, Leah knew *exactly* what to say, and she said it cheerfully: "Thank you, Grandma!" Her day was salvaged and she felt as if she had the strength to carry on for the rest of the afternoon or however much longer they would stay in the mall. All of the frustration and humiliation and disappointment that she had felt was now swept aside and forgotten.

Leah put the book back into the bag and held it close to her as the three of them continued shopping. Leah also began to orbit her grandmother just as she had stayed close to Mrs. Nells earlier in the day. Leah looked at what Grandma looked at, went where Grandma went, and the two of them were inseparable. They didn't have to say anything to each other; an unspoken bond had formed. Meanwhile, Leah's mother was the one who was isolated and left out. For the rest of the afternoon,

Mrs. Nells kept her distance from both her mother and her daughter. She did talk to Grandma sometimes, but only sparingly, and only to say things like, "Are you ready to go on to the next store, Mother?"

It was just after five o'clock in the afternoon when the family exited the mall and started their long journey across the parking lot that was only now beginning to empty. Leah felt completely exhausted and spent her last reserves of strength walking to the car. Once there, she sat down in the back seat and let out a sigh. She had been walking and standing for almost six straight hours. Her aching legs and feet weren't accustomed to so much exercise in one day. She still held her book close to her and was thankful that the day hadn't been a complete waste like she had feared it might be. Mrs. Nells and Grandma also looked tired, but that wasn't why the two women were silent during the trip home. Leah tried to pretend not to notice the hostility that had sprung up between the two women. She didn't want them to be angry, and it made her feel guilty to think that she was the cause of their anger. Leah stared blankly out the car window as her mother drove, watching the sky darken as the sun set.

When they got home, Mrs. Nells pried her husband (whom they found taking a nap) off the sofa and recruited him to help fix dinner. Mr. Nells, unaware of what had happened at the mall, helped to ease the tension by talking to both women. They, in turn, spoke to him and eventually they started speaking to each other again. Before long, the incident with Leah seemed to be forgotten. The family enjoyed their dinner of Thanksgiving leftovers.

After dinner, Leah washed the dishes and then took her new book upstairs to her bedroom and left the adults in the living room to watch TV. Leah put her new book on her bookshelf and sat on her bed with *The Interstate Commerce Commission*. She was eager to finish it and begin her new book as soon as possible, so she broke routine and tried to read quickly without really concerning herself with what the text was saying. After half an hour, she began to feel restless. The events of the day began intruding upon her conscious mind, especially the episode at the bookstore. While she was certainly thankful that her grandmother

had bought the book for her, Leah knew that she should have been able to buy it herself. Anyone else could have done it without any problem. She recalled that Melanie and her friend had appeared to be by themselves at the mall. They might have had some sort of parental supervision nearby, but Melanie and the other girl were still browsing through stores on their own. Those girls wouldn't have had any problem purchasing something without help. Leah wished she could be like that.

Unable to cure her restlessness, she instead acted upon it. She got up and went to her bedroom door. Opening it quietly, she stepped out into the hallway and paused. She could hear the adults downstairs talking over the sound of the television. Leah had an urge to go downstairs, but she didn't know what she would do once she was there. She certainly didn't want to talk to her parents, but she also didn't want to return to her bedroom. She found a happy medium by sitting down on the stairs and eavesdropping on her family. Leah didn't have any trouble hearing them, in spite of the television.

Mrs. Nells and Grandma were telling Mr. Nells about their trip to the shopping mall. At first, neither of them said anything at all about Leah, not wanting to reopen that wound. It was Mr. Nells who brought up the subject without realizing the fire that it would spark.

"I saw that Leah brought home a book," Mr. Nells said. "Did she buy it herself?"

There was a short pause, and only the television was making any noise. Leah strained to hear, fearing she was missing something, but she wasn't because no one was speaking. Had she been in the living room, Leah would have seen her mother and grandmother stare at each other, both wanting the other to tell the story of what happened. Finally, it was Mrs. Nells who spoke.

"When we were at the bookstore, Leah found some stupid health book that she really seemed to want—I swear, I really don't understand how she chooses what she reads. But anyway, I said, 'OK, I promised you a book, so here's some money.' I gave her a twenty and told her she would have to pay for it herself."

"And she did it?" asked Mr. Nells, jumping to a conclusion that

seemed supported by the evidence: Leah *did* bring home a book.

"No."

Leah's father was confused, "But she's got it . . ."

"But she didn't pay for it." Mrs. Nells explained. "Mother went behind my back and paid for it herself when Leah was too afraid."

Grandma objected, "Oh, I wouldn't say 'I went behind your back.' That sounds so awful."

"Well, what would you call it then?" Mrs. Nells demanded, releasing some of the anger she had been saving all afternoon and evening. "I told you when I gave Leah the money that I wanted her to pay for it herself."

"But why?"

"Because she has to learn how to do those things by herself," Mrs. Nells said sternly, as if she were making the argument to Leah instead of her mother. "We just want her to learn to be independent, to stand on her own as an individual. If she keeps relying on us to do everything for her, then she'll never learn how to survive in the real world. She'll never make friends, and she'll never learn how to relate to other people. She can't waste her whole life in her bedroom reading books."

"I don't want her to be alone either," Grandma said, "but it seems to me that the only thing she's learning is just how frightening and uncomfortable those situations can be. I'm not sure you're helping her by forcing her to suddenly perform like that."

"I think we know how to raise our daughter," Mrs. Nells snapped.

There was a brief pause and then Grandma said quietly, so that Leah could just barely hear, "I'm not trying to tell you how to raise your daughter, I'm just saying that you shouldn't worry about her shyness so much. When I was younger, I was very shy around strangers, too."

"Oh, Mother, you were never shy," Mrs. Nells said with weary disbelief.

"I certainly was! By the time I met your father, I had gotten over it—mostly—but when I was Leah's age, I was a lot like her, and I think

I've got a pretty good idea about what she's going through. I know how intimidating the world can seem. And I also know you can't solve all of her problems by forcing her to buy a book by herself. There's no reason for punishing her just because of who she is."

"We're not *punishing* her," Mrs. Nells argued. "We just want her to be happy and have a good life—and not be afraid all the time."

"I know you do, and it's what I want, too."

There was another pause and then Mr. Nells quickly jumped in and changed the subject to something a little more pleasant. They no longer talked about Leah, or the trip to the mall, and so Leah didn't listen as intently as she had a moment ago. She merely listened to the sounds of her family's voices while she thought about what the adults, and especially Grandma, had said. After a little while, she quietly got up and returned to her bedroom. She tried to finish the railroad book before her bedtime, but she didn't quite do it. She promised herself she would finish it tomorrow. She dressed for bed and turned out the lights. After a busy day like today, she had no trouble falling asleep, and the last thing she heard before she drifted off was the muted voices of her family downstairs.

Twenty-Three

LEAH found her mother and Grandma getting ready to go out and spend another day shopping when she left her bedroom Saturday morning. They didn't say where they were going, but Leah guessed it probably wasn't the mall. Grandma invited Leah to come along, but Leah politely refused. She knew her mother wasn't likely to take her to another bookstore today, and even if she were, Leah wasn't eager to relive yesterday's awful experience. She had had enough shopping for one Thanksgiving. Instead, Mr. Nells took Leah's place on the shopping trip. At first, he didn't want to go either, but Mrs. Nells kept urging him to go until he finally agreed—and then he even cheerfully offered to drive. When they were ready, the adults said goodbye to Leah and left her all alone in the house.

Leah was hungry and since it was almost lunchtime, her first meal of the day was a turkey sandwich and a glass of milk. When her stomach was full, she decided to finish reading her railroad book. She had the whole house to herself, so she brought the book downstairs to read in the living room. She had less than a chapter to go so she read diligently and finished it in under half an hour. It was such a relief to be finished with that awful book at last. Leah had an urge to immediately start the book Grandma bought for her yesterday, but she also wanted to take her

time with it. When the health book was finished, she wouldn't have anything new to read, and considering how angry her mother had been yesterday, Mrs. Nells might not be willing to take Leah shopping for books again anytime soon. No, she would start reading her new book later. There would be plenty of time to read tomorrow and next week when she returned to school.

Leah set *The Interstate Commerce Commission* in her lap and wondered what she should do next. She didn't have any homework to work on, and no family members to listen to. Leah looked around her and found the TV remote control on the coffee table in front of her. To save herself from boredom, she turned on the TV and searched through the channels. She found nothing that interested her, but she didn't want to turn the TV off. Instead, she muted the sound, restoring silence to the living room and the house. For a few minutes, she sat and stared at the actors on the screen who continued to speak even though Leah couldn't hear them. She found that she didn't mind watching them; it was their conversation and dialogue that made her uncomfortable. Everything the actors said always took Leah by surprise. It was different than talking to her parents. At least with them, she could usually anticipate what they said to her—things like, What happened at school? Had she met anyone? Did she make any new friends? Having been asked those questions so many times, Leah had learned how to answer them. She didn't like the questions, but there was a reassuring consistency in them. With strangers, though, it was different: she never knew for sure what other people might say to her, and so she couldn't plan in advance how to respond. The only person outside of her family who she didn't mind talking to was David, but he didn't want to talk to her.

Leah shifted uneasily on the sofa. She didn't want to think about David. On Monday she would have to see him again whether she wanted to or not, so for now, she preferred to keep him out of her mind. To that end, Leah continued to stare at the television—at the people on the screen whose lips were moving, who were speaking, but who Leah could not hear. She wondered if this was what it was like to be deaf. Sometimes she wished she could be deaf, just so that when people spoke to her, she

could have an excuse for not replying. Her shyness practically made her mute, but because she *could* physically talk, people *expected* her to talk. They would speak to her, bothering her with questions until they decided her silence meant that she was stuck-up or weird—or both—and finally they would turn away from her and never speak to her again. People never ask a deaf girl, "Why don't you ever listen to people?" but they always ask a shy girl, "Why don't you ever talk to people?"

Leah put her head back against the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. She tried to concentrate on the silence and pretend that she was deaf, but even in this empty house, in the quiet and the stillness, there were sounds to be heard. These were subtle sounds that were ignored when voices filled the air. Leah could hear the furnace blowing hot air into the house, making it feel comfortably warm while outside it was chilly. Here, in the silent room, it almost sounded like a roar. Beneath it, Leah could hear herself breathe. She held her breath to make herself as quiet as possible, but deeper within herself she could hear her heart beating, softly.

Leah heard other sounds, too—sounds which came from the outside. She could hear the wind pressing against the windows of the house as cold air blew in from the north. Every once in a while she heard a car drive past the house, or a barking dog, or the distant yell of a child playing in her family's backyard. Each of these sounds only shattered the illusion of deafness that Leah tried to fool herself into believing, sounds that only proved that she wasn't deaf after all. Yes, she could hear. When people spoke to her, she could hear them; when they asked her a question, she could understand it. She was physically able to talk; yet she did not talk.

Leah took a quick glance at the television. It was still muted, still flashing images onto the screen, disjointed pictures and faces that could only begin to make sense if the sound were on. She saw a commercial for a movie that had just been released this Thanksgiving weekend. The title of the movie flashed on the screen. Leah started to read it, but she couldn't get past the very first word, "Alone." Alone. *Alone*. Leah let the word echo in her mind over and over. Alone. What did the word really

mean? Leah was alone in her house, alone in this room, on this sofa. She was often alone at school during lunch, or in the mornings and afternoons when she walked to and from school. Alone. It had such negative ideas associated with it, such as the word "lonely." For others—for the people of the world who liked to talk—the words "alone" and "lonely" meant the same thing; other people thought that it was impossible to be one without also being the other. But in all those times when Leah was alone, truly alone, like right now, she didn't feel *lonely*. As boring as being alone sometimes was, she actually preferred it. She enjoyed the quiet, the calm, the peacefulness. Here she didn't have to speak or prove herself to the world. Here there was no pressure to do anything she couldn't do. Here she could just be herself. She could be Leah Nells. She could be *alone*.

Of course, there were times when she was lonely. When she sat in history class during the worst days of her infatuation with David, for instance, or when she had to sit in the cafeteria when it rained outside, or when her mother tried to force her to buy a book at the mall by herself. Those were times when she felt lonely, but she realized that she only felt lonely when she was not alone. Other people made her feel lonely! Comparing herself to them, her life to theirs—that's where her loneliness came from. It was other people who made her feel uncomfortable and frightened and nervous. Right now, in moments like this when she was alone, she felt relaxed and at peace.

Leah let her body ease back into the sofa cushions as she stared up at the ceiling. She listened to the sounds in the silence around her, and she reveled in being alone.

Sunday morning, Leah was in the guest bedroom helping her grandmother pack. Grandma's flight was scheduled to leave at 1:30, and it was 11:20 now. Mr. and Mrs. Nells were downstairs in the kitchen preparing an early lunch for the household. Leah and Grandma were

alone, but for the moment, both of them were silent as they folded clothes and packed bags. Leah didn't want her grandmother to leave; she had gotten used to having her around, and she felt like Grandma belonged in this house just as much as she did. Leah didn't like the idea that she would have to wait for another holiday before she saw her again, or that her grandmother's departure meant that Leah would be left alone in the house with her parents. Leah liked having someone here who she felt understood her and seemed to be on her side. If only Grandma could stay in town for just a few more days!

Grandma noticed Leah's attachment. Ever since they returned from the mall on Friday, Leah had been eager to spend a lot more time near her. The fourteen-year-old was still as shy as ever, and she didn't speak any more than she usually did, but Leah made it clear that Grandma was who she liked the most. Grandma was going to miss Leah, too.

When everything was packed, Grandma sat down on the side of the bed and beckoned to Leah. "Sit down here—there's something important that I want to tell you." Leah sat down, and Grandma whispered, "You know that when your mother and father criticize or pressure you, it's not because they don't love you—it's because they're worried about you and they're trying to do what they think is best for you, right?"

Leah nodded. She knew. She didn't like it when they pressured her to be more outgoing or to make friends, but she understood why they did it. She wanted to tell her grandmother about all the times that her parents had been disappointed in her, and she wanted to tell her how badly that made her feel. She stayed silent, though, and let Grandma talk.

"I just want you to remember that no matter what happens, they'll always love you very much, and so will I. But there's one more thing that I want you to remember: you shouldn't feel ashamed of who you are. You might be different from most people, but that doesn't mean you're a bad person. It doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you."

Now, this was something that Leah didn't understand. What did

Grandma mean that there wasn't something wrong with her? Of course there was! It was obvious—everyone could see it. Leah was the only person in the world who didn't know how to talk to people or make friends. At school, she was an outcast; people thought she was weird. Shyness wasn't normal, and so that meant that *she* wasn't normal. Wasn't that bad? Wasn't that something to be ashamed of? Leah wanted to ask Grandma to explain what she meant, but she didn't. She just held her grandmother's words in her mind, thinking about them and trying to make sense of them.

Grandma added, "Someday it won't even matter that you were once shy. Just give it time."

Such optimism made Leah smile. Wouldn't that be wonderful if it were true? For now, though, she couldn't see it happening. She didn't believe that her future would be any different than her past had been. Her life of isolation and shame would continue. Grandma paused and then said, cheerfully, "Well, what do you say we go downstairs and have lunch. Your mother's probably waiting for us. We can leave the suitcase here for now. I'm not going anywhere just yet."

They stood up and went downstairs. They found Mr. and Mrs. Nells in the kitchen. The television next to the kitchen table was on and it was tuned to yet another football game. Mr. Nells was listening to the game as he helped his wife prepare a meal of turkey sandwiches, chips, and soda. The four of them sat down at the table and started eating. The adults talked amongst themselves about the details of Grandma's flight home. Leah didn't pay much attention to their conversation, though. She concentrated on her meal and was the first to finish eating. When she finished, she got up from the table and went into the living room to wait.

At 12:15, Grandma was ready to leave. Mr. Nells brought Grandma's luggage downstairs and loaded it into the trunk of his car. His wife helped make sure Grandma was leaving with everything she brought with her by asking her, "Did you remember this? Did you remember that?" Leah stood at the threshold between the kitchen and the living room, waiting to say goodbye. She wouldn't be accompanying the rest of the family to the airport—not because she said she didn't want to go, but

because no one thought she might want to come along and so she wasn't invited. Grandma knew this would be the last time during this visit that she would see her granddaughter, so she said goodbye.

"Give me a hug before I go," Grandma said as she opened her arms to Leah. Leah didn't hesitate to hug her. She really was going to miss her, and she tried to express her feelings in her hug.

"I hope you enjoy the book," Grandma whispered in Leah's ear. "And don't forget what I told you—you'll be all right." Leah smiled meekly and broke her silence, "Goodbye, Grandma."

They parted, and as Grandma accompanied Leah's parents out the door, she said, "Come and visit me soon, Leah. I love you."

The door shut and they were gone. Leah remained standing in the still and quiet kitchen as she listened to them get into Mr. Nells' car. The engine started, the car left the garage, and the garage door was closed. Grandma was gone, and the house suddenly felt like a much emptier place.

After a moment, Leah sat down at the kitchen table. Mr. Nells had left the Sunday newspaper on the table, and Leah browsed through it. She didn't read anything; she just stared blankly as she turned the pages. Soon, her attention turned to the window, and she stared outside for a few minutes. The sun was out today and there were no clouds—a sharp contrast to the last few days, which had been cloudy, cold, and gloomy. It looked warm outside, but it was only an illusion. Grandma and Leah's parents had worn jackets and coats when they left the house, so Leah guessed it was probably very chilly. Leah thought about walking to school tomorrow, and she hoped it wouldn't be too cold in the morning.

But the real misery for the next few weeks, Leah thought, wouldn't come in the morning. It would come in the afternoon, in history class. With their project finished, Leah didn't think that David would want to talk to her again. She would never be anything more to him than the shy girl who read strange books and almost never said a word. That's pretty much all she was to most of her classmates. In spite of what her grandmother told her a little while ago, that is all that she

would ever be: the same Leah Nells who never spoke and who had no friends.

Leah lost track of time and before she knew it, she heard her parents return home from the airport. She got up from the kitchen table and went to the living room where she could sit on the sofa. When her parents entered the house, they were smiling and appeared to be in a good mood. The stress of having a guest stay with them for a few days had passed and now they could relax and enjoy the few remaining hours of the long holiday weekend. They talked for a moment about Grandma, finishing a conversation that had begun in the car. Leah listened to every word they said, and she was happy that neither of them had anything bad to say. The trouble that Leah had caused last Friday seemed to be forgotten. She was glad; she thought her grandmother's visit had been good, and she wanted her parents to feel the same way.

After a few minutes, Mr. Nells sat down at the kitchen table, in the chair where Leah had been sitting some moments earlier, and he turned on the television and finished reading the Sunday paper. Mrs. Nells started doing some household chores that had been postponed while Grandma was staying with them. Leah, with nothing else to do, offered her help to her mother who gladly accepted. Everything was settling back to normal, just like it was before Grandma's visit and the start of the Thanksgiving weekend. This was the way it had always been.

Twenty-Four

MONDAY morning, as Leah walked out the front door of her home and began her journey to school, she reminded herself of her class schedule, where she sat in each of her classes, and her locker combination. The five-day weekend had given her time to forget, and in a way, today almost felt like the first day of school all over again. As she stepped down from the porch, a cold breeze enveloped her, and she knew she made the right choice in wearing her coat to school today instead of trying to get by with only a sweater. The walk to school would still be uncomfortable, though, and she wished she didn't have to go back.

When she reached the busy avenue that led to her school, she hoped that she wouldn't see any of her schoolmates on the sidewalk, because that might mean that she was mistaken—that she really *did* have the day off and she could turn around and go back home. But at the first intersection where she had to cross the street, she found five other teenagers waiting for the light to change. Like her, they carried backpacks and wore glum expressions on their faces. Yes, today was definitely another school day. When the light changed, Leah crossed the street with them, but when they got to the other side, she walked slowly, letting them go on ahead so she could be by herself to enjoy a few minutes of

peace before she reached the crowded, noisy campus. As she walked, she noted the same trees, the same cracks on the sidewalk, the same buildings, and the same sounds of early morning rush hour traffic speeding past. In only three months, this route to school had become predictable and familiar. It no longer felt like the first day of school all over again, but just another normal school day.

But there was *something* that felt different, although Leah didn't quite know what it was. As she watched the students walking ahead of her, she thought that there was something that was different about them, too. Some sort of feeling—a new feeling—was slowly working its way into her psyche. It kind of felt like something was out of place or different. She almost felt self-conscious, as though something were wrong—like when one walks to school with one's backpack accidentally left open—it was just a weird feeling that she had. Thinking that maybe something *was* wrong, she stopped for a moment on the sidewalk and checked her backpack and purse. Everything was zipped up securely. She took a peek inside her backpack and found everything was there, including her lunch and her new book that Grandma bought for her—she hadn't left anything behind when she left for school this morning. Reassured that everything was OK, she continued walking to school, but the odd feeling stuck with her.

At school, she stood near the doors where she usually waited for the bell to ring in the mornings. She felt like the eyes of the entire student body were on her, but as she looked around, no one seemed to be paying any attention to her at all. They were either talking to their friends or sleepily staring off into space; perhaps they wished they could have one more day of vacation, too. Just to make sure she didn't look weird, she glanced down at herself. Her clothes looked fine. She couldn't see her face or her hair but she remembered that before she left home this morning, she had brushed her hair and tied it back in a tail. With her hand, she felt her hair and her head, but everything seemed all right. She decided that when the bell rang, she would check the mirror in the girls' room and make sure. She continued to stand and wait, but she still felt agitated, uneasy.

At 8:00 exactly, the bell rang and the students trudged into the building for another day of school. Even though Leah made a beeline to the girls' room, she found it crowded when she entered. She had to compete with several other girls for space in front of a mirror, but she found that her reflection looked fine—she looked just like she had when she left for school that morning. Satisfied, she left the restroom and hurried to her locker. She remembered her combination and exchanged her coat and purse for her biology textbook. She headed to class and, despite her detour to the restroom, she found that she was among the first to arrive. Mrs. Safley, the biology teacher, was facing the board, posting the day's agenda. Leah sat down in her assigned seat and removed her notebook and textbook from her backpack and set them on the desk in front of her. She considered killing some time by reading her new health issues book, but she wanted to save it for lunchtime so she sat patiently and watched the other students file in. One by one they arrived and sat in their assigned desks. The other students were very talkative this morning. Many of them asked each other about what they did during the long weekend, or they bragged about their own experiences, especially if they took a trip out of town. Others just complained about having to return to school. When Mrs. Safley finished writing on the board, a pair of students approached her and began talking to her, too. Soon, the whole class was animated and noisy. Only Leah sat silently in her desk.

When the bell rang again, and after the morning announcements, Mrs. Safley began her lecture. Today, they were starting a new chapter, and, as Mrs. Safley liked to do, she began the new unit by asking questions to discover the extent of the class's knowledge on their new subject. She didn't expect them to know the answers to her questions, but when someone did, she was always delighted. Today, though, few people volunteered any answers.

Throughout most of this question-and-answer activity, Leah sat silently. Like most of the other students, she didn't know the answers to most of her teacher's questions, but she did know the answer to the final question: "What does the word *amphibious* mean in Greek?" The

question was met with a lot of blank stares from the students, but, Leah remembered reading a book about amphibians last spring and she remembered that the word meant "living two lives". This was one of those rare occasions when Leah's reading resulted in knowledge that was relevant to what she was learning in school. As Mrs. Safley waited for someone to guess the answer to her question, Leah entertained the fantasy that she might raise her hand and provide the answer. Silently, as her lips formed the words, she imagined her voice breaking through the silence. She felt a sense of pride at the idea that she might be the only student in the room who knew the answer, and at the same time, the strange feeling that had followed her to school returned. It felt like a soft glow in the pit of her stomach. She still didn't know what the feeling was, but it no longer seemed threatening or disturbing, and it dissipated the instant that Mrs. Safley gave the class the answer, which was exactly what Leah thought it would be.

The nagging feeling returned an hour later in algebra class. The teacher began the period with a pop quiz to see what the students remembered—if anything—from last week's classes. The quiz consisted of only five questions, and when it was over, the class was instructed to exchange papers for grading. Leah and her classmates knew the drill: each student handed her paper to the person behind her and the last person in each row sent her paper to whomever sat at the front of the row. When all the quizzes were exchanged and ready to grade, the teacher called out the answers.

Algebra had become one of Leah's better subjects, and she felt confident about her performance on the quiz. Right now, though, she was only thinking about the girl in front of her, whose paper Leah was grading. Leah knew from grading her work in the past that the girl certainly wasn't one of the top students in the class. She often did poorly on homework and quizzes, and Leah always felt guilty about giving the girl a bad grade even though Leah knew she wasn't to blame. Of the five questions on the quiz, the girl missed four. As Leah returned the paper to the girl, she thought to herself, *I'm glad I'm not her*. It was only a passing thought, but as soon as the idea popped into her head, she also realized

that she really *wasn't* the girl sitting in front of her. That girl and Leah were two different people. The idea was so simple and so obvious, but at the same time it seemed so profound. *I am me and she is her*, Leah thought. She might have sat there for a few minutes trying to make sense of what her mind was trying to tell her, but she felt a tap on her back and realized that the boy sitting behind her was trying to give her graded quiz back to her. Leah had only missed one question and scored a B.

She glanced around to see how well her neighbors had done. A boy to her left answered all the questions correctly, but then he always made good grades. The boy in front of him, however, missed either two or three questions—Leah couldn't see his paper very well from where she sat. On Leah's right, a girl who missed three of the questions was whispering to a boy who scored the same; they had cheated and copied each other's answers during the quiz. Nobody—at least nobody nearby—had missed only one question.

All this time, while she thought about the girl in front of her and the students around her, she felt the feeling in her stomach return. It seemed to be at the root of everything that she did. It wasn't a bad feeling; in fact, it kind of felt good. While the rest of the class listened to the new lesson, Leah sat in her desk and tried to enjoy this strange, new emotion that she was experiencing.

A little later, while she was on her way to phys. ed., Leah wondered if her class would be going outside today. She noticed, as she left the main building to go to the girls' gym, that it felt colder than when she had walked to school—but maybe that was simply because she wasn't wearing her coat any more. In the gym, there was no indication of what the coach had planned for them that morning, so she decided to play it safe and change into her sweats.

Once dressed, she waited in the gym. As usual, she was among the first to arrive, and she took her assigned place on the floor. Slowly, the other girls in the class entered and either sat down on the floor with Leah, or stood in groups and talked until their coach arrived. Among the girls who were talking was Megan, the girl who had unsuccessfully tried to befriend Leah earlier in the semester. Megan stood among a group of

five other girls, whispering and gossiping. Her popularity had grown steadily over the course of the last three months. She had progressed from spending one futile day with Leah, to making two or three friends, to becoming a member of a rather large clique of girls. Megan no longer paid any attention to Leah, and she never acknowledged her when the two girls were on the same volleyball team or if one passed the other while walking the track outside.

When the girls' coach emerged from her office, the girls lined up and roll was called—the one moment of the school day when Leah was guaranteed to speak. Leah listened carefully as each girl in the class answered to her name. Starting from the Ds, Leah had memorized the list up to and including her name. There were exactly twenty-five names between the first D—Dawson—and Nells, such was the importance Leah placed on this event. Anytime she spoke it was a big deal for her, so when the coach reached the names beginning with the letter M, Leah took a deep breath and held it until her name was called.

"Nells?"

"Here!" Leah chirped. In the gymnasium, where all the girls were dressed almost exactly alike, the peculiar feeling that had haunted Leah all morning had almost disappeared completely. However, when Leah answered her coach and replied, "Here!" the feeling returned for a few seconds, but then it faded again.

After roll call, the coach told the girls they would stay in the gym today and do some light aerobic exercises. They would follow the lead of the sophomore class who were participating in the same activity. The sophomore coach brought with her an old boom box that looked like it had been used since the early 1990s. The same stale dance music from that era was played, too, but because Leah and the other freshmen girls were on the far side of the gym, with its awful acoustics, they weren't able to move in rhythm to the music like the sophomore girls. The effect was that the freshmen didn't appear to be trying as hard as the sophomores even though that wasn't necessarily true. But this wasn't the first time the class had done these exercises and since they always followed the same routine, Leah and her classmates were able to get by without relying on

the music.

Exercising to music was one of the more physically strenuous activities that Leah and the other girls were subjected to in phys. ed. class. By the end of the hour, after bending and jumping and stretching, Leah's body felt tired and hungry. She was glad that her lunch hour followed phys. ed. After class, she navigated through the crowded hallways of the school until she reached her locker. She opened it and pulled out her coat, her lunch, and her new health book. She was eager to begin reading it. She was so focused on going straight outside that when she closed her locker and turned around, she nearly ran right into David Parks, who was standing behind her waiting to talk to her. She was surprised to see him so early in the day and even more surprised to see him here at her locker.

"Hi," he said. Leah wanted to reply but she was too startled to speak; she simply stood and stared and listened. David explained, "I was just on my way to the cafeteria, and I saw you at your locker. I just thought you might want to know what I learned on Wednesday about our history project. You probably haven't heard, yet." Of course, Leah hadn't heard anything at all about history class since their presentation. Before he told her the news, though, David asked, "Where were you anyway—trying to get an early start on Thanksgiving?"

Leah wished she could tell him everything that had happened during her holiday, but instead she nodded her head and smiled shyly.

David said, "That's cool. I would have done the same thing, too, if I had the chance, but I had to make up a test in another class so I was one of, like, five or six people who didn't skip out on Wednesday. Anyway, I asked Simmons how he thought our group did on our presentation. He said something about how we did a good job and we probably made an A. So that's good news, huh?"

Leah nodded again.

"So anyway," David continued, speaking slowly, as if he wasn't really sure what it was that he was going to say, "I just wanted to let you know that I thought your part of the report was pretty good. I know you're kinda shy, and I know how you don't like to talk, so I guess it wasn't easy for you to stand in front of the class like that, but I wanted to

tell you I thought you did a good job anyway. I would have told you that on Wednesday, but you weren't at school."

Leah wanted to say something polite in return, but the best she could do was whisper, "Thanks." A brief silence followed in which both of them stared past each other, avoiding eye contact.

"Well . . . I'll, uh, I guess I'll see you later in class. Bye." Leah watched as he disappeared into the crowd. She realized that he had said everything she had wanted him to say last Tuesday, when she thought his words had the power to make her fall in love with him again. She felt grateful for what David said, but she didn't feel any resurgence of her crush. She stood there in front of her locker for a moment, staring into the crowd of students streaming past, staring at one face after another. She tried to feel some sort of connection with them—with any of them—but her stomach growled and all she felt was hunger, so with a sigh she put on her coat, grabbed her lunch, her book, and her purse and went outside.

The weather was definitely colder than she expected it to be. Leah wondered if the temperature had dropped since earlier that morning. The sun was still out, and the sky was blue, but that didn't seem to make any difference down here on the surface of the earth. A light breeze blew steadily, making the air feel a little bit colder than it really was. Most of the tables on the patio, including her own, were empty as students chose to eat inside rather than shiver in the cold. She sat down at her usual table. The giant tree which loomed overhead partially blocked out the sun and made sitting here a much more uncomfortable experience than it might otherwise have been. Winter was finally upon her, and Leah wondered if this would be the last day that she would be able to sit outdoors until the spring returned with its warmer temperatures.

Leah tried to ignore the weather and eat her lunch. She bit into her sandwich and chewed slowly, but it tasted cold and she didn't enjoy it. Before Leah could swallow the second bite of her sandwich, she found herself shivering. She didn't want to spend the entire period like this, so in a bold move she stood up, gathered her things, and moved to another

table, one that wasn't shaded from the sun. She had plenty of tables to choose from. The only other students sitting outside were huddled near the doors of the cafeteria where they were protected from the wind. Leah's new table brought her a little closer to them, but she was still clearly by herself. The direct sunlight made her feel a little bit warmer. She stopped shivering and was able to continue eating her lunch.

While she ate, she took in her new surroundings. She found that this table was in even worse shape than her usual one. There were more scratches, more flakes of paint had peeled off, and the graffiti on this table was more abundant. Most of the messages carved or scribbled on the table were the usual profanities, but there was one message that drew Leah's attention back to it again and again while she ate. The message was written in ink and read, *I LOVE*—and nothing else. Perhaps whoever wrote the message hadn't had time to complete it. Maybe a teacher or a janitor had caught them in the act. Maybe whoever wrote it wasn't sure how to complete the idea. Leah thought she knew what it should say. As she stared at the words, she imagined it reading *I LOVE DAVID*.

But that didn't feel quite right, and the strange sensation that had followed her throughout most of the morning now surged inside her, almost making her sick. Leah took a few deep breaths and set what was left of her sandwich down; she didn't want to eat any more of it. A couple of weeks ago, she would have completed the message with David's name and it would have felt right, but now she realized it wasn't right at all.

"*I know you're kinda shy,*" David had said to her a little while ago. David was nice and cute and friendly, but he didn't really know her—and he certainly didn't love her. Perhaps he pitied her; perhaps he felt like he needed to protect her, but his pity and his protection wasn't what she wanted from him.

"*I know you're kinda shy.*" Everyone knew it, and Leah had always believed that it was something to be ashamed of. That's what she had always been told. It was something to be overcome, something that her parents and teachers and classmates had all pressured her to change. It

was the one thing about herself that she wished she could alter, something that she wished she could extinguish from her personality forever. But as she stared at the incomplete message on the table, for the first time she wondered, *Why?* And all of a sudden, she understood what her grandmother had told her the other day.

In that instant, she also understood what the strange, exhilarating feeling inside her was. As it blossomed and grew, she didn't try to resist it any longer. She embraced it. She knew now that it was what she had been waiting for her entire life.

And as she looked around her, at the other students sitting outside and at those whom she could see through the cafeteria windows, they all seemed to merge together into one great, homogeneous mass of humanity. Only Leah stood apart from them, alone, here at this table. Although she didn't know what course her life would take, although her future was still filled with uncertainties and possibilities, she did know one thing: her future—her life—would not be like theirs. Leah looked once more at the words *I LOVE* on the table, and now she knew who it was whom she loved. She knew what the message needed to say.

She searched in her purse and found a pen. Not caring if anyone saw her write on the table, Leah Nells completed the message with a single word: *MYSELF*.

She smiled, and her smile quickly became a giggle, which then turned into laughter. She laughed as the world around her and everyone in it seemed to fall away, forgotten. As the cold November wind struck her face, she only laughed louder.