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The Year Two Thousand

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

THE YEAR TWO THOUSAND

submitted by

EMILY CAHILL '17

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Prologue

1994

When you walk past the public playing fields of Bokum you'll see a series of well-padded boys waddling out onto the field. You'll stop for a minute, wondering when visored caps became a staple in a football uniform, and when precisely bats also became part of throwing around the pigskin, before you realize this well-armed troupe is indeed the town's Junior League team, shouldering ten pounds of padding for a slow-pitch practice. And then you'll notice the plaque on the fence dedicated to Paul Ciccio, the kid who died on the field in the middle of a game.

Out on the field the 13-year-old pitcher took a few practice spins, rotating his pitching arm as if he was old enough to have tight muscles to loosen up. There was still baby fat hanging from his cheeks. Outfielders lolled behind him, unwilling to take an active stance until the ball at least was pitched.

At home plate, Paul Ciccio stamped his feet. Dust rose up around his cleats, clinging to the bright white uniform socks his mother had bleached the night before. The pitcher made eye contact with him, his face mean, more so than the rivalry of their teams called for. Heck, they'd both be on the same regional high school team next year.

Toward the front of the bleachers a young man appeared from beneath their shadows and sat in the first row. He pushed his palms over the worn knees of his jeans. He was alone on the bleachers today, his parents absent—one more permanently than the other.

A girl, bored, trailed her hand along the top rail of the bleachers. She balanced one foot after the other along the uppermost bench. A cotton pink skirt swirled around her knees, bright against the afternoon's clear skies. She was used to having to find ways to entertain herself at matches and games. Her brother was the athlete in the family. She squinted against the sun looking for him somewhere out by first.

The umpire threw out some signs. Paul made his last tweaks to his stance. The young man at the base of the bleachers watched with pride as his brother wound up on the pitcher's mound. The girl in the pink paused at the end of the railing, tuning into the game now that something was happening.

The pitcher released the ball. It was almost too fast to see and just a few inches wide of the bat. Maybe it was bad aim. Maybe Paul turned into the oncoming ball. Either way it struck him square in the chest.

His body absorbed the shock as the crowd looked up from their juice boxes to gasp but then he regained his posture and everyone breathed again. He took one step then another toward first base, as if uncertain, and then he dropped to the dusty track, his body crumpling inward like a forgotten scarf sliding off a careless shoulder.

There was a mass inflow of parents and coaches to huddle around Paul so that in a minute even from the top of the bleachers his crumpled body was invisible. What was visible was the one person running in the other direction, the pitcher, almost colliding with the second baseman, his green cap flying off his head as he bisected the outfield. He was tall for thirteen, legs covering ground in one stride that would take his

teammates two. He was strong looking, as well. Strong enough to send a badly aimed baseball hurtling home.

The brother at the base of the bleachers fought out of the crowd and went tearing across the field after the pitcher, who at that point had hit the high chain link fence at the other end of the field. A woman's wail arched out of the huddle around Paul. The brother had caught up to the pitcher. He snatched him from the fence, to the ground by the back of his number 13 jersey almost like he was mad at him, like he was Mr. MacGregor snatching Peter Rabbit by the back of his blue sweater right at the edge of his decimated garden.

The pitcher landed in a way that sent shockwaves up his spine but still he tried to get away. He fought with his older brother until he lay on his stomach, held down. Fingers clawing the grass, the pitcher opened his mouth in a shout that could not be heard over all the other shouts. Everyone was still paying attention to the main stage.

If you were standing at the top of the bleachers you would have seen his contorted face upturned in your direction. Maybe the flutter of a pink skirt had caught his attention. Or maybe you wouldn't see his face, the sun was dropping to the horizon right about then. Maybe, if you squinted real hard you could sort of make out the features of his face but not enough to testify to their expression. But he stopped struggling just for a second and the brother was able to get his arms around him so that he wasn't so much holding the pitcher down as just holding him and he crumpled too, not like a falling scarf but like a piece of fruit left too long in the sun, all its tenderness shriveling in the broad sweep of the harsh heat.

The ambulance came tearing into the school field's parking lot and Paul's lifeless body was loaded into it to be brought to a hospital where he would be pronounced dead a solid half hour after he had actually died. Parents pulled children down out of the bleachers or fished them out of the dissipating crowd around Home, and took them away.

There was a nasty lawsuit in which the Ciccios went after the baseball company, the coaches, and, then, most senselessly it seemed, after the pitcher himself. They alleged violent intent citing an unknown witness who claimed that he had threatened Paul before the game. They settled out of court. Thus the overzealous padding of the Bokum Junior League and the dismal financial situation of the pitcher's family, already recently deserted by their father. With no money left for college, the pitcher's older brother abandoned his plans for a degree in programming at the state university and volunteered for the Peace Corps. The pitcher and his mother remained in their large white colonial home, half empty, and just a few blocks from the playing fields and the plaque erected in honor of the dead boy.

The pitcher didn't behave like he was sorry. He fell out of touch, got in trouble a few times, periodically disappeared from the halls of school as suspensions required. He was slowly, painfully excised from the Bokum teen social scene, ignored except for when academics required notice of him as a lab partner or a teammate in gym. There was one tense moment when it was his turn to pitch in a PE class. When Coach Elber tossed him the ball a look of incredulity came over his face. The coach was new in town and didn't know. And the pitcher wasn't going to explain. But a sophomore, who was

next up to bat had no trouble doing so. "I'm not going out that way," he prefaced the explanation. Coach Elber floundered, and in the awkward silence that followed the pitcher tossed both glove and ball on the mound and stalked off through the outfield back to the school. He never took another PE class.

So the parents of Bokum padded their Junior Leaguers to the point where the game could hardly be played thanks to it all, thinking they were protecting their little darlings from the sort of freak accident that had a one in a trillion chance of happening again, but sleeping easier because for just a moment that day, they beat the random tragic chaos that is sweet, precarious life.

Chapter 1: The Statistical Probability of the Whole World Going Kablowie

1999

The sink was full of red, streaking down the sides, the drain sucking like an open chest wound.

The rubber gloves pulled in Crystal's hair as she yanked at the snarls. She clicked the spray hose again, the cold water hitting the nape of her neck and making gooseflesh rise down her back. More pink-ish red water slid out of her hair. A little bit of pink rubbed off on the towel as Crystal wrung her long hair dry. Cheap dye, but her hair was still a violent hot pink, darker in its wetness. She pulled a comb through its length until the thin straggling strands unknotted, and then reached up to weave it, still damp, into a French braid.

She jerked upright as the kitchen's back door opened. Glass broke on the floor with a clatter and her mother shrieked, "Crystal. Your hair!"

Groaning inwardly, Crystal turned to face her mother, her damp hair supported off her shirt by her still gloved hands.

Her mother bent to pick up the bag of groceries. "Damn it, Crystal, I said no. Get me some towels."

As she turned for towels, her fuchsia-tinted reflection came into focus in the dark window over the sink. On the floor in front of her mother, a jar of spaghetti sauce had broken soaking the paper grocery bag. She hurriedly tossed her mother a kitchen towel, the fingertips of her gloves staining it pink.

"Pink, Crystal, pink?" said her mother, mopping up the sauce.

"What's wrong with pink, mom?"

"The new dress code!" Her mother tsked. "Get me another towel."

"You always used to dress me in pink when I was a kid. I thought you'd be happy."

"Watch out, don't cut your hand on the glass."

"I'm sixteen, Mom," she said, rolling her eyes.

Her mother only scoffed. "Set the table when you're done here."

Crystal wiped out the sink with paper towels. She peeled the gloves off without touching the dye to her skin. The damp braid curled over her shoulder making a wet spot spread on her t-shirt. She swung it to the other shoulder, pulling four dishes from the cabinet next to the sink.

"Shane's at practice tonight," her mother reminded her, her head halfway in the refrigerator as she arranged the other groceries.

Crystal put one plate back. If her brother wasn't at practice, he was at Jessica's. And she, Crystal, was home, the lone object under their parents' watchful eyes. She finished setting the table and her mother brought over containers from the market's prepared food section.

"We'll have a nice dinner on your last day of vacation," her mother said, dishing them out. "Go get your father."

The room at the front of the house where Crystal's father liked to fall asleep in front of the news was at the end of a dark hallway. She walked down it barefoot, quiet, trying not to startle her father awake. As she poked her head through the living room

doorway, she saw him leaned back in the blue light of the TV, snoring. She wanted to leave him asleep, postpone his lame dad jokes about her hair. Before she could make a decision the television caught her eye.

They were playing the clip on the news again, of the boy falling out of the second floor school library window. Crystal stood stuck in the hallway, watching. The news was a follow-up, an update on the injured students' conditions. The boy in the window was doing okay. They played the clip again. Crystal watched once more as he pulled himself out over broken glass and seemed to pause before falling into the arms of the cops below him who had scrambled on top of their vehicle. It was the daring sort of feat Crystal hoped to never have to do, least of all at school.

She knew things would be different tomorrow. Changes were being made since Colorado. Locker searches, no backpacks in class, school IDs. Crystal didn't really get it. She had read all the news. The shooters at the Colorado high school hadn't kept anything in lockers or carried their guns hidden in backpacks to class. They were recognizable faces on campus, not people who needed to be ID'd. But apparently the illusion of safety was better than admitting there was no safety at all.

The news went to a commercial. Crystal backed away without her Dad seeing her linger there. They had told her to stop watching the news, to stop worrying about things she could not control. But how could she not worry? If it wasn't a bunch of high school kids getting shot while they ate their lunch, it was the world ending when the clock struck midnight on the New Year. The news, even with its penchant for

melodrama, was the only thing that approached the uncomfortable truths that everyone else in her life wanted to skirt around.

But even that was not enough. The thought of going to school on an ordinary day and then leaving in a body bag plagued Crystal. She had been grateful that summer break came when it did. At the end of the year, more than once she had left for school, waited for her parents to go to work and then snuck back in to spend the day at home. They hadn't caught her until the last week of school, when a plant shutdown had sent her father home early from his shift. By then it was too late to save her algebra grade. She had just barely passed biology and history. And her parents had made her pay for it all summer long. Returning to classes had hung on the horizon for months, and now tomorrow was almost here.

Contrary to her mother's opinion, it was not Crystal's hair that piqued the enforcement of the dress code the next morning at the high school. It was tense getting off the bus and walking through the glass front doors with the mass of students. Who had what in their backpacks? Whose outfit would be in violation of the new stricter codes? She left the crowd and moved down the bright biology hallway toward her locker. While depositing her backpack into her locker as per the new security measures, she caught the edge of a conversation between the Vice Principal and—seeing him was always an unpleasant shock—Jamie Wozniak.

"Detention on day one, Mr. Wozniak, that's a new record," Vice Principal Belliconti said. Crystal tried to pretend not to be watching through the vent in her open locker door.

"What can I say, Mr. Belliconti, I'm only trying to protect my first amendment rights to freedom of expression," Jamie said, plucking at the lapels of the long black duster.

"You're violating the dress code."

"Tomato, tomato," Jamie said with a shrug.

"You'll be showing around a new student during your lunch detention."

"Jeez, Belliconti, let me just sit in the room by myself and think about what I've done wrong."

"Has that ever worked before, Mr. Wozniak?"

Crystal's locker suddenly was slammed shut by someone else's hand, cutting off Jamie's surely smartass response.

"Yo, girl," said Jessica, blocking the exchange entirely from view. "Your *hair*."

Her mouth fell open, revealing a large wad of yellow bubblegum. "Shane said you *dyled* it, but nothing about this."

The bell rang. Crystal shrugged. "I've got to go. Stats I," she said.

"I'll give you a ride home," Jessica called after her.

Two hallways away, Crystal located the classroom. Taking a deep breath she entered the room and made a beeline for an open seat in the very back. Crystal sat on the stool and pulled herself forward against the tall counter. She did not know anyone

in this class well. It was a remedial course, and having failed her Algebra final last year, she had been demoted. The few people she recognized were those she had always known to be trouble makers. At the end of one bench sat her brother's teammates Larry, Scooter, and Tomilson likely plotting their next obnoxious misadventure. Surely the vending machine by the gym still smelled like rotting fish.

"Welcome to Statistics I," said Mrs. Blahb, not even bothering to rise from her rollie chair at the front of the classroom. Crystal kicked her feet up onto the empty stool beside her trying to get comfortable for what was likely to be an exceedingly boring semester. "Most of you have found this course after a struggle with Algebra. This a form of applied equations—" Mrs. Blahb murmured on. Crystal stared out the window, watching in the distance where she could see the playground of the lower grade students. It was warm and summery out there. The air came in the cracked open fire escape window. Mrs. Blahb had dimmed the lights. Crystal felt herself drifting off as she sat slumped on the edge of the high counter, lulled by Mrs. Blahb's lecture on statistics.

"Hey, I got a question." It was Larry. "What's the statistical probability of the whole world going kablowie on Y2K?" His friends laughed.

Mrs. Blahb seemed to take his question seriously. "That's an interesting topic —"

The classroom door swung open. A tall figure in a long black coat stood in its frame. Crystal whipped her head from the window, her heart pounding at this abrupt entrance by someone dressed in this manner. But she saw with a different sort of

sinking in her stomach that it was only Jamie Wozniak. Why he insisted on wearing that thing, given the events of the last few months, she couldn't understand.

"You're late, Mr. Wozniak," Mrs. Blahb said from her chair still. "Looking for an opportunity to fail this class again?"

"Sorry," said Jamie, pulling the door shut with a careless backward hand on its edge. It slammed behind him as he strode through the first rows of the counters and stools, looking for an empty seat. Crystal realized with something akin to horror that the seat her feet rested on was the last open one. Jamie stopped beside her, raised one eyebrow, and she withdrew her sneakered feet onto the rungs of her own stool like a snail escaping back into the protection of its own shell.

"Cool hair," Jamie said so tonelessly, sitting, that Crystal could not tell how exactly he meant it.

Mrs. Blahb cleared her throat, "As I was saying, Y2K's probability..."

Crystal tried to pay attention, but Jamie, beside her, was jittering a knee up and down, his heels pressed onto the lowest rungs of the stool. Crystal could not believe he was able to keep the long black coat on in the heat that was coming through the window. As she watched surreptitiously, he reached into the coat and withdrew a silver pen and one crumpled piece of loose leaf college ruled paper. He wrote the date in the upper right hand corner. Clicking the pen in time to the way he was bouncing his knee, he appeared to turn his attention to Mrs. Blahb.

But a moment later, from the side of his mouth, he whispered, "Stop staring at me."

"Stop clicking that pen," Crystal spat back.

"Is there something you both have to say to the class?" Mrs. Blahb asked, her eyes zeroing in on them even from her low vantage point in the wheelie chair. "No?"

Crystal shook her head, blushing, but Jamie only clicked and unclicked his pen once more.

"You've both reminded me to start the assignments for problem set partners. Thank you for volunteering to be the first pair," Mrs. Blahb continued but before Crystal could protest she swiveled backward to the board and began writing names in pairs, *Jamie+Crystal* going up first.

Chapter 2: Hostile Mob

Grabbing a chance to check her e-mails Friday morning before school, Crystal sat at the desk in the living room. The speakers projected a garbled dial tone and static before making the connection. AOL messenger opened with its electronic, "You've got mail." There was one e-mail from Jessica about plans for later that night and one from a classmate, a forward:

To: crystalball83@aol.com

From: thedarklordvesper@yahoo.com

PASS IT ON. YOU ONLY HAVE THREE DAYS AFTER YOU SEE THIS MESSAGE TO SEND IT TO TEN FRIENDS. IF YOU DON'T SEND IT BY MIDNIGHT ON THE THIRD DAY YOU WILL...D...I...E.

PASS IT ON. PASS IT ON. 3 DAYS UNTIL YOU...D...I...E.

Inheriting the baton from The Trenchcoat Mafia, The Hostile Mob moves forward. No one is safe, but especially not the jocks. With the New Millennium comes a New Order.

Crystal only had a moment to close out of the screen before her father stuck his head around the living room door.

"You want chicken for dinner? Or spaghetti?"

"Whatever."

Her father sighed. "Stop saying whatever."

"Yeah, ok, what—"

"Crys!"

"Spaghetti."

Her father backed into the hallway and she could hear his footsteps approaching the kitchen. She clicked again, her wrist rubbing against the torn rubber mouse pad, reopening the page. Under the message there were links to what looked like newspapers. Crystal clicked one by one, each bringing her to stories of massacres around the world, the rare and terrifying public attacks like the ones in Australia and Colorado and the Embassies.

Her father stuck his head back in. "Crystal, I need you to get off the web, I have to make a phone call."

"Dad, I don't feel good. Can I stay home today?"

Her father's face clouded. "Crys. Don't start this again."

Crystal protested, "Really, I—"

Shane bounded down the stairs interrupting them. "Come on, Jess is waiting outside for us."

Crystal hadn't gotten her license yet, one more feature of the royal grounding her parents had administered over the summer. School mornings consisted of rides to school in the backseat of Jessica's car, Shane's hand reached across the front seat tucked under the edge of Jessica's mini skirt or in her thigh high pastel socks. It was that or the occasional bus ride. Crystal had invested in a good pair of headphones for her Walkman. It made these rides slightly more bearable, with her forehead against the window and Oasis blasting in her ears.

When exactly her childhood friend and her brother had started doing it Crystal could not say. All she knew was that she had discovered Jessica exiting their bathroom at three in the morning six months ago. She had been wearing a long t-shirt of Shane's and when he stuck his head out of the his bedroom to see what was keeping her, things had become too Brenda-Brandon-Kelly for Crystal's liking and she had ducked into the vacant bathroom, thinking about what a bitch Shannen Doherty was.

"Isn't that your freak of a stats partner?" Jessica shouted.

"What?" Crystal asked, pulling the headphones off her ears, resting their orange foam pads around her neck. Jessica was stopped at the crosswalk right before the student lot behind the school fields.

"Jamie Woz-niak," Jessica said, drawing out his name unnecessarily. She had gasped earlier in the week when Crystal had informed her of her Stats partnership. "He's darkly sexy, Crys."

"You think?" Crystal asked skeptically just as Shane said, "Hey!"

Jamie appeared in the crosswalk, mysteriously backpackless like he had left his books in his locker, homework free. He strode purposefully as if to some much more important destination than homeroom.

"Darkly sexy, huh? More like school shooter chic," Shane said, in a high-pitched voice that Crystal recognized as vaguely Jessica-esque.

"Not funny, Shane." Annoyed, Crystal opened the door of the still stopped vehicle and got out. On the other side the field fences was the sprawling pillared entrance to the high school. She slid the foam earphones back over her hair, the dash of

the pink and orange a vivid reflection in the shadows of the glass door as she entered. A steely sense of a vague threat settled over as she crossed over the threshold, but then she was inside and the day had started.

The tiny screw dropped down the drain with a distant ping. "Dammit," said Matthew, his hand plunging ineffectually after it, too late. The sink was meant to act as a static-free basin for all of this, not the cause of the trouble. He'd taken the whole Macintosh apart piece by piece the night before, scrubbed it, put it back together with enhanced memory and storage. It was rare that he could make the expensive improvements he wanted, but the most recent freelance project had paid well. And he'd monetized Y2K4U.net, which eked out respectable pocket change. Jamie, at least, would appreciate the memory increase. He'd been asking for it lately, frustrated by the processing bogged down by too many technical applications.

The back door banged open. Jamie entered, his face shadowed, kicking the door closed. He immediately went to the refrigerator. Matthew could hear the *glug-glug-glug* that accompanied milk chugging. Jamie replaced the milk in the fridge, breathing heavily.

"Little brother," Matthew said.

"Solve the Y2K bug today, Matty?"

"It's a good thing I'm wearing all this armor to protect me from that sharp wit."

"Yeah," Jamie replied with a grumble, still surveying the contents of the fridge.

"What crawled up your ass?"

"Belliconti's foot."

Matthew snapped one of the last buttons into place. "That new vice principal?"

"He never got laid in high school, I'm telling you."

Matthew felt a smile crack over his face. That was rare these days. "What'd he do to you?"

"Pulled me out of class. Wasted my time."

"About what?"

"Some chain e-mail prank bullshit."

Jamie shrugged out of his long dark jacket, tossing it over the back of a kitchen chair. It was the sort of thing that would have driven their mother nuts five years ago. Now she probably wouldn't notice, practically racing from the garage to her bedroom when she arrived home. Taking care of Jamie had more or less fallen to Matthew when their dad left. No one had ever told him who—if anyone—had picked up the slack when he had gone to Africa.

"Chainmail prank bullshit? Like what?"

"It like threatens to kill the jocks and stuff. Such BS. As if I'd waste my time on Jocks."

"So what'd he say?" Matthew asked, anxious.

"Belliconti? He thanked me for coming in, I asked him if I had a choice, he reminded me 'we all have choices.'"

Matthew leaned back against the countertop. A heavy plate in his vest made a dull clinking sound, rigid against his spine. "What a load."

"No kidding," Jamie actually looked sort of pissed. Matthew was often disturbed by his younger brother's perennial chill. He straddled one of the high stools at the island across from Matthew. "Asks me if I've checked my e-mail today. I inform him that in a fit of panic my older brother disassembled the family machine in the kitchen sink at 2 a.m. —"

"Sorry."

"— and that, no, I haven't checked my email. He boots up his machine, brings up this macabre e-mail, makes me look at these grainy frigging images of all the massacres it mentions. Took forever for it to load so we were just sitting in silence for like ten minutes."

"What?" asked Matthew, trying to hide his discomfort.

"Just to be a little more of a dick, he starts ragging on my coat, telling me they can confiscate it if they want."

Matthew stepped over to the counter. "Why do you think he was asking you about it?"

"You know," Jamie said quieter, "I still don't have a clue what it's about. I didn't want to look it up on the computers at school. You about done with that?" he nodded at the reassembled tower.

"I have to reload the operating system."

"Damn."

"Someday we're gunna have personal handheld computers in our pockets that connect to the web through the air. Then we can look up whatever we want wherever we want."

Jamie grabbed a banana off the counter and stood up to leave. "Whatever you say, bro. That's why you're building the bunker and not me."

Chapter 3: Party Like It's 1999

The cars were backed down Spruce Street outside Schwartz's party, one or two steamed up in the cooling air. Jessica dragged Crystal by the hand as she reluctantly dug her heels into the pinecone littered sidewalk.

"I really don't to want go, Jess," she whispered.

"You'll be fine. After one drink you'll relax and be feeling it. Come on, Shane said he'd meet me here."

Alcohol very rarely relaxed Crystal or left her "feeling it." Jessica conveniently forgot this every time there was a party to which she wanted to drag Crystal. She would have long abandoned the friendship if Jessica wouldn't be around the house so much with Shane. But as she followed Jessica into the pulsating, flashing party it was clear she had to down one drink at least to get through this.

"There's Shane!" Jessica said, abruptly deserting Crystal, as Crystal had known she would. She had not wanted to come out tonight to Jimmy Schwartz's house party. But the prospect of spending a Friday night alone with her parents was worse. They thought that she was just sleeping over at Jessica's, which she was...after the party.

The music thrummed from two opposing sound systems, Smashing Pumpkins "Tonight, Tonight" from one and TLC's "No Scrubs" from the other, a hefty boombox, lifted onto the shoulder of one of the dancers in the crowded living room. The couches had been pressed back against the wall. Jessica had found Shane there. Crystal could see her now perched upon his lap, her back to the dancers as they pawed at each other.

"Hey, Crystal," said one of the girls passing by, surprised. She knew most of the kids here but hadn't spent a lot of time with them recently. The summer had been a quiet respite from the crowded sweaty social scene.

It was too warm. Crystal pushed through the dancers to the bar—a row of half-drunk beer cans and a random assortment of liquor bottles clearly lifted from parents' private collections meant to be poured into the towered plastic cups. She poured something random, a dark amber, and scooped a handful of ice out of a questionable open bowl. Perhaps the cool drink might staunch the uncomfortable feelings crawling up her spine. But the few sips she took only burned on the way down, increasing her sudden wooziness. The alcohol evaporated off her tongue, tiny explosions against the roof of her mouth. Catching sight of the nearby stairway, she made her way through the edge of dancers and out of the sweaty crush.

Crystal climbed the stairs to the second floor, pausing on the landing when she heard a voice above her call, "Look out below." She could just see the hallway at the head of the staircase. Three guys were standing crouched, cups in hands. There was a tumbling sound that rolled closer and closer until it arrived. A mottled blue bowling ball tipped over the upper floor and *thump-thump-thumped* down the stairs at Crystal. She jumped back at the wall of the landing, out of the way.

"We said look out!" yelled one of the guys, chasing after the bowling ball. Crystal rolled her eyes and continued up the flight.

Entering the first bedroom, her plastic cup in hand, she shut the door. It was dim in the room as she sank onto the white eyelet bedspread, the only light coming from an

open window. She clenched her eyes shut, willing away the tunnel vision that was descending on her. Fumbling blind she decided to leave the rum on the nightstand. Tiny hiccuping noises were sounding from nearby and it took her a moment to realize that they were coming from her own mouth. It was happening again. In the darkness behind her eyes starbursts like fireworks were exploding.

"Hey," came a voice. "You ok?"

Her eyes snapped open, her breathing still rapid. But she was just as alone as she had been a few moments ago.

"I'm really losing it," she whispered to herself.

"No you're not, out here."

She turned and looked out the open window and saw a glint of light off glass. Rising, she approached the sill and leaned out.

On a thick tree branch extending along the second story sat Jamie Wozniak, in his dark coat. Crystal felt her usual discomfort at seeing him, as if his brooding presence stained the air around him. He leaned forward, straddling the branch, one hand wrapped around a bottle, the other gripping the bark.

"Everything ok, partner?"

"I—" Crystal faltered for words.

"Come out," he said, sliding back on the branch to make room. "Get some air."

Crystal's heart was still beating erratically, but behind her a drunken voice shouted through the door, "You in there, Biff?"

Hoping to avoid a confrontation with a drunk football player, Crystal climbed out the window, her Chuck Taylors sliding over the rough bark. She reached out to steady herself as she landed in a straddle and found Jamie's rough hand gripping hers.

"You got it," he said, half-smiling.

Below, around the corner in the back yard, the party raged on, lights and music hissing up into the star-spangled sky.

"I'm just —" Crystal started. "I just don't really like these kind of parties."

"Why did you come?"

"I want to like them."

"There's not much going for them."

"No. There's not."

Crystal pulled her baggy wool sweater close, and combed her hair down over her shoulders like a scarf.

She started to say, "Why did you come then—" just as Jamie said, "You were wearing a skirt that same color that day." And he reached out to run a curl of her hair through his fingers. "The girl in the pink skirt. That's how I've always thought of you."

Crystal shut her mouth quickly, as if afraid of what might get in or escape out. It was true. It was bright pink had a print of black stars and she had liked to wear it with black Converse high tops. She remembered twirling in it on the bleachers that day, bored by Shane's game. So he *had* been looking up at her.

"I loved that skirt," she said in the absence of anything better. His fingers were still wrapped in her hair, his knuckles brushing her shoulder. "That was...that was freak, huh?"

"Are you calling me a freak?" He let go of her hair.

"No – no, I just meant that day at the baseball field. A freak accident."

"That's not what Paul Ciccio's family thought. They practically bankrupted my mom with a settlement."

"You were just playing a game."

"Was I?"

"Weren't you?"

"I don't know," Jamie took a sip of his beer. "Paul could be a real prick sometimes."

"Yeah, but you never were," Crystal said.

Jamie raised his eyebrows. "Tell that to the judge." He looked down at the party spilling around the corner from the backyard. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I just – felt really trapped down there." She didn't meet his eyes. "Like I couldn't breathe or get out."

"Here, hold this," he said passing her his beer. He rustled in the inside pocket of the long coat, finally withdrawing a rolled cigarette and a lighter. His eyes on her, he placed the cigarette between his lips. The lighter flared up behind his cupped hand, gilding his cheeks and eyes in the briefly shifting light.

He held it out to Crystal. "This will help." The sweet musty smell hit her then.

"Oh, no, I don't do that."

Jamie shrugged. "Maybe you should. I get it for my brother. He has panic attacks sometimes."

"That's – that's not what's happening to me," Crystal said, shoving the beer bottle back at Jamie. He took it back with his free hand, appearing to rock off balance for a moment.

"Ok, whatever you say."

"Crystal!" a voice shouted from down below. Jessica stood at the edge of the patio, hollering into the dark side yard.

"That's me," Crystal said, suddenly eager to get away from Jamie Wozniak and the chronically intense air that surrounded him. "I'd better go get her."

Jamie nodded, gesturing with the bottle to the window. Crystal shimmied back to the sill and tried to slide as gracefully as possible into the bedroom. With one foot on the floor she moved to bring the other one in but found the ragged edge of her jeans stuck to a broken branch on the tree limb. Before she could fall or right herself there was a hand gripping her ankle. Awkwardly turning she saw that Jamie had hold of her with one hand, the other hand clamped around the bottle and the joint between two fingers. He met her eyes as he bent forward and bit into the tattered denim, unhooking it from the tree branch. The scruff of his cheek scraped the skin at the inside of her ankle and then, released, she tumbled into the bedroom. Righting herself she turned back to the window but could only see the light reflecting off the bottle.

"See you in class," she said, turning and crossing to the door.

As she pulled it closed she heard a faint, "See you."

On Monday, Crystal could not face yet another ride with Jessica and Shane and walked to the end of the lane to catch the bus. The bus had smelled the same since kindergarten, that same mix of sweaty kid and Naugahyde seating, with hot dusty air blasting from the heaters. Crystal resented the hold her parents had put on her getting her license as punishment for the end of last year. They offered a bevy of excuses.

"What if we can't find you?"

"Jessica or Shane could take you."

"All that independence is a lot to handle right now."

"Where do you have to go anyway?"

It was the last one that had really pushed her over the edge during their argument about it, slamming the screen door behind her and disappearing for three hours. She returned home later to find her parents frantically staring at the new caller ID, waiting for the phone to ring.

"Where have you been?"

"Oh you know. That new club downtown? Sodom and Gomorrah?"

In truth, she had been at the town library, nestled in the children's section beanbags with a new fantasy series, *Harry Potter*. But given the events of last semester, even that would likely worry her parents.

Riding the bus, she stared at her own reflection in the escape window smudged by elementary student fingerprints. She'd piled her hair on top of her head, roots she had not covered well showing amongst the pink at the edges of her hairline.

The bus smoothed to a stop and several of the boy's soccer team members got on at the new pricey subdivision off Peach St.

"Hey, Cotton Candy," one of them with badly frosted tips said, passing her on his way to the back of the bus. "Can I have a bite?"

Digging into her backpack, Crystal pulled out her headphones, settling the orange foam over her ears. She switched the Walkman on, sitting back into a swarm of tinny acoustics.

Finally the bus pulled up to the school entrance. Crystal filed into the line slowly disembarking, breathing in a lungful of cold air mixed with potent exhaust. Her headphones were firmly in place as she walked through the quadruple glass door entrance with everyone else. She followed everyone up the stairs in the mass of shouting, cheerful teenagers, much too enthused this early in the morning. Her locker was outside the marine biology lab and always seemed to release an aquatic waft of air when she spun the lock and pulled the shuddering metal door open.

A note flew out onto the ugly floor tiles. She picked it up, wondering who could have bothered to leave it. The spiraled edges were left on the wrinkled sheet torn from a college-ruled notebook.

Stats problem set, noon, pool roof? read the cramped scrawl. Jamie.

It was hard to get up the stairs to the pool roof. The coaches' office was around the corner and quite frequently they popped their heads out for no good reason at all as if they knew there were students like Crystal lurking for the sole express reason to climb the stairs unpermitted. She had been waiting, watching, for ten minutes when Jamie appeared, sweeping through the lobby of the gym and pool, his black trench coat blowing out the like the duster of a wild west villain. He didn't pause to look at her or the coaches' office, but simply hit the bar of the crash door and ascended the stairs. Crystal slipped through the door behind him, her heart pounding.

"Are you nuts?"

The stairs were dim. She followed him up their switchback landings by sound more than sight.

"You always look guilty, Cotton Candy. You give everything away in your face."

"Don't call me that."

"Everyone else does."

"Yeah, and they piss me off too."

She could hear him pause up ahead. "She curses."

"She does."

"Tell them to stop."

"As if they'll listen."

"Well at least you'll have defended yourself instead of bending over for them."

"Hey," Crystal said. Gaining the second landing, she grabbed him by the back of the trench coat just as he stepped onto the stair above her. He slipped off it. Cloudy

light was filtering from the door's window on the next landing, six steps away. "Don't talk to me like that."

"Yeah. Just like that," he said.

"I'm serious."

"So am I." Shaking loose of her grip he ascended the remaining steps.

He pushed the crash bar on the roof door open and gestured her through like a courtly gentleman. She stepped onto the roof. From there they could see the intersect of 171 and the Post Road, the highway cutting through in the distance, and the playground at the lower grades school next door where two hundred plus children were hanging off the wooden jungle gym, the fake pirate ship and the rope and wood bridges, leaping off and landing in piles of wood chips with their neon t-shirts spread out like excess skin of a flying squirrel. They hit the chips on flexible joints, rebounding into a run that slowed as they crossed onto blacktop. Their voices melded like a low drone of bees.

Jamie dragged a nearby roll of rubber roof material and slid it in the door to prop it open. He went behind the humming air vents and settled in place against the pale sandy brick of the raised stairwell, snapping his duster out like a cape. "Ok. Probability."

He may have gotten taller, and older, grown his hair out and dressed in a dark and vastly different way, but somehow it was always easy to see the kid he had been underneath it all. Maybe it was the way he turned his body or held his jaw or always

looked like he was about to take off sprinting. When Crystal saw Jamie she saw that pitcher running away from the crumpled body at home plate.

Kids died all the time. She knew that now. Sometimes they even got murdered by their classmates on their lunch breaks. But the baseball game was the first time she had learned it and it was hard to uncouple Jamie from that lesson. But there were other lessons to learn—statistical ones and she couldn't help learning them beside the pitcher anymore than he could help learning them beside the girl in the pink skirt.

Crystal tossed her backpack on the ground and slouched into place beside Jamie. She worried the stretchy choker she wore.

"Do you have a PC to type this up on?"

"Macintosh."

"Fancy."

"My brother Matt tinkers."

"I used to see him at the library a lot when I was little."

Jamie reached into his pocket, feeling around. "He doesn't get out that much any more."

Crystal felt like she was treading on unwanted territory but couldn't stop herself from asking. "He wasn't injured, was he? He was with the UN in Rwanda, right?"

"No, Peace Corps in Tanzania."

"Right. I remember. They asked us to pray for him at church."

Jamie snorted, withdrawing a rolled joint from his pocket with a lighter. "Guess that guardian angel was working for him."

"But he's back here now? At home?"

"You wanna work on this probability problem set or what?"

"Yeah. You're going to type it?"

"Sure. You know, actually, why don't I just do it." He clicked the lighter and flared the flame to life, lighting one end. "You want some?"

"No," said Crystal, coldly.

Jamie stood up, cool and untouchable in the long coat. He inhaled deeply once, twice, and stamped the end of the joint against the brick wall before stuffing it back in the deep pockets of the coat.

"Your hair says you really want to be a rebel but the rest of you don't."

He started to walk away.

"Shows what you know."

He barely paused in his approach to the roof door. "Prove it. Skip class with me."

Crystal weighed the risk of someone noticing her missing midday and calling her mother. "I will if you tell me about what's wrong with your brother."

He stopped now, turned around, anger on his face and Crystal remembered that she had once been the sole witness of much greater and worse emotion from him before.

"He's all fucked in the head."

"I've gathered."

"How?"

"You said he doesn't get out much."

"And what exactly does that tell you?"

She hoisted her backpack on, leaning away from him and looking out over the playground where the children were being called in from recess, funneling into orderly lines and looking very unnatural in the process. The parents in this town had never recovered from what happened to Paul. They exercised the force of their parental anxiety in spades, micromanaging their children's lives, padding them for safety and scheduling them so brutally that they never had a moment to stray from the flock and find trouble. What would happen when they weren't there to organize them into neat and orderly lines, protect them from the booboos of childhood and the perennial hurts of life? She looked back at the one kid who Paul's death had impacted the most. None of this protection had done him any good.

"No one lives with their parents unless they have to."

Jamie quirked a crooked smile. "Touché. Are we going now?"

"Yeah," said Crystal, moving past him and hauling open the heavy door. "Take me somewhere with French fries."

"You got it." The door slammed shut behind Jamie and they stood on the upper landing, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the darkness in the stairwell.

"He bought a flak jacket when he came home. He wears it all the time."

"That's weird," Crystal said, not without sympathy.

"He was in a bombing."

"What?" Crystal asked.

"At the embassy, getting paperwork done to come home. His friend died."

"I'm...sorry."

"He's building a Y2K bomb shelter."

"That's even weirder."

Jamie started to walk down the stairs ahead of her, but turned back when he said, "Yeah. It really fucking is. Come over to my place for the problem set later. He might even let you see it."

Chapter 4: The Bunker

"So my mom had to fork over for the cement guy," he was saying, describing how his brother Matthew had hired a cement truck while their mother was out of town to fill the foundation he'd also hired a neighbor with a backhoe to dig out, without having asked permission to tear up the yard or having the money to do so. They were sitting at the McDonald's on the corner opposite the high school, filled with others cutting, sharing a plate of fries.

"That's insane," Crystal said, idly dragging a fry through the blob of ketchup Jamie had left at the edge of the tray.

"Literally," said Jamie.

"And now he has a bunk —"

Crystal was cut off by Jessica, slamming her tray onto their table. "You're cutting again? No way."

"Hey, Jess."

"What did you, like, kidnap her, Wozniak?" Jessica didn't exactly look at Jamie as she spoke but rather to an undeterminable spot above his head. Crystal rolled her eyes and was about to reply when one of three guys passing behind Jessica suddenly spoke up.

"Manslaughter is more his style than kidnapping," he said. It was Larry, backed by Scooter and Tomilson in their basketball sweatshirts. Jamie turned his face to them, still seated, resembling very much a storm cloud threatening to break lightning and torrential rain. Crystal's eyes jumped from one to the other, unsure of what to say.

"So not funny, guys," Jessica sing-songed. "Get back on the court so my boyfriend doesn't kick your ass in practice this afternoon." She turned her back on them, dismissing the jocks. "Crys, you coming for the history quiz?"

"Shit, yes," Crystal said sliding out of the booth. "Thanks for the fries."

"Four o'clock this afternoon?" Jamie asked.

"Yeah, see you then."

Crystal followed Jessica out of the McDonald's. Once outside she threw a cautious glance back through the window. Jamie sat in their booth still. He pulled a paperback out of a pocket and looked like he was about to start reading. His jaw was still clenched from Larry's jab.

"Were you just on a date with Jamie Wozniak?" Jessica asked with a salacious tone in her voice.

"No, of course not. Hurry up, we're going to be late for this quiz."

Crystal and Jessica arrived back on campus just in time to duck inside before rainclouds broke and to hear a squawking PA announcement echo through the halls.

"Will the student body please report to the auditorium for an assembly."

"Awesome. Definitely did not study for that quiz," said Jessica.

They followed a sea of students to the pitched auditorium, climbing uphill to the back seats. There were seats empty amongst the basketball players and they took them, waiting for Shane to arrive. He jumped over the back of the seat, settling on Jessica's other side. In the last few moments before the assembly started Larry, Scooter, and Tomilson slunk in. Crystal caught herself glaring at them. Jamie, of course, didn't show.

Even if he had made it back to campus, Crystal doubted he could be bothered to make an appearance at an assembly. The overhead panel lights flicked on and off, signaling quiet in the auditorium. Vice Principal Belliconti strode onto the stage from the stage left wing, a microphone in one hand. He stopped center stage and crossed his arms, the microphone burrowed somewhere in the armpit of his sports coat. He brought it to his mouth but did not say anything right away.

"I know, five or so months ago in April, we talked. We talked about how you were feeling and I made a promise that we would do everything we could to keep you safe." He paused, attempting to make meaningful eye contact with the students. Earnestness replaced his typical strongman-disciplinarian projection. "But I told you that would mean we had to be tough. There would be no tolerance for anything that could even potentially be considered violent. It's no secret that last June one of your fellow students came to class wearing a jacket that he had worn on a weekend fishing trip. He realized, too late, that a knife from the trip was still in his pocket. He came to me and Principal Saylor and told us what happened. He surrendered the knife. But, I think you know, we had to expel him. Zero tolerance."

Crystal tried to remember this incident. "When was that?" she whispered to Jessica.

"When you were skipping all the time."

"Gone! Just like that," shouted Belliconti, back to his usual pit-bull voice. "I don't want to have to do it to any one of you. But we're all on edge."

"Some more than others," said Jessica, still whispering.

"Seriously," said Shane. "Someone needs to get VP some Prozac and tell him to chill."

It was true. Belliconti had taken on a somewhat manic expression.

"I think we have all been watching the news," he continued. "The world is changing."

Was it though? It seemed the world had been an eternally violent place where life and death arrived, each a little haphazardly, to the surprise and horror of human beings. Sure, recent events were a new flavor of terrifying but perhaps the exaggeration of danger to which adults were so prone had gripped Belliconti now.

He stepped forward to the edge of the stage. With his arms crossed again in something of a self-embrace he looked up at the spread out slope of students. He looked less like their Vice Principal now and more like a father, concern, disappointment, and worry coming out from behind the mask of anger. "I hope you know we are taking the recent e-mails some of you have received as a threat. We have been working tirelessly over the past five months to update our policies and procedures, to prepare for whatever challenges we may face, and to ensure a safe place for you to continue learning." He paused. "If you know anything about those e-mails I ask that you come forward so that we may ensure the safety of our community at large."

There was some uncomfortable rustling in the room.

"You can go back to class now," Belliconti finally said.

Every student stood up at once, creating something like a stampede that bottlenecked itself in the narrow exits. Crystal let herself be swept along in the rush.

At 4 o'clock Crystal arrived at the Wozniak front door, just as it began to pour rain again. After knocking several times at the colonial style front of the house with no answer she decided to loop around the side and look for a back door. What she found instead, upon rounding the back corner was a large swathe of dirt in the middle of the back lawn topped by a freshly welded steel trap door. The bunker. As she stood looking at it in amazement she suddenly felt a whoosh of air behind her and a shadow fell across her path.

"Who are you and what the hell are you doing here?"

Matthew Wozniak. Crystal knew it was him before even turning to see his face. She put her hands up as if it were a cop behind her and slowly spun.

"Hi, Matt," she said. "I'm your brother's stats partner, Crystal Sheffield. We've met before, a long time ago."

He was a hollowed version of what she remembered. His sandy hair was plastered to his forehead. His eyes were hardly more than two dark shadows. The fabric of the flak jacket he wore was soaked.

"I'm just here to do some homework," she said. "Where is Jamie?"

Matthew seemed to relax. "The post office. He's sending something out for me. He'll be back in five minutes."

"Ok, so I'll just wait for him," Crystal said, resisting the impulse to step backwards, away from Matthew

Matthew nodded thoughtfully. He stood staring at her for an uncomfortable amount of time.

"Is...is that ok?" she faltered. She pushed her wet hair back.

"Wanna come inside?" he asked abruptly.

"Sure...."

Instead of going to the house, he led her to the heavy metal trap door. Crystal looked back over her shoulder once to make sure Jamie had not suddenly arrived and then followed Matthew down the short staircase. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the brilliant construction lighting in the small space, but once she did, she saw the one room area with a large hole in one corner of the flooring. Mounted shelves were stocked with canned food. Gas masks and rolls of duct tape lined another shelf beside the entrance. Matt stood back, beneath a wall of looped ropes on hooks. Barrels large enough to fit a person lined the right wall. She could only hope that all they were filled with was water. The news had been covering people like this who were hoarding canned foods and antibiotics, convinced a computer bug was about to destroy the inner workings of society. The wet weather outside increased the musty smell in the bunker. She wrung her pink braid out and saw actual drops of rain water hit the cement floor at her feet.

He spread his arms like a tour guide. "Everything you need to survive the coming disaster of the year two thousand."

"So you're into all this Y2K stuff?"

"Yeah, aren't you?"

“I have a lot of other stuff to worry about.”

“This seems like the most urgent to me,” he assured her.

Matthew Wozniak had been something once upon a time. The last she really remembered seeing him had been at one of those Junior League games before that final fateful one, watching Jamie pitch with brotherly straight-backed pride.

The picture before her now was of something utterly different. Matthew must have been past twenty now, thinner somehow at this age than at sixteen, muscles ropy and wasted. He wore a t-shirt untucked from his tattered jeans, a heavy camo vest over the ensemble, a blue bandana tied like a sweatband under his hair which was badly in need of a trim. The resemblance to Jamie was clear around the shadowed eyes and she could tell it would be greater if he gained some weight back.

“So what are they saying about this Y2K thing? Why do we need bunkers?”

“The computers might bug out. You won’t be able to access any of your bank accounts and the stock market will crash worse than ‘29. Everyone should be prepping a year or two’s survival in food, water, medication, and weapons. We have no idea what the world will be like after the computers set back. Check it out on my website Y2K4U.net.”

It was then that Crystal really took in the ropes and zip ties hanging on the wall with all manner of tools and stacks of duct tape. None of it would look dangerous alone, but collected...

“When did you say Jamie would be back?” she asked, edging toward the stairs.

The hatch wrenched open. Jamie appeared then, his boots showing at the top of the shelter staircase. "Bro, is my stats partner down there with you?"

"I'm here," Crystal called up the stairs. She gathered her messenger bag up against her. "It was...nice to see you, Matt."

Matthew retreated to the corner workbench, already reinvested in the computer parts before him. He did not seem to notice as she went up the stairs. Jamie waited for her. The brief rain had stopped. The afternoon autumn light was already coming at a slant through the leaves, freckling the wet grass. Crystal squinted in its warmth, the brightness obscuring half of Jamie's face from view. He looked gentler to her somehow and she realized that he was not wearing his long black coat. He raised his eyebrows at her.

"You look different without the coat," she said in response to his raised eyebrows.

"Good or bad?" His voice did not let on whether he cared about her answer.

"Just different. Why do you even wear that thing with all the...bad press lately."

Jamie shrugged. "I look good in it." He gestured to her left. "Inside?"

In the cluttered kitchen inside, Jamie pulled a chair out for Crystal at the table. "Problem set?" he asked.

Crystal rolled her eyes and took out her Statistics binder.

"What do you think the probability of Y2K actually happening is?" she asked, leafing through her binder.

"Something like the standard deviation of fifteen past I don't give a fuck."

Crystal threw the binder of statistics down on the table. "What's the matter with you? You're not some member of the elite intelligentsia. You're in high school. Well, the days you bother to show up for it."

Jamie shoved his hands in his pockets, his fingers visible through the gaping holes in the denim. He smirked at the window. "Redundancy."

"What?"

"You're redundant."

"Me in general?"

Jamie turned back, still smirking. "What you said. Elite intelligentsia. The intelligentsia is so rare these days it is automatically elite."

"What happens if the computers don't click on to 2000?"

"I suppose we'll all time travel back to the turn of the century. No cars, terrible phones. You won't be able to vote, I'll take up wearing bowler hats..."

Crystal elbowed him in the side. "Seriously."

Jamie shrugged. "We'll be fucked."

Crystal breathed out in frustration. "That's comforting."

Somehow, it was. His nonchalant, apathetic nihilism – which one might mistake as something akin to acceptance – calmed her.

"Yeah." Jamie smirked. "But the guys from NASA and Macintosh and probably some Japanese fellows will have it under control in a week. Two tops. It'll be like a camping trip in the meantime."

"Yes camping with looting and anarchy."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"Anarchy?"

A head bob.

"Can you say it like it's a good thing?"

"Emma Goldman did."

"Who?"

"Wow," said Jamie snatching the problem set and a pencil from Crystal's hands, "Maybe I am a member of the elite intelligentsia after all."

As the girl's sneakers disappeared through the hatchway, Matthew looked up from his tinkering, relieved. He hardly ever allowed anyone into the shelter, but she had looked beyond pathetic outside, soaking wet with that pink hair turning the color of bruised flesh. Something about her, the set of her chin maybe, was unbearably familiar. And hot. He shifted uncomfortably in the chair. He was surprised. Between the cocktail of mind-numbing medications and general lack of interaction with the public at large, this was a rarity. But it wasn't just this girl he was thinking of.

Shaking himself, he stood up. He needed something else to do, something more physical, distracting. In the corner was the open part of the foundation where he was finishing the piping for the self-contained septic system. He snatched a wrench up from a nearby shelf, and the urge to smash it through the piping he had already laid almost over took him. It was tough lately to balance emotions of any sort. Everything became extreme. The doctors kept telling him these were the times to "use his toolbox," to step

back from his emotions and analyze where they were coming from. Fine, he would use his toolbox.

He crouched down into the hole, gripping the wrench, one boot propped uncomfortably against the edge of the concrete lip. The ring of metal on metal was satisfying in an unexplainable way, a tiny piece of violence. He turned the nut until it squealed and was in danger of snapping. He grabbed the next size wrench from the shelf, knocked a box of canned peaches sideways, and something slipped to the ground. An envelope with a letter and two photographs inside.

A month ago his former co-volunteer Anderson had mailed him a letter. It was the first he had heard from him since Renzo's service. He told him he didn't sleep through the night anymore but that that was ok because he and his wife had just had their first kid and one of them had to be up for 2 a.m. feedings anyway. Folded in the pages of the yellow legal pad paper was a Polaroid of them. It had been taken from behind and you could only see the sides of their faces. Anderson held up a water filtration system. Matthew stood with his shirt untucked. Renzo was crouched with a group of wide-eyed children. It was dated the day before the embassy attack on the back. Matthew had really thought about throwing out the letter and the photograph. Instead he tucked them inside a box of canned peaches in the shelter and tried to forget it was there.

And the other photograph, of course, was her. He'd tried to tuck it away with Renzo, not quite forgetting where he had put the envelope, but purposely not thinking

about it either. Worn from being worn, tucked into the inside pocket of his vest. She stared up at him with a smile of saturated ink. He'd been right about the resemblance.

These were just two more in the line of people he had let down, his brother first, then their mother, all the children he had held through fevers in Tanzania, sickened by the dirty water, waiting for the doctor to arrive. The basic medical training he received as a health educator only went so far, and that was never far enough. Just two more in the line.

He wondered briefly if Jamie was dating this girl, this other girl who had appeared so suddenly in the yard. Somehow, he wanted him not to be, not because he particularly wanted her, but because he felt instantly jealous of his brother having such good luck. This, of course, provoked a bitter laugh. The idea of either his brother or him having good luck was almost beyond laughable.

He had bigger projects to pursue in the shelter than to worry about the past. The greatest challenge he had yet encountered was the bathroom problem. To connect any plumbing would leave the occupants possibly exposed to the contaminants of the outside world. It was better to contain and store waste until emergence was safe. With instructions he found on a grainy websites, which he had organized on his own for Y2K4U.net, he had begun constructing a self-contained septic field directly below the bunker, otherwise known as digging a big frigging hole. He had done so, alongside Renzo more than once in Tanzania. He was digging a hole. That was enough for today.

Chapter 5: Scream

Crystal was bent halfway into her locker after third period when she heard a voice behind her say, "Hey." She straightened up quickly, knocking the narrow locker door with her elbow into the speaker. Jamie caught the sharp metal edge with a quick hand. "Sorry. Did I scare you?"

"I don't scare that easy." Her hands went self-consciously to her hair, fussing with the clip that held it up.

Jamie cocked his head to the side. "I just saw Blahb – "

"Was she rolling down the hallway in her wheelie chair?"

Jamie smiled, a genuine grin not the derisive quirk of the corners of his mouth he usually supplied at humorous moments. "You know, she was. And she told me – in a tone of obvious disbelief – that we scored highest on the second problem set."

"Awesome! Only took her three weeks to grade it."

Jamie opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted by the arrival of Jessica.

"Crys, you have to find a date and double with me and your brother to the Halloween Scream Marathon Friday," she said, ignoring Jamie's presence entirely.

"That slasher movie?"

"It's not *just* a slasher movie.

"So it's a murderer in a mask?"

"Yeah that goes after all these kids with a knife."

"I don't know, Jess, that sounds dumb."

"Find a guy and come with me and Shane."

Jamie stood there looking back and forth between the two of them with one raised eyebrow. Crystal leaned far enough back into her locker that she could close her eyes and take a deep breath. "Jess, I'm really not in the mood for —"

"We could go together," Jamie said.

"Do you even like to go to the movies?" Crystal asked, leaning back, surprised by his offer.

"Well, my brother says movie theaters are the obvious site of the next great massacre," said Jamie. "But that doesn't worry me much."

"Oook." Jessica raised her eyebrows. "So are you coming?"

Jamie shrugged. "Crystal?"

Crystal nodded, surprised still.

Jessica squeezed Crystal's arm. "See. Now you have a date. See you after lunch." And she disappeared into the flood of students.

"That was...weird of her," Crystal said.

"Nah, whatever," Jamie responded. "I'm always down for some B-horror. Meet after class for work? I gotta roll, Belliconti's headed this way and I don't wanna hear about how I'm violating the new security policies with this coat."

"Sure," said Crystal, as he moved away, his coat following in his wake, Belliconti not far behind.

The water had long since run cold by the time his brother found Matthew sitting under the shower stream, disassociated and certain he was watching himself from across the

room. He could see himself, naked and folded like an unhatched chicken, pathetic and weak under the water. He heard the sharp scream echo off the porcelain, but he could not claim it as his own. His hair hung down in his eyes, divided by rivulets, badly in need of a trim that he didn't have the money for or the strength to sit through. It was something about the water on his bare skin, unprotected by the heavy vest. The pattering of droplets was not unlike the fine mist that he felt land on him when Renzo was killed in the embassy bombing, a cloud of red rain that had nothing to do with bright Tanzanian blue sky. He tried to reach out and shut off the water but his hands were as ineffectual as they had been in applying pressure and cinching the tourniquet.

Jamie burst into the room. "Matt, what's wrong?"

Matthew could only shake his head.

Jamie opened the glass shower door. "Matty, come on, get out of there." Jamie held up a worn, holey towel, looking away so as not to stare at him, naked and whimpering. "You know you're supposed to let one of us be here when you shower."

"I spilled some lime in the shelter. I thought...I thought I could handle it alone."

"Just stand up." Jamie reached in and turned off the water abruptly.

Matthew could feel the chill now, felt his skin pucker into goose pimples. He stood and let Jamie wrap the towel around him. It took him a moment to remember how to dry off. The raw sensation on his skin brought him back little by little, connected him to his body again. He no longer felt as if he was watching from across the room.

"What are you supposed to tell yourself?" Jamie asked, rehearsed, as he dried Matthew's face with a second towel.

Through the towel Matthew answered, "I'm not there right now. That was a year ago."

"And?"

"Bin Laden is on the FBI's most wanted list and they will catch him."

"Also...?"

"I'm a survivor."

Jamie peered into his eyes up close. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"What are you going to do tonight?"

Matthew shrugged.

"Why don't you take some medicine and go to bed?"

Matthew shook his head. "Those pills make me feel like I'm under water."

Jamie sighed. "Want to order a pizza in? Watch the game together?"

Matthew nodded. "Sure."

"Okay. I have to go call someone I was supposed to meet tonight, then I'll call the pizza."

"You have plans?"

"I was meeting a girl for a movie."

"That girl with the pink hair?"

"It's no big deal, we can reschedule."

"No, Jamie, you have to go. She's hot."

Jamie took a deep breath in, looking Matthew straight in the eye. "Matty, I can't leave you like this."

Matt looked around, helpless, feeling the burden that he was. Water dripped off his hair onto his bare skin, and he felt himself coming apart again at the familiar trigger. But he pushed through. "What if I come with you?"

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

Crystal's bedroom door shuddered. "Let's go, Cotton Candy." It was Shane. Nervously Crystal ran her fingers through her hair once more. She hoped the ripped jeans she wore over the Chucks gave the right impression of cool disinterest. She couldn't be entirely sure why she had allowed Jessica to steamroll her into this. "Yo, I'm leaving."

Crystal swung the door open. "Could you like chill please?"

"Jessica called. She's waiting."

"You're whipped, brother," Crystal said. She hit the light switch just inside her room and followed Shane to the stairs.

"Yeah, tell me about it when you're in a relationship, Candy."

"Stop calling me that."

"Stop calling me that," Shane repeated in a mimic.

"I mean it, Shane."

"I mean it, Shane."

Crystal rolled her eyes as they entered the kitchen.

"Back by 10:30," her mother said, hardly looking up from the soup pot.

"11," said Shane.

"As long as you stay with Crystal the whole time."

"What are we, Amish? Your daughter can only have a late curfew if she stays with your son. Way to go, Mom."

"It has nothing to do with you being a girl," said her mother pointedly.

"Whatever," said Crystal, shouldering her purse, which had been hanging on the hook by the back door.

"Stop saying whatever," her father shouted from the living room.

Shane was already out the door. He started up their father's convertible. Crystal went to sit in the front seat but Shane leaned across and flipped the seat forward. "In the back, sister dear."

Crystal climbed in the back and pulled the seat back into place. Her knees bumped up against it.

"Here we go," said Shane as he put on his aviator shades.

"Yeah, ok, whatever."

Jessica lived a street away from the theater. After picking her up, they cruised into the parking lot, the cheap stereo going full blast. On the curb outside the theater stood Jamie in his long coat and beside him, Matthew. He had a thick zippered sweatshirt on, but Crystal could tell that heavy vest was strapped underneath.

"Did he bring his brother with him?" Jessica asked. She sounded as if she could hardly believe the audacity of inviting one's family member to a social gathering. "That dude is so weird."

"No," Crystal said, suddenly defensive, "he's alright."

Shane turned around lifting his shades onto his forehead. His frosted tips glowed in the setting sunlight above them. "How do you know?"

"I've met him. At the house. Jamie and I are Stats partners."

"Is it true he's building some sort of bug out bunker?" asked Shane, cruising into one of the empty parking spaces along the curb.

"Yeah," said Crystal. "He runs a website about it and everything."

"Geek," said Jessica. She giggled.

Matthew saw the car pull up and slip into one of the parallel parking spaces. Beside him Jamie stood stoically, hands in the pockets of his duster. He knew his brother had not wanted to take him with his younger friends tonight, but he had also staunchly refused to leave him at home. Two people got out of the small convertible before the girl with the pink hair did, unfolding like clowns from where the floorboards almost touched the ground. She climbed out last, her pink hair swinging into her face, obscuring her from view. She had surprised him the other day, appearing so suddenly in the backyard, her hair a vibrant beacon in the unexpected rainfall.

"Hey," his brother said to her. He lowered his voice, "Hope you don't mind that I had to bring Matty."

"No, of course not. Hey, Matt."

A pack of hollering teens in basketball jerseys were making their way down the sidewalk towards them. The guy with frosted tips who had driven the car—Crystal's

brother, Matthew realized suddenly, Shawn or Stephen—leaned out to give them back-thumping sort of hugs only teammates allowed. Crystal, Matthew noticed, seemed to suppress an eye roll.

"This is gunna be so gory," said the tallest.

"Nah, Jason, I've heard it's nothing that bad," the brother responded.

"Who needs gore when we have our own executioner right here," said another of the guys and with a jolt Matthew recognized the guy as one of the opposing team members from Jamie's Junior league team, a friend of the dead batter. And he knew, given the tight set of Jamie's jaw, exactly what the kid was insinuating.

Before he could work up the words to his mouth to defend his little brother, Crystal spat back, "Oh, go suck a big one, Larry."

Matthew saw a look of surprise and entertainment spread across his brother's face.

The other girl anxiously tried to smooth things over. "Let's go in." As they did, Jamie, Matthew noted, was as close to grinning as he ever got nowadays.

In retrospect, Crystal thought, as the whole group of them—her brother, Jessica, his teammates, and the Wozniak brothers, entered the diner next to the theater—*Scream* may not have been the best movie for someone in Matthew's state to attend. By the time they had reached the stabbing scene Jamie had his hands full—literally—trying to calm what appeared to be a panic attack. Matthew curled into a ball on the end seat, holding Jamie's hand as he took concentrated breaths. Though Jamie and Crystal sat between

him and the others, they all seemed to notice. They shuffled into the diner with him awkwardly.

"Over here," Jessica said, snagging a round booth.

"No, we'll just – " Crystal started to say pointing to Matthew.

"Don't bounce now, Crys," Jessica said with a pout.

Crystal obeyed, trying not to draw attention to Matthew. Matthew again sat on the end. Though he appeared calmer now, Jamie was the one who looked exhausted and on edge. A waitress took their orders and the basketball players kept up a steady stream of shop talk.

"We have about as much chance of beating Xavier as we do of the computers shutting down on Y2K."

Crystal, who was pressed against Jamie in the crowded round booth, felt him heave a preemptory sigh.

Matthew leapt at the topic, "It's gunna happen, man. The government doesn't want to admit it because they're so fucking scared but it's going to happen. All the way back to 1900."

"Sounds like a party."

Titters of condescending laughter.

"It won't be a party, man. It's gunna be chaos."

"Well that's what most of our parties end up being, am I right?"

Shane exchanged high fives around the table while Matthew adjusted his vest, squinting at his napkin.

"So, like," Jessica started. "The computers are just going to forget that 2,000 comes after 1,999 and go berserk and we would be plunged into the void that was a time before technology?"

"Like when our grandparents grew up?" Shane butted in. "Well seeing as Nana came through ok, I'll take my chances."

"So, Matt, my man," said one of the teammates. "Should I be building a bunker or something?"

"Yes, everyone should be building a shelter," Matthew exclaimed latching on to Jason's question without hearing its underlying sarcasm. He began detailing a list of requirements he had published on Y2K4U.net, "Water, medicine, security..."

Crystal could see the others' eyes glazing over, except Larry's which had grown shrewd with a mounting insult. She cut him off.

"I think your bunker is really cool, Matthew," she said. "I'd love to help with it sometime."

"Sunday?" Matthew said, turning eagerly in her direction. Someone scoffed, Tomilson or Scooter she could not tell.

"Sure," she said, trying to sound comfortable with this commitment.

Matthew smiled. Under the table, Crystal felt the briefest brush of a warm hand just above her knee and a gentle squeeze.

"I think we should call it a night, bro," Jamie said.

The hand left Crystal's knee. They both stood, sliding out of the booth.

"See you Sunday," Jamie said, guiding his brother out of the diner.

"See you," Crystal said.

Chapter 6: Nuclear Hypothesis

Crystal squeezed through the gap in the hedges of the backyard of the Wozniak residence early Sunday morning. The big white house looked quiet, as if the other occupants were long asleep. The sloped hatch of the bunker was propped open. The faintest sound of a CD player came up from below ground. At the edge of the hatch she shouted down, "Are you down there?"

The sandy head popped into view at the foot of the dim stairs. "I'm almost finished with the dry wall," Matthew said.

"This is basically just a concrete box," said Crystal once she had come inside. "You'll go crazy if you have to live here for any length of time." It was true that the bunker was beyond depressing. If he spent any amount of time in there, even just hanging out, she couldn't imagine it being any good for his psyche.

"Already there, Cotton Candy."

"You know what I mean." Crystal eyed him, uncertain. "Does Jamie call me that?"

Matthew shrugged and walked to the shelf with his toolbox.

Crystal spun in a slow circle. "It looks like a prison cell."

"If a prison cell could save your life in a nuclear disaster."

Crystal bit her lip. "It doesn't feel that way."

"What do you think it needs?"

"Curtains."

Matthew paused. "There are no windows."

"Exactly. They would be reminders of windows. Of a way out."

"There is no way out." Matthew shook his head. Sweat was building on his forehead and the bicep of his right arm trembled.

"What's all the banging this early in the morning?"

Crystal whipped around, sure it was Mrs. Wozniak angry to have been awoken so early in the day by hammering in her backyard. But it was only Jamie, standing on the bottom step in a ratty sweater, jeans and a pair of slippers, his un-brushed hair falling into his eyes.

"Hey," she said, making a somewhat lame wave.

"Matt, did you hang *drywall* last night?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Were you up all night?"

"Couldn't sleep anyway.

"You could have asked me for help."

"Yeah? Could have," Matthew said, noncommittally.

"Yeah."

"You can help now."

"Where at?"

"You know," Crystal started, "I have an idea."

"For what?"

"Decorating." She climbed halfway up the stairs. "I'll be back in thirty minutes tops."

After Crystal left for supplies, Matthew and Jamie finished the last touches of drywall.

"That girl has really got her shit together," Matthew said.

"She does."

"And she's pretty."

"She is."

"So...what's the problem?"

Jamie sighed, resting his hammer against the wall. "She's way too good for me."

Matthew could only shake his head.

"Sometimes it's like I'm a spectator of my own life standing there on the sidelines.

Just watching it run off the rails."

"It's not off the rails."

"No?"

"No. Why do you say it is?"

"Oh, I don't know. Involuntary manslaughter at 13. Arrest at 16. Three suspensions, no shot at college, a downright psychotic for a brother. I'm so deep in the shit I can't even see brown anymore."

"Your self pity is unappealing to me. You've never cared about this before. Also, not a psychotic."

"That's not what the letter Mom got from your doctor the other day said."

"Are you reading Mom's mail now?"

"Gotta make sure nothing is in there about me. Never know what Belliconti will send home."

"Little brother." Matthew stepped back, looking briefly around the shelter. This was the first time Jamie had really come down to help him. He did not want to ruin it.

"What?"

"You can do a lot better than this."

Jamie refused to acknowledge what he said. "Hand me another nail, will you?"

"That'll be \$17.75," the hardware store clerk said, ringing up Crystal's paint cans. She unrolled the few bills she had stuffed in the back pocket of her jeans.

"Here you are. Thanks."

She grabbed a can with each hand and the plastic bag of supplies, and exited the hardware store. The early morning sunlight made her squint. She had made the correct color choice, that was clear. Attempting to avoid any resemblance to John Travolta in the opening scenes of *Saturday Night Fever*, she walked at a slow pace down the sidewalk. When she returned to the bunker Jamie reached for the paint can and pried it open with a screwdriver.

"What color is this even?"

"Sunrise-Sunset.' I'm bringing the sun inside. In the event of Y2K or a nuclear apocalypse or something, at least we'll have the sun."

Matthew eyed the paint skeptically. "When I was little I used to think it was 'a nuclear hypothesis.'"

"It fits."

"Hey, wait—'we'll have the sun'?" Matthew asked.

"You think I'm helping you out of the goodness of my heart? This paint job is my first class ticket to safety in the event of a nuclear hypothesis."

They worked in companionable silence for some time, Crystal between the tall brothers. Jamie worked ahead of them with the primer. Matt rolled large swathes of orange. Crystal did the detail work around shelves and electrical wiring with a narrow brush. She was glad now to have come and assisted them, however much she had been uncertain about volunteering in the first place.

"You know what this place needs," Jamie said, looking around, "A sick couch."

"Leather," said Matthew, taking a step back as if putting the room into camera focus.

"White leather," Jamie added. "And I know where you can get one."

"I feel like we're in Malibu," Jamie said. He leaned back on the white couch.

"Why Malibu?" asked Matthew. "Miami, maybe."

"Feels like the beach."

"I can't believe Mom kept all of Dad's stuff in the basement all these years," said Matthew, running his hand over the arm of the couch. "Do you think she thinks he's coming back?"

Jamie shook his head. "When we finally put it away, after you were gone, I think it was more about making sure he never got to enjoy any of it again, even if he did come back. Hence the padlock."

"Nice use of 'hence,'" said Crystal. She sat between the brothers on the overstuffed white leather couch. Though the smell of paint was still strong, the soft orange of the walls had dried. Crystal had found some white linen curtains among the boxes in storage as well and with the aid of a staple gun had affixed them as if to windows on either side of the couch.

Jamie looked around, the subject of their father dropped, and then at Crystal, smiling widely. "I'm almost looking forward to the coming apocalypse now."

The sun was setting, much the same color as the bunker's walls, when Jamie and Crystal emerged above ground. Matthew had work to finish on the computer he had wired for down there, so they left them to it, but Crystal did not really want to go home yet. "Do you want to get started on the next Statistics problem set?" she asked Jamie.

He glanced at the windows of the house. "Mom's home. I don't want to get into it with her yet about pulling Dad's shit out of the basement."

"You think she'd notice?"

Jamie shrugged. "Come on, come with me."

At the edge of the backyard, the thickest tree had boards nailed into its trunk. For the first time, Crystal noticed a squat tree house up amongst the autumnal leaves. Jamie motioned her up it and she climbed the boards with shaky hands, hauling herself into the plywood house and watching as Jamie followed her in. The roof was low and toys were strewn across the floor. The light was dim, a blue tarp stretched across a paneless window.

Jamie looked around. "I haven't been up here in...years."

Crystal swiped at a cobweb. "I can tell."

"Thanks for today. For Matt." Jamie looked more serious.

"You really watch out for him, don't you?"

Jamie shrugged. He leaned back against the wall, one knee casually bent. "He's my responsibility."

"Not really. Your parents –"

"My parents aren't the reason he ended up in Bumfucknowhere, Africa and almost died in some frigging terror attack."

"As if you're reason he did?"

"Of course I'm the reason."

Crystal shook her head. "How?"

"After the accident, there was no money to send Matt to college for programming. So he joined the Peace Corps."

"But Jamie, that was just an accident. It wasn't your fault, and neither was whatever came after it."

"Was it just an accident?" She remembered him asking the same at the party weeks ago. The blue tarp flapped some in the breeze. The air was getting cooler, heralding winter soon.

"Wasn't it?"

Jamie's face, so often giving nothing away contorted into the grief of that day for just a moment. He seemed to chew on the words before speaking them. "We fought.

Paul and I, before the game that day. Larry knows about it somehow, that's why he's always ragging on me." It exploded from somewhere deep in Jamie's chest "Paul was a little prick. "I wasn't trying to kill him but I won't pretend I wasn't happy when his face hit the dirt. The things he said about my dad – "

"The fight was about your dad?"

"It was right after he left. It was still really bad then."

"And Paul said something about it."

"Yes." Jamie looked indignant. "Ever since that day everyone has walked around talking about Paul like he was some kind of child saint. He wasn't though. I remember. I'm sure lots of people remember. He was a bully and he was mean, but now he's just a dead kid so you can't say that. I really can't say that."

"You are saying it."

"To you!"

"Yes..."

"Do you count?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You don't count because you saw me. You know why I was running."

"You're not the only one who can't forget that day," said Crystal. "I think about it all the time. How you can just drop dead like that, how you could hurt somebody accidentally – "

"The chances are so low – " Jamie protested.

"It happened to you! How can you not be afraid?."

"The worst already happened. What's there left to be afraid of?" His hands rose in ineffectual frustration.

Crystal bolted up onto her knees. "Everything!" She hated the way her voice sounded when she said it, screechy and fearful. Her cheeks grew warm.

Jamie shook his head again, as if he disagreed. He rose up on his knees too. The roof of the tree house just barely touched his hair as he knelt in front of her, nose-to-nose. "If you think about it hard enough, everything and nothing are basically the same thing."

Crystal had the feeling that if this were a movie he would have kissed her then, and she would have let him. But it wasn't a movie. She got up, stooping under the low roof and looked down at him. "I'll see you at school," she said, before climbing down.

Chapter 7: Thankful

Following the Thanksgiving meal, the Sheffield house had divided into bedrooms, the parents falling asleep early. Taking advantage of having the next day off from school, Crystal stayed up listening to music. Around 1 o'clock Crystal heard footsteps creaking in the hallway, doors opening and closing. Then from Shane's room, snatches of Jessica's whispering—what Jessica considered whispering—came through the shared wall. It was quiet for a while. Crystal thought she knew why. The memory of Jamie's face nose-to-nose with hers in the treehouse came to her unbidden, as it had ever since the Sunday they spent painting the bunker a few weeks ago. She had had no excuse to see him alone since then. He had even skipped class a couple of times, a normal event that she somehow took personally now. And now with the holiday, it would be at least three full days until she even saw him at all.

Unless she went over there tonight. After all, it wasn't a school night. She weighed it a moment. Her parents probably wouldn't miss her until early afternoon when they got back from their Black Friday errands. Changing quickly from her sweatpants and pajama top to leggings and a heavy flannel shirt, the cold made Crystal's teeth begin to chatter. She laced on her sneakers and pulled a puffy jacket out of the back of her closet. She was finger combing her hair and twisting it up into a topknot as she crept down the hallway when she heard her parents' door open.

"Crys?"

It was her mother. There was no hiding, but perhaps it was dark enough to cover her clothes.

"Just thirsty, Mom."

"Oh, alright. I thought I heard a sound."

"Sorry, I just got up. It was probably me."

"Ok. Goodnight, Crystal."

"Night, Mom."

Her parents' door closed. She crept downstairs in the dark, snapping the pins into her hair. In the kitchen she ran the water and took a sip of it, hoping her mother wouldn't listen harder than that before drifting off to sleep. The front door was out, as was the back slider. Both made too distinct of a sound. No, it was the small window in the half bath that would have to do it. She crept into the dim room, stepping carefully onto the mat around the toilet to silence her footsteps. The window was new from when they had remodeled and added the half bath and therefore was the quietest in the house, probably how Jessica got in and out at night. She slid it up slowly, expecting her mother to appear at the bathroom door any moment. Then she released the screen, catching it before it fell onto the back porch.

She traced the path she had followed a few weeks before to the Wozniak's. The streetlights were dim along the maze of side streets. The lights were mostly out in the house when she arrived, all except one: the living room. Through the illuminated window she could just make out the shape of a person on the couch, a book lying open on his chest as he slept. Jamie. Hoping she didn't startle him too badly, she knocked on the window, standing on tiptoes to see in. He did not wake immediately but she did not dare knock much louder. She thought about going around to the bunker and seeing if

perhaps Matthew was up late as well. But as she turned to go she tripped on roots of the shrubbery beneath the window and smacked into the glass. Jamie leapt awake on the couch, springing toward the window when he caught sight of her.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he asked, pushing the window up. "I thought you were trying to rob us."

"I was just out for a midnight stroll," she said, noncommittally.

Jamie raised both eyebrows. "And you had a statistics question?"

Crystal shook her head and turned to walk away. "This was a stupid idea."

"Crys, wait." Jamie shut the window and a moment later the front door opened slowly, without sound. "Come in," Jamie whispered.

Inside she followed Jamie up to his room where he shut the door and turned on a row of track lighting over his bed, offering just barely any visibility.

Jamie cocked his head to the side. "So. Did you miss me?"

"Was I supposed to? You've hardly talked to me."

"Things have been...busy here."

"Is that an excuse?"

"It would be if you accepted it." Jamie grinned at her and took a step closer.

Crystal could not help but cross her arms. "What are you trying to do to me? Because if you think I'm some kind —"

He took another step closer. "I'm not thinking."

"What does that even mean, Wozniak?"

But he only kept on grinning, leaning his face down to her level, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets.

They jumped apart as if electrocuted at the sound of a clatter from the next room.

When Matthew jerked awake at 2 a.m., he had awoken mid-flail, shouting her name. His hand groped in the dark into the pocket of the vest until he found the grubby square of paper, tacky on one side as the photo finish ink degraded after all these years. He couldn't see it, but sliding it into his palm in the dark made a difference. Rolling onto his back he breathed deep, the chill air filling his lungs. The heavy vest—and the sheet over it—rose and fell. It was too cold. Something wasn't right. The temperature was so different than where he had just been dreaming about.

The door creaked open, dim light from a hallway nightlight seeping through and illuminating a tall and muscled figure. "Matty?" it whispered from the doorway. It did not come in right away. The silhouette of its head tilted as if listening.

It chanced a step forward into the room. "Matthew," it said, more sharply now but Matthew found himself unable to answer. "I'm going to turn the light on, Matty."

"No, don't." His voice came out harsh as if he had just smoked a carton of cigarettes alone.

"I can't see anything," it said, sounding frustrated. It took another step forward. There was a cracking sound as it stubbed its toes on the leg of the desk or chairs. "Just let me put it on."

"They'll see us."

"No one will see us."

"They'll know we're here."

"Matty, where do you think you are?"

The nightmare faded completely. "Jamie?"

Apparently no longer willing to humor him, Jamie reached behind himself to the wall to flip up the light switch. The soft light of a 40 watt bulb in the desk lamp pushed back some of the darkness. He looked wary, tilted backwards as if ready to fend off an attack. Matthew remembered, with shame, an incident several months ago when he had mistaken his brother for a midnight attacker. He had tackled him when he entered the room, almost choked him. But Jamie had somehow gained the upper hand. Matthew remembered a whimpering sound, like that of a wounded dog, but he could not say which of them had made it. Some things were best left unexamined. He knew their mother wouldn't come, she couldn't. The disengagement she employed to deal with problems both her sons had brought into her white colonial home was unheard of. Often times when sitting through a group therapy session, Matthew had thought psychologists should be brought into their home and his mother exhibited as a newly discovered version of denial. No, when he called out in the night it was his little brother who arrived.

Jamie looked at him in the soft light and moved to crouch by the side of the bed. "Can I see that?" he asked, nodding at the photograph Matthew clutched his hand.

Jamie took the photo from him, careful with its worn edges. He sighed, looking at it. Matthew knew he recognized her, even after all these years, the girl with the

brown curly hair and dark blue eyes. Violet Elliot, who had spent so much time at their house seven years ago his parents had joked about adopting her. Jamie, at 11, had once walked in on them. Perhaps that was why he had so clearly remembered her all these years later.

Matthew himself could not remember what had happened between them. He had brief memories of her visiting him at the hospital, of phone calls filled with awkward silences. The chronology of it all got mixed up in his mind.

"Matty," Jamie said, putting the photo face down on the nightstand. "Why are you even thinking about this chick?"

Matthew threw off the sheet. He stood up and faced his brother. "Because I love her." He began to move towards the door. "I'm going to go tell her."

"Matty, don't call her, it's late. You can do it tomorrow."

"I'm not going to call her. I'm going to see her."

"What?" Jamie said, sounding panicked, as Matthew snatched up a pair of pants lying on the floor and began to pull them on. "Doesn't she live in Albany now?"

"Yes. Two hour drive, tops."

"You're nuts. You haven't driven in years."

"I'll be fine." He pulled on his boots.

"What if she went somewhere for the holiday?"

"Worth the risk."

"Matty," Jamie said, getting in his face.

Matthew turned to face him fully. Jamie may have had an inch or two on him but he was still the older brother, with three more years to build muscle. "I'm going. You can come or you can stay, but you're not stopping me."

"Fine," said Jamie. "But I'm bringing in reinforcements."

It was then that Matthew noticed Crystal peeking around the door.

"Wanna come for a ride?" Jamie asked, looking at her over his shoulder.

"Where?"

"Albany."

"You're insane," she responded, clapping a hand over her mouth when she realized how loud she had been.

"Certifiably," said Matthew, a hint of humor coming into his voice.

"So why are we going to Albany?"

"A girl," said Jamie.

"The girl," said Matthew.

After Matthew dressed, he met them in the hallway and they quietly went down the stairs one at a time, first Jamie, then Matthew, then Crystal.

"I can't see the last step," she whispered into the pitch-dark hallway. She stumbled over the last lip and was caught in a tangle of hands, both brothers arresting her fall and pushing her back upright as she got her own feet under herself.

"Thanks," she whispered to both.

The pickup truck was parked in the drive. Jamie removed the keys, jingling them from his pocket. "Crystal, you wanna get in the middle?" He pulled open the cab door to reveal the narrow bench seat. Crystal stepped up into the cab, straddled the floor shift and clicked the lap belt snug. The Wozniak brothers swung up into the truck at the same time. Crystal wondered if they realized how similar their movements were, strong motion with heavy follow-through. They reached for the seatbelts the same way, each elbowing her in the sides simultaneously.

"Sorry," they muttered.

Jamie started the engine. It turned over with a rumble. The headlights winked on, reflecting off the colorful stained glass lawn ornaments in their neighbor's yard. Crystal had to open her knees a bit for Jamie to be able to shift into gear, her legs pressing against the side of both of theirs. It was her turn to mutter, "Sorry."

As they rolled to the stop sign at the end of the lane, Crystal turned to Matthew. "The girl?"

"The very one." He unfurled his fingers to reveal a wrinkled photograph in his palm. The girl looked familiar to Crystal, but she couldn't say for sure who she was.

"Violet."

"Is she from town?"

"She was. She moved in 9th grade."

"So you haven't seen her in a while?"

"No," Jamie butted in. "He has. He used to make this drive every weekend to see her."

"And what happened?"

"I joined the Peace Corps. Got sent to Africa."

"Yeah?"

"I guess she didn't want to wait. I dunno."

"She didn't say?"

"I can't really remember. On account of psychological trauma and whatnot."

Crystal turned to look at Jamie. "So we're going to find this girl at what, four or five in the morning, to try to find out how they broke up?"

Jamie shrugged.

"No," said Matthew. Crystal met his intense stare. "I'm going to tell her that I love her."

Matthew really could not remember the last time he and Violet Elliot had spoken. It had to have been after he arrived in Africa but before the bombing. He knew that because by then he had already been carrying the photo of her in the pocket of his shirt. That's where it had gotten wrinkled and worn down. Her blue eyes had remained intense though, staring above a wide smile frozen in time.

"You're going to tell her that you love her? After all this time?" Crystal was speaking to him, interrupting his train of thought.

"Time is an illusion."

Crystal cleared her throat. "I agree, Matthew, but—"

"Somewhere out there in the universe on some loop of time I'm holding her and she's looking at me and she's saying, 'I only ever want you.' If she's saying it then there's no reason she can't be saying it now, too."

"Maybe she changed her mind."

"The mind changes, you don't change it."

"She might not feel the same way anymore, Matty. She might be with someone else. Married even." Jamie said.

"But somewhere out there, she's with me too."

In the wing mirror, Matthew could see Crystal and Jamie make brief eye contact. He understood the universe and time. Out there somewhere was him and Violet. Out there was Renzo still alive. Also out there was him and Violet breaking up and Renzo dying. You couldn't just take the good, not if it was all happening at once.

It was just under two hours when they hit Albany, Matthew directing Jamie off the correct exit ramp. Crystal was stiff and warm from sitting so long. She nodded off at one point and woke up to find her feet tangled with Matt's in the passenger well, her head lolling on Jamie's right shoulder. She had only been awake twenty minutes when they cruised into the suburbs of Albany, Matthew directing Jamie down a street lined with autumnal maples. They pulled at last into the gravel driveway of a pastel 1½ story home.

"Here," said Matthew, unclicking his seatbelt and climbing out of the truck.

"Should we—" Crystal began to say, turning to Jamie but she stopped. He had turned off the truck but left his hands resting on the wheel. He looked at her then, eyes travelling from the sloppily pinned bun on top of her head down to her lips.

"Thank you for coming with us," he said.

"I can't believe he's doing this."

Jamie shrugged and looked away. "When you care about someone, you take chances." He turned back to her.

Crystal held her breath, waiting.

"Violet!" Matthew yelled, knocking at the door. "It's me, Matthew."

"Shit," Jamie said, jumping out of the truck. Crystal followed after him quickly, stopping some distance behind Matthew but in front of the truck. "Matty, quit it, what if she calls the cops?" Jamie tried to pull him away.

The outline of a figure approached the frosted window of the door. Matthew took a step back so that the door could open. Crystal waited behind unsure if she should stay or go. Matthew did not need an audience and surely this girl would be wary of stranger in her driveway in the wee hours of the morning.

The door opened with the sound of a box clicking open. A thin woman slid out from behind the screen and stood, looking down at Matthew from the upper stone step. She wore a purple bathrobe, terry cloth, not sexy, with dark curly hair bundled in a thick ponytail over one shoulder. Her feet were bare and turning white already in the cold. Shaking her head she said, "I knew it. I knew it would be you. Who else would

come at four in the morning and just ring the doorbell like that?" She looked away briefly. "Jamie?"

"Hey, Violet." His voice came out awkward, unsure and un-Jamie. "Sorry about this. We, um, couldn't let him come alone."

Violet Elliot nodded, her eyes travelling over Crystal. Crystal awkwardly dragged the toe of her Converse across the gravel.

"I love you," Matthew said. No finesse, no pretense, no grace. He said it with an earnestness that made Crystal want to look away, to not be witness to this private moment. It was like the things she saw in the news. The broadcast of intimacies and traumas and brutalities was too easy now, just the click of a few buttons. They were not things you were supposed to see but there they were in front of you and it was up to you what you did with it now that you had seen it. Everyone had become reluctant witnesses.

At eleven years old Crystal had watched two boys fall to the ground, one dead, one shattered. It had been the first thing she both wanted to look away from and could not stop watching. But of course no one was free of that. She could leave the room when the news was on. She could look away now from the way Matthew stared up at the thin pretty girl in the bathrobe. But there were just some things you couldn't help but see.

"I know," said Violet.

"Your feet will get cold."

"They already are."

"Go back inside. I said what I came here to say."

Matthew turned from her then. Having dropped the bomb he refused to watch the shrapnel fly. Jamie and Crystal stood behind him, staring at their feet.

"You left me," Violet sounded as if she might cry but also might tear his head off barehanded. "Over and over, but you can't remember any of the times, can you?"

Matthew turned back. If there was ever a time to simply be honest this was it. "No."

"Not the six times on the sat phone calls that were only three minutes long?"

"No."

"Not when I visited you in the hospital and you only screamed at me?"

"No," Matthew admitted. It was like confessing a sin, the shame of being such a dick coupled with the acceptance found in admitting it.

"Well, I remember."

There was the lightest crunch on gravel behind him, his brother or Crystal backing away from the scene. "Good. One of us needs to."

She laughed bitterly then. "I can't even be angry with you."

"Yes, you can."

She was quiet again, her jaw set tight. Her toes, he could see in the light of the lamp mounted over the door, were turning blue.

"Go back inside, Violet. You're cold. I only came to say what I did." She still didn't move. He took on the encouraging voice he had used when he told Renzo it was

okay to die. "It's okay." *It's okay, you can let go.* "None of it was your fault." *I've got you, brother.* "I love you and it's okay." *Don't fight, don't fight. You've done enough.*

Violet's eyes glittered for a moment, and then she turned and opened the door without looking back. The door shut with a vacuum of air and the light blinked out. Matthew turned toward the truck. Jamie had backed away and leaned against the door, his wool cap pulled down considering the buckles of his boots. But Crystal still stood in front of the truck, watching Matthew and the house behind him intently. Her eyes barely blinked even as he stepped towards her.

"It's okay. Let's go home."

The clutch seemed to stutter under his brother's foot as he coasted into the gas station. Matthew felt the jostle as they turned off the highway. No one in the cab made a sound. The artificial lights under the pump canopies played tricks with his eyes after the darkness of the Mass Pike. Jamie swung into the leftmost slot. The air was chilly when he opened the door. Crystal's hand crept into Matt's. It felt warm and soft, the way Matthew remembered women's hands. He tried not to think of whom they had just left. He had said what he needed to. Clinks came from the pump as Jamie flipped the appropriate lever. The light and bell were on in the cab. Jamie leaned his arm on the upper door so that he could duck back into the cab.

"Do you want anything inside?" he said. His voice trailed off as he noticed both Crystal and Matthew had tears dripping down their cheeks. Matthew wiped his on the elbow of his shirt.

Crystal wiped her eyes but didn't look embarrassed by her tears. "Sure, I could stretch my legs a bit."

The pump clicked off. Jamie went back to the nozzle, replacing it, while Matthew and Crystal got out of the truck.

The inside of the gas station was even brighter than outside. Crystal disappeared down a back aisle toward the bathroom sign. Matthew stood between the display at the front counter feeling lost. His eyelashes were still damp.

"Matty, you want a soda?" Jamie pulled open one of the cooler cases reaching for a Pepsi.

"I don't know what I want," Matthew said.

"That's ok. Just take a minute and look for something."

Jamie went up to the counter and placed his Pepsi next to the cash register. "Pump 4," he told the cashier.

"I don't know what I want, Jamie," Matthew said again. He zipped and unzipped his vest. The clerk watched him.

"Chocolate milk maybe?" Jamie tried. "Or how about a Milkyway?"

"I don't know!" Matthew looked from door to corner to window, feeling exposed, and he took shallow breaths.

"Is he okay?" the clerk said, leaning forward. Matthew felt his eyes flicker between him and whatever he kept beneath the register.

"He's fine," Jamie said shortly. He took a step forward, placing a hand on Matthew's chest. "Breath in, bro."

Matthew gulped a breath of air.

"Not like that," Jamie said. "You know how, slow."

"I want that," Matthew said, suddenly pointing behind Jamie.

Jamie turned. Neon writing blinked above the head of the cashier. LOTTERY.

"You want a lotto ticket?" he asked Matthew.

"010100."

"Is that...binary?"

"Y2K."

Jamie pulled a dollar out of his back pocket laying it on the counter next to his Pepsi. "And a lotto ticket. 010100."

"Thank you," Matthew said, finally breathing in.

Chapter 8: Three Days 'til Boomtown

"I'm exhausted," Matthew said, tonelessly, as they crossed the town line in the purple early morning light. Without even being asked, Jamie stopped at their house first and Matthew got out of the car. He shut the door without saying anything. Crystal watched him walk down the driveway towards the backyard and bunker. She thought maybe he looked a little lighter.

They rode in silence, following an early morning mail truck down her narrow street slowly as it came to one mailbox after the other. The silence after the intensity of the last few hours was oppressive.

"Are you upset with me?" she asked.

"No."

"You seem....mad."

"I'm thinking."

"About Matthew?"

"About you and him."

"What about me and him?"

Jamie shook his head. He tapped the brakes almost coming up on the mail truck too fast. "I like you, Crystal."

"I like you too –"

"No I like like you."

He pulled around the mail truck suddenly, driving down the wrong side of the road, and crossing back over to stop short at the end of her driveway. In the wing

mirror she could see the mailwoman shaking her fist at them, leaning half out towards a mailbox.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you home."

"What's up with you?"

"I gotta get going."

Crystal sat stubbornly, looking at Jamie. The collar of his grey thermal moved up and down as he swallowed. His wool hat was still pulled low. But then he leaned across her—his shoulder was warm. She could smell his shaving cream—and popped her door open.

"See you in class."

She got out and slammed the door and waited as Jamie pulled away, refusing to meet her eyes in the rearview mirror.

The mail truck pulled up, the mailwoman leaning out with a bundle of TV guides and thick envelopes. "Your boyfriend's a dick, baby."

"What?" Crystal asked, shock.

"I didn't say nothing," said the woman pulling back in the truck and gripping the steering wheel.

"And he's not my boyfriend."

"Sure he ain't, baby." She too pulled away.

She slipped inside through the bathroom window. Everyone was asleep. Too awake to go back to sleep, she sat down at the computer in the living room and booted

it up. While it connected to the internet, the screeching static sound, she closed her eyes, but all she could see were Matt's tears and Jamie swinging the door open to send her away.

"You've got mail," chirped the computer as the sign-in opened.

To: crystalball83@aol.com

From: jessmess69@yahoo.com

FWD: 3 DAYS, HOSTILE MOB BRINGS BOOMTOWN TO BOKUM HIGH.

When Crystal opened the e-mail she thought immediately about deleting it before that cold grip could even take hold around her chest. Thundering steps came down stairs, Shane leaving for early practice, Jessica clearly long gone.

"Hey," she called. "Have you gotten this e-mail? Jess forwarded it to me."

Shane came in and looked at it. "Yeah, just a chain e-mail prank," he said.

Crystal looked at him warily. "I don't know."

"Forward it to Belliconti," Shane said with a shrug before leaving.

Crystal chewed on the side of her nail for a minute. She clicked FWD: and typed in VPBelliconti@bokumhs.org. This was the sort of thing to leave up to the experts. What were the odds it was something? But sometimes things happened against all odds.

Sunday morning Crystal found herself walking the now familiar path and ending up in front of the white colonial. She was not sure which brother she was there to see. She had

thought of Matthew since watching him disappear down the driveway Friday morning. She had tried not to think of Jamie since he had unceremoniously kicked her out of the truck just a half hour later. Now, her feet decided for her, taking her to stand over the hatch, which she knocked loudly on with the back of her heel.

The hatch opened slowly, and Matthew blinked into the bright, windy day.
"Hey."

"Hey. Can I come in?"

He stood back and she brushed past him on the stairs. He closed the hatch against the wind.

"How are you?"

"Better than you, I think."

"That obvious?"

Matthew shrugged, his shoulders lifting the heavy vest up and down. "Want to help with my heirloom seeds?"

Crystal sat down at the workbench where at least a hundred packets of seeds were sloppily piled next to a photo album. The album had thick paper pages onto which Matthew had stitched some of the seed packets with embroidery thread. She picked up the needle and thread and started on the next packet.

Matthew stood halfway in the small bathroom, wrenching something into place.

"What happened between you and my brother?"

Crystal looked up from where she was stitching the seed packets into the book.
"What do you mean?"

"He's been in a piss poor mood ever since he dropped you off on Friday morning."

Crystal shrugged.

"Well if you won't talk about him, I will. Jamie doesn't look up to me anymore."

"I don't think that's completely true."

"It is *completely* true."

"And how do you do know that?"

Matthew sighed. "It's nothing dramatic. You just know. You can only be the big brother for so long. Eventually you just become the older brother."

"You are pretty old," Crystal said. She bent back over the binder.

"My left nut tingles every time it's going to rain."

"You're awful."

Matthew smiled, but it quickly dropped off his face. "I tried to be there for Jamie, after our dad left. I really did."

"I'm sure you did," Crystal replied. Matthew sounded disappointed.

"I've made so many mistakes. I was afraid for so long. That's why...that's why I needed to go the other night. I was trying to — break free."

Crystal was not sure how to respond. She had held his hand on the car ride home and cried with him, but there had seemed little to say. Looking around the walls, now of course painted bright orange but still close and low and inherently claustrophobia-inducing, she wondered if he had managed that break he was striving for. "Why do you think its fear that always gets the better of us?"

"It's pretty strong," Matthew said in response.

"Yeah," said Crystal. Idly she tipped some squash seeds into her hand. "But it's not the strongest part of us, is it?"

Matthew looked around the shelter, his hands fingering the edges of the heavy vest. "I'm not sure I'm the right person to ask."

"That's not what your brother would say."

"The miracle of biological differentiation."

"But you're very alike."

"Ah, now you want to talk about him." Matthew shook his head. "But no, not where it counts. Jamie took a life. I couldn't save one. Very different."

Crystal laughed. "These are the things it comes down to? The worst days of your lives?"

Turning back to the plumbing, Matthew asked, "What else should it come down to?"

"What you believe in. The good things you've done. The people you love," she suggested earnestly.

"Is that what it comes down to for you?" he asked her. She could not answer, and instead watched Matthew until he stood back and turned to her. "So are you going to see my brother or not? I know you didn't brave the cold on a holiday weekend just for my company."

"I'm not going to force him to talk to me. You're the one who shows up at people's front doors in the middle of the night to have a conversation."

Matthew shrugged. "I didn't want to leave things unsaid. Time...is running short."

Crystal smiled wide at that. "Before the grid goes down?"

"Yeah," said Matthew. "Or whatever the hell it will be."

Crystal had set out to brave the windy walk home just moments ago and Matthew had just sat back at the workbench of the shelter when Jamie thundered down the steps, his timing obviously suspicious.

"You just missed her," Matthew said.

"Who?" Jamie said, obviously playing dumb.

"What's up?" Matthew asked, eyes on the motherboard.

"Oh just the sweet sounds of mom fighting with the bill collectors."

"Credit card?"

"What else. Hey can I help with some more caulking?"

"Sure." As Jamie set-up with caulk, Matthew turned back to his work. The memory of what had happened Friday night as he sat before the living room TV, after the trip to Albany, the secret he was keeping, replayed in his mind.

The odds, which had not been in Matthew's favor for a very, very long time suddenly were, one number at a time. They ticked into place, the small balls filtering into the set-up on screen: 0-1-0-1-0-0.

"What are the odds?" asked the host. "Can we get some statisticians to run the numbers on that probability, heh?"

"What's that?" replied the vapid blonde at the crank of the balls.

"That's it folks," said the host, trying to get himself back on track and plastering a fake smile across his face. "Your \$500,000 Jackpot with....astronomically low odds of being this number. If you are the lucky winner somewhere out there..."

The lucky winner somewhere out there... Matthew had sat back in the plaid living room chair, winded as if he had just sprinted a mile.

Now, reminded by his brother of their mother's situation, he could not even truly explain to himself why he didn't turn the ticket in. Something about feeling undeserving, he thought, evaluating himself with the professional distance of a shrink.

Time was getting short though. Seeing Violet had been one of the most important things he could do before the impending disaster. And seeing her, it had made things worse for himself, though he hoped it had made some of it up to her. Looking at her face and knowing that it would never be his again had ripped open a hole he thought had healed.

There was a knock at the hatch. It opened before either of them could answer it. Light flooded the stairwell.

"Police. We're looking for Jamie Wozniak." The words were hardly audible over the windy weather above.

Jamie, who had paused with a hand halfway up to a structural joint, looked back at Matthew. He set down the tools. "Yeah? I'm down here."

"We need to speak with you," replied the officer. From this angle Matthew could only see the hems of his blue pants and scuffed black shoes.

Jamie climbed the steps. Matthew warily followed him, squinting against the brightness of the day. There were three officers waiting for them, one with a folded warrant in his hand. They stopped before them, keeping a small distance.

"You're under arrest," said the third officer to Jamie. "For death threats and conspiracy to commit murder."

Jamie laughed. "What?"

"You know the drill Mr. Wozniak. Put your hands behind your back. You have the right to remain silent – "

"I didn't do anything," Jamie shouted.

Matthew felt a flare of the old rage and panic that had come after Renzo. He wanted to cry but he also wanted to kill them with his bare hands. He clapped his hands over his ears.

"Watch the brother," one of the cops said to his partner.

"He has mental problems," Jamie said stepping between Matthew and the officers.

"If you don't turn around right now you'll be charged with resisting arrest as well."

"I did it," Matthew said first, quietly, then louder, "I did it."

One of the officers turned back to him, making eye contact. Matthew spoke directly to him. "You're here about the emails. I did it. Hostile Mob. I designed it."

"Matty, what the hell are you talking about?" asked Jamie, half-cuffed.

"My brother did nothing wrong," Matthew said. "I'm behind the website."

The nearest officer turned back to Matthew. "You're going to have to come with us."

And as they cuffed him across from his brother, Matt felt for the first time in years, something close to freedom.

Chapter 9: Broomsticks

The windy weather had lasted in Bokum over the weekend into Monday morning. Though the wind remained, the clouds at least had dissipated, revealing a powder blue sky. As Crystal exited Jessica's car—leaving her and Shane to their typical pre-home room tonsil hockey session—the fallen brown and orange leaves gusted up in a rustling explosion of drab colors. She kicked through them angrily, glad to put distance between herself and her brother and best friend who were so sickeningly in love. The school sat before her, flat and yet hulking, the unpeaked roofs rising above and casting dark shadows on the sidewalks which wound beneath the bleachers of the baseball field between the senior parking lot and the side entrance of campus.

Stepping through the piles of leaves up to the chain-link fence of the field, she pictured Paul Ciccio crouched over home plate, and on the pitching mound, Jamie, winding up. That day she had looked down on them from above, but now she saw them directly before her, watched as the ball approached Paul's thin chest in slow motion. She watched Paul crumple again. Death, before, was a grown-up chore you'd have to deal with in the future, like taxes or balancing a checkbook. Now it felt like something that lurked around every corner or was heralded by every loud noise. The words of the e-mail came to her again. Boomtown. She had wanted to stay home, but her parents had refused. She thought about Matthew, his desire to stay below ground in the safety of the shelter. She had not been kidding when she said the paint job was her ticket in.

The chain link was cold under her fingers, her bitten nails with the chipping black polish clawing into the icy metal. The wind rustling the leaves blew some of her fading pink hair in between the diamonds of the fence. She brushed it back, reining in her loose hair and tucking it beneath her dark scarf. Behind her, suddenly, a janitor appeared. He pushed the leaves off the paved pathway with a wide broom, his hands clenched and white in the cold around the black broomstick. Getting out of his way, she headed to stats class.

She sat alone at the back desk, watching the door. She had not heard from Jamie all weekend, not since he had more or less kicked her out of his car early Friday morning, not even after visiting Matthew on Sunday. The bell rang and the seat beside her was still empty.

Mrs. Blahb rolled her wheelie chair to the center of the chalkboard. "I'm going to take attendance and then you're going to be called to an assembly."

"What for?" asked someone toward the front.

Mrs. Blahb shrugged, "Some safety advisement. Max Ahern?"

"Here."

As Mrs. Blahb moved down the list, Crystal flexed and unflexed her fingers.

"Larry Greer? Absent? And Scott Hampton? Absent too?"

That was Scooter. Crystal looked to two desks up to see that Larry, Scooter, and Tomilson were all absent.

"Why are so many people missing?" asked Mrs. Blahb.

"That e-mail," said one of the girls.

Mrs. Blahb raised her eyebrows and moved on.

"Crystal Sheffield?"

"Here," she responded.

Mrs. Blahb called for Tomilson, marked him absent, then, asked for Jamie.

"You didn't hear?" a student at the front asked almost pleased to be delivering privileged information.

Crystal felt herself hit the ground, but she was still sitting. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, preparing her to hear the worst. Jamie was dead. Matthew had killed himself. Both brothers had died in a tragic but bizarre plumbing accident while finishing the bathroom of the bunker.

"What's happened to him?" Mrs. Blahb asked.

Before anyone could answer her, the PA system crackled with static. "Student body report to the auditorium for an assembly. Report for an assembly to the auditorium."

There were scraping sounds as stools were pushed back, the class moving to and through the doorway without another glance at Mrs. Blahb. Crystal moved with the crowd to the auditorium, entering at the base of the lowest seats and scanning the mass of students for Jessica or Shane. Spotting them, she climbed up to the empty seat Jessica had saved for her. She had just barely sat when up on stage Belliconti tapped a hand held microphone.

"Let's get started, kids, quiet down."

The volume in the auditorium did not particularly lower, but Belliconti forged on. "I'm here today to say thank you. We asked students to come forward with any information you had about the so-called 'Hostile Mob' threats. You did. And yesterday the police were able to apprehend the architect of the e-mails."

Chatter went up around the auditorium.

"Who was it?" someone shouted.

"At this time, we have decided not to identify the culprit as they have ties to the school."

There were sounds of protests.

Belliconti signaled them to quiet, "I can say, please, quiet, I can say it was former student who served abroad for the federal government and has been receiving treatment for mental illness. He is in custody as are his computer and some records, and the police are confident that there was no intent or possibility to actually carry out an attack. No weapons were found that is —"

Crystal had stopped listening, stopped breathing even. To her left Jessica stared at her wide-eyed.

"Is it —" Shane started.

"Shut up," said Jessica. "Don't say anything now."

Belliconti was still talking but Crystal stood up, walked down the aisle to the door, attracting stares as she went. She stalked across the empty cafeteria and into the long hallway that connected the gym and locker-rooms, to the rest of the school. Next to the coaches' office she pushed through the crash door almost at a run and slammed into

something solid directly behind it. Hands reached out to steady her, hands she recognized.

"The shits have locked the door to the roof," he said in a low voice.

"Are you just standing here in the dark?"

"I needed a quiet moment."

"Jamie," she said, impatient. "Is it true?"

Faint light came in through the window at the top of the stairs. Jamie's face was impassionate, unwilling to meet her gaze.

Jamie looked angry at first. Then he looked exhausted, resting against the stair rail and rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Yes and no. I don't know. They're hardly giving us any information. We saw him for five minutes this morning. He said that freelance job he got last month...he thought it was a prank. They've torn our house to shit."

The sound of footsteps and chatter came from outside, the doors to the locker-rooms and the exit to the field opening and closing. The assembly had ended and students were headed to second period.

"They can't hold him," she said, anger flaring. "He's not well."

"Tell me about it. He thinks someone did it to get at me."

"Why?"

"Because when the police first got there they tried to arrest me."

"But Belliconti said there are no weapons. Why are they holding him?"

"He made threats. Or at least conspired in building tech to make threats."

"But then, who made him do it?"

"The police say they'll look into it, but I don't think they are. He didn't even know who hired him. They mailed him cash. Or maybe there isn't anyone who hired him to find. Maybe he's really lost it this time."

Crystal worried the skinny scarf she had wrapped around her neck. "Jamie, I don't know what to say."

Jamie reached out and touched her hair like he had the night at the party. "I'm really sorry about the other morning," he said.

Crystal opened her mouth to say it was ok, to forgive him, but was cut off by a loud "pop." They both froze. *Pop, pop.* And then, at a distance a steady pounding sound not unlike the beginning of a rainstorm. But the small window at the top of the stairs was bright with sunshine. Crystal raised her face to Jamie in confusion, about to ask what was going on when he suddenly shoved her back and hissed, "Get down and shut the hell up."

Crystal couldn't understand what he was talking about as he strode to the heavy crash door and fiddled with the handle. Suddenly she understood.

"Get down," he hissed again. The pounding was closer as he pulled her up the stairs to the landing and crouched down, his body in front of hers. The pounding reached a crescendo.

"Why the fuck would they lock the roof exit?"

The pounding was upon them now and she could feel the vibrations of a hundred pairs of shoes running by the stairway door, see the flickers of their shadows

in the space beneath it. There was a slam of bodies against the exit that led to the fields, the fences that would herd them around the side of the school towards the only break in the chain link at the back parking lot.

"Guns! They've got guns!" a passerby shouted. Two more *pops* sounded closer now.

Crystal detached from her body. She could feel the soft flannel of Jamie's shirt against her cheek as he turned into her, smell the spice of his soap but she was above them now, watching how they crouched on the landing, his hand reaching up into the back of her pink hair to cup her skull, pressing each fingertip into her scalp. She saw the shadows beyond the door peter away, an eerie silence descending in their place except for, ah, another *pop*. And then another, maybe just a hallway away. Someone pounded on the exit, fumbling with the mechanism and she felt it in her spine. Their panicked footsteps echoed down the hall. And then the fire alarm began blaring, deafening her to all else.

This isn't fair, she registered. She knew what was happening. In the dim light she watched the door, waiting for it to open, waiting to see the muzzle peek around it. She was only sixteen. There was so much left to do and this was happening too soon. Long before she expected it to.

Another *pop*.

What would her mother do? The image of her screaming when the cops came to the door somehow seeped through the numbness of the moment, but feeling was

worse. And Matthew. Never mind the predicament he was in now, how much loss could someone like Matt endure?

Suddenly she was aware of a quaking. Had a bomb had been detonated, the sound swallowed by the piercing alarm? A minute later she realized it was Jamie shaking. She raised her face to his and saw that tears were gathered in the creases of his eyes. She thought for a second that at least they were in the same place, breathing the same air, existing in that liminal space before the bad thing happened. His hand moved back as if readying to pitch a ball but when he brought it forward his fingers wove through the fading pink strands of her hair again. She was 11 years old, on the bleachers watching as Jamie flailed in the dusty outfield, the last time they were in the same space occupying only a moment that they both could know and she felt then that given the chance, having been given enough time, they would be able to return to this space again and again. Perhaps this was the great loop Matthew had spoken of.

But with another *pop* she became infinitely less sure that enough time would be given. In fact there seemed to be very little time at all. Glass broke in the hallway outside, the trophy case by the locker-rooms she suspected.

"Jamie," she whispered.

He shook his head, his face near panic.

She persisted, "I—"

"Stop!" came a voice outside, fluid against the monotony of the fire alarms. Jamie pulled back and met her eyes. She could tell he recognized the voice as well. It was Vice Principal Belliconti.

"I beg of you, stop. Let the kids go. Let them go."

There was a chorus of cackling, raucous voices. "What a joke you are, man." Crystal recognized that voice too. Larry Greer. The other voices, no doubt belonging to Scooter and Tomilson. Her brother's teammates. Where was Shane? Jessica?

There was a crunch of glass, maybe Belliconti walking over the shattered shards.

"Please," he said in the most gut-wrenching voice.

The cruel laughter erupted again. Crystal looked back to Jamie.

"Don't listen," he breathed in her ear. He closed his eyes and buried his head in her shoulder his breath warm on her neck. And giving in for a moment she closed her eyes too and accepted that this was how things were. She breathed out. She thought again of the loop, that all moments existed at once, that as she lay here waiting to die, somewhere she was also being born, and walking for the first time and standing on the bleachers watching the young boy who was also here now holding her as a young man. It all existed together.

"Broomsticks." It was Belliconti's voice again, bemused, a jarring and unexpected tone given the circumstances. And then it came again in a roar that rent the air, reminding Crystal of the yell her father had let out to scare off teenagers trying break into the garage at 2 a.m., protective, animalistic, fierce, "BROOMSTICKS."

There was a skittering sound, running feet on glass and an almighty thud, a body slammed into the lockers. Crystal was up before she was conscious of her desire to be so, slipping down the stairs, throwing the door open, Jamie screaming her name but she was already out in the hall. Vice Principal Belliconti had Larry, who was wearing a long

dark trench coat, against the lockers. Something long and black was in Belliconti's hand. Scooter and Tomilson were backing away, similar black objects in their hands. Guns, Crystal thought, taking in their length, the triggers and the scopes on them until she realized in a slow-coming thought that they were simply black painted broomsticks, tricked out to create an illusion of weaponry.

Vice Principal Belliconti took the one in his hands and swung it, catching Larry in the chin. His head snapped back in an impossible arc against the lockers, sliding to the floor. Scooter made a move forward and Belliconti swung out, catching him in the guts.

Jamie came flying behind Crystal, pushing her gently to the side and reaching for Tomilson. "You set up my brother," he shouted, taking him out in a linebackers tackle at the waist. They went skidding backwards into the floor. Tomilson dropped his broomstick.

"Get up," Belliconti shouted at Larry. He held the broomstick like a baseball bat. "Did you think this was funny? Get up, show me how funny it is now." Larry showed no sign of moving.

Jamie sat astride Tomilson's chest, punching him in the face repeatedly. Scooter had crawled over to them and was trying pull Jamie off with an arm around his throat.

Crystal saw them, the source of the pops, a string of smoldering, smoking firecrackers lying amidst the broken glass, and next to them Tomilson's fallen broomstick. She seized it up, and thinking briefly that it was a shame Shane was the athlete of the family, swung back. She hardly noticed as her left knuckles crashed into

the broken glass front of the trophy case and brought the stick down on Scooter's head. He collapsed immediately. Belliconti dropped his broomstick.

For a long moment there was only ringing alarms and then the world snapped back as her feet seemed to lose hold of the floor and she went crashing down. Without thinking she cradled her shredded hand against her blouse. Deep red blood was spreading in a wet spot on her shirt. Coach Elber had come out of nowhere and pulled Vice Principal Belliconti away from Larry shouting, "You'll kill him!" A biology teacher cracked open the door of a nearby locker-room. With a gasp she rushed out to Crystal, shoring her up and examining the rapidly swelling hand. And Jamie. Jamie stood across from her with a look of a cornered rabbit, trying to decide whether to hide or flee. She could see him wanting to run, somehow still the same little boy who ran across the field. To run was a Darwinian imperative, and Jamie was clearly susceptible to that impulse. If he wanted to run, extricate himself from this situation, he could and it would all be over.

Frustrated, aching with the pain of the shredded hand, Crystal looked down at where the biology teacher was attempting to uncurl her clawed fingers. The sprinkler system, triggered by the smoking firecrackers, clicked on. Her hair, whipped into knots, became wet and turned magenta.

Jamie appeared at her side then, kneeling. "Thank you," he said.

Pain was edging out Crystal's vision. She nodded and slumped against his shoulder.

Epilogue

12/31/1999

Crystal brushed her hair with her left hand awkwardly. The occupational therapists said it was time to start using it again. The skin was healing as well as could be. Following the incident she had been rushed to the hospital and brought into surgery--ahead, even, of concussed a Larry. But still they had taken Crystal first, a surgeon piecing the skin and tendons back together.

There were more surgeries ahead. And her left hand was a gauze-wrapped mitt of unending aches, some of the deepest stitches still partial to pulling at inopportune moments. But there was some comfort in that being the only casualty of the day. Everyone she saw wanted to shake her good hand, though she knew that she was not deserving of so much attention. Vice Principal Belliconti, on leave from the school, was the more deserving, and of course Jamie who had given Tomilson such a knock that he readily admitted the prank plot to the police as they arrived on scene. Some of the charges against Matthew had thus been dropped and apparently he was out on bail, though with the hospital and then the holidays she had not seen him yet.

She finished with her hair and looked out the window at the sunset, the last of the millennium, she realized, a harsh orange. She wondered what the first had looked like, 1,000 years ago but that felt like too great a distance of time to comprehend. Maybe, though, Matthew was right. Maybe as this sun was sinking it was also rising 1,000 years previously somewhere else. Maybe.

When Crystal went to leave later that night, her mother stuck her head into the kitchen behind her. "You going to that boy's house?"

Crystal smiled. "Yes."

"Be smart. Come home at a reasonable time."

"Ok, Mom." Crystal fumbled with the buttons on her coat, her fingers bound too tight.

"Let me help you." Her mother bustled over and buttoned her coat like she was a little girl again. Then she leaned down and kissed the top of Crystal's head, where the new pink dye had covered her roots. "Have fun."

The white colonial looked empty as per usual, but she did not even bother trying to knock today. Instead she went directly around the back to the hatch, rapped on it and waited for the sandy head to pop out of it.

"Hey," he said, weighted down by the ever-present flak jacket. "Come in."

She climbed down the stairs into the damp warmth of the shelter. It looked as if Matthew had more or less totally moved down here, personal belongings mixed with the survivalist gear. Shirts sat folded next to stacked cans of beans. Photographs hung on the wall alongside instructional posters for water filtration. She hoped the arrest had not set him back too far.

"Do you want some cranberry tea?" he asked.

"Why not?" She sat down on the leather couch, fumbling to unbutton her coat. Matthew busied himself with a kettle and hotplate set up. Then he turned back and saw her struggling with the buttons.

"That's an awfully big mitt they gave you."

"It's awful."

"I could redo that if you want. I have basic medical training."

"Sure," she said. She watched as he shifted a few things on a shelf, retrieving a first aid kit and bringing it over. He knelt on one knee before her opening the kit.

"How you doing, Matt?" she asked as he cut some of the wadded gauze off her hand.

"Comme ci, comme ça," he answered noncommittally. He dropped the heavy bandage in the trash. It was crusty with yellow ointment.

She lifted her hand gently. "Better than it was."

Matthew would not meet her eyes. "I'm really sorry for whatever part I had in this."

"Stop—"

"I feel guilty."

"If you haven't learned from your brother by now about guilt, you haven't been paying attention."

Matthew nodded. He unwrapped a roll of sterile gauze and began to gently wind it around her hand. It felt more comfortable already.

"You're good at this," she said lightly.

Matthew looked up at her finally and she saw with surprise that his eyes looked damp.

"I'm okay," she insisted unsure of what upset him. "You're making it feel so much better."

"Good," he said swallowing hard. "Because the last guy I did this for bled out all the hell over the place."

Crystal laughed without thinking and was relieved to see Matthew smile.

"About my brother – " he started, sounding more serious, but the kettle whistled then.

Crystal stood up, twitching her fingers beneath the bandages. Matthew was right about his medical skills, they were more comfortable all ready. He turned to the hot plate and pulled the kettle off. Its whistle waned. He poured the tea water. The steam rose up obscuring his face for a moment.

"Matt. Tell me what you were going to say about Jamie."

Matt shrugged, the heavy vest moving with his powerful shoulders. "It's nothing brilliant." He dunked a tea bag in. Swirls of red unfurled in the water. "I think you already know anyway."

"I do?"

Matthew sat on the couch, cradling the tea, an armchair philosopher in a tactical vest. "Random bad shit happens to everyone all the time."

"That's it?" Crystal laughed and held up her bandaged hand. "That's the big secret?"

Matthew shook his head. "No this is the secret: Random good shit happens too."

He held her gaze. His jaw was relaxed, his eyes alert. For a moment Crystal remembered the handsome boy he had been before he had left town, before the random bad shit had befallen both Wozniak brothers. He had come to the Junior League games with their parents. Sometimes she had seen him and Jamie playing catch once the scores were tallied and the field had emptied. She remembered turning back to see Violet Elliot's face in the window as they drove away. The innate goodness in Matthew couldn't help but show in the holes others had blown in him.

Matthew pulled something out from beneath the vest, unfolding the small scrap of yellow paper. For a moment Crystal thought that it was a post-it note, perhaps some list he had meant to give her or some notes he had jotted down. Instead she saw the analog numbers printed on it and the watermark of a state lottery.

"The ticket you bought on the Mass Pike?"

"Yep."

"You kept it. Why?"

Matthew breathed in and out, his shoulders moving with the breath. "It's worth a half a million dollars."

When the fireworks had gone off in the school she had not thought she would ever be more shocked or surprised again in life. She had been wrong. "*Matthew*," she hissed. "You've got to turn that in."

"Do I, though?"

"Yes."

"It could get complicated."

"It could be the answer to your problems."

"If we all live past tomorrow," he said, but with a twinkle in his eye that told her he was more or less joking. "The random good shit, then."

"Yeah," said Crystal, a warmth tingling along her spine. *The random good shit.*

"My brother must be waiting for you."

"He is."

Matthew tucked the winning ticket back into the pocket of his shirt beneath the vest. "Let me help you out," he said and he climbed up to the hatch, levering the heavy metal door open for her. She climbed out into the gloomy darkness, letting her eyes adjust after the soft yet fluorescent lighting of the bunker.

At the edge of the yard she could just make out the shape of Jamie standing in shadows. He had traded his long duster for a short down coat. He looked more like a normal guy, perhaps ready to go skiing or snowmobiling, than anything else.

"You sure you want to stay down there?"

Matthew nodded. "It's where I feel...safe."

As Crystal started across the yard she heard the hatch close behind her.

The steps up to the tree house were crooked but solidly bolted into the sturdy oak at the very back of their yard. Jamie and Crystal stood at the base of the tree, waiting until Matthew's footsteps receded down the steel steps of the bunker.

"Can you make it?" Jamie asked with great concern, a hand at her back, eyes on her bandages.

"I think so."

Crystal moved carefully up the ladder. When she began to feel her strength flag, a reassuring hand reached up, bracing her against the side of the tree until she could move on. The inside of the tree house was littered with the stuff of childhood. Frisbees and shrunken sticks of sidewalk chalk. Baseballs in the corners half covered by leaves. A line of army men set off on some mission along a shelf following their fearless leader, G.I. Joe. Jamie pulled the blue tarp off the open window. They settled against the back wall of the tree house, looking toward the center of town through the wide empty window, where, if the world didn't come to a grinding halt, there would be fireworks set-off. From inside his coat Jamie pulled a thin folded blanket that they wrapped around their knees. Crystal leaned her head back on his shoulder.

"What time is it?"

"11:59."

"So it's the end?"

"It's the end."

Afterword: Writing with the Door Open

Stephen King, though one of the top twenty best-selling authors, is a writer I have never been able to truly enjoy. Though I have tried on many occasions over many years to read his books, I have only ever finished one: *On Writing*. It is from this text that I learned the best advice I have yet heard about writing, and applied it during the writing of this piece. King, in *On Writing*, says, "Write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open." A writer must maintain the integrity and cohesiveness of their work before introducing other influences. This was perhaps the most important concept to balance, particularly in a thesis project which almost completely requires you to write with the door open at all times. You must be in control of your own story before you can present it to others or even review it yourself. There were questions I had to answer about what this story was before I could talk about anything else. To answer them, I had to look back at how I came to write this piece at all.

I will start then in a brief imitation of *On Writing* with, "...a kind *curriculum vitae*—my attempt to show how one writer was formed." I can trace this formation, in its relevance to the subject of *The Year Two Thousand*, to a few key events. People my age have grown up seeing a world a vastly different than the one our parents or grandparents saw in their childhoods and adolescences. When I was 8 years old—for some unknown reason—my parents allowed me to watch the news following the Columbine High School massacre. The image of Patrick Ireland falling out of the library window into the hands of the SWAT officers has stuck with me. Returning to it as narrated by Ireland in Dave Cullen's *Columbine*, I recognized that the memory was not

just a fixation of a child but that it was a recognizable, cultural touchstone. What happened next? Months of talk about Y2K. I turned nine a month before the New Year. Posters were tacked to telephone poles on my way to school reminding us that the world as we knew it was coming to an end. And after that? George W. Bush became president after seemingly losing an election. And then? 9/11. I think the rest is recent enough history.

So I wrote with the door semi-closed—as closed as it could get in a project that is reviewed weekly—concentrating on these huge cultural and historical events and trying to translate them into how it impacted people in their everyday lives. This constituted the bulk of the first few weeks' work. I was also reading, and by the time I had finished the first draft, I was ready to open the door to both critique and literary influence.

While writing I found myself drawn to post-apocalyptic texts, some I had read previously some I was reading for the first time: *Green Angel* Alice Hoffman's novella, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx & Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Why if I was writing about the recent past was I drawn to these somewhat futuristic dystopian texts? And then it occurred to me that what I was hoping to do was write the question that these pieces answer: the ante-apocalyptic, a genre of hindsight. In the way the Hostile Mob take over comes out of nowhere but quickly becomes a null threat, I also feel that much of our social and political concerns are based on illusions and misdirection. Real threats exist, but we hardly ever pay attention to them in time. When Hoffman, Atwood, and McCarthy are showing where we were going, I want to

talk about how we started on the journey. Post-apocalyptic texts, especially McCarthy's *The Road*, are told in fragmented episodes, a style I had a hard time resisting. It is of course appropriate for their fragmented settings but perhaps less so for my depiction of the disintegration. These fragmented styles allowed for an avoidance of the "event" that caused the apocalypse. I want to write about the event, or the complications that lead to such an event, so instead forced the episodic style I was drawn to into an exercise in points of view. What characters experienced and how they interpreted it differently than everyone else became significant.

As I sat, writing with my door closed, I placed my characters in what had been a pivotal year in my personal understanding of the world, a constellation of events that shaped a generation, and then meditated on the future that was to come for my characters. It was important to lay the groundwork for events that would follow so closely in the early years of millennium but after my ending on December 31, 1999. I initially conceived of doing so by having Matthew be a traumatized veteran of the Somalia conflict. Matthew began, essentially, as a character borrowed from the future meant to call to mind the mental health crisis of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While this provided great depth of character, it also felt like a subject vastly overdone in recent work. Having him be a civilian, present in a foreign country as a member of the Peace Corps, there to "do good," only to be caught in an attack that heralded the events of 9/11 seemed to work better. The tension this story should

contain is that at this point in history many events were about to kick off, but we can only see that in hindsight.

Some things are impossible to understand in anything but hindsight. Eyewitness accounts are inherently untrustworthy. We know this. *The Year Two Thousand* opens on a scene in which three different people witness and experience a tragic accident. How it affects them in the years to follow varies, because for each of them what they witnessed means different things. Perspective is the key. Crystal reacts with fear. Jamie holds everything at arm's length. Matthew runs away from suffering. Choosing to write their individual voices seemed like a given, but I had to look to other authors to figure how best to do so.

If you were a fan of Harry Potter fan-fiction in the early 2000s, you will remember Cassandra Clare (then stylized "Cassandra Claire") as a controversial writer at best. If you are a fan of young adult fiction nowadays, you will know her as a best-seller powerhouse and one of the authors that Kelly Link and Holly Black frequently write with. While she may not have an amazing reputation amongst fans from her early days, she has had a very successful career. Though there is this dark shadow in her past, I, like many others, anxiously await every one of her books. That is because they move like wildfire. She turns out 500-600 page novels in series of 3-6 books. Her pacing, action, and plots are almost constantly driven forward. Perhaps the most important technique to provide momentum to expansive plots is the way she skips through perspectives.

Early on in this project, the story was seen through three perspectives: Crystal's, Matthew's, and Jamie's, the three people who were somehow bonded by the baseball accident and its ripple effect in their individual lives. Feedback on this was that in striving to give Matthew enough "screen time," he began not only to overshadow Jamie, but also to start to sound like him. The solution offered was to eliminate Jamie's point of view and turn those scenes over to Crystal and Matthew. I was hesitant at first—Jamie is really the hero of this story. But then I realized I had the answer in Cassandra Clare's Victorian Steampunk trilogy *The Infernal Devices*.

The Infernal Devices centers on three characters Tessa, Will, and Jem, three demon-hunting Victorians with complicated romantic lives. Will and Jem are best friends and sworn brothers. Both inevitably fall in love with Tessa. Tessa, as all young adult heroines do, has trouble choosing between them. Point of view shifts between Tessa, Will, and several other minor characters over all three books and never once transfers to Jem. The reader hardly notices this until the final book, when Jem essentially fakes his own death. It is clear that had Jem ever been in possession of the narrative reins this great deception would have been impossible.

Beyond that, the characters of Will and Tessa are more solidified because in addition to their own perspectives we also get their view of each other, and Jem becomes an amalgam of who he is to each of them. When a character's perception of self or an event and another character's perception of them or that same event differ, nuance and depth are created. In my own story, which centers on three different characters' perspectives regarding one crucial event and its meaning, these slight variances in

perception helped me nail down the driving force behind the individual characters. Though they shared important history, they are also individuals.

Jamie lost his point of view chapters early on. His voice and his story had initially seemed clearest to me and it was an adjustment to let them go. However, Jamie is really the vertex in this angle metaphor between Crystal and Matthew. It is his accident that changes both of their lives. It is his accident that brings the past into the present. He is something very different to each of them, but he also *represents* something very different to each of them. With all these different versions of Jamie floating around, having his own version as well became redundant, and so his scenes were turned over to his companions. What is left is a blurred version of their perspectives of Jamie, and it is a stronger, more mysterious version for it. I would never have felt comfortable applying the same shifting points of view—or even known how to do so—to my story without Cassandra Clare's example.

My admiration of Cassandra Clare and her contemporaries shaped the story in a second way as it was subconsciously layered with the familiar trappings of the young adult novel. One of the fundamental problems with this piece was that it suffered from an identity crisis from day one. Originally envisioned in its earliest pages as a young adult novel, I had to answer the question of whether it was didactic, for young adult novels always have a moral of the story. Though I had imagined it along the lines of something like Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* or Stephen Chobsky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, works I feel approach thoughtful themes without overt lesson giving, I veered from the young adult label in the hopes of avoiding writing something too John

Green-esque. My story, however, fought to veer back every step of the way. The ages, concerns, and setting of the novel are certainly consistent with YA, but I hope I have resisted its less appreciated tropes concerning romance, popularity and—heaven forbid—prom date subplots.

What has it all come to? Three months, four drafts, a truly wasteful amount of printed copies for editing, and ultimately a story that has got a beginning-middle-and-end and hopefully some potential. Having left myself open to influence and critique, considered the post-apocalyptic, the dystopian, points of view, and the literature of young adults, this story has been shaped by far more than my initial interest in historical events and cultural hindsight. It has grown in leaps and bounds, stretching into unpredictable offshoots with plenty of space left to keep growing. And it will, because this is one story I do not want to forget. I'll be getting back to work on it soon, perhaps going back to the beginning and starting the process all over again. So I'm going to close the door now.

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