

If You
Don't Have
Anything
Nice
to Say

Also by Leila Sales

Once Was a Time

Tonight the Streets Are Ours

This Song Will Save Your Life

Past Perfect

Mostly Good Girls

*If You
Don't Have
Anything
Nice
to Say*

LEILA SALES

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX

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*For Emily Heddleson, my constant partner,
the closest I'll ever come to having a big sister of my own*

*“We tend to relentlessly define people by the
worst mistake they ever made.”*

—JON RONSON

*“That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all.”*

—from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by T. S. ELIOT

“But what one ‘means’ is neither important nor relevant.”

—from *Between the World and Me*, by TA-NEHISI COATES

1

I'm seventeen years old and I have already been famous twice in my life. The first occasion was a dream come true. The second occasion was a nightmare from which I still cannot wake up.

Fame seems from afar like one of those things that's inherently great. Like owning a pony! It's only once you get it that you realize your pony is in fact a wild stallion. It will turn on you. It will wreak havoc. It will run away. It cannot be contained.

My fame arrived, both times, because I love words. I love the sounds they make, the funny and surprising ways that the same twenty-six letters work together in infinite different combinations. I love the stories behind words: where they come from, where they're going. I love piecing them together like a puzzle.

You get punished for loving something too much. That is the truth of it all.

This sounds stupid now, but I used to want to be a writer. I

thought that writing might be a good place for all the words I have rattling around in my brain. And it was, for a little while. Until someone read what I had written.

That's supposed to be the best, right? You work hard on something, you practice and execute and refine it, and you claim, "It's just for my own enjoyment. As long as I like doing it, that's all that matters." But even as you say that—because you know it is the noble thing to say—what you *really* hope is that outsiders who know what they're talking about will see this thing you have produced and say, "You're a genius!"

So I'll own up to it: I didn't *just* want to write. I wanted to write, and I wanted people to read what I had written, and to like it, and to like me by extension.

This obviously did not go the way I had envisioned it.

I don't know what the moral of this story is. That's how you know it's not a good story. Good stories have morals. The moral is that there's no place like home, or the moral is that love conquers all, or the moral is that love actually conquers nothing of consequence. You should come away from a story thinking that you at least kind of understand what the point of it was. That it wasn't just a bunch of made-up people doing made-up things to no purpose.

What *is* the moral of my story? Don't aspire to make anything of yourself? Don't try to do anything? No one will ever understand you? Shut up and sit down? Whatever the moral is, it's clear that I haven't learned it yet. I am no wiser for my errors. Wounded, but no wiser.

The best I can hope for is that my story isn't over yet. That the moral will show up sometime much later.

Before we go any further, I want to make sure you understand this: I am not a good person. If that's important to you, to only read things by good people and about good people, where all their conflicts are unfair things that happened to them despite their pluck and kindness, then you should stop reading right now. I am not the girl for you.

I'm sure you know what I did. Everyone does. You might not *remember* that I did this. Or you might remember that *somebody* did it, but not that the person in question is *me*. I will jog your memory because I don't want our relationship to be founded on any pretense. I want you to know who you're dealing with here.

Pretense. If you trace its origins way back, it comes from the medieval Latin word *praetendere*, which later turned into *pretend*. Use it in a sentence: *I have no pretense to innocence*.

I am Winter Halperin. I'm the one who went online after the National Spelling Bee and posted, "We learned many surprising things today. Like that *dehnstufe* is apparently a word, and that a black kid can actually win the Spelling Bee."

That's what I wrote. And I put it online for the whole world to see.

You can stop reading now, if you want.

2

Who would say such a thing? What kind of racist, insensitive, attention-seeking, sheltered, clueless bitch would say something that basically amounts to, *Wow, I didn't know black people knew words!?* That's what everybody wanted to know.

Well, no. They didn't actually want to know. If they had, they would have asked me. I have this fantasy sometimes where CNN or NBC has me in for an interview, and the whole world is watching, and the news anchor asks me in a very calm way, "Winter, do you want to explain why you did it?" And I respond in an equally calm way, and I explain myself, and then the whole world understands and is satisfied.

This would never happen. The nightly news doesn't care what I have to say. Nobody does. And if I were given the opportunity to explain myself, I would somehow screw it up, my words would get twisted again, and whatever I said in my defense would be used

to make me look even more racist, insensitive, and bitchy than I already do.

However, this doesn't stop me from sometimes explaining myself to my mirror. Like if anyone ever asks, I want to make sure I'm ready. Like I need to say it aloud sometimes, even if I'm the only one who can hear, just to remind myself what the truth is. It sounds good, I think, when the only person listening is me. But what do I know? Lots of things sound good to me. I can't trust myself.

It was close to midnight on a Thursday in late May, four weeks before my high school graduation, when I wrote and posted that: "We learned many surprising things today. Like that *dehnstufe* is apparently a word, and that a black kid can actually win the Spelling Bee." I brushed my teeth and then checked to see if anyone had read my post. Already Corey had liked it and Mackler had reposted it, and that pleased me, that in only five minutes two of my friends had given their approval. Then I went to bed.

I silenced my phone, as I always do. When I first got it, I used to leave my phone on overnight. But then the screen shattered. (Technically, this was my fault, since I threw it against the wall. In my defense, it was beeping with a notification of a new crossword puzzle's availability at four a.m.) I never bothered to repair the screen, but I did start silencing the ringer while I slept, figuring that anyone who needed to reach me could wait until the morning.

What I didn't realize is that a life can be destroyed in the course of one night.

When my alarm went off, I looked at my phone for the weather, which is what I do every morning as an excuse to stay in bed for

an extra minute. But I couldn't even get to the weather, because my phone was filled with notifications. And I don't mean that Corey had texted me minute-by-minute updates of the old *Star Trek* episode that he was watching, or that I'd gotten an automated traffic alert or whatever. I mean *hundreds* of notifications. Maybe thousands. So many notifications that my phone couldn't handle them; it kept shutting down and then restarting, like it had forgotten how to be a phone.

It was hard to read any of these notifications, because new ones kept coming in on top of them. So I knew that something bad had happened, but my first instinct was that a bad thing must have happened to *everybody*. Maybe the president had been assassinated or an earthquake had wiped out the entirety of California except for my house. What else would I possibly need to know about with so much intensity?

I finally managed to get one of the notifications open, but without context, it didn't make any sense. "I can't believe you still haven't apologized," it said. It was from someone whose name and face I didn't recognize, an adult, and I didn't even wonder why I'd need to apologize to this woman, but instead wondered who she had mistaken me for.

The next message said, "Winter Halperin is a racist bitch who deserves to burn in hell," and that was the moment at which I panicked. I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs to where my mother stood, resting her hands on the countertop, leveling a bleary-eyed gaze at the espresso machine as it whirred.

"Mom," I said. "Mom, Mom, Mom."

She turned, looking alarmed—probably as much by the fact

that I was awake and downstairs so early as by the horror in my voice.

“Winter? What’s wrong?”

I shook my head and thrust my phone into her hands.

“I don’t know what . . .” She trailed off as she started to read. “What is this all about?” she asked, her voice shrill. The espresso machine started spurting out coffee, but my mother didn’t even seem to notice. “Who are these people?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know. I think they’re playing a prank on me.”

“Playing a . . . Why?” She started poking randomly at my phone.

“Mom,” I said. “Stop it, you don’t know how to . . .” My mom isn’t *that* old, but she is old enough to be terrible at technology. She somehow managed to turn on the ringer, which resulted in about a hundred consecutive beeping sounds.

“*Oy gevalt*. What did I do? What did I do?” she asked, frantically jabbing at the screen.

“*Mom*.” I tried to wrest it out of her hands, but she was still trying to fix the situation by pressing buttons, so she wasn’t letting go, and I pulled the phone toward me, and she pulled it toward her, saying, “Just one second,” and then my phone went flying up into the air, crash-landed on the floor, and went skidding under the refrigerator, knocking down a magnetized finger puppet of Mozart as it went.

“What is your *problem*?” I yelled, even though I knew that whatever this problem was, it was far too big to be my mother’s fault.

“At least that beeping stopped,” she pointed out. “Maybe all those terrible messages have stopped, too.”

“They were on the internet, Mom. If we looked on my computer, they would still be there . . . Oh my God, *why*? How can we make this go away? Where is Dad?”

“He already left for Portland,” Mom said absently.

My father is a sales representative for a toy company, so he spends a lot of time on the road, visiting toy stores or attending conventions, with his car packed full of puzzles and glow-in-the-dark bouncy balls and, sometimes, magnetized finger puppets of famous composers.

“Where’s my phone?” Mom asked, feeling around on the counter as if maybe her phone were right there but she was for some reason unable to see it.

“Probably still charging in your room,” I answered. “Mom. Drink your coffee. I need you to be helpful right now.” My mother gains roughly ten IQ points for every sip of caffeine that she downs in the morning.

She drank her coffee. “Can we just tell them that they need to stop? This is harassment. You’re a minor. I don’t even think this is legal. I’m going to call my lawyer.”

I nodded vigorously. Even with my phone silent, maybe destroyed, under the fridge, I could still picture those messages that had lit it up: *You are such a bitch. You are such an idiot. What is Winter Halperin’s PROBLEM?* Mom must be right. That couldn’t be legal stuff to say, not to a seventeen-year-old.

“I’m going to get my phone,” Mom told me. She strode forward, and I stuck to her like a burr. I didn’t want to be alone.

There was a banging at the front door, and I grabbed my mom in a panic. Could it be that one of those crazies had somehow tracked down where I live and was outside right this minute?

Mom seemed to have the same thought, because she said, “Stay here. I’ll find out who it is.”

I stood alone in the kitchen, knotting and unknotting my hands. Without really thinking it through, I grabbed a chef’s knife from the drying rack. In case whoever was at the door came for me, I’d be ready to . . . what? Cut them? Yeah, right. I’d never hurt anyone in my life. I couldn’t even manage to spar when I took karate in first grade. If a crazy from the internet was here to kill me, I’d have more luck winning a debate than a physical fight.

Then my sister, Emerson, came flying into the kitchen, her blond topknot bouncing up and down on her head. Mom was right behind her.

“Oh, it’s you.” I breathed a sigh of relief, set down the knife in what I hoped was a casual manner, and gave her a big hug. “I thought you weren’t getting home until later?” Emerson had just finished her freshman year in the University of Oklahoma’s musical theater program.

“Apparently she decided to drive all through the night so she could get home earlier,” Mom said drily. “You can imagine how her mother feels about this.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell you in advance,” Emerson said, “because I knew you’d worry. But look, here I am, I’m safe and alive—”

“*Kina hora,*” Mom muttered.

“—and the person you really need to be worrying about right

now is Winter,” Emerson went on. She turned to me. “Winter Leona Halperin. What the hell is wrong with you? Did you actually tell the entire world that African Americans *don’t know how to spell?*”

And *that* was when I put two and two together.

“Oh,” I said. “Oh my God. Is *that* what this is all about?”

“Is *what* what this is all about?” Mom demanded.

“My friends have been texting me about this since, like, three a.m.,” Emerson said. “I *tried* to reach you. Don’t any of you people ever look at your phones?”

“My phone’s under the fridge,” I answered.

“Emerson, you were texting while you were *driving?*” Mom exclaimed.

“Of course not,” Emerson said, which I immediately took to mean *yes, definitely*. “But Brianna just sent me this Yahoo article a second ago, and I had to . . . Look, it’s easier if I read it to you.” She cleared her throat. “The headline is ‘Spelling Bee Champ Disses Minorities.’”

“*Disses?*” I repeated. “What kind of reputable news source uses *disses?*”

Emerson kept reading. “If you haven’t gotten caught up in the general societal bashing of one Winter Halperin (yes, her name really is Winter), you must be living under a rock. To bring you up to speed—last night, after the final round of the annual Scripps National Spelling Bee, the California teen took to the internet to post the following: ‘We learned many surprising things today. Like that *dehnstufe* is apparently a word, and that a black kid can actually win the Spelling Bee.’”

“Ms. Halperin was referring to the victory of Sintra Gabel, the eighth grader from Queens, New York, who took home the gold in this year’s spelling bee by correctly spelling the word *dehnstufe*, which means ‘a lengthened grade’ and derives from the German.

“When asked for her opinion on Ms. Halperin’s statement, Ms. Gabel declined to comment, but her father said, “My daughter is terrifically smart and hardworking, and as of tonight she is the best speller in the nation. It’s unfortunate and hurtful that this has been turned into a conversation about her race rather than her intellect and her accomplishments. Winter’s thoughtless remarks show just how far America still has to go before we reach true equality.”

“Ms. Halperin’s original post has, in the few hours since she wrote it, been reposted and commented on more than twenty thousand times. “It’s the very definition of viral content,” explains Dr. Orlando Beaudrault, professor of media studies at Northwestern University. And where will it stop? “Who knows,” says Dr. Beaudrault. “As the internet grows, so too do its viruses. It seems like every time we see an explosion of outrage like this one, it gets bigger and bigger. How far will this specific one go? As far as I can tell, the sky is the limit.”

“If you’re wondering why so many people are reacting so strongly to a teenager’s post, all you need to know is who Ms. Halperin is: she herself was the champion of the National Spelling Bee five years ago, when she was in seventh grade. Her winning word was *ptyalagogue*. Now a high school senior, Ms. Halperin will be attending Kenyon College starting this fall.’”

Emerson clicked off her phone and crossed her arms.

“I don’t understand this,” Mom whispered, steadying herself on the wall.

“I’m going to delete that post,” I said. “Right now.”

“It won’t matter,” Emerson said gently. “You’re already crucified. It’s too late.”

And, of course, she was right.

3

What else happened on that first day? I can't give a full account; even as the moments unfolded, I didn't know what was happening to me. I felt like I was drowning, like I kept losing consciousness and then regaining it only to find myself further and further underwater.

I stayed home from school, which was unprecedented. Some people, like my friend Mackler, have a pretty *laissez-faire* relationship with school attendance: a poor night's sleep or the first warm day of spring is reason enough to stay home. But in my family, you follow through on your commitments and show up at school or work unless you are on death's doorstep. But maybe I *was* on death's doorstep, because Mom and I didn't even discuss the idea of my leaving the house. It was as if school didn't exist, as if nothing in the real, tangible world existed, and the only world of consequence was the one on the internet.

My name went from getting no more than a few search results, all five-year-old news pieces about my spelling victory, to being the first result to pop up when you typed the letters *W-I-N-T* into the search bar. Let me repeat that: “Winter Halperin” preceded even *the season of winter* in Google search results. BuzzFeed ran an article of “20 Perfect Responses to Winter Halperin’s Racist Post.” I remember them all, and I imagine I always will. Number seventeen: “We learned many surprising things today. Like that just because someone is a good speller, it doesn’t mean she’s not a bigot.” Number nine: “Hey, Winter Halperin, do you know how to spell ‘white supremacy?’”

I’ll just explain myself, I thought. *I need to explain myself.*

I didn’t understand, then, that this is not how the world works. When we decide someone is an angel, she is an angel only until she falls from the sky. But when we decide someone is a villain, she is a villain forever. Everything she says or does is only more proof of her villainy. She cannot be redeemed.

Yet I wrote and posted my defense as though the internet was some fair court of law. “This is Winter Halperin,” I wrote, “and there’s been a big mistake. I was definitely never trying to say that white people are in any way smarter or better spellers than African Americans, or people of any other race.

“In fact, the National Spelling Bee is disproportionately won by kids from Southeast Asia. I’m one of the few white winners from the past decade, because so many of them have been of Indian or Pakistani descent. Black kids almost never win the Bee—even less often than white kids. I don’t know why that is, and I

certainly don't believe that it's right or good. I was just trying to call attention to that situation.

"It's not that *I* was surprised that Sintra Gabel was the country's best speller. It would be like if a short person won the NBA championship and I said that was a surprise—not because *I* assume short people aren't good at basketball, but because *society* assumes short people aren't as good at basketball as tall people.

"I promise I'm not a racist. Two of my best friends in the world are African American. I was trying to make a humorous commentary here, but obviously it fell flat, and I sincerely apologize if anyone's feelings were hurt. Sintra's an amazing speller and she deserves this victory. I give her my wholehearted congratulations."

I worked really hard on that explanation. I was proud of it, especially the basketball analogy. I honestly, idiotically thought that might be the end of the whole thing.

But it took only seconds—hardly enough time for anyone to even read and process what I'd written—for the rebuttals to start pouring in.

"Oh, look, White Winter speaks at last."

"I sincerely apologize if anyone's feelings were hurt'—can you even *imagine* a more passive way to apologize?! Like, 'If anyone's feelings were hurt—which maybe they weren't, who could say!—then I'm sorry that they feel bad, even though I'm *not* sorry for my actions, which totally have nothing to do with people's hurt feelings.' WINTER, YOU ARE THE WORST."

"omg I can't believe she's parading out the old 'I can't be a racist, some of my best friends are black!' shtick. If I were her right

now I'd be so mortified, I'd literally kill myself. Can anyone explain why this bitch is still alive??"

"I just want to be clear that I am a guy and I'm only 5'8", and my basketball team has never lost a match. Short people can be great athletes. Black people can be great intellectuals. Sorry to ruin your tiny little understanding of the world, Winter."

"I hate that this is the sort of bullshit we have to put up with, even in the twenty-first century, even in what is supposedly the greatest nation on Earth. There are only so many black stereotypes: you can be the athlete or the drug dealer, you can be the baby mama or the ho. And if you deviate from that in any way—like if you're a smart, kick-butt little girl who's a spelling bee champion—people's minds are blown. They're all, 'Whoa! Where did she come from? Is she a unicorn?' Nope, she's not. She came from the same place as the rest of us—it's just that she hasn't learned yet that there are certain things she's not 'supposed' to be able to do."

"Someone should steal *her* away from her home, enslave her, beat her, rape her, tell her she's three-fifths of a person at best, and see if any of that helps her understand what she did wrong."

"Ooh, let's see what Winter says. 'I was definitely never trying to say that white people are in any way smarter or better spellers than African Americans.' Why do you think that we care what you were *trying* to say? I don't give a rat's ass if you were *trying* to say, 'Let's have peace on Earth' or 'I want pancakes for breakfast.' What you *actually* said was that you were surprised a black kid was smart enough to win the National Spelling Bee. Do or do not, Winter—there is no *try*."

"Is Winter hating on Southeast Asians now, too? My dad is

Pakistani and he's one of the worst spellers I've ever met. (Love him, though!) RACE DOESN'T EQUAL SPELLING ABILITY. How does she not get this??"

And on and on and on. They didn't stop. They never stopped. For every individual out there who grew tired of my story or had to take a break to go to school or work or take a shower or a nap, there was some new person seamlessly moving in to take their place, as if this were a relay race that everyone in America was playing and the baton of Hating Winter could never touch the ground.

The morning faded into afternoon, the afternoon into evening. Emerson went out for a while, then returned with reports from the real world. "You were all anyone could talk about," she said, jumping onto the couch where I had been sitting all day, searching for my name again and again. "Katharine said everyone is making a mountain out of a molehill, and Brianna said she's known you since you were four years old and obviously you're not a racist, and Tyler said his cousin who lives all the way in *Toronto* e-mailed him to ask if he knew you. Everyone is on your side." Emerson held my hand in hers. "They know you well enough to know that you just made a stupid mistake. You're not the terrible person that all these idiots online seem to think you are."

Of course I wasn't that terrible person. I couldn't be. I was a good girl. Vacationing neighbors trusted me to feed their cats. Overworked teachers counted on me to monitor the class if they had to leave for a moment. I didn't get in trouble. I'd never once gotten detention. I didn't even run in the halls. I was nothing like the person being described online.

"Did anyone you talked to say I should be raped and murdered?"

I asked—because those were the comments that frightened me most, the ones that said, “Why doesn’t White Winter do us all a favor and go die,” followed by, “We should just kill her and put her out of her misery,” followed by, “Death is better than she deserves. Someone needs to rape that bitch,” followed by, “Not it. She’s way too ugly to fuck.”

Emerson blanched. “*Obviously* not. Who the hell would say something like that?”

I gestured limply toward my computer.

“That’s horrible,” Emerson whispered.

“I know.” It was scary, too. I didn’t really believe that one of these commenters was going to track me down in person and torture me the way they said I deserved—but they *could*. Saying that sort of thing would get you kicked out of school, but what happened to you if you said it online, to a person you didn’t even know? Nothing. There was no principal or police force of the internet. No one could stop you.

Later that afternoon, some enterprising asshole found a photo of me at age eleven, competing in my second National Spelling Bee. That wasn’t the year I won. This photo was from the year before that, when I was in full-on middle-school awkwardness: colorful braces, too-long split-ended hair, a headband with a ridiculously big cloth daisy on top. It doesn’t matter; nobody expects an eleven-year-old to have figured out how to get the most out of her hair and wardrobe. Still, if there was going to be a photo that everyone in the world associated with me, I wished it had been taken after I’d shed some more of my baby fat. In this photo I’m standing at the microphone, my mouth open, my eyes

mostly closed. I don't remember the exact moment this shot was taken, but based on my expression, I'd say I was in the process of spelling a word aloud as I visualized it in my mind.

At first, the internet had a lot of commentary on my physical appearance. "No wonder she's lashing out at other people," said one post. "I'd do the same if I looked like *that*. Whatever it takes to feel better about yourself, am I right?" And, "How am I not surprised that White Winter is a fatty?"

Here and there I would see a post saying something like, "Come on, she's just a kid in this photo. I'm sure none of us were gorgeous prepubescents. Lay off." But even those posters would hastily add, "Not that I am in *any way* defending her completely inappropriate remark." As if they were worried that by suggesting I wasn't a monster through and through, someone might suspect *them* of being the racists.

Within a few hours, the use of this photo morphed. People started posting it with their own writing on it. This picture of me—innocent, hard-at-work, little-girl me—became a meme. "We learned many surprising things today," said one iteration of my photo. "Like that 9/11 was an inside job." Or, "We learned many surprising things today. Like that my cat just peed in my shoes." Now it wasn't only when you typed in *W-I-N-T* that you got search results about me. If you typed in "surprising things," up popped hundreds or thousands of versions of this same photo, each one with a different stupid surprising thing to learn. And I saw them all. I clicked through every last one.

That evening faded into night. We'd had plans to take Emerson out to her favorite Greek restaurant in honor of her first night

back, but now no one even mentioned it. My dad came home, cutting his business trip short to be with me. He held me in his arms for a long time, crushing me toward him, as if by keeping me close he could keep everyone else away.

But he couldn't, of course. As soon as he left the room, I checked the internet again, desperate to know what I had missed, and this time I saw a statement that came to my defense—in the worst way possible. “We here at the Aryan Alliance stand in full support of Winter Halperin and the truth she espouses,” it said. “If you are a believer in white superiority, then you will stand with us and stand with Miss Halperin.”

My stomach roiling, I clicked on their profile. I could get through only half of their description of the Aryan Alliance as an organization devoted to the principle that the white race is smarter, braver, kinder, and altogether better than any other race in the world before I had to close out of that window, pressing my hands to my stomach, trying not to throw up.

How could those people possibly think that I was one of them? I was *nothing* like them. That was in no way what I believed. That wasn't ever what I meant. Didn't it *matter* what I meant?

Eventually the rest of my family went to bed. It was one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock in the morning, and it did not even occur to me to try to go to sleep. Basic systems in my body had shut down. The parts that demanded food, hydration, sleep, and bathroom breaks had all gone silent. It was as if I didn't even have a body anymore, just an online persona.

And I was scared to go to sleep. I remembered too clearly that the night before, I'd closed my eyes and everything was fine, and

when I woke up, everything would never be fine again. What *is* the moral of this story? Is it *don't fall asleep*?

Sometime early on the second morning, my eyes burning from too many hours spent open, I started seeing a new sort of photo. These ones weren't of me (though that humiliating photo persisted, too, don't worry). These new photos were of all different people: old, young, male, female, smiling, stern. What every one of these individuals had in common was that they were all black, and they were each holding a sign that said SURPRISE: I CAN SPELL. Almost immediately, a website sprang up to collect them. I spent the early hours of the morning, with all the world dark and silent around me, clicking through page after page of strangers' faces and their handwritten signs.

I just wanted this to stop. I wanted this to disappear. I wanted to rewind thirty hours and make one simple, different choice. I wanted anybody's life except for my own.

And then things really fell apart.

4

My friends tried to help—most of them did, anyway. Corey and Mackler kept up a running commentary of normal-sounding messages all day long. **I showed Fiona the hamster video and she almost peed herself laughing IT IS COMEDY GOLD YO.** And, **Are you sure you don't want to come to the movies with us? Mack will even give you free popcorn, think about that.** And, **Jason and Caroline are fighting AGAIN it's hilarious.** It took all my energy and focus to reply with a smiley face.

But the mention of Jason jabbed at me like a knitting needle, because he himself—the final member of our crew, our other best friend—hadn't said a word. And as the day went on, and then the evening faded into night, and still I didn't hear from him, I grew more and more concerned. Surely he knew what was going on. Everyone in the entire world knew.

So where was he?

I messaged Jason a dozen times over the course of the day, starting with **Hey** and going all the way to **Please just reply to let me know you're alive.**

He didn't write back.

Is Jason still with you? I asked Corey and Mackler after a family dinner that I couldn't bear to eat.

Nah he's out with Caroline, Corey responded. **Why?**

Nothing, I said.

Around twelve thirty, I slipped out of my house and walked over to the Shaws'. Jason and I live in the Berkeley Hills, and to drive between our houses takes a lot of winding through the streets, but fortunately there are steep staircases cut through the hills that lead straight from my street down to his. The staircases are poorly lit and poorly maintained, and late at night it's easy to convince yourself that you're going to run straight into a dead skunk or a murderer. Our parents always asked us to stick to the roads, but I never did.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs and Jason's house, I saw him through the living room window, reading a book on the couch. I paused for a moment before making my presence known, just watching him. I almost never saw Jason alone. He was always with Corey and Mackler or the guys on his basketball team or his girlfriend of the month, so I never had the opportunity to admire the confident sprawl of his legs, as I did now, or the way he unconsciously rubbed his hand across his stubbly black hair, or the way he bit down on his bottom lip when he was thinking.

Snap out of it, Halperin, I told myself. It's hard when one of

your best friends is stupidly good-looking. People who are your friends shouldn't be allowed to be so beautiful.

I approached the living room window and stood on tiptoe to tap at it. Jason's head jolted up from his book, then stilled when he caught sight of me. For a moment we stared at each other through the glass. Then he stood and crossed the room to the front door to let me in.

"Thanks," I said once I was inside. "I didn't want to wake up your parents, and you weren't answering your phone. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said, not quite meeting my eye.

I waited for an explanation, received nothing but silence, and tried again. "What did you and Caroline get up to tonight?" I asked brightly.

He shrugged. "I dunno. Turns out she's kind of crazy."

This is how Jason describes all his exes and soon-to-be-exes. If you ask me, he *drives* them crazy by asking them out and then being completely emotionally unavailable. But that is simply my opinion.

"Crazy how?" I asked, just to keep him talking.

"She gets jealous. It's weird."

It wasn't weird at all. To really get to know Jason, to become part of the fabric of his life and have him woven into yours, took a herculean effort. Mackler, Corey, and I came closest out of everyone, and I suspected that even we had access to only about twenty-five percent of Jason. Any girl who he was dating got far less than that: a Saturday-night date to the movies, a perfunctory pre-bedtime text, as much physical affection as she wanted—but emotionally,

she was always cordoned off and penned in. I couldn't blame Caroline for feeling jealous of all the sides of Jason that she couldn't know and could never have.

"What are you doing here?" Jason asked at last. He hitched up his flannel pants, and it occurred to me that even this—my being here alone and late at night when he was in his pajamas—was infringing on his firmly marked territory.

"I don't know if you heard," I replied, "but I'm having kind of a rough week."

"What do you want from me, Winter?" he said.

"I just need you to act like my friend," I replied in a low voice. "I need to know someone is on my side. This is so scary, and I don't know how to make it stop. Or if I can *ever* make it stop. I said I was sorry and tried to explain myself, and nothing changed. I don't know what else to do." I flopped down onto his couch.

Jason's voice was heavy. "Look, I believe that you're sorry you said that thing because it made people act like jerks to you. I believe that you're sorry you got in trouble. It goes without saying that you're sorry.

"But here's the thing: I don't believe that you're sorry you actually had those thoughts in the first place."

I stared up at him. Could this really be the reason for his silence—silence at the time in my life when I most needed support?

He went on. "I don't believe that there's anything that would stop you from saying the exact same thing again if you knew that next time, no one would care."

"I was just trying to make a joke," I whispered.

I could imagine—sort of—how strangers might not know that,

might not understand my tone and might assume the worst of me. But if you *knew* me, how could you fault me? And how could Jason at this point *not* know me?

“Should my life get destroyed over the fact that I made one bad joke?” I asked, my voice stronger now. “I get it, okay? *I’m not funny*. It wasn’t funny. It was supposed to be, but it wasn’t. But should I be punished because I’m not as funny as I thought I was, because I’m a worse writer than I wanted to be?”

“This isn’t about *your* punishment or *your* writing skills,” Jason snapped. “Have you even taken *one second* to consider how this might make anyone else feel? Let me spell it out for you: you said it’s a shock for a black person to win a competition that requires intelligence.”

“I did not,” I argued. “Do you really think that’s the sort of thing I would say?”

“It’s what you *did* say.”

“That’s obviously not what I meant. For starters, as someone who once spent, like, five hours a day spelling words, I can say that spelling is not even really a test of intelligence. A lot of it is just rote memorization. It takes mnemonics and hard work, it’s not *easy*, but it’s not like the world’s smartest people are also the world’s best spellers.”

This was one of the things that bothered me often. I’d been one of the best spellers in the country, but you couldn’t *do* anything with that skill. It didn’t translate into better grades or a greater understanding of the French Revolution or organic chemistry or anything, really. As it turned out, it didn’t even make you a better writer. Because even if you had access to almost every

single word in the English language, as I did, the trick was in how you used them. And no matter how good your words were, there was still no guarantee that anyone would understand your meaning.

“Are you really taking the side of all those crazies out there?” I demanded. “The strangers saying I should be lynched, I should be whipped, I should be raped and then have my children taken away from me and sold into slavery so I could pay for what I’ve done? Are you going to take their side over mine?”

“Of *course* not,” Jason said, flinching. “I’m not associating myself with any of those assholes. But if there are sides here, I’m not taking yours, Winter. You betrayed me.”

“In what way did I *betray* you? Are you really going to try to make me feel guilty about this? Do you think I don’t feel guilty enough?”

“I just want to know if, at any point in the past two days, you ever stopped to think about how it would make *me* feel,” Jason said, “finding out after all these years that you think I’m an idiot.”

“I don’t think that.” I was astonished.

“I am black,” Jason said. “In case you didn’t know.”

I didn’t speak for a moment. Yes, Jason was black. But it was not anything we ever *discussed*, because what was there to say? Like, “Hey, what do you think about the fact that our skins are different colors?” We didn’t talk about any of that stuff: how I was Jewish while Mackler was Methodist; how I was female while the rest of them were male; how Mackler was so large and Corey so scrawny. What was there to say about any of that? It was all just stuff we’d been born with, the backgrounds to who we really were.

I was so flustered that Jason was bringing this up now when he never had before, not once, that I blurted out, “I don’t care that you’re black.”

He grimaced. “Clearly.”

“That came out wrong. I’m sorry. Look, Jason, I don’t believe that all white people are smart or all black people are stupid. You *know* I don’t believe that, because that is an insane, irrational, backward, horrible thing to believe.” I thought of the Aryan Alliance and shuddered.

“Nobody *says* they believe that one race is better than another,” Jason said, starting to pace the room. “But when a security guard ‘casually’ trails me at the mall, or a woman crosses to the other side of the street when I’m walking behind her, or when my pediatrician told me that when I started high school I shouldn’t get involved in any gangs, do you think it makes any difference what they *meant* by any of that?”

“Is that real?” I asked, horrified. “I’ve never seen anyone treat you like that.”

“Do you think I’m making it up?”

“No! I just can’t believe it.”

“You don’t notice it because they don’t do it much when you’re with me,” he said. “Because you look so safe. You look like the stereotype of a person who would *never* shoplift or drag someone into a dark alleyway and pull out a switchblade. If you’re with me, then I *must* be safe.”

And yet of the two of us, I was the more radioactive. I didn’t know how people thought they could see that in his skin color when they couldn’t see it in me. That was irony.

Irony. A truly great word. From the Greek, obviously, as so many great words about literary technique are. It has a bunch of different meanings, and yet still people use it at the wrong times. *Irony* refers to the difference between the expected outcome and the actual outcome—like here, apparently one would expect the danger to be Jason and not me, when really the opposite is true. And it can also mean something more like sarcasm: when you use words to express the opposite of their literal meaning.

How do you tell people, though, when you want your words to be understood *ironically* rather than *literally*? How do you convey that? Why isn't there a special font we can use that means "just kidding"?

Jason sat down beside me and looked at me, his brown eyes soft and sad. I understood so badly what drew girls like Caroline to him. He was handsome and inscrutable. He had vast wells of emotion, and maybe, if you tried hard enough, someday you would get to the bottom of them.

"Corey's black, too," I reminded him, feeling supremely uncomfortable to be calling attention to this fact, as if I were revealing a secret. I'd never *announced* somebody's race like this, and I hated doing so now.

"I've noticed," Jason said drily.

"I'm just saying, *Corey* doesn't care about my post. He thought it was funny—or, I don't know, if not funny, at least not any sort of *problem*. He liked it."

"Good for Corey. He and I don't have to have the same opinions, any more than you and Mack are going to agree on everything just because you're both white."

“I didn’t say that,” I said, my voice growing louder with frustration. “Stop trying to tell me what I believe. I said it’s surprising for an African American speller to win the Bee simply because *that almost never happens*. It’s surprising because it’s *unusual*. And that’s a fact. I didn’t say that I thought that was a *good* thing. In fact, I think it’s a *bad* thing. But it’s what happens, year after year.”

“And why do you think that is?” Jason asked bitterly. “Do you have any possible ideas about *why* they almost never win?”

“Because they’re . . . not as good spellers.”

“Because we’re stupider,” he supplied.

“No! That’s obviously not true. Look at Sintra Gabel.”

“Oh, sure,” Jason said. “There are exceptions. There are always the exceptional ones who prove to the world that the rest of us could succeed, too, if we just worked really hard, like they did. But on average—*disproportionately*, as you said—there’s a whole goddamn race of people who are worse spellers. Why? Do you think they’re born that way?”

I shook my head, though it actually didn’t seem entirely irrelevant—there *were* things that each individual was born to be better or worse at. It mattered what you did with them, of course: I was born good at words, but probably that wouldn’t have come to anything if my parents hadn’t encouraged me. And on the flip side, no matter how much training I’d been given, I probably never would have turned into a truly gifted athlete, because I wasn’t born with whatever it is good athletes are supposed to have. (Reflexes, I think. Maybe reflexes.)

“I can’t believe I have to explain this to you,” Jason said. “I *hate* that I have to explain this to you. *Not everyone has your privilege*,

Winter. Not everyone has parents with college degrees, who are around all the time, who talk to them with big words, who listen to what they have to say. Not everyone has money to throw at coaches and after-school enrichment programs and books and computers. Not everyone even knows all those things are options in the first place. Not everyone has spent their whole life in a good town with a good school system. Not everyone is trusted like you, or given the benefit of the doubt like you, or expected to do great things like you. A lot of people are fighting a seriously uphill battle just to get treated with the basic respect you go through your whole life assuming you're entitled to."

Jason had never said anything like this to me before, but he wasn't telling me anything I didn't know. I knew I was fortunate to have a loving family and good education and health and people who believed in me. I knew lots of people all over the world didn't have half of that; it wasn't a guarantee. I was grateful for it all. But how did any of that make me a racist and a bad person?

"Can you even try to understand what it's like to *not* be you?" Jason asked, frustrated. "My mom used to tell me that I had to be twice as good as the other kids in school—twice as polite, twice as hardworking—just to get half of what they got. I knew that was true before I even thought to ask *why*. Then I started seeing all this black activism stuff online, and it was like . . . I woke up.

"When I started middle school, my parents had all these rules for me: never run or shout unless you absolutely have to, keep your hands out so everyone can see that they're empty, don't wear hoodies so people can see your face, don't be on the streets late at night . . . a hundred ways to make other people feel safe around

me so *I* don't get in trouble. When your mom was so busy teaching you how to spell, Winter, did she ever have to teach you any of that stuff?"

My mouth had fallen open. "I'm so sorry, Jason," I said when I found my voice. "I had no idea. Why didn't you ever mention any of this before? I could have . . ." But I didn't know what I could have done. How could I—how could *anyone*—have changed that?

There was so much of Jason I had no idea about. His grandmother lived with him, and somehow I'd only met her once. When he passed his driving test, we found out weeks later, and then only because Mackler wrested his wallet away from him and discovered a driver's license in it. I didn't even know Jason's middle name. None of us did.

"You know what the *really* funny part is?" he asked. His voice was bitter. "I actually used to think my parents were wrong. Like, okay, maybe when *they* were my age, people were racist, but surely by now society has moved on. Or maybe in some parts of the country it's like that, but not *here*. I even used you and Mackler as proof. I told my parents they were ridiculously old-fashioned and overprotective, and why would you be friends with me if deep down you thought you were better than me?"

"I don't think I'm better than you," I said. "You know I don't."

He kept going. "My dad said, 'They might be your friends, but they will never truly understand where you are coming from. They might like *you*, but they will always view you as an exception to the rule.' I thought he was wrong, but he was right." Jason rubbed his hands over his face. "And I don't know, maybe I'm not even

mad at you. Maybe I'm mad at myself for convincing myself that you were different."

"I *am* different," I told him, reaching out for him. "You can't blame me for all of the world's problems."

But he moved out of my reach. "I think you should go home now, Winter," he said. He blinked slowly, crossed the room, and held open the door for me. So there was nothing for me to do but head back into the night again, alone.

As I walked slowly up the dark, steep stairs toward home, I let in a thought that I'd barricaded myself against for the past forty hours. What if I wasn't the innocent victim after all? What if Jason was right? What if *everyone* was right and the bad guy here . . . was me?

5

The rest of the weekend I did not change out of my pajamas, and I did not leave the house. I sat in front of the TV and watched Cartoon Network for about twenty hours straight. My mother spent most of her weekend on the phone with her lawyer. “Isn’t there anyone we can press charges against?” I heard her say from my nest in the living room. “This BuzzFeed list, for example . . . Oh, I see. Oh . . . I understand. *Oy*. What if we made a list of these commenters who are calling her names? There’s this one person, his username is Troll1776, and he describes her as ‘an ugly excuse for a human, both inside and out.’ That must be defamation of character. Can’t we go after him? . . . Really? But couldn’t we track down who he is? Find his IP address or . . . something?”

If I were in a different sort of mood, I might have giggled to hear my mom throwing around references to BuzzFeed and IP

addresses, as if she were some sort of internet genius when I know for a fact that she can't even find the folder where she keeps her MP3s without enlisting help. But I wasn't in that mood, and I didn't know if I ever would be again.

"Can we send cease and desist letters?" Mom asked, her voice rising. I turned up the volume on the TV. "Tell Google to stop listing these sites? . . . Jerry, you're not helping! . . . Are you seriously telling me there's nothing we can do except *wait it out*? What about when she starts college in the fall? What about my *business*?"

Some amount of time passed. The Powerpuff Girls stopped saving the world, and the Scooby-Doo crew started solving mysteries. My mother came into the living room and clicked off the TV. She moved aside a fuzzy monster prototype that my dad had brought home from work so she could sit on the couch next to me. "Do you even understand how serious this whole situation is?" she asked.

I blinked at her. "Yes?" How much more serious could this possibly be?

"Yet you're just going to sit there and watch TV all day?"

"What should I be doing?" I asked. "What else can I do?"

"Do something productive. Try to show people that you're a good girl, that this was all a big misunderstanding."

"I wrote an apology, Mom. I explained myself. I tried."

"Keep trying. Do some volunteer work. Donate money to the ACLU."

"Sure," I said listlessly. It's not like these were bad ideas. But they wouldn't be enough. Nothing would be enough, nothing, *nothing*, so there wasn't much point in trying anything.

“Do you understand what your actions have done to the family?” Mom asked.

I didn’t say anything, just stared at the blank television screen, trusting that she would tell me exactly what I had done to the family.

“You’ve made me look like a fraud,” she said. “You’ve made me look untrustworthy. My publicist says I need to release some sort of statement, and right now, frankly, I don’t even know what to say.”

My mom is neither a fraud nor untrustworthy. In fact, if there were some kind of mom contest, she would probably win it. She’s, like, a *professional* mother. For a few years, starting right after Emerson was born, she was a mommy blogger, which is the vaguely demeaning term applied to mothers who write online about being mothers.

My mom’s blog was called *Turn Them Toward the Sun*, and it became a really popular parenting site. She’d originally intended to go back to her job after having me—she’d been a strategy analyst for a health-care company—but then she discovered that, one, she loved writing about parenting and, two, thousands of other people loved reading what she wrote. When I was four years old, she published her first parenting book. The back cover said, *If you want to teach your child to sleep through the night or eat his veggies, this is not the book for you. But if you want to teach your child to be extraordinary, then read on!* Since then she’s published five more books of parenting advice and has established a career as a parenting consultant, which means that she gives inspirational speeches on how anyone, with the right love, commitment, and strategy, can raise extraordinary children.

And now here we were.

“Maybe people won’t know that I’m your daughter,” I suggested, grabbing the monster prototype and hugging it to my chest. She had kept her maiden last name, after all—surely that would help.

“They figure these things out,” she said. “It’s not that hard to put together the pieces, and nothing is a secret on the internet if you’re looking for it.”

“But it’s not *your* fault,” I tried. “It was me. You didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“How are they supposed to know that? People always blame the parents.” She sighed deeply. “Please help me understand. Why did you post that comment?”

“It was stupid,” I said. “I shouldn’t have done it.”

“So why *did* you?” she asked again.

“Because . . . well, it’s true that the Bee is almost never won by an African American speller. So it surprises people when it happens. I didn’t mean that I think that’s fair or right.”

Mom shook her head. “I understand what you *meant* by the comment. That’s not what I’m asking. I’m asking, why did you put it up on the internet?”

And this was the humiliating part. Because there was no good reason for it. “I just hoped people might think it was funny,” I mumbled.

“I cannot understand it,” she said. “I don’t understand your generation’s impulse to share everything you think or do the instant it happens. Where does that come from?”

I shrugged. I didn’t know. And was that only *my* generation?

Or was it everyone who understood how the internet worked (i.e., everyone except my mother)?

Mom pulled me in for a hug, and I breathed in the lemony scent of her shampoo as I buried my face in her shoulder. “I wish everyone in the world could just see the Winter who I see,” she murmured. “A caring, beautiful young woman who would never purposely hurt anybody.”

I wished that, too. I didn’t want to cause any problems for *Turn Them Toward the Sun*, which had been so important to my mom—to my whole family—for my entire life. I’d been an anxious little kid, and one of the big things that used to worry me was that I would let down my mom’s business by not being sufficiently extraordinary. Emerson was, probably from the minute she was born, though obviously I wasn’t present for her birth so I can’t say for sure. But pretty much from the time she could talk, she could sing, in this expressive, weirdly husky voice that sounded out of place on a child but totally mesmerizing. And she had no stage fright, no fright of anything, as far as I could tell. She was recruited to play every kid role at the community theater—they were desperate to have her.

And that was, in part, why I was so *relieved* when I discovered that I had a knack for words. Emerson was a fine speller and a serviceable writer, but she was busy with other things that seemed more important to her. She hadn’t claimed words yet. So I claimed them instead, because I could. I made them my own. All of them. Every word I could find.

After my spelling bee victory, there had been a big article about my mother in *The Pacific*. It was called “Darlene Kaplan: The

Inventor of Modern Parenting?” (That question mark was key, and the reporter’s answer seemed pretty clearly to be “no.”) Most of the article focused on my mom, of course: the reporter sat in on some of her seminars and counseling sessions and described how the Turn Them Toward the Sun approach functioned. But she also came over to the house briefly to meet me, Emerson, and Dad.

Usually Mom kept us out of any media about her. Even on her blog she had just referred to us as W, E, and The Dad. This was both because she didn’t want us to get kidnapped and because part of the Turn Them Toward the Sun approach was encouraging your kids to pursue activities for the sheer love of them and not for any external reward. Therefore you weren’t supposed to pay your kids for good grades, or give them a medal if they participated in an athletic event, or give them name recognition if they did something cute. But Mom let the *Pacific* reporter meet and write a little about us, I think because the woman was suspicious of my mother’s parenting techniques and Mom wanted to prove that they really did work, and we were proof.

The reporter’s name was Lisa Rushall. I remember thinking she looked surprisingly schlumpy—not in a bad way, just not how I’d imagined a big-deal reporter would be. Her hair hung in a loose ponytail, and she wore an oversize flannel shirt over the rest of her outfit. She talked to me about winning the spelling bee, and I told her that in the months before my victory, I’d been studying words for thirty hours a week. “How do you find time to do your homework?” she’d asked, and my mom frowned and said, “Homework always comes first in this house.” Then the reporter asked me to

spell a few words, like *idiosyncratic* and *chicanery*, which I was used to at that point: as soon as you qualify for the National Spelling Bee, it seems like the only thing adults can think of to ask you is whether you know how to spell different things.

Then she talked to Emerson about how she had started dance classes before most kids could even stand, and began method acting classes when she was eight, and had the starring role in the high school play as a mere freshman, and all that. Emerson told her she was Broadway-bound in a calm, almost patronizing tone that left no room for debate. There aren't many fourteen-year-olds who can be patronizing to adults they don't even know, but Emerson was one of them. "Would you girls say that Turn Them Toward the Sun has worked for you?" Lisa Rushall asked.

"Definitely," Emerson said.

"I wouldn't be national champion without it," I said.

All of which was completely true—I stood by it then and I stand by it today—but the reason we said it wasn't that it was true, but that we knew Mom wanted us to. She needed us to make her legitimate, and so we did.

And now I'd gone and ruined it all.

6

I awoke with a gasp on Monday morning, my alarm like an ambulance siren in my ear. It had been past three in the morning by the time I'd managed to fall asleep, which meant I'd gotten in less than four hours of nightmares. That wasn't a lot of time, but it was long enough for anything in the world to have happened. It is dangerous to stop googling your name, even for just a few hours. You should never stop searching for yourself.

Lying in bed, my head throbbing, I did a quick pass through the internet. The "Surprise: I Can Spell" photos had multiplied. The "We Learned Many Surprising Things Today" meme had jumped the shark ("We learned many surprising things today," read one entry. "Like that my boyfriend is the cutest in the whole world!!! xoxo"). There was an article about me on the *New York Times* homepage.

"Do I have to go to school?" was the first thing I asked Dad as

I walked into the kitchen. He was sipping tea and examining the underside of a robot figurine, which he set aside when he saw me.

“You love school,” Dad reminded me. “Remember when you had to miss a week because we were in Cleveland and you said that you were ‘school-sick?’”

“I was nine,” I pointed out. “And it was easier to love school before hundreds of thousands of people hated me.”

“So what’s *your* idea?” Dad asked, setting down his mug and leveling his gaze at me. “Just stay in hiding forever?”

“Is that an option?”

He sighed. “Look, Winter, sometimes bad things happen. They’re hard to deal with. Everyone experiences that. When your grandmother died, I didn’t want to get out of bed ever again. But as you know, I got past that.”

“How?” I asked. “How did you get past that?”

“Simple,” he replied. “I got out of bed.”

This was different, though. What my father was talking about was a bad thing happening *to* him. But this time, *I* was the one who had done the bad thing. How do you get past *that*?

“When Grandma died,” I said, “we *needed* you to get out of bed. Emerson and Mom and I and everyone who you work with. You didn’t have the option of staying in bed forever. But nobody cares if I show my face in the world ever again. In fact, I’m pretty sure most people would prefer if I didn’t.”

“*I* would care,” Emerson announced, snapping shut her purse as she walked into the kitchen. She was heading to her first day of her summer internship at the San Francisco Theatre, and she was fully dressed for the part: high heels, slim-fit slacks, a statement

necklace. There seemed a good chance she'd be president of the place by the time the day was out.

"It doesn't matter, though," I appealed to Dad. "We only have a few more weeks of school, anyway. Nothing's going to happen except exams, and I can do those from home. I can stay here all summer, let everyone forget about me, and then start a new life at Kenyon in the fall. I don't need to go to school now."

"You have to keep living your life, babycakes," Dad said gently. "That's all you can do. You don't have to win every fight or make everyone love you or be the cleverest person in the room. You don't even have to raise your hand or answer every question on a test or get to every class on time. You just have to keep living."

Emerson and I exchanged a narrow-eyed look, because this was *not* the gospel of Turn Them Toward the Sun that Dad was quoting. This was some kind of half-assed strategy that he definitely seemed to be making up on the fly, and if Mom hadn't already left for a meeting, there was no way she'd let this stand.

Turn Them Toward the Sun is actually a pretty straightforward approach to parenting—though, shh, don't tell anyone or they won't spend hundreds of dollars buying books and webinar sessions about it. The name comes from a conversation that Mom once had with her sister, who was freaking out about having a baby, and what if she raised it wrong, etc. And Mom told her, "You'll be fine. Children are like plants. Just water them twice a week and turn them toward the sun."

What this means in practice is: Don't get too involved in your children's lives. Don't tell your kids what to do; just foster the right worldview in them so that they will choose to do the right things.

If your child shows an aptitude or a passion for something, encourage her toward it and do whatever it takes to allow her to continue pursuing it. Give her all the resources she needs, but let her decide how to use them.

This was how I became the nation's best speller. At an early age, I'd shown an interest in words: I compulsively named things as I saw them, starting with *car* and *dog* and later moving on to *palm frond* and *ramekin*. Obviously my mom played along with me, because this was what I was into, so that meant she was into it, too.

The first time I won a spelling bee was in third grade, and that was just luck: I went to a small Jewish elementary school, and I read more books than anyone else in my class did. I lost in the all-school bee to the fifth-grade competitor; not a surprise. But I was hooked. I wanted to do another spelling bee, and next time I wanted to win.

My mom kept spelling with me. Casual practices on long car rides or while we waited for our food to come at a restaurant turned into marathon sessions with dictionaries and flash cards. I started studying English words' origin languages: German, Latin, Greek. Dad and Emerson got roped into quizzing me. Mom hired a coach to teach me how to picture words in my head and another to train me in staying calm during competition.

The stereotype of parents with kids who do stuff like that, kids who study the dictionary every day in order to *win*, is that they're pushy stage moms, trying to derive their own life satisfaction by wringing everything they can out of their kids' performances. That's never been my parents. The spelling thing—that was all

me. They just gave me what I needed to make my own dream come true. They told me over and over again that I could quit at any time if I wanted to and they would love me every bit as much. If on any given night I said I didn't want to practice, we didn't practice. They told me that there were no winners or losers and that just by getting up on that stage I was already a champion. I did not ever agree with them.

I didn't know what Turn Them Toward the Sun would have to say about Dad making me go to school when I so clearly did not want to, and I was going to tell him as much, but then Emerson said, "Oh, God, look at this."

She slid her phone across the counter, and on it I saw a new post about me. This one was on the front page of Reddit, which was impressive in a horrifying way, because it's very competitive to get on the front page of Reddit. Mackler had tried to achieve this a number of times, but the closest he ever got was when he painted Abraham Lincoln's face on his stomach and we made a video of him reciting the Gettysburg Address at the supermarket until he got thrown out. Even *that* didn't make it to Reddit's front page.

This post was the apology note that I'd written on Thursday, old news, except some genius had gone through and added reaction GIFs after pretty much every sentence. Some of them were of people silently screaming, some were of children shaking their heads disdainfully. One of the GIFs showed a woman repeatedly stabbing herself in the chest. Apparently this was easier to upvote than Mackler pretending that his stomach was president of the United States.

"I just want to say that every time I read about Winter

Halperin, I feel so much delight,” one comment read. “Thanks for entertaining me as I’m stuck at work.”

“Some of the comments are nice,” Emerson told me. “Like this one.” She read aloud over my shoulder. “‘You guys are disgusting. I’m sure most of you have said or thought things just as bad as Winter, and the only difference is that when you said it, no one was paying attention. Stop ruining the poor girl’s life.’ See?”

“Not really.” Because what I immediately saw was the first response to that comment: “I may have made jokes about race, but they’ve never been as tone-deaf as Winter’s. You have to be a truly shameless, soulless person to think something like that. Sorry if I don’t feel guilty about ‘ruining’ the life of such an individual. I only have so much compassion and empathy, and I’d much rather give it to people who actually have done nothing wrong. Let’s get this straight: the middle-class, overeducated white girl is not the victim here.”

This commenter sounded so certain that I believed him. I believed that only truly shameless and soulless people would do as I had done.

But it wasn’t my fault that I was middle-class, overeducated, white, or a girl. All of that was just an accident of my birth. Did it mean that I wasn’t qualified to be a victim? I understood that I’d offended people. But my *entire life* was being systematically torn to shreds. Was what I had said—who I *was*—so irredeemable that I could never again deserve sympathy?

“You can’t listen to what other people say about you,” Dad told us. He held up the robot figurine as if it were proof. “Especially not if it’s bad, but even if it’s good. You need to have your own

sense of self-worth, unrelated to what anybody tells you your worth is. *Capisce?*”

The prototype robot’s head fell off.

“Crap,” Dad said, going down on hands and knees to retrieve it.

I had a sense of how much my self was worth. I had a crystal-clear sense. *Nothing.*

I stopped scrolling through the Reddit comments when I came to a username I recognized. It was Jason’s.

“I’m one of Winter’s black ‘best friends,’” he’d written. “Though I’d say *best* friend is a stretch. It’s really weird and uncomfortable for her to use me as some kind of an excuse for that post. I don’t enjoy being used. And even if I trusted her before, I definitely don’t anymore.”

Nearly a thousand people had liked that.

I let the phone drop onto the counter, and I cradled my head in my arms. I thought that if I’d been smart, I should have been prepared for this. After all, in our years of friendship, I’d seen Jason break up with dozens of girls.

I had just never imagined that he’d break up with *me*.