

THE SPACES BETWEEN US

STACIA TOLMAN

Christy Ottaviano Books

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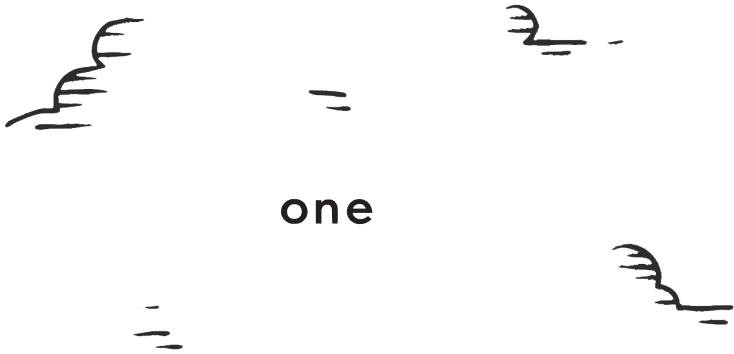
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For Teresa



one

IN MY WESTERN CIV CLASS this year, I worked out a concept for a new superhero action figure. I call him Irony Man. He's a superhero who exists only to help others. Irony Man rescues those in distress—maidens on railroad tracks, cats up trees, victims of natural disasters, hostages—but then he always delivers them to a worse fate than if he just left them alone to begin with and let them figure their problems out themselves. Needless to say, Irony Man doesn't receive the kind of love he feels entitled to, and this makes him vengeful, and lonely. Sort of like Mr. C., my Western Civ teacher. Because I work on my superhero action figure during class and have to look like I'm paying attention, Mr. C. ends up being the model, and Irony Man comes out balding, with thick black glasses, earlobes that rest on his shoulders, and a big cross banging around his neck. Not the kind of guy you want to see coming at you in a cape and tights.

So on my final exam I sketch him in. Today, it's my grade that needs rescuing. I need a perfect score on this test to pull my grade out of the deep muck, pass the class, and turn into a senior

in high school. Before I begin my quest for perfection, I stand up and look on my best and only friend Melody Grimshaw's final exam. To see how she's doing, I have to crane my head around the swollen neck and shoulders of Junior Davis, the alpha male of Colchis High. Junior has worn his football jersey to the final, so he can advertise his IQ in school colors. He has decorated the back of Grimshaw's head with lilac blossoms and is now keeping himself occupied by wrapping a lock of Grimshaw's hair around his pen. Aside from lounging in her chair and gazing out the window at a squirrel eating the end of a hot dog bun on a branch of this big pine tree, Grimshaw is hardly a bustle of academic activity. She has long brown hair, which spills down her back and over his desk, so the obvious thing for him to do is to wrap it around his pen.

Grimshaw is bored—by Junior, by the final exam, by history, by life. She wants to go somewhere, but she doesn't know where, and if she did know, she wouldn't be able to figure out how to get there. She wants to be a dancer, that's all she's ever wanted to be, but she doesn't know what that means she should do. There are no professional dancers in Colchis, not like the kind she wants to be, anyway, so she can't ask them what they did to get there. It's a dream for her, like a god she prays to. Nothing else matters to her. My family used to get her ballet lessons for her birthday down at Monique's Dance Academy, a Christian dance studio owned by one of my mother's church friends, on the condition that her family take her to them, but you can't really count on Grimshaws for anything. Her brothers are numerous, but when you need them they are always ending up in the emergency room, or jail, or need-

ing her to babysit, or their cars have issues. Now my mom buys her subscriptions to dance magazines, which get delivered to our house, so it keeps the dream alive that way.

She doesn't have anything written on her paper. Mr. C. catches me looking.

"Miss Velasco," he enunciates.

"I'm not cheating." I sit back down. "But other people might be."

He stands up and scans the room, which interrupts these two vicious cheerleaders who are sitting in front of me and passing misinformation back and forth.

The cheerleaders give me dirty looks, and I smile at them. The football player who is playing with Grimshaw's hair belongs to one of them.

Mr. C.'s gaze comes back to rest on me. His eyes narrow. "Miss Velasco," he says again, with his usual complement of sarcasm. "I assume you've done the math."

"Yes."

"You need to hand in a perfect exam today if you expect to achieve one of your Ds and come back in the fall as a senior."

"I know."

Mr. C. stares out the same window as Grimshaw. "We know you know everything already," he says, "but what we don't know is if that's an asset or a liability."

I accomplish the short answer questions in less than ten minutes. Mr. C. is right: since my grade in Western Civ is currently a deep F, I do have to ace this test. Around me, my classmates are sighing while the grinding of the motor in the clock on the wall

gets louder and louder. Grimshaw has picked up her exam and is staring at it with profound disinterest. Junior is still keeping busy with tying her hair into little bows. Junior's cheerleader girlfriend looks pretty upset about all the attention he's putting into Grimshaw's hair, but he ignores her.

Mr. C. paces the aisles a few more times, so I try to focus on the essay questions. The directions say to pick three out of five. The sixth, for extra credit, is actually fairly interesting.

"Is democracy a failed experiment? Pick another failed social experiment and compare."

This one is a soft pitch to me. I start by stating the obvious, which is that to determine whether or not an experiment has failed, you first have to define success. And then I introduce my favorite subject to talk about, which is communism, although I do point out that putting communism next to democracy like that often leads to sloppy thinking because one is an economic system and the other one is political, and they could go together, theoretically. And then I get into it. I drop the big names—Lenin, Marx, Mao—although strictly speaking, I don't know what they did or thought or said. I just know you're not supposed to like them, and that's good enough for me. I like how their names sound; they ring with this upsetting clang, like a pot dropped in the kitchen of an upscale restaurant, disturbing the dignity and repose of the capitalists at lunch. Or at least they should. My father was a radical political economics professor and had some theories about oppression and human liberation, which is all I know about him. By the time I'm two pages into my essay, though, it's not about my father. As I cover page after page, everything else dis-

appears, the noise from the wall clock, the depressed sighs of the other students. One thought leads to the next thought until I'm scrawling down things I didn't even know I knew. It's like I'm learning something, maybe from myself.

"Miss Velasco." Mr. C. is standing next to my desk.

"What?" I look around. The classroom is empty. I'm the only one left. I slam the test down on his desk and run out of the room.

Outside, it's started to rain.

I thread my way down the stairs in front of the school, through groups of kids standing around in front of the buses on their last day of classes. Nobody says a word to me as I go by. Grimshaw and I are a pair of pariahs, like a virus in a lipid envelope. She's poor and I'm smart, so between the two of us we're practically an un-American activity. On the other side of the line of buses, Grimshaw is waiting for me on our bench.

When I sit down next to her, she puts two cigarettes in her mouth, lights both, and hands one to me. Every year at the end of the last day of school, it's our tradition to smoke a ceremonial cigarette on school property.

"A wet menthol," I comment. "Yum."

Today, Grimshaw has an enormous formerly pink suitcase next to her. The suitcase means she had a fight with her mother this morning and is running away to my house. The suitcase has a bumper sticker on it from Niagara Falls, which dates from her parents' honeymoon.

"We're free," I announce, taking my first pull.

"*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,*" she sings as she exhales her first drag. Grimshaw speaks mostly in lyrics

from prehistoric rock and roll, especially if the song is about getting free. She's obsessed with getting out of the Minnechaug Valley, which is our very small corner of New York State. She's never been anywhere else, so she's sure it's better there.

"Do you think you passed?" I ask her.

She shrugs. "I didn't really get the essay questions."

"Did you write anything?"

"I sure as hell didn't write a book."

"As long as you wrote something. It's not like he gave you much space to fill. I had to use extra paper."

"I know. You didn't even look up when I left. What did you write about? The usual?"

"Pretty much."

"You never learn."

"Neither do they."

Grimshaw grinds out her cigarette as she walks toward the bus. "I'm not coming back, anyway," she says. "I'll be eighteen. After that, what's the point?" I pick up her suitcase and follow her. I know what's in it—her toothbrush, toothpaste, and a set of rose-printed flannel sheets. My mother bought them for Christmas last year, a gesture that offended her mother. Mrs. Grimshaw doesn't drive, so one of her sons brought her over to our house to return them. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Grimshaw hardly ever leaves her house, and so coming over to my house and yelling at my mother was kind of a big outing for her. But of course, the next time Grimshaw spent the night at our house, she picked up the sheets again, so here they are. She walks ahead of me, still hum-

ming a tune. Her white T-shirt has fallen off one shoulder, revealing a shiny black bra strap. With her, it looks like an invitation. It's something about the way she moves. If her big ambition to be a dancer dies, plan B is to be a stripper.

"Slut," somebody says as we pass by a group of cheerleaders. I turn around. Of course—it was Junior Davis's girlfriend, no doubt pissed that her boyfriend spent the Western Civ exam playing with Grimshaw's hair and ignoring the death-looks of his girlfriend.

"Bitch," I say back, even though they weren't talking to me. "Cheaters."

"Like you don't," she says to me.

"At least we'll pass."

Grimshaw just keeps humming and gets on the bus.

Do you ever notice something, something that nobody else notices, you don't know why, something just makes you notice it, it catches your attention, it gets on your radar screen, and you pick out this little detail from far away? It doesn't even register as significant; you don't even know why you notice it. But you do. This gold Corvette struck me that way, like, why am I noticing that gold Corvette going so slowly down that street? It's too far away to see who's driving it, but it catches the afternoon sun and glints before it disappears, so I notice it and watch it move by.

"You coming on?" the bus driver calls down to me, and then I follow Grimshaw onto the bus.

"Hello, Prof," Grimshaw says cheerily, mounting the steps of the bus.

“Afternoon, darlin’,” says the bus driver. “Miss Serena, how was history?”

“It’s over,” I tell him. “We passed.”

“Remember what they say,” he cautions with his finger in the air.

“What’s that?”

“If you don’t remember your history, you gotta repeat it.” He laughs heartily at his own joke.

With the completion of our Western Civ exam, we are now seniors in high school, and strictly speaking, mature young ladies such as Grimshaw and I shouldn’t be riding the school bus, which is really a rolling day care center. If I were more like my older sister, Allegra, I would be driving home with friends. But I’m not Allegra, and I don’t have friends with cars. With all Grimshaw’s brothers, we could have our choice of a whole rusty fleet of Blazers and pickup trucks, but she never took Driver’s Ed, so she doesn’t have her license, and I’m not old enough to drive.

I park the suitcase in the seat across the aisle and sit with her next to the window and get a book out of my backpack. I always keep a book in my backpack for the long ride home. I’m kind of a history nerd. I should really be in Honors classes, but Foundations is much livelier and funnier, so I make sure I keep my average at a D so I can be in there with Grimshaw. Today’s book is called *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, which I took out of Mr. C.’s room. Reading a fat book guarantees that nobody will talk to me. Except for Prof, who usually has read it, too, and talks to me about what I’m reading. He’s the kind of guy, if he sees you reading a book, he wants to know what it is. My mother told me

that way back when, Prof got a PhD but had too many controversial opinions, and so here he is, an old black man driving white kids home every day on the school bus. Grimshaw sits down in the front seat and starts filing her nails.

“Fight with your mom?” Prof asks Grimshaw, looking at the seventh graders in the rearview mirror. Then he lets off the air brake and we lurch away from the high school behind the other buses. “What happened this time?”

“Well,” she says. “First my brother gets busted.”

“Dale?”

“Who else?”

Prof whistles. “That’s too bad.”

“So then Lisa gets mad and leaves.”

Prof shakes his head. “She take the kids this time?”

“I wish.” Grimshaw decides her nails are fine, and then gets up and flips through Prof’s music collection, which he keeps in a cardboard shoe box under the dashboard. “Nope,” she says. “Those kids always get left behind. With me. Because it’s not like I have a life. So my mom wanted me to stay home and watch them today. But I told her I can’t, I have these two big tests, first English and then Western Civ, like, hello, finals? Like pass the year and come back as a senior? So she gets mad and tells me it’s time I get a job and help out with rent.”

“School’s important,” Prof says philosophically. “You gotta finish school.”

“So is Junior Davis after you now?” I ask her while Prof is exchanging good wishes for the summer. “You still have a lilac blossom in your hair.”

“Be serious,” she says, looking through the shoe box. “He’s owned.”

“His owner wasn’t very happy with you just now. She had a bad word for you.”

“It’s the only word she knows. I would never go out with him. Junior Davis is poorer than I am. He doesn’t even have a car.” She holds up a CD and considers it. Prof rotates his CDs a lot, so there’s always something new in the shoe box. “Is this one any good?” she asks Prof. “Marvin Gaye?”

“Put it on,” Prof says. “You’ll find out.”

The school bus passes by the vacant mall in the middle of Colchis, the empty stores, and then under the shadow of the four smokestacks of Franklin Arms, where they made guns until they went bankrupt last year. Across the street from the entrance to the Arms is a bar called the Crossways Tavern, which has a neon martini glass with an olive that is already blinking on and off when the school bus passes it every day at three o’clock. Colchis is a special place to live. It’s one of four small and grimy factory towns crammed together in the Minnechaug Valley. The others are Minnechaug, Bavaria, and Linerville. Although the towns appear uniformly depressing, each one is in fact unique, with its own history, extinct industry, and adjoining vacant mall.

Grimshaw is still telling Prof about her domestic woes. “So, anyway,” she says as she puts the music on, “I’ll be getting off at her house today.”

“I have a name,” I say to the window.

“Uh-oh,” Prof says. “Your mom complains about that. She worries.”

“Right.” Grimshaw sits back down next to me. “Maybe I’ll get kidnapped by the principal.”

“Sst!” I throw an elbow into her ribs. “Careful with the state secrets, there.”

“Will you relax,” Grimshaw hisses back at me. “Nobody even cares.”

Grimshaw’s mom doesn’t like me. There are a number of reasons for this. First is the issue of my mother’s continuous faux pas. Second is that Grimshaws never graduate from high school. Around age fifteen and a half, they quit, and then let the clock run until the attendance specialist from the district gets tired of facing the Rottweiler mixes chained to the car wrecks in front of their house. Now, under my evil influence, the last Grimshaw is within a year of ruining her mother’s perfect record.

After Prof disgorges half his passengers on the way out of town, we start climbing the highway into the country, past the dead farms and the double-wides. We pass the new church where my family worships. Well, except for me: I put a condom in the offering plate once, so they thought it would be better if I didn’t go anymore. The farther we get from town, the smaller and shabbier the houses get. Eventually, we pass a driveway that you wouldn’t notice if you didn’t know it was there. It’s the junkyard where Grimshaw lives. Her brothers make money by dragging old cars in there, fixing some, and selling parts out of the rest. The house used to be part of a dairy farm. There was a big barn there, and an old farmhouse, too, covered with graffiti and filled with broken glass, and as you drove by, you could look through the empty windows at the pastures growing over with thistles.

Grimshaw never gets off the bus there. She is embarrassed that she lives in a junkyard.

“The blackberries are blooming now,” I remark as we pass by. She’s listening to Prof’s story of the time he saw Marvin Gaye play Cleveland, and how good he looked in his white suit.

“He sang real history, too,” he is saying. “Not just entertainment. He was the real thing.” As we pass by her house, I catch a glimpse of something in the rearview mirror. Is that that same gold Corvette again? I turn around and watch it slow down and signal to turn in her driveway.

“Some guy in a gold Corvette’s about to go down your driveway.”

“So?”

“I saw it down in town across from the school before we got on the bus.”

“A ’Vette?” Prof asks. “I used to have one of those. Went like the devil, used to get me in trouble.” He laughs.

“Do you know him, then,” I demand, “that guy?”

Grimshaw looks at me and smiles. “Why, do you like him?”

“No, I’m just wondering who it is.”

“He’s too old for you. Leave him alone.”

“That’s not why I was asking.”

“We’ll find somebody for you,” she says. “Don’t worry.”

“That’s not why I was asking,” I repeat. I go back behind my book.

“You listen to your friend, now,” Prof says to me. “She’s trying to take care of you. She’s looking out for you.”

“Who do you think would be good for Serena?” Grimshaw asks.

“When the heart is ready, the love will come,” he says.

“Is that really how it works?” she asks. “I guess my heart’s never been ready.”

“There’s no rush,” says Prof. “No rush at all. That’s what the rest of your life is for.”

The story of Grimshaw and me started in sixth grade. I had skipped a grade, so everybody hated me, this little kid coming into their class who knew all the answers. At the same time, Grimshaw failed sixth grade, so nobody had any use for her, either, and we found each other at the bottom of the social food chain. In sixth grade, Grimshaw looked kind of like a dirty shoelace. She was skinny and grimy and had big mats in the back of her hair. One distinguishing characteristic of the Grimshaws is they all have olive skin and dark hair, but their eyelashes are white—long, stiff, and white. It’s a genetic thing, she told me, from her father, who died. So at school, they started calling Grimshaw Pig-Eye, and made a game of it, like cooties. During lunch they would have to touch somebody else to get rid of it, and it would go all the way through the cafeteria—*Pig-Eye, Pig-Eye, pass it on*. It would go up one table and down the next, only it always skipped me, because I didn’t exist. One day, while Grimshaw sat across from me, calmly chewing on her welfare lunch, and the day’s game of Pig-Eye raged around us, I felt her eyes on me. I concentrated on my sandwich, but every time I looked up, there was her gaze—not friendly, not

unfriendly, just steady and curious. Even though I was lonely, I didn't want any attention from her. It's a good thing I wasn't included in the Pig-Eye game, because I probably would have played along. If I had, we never would have been friends. People don't know this, but the Grimshaws have a lot of pride.

Even then, when she was little and dirty, boys were attracted to her. In seventh grade, my mother bought her some mascara, and that took care of the white eyelashes. Since then, she's always had a boyfriend, usually somebody else's, hence the hostility we have always enjoyed from every female in Colchis. Her relationships never last long: either they get serious and she gets bored with them, or they don't get serious and she gets bored with them, and then she throws them back like a used fish. By the time we started high school, she had this special Melody Grimshaw allure, this way of moving and looking at guys and smiling at them in a way that makes them think she is promising something, which might be why she thinks she could be a good stripper. This is a girl in search of an audience.

As for me, Serena Velasco, aside from being taller than average and hated for my brilliance by students and teachers alike, there's nothing all that special about me. I'm your basic middle-class American teenager, bored and disgusted by my surroundings. I'm a classic left-brained, linear learner, which means I can memorize long lists of unrelated and irrelevant facts and regurgitate them with ease but am challenged by tying my shoes, dancing, reading maps, telling time, and being nice to people. Since high school started, I have kept my hair dyed some patchy, hybrid-industrial color. I wear combat boots, and have a bad attitude but

very good posture. Although some people say I would be pretty if I ever smiled, Grimshaw is my idea of beauty, and I don't look one little thing like Grimshaw. I never wear makeup. Most adults think I do drugs. If they'd rather think that than consider that my critique of the moronic society they've created might be based on hard evidence, that's fine with me.

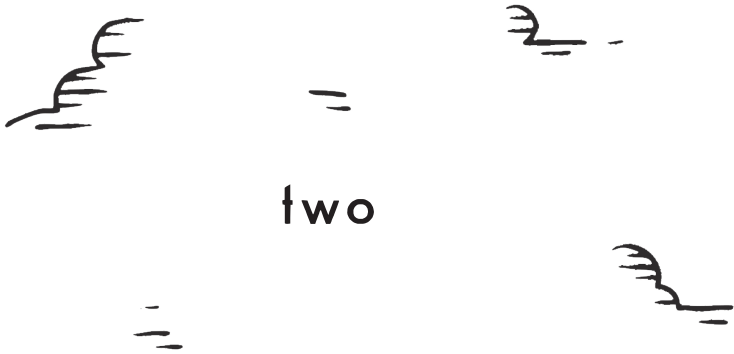
I find that adults are very jaded these days. No combination of hair color, clothes, body piercing, or tattoos can shock them. About the only thing that can still guarantee a reaction in this factory town is communism. So I wear a Red Army cap every day, with the red star. I think it belonged to my father, who has been dead now a long time, at least I found it at his house in Maine, where I have to go every summer for an obligatory visit with my grandmother. I probably overdo it with the communist thing, but otherwise I'm not sure anyone would know I exist.

The development where my house is is at the very end of the bus route. As we turn onto our road, the bus shudders and clanks climbing the last hill. We're way up in the country now, and the air has cooled down and feels fresh, coming in through the open windows of the bus. As we approach the gates of the development where I live, what should be coming down the road but the same gold Corvette. The bus flashes its lights, and the Corvette slows down and stops, and waits.

"Look, there it is again."

"Like a bad penny," comments Prof. And it does look like a penny, a bright shiny new penny, even though it's an older model

car, with curving lines. When the school bus stops to let us off, we walk in front of the Corvette. I have the impression of a really big guy squeezed into a space that's too small for him. Grimshaw walks in front of the car without looking at him. Something about the way she lifts her chin and ignores him makes me feel that she knows exactly who he is and why he's here. But I follow along behind her with her suitcase and we nod at each other briefly, this big guy in his low car. Out the window Prof wishes us a great summer and tells us it'll be September before we know it. I walk backward and wave at him, but Grimshaw just smiles to herself, like she knows the answer to questions the rest of us are too dumb to ask.



“**WE’LL NEVER KNOW IF COMMUNISM** is a good idea until we try it,” the principal of Colchis High intones. Two days into my summer vacation, and I’m back at the high school listening to her read from my final exam essay. “The totalitarian state of the USSR was just a form of capitalism,” she continues, “and government functionaries acted as owners.” After that, she reads silently for a minute and then skips to my analysis of the failure of twentieth century communism, which is, objectively speaking, brilliant. “If you went to bake a chocolate cake,” she reads, “and then you used no chocolate, no sugar, no butter, no flour, and no eggs, but cooked it and forced everyone to eat it anyway, and the sicker they got, the better they were supposed to say they felt, and you still insisted it was chocolate cake, you should not be surprised if your enemies outlaw chocolate cake and decree that from now on, anyone who tries to make or eat or know anything about chocolate cake will be summarily bombed.” At that point, the principal sighs, shakes her head, and scans the next two pages. On the last page, next to

a giant red F, I can see that Mr. C. made a little drawing of a pile of steaming manure with a pitchfork stuck in it.

She turns the booklet over and sees the note I wrote. “Dear Mr. C.,” she reads out loud. “You’ll notice I only wrote on one essay question instead of three. However, the total number of word-inches far exceeds the requirement, and it should be obvious that when it comes to Western Civilization, I do know what I’m talking about, especially by the standards of Foundations. Have a good summer. Sincerely, Serena Velasco.”

Then she sees Irony Man. On the back of the last page of the exam, before I knew I would need the extra space for my essay, I drew a panel of him rescuing my Western Civ grade. I meant to erase him, but I ran out of time. He came out looking a little too much like Mr. C. in a cape and tights.

The principal looks up at me. She is deathly pale and gazing at me through slitted eyes, as if already planning the humiliation and dismemberment she will put me through as soon as it’s legal, which will be soon.

The principal is my mother.

Nobody knows that yet, because she hasn’t even been principal for two months. She was hired from a different district. We have different last names. She’s Mrs. Pentz. Today, Mrs. Pentz is wearing a red linen pantsuit, which my sister Allegra picked out for her. Everyone who failed the Western Civ final is crammed in Mrs. Pentz’s office—me, Grimshaw, and those two vicious cheerleaders, Angel Ciaramitaro and Claudette Mizerak, co-captains of next year’s varsity squad. Angel and Claudette basically run the school. Of course, Mr. C. is there, too.

“So . . .” Mrs. Pentz begins. She turns to Mr. C. “Are you saying this essay was—”

“Plagiarized!” Mr. C. shouts. “That is not original thinking!”

“Okay,” my mom says, tiptoeing through the minefield. “Can you . . . prove it?”

Boom. She hits the landmine.

Mr. C. stands up. “I have been teaching in this school for over three decades!” he yells. “I have read the essays of literally thousands of sixteen-year-olds. I know how they think!” He glares at me. “Even the so-called smart ones!”

My mom’s face has gone very white, except for two red spots about the size of a quarter on each cheek. Her five children know those spots. They are warning signs. She’s still breathing carefully. I’m not sure if she’s angrier at me or Mr. C.

She opens her mouth to say something. But Mr. C. isn’t done. “Why doesn’t somebody call this girl’s bluff?” he shouts. “She coasts along, acting like she’s so much smarter than everybody else, no-o-o, she doesn’t have to answer the essay question, she’s too smart. She can write about whatever she wants! And I’m supposed to feel honored that *she* took the time to lecture *me* on everything *I* don’t understand about history?” Mr. C.’s rant ends with a little shriek of indignation. His face has gotten bright red. He has to pause and gather himself so he doesn’t have a stroke. “Why don’t they put her in real classes? Let her take physics and calculus. Let her take AP, let’s see if she’s as smart as the kids who actually study.”

“With Ds in Foundations,” my mother points out, “we can’t very well put her in Honors.”

“She’s playing a game, is all I’m saying,” says Mr. C. “And she better make sure she doesn’t lose.”

“I think you make a good point,” my mother says quietly. “How about the others?”

“Equally insulting!” Mr. C. snatches up Grimshaw’s exam and skims it across my mother’s desk. She picks it up and holds it at the end of her arm.

“The multiple choice looks okay,” she says. Mr. C. snorts. The cheerleaders snicker together. My mother looks at them severely over the top of her glasses. She flips to the essays. She looks at them quickly, then looks at Grimshaw and takes off her glasses until the snickers subside. Grimshaw twists her fingers together in her lap and starts scratching the nail polish off one thumbnail. Grimshaw adores my mother.

“Oh, Melody,” my mother says.

“Melody” looks mortified. “I never do good on essays,” she mumbles. “I don’t know how to begin.”

“But to not even try . . .” my mother pleads. “To answer an essay question with—what are these, lyrics from rock and roll?”

“I’m sorry,” Grimshaw whispers.

“This is just mockery,” she continues. “This is the kind of thing Serena would do.”

Grimshaw looks at me sideways. “I know,” she whispers. “I just couldn’t focus.”

“They’re willing to give you the benefit of the doubt here,” Mrs. Pentz lectures her. “But you have to write something, anything at all, to prove . . . that you can do it! That you *want* to do

it!” Grimshaw stops scratching at her nail polish and stares at the floor.

The principal sighs and shakes her head. “Okay. Next.” She picks up the cheerleaders’ exams.

Claudette Mizerak is really rich. She lives pretty close to Grimshaw and me, but she’s never ridden the school bus in her life. Her father has the biggest dairy farm in the Valley, with a ten-thousand-dollar-a-month interest payment on his debt. Angel Ciaramitaro lives in a trailer park across the road from Claudette. Angel’s dad was Mizerak’s farm manager until he was automated out of a job. I know these details because my stepfather bought one of his cornfields to build the development we live in.

My mom looks down at their tests. “It looks like the two of you just plain failed.”

“I’m ADD,” says Claudette.

“Did you study?” my mom asks.

“Yes,” Claudette says.

“No,” Angel says.

“Did you study together?” she asks.

“No,” Claudette says.

“Yes,” Angel says.

“It looks,” my mother says, tracing down each of their tests with a finger on each one, “as though your answers are both wrong *and* identical. That makes me wonder if—”

“Redundant!” interrupts Mr. C., holding up his hand. “They would have failed anyway. So spare us the paperwork.”

“There is just so much else going *on*,” Claudette explodes.

“We’re very busy,” says Angel.

“I can understand that,” says my mother. “But—”

“We have so many responsibilities,” Claudette continues. “We’re co-captains for football *and* basketball spirit squads. *And* we’re on student council *and* we single-handedly put the prom on this year because the junior class has negative school spirit.” Here she stops to glare at me and Grimshaw. “Because some people never show up for anything.”

“So?” I rise to the bait. “What’s to show up for?”

“There is such a thing called pride,” Angel says, studying her nails without looking at me.

“What’s to be proud of?” I ask. “I don’t see it.”

“That reflects on *you*,” says Claudette.

“Even so—” Mom interjects.

Claudette turns her attention back to my mother. “*And* we teach Sunday school,” she finishes triumphantly.

“Except I don’t teach Sunday school,” Angel says, holding up her hand. “Just saying.”

“Where’s Junior Davis?” Mr. C. interrupts. “Wasn’t he supposed to be here, too?”

“Well, he did fail the exam,” says my mother. “But clearly other things are taking precedence for him today.”

“He has a training schedule,” Claudette says, using her indignant little head-wag. “He’s going to a scouting camp, which is a pretty big deal, like, for his future?”

“He’s the only chance Colchis has at winning any football games next year,” Angel points out. “Like, at all.”

“He can’t play next year if he fails a class,” I tell her. “It’s pol-

icy. Read the handbook.” The handbook is on my mother’s desk, covered in gold and purple paper. “Here.”

My mother stands up and takes the handbook away from me. “I will decide about Junior,” she says. “The four of you can wait outside while Mr. C. and I talk this over.”

We file out past Mrs. Kmiec, the principal’s secretary. Mrs. Kmiec has been at Colchis High so long that nobody even sees her anymore. She just sits there at that big steel desk of hers, like lichen on a rock. Angel and Claudette repair immediately to the girls’ room, while Grimshaw and I sit like bookends on the losers’ bench outside the principal’s office.

“Do you think we’ll fail?” Grimshaw whispers.

“Not a chance,” I tell her. “It’s a pain in the ass for them to fail anyone. That’s what Mr. C. meant when he talked about not wanting to do the paperwork. It’s way easier to pass us. Also, they’re worried about our self-esteem.” I’m hoping Mr. C. hates me enough that he’ll free me from Western Civ with a D. I’m a straight-D student, which keeps me in Foundations-level classes with Grimshaw. I used to take pride in that, like I was beating the system, like there was an art to achieving a D. I thought getting a D required the precision of a Swiss watchmaker—after all, there’s only a five-point spread to aim for, as it hangs over the abyss, but then I look around at the other people who get Ds, and it seems that I got the metaphor wrong, that a D is actually a huge sack that has room for every loser in the school.

My mother is just the interim principal of Colchis High School. In April, Mr. Van Horton, the real principal, dropped dead of a brain aneurysm while repotting some African violets in

this very office. Mr. Van was tall and bald, pink-cheeked and fairly fat, and wore gray suits and walked the halls all day, whistling tunelessly and jingling the change in his pockets. In the back hall of Colchis, there is a big picture window overlooking the football field, and you could find him there sometimes, not whistling, not jingling, just standing tipped back on the worn half-moons of his heels and gazing out at the white lines on the green. If he heard you coming, he'd frown and clear his throat and bark, "Where are you supposed to be?"

And then, bang, he died, which is how my mom got to be the principal for almost two months. She taught here once before, about seven years ago, but I was still in elementary school. Now that she's here again, she's trying to keep me a secret, too. I haven't exactly made her proud. In addition to the name difference, we don't look anything alike. Our voices are identical, though, when we answer the phone, a fact I took full advantage of until I got caught skipping school and grounded. She's going for the permanent job in the fall, but the school board is toying with her, pretending they have long lists of people clamoring to lead Colchis High School into the future. She's trying to prove her fitness for the job by instituting a regime of high academic standards.

From inside her office, we can hear Mr. C. yelling about how awful kids are today. There's no respect for rules, he says, no self-discipline, no manners. "She was right!" we can hear him yell. "There's no pride in this place anymore. None!"

Grimshaw leans over. "If they fail us," she whispers, "I'm not coming back."

“What are you talking about? What will you do?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “But I have to do something. I can’t just wait around, like my life’s gonna fall out of a tree and land on me. That’s what I’ve been doing, just sitting on a rock and waiting. And it’s not working.”

“But you have to finish school.”

“Why? Obviously, I’m not learning anything.”

I wish I had an answer for this, a scheme for us, a vision, a plan, but I don’t. We always talk about leaving Colchis and going to New York City, where she’ll be a famous dancer and I’ll be famous, too. She dances, and I—well, I don’t know what I do, but I figure it out and do it and be famous, and we meet at sidewalk cafés and put our cold drinks on tiny tables. I feel like the future is coming at us too fast, though, and I wish I had known what to do to get ready for it. Claudette and Angel come out of the girls’ room, and then Mrs. Kmiec comes out and signals us all back into Mr. Van’s office.

“All of you have failed Western Civ for the year.” The principal’s voice is crisp. “If you plan to graduate next year, you do need that history credit.”

Claudette’s mouth hangs open. “You mean we have to repeat the whole *year*?”

“If you want to graduate, yes.”

“What about summer school?” asks Angel.

“We’re not offering Western Civ this summer.”

“I’m talking to my father,” Claudette storms.

“Good,” my mother says. “I will be, too.”

Mr. C. stands up. He rubs his hands triumphantly. "I'll see you in September, girls."

On the drive home, my mother seems more tired than mad. She informs me that of course she knows I didn't plagiarize, but I didn't deserve to pass Western Civ anyway, so yes, I do have to take it again next year, and so does Melody: she is not going to put her career in jeopardy defending my right to be an arrogant little smart-ass. Mr. C. plays golf with the chairman of the school board, and that's probably where her candidacy for principal will be decided. "Not that there shouldn't be further consequences—"

"Maybe you should get contact lenses," I suggest, trying to divert that one at the pass. "Your glasses make you look more liberal than you really are."

She lets out one long, irritated exhalation. "Serena," she starts. "What? Allegra gives you career tips all the time."

She lets out another one of her tight sighs and grips the steering wheel. Then she remembers a recent commitment to take all her problems to the Lord, so she starts to pray. "Dear Lord," she starts, "please help this family and guide our thoughts toward You." When my mother prays, she has this creepy prayer voice she uses, which makes me feel like I have snails crawling up my back. "Lord," she continues, "we just thank You today, for Your blessings, and also for Your wisdom, Lord, and we know that if we trust in You as a family, You will bring us to the same place together." Then she gets to the point, which is to guide Serena's footsteps closer to the will of God. At this point, I sigh heavily. It's wrong to sigh in the middle of a prayer, but I can't help it. In

addition to being the new principal of the high school and raising five kids, my mom is in church multiple times per week and maintains committed prayer relationships on the phone. When Mom started dating my stepfather, she joined his church, where the half of Colchis that isn't Catholic goes. That was seven years ago. Scot had been recently widowed and had a baby daughter, Nora, who is now my little sister. My mom got involved with him and then added religion later to smooth things out with his parents, who didn't trust this older woman, this highly educated single mother of three.

We—Aaron, Allegra, and I—thought her relationship with Scot was going to be short-lived—after all, we'd seen Mom through other guys before—but then she got pregnant.

Oops.

A prominent educator in a conservative county getting knocked up by a younger man, what a disaster. When Mom and Scot told us they were going to get married and have a baby, all I can remember is Allegra sobbing about overpopulation. My mom and the baby, Zack, were baptized on the same day.

Since the prayer's not likely to end soon, I take *The Communist Manifesto*, also from Mr. C.'s room, out of my backpack. When I open it up, it has that faint smell of burning paper that old books have.

"Put that away," my mother snaps.

I turn the page.

"I said put it away."

"Me? I can't read now?"

"I'm waiting."

“Fine.” I put it back in my backpack. “I thought you were talking to someone else.”

She resumes her prayer, still on the subject of Serena, which really irritates me. Even when talking to God, I think it’s rude for people to refer to you in the third person when you are sitting right there. She’s having a hard time maintaining her prayer voice, though, so she gives up and leaves God hanging.

“You’re grounded,” she says, “just on principle.” She keeps going. I will have to babysit Nora and Zack every day until I leave for Maine. And, no, I won’t get paid for it. Money is very tight right now, and Scot is moving his office to the bedroom over the garage, to save on rent.

“Does that mean Nanci Lee’s gonna be at the house?” I ask.

Nanci Lee is Scot’s secretary, so of course that’s what it means, my mother says, and if her girls are with her, I can babysit for them, too. For free. She keeps thinking of more punishments. As a matter of fact, I won’t even get to go to Maine. Nope, no Maine at all. I don’t deserve it. The more she piles on, the angrier she gets. Oh yes, I will have to write an apology to Mr. C., and not with another one of my smart-ass screeds, either, she will read it first. And I have to start going to church again; she should never have let me get away with a stunt like I pulled with the condom. I owe an apology to Pastor Don for that one. I endure this onslaught of consequence without responding to it. Reason would just be wasted on her.

Eventually, we roll through stone pillars that spell out *Versailles* in wrought-iron lettering, and drive the quarter mile to the last and only house in the development. We’re home.

When we pull up in front of the house, there is Scot, with his secretary and rumored mistress, Nanci Lee. Her nasty twins are with her, Madison and Taylor, looking like they drink ground glass out of their sippy cups. When we roll up in the car, everybody ignores us. Only our old dog seems happy that we're home by standing up and wagging his tail. Nanci Lee's glance flickers in our direction and dismisses us, like she's the one who owns the place and we are the uninvited guests. She is always entering Madison and Taylor into kiddie beauty pageants, and nobody cares that they bully my little sister, Nora.

We sit for a minute in the car without getting out.

"I don't understand this penchant for naming your baby daughters after early American presidents."

"Serena," my mother says with a tight jaw, "I've had just about enough of your—"

"If I had twin girls, I'd name them Hamilton and Burr and get it over with."

After a second of silence, my mother gets the joke. She lets out a yelp of laughter, which is loud enough for them to hear, and they look at us. Nanci Lee looks at me and narrows her eyes. I give her the peace sign, and she looks away. Some people just instantly recognize each other as enemies, and that is me and Nanci Lee. She's the cheerleading coach at the high school, and those two cheerleaders who failed Western Civ are her acolytes. My mother leans her head on the steering wheel, and her shoulders shake with laughter. Good. If you make your oppressors laugh, they can't keep punishing you, which is something anyone who has read *The Communist Manifesto* should know.

My mother gets out of the car and goes at Nanci Lee with a big, phony hug, which Nanci Lee returns with as little enthusiasm as she dares. Scot doesn't look up from his phone. I get out and slam the car door. I walk through the middle of them without saying anything to anybody and go inside and lock myself in my room with French poetry. I'm not taking French IV next year, which broke Mlle. O'Shea's heart. She gave me the poetry to keep my love of French alive "until college," an institution for which I have no use whatsoever. It seems like four more years of high school to me, four more years of people telling you what to read. But Mlle. O'Shea is right that I love how French sounds: sometimes I wonder what it would be like to live in a place where everything anyone says sounds like they're breathing love at each other. If my mother knew how much I like reading Baudelaire, she'd probably take that away, too, so I stay in my room all night, reading "Spleen" and listening to sounds of conviviality from the family dinner below, in honor of my sister Allegra's and brother Aaron's successful school year.

My punishment starts after Allegra and Aaron leave for Maine. On my first full day of babysitting, I take Nora and Zack and go to Grimshaw's. We ride bikes down the dirt road that comes out near the trailer park, and from there we cross the highway and coast about half a mile to the junkyard. It's almost noon. When we get there, two of Grimshaw's older brothers are staring into the engine of a blue Subaru station wagon.

"There she is," they say cheerily when they see me, like I'm the one who just got out of jail. "How you been?"

“Good.” Nora and Zack shrink against me and say nothing.

“Hold this.” Dale hands me a flashlight. “See right down there? That little pipe coming out of the engine wall? Shine it right on that spot. I can’t trust these guys to do it right.”

I hold the flashlight just so while Dale crawls under the car. “You should get a headlamp,” I say down into the engine, which sets off a round of jokes about mining and joining the union and going on strike so you can get paid to do nothing. Under the car, Dale’s laughter comes up through the engine as I watch him loosen the nut I’m pointing the flashlight at. Nora and Zack stare up at me with their mouths open, like they had no idea I had such impressive skills. Eventually, Dale gets the nut loose, and I help pull him out from under the car by his boots. Then we head toward the house.

None of Grimshaw’s older brothers live at home, except for Gumby, who can’t take care of himself and so will never leave, and Ruby, the closest to Grimshaw in age, who sleeps on the pool table in the basement. Ruby’s boots are sticking out from underneath his pickup truck, a two-tone yellow and white antique, his pride and joy. I kick the sole of the left one as I go by. He grunts in his sleep. We find Grimshaw inside the house, already in her bathing suit. Her niece Whitney and her nephew Dallas are standing each with an arm inside a box of cereal, staring slack-jawed at a game show. I toss her the latest issue of her dance magazine. When she sees me, Mrs. Grimshaw greets me with her usual hospitality. She snaps off the TV, hauls herself to her feet, and shuffles massively away. She doesn’t have her teeth in.

“Take those kids outside,” she orders over her shoulder.

Grimshaw packs cookies and chips and soda, representing three of the four basic Grimshaw food groups—the other one being cigarettes—and we head outside into the June sunshine. The kids follow us in a line, like ducklings. At the edge of the woods behind her house is a field filled with old farm junk, plows and rakes and manure spreaders, as well as a wasp-infested wood-paneled Country Squire station wagon sitting on its axles. Grimshaw used to use the front hood as her stage, putting on dance performances for an audience of nobody. Between the field and the woods runs a stream where Grimshaw and I dammed a swimming hole a few summers back. Grimshaw sits down to read her magazine, and the rest of us slide down the shale and then pick our way upstream to a flat spot where the water pools. I start pulling rocks out of the swimming hole that have fallen in over the winter and spring. We build the dam back up so the water gets deep enough for the kids to dunk under. I catch a crawfish and show it to them. Then we make boats out of pieces of bark, decorate them with bottle caps and other trash, and race them down the stream.

I look up at Grimshaw, a nonparticipant in our fun. She's sitting cross-legged on the bank above us, with her face tilted up at the sun. Her chin makes a shadow that vees down between her breasts. Her eyes are closed. I climb up and sit next to her and throw grass at her face.

"Ruby says there's a big party in the gorge tonight," she says.

"That's cool. Except I'm grounded for failing history."

She's incredulous. "Just for that?"

“Yup. The only difference between me and a political prisoner is that I can lock my own door.”

“Can’t you sneak out tonight?” she asks.

“No problem. I’ll sever the chain-link fence with my bolt cutters, crawl through the concertina wire on my elbows, and tunnel under the guards at the perimeter with a spoon.”

Grimshaw sighs heavily. Her eyes remain shut. Sometimes my sarcasm wears her out.

“Is Ruby going?” I ask.

“Of course. He asked me if we wanted a ride.” I don’t exactly have a crush on Grimshaw’s brother Ruby, but I do sort of think of him as mine. If Grimshaw has a boyfriend with a car, sometimes we go on double dates. Grimshaw and friend sit in the front and make out, and Ruby and I sit in the back, usually with Jake and Jaws, Ruby’s two Rottweiler mixes. If Grimshaw and friend want to get serious, they get out and go somewhere else, and Ruby and I usually stop kissing and talk about cars.

“Are you going to meet up with Junior Davis?” I ask.

She opens her eyes. “Will you let go of Junior Davis? I told you, he doesn’t have a car. Besides, he left for football camp yesterday.”

“How do you know that?”

She shrugs. “I know things, too, you know.”

“You better watch out for that cheerleader.”

“I’m not worried about any cheerleader. So if you don’t go tonight,” she says, “I’m going with Mike Lyle.”

“Not the one in the Corvette,” I guess.

“Yes. That one.”

“Figures. I knew you knew who it was.”

“You’re not allowed to be a snob, Serena. He has wheels.”

“Yeah, but it’d probably go faster if he stuck his feet through the rust holes and ran.” That gets a laugh out of her, the first one of the day.

“Don’t give him any crap about it, okay? He paid a lot of money for that car. He’s very sensitive about it.”

“How old is it? How old is *he*?”

“I don’t know. Old. Promise you won’t give him any crap?”

“I won’t give him any crap. It just looks like the car is about six sizes too small for him, that’s all.”

“He thinks you don’t like him.”

“I haven’t even met him! He *is* sensitive. What does he want with you, anyway?”

“Nothing. He just comes by and we get to talking.”

“Yeah. After he stalks you. What a loser.”

“He’s got a car,” she says. “And he’s not a loser, anyway, he’s okay.”

I remember how I noticed the car in the first place. There was something deliberate, something watchful about the way the car moved down the street. I would bet anything he was looking for her. And then he came here, which was weird. Not that she’s not pretty, because of course she is. It’s just that she comes from this long and proud line of Grimshaws, who are gun-shootin’, chaw-chewin’, school-quittin’, weed-growin’ rednecks, and if you take her on, you get the rest into the bargain. Not many guys come by here. Until Mike, I can’t even think of one.

Grimshaw starts telling me not to be jealous, either, that there

are guys out there for me, too, but I might have to wait for college to find them. They might not be here in the Valley, boys who walk around with their face in a book like I do.

"I'm not going to college," I remind her. "College is for people who can't figure it out on their own."

"Don't be a dumb-ass," she says.

It bothers me, this mention of the future. I don't like the Valley, either, but I've always gotten furloughed every summer, to Maine, while Grimshaw stays up here in the junkyard and can't even get down to town, which is not even much of a town to get to. At least I know a bigger world exists out there.

"Anyway," she concludes, "you shouldn't worry about Mike. I don't even like him. I mean, he's nice, but it's just that something needs to happen with me. I'll be eighteen, and if something doesn't happen soon, it won't ever, and then I'll be stuck here."

I try to think of something reassuring, like we can figure it out ourselves, but I can't really think of any specific ideas.

"Mike says he knows people who can help me."

"Help you do what?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. "Dance? Make something happen?"

"You're sure he's not saying what he thinks you want to hear, just to make you happy?"

"What the hell's wrong with trying to make me happy? Who's ever wanted that?"

The four kids come clambering up the shale toward us for food. They're hungry.

"And try not to wear that stupid hat tonight, okay, just once?" she says. "Everyone thinks we're communists."

“I have to wear it. My roots are growing out.”

She sighs. “Nobody even remembers what color your hair is. Or cares.”

“That’s the whole idea.”

“I was buying cigarettes, and the guy behind the counter asked me how the revolution was going. Because of you.”

“Dancers shouldn’t smoke.”

I pass out the food and the drinks. As far as asking my mom if I can go to the gorge tonight, I might as well ask her for permission to grow wings and flap them all the way to the moon. It would be one thing if I were Allegra, who gets away with murder because she’s so trustworthy, but I’m not Allegra. If you’re not trustworthy, you need a plan.

My plan starts after supper. I wash the dishes and wipe the counters and sweep the floor until the kitchen has never been so immaculate. After that I go upstairs and read for a while, from Mlle. O’Shea’s anthology. I love Baudelaire, but now I’m getting into the twentieth century. My new favorite is by Jacques Prévert, called “Barbara.”

Rappelle-toi Barbara

Il pleuvait sans cesse sur Brest ce jour-là.

It’s about a woman he sees crossing the street in the rain. He hears her lover call her name, a man that has taken shelter under a porch, and Barbara runs into his arms. She’s beautiful and happy with the rain on her face, but in between when that happens and

when he remembers it in the poem, the war comes and takes everything away and changes what everything means, even rain. It really gets to me.

Eventually, I can hear my family assemble downstairs in the family room, and they've started a game of Uno. Usually at this juncture, I would lock myself in and read for the rest of the night, but step two of my plan is to take a deep breath, go downstairs, and watch them play cards. So that's what I do. They ignore me.

"Any objections if I sleep outside tonight?" I ask, casually, after a while. "Aaron said I could use his old sleeping bag."

My mother looks guarded. "Outside . . . where?"

"On the front lawn. You know how my bedroom heats up on these hot nights."

Mom looks at Scot, but Scot's face is a black hole. She looks at her watch. "It's kind of early for bed, isn't it?" she asks.

"Mom." Nora yanks on her sleeve. "It's your turn."

"I'm not going to bed now," I explain in a reasonable, even, and unexcited tone of voice. "I just mean for when I do go to bed." Scot doesn't say a word. He looks like he's going to have a problem no matter what happens.

"Well." My mother uses her Christian, sweet-but-firm voice. "In that case, why don't you sit down and join us?" I don't want to be here. Nobody else wants me here. But without commands coming down from the general, a mere lieutenant needs to cover her ass. Just because I failed Western Civ doesn't mean I didn't learn anything about history. As long as she's making me unhappy, she must be doing something right. So I sit down and join them. Scot deals. We look at our cards. Nobody talks. We play through

a hand. I put down my first wild card, call it green, and then watch Scot have to pick up about twenty cards, getting angrier with each one. Three more cards, and I win the hand.

“Daddy,” Nora says, “Serena made us a swimming pool today. I thought *we* were going to have a swimming pool at *our* house. When are you going to make *us* a swimming pool?”

Scot puts his cards down, gets up, and leaves the room without comment.

“Where’s Daddy going?” asks Zack.

“It was a swimming *hole*, not a *pool*,” I explain to my mother’s furious face. “In the stream in back of Grimshaw’s.”

Scot turns around and comes back in the room. “She took our kids *where* today?” he shouts at my mother.

“I’ve taken them to the Grimshaws’ before,” I say. “It’s no big deal.”

“Do you know how they make their money?” Scot shouts at my mother.

“I don’t think it’s *so* bad,” says my mother. “It’s almost legal.”

“Oh, that’s great.” Scot lifts both hands in the air. “Just great. Almost legal, the principal says. You heard it here.” Scot turns in the doorway and points at me. “I don’t want my kids hanging out at that place anymore. It’s dangerous.”

I start to laugh. “Dangerous?” I say to my mother. “That’s really ridiculous.”

“Serena fixed their car today!” Zack yells.

“Yeah!” chimes in Nora. “She fixed their car! Then we went swimming in their swimming pool!”

“I know those people,” Scot says between clenched teeth.

“They don’t have enough pride to bend over and pick up their own trash.”

“You can’t just say that about them!” I say to Scot.

“Melody’s different,” my mother pleads with Scot. “I really pray for that girl. And I’d like to think it’s having some effect.”

“I think,” he says quietly, ignoring my mother, “in my own house, I can say whatever I want.”

“No, you can’t,” I yell back. “You can’t just talk trash about people.”

Nora and then Zack start to cry. Scot sticks his chin out at me. “If it’s true, I sure can.”

“You want to know what people say about you, then?”

He is right in my face. “Okay,” he says. “Tell me.”

“Serena,” says my mother, getting in between us. “Go upstairs to your room, right now.”

“If we’re being so free with what we’ve heard other people say,” I tell him over her shoulder. “I hear things, too, you know, if we’re passing rumors around. That’s what you’re doing. Talk about trash.”

Scot rushes toward me with his fists clenched, and for a second I actually think he might punch me. “Go ahead, then,” he says quietly. “Say it.”

“Scot,” my mother says behind him. “You are reasoning with a teenager. You won’t win.”

He spins toward her. Now he gets in her face. “Oh,” he says, “I won’t win, will I? And why is that? Because you’re all so educated and I’m just a guy who works with his hands?” Now he’s shouting at her, the dog is barking, and both kids are screaming

in earnest. “Every day, I face my problems, even the ones I didn’t create. I face another guy’s problems who was too weak to hack it. I’m not as smart as him, I’m too dumb to kill myself. I just get up, every day, to keep a roof over his kids’ heads. It’s all on me.”

Now my mother has started to cry, too. “Sweetheart,” she says, holding out her hands in supplication. “Please don’t do this. Please.”

“No,” he shouts. “Let’s say it all. Let’s get it all out.” Scot keeps going. “She’s so smart, and all we hear from her, all year long, is about how stupid everybody else is, her teachers, how stupid they are, how stupid the town is, my town—this is my town,” he shouts again, jabbing his thumbnail into his chest, “and I have to listen to this, and now she’s too smart to pass her dumb classes, and how does that make you look, Dr. Pentz, with your PhD? Like the laughingstock of the whole Valley, that’s how! You think the school board is gonna hire you now?”

“Sweetheart, I really don’t think—”

“You think they’re gonna hire you now?” he repeats. “I wouldn’t. You want to raise the standards for the whole town, but your own daughter—” He stops abruptly. “People are known by the company they keep, and that’s all I’m gonna say.” He leaves and slams the door. Zack and Nora run at my mother and cling to her leg and cry.

“It’s okay,” she says to them, with a hand on each of their heads. “Daddy’s just having some feelings.”

Then Scot comes back. “I don’t want her watching my kids anymore,” he yells. “Maybe you don’t care about your kids, but I care about mine. From now on, hire a babysitter, and make sure

it's somebody who's smart enough to keep them safe." Then he leaves again. We stand there, hear him slam the door again, start his BMW, and drive away, probably to meet Nanci Lee at the Crossways Tavern.

"That's ridiculous," I protest to my mother. "It's not dangerous at the Grimshaws'. And they're not trash, either. They're my friends."

"Serena," my mother says, rubbing her forehead, "do you think you can speak to Scot without a sneer in your voice?"

"Well, do you think it's right, what he said about them? It's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"Just go," she says. "Just go away."

"So can I sleep outside tonight?"

She gets up and starts to leave the room with Zack and Nora. "I don't care where you sleep."

"Fine," I mutter. "If you don't care where I sleep, maybe I'll sleep with the football team."

It comes out a little louder than I intend. She turns around and stares at me. "Get out," she says. "Get out of my sight right now."

So I get out. I take Aaron's sleeping bag outside and lurk by the gates of Versailles and watch the fireflies blink while I wait for Ruby to pick me up. As for the scene that just happened, it doesn't even bear thinking about. They need a babysitter, and they can't afford to pay anyone. I'll just tell Nora and Zack that instead of having a swimming hole, they now have a *secret* swimming hole. The fact that Scot now works from home complicates things, but I'll figure something out. It's not like the guy's a genius. My sister's

analysis is that when the woman makes more money than the man, the man has to make up for it by swaggering around and threatening everybody and yelling a lot. Allegra says Scot's affair with Nanci Lee is his way of equalizing the difference in intelligence and power between him and Mom. As far as staying away from the Grimshaws', I can't say anything about it to Grimshaw. It will take her less than one second to guess why I've been forbidden to bring Zack and Nora over to play. She's very sensitive that way.

Eventually, Ruby's truck rolls up and stops. Only his parking lights are on.

"Melody's there already," he reports when I get in. "She went down with Dale and Lisa."

"Lisa's back?"

"Yeah. She just came back tonight. The kids were happier to see her than she was to see them."

We head down into the Valley, stopping to buy beer and pick up three of Ruby's friends, who all cram in front of the pickup with him. I stretch out in back with the Rottweilers and watch the stars go by over my head. I think about what Scot said about my father. He died when I was so young that I don't have any memory of him at all. If I ever ask anything about him, it's like it's none of my business and I should stop being so nosy and be grateful for what I have.

By the time we arrive, the party is raging. It's in a deep, ferny gorge above Colchis where tiny feathery waterfalls spill down steps of black shale into the same stream that winds in back of Grimshaw's house. A huge bonfire licks at the sky. A bunch of

guys with their shirts tied around their heads are watching the fire. Some guys from the football team throw a car seat on the fire, and a column of sparks rises about thirty feet in the air, twisting around itself. Ruby puts a can of beer in my hands and then dissolves into the shadows. I crack it, take the first sip, and wander off in search of Grimshaw. The firelight makes people's faces strange and their shadows lurch against the trees. Cars keep pulling in, and their headlights illuminate more clumps of people leaning against cars and drinking. I thread through them. The gorge is the melting pot of Colchis. All the discrete, mildly antagonistic lifestyles—rednecks, jocks, stoners, even Christians—are like one-celled organisms whose membranes become permeable at parties to beer and drugs and sexually transmitted diseases. Nobody talks to me, though.

This year's valedictorian is standing on the roof of a pickup truck parked next to the fire. Allegra was salutatorian. He holds a bottle up and watches the fire through the glass. He tips it back, and as he starts to guzzle, a bunch of guys jump into the bed of the pickup and start rocking it. The crowd starts to clap in unison. "Chug, chug, chug," they chant as the guys in the bed keep rocking the truck. He empties the bottle, throws it into the flames, and holds both arms up in victory. I turn away to keep looking for my friend. If I don't find her, there is no point in my being here.

Headlights snap on, illuminating Claudette Mizerak and Angel Ciaramitaro, sitting right in front of me on the hood of a pickup truck. They're passing a bottle of wine back and forth. We freeze when we see each other, like we know we don't like each

other but we can't really remember why. Then the headlights snap off and leave us in darkness again.

"Slut," one of them says.

"Bitch," I say back, and keep going.

It takes me a while to find Grimshaw, or rather, her shoes, because that's what I see first, placed neatly side by side next to the passenger door of the ugliest car on the planet, the ultimate in loser-mobiles, a metallic gold mid-'80s Corvette. A small knot of older guys, last year's football players, are standing in front of it. The passenger-side window is open about three inches. I knock on the side of the car.

"Bee-yootiful," I exclaim. "What an echo!" From the murky depths of the car, I hear her giggle. "It's Serena!" I hear her say. "She found us!" On the other side of the car, Mike Lyle gets out, slams the door, and lumbers off into the shadows. The window comes down, and a lit cigarette comes out in Grimshaw's hand. A menthol.

"No thanks." I give it back. "When I want more fiberglass in my diet, I'll chew on the insulation. Move over." I open the door and squeeze into the passenger seat with her. The car smells of sweat and cologne and cigarette smoke and beer.

"How old is that guy, anyway?" I whisper. "He's not very friendly."

"He says he knows your mom. He was in her English class back in the day. Schnapps?"

"Ew. Liquefied grasshopper guts."

“He likes it,” she says. “Take off your shoes, too. He doesn’t want to mess up the car.”

“You better make sure he doesn’t have a stroke. These old guys are kinda fragile, you know.”

She blows a smoke ring and admires it as she turns up the radio. “He says he knows a lot of people where I can get a job.”

The door opens. Mike Lyle is back, shoving the front of his shirt into his pants. He gets in on the other side of Grimshaw. It’s impressive how quickly and easily such a big guy can fit into such a small space. He leans forward and stares at me.

“Corvettes don’t rust,” he announces.

I look at Grimshaw, and I can’t help it, I burst out laughing. It just seems so silly to me, that a grown man would care what anyone says about his car. Then I realize he doesn’t have a sense of humor about his car, or me, or maybe anything.

Grimshaw stares straight ahead of her. “Mike, Serena,” she says. “Serena, Mike.”

“Mike.” I extend my hand to him. “Mike, I’m charmed.”

He doesn’t take my hand. “You think you’re pretty funny, don’t you?” he asks. In the darkness, all I can see are the dull reflections of his eyes. The glowing end of Grimshaw’s cigarette flares up between our noses as she sucks down the last inch. Then headlights swing through the car and stop, and for a split second, Mike Lyle and I make eye contact. Although I wasn’t expecting to see warm pools of affection, I’m taken aback by the paleness of his eyes. The blue of them is so light there’s something empty-looking about them. I lean in closer to get a better look.

Then Mike says a bad word. He gets out and slams the door so hard it rocks the car. Mike walks into the light of the headlights. He's not that tall, but his shoulders are wide. Somebody holds a beer out for him. He drains it, and then he holds the can out and with a series of flexes, grunts, and grimaces, crushes it into a ball with one hand while the other two watch. Then he tosses it off into the dark distance.

I look at her and roll my eyes. "That was for your benefit." She doesn't answer. I watch her light a second cigarette off the first one. "What are you smoking so much for? Are you nervous or something?"

"Maybe."

"What do you see in that guy, anyway?"

"It's what he sees in me," she replies.

"And what's that?"

"A future."

I wait for her to explain, but she doesn't. "I don't get it."

"You wouldn't." She exhales a long blast of smoke. "You and Mike might get along if—I mean—can't you ever take a day off?"

"A day off what?"

"Isn't there ever a day when you get up and say, 'I'm not going to say anything sarcastic today until at least noon?'"

"Well, what did you go and tell him I thought his car was rusty for?" I demand.

"That was a mistake," she sighs. "I was telling him about you, trying to explain that most of the time you're not trying to be mean, you just want people to like you. Everything's an act with you, a show. Most people don't know that."

“Well, do me a favor and don’t blow my cover.”

“Let’s just get out of here,” she says. “I’m getting cold.” I open the door and hand Grimshaw her shoes. I take off my sweater and give that to her, too.

“Take it,” I tell her. “I’m too hot.”

When we get to the bonfire, Grimshaw breaks into the circle surrounding it. She’s still holding the bottle of schnapps, and she tips it up to take a sip.

“Nice swallow,” a male voice says from far back. A smattering of female laughter breaks out. Grimshaw’s face just twists up in a defiant smile, and she takes another sip from the bottle.

“Why don’t you just get pregnant and stay home?” a female voice mutters near me. I don’t know if it was loud enough for Grimshaw to hear. She could have anyone’s boyfriend here, and often has, but she wouldn’t like it if I heard that, so I leave the scene before it becomes an issue. And since Grimshaw’s relationship with Mike Lyle seems destined to last at least a couple more hours, I should start exploring possibilities for a ride home. I still have to babysit tomorrow, so it would be good if I showed up for breakfast. I wander the outskirts of the party, through necking couples, heaps of beer cans, and people comatose in cars, but find nobody within six degrees of separation of either Grimshaw or me.

When my eyes adjust to the light, I pick my way down to the stream, take off my shoes, and find a flat rock that’s big enough to sit cross-legged on. I mull over Grimshaw’s comment about Mike Lyle. It’s not what she sees in him, it’s what he sees in her. So does she see anything in him? Does she look straight through him at his car? And what does he see in her, anyway? What other

guys see, or something else? I don't know why I bother trying to solve her riddles, though. I always search for meaning in everything she says, until I find out she's just quoting old songs. Still, Mike Lyle is different from the others. She's gone out with other older guys, but this one's more determined, somehow. He's not bad-looking, I suppose, in an older-guy sort of way. He has a trim goatee, shiny black hair, the Corvette, of course, instead of a brain, and arms like the branches of an oak tree. If it'll really make her happy, I can try to be nice to him. But I don't have to like him.

I wish we could just go, just leave this town and this Valley, these people and their comments. If we just got on the bus and went to New York City, we could probably figure it out from there. We just have to make the first move. Every time Grimshaw starts a dance class, they tell her how much talent she has, and I'm smart enough to succeed at whatever I want, once I decide what that is, so I do have confidence that something is out there for us. I know what Grimshaw would say to that, though: confidence doesn't have wheels, and I'm not old enough to drive.

I stick my hand in the water and let it lap up to my elbow. The voice of the water slowly clears the beer out of my head. Somewhere on shaley cliffs above me, maidenhair ferns hang down, and every few minutes, a drop of water lands on my face. From here, the party is only a flickering orange glow against the trees and a few hoarse shouts.

I lie down on the rock and close my eyes. The moss is soft, and the occasional drops of water that reach my face remind me of the woman in the rain in the Jacques Prévert poem. If I pre-

tend to be French, I might forget about where I live. I hear sirens, and blue lights flash over my head through the trees. I listen to the commotion that has started above me, shouts and the running of feet. The police coming to flush the underage drinkers home is a regularly scheduled feature of weekends in Colchis. After the excitement dies down, I make my way back up to the party. The fire has become a glowing orange mound of coals. People are quieter than they were before, but it's a warm night, and there's still a buzz in the air, like anything could still happen. I don't see Grimshaw anywhere, or Mike Lyle, or the Corvette. An old Blazer and a bashed-in pickup truck are parked on either side of the bonfire, close enough to blister the paint. Stretching over the fire from the top of one to the top of the other is a long board. I'm trying to figure out the point of this when somebody shouts, "Who's gonna walk the plank?"

"I'll walk it," somebody slurs. It's the valedictorian again. People cheer. He crawls on top of the pickup, and they help him up onto the roof. Of course, as soon as they let go of him, he staggers forward, twirls around, and then falls off, which everybody thinks is very funny. They beat him on the back, even though he falls clear of the fire, and he holds up his bottle like he has won a great victory. Then he gets dragged off by the armpits to retch into the poison ivy.

Heavy metal music comes buzzing and thumping out of the open windows of a truck. I while away some time thinking of the torture that awaits me at home as I watch the youth of the Minnechaug Valley fall one by one into the coals, which get grayer and dustier as they cool. The plank is kind of soft and spongy,

and sags when they get to the middle of it. Nobody makes it to the other side. After a while, I notice a certain chill in the air and the sky getting a little darker. A yellow rind of moon climbs out of the trees. This night is ending, and I need to get home.

Then I see her, up on the roof of the Blazer. This might be what we were waiting for, it might be why we came to the party in the first place. For her it's not a party, it's an audience, but she has to be drunk enough, and so does the audience.

The bottle of schnapps is still with her. She takes a swig of it, makes it part of the dance, then lets the bottle lead her out to the middle of the plank. Everybody is quiet, watching her undulate into center stage. Grimshaw's dancer fantasy doesn't come out of nowhere. The girl really does know how to move. Even drunk and in heels, her balance is perfect, and she doesn't take a false step. She gets to the middle of the board and stops and sways with her eyes closed.

"Take it off!" somebody says, a male voice. Grimshaw smiles and closes her eyes and continues to sway. First she holds her hair up. Then she stretches her arms out and starts to unbutton her sweater—my sweater—with one hand.

Somebody turns the music up. Once her sweater is open, she starts peeling it slowly off her arms. I don't want it to end up in the fire, so I fight my way to the front of the crowd and grab it just before it lands in the coals.

Underneath the sweater is a lacy top, and under that is her bra. Liberated from the sweater, Grimshaw moves her arms more freely. The silence of the men around the fire has a particular focus to it, like they don't know Grimshaw is just dancing. They think

she's promising them something. I seem to be the only other female present. With my eyes open, I say a silent prayer that the song will end and we'll go home with no more drama than that. The skin on the back of my neck starts to prickle. Behind me a stick cracks. Mike Lyle walks up behind me. I'm glad to see him. He'll defend our honor and drive us home in his Corvette. He's the answer to my prayer.

"Looks like all the good little girls have gone home," he says. "And you're still here."

"Could you take us home?" I ask him. "Like, right now?"

He focuses on me with those laser-vision eyes of his and pretends to be confused. "You want to go home with me, little girl? I thought you didn't like my car."

"I didn't say—"

He looks around. "Seems to me like the party's getting going again. All the little kids have gone home." He lets out a long, low belch. "Or almost all."

Suddenly, I feel like one of those little kids, and all I want to do is go home. We both look at Grimshaw. She's holding the bottle at the end of her arm and following it around in small circles.

"How much has she had to drink, anyway?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says. "I'm not her babysitter." He takes another swig of beer. "And neither are you."

The song stops, and I wait for her to get down. Mike and I stand there together and watch her twirling around on the plank in silence, smiling to herself while all these guys watch her from the shadows. But no, another song starts, and she moves to that. She could dance to anything, really.

“Somebody should stop her,” I say. “It’s not safe, what she’s doing.”

He takes a swig of his beer. “Life’s not safe. You better get used to it, little girl. Or stay home.” He leans in closer to me, without taking his eyes off Grimshaw. “You think you could do that?” he asks me softly. He doesn’t look at me, just gestures with his chin toward Grimshaw.

“Do what?” I whisper. For some reason, my voice doesn’t seem to work. I clear my throat. “Do what?” I ask again, louder.

I hear a low chuckle. “You know what I mean,” he says. “Smart girl like you. I think you could,” he says, still without taking his eyes off her. “I think you got it in you. You’re still just a little . . .” Here he leans close to my ear. “Scared . . .” He breathes on my neck. “We’re all just the same, underneath it all, we’re just animals, you and me.”

He clearly isn’t going to help us, so I don’t want to waste any more time on him, but there’s something about the way he stares at you that you can’t look away from.

Then he keeps going. “You and your mom,” he says. “I know Scot. Put it this way—she ain’t Mrs. Pentz because of their intellectual discussions.” He laughs, like he’s just told a joke. Then he winks at me.

Somebody throws something—a chunk of wood or a heavy rock—in the fire. I turn to look. A column of sparks swirls up around Grimshaw, who seems to enjoy it. Like she’s been waiting for that cue, she holds the bottle over her head and twirls around. It’s gotten light enough that I can see Ruby’s pickup truck parked at a little distance. Why doesn’t her own brother know what’s

going on? Ruby will do something about this if Mike won't. I run to the truck, and there is Ruby, asleep behind the steering wheel. I slug him in the arm as hard as I can, so he stirs, barely opens his eyes, sees me, and shuts them again.

"You better drive," he says. "I've had . . ." He doesn't finish the sentence.

"Move over, then."

I leave the driver's side door open, go back to the Blazer, walk out onto the plank, and reach for Grimshaw's hand. "Let's go," I tell her. "We have to go home."

She opens her eyes wide at me. "Come on." I snap my fingers. With drunken docility, she lets me lead her off the Blazer. I help her down, then I push her in front of me to Ruby's truck, and she gets in and slumps against the passenger-side window. Ruby is already stretched out in the back, sleeping next to Jake and Jaws. Before I get behind the wheel, though, I turn around. Mike is still standing in the same place, watching me.

"Remember what I said," he calls.

I rush up to him and get right in his face. "You leave us alone," I tell him. As I turn to go, his hand snakes out, he grabs me by the back of the shirt, and he pulls me in close to him.

"I'll give you some advice, little sister," he whispers into the back of my head. "Don't take me on."

He lets me go and I run to the truck. When I get to the door, I turn around and give him the finger. "You're too old," I shout at him. "We're still in high school."

He seems to think this is the funniest thing he's heard all night, and his laughter stays with me all the way up the hill.