

**THE ART
OF BEING**
Normal

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LISA WILLIAMSON

Margaret Ferguson Books
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For Matt

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DAVID

When I was eight years old, my class was told to write about what we wanted to be when we grew up. Then our teacher, Ms. Box, went around the room asking each of us to stand up and share what we had written. Zachary Olsen wanted to play soccer for England. Lexi Taylor wanted to be an actress. Harry Beaumont planned on being prime minister. Simon Allen wanted to be Harry Potter, so badly that the previous term he had scratched a lightning bolt onto his forehead with a pair of scissors.

But I didn't want to be any of these things.

This is what I wrote:

I want to be a girl.

DAVID

FIVE AND A HALF YEARS LATER

My party guests are singing “Happy Birthday.” It does not sound good.

My little sister, Livvy, is barely even singing. At eleven, she’s already decided family birthday parties are totally embarrassing, leaving Mum and Dad to honk out the rest of the tune, Mum’s reedy soprano clashing with Dad’s flat bass. It is so bad Phil, the family dog, has retreated to his bed. I don’t blame him; the whole party is pretty depressing. Even the blue balloons Dad blew up look pale and sad, especially the ones with *Fourteen Today!* scrawled on them in black marker. I’m not even sure the underwhelming events unfolding before me qualify as a party in the first place.

“Make a wish!” Mum says. She has the cake tipped at an angle so I won’t notice it’s wonky. It says *Happy Birthday David!* in bloodred icing across the top, the *day* in *Birthday* scrunched up where she must have run out of room. Fourteen blue candles form a circle around the edge of the cake, dripping wax in the buttercream.

“Hurry up!” Livvy says.

But I won’t be rushed. I lean forward, tuck my hair behind my ears, and shut my eyes. I block out Livvy’s whining and Mum’s cajoling and Dad’s fiddling with the settings on the camera, and suddenly everything sounds sort of muffled and far away.

I wait a few seconds before opening my eyes and blowing out all the candles in one go. Everyone applauds. Dad pulls on a party popper but it doesn’t pop and by the time he’s got another one out of the package Mum has started taking the candles off the cake, and the moment has passed.

“What did you wish for? Something stupid, I bet,” Livvy says, twirling a piece of golden-brown hair around her middle finger.

“He can’t tell you, silly, otherwise it won’t come true,” Mum says, taking the cake into the kitchen to be sliced.

“Yeah,” I say, sticking my tongue out at Livvy. She sticks hers out right back.

“Where are your two friends again?” she asks, putting extra emphasis on the *two*.

“I’ve told you, Felix is at Math Camp in Florida and Essie is visiting her dad in Leamington Spa.”

Leaving me festering alone in Eden Park all summer, I add silently.

“That’s too bad,” Livvy says with zero sympathy. “Dad, how many people did I have at my birthday party?”

“Forty-five. All on roller skates. Utter carnage,” Dad mutters grimly, ejecting the memory card from the camera and putting it into his laptop.

The first photo that pops up on the screen is of me. My eyes are closed midblink and my forehead is shiny.

“Dad,” I moan. “Do you have to do that now?”

“Just doing some red-eye removal before I e-mail them over to your grandmother,” he says, clicking away at the mouse. “She was so sad she couldn’t make it.”

This is not true. Granny has bridge on Wednesday evenings and doesn’t miss it for anyone, especially her least-favorite grandchild. Livvy is Granny’s favorite. But then Livvy is everyone’s favorite.

Mum returns to the living room with pieces of cake on plates and sets them down on the table.

“Look at all these leftovers,” she says, frowning as she surveys the mountains of picked-at food. “We’re going to have enough pigs in a blanket and brownies to last us until Christmas. I just hope I’ve got enough plastic wrap to cover it all.”

Great. A fridge full of food to remind me just how wildly unpopular I am.

After cake and intensive plastic-wrap action, there are presents. From Mum and Dad I get a new backpack for school, the *Gossip Girl* DVD box set, and a check for one hundred pounds. Livvy gives me a box of candy and a shiny red case for my iPhone.

Then we all sit on the sofa and watch a film called *Freaky Friday*. It’s about a mother and daughter who eat an enchanted fortune cookie that makes them magically swap bodies for the day. Dear World, if only it were that straightforward. Dad nods off halfway through and starts snoring.

That night I can't sleep. I'm awake for so long my eyes get used to the dark and I can make out the outlines of my framed posters on the walls and the tiny shadow of a mosquito darting back and forth across the ceiling.

I am fourteen and time is running out.

DAVID

It's the last Friday of summer vacation. I have been fourteen years old for exactly nine days.

I'm lying on the sofa with the curtains closed. Dad's at work (he's an accountant) and Mum is with a client (she works from home as a Web site designer). Livvy is at her best friend, Cressy's, house. I'm watching an old episode of *America's Next Top Model* with a package of double chocolate chip cookies balanced on my stomach. Tyra Banks has just told Ashley she is not going to be America's Next Top Model. Ashley is in tears and all the other girls are hugging her even though they spent almost the entire episode going on about how much they hated Ashley and wanted her to leave. America's Next Top Model house is nothing if not brutal.

Ashley's tears are interrupted by the sound of a key turning in the front door. I sit up, carefully placing the cookies on the coffee table beside me.

"David, I'm home," Mum calls.

She's back early from her client meeting.

I frown as I listen to her kick off her shoes and drop her keys in the dish by the door. I quickly grab the crochct blanket at my feet, pulling it up over my body and tucking it under my chin, getting into position just before Mum walks into the living room.

Immediately she pulls a face.

"What?" I ask, wiping cookie crumbs from my mouth.

"You might want to open the curtains, David," she says, hands on hips.

"But then I won't be able to see the screen clearly."

She ignores me and marches over to the window, throwing open the curtains. The late-afternoon sun floods the room, making the air look dusty. I shield my eyes.

"Oh for heaven's sake, David," Mum says. "You're not a vampire."

"I might be," I mutter.

She tuts.

"Look," she says, gesturing toward the window. "It's beautiful out. Are you seriously telling me you prefer lying around in the dark all day rather than being outside?"

"Correct."

She narrows her eyes before perching on the sofa by my feet.

"No wonder you're so pasty," she says, tracing her finger down the side of my bare foot. I kick her hand away.

"Would you rather I lie in the sun all day and get skin cancer?"

"No, David," she says, sighing. "What I'd *rather* is see you doing something with your summer vacation other than staying

indoors watching TV for hours on end. If you're not doing that, you're holed up in your room on the computer."

The phone rings. Saved by the bell. As Mum stands up the blanket snags on her wedding ring. I reach to grab it but it's too late, she's already looking down at me, a quizzical expression on her face.

"David, are you wearing my nightie?"

It's the nightie Mum packed to take to the hospital when she had Livvy. I don't think she's worn it since; Mum and Dad usually sleep naked. I know this because I've bumped into them on the landing in the middle of the night enough times to be scarred for life.

"It's so hot out, I thought it might keep me cool," I say quickly. "You know, like those long white dress things Arab men wear."

"HMMMMM," Mum says.

"You'd better get that," I say, nodding toward the phone.

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I keep the nightie on for dinner, figuring it'll be less suspicious that way.

"You look like such a weirdo," Livvy says, her eyes narrowing with vague disgust.

"Now, Livvy," Mum says.

"But he does!" Livvy protests.

Mum and Dad exchange looks. I concentrate really hard on balancing peas on my fork.

After dinner I go upstairs. I take out the list I made at the

beginning of summer vacation and sit cross-legged on my bed with it spread out in front of me.

Things to achieve this summer, by David Piper:

1. Grow my hair long enough to tie back in a ponytail
2. Watch every season of *Project Runway* in chronological order
3. Beat Dad at Wii Tennis
4. Teach my dog, Phil, to dance so we can enter *Britain's Got Talent* next year and win 250,000 pounds
5. Tell Mum and Dad

I had one glorious week of being able to scrape my hair into the tiniest of ponytails. But school rules dictate boys' hair can be no more than collar length, so last week Mum took me to the barber to have it cut. Points two and three were achieved with ease during the first two weeks of the break. I quickly realized four was a lost cause; Phil isn't a natural performer.

Five I've been putting off. I've practised plenty. I've got a whole speech prepared. I recite it in my head when I'm in the shower, and whisper it into the darkness when I'm lying in bed at night.

I've tried writing it down too. If my parents looked hard enough they'd find endless unfinished drafts stuffed in my desk. Last week though, I actually completed a letter. Not only that, I nearly pushed it beneath Mum and Dad's bedroom door. I was right outside, crouched down by the thin shaft of light, listening to them mill about as they got ready for bed. All it would take

was one push and it would be done; my secret would be lying there on the carpet, ready to be discovered. But in that moment, it was like my hand was paralyzed. And in the end I just couldn't do it and went racing back to my room, letter still in hand, my heart pounding like crazy inside my chest.

Mum and Dad like to think they're really cool and open-minded just because they saw a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert once and voted for the Green Party in the last election, but I'm not so sure. When I was younger, I used to overhear them talking about me. They'd speak in hushed voices and tell each other it was all "a phase," that I would "grow out of it," in exactly the same way you might talk about a child who wets the bed.

My friends Essie and Felix know of course. The three of us tell each other everything. That's why this summer has been so hard. Without them to talk to, some days I've felt like I might burst. But Essie and Felix knowing isn't enough. For anything to happen, I have to tell Mum and Dad.

Tomorrow. I'll definitely tell them tomorrow.

I climb off the bed, open my door a crack, and listen. Mum, Dad, and Livvy are downstairs watching TV. The muffled sound of canned laughter drifts up the stairs. Although I'm pretty sure they'll stay put until the end of the program, I lock my door. Satisfied I won't be disturbed, I retrieve the small purple notebook and tape measure I keep locked in the metal box at the bottom of my sock drawer. I position myself in front of the mirror that hangs on the back of my bedroom door, pull the nightie off over my head, and step out of my underpants.

An inspection is due.

As usual, I start by standing against the door frame and measuring my height: 168 centimeters. Again, no change. I allow myself a tiny sigh of relief.

Then I press my palms against my chest. I will it to be soft and spongy but the muscle beneath my skin feels hard like stone. I take the tape measure and wrap it around my hips. No change. I go straight up and down, like a human ruler. I am the opposite of Mum with her fleshy curves—hips and butt and boobs.

I move up closer to the mirror, so close to the glass I have to fight to stop myself from going cross-eyed. I lift my chin and run my fingers over my Adam's apple, then over my chin and cheeks. Some days I swear I can feel stubble pushing up against my skin, sharp and prickly, but for now the surface remains smooth and unbroken. I pout my lips and long for them to be plumper, pinker. I have my dad's lips—thin, with a jagged Cupid's bow. Unfortunately I appear to have inherited pretty much Dad's everything. I skip over my hair (sludge brown and badly behaved, no matter how much gel I use on it), eyes (gray, boring), nose (pointy-ish), and ears (sticky-outy), instead turning my head slowly until I am almost in profile, so I can admire my cheekbones. They are sharp and high and probably the only part of my face I like.

I move downward to my penis, which I hate with a passion. I hate everything about it, its size, its color, the way it has a complete mind of its own. I discover it has grown an entire two millimeters since last week. I check it twice but the tape measure doesn't lie. I frown and write it down.

I inspect my hands and feet last. Sometimes I think I hate them the most, maybe even more than my private parts, because

they're always there, on show. They're clumsy and hairy and so pale they're almost translucent. Even worse, they're huge and getting huger. My new school shoes are two whole sizes bigger than last year's pair. When I tried them on in the store I felt like a circus clown.

I take one last look in the mirror, at the stranger staring back at me. I shiver. This week's inspection is over.

LEO

“Leo!” my little sister, Tia, calls.

I close my eyes and try to block her out.

It’s hot. It’s been hot for days now. I’ve got the windows and doors open and I’m still dying. I’m lying on my twin sister, Amber’s, bunk trying my hardest to keep cool.

At night I sleep on the bottom bunk because Amber says she gets claustrophobic, but when Amber’s not around I like to hang out on the top. If you lie with your head at the end closest to the window, you can’t see the other houses or the garbage cans or the crazy old lady from across the way who stands in her front yard and yells for hours on end. All you can see is the sky and the tops of the trees and if you concentrate really hard you can almost convince yourself you’re not in Cloverdale anymore.

“Leo!” Tia yells again.

I sigh and sit up. Tia is seven and a complete pain in the neck. Mam let her have a pair of high heels for her last birthday and

when she's not watching TV she clomps around the house in them, talking in an American accent.

Tia's dad is Tony. He's in prison, doing time for fencing stolen goods.

My dad is Jimmy. He left when I was a baby. I miss him.

"Leo, I'm hungry!" Tia wails.

"Then eat something!"

"There's nothing to eat!"

"Tough!"

She starts to cry. It's earsplitting. I sigh and heave myself off the bunk.

I find Tia at the bottom of the stairs, fat tears rolling down her face. She's short for her age and paper clip—skinny. As soon as she sees me her tears stop and she breaks into this big dopey smile.

She follows me into the kitchen, which is a complete mess, the sink piled high with dishes. I search the cupboards and fridge. Tia's right, there's nothing to eat and God knows what time Mam's going to be back. She left just before lunch, saying she was off to the bingo hall with Auntie Kerry. There's no money in the tin so I take the cushions off the sofa and check the inside of the washing machine and the pockets of the coats in the front hall closet. We line up the coins on the coffee table. It's not a bad haul—four pounds.

"Stay here and don't answer the door," I tell Tia. She'll only dawdle if I take her with me.

I put my hoodie on and walk fast, my head bowed, sweat trickling down my back and sides.

Outside the store there's a bunch of guys from my old school. Luckily they're distracted, mucking around on their bikes, so I yank my hood up, pulling the drawstring tight so all you can see are my eyes. I buy bread, soda, dishwashing soap, and a chocolate Swiss roll that's past its expiration date.

When I get home I put the *Tangled* DVD on for Tia and give her a glass of soda and a slice of the Swiss roll while I wash the dishes and stick bread in the toaster. When I sit down on the sofa she scampers over to me and plants a wet kiss on my cheek.

"Thanks, Leo," she says. Her mouth is chocolaty.

"Get off," I tell her. But she clings to me like a monkey, and I'm too tired to fight her off.

Later that night, Mam is still out so I put Tia to bed. Amber's staying over at her boyfriend, Carl's, house. Carl is sixteen, a year older than us. Amber met him at the indoor ice skating rink in town last year. She was showing off, trying to skate backward and fell and hit her head on the ice. Carl looked after her and bought her a cherry slush. Amber said it was like a scene from a movie. Amber's sappy like that sometimes. When she's not being sappy, she's as hard as nails.

I lie on the sofa and watch some stupid action movie on TV with lots of guns and explosions. It's almost finished when the security light outside the front door comes on. I sit up and check the time. It's nearly midnight. I can make out shadows behind the swirly glass. Mam is laughing as she tries and fails to get her key in the lock. I hear a second laugh—a guy's. Great. More fumbling. The door finally swings open and they fall into the front hallway, collapsing on the stairs giggling as the front door shuts

behind them. Mam lifts her head and notices me watching. She stops giggling and clammers to her feet. She puts an unsteady hand on the door frame and glares.

“What are you doing up?” she asks.

I don’t say anything. The guy gets up too, wiping his hands on his jeans. I don’t recognize him.

“Hello there,” he says, holding up his hand in greeting, “I’m Spike.”

Spike has inky-black hair and is wearing a battered leather jacket. Mam goes to the kitchen to get him a drink. Spike sits down on the sofa next to me and takes off his shoes, plonking his feet on the coffee table. His socks don’t match.

“Who are you then?” he asks, wiggling his toes and putting his hands behind his head.

“None of your business,” I reply.

Mam comes back, a can of beer in each hand.

“Don’t be so rude,” she says, handing one to Spike. “Tell Spike your name.”

“Leo,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“I saw that!” Mam barks. She takes a slurp of her beer and turns to Spike.

“Right little so-and-so this one is. Dunno where he gets it from. Must be from his father’s side.”

“Don’t talk about my dad like that,” I say, standing up.

“I’ll talk about him how I like, thank you very much,” Mam replies, rummaging in her purse. “He’s a good-for-nothing bastard.”

“He. Is. Not.” I growl, separating each word.

“Oh really?” Mam continues, lighting a cigarette and taking a greedy puff on it. “Where is he then? If he’s so marvelous, where the hell is he, Leo? Eh?”

I don’t have an answer for her.

“Exactly,” she says.

I can feel the familiar knot in my stomach forming, my body tensing, my skin getting hot and clammy, my vision fogging. I move over to the window and try to use the techniques my therapist, Jenny, taught me; roll my shoulders, count to ten, close my eyes, picture myself on a deserted beach, et cetera.

When I open my eyes and turn around Mam has moved to join Spike on the sofa, giggling away like I’m not even in the room. She notices me watching and stops what she’s doing.

“And what do you think you’re looking at?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I mutter.

“Then get lost, will ya.”

It’s not a question.

I slam the living room door so hard the entire house shakes.

LEO

Family legend goes that Mam's waters broke as she was waiting to pick up takeout from the Taj Mahal Curry House on Spring Street. Family legend also goes that she was still clutching the naan when she gave birth to Amber an hour later. I took another half hour. Auntie Kerry says I had to be dragged out with forceps. I must have known that I'd be better off staying where I was.

My first memory is of my dad changing my diaper. Amber reckons you can't remember stuff that far back, but she's wrong. In the memory I'm lying on the living room floor and Dad is singing. It's not a real song, just something made up and silly. He has a nice voice. It's only a short memory, just a few seconds, but it's as real as anything.

After that, the next memory I have is knocking Mam's cup of tea off the coffee table and scalding my chest. I still have the scar. It's the shape of an eagle with half of one wing missing. I was two and a half by then, and Dad was long gone. I wish I

could remember more about him but I can't—that one memory is all I've got. I've tried searching for him on the Internet but finding him is easier said than done. Do you know how many James Dentons there are out there? More than you might think, and so far none of them have turned out to be my dad.

I only have one picture of him. I took it from Mam's room when I was a kid. It's a full-length shot of him standing next to a burgundy Ford Fiesta. He must have just finished washing it because it's really shiny and there's a bucket of soapy water at his feet. I wish the photo was at a different angle because then I might be able to read the license plate, but it was taken side-on, with Dad leaning up against the passenger window. He has his arms folded across his chest and is grinning proudly at the camera. He has good teeth—white and straight. I think I must take after him because Mam's got horrible teeth, yellow from a lifetime of cigarettes. He's tall with sandy-brown hair, just like mine. It's too far away to really know whether I've got his eyes or nose or anything else. On the back there's a date written in Mam's scratchy handwriting. Seven months before Amber and I were born.

One New Year's Eve, tipsy on cheap white wine, Auntie Kerry let it slip that Dad was a carpenter. I like the idea of that, of him working with his hands and making beautiful things from scratch. Auntie Kerry also let it slip that she reckons he went down south to live by the sea, but no one seems to know this for sure. Any time I ask questions, people clam up or get angry and the subject is always closed before it even gets started.

I wonder what he'd think if he could see me now—standing

in front of the bathroom mirror wearing an Eden Park School blazer over my T-shirt.

It's the night after Spike came home with Mam, the end of the last day of summer vacation. I heard Spike leave early this morning, whistling as he went down the stairs. Mam spent the day in bed with a "migraine." She must be feeling better now though, because ten minutes ago I saw her leave the house and climb into a battered white Peugeot, Spike behind the wheel. Not that I care. Amber is over at Carl's and Tia is in bed so I have the place to myself.

I stare at my reflection, at the snazzy-looking stranger staring back. It's the first time I've tried on my blazer since the beginning of summer vacation, and it's weird how different it makes me look. There are no blazers at Cloverdale School, just yellow-and-navy sweatshirts that get pilly after one wash. I was given special coupons so I could buy this one and some school pants from a fancy shop in town. When I modeled for Mam she burst out laughing. I straighten the lapels and relax my shoulders. I ordered it a size too big so it's a bit baggy on me. I don't mind though; I prefer it that way. It smells different from my other clothes—expensive and new. It's burgundy with thin navy stripes and a crest on the right breast pocket with the school motto—*Aequitas et inceptum*—stitched underneath. The other day, I went to the library and looked up what it meant on the computer. Apparently it's Latin for "Fairness and Initiative." We'll see.

The Eden Park district is on the opposite side of the city from the Cloverdale district. Mam and I went to the school for a

meeting back in the spring. Eden Park itself was exactly how I imagined it, all green and lush with tree-lined streets and little cafés selling organic-this and homemade-that. And even though Eden Park School is a regular public school, just like Cloverdale, the similarities stop there. Not only did the school look different, with its nice buildings and tidy grounds, it felt different too: clean and neat and orderly. About a million miles away from Cloverdale School.

Jenny came with Mam and me to the meeting. Mam spoke in a snooty voice that I know she thinks makes her sound smart. She always uses it when she's around doctors and teachers. We met with Ms. Logan, the guidance counselor, and Mr. Toolan, the head teacher. They asked lots of questions. Then Mam and I waited outside while they talked with Jenny. A few times students walked past and gave us funny looks. They looked rich. I could tell by their neatly ironed uniforms and Hollister backpacks. Mam and I must have stuck out like a sore thumb.

After more talking and questions, I was offered a place for year eleven. Jenny was really excited for me. Supposedly people move just so they can be in the Eden Park school district. Jenny thinks it'll be a "fresh start" and "an opportunity to make some friends." Jenny's obsessed with me making friends. She goes on about my "social isolation" like it's a contagious disease. After all these years she still doesn't get that social isolation is exactly what I'm after.

"Leo?" Tia calls from her bedroom.

I step out into the hallway. Tia's door is ajar as usual, so she can see the landing light.

“Leo?” she says again, louder this time. I sigh and push open her door.

Tia’s room is tiny and a complete wreck, clothes and stuffed animals everywhere and crayon scribbles all over the walls. She sits cross-legged under the duvet she inherited from Amber. The cover was once a Flower Fairies print, it’s now so faded and worn that some of the fairies are missing faces or limbs, ghostly white smudges in their place.

“What do you want?” I ask wearily.

“Where’s Amber?”

“Over at Carl’s. She’ll be back soon.”

“Will you tuck me in?”

I sigh and kneel down next to Tia’s bed. She beams and shim-mies into a lying-down position. Snot clings to her tiny nostrils. I pull the duvet up under her chin and turn to go.

“That’s not the right way,” she whines.

I roll my eyes.

“Please, Leo?”

“For Pete’s sake, Tia.”

I lean over and begin tucking the duvet underneath her, working my way down her spindly little body until she looks like a mummy.

“How’s that?” I ask.

“Perfect.”

“Can I go now?”

She nods.

“Leo?”

“What?”

“I like your jacket.”

I look down. I still have the blazer on.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, it’s really nice. You look handsome. Like Prince Eric from *The Little Mermaid*.”

I shake my head. “Thanks, Tia.”

She smiles serenely and shuts her eyes. “You’re welcome.”

DAVID

“David!” Mum yells up the stairs. “Time to get up!”

I turn onto my stomach and pull a pillow over my head. A few more minutes pass before my bedroom door creaks open.

“Rise and shine,” Mum singsongs, creeping across the carpet and peeling back the duvet.

I snatch it from her and pull it over my head.

“Five more minutes,” I say, my voice muffled.

“No way. Up. Now. I won’t have you making Livvy late on her first day.”

Livvy is starting at Eden Park School today.

I heave myself out of bed and glance in the mirror. I look awful—sweaty and pale with dark circles under my eyes and crease marks across my cheeks. I never sleep well the night before the first day back.

By 8 a.m. I’m sitting in the passenger seat of the car. Livvy is still outside posing for photographs while Mum weeps behind the lens. Livvy is very photogenic; everyone says so. Mum and

Dad often joke her real dad's the milkman. No one *ever* makes similar jokes about my parentage.

Livvy cocks her head and smiles angelically. The way the sunlight hits her, I can see the outline of her bra through her blouse. She already wears a 32A. She and Mum went shopping for it over the summer, and when they got home they acted all giggly and secretive.

"Look after her, David!" Mum says when she drops us off outside the school gates.

As we start to walk up the drive, I place a protective hand on Livvy's shoulder. Immediately she grunts, shaking it off.

"Don't walk so close to me!" she hisses.

"But you heard Mum, I'm supposed to look after you," I point out.

"Well, don't. I don't want people to know we're related," she says, quickening her pace. I let her go, watching as she strides confidently toward the lower-school building, her long hair flying out behind her.

"Nice," I mutter to myself, recalling a time when Livvy used to follow me around the house, sweetly begging me to play with her.

I hear two voices calling my name. I grin and spin around. Essie and Felix are heading toward me, waving madly.

Essie is tall (almost a head taller than Felix) with masses of (currently black) hair, pale blue eyes, and stupidly long legs. Beside her Felix is immaculate as usual, his fair hair combed into a neat side part and his face tanned from the Florida sun.

I skip toward them and we collide in a messy group hug.

“When did your little sister get so hot?” Felix asks as we separate.

“Ew, don’t be such a pervert, she’s only eleven!” I cry. At the same time Essie punches him on the shoulder, sending Felix staggering back a few steps.

“Ow!” he cries, clutching his shoulder.

“Er, hello? Girlfriend? Right here?” Essie says.

Felix and Essie got together at the Christmas ball last year. I left the dance floor to buy some chips and a Coke and by the time I returned, they were chewing each other’s faces off to an Enrique Iglesias song. I didn’t even know they liked each other that way so it all came as a surprise. Felix and Essie claim it was as much of a shock for them (“I blame Enrique,” Essie often says, usually when Felix is annoying her).

“How was Math Camp?” I ask Felix. I can’t imagine anything more hideous.

“Awesome,” he replies.

“I missed you both so much,” I say, as we head toward the upper-school building, instinctively falling into step with each other. “My birthday party was beyond miserable without you.”

“Don’t talk to me about miserable,” Essie says. “I’ve been in stepmonster hell for the past six weeks. Can you believe she tried to make me take my nose ring out?”

“Oh God, don’t get her started,” Felix moans. “It’s all she talked about last night.”

I stop walking.

“You guys hung out last night? Why didn’t you call me?”

Essie and Felix exchange looks.

“It was kind of boyfriend-girlfriend hanging out,” Essie says. “If you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Felix echoes, turning a bit red and pushing his glasses up his nose. I notice his skin is peeling around his hairline.

“Oh, right,” I say. “Never mind.”

We keep walking.

Although I’m obviously thrilled my two best friends in the entire world are in love, I still can’t help but get slightly freaked out by the idea of them “together.” I don’t know if they’ve had sex or anything yet and I haven’t asked. Which bothers me. Up to now, we’ve always told one another everything and all of a sudden one topic, and a pretty major one at that, is unofficially off limits. To me anyway.

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I get to my homeroom early so I can reserve a seat near the front, as close to Mr. Collins as possible, even if that means sitting next to Simon Allen, who always stinks of plasticine. The same kids have homeroom together for all of upper school so I know what to expect and this way I can guarantee people like Harry Beaumont and Tom Kelly won’t be sitting anywhere near me. Homeroom only lasts for twenty minutes but it feels like an eternity some days. For about the thousandth time I wish I was in the same homeroom as Essie and Felix. They’re just next door but it feels like light years away. At least we have Biology and History together this year so it’s not a complete disaster.

Bam! The spitball strikes me hard on the back of my neck. I twist around in my seat. Harry is pretending to tie his shoelaces. Everyone around him is sniggering. I peel the spitball off my skin and flick it onto the floor where it lands with a dull splat. It's fat, moist, and heavy. He's been practicing.

"Hey, Freak Show!" he calls.

I pretend not to hear him. "Freak Show" has been Harry's nickname for me for years. A lot of other kids call me it too, but Harry's the one responsible for its longevity.

"Aw, c'mon, Freak Show," he says coaxingly. "That's not very polite, is it? I'm trying to have a nice conversation with you and you've got your back turned to me."

I sigh and twist around in my seat again. Harry has stood up and is now lounging on Lexi Taylor's desk while she giggles like a hyena. Lexi is Harry's current girlfriend. She thinks she's superhot because apparently modeling bridesmaid dresses in the fashion show at the Eden Park Summer Fair last year somehow makes her Naomi Campbell.

"Was that your little sister I saw you arrive with this morning?" he asks.

"What's it to you?"

"No need to be touchy! I was only asking."

I sigh. "Yes, she's my sister. Why?"

"It's just that she looked, well, almost normal."

Laughter ripples across the classroom. Harry basks in it, a slow grin spreading across his face. I try not to let my irritation show.

“So what I’m trying to work out is this,” he says. “Which one of you is adopted?”

Mr. Collins breezes into the classroom, oblivious. “Welcome back, everyone! Harry, sit down, please.”

Harry slides off the desk, smirking.

“I reckon the smart money’s on you, Freak Show.”

DAVID

Lunchtime. I take a Coke from the fridge and put it next to the plate of lukewarm congealed mac and cheese already on my tray.

“Well, I heard he got expelled,” a year-eleven girl with frizzy brown hair in front of me is saying.

“Who?” her friend asks.

“The new kid.”

“Expelled? What for?” someone else asks.

“I don’t know. It must be something bad though. I’ve heard it’s almost impossible to get expelled from Cloverdale School.”

I’ve heard of Cloverdale School. It has a reputation for being really rough and scary, always in the papers for poor student scores.

“I know why he got expelled,” one of the boys chimes in proudly. “Apparently he went nuts during wood shop and chopped off the teacher’s index finger with a junior hacksaw.”

There’s a collective gasp. Apart from the frizzy-haired girl

who says, “I’m not surprised. You can tell he’s a bit crazy, just look at his eyes.”

I follow their gaze to a boy sitting alone at a table in the far corner of the cafeteria, glaring at a plate of fries. I’m too far away to tell if his eyes are “crazy” or not.

“How has he ended up here, then?” someone else asks.

“I don’t know but I’m not going to go anywhere near him,” another boy says. “To have been expelled from Cloverdale he must be a real maniac.”

I pay for my food and find Essie and Felix at our usual table in the corner. I pass the popular kids in the center of the room, shrieking and laughing and showing off—the star attractions. Their hangers-on are eating at the surrounding tables, forming a protective barrier, leaving the more out-there groups to populate the outer tables. Over in the opposite corner, the emo kids huddle around an MP3 player, listening intently, bobbing their heads in time to the music. A few tables over, the clever, nerdy kids are debating passionately about the latest Marvel movie.

Essie, Felix, and I don’t fit into any particular group. Essie thinks this is a good thing. It was Essie who came up with our name—the Non-Conformists (or the NCs for short), not that anyone ever calls us that.

“Hey, Davido,” Essie says as I slide into my seat. “We’re discussing which has more nutritional content, today’s delicious mac and cheese”—she leans in and sniffs her plate—“or a can of dog food.”

“I vote for the dog food,” Felix says cheerfully, his mouth full, spraying pumpkin-and-tahini-millet-ball crumbs in all

directions. He's allergic to pretty much everything so his mum prepares him a macrobiotic lunch every day.

"I vote for the dog food too," I say, unfolding a paper napkin. "I once tasted some of Phil's kibble and it wasn't all that bad."

"You did what?" Felix says, putting down his carton of carrot juice.

"How have we not heard this story before?" Essie demands.

"Mum caught me eating from our old dog's bowl one morning," I say. "I guess I must have just been really hungry. In my defense I was only about three at the time."

"And this is precisely why we love you, David Piper," Essie says. "Pass the salt, will you?"

I can't quite pinpoint the moment Essie, Felix, and I became best friends. I only know we somehow gravitated toward one another like magnets, and by the end of our first year at primary school, I couldn't imagine the world without the three of us in it together.

As I pass the salt to Essie, my eyes fall on the new boy. He's sitting two tables away, still staring at his food. Up closer, he doesn't *look* crazy. In fact, he's sort of cute with his snub nose, messy light brown hair falling across his forehead, and the most incredible cheekbones.

I lean in.

"Hey, do either of you know anything about the new boy in year eleven?"

"Only that he got expelled from Cloverdale School and is meant to be a violent lunatic," Felix says, his voice carelessly loud.

"Sssshhhh, he might hear you!"

I peer over Felix's shoulder but the boy is still having a staring competition with his fries.

"I feel bad that he's on his own," I say. "Should I ask him to sit with us?"

Felix raises his eyebrows. "Did the words 'violent' and 'lunatic' not raise even the faintest alarm bells?"

"Oh don't be so boring!" Essie says. "Anyone who has an official screw loose is more than welcome at our table. Go for it, Mother Teresa, spread some NC love."

I hesitate, suddenly afraid.

"Why don't you do it?" I say.

"I don't want to scare him off," Essie says. "A lot of men are intimidated by strong women."

Felix and I roll our eyes at each other.

"No, definitely best you go, David," she continues. "You're nice and unthreatening."

"Gee, thanks," I say sarcastically, pushing back my chair and making my way over to the boy's table.

"Hi," I say, hovering at his side.

I notice a red free-school-meals token poking out from under his tray. The boy doesn't respond.

"I'm David Piper," I say, extending my hand. "I'm in year ten. Nice to meet you."

The boy ignores me and takes a swig from his Coke instead, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his blazer. My hand hovers awkwardly in midair. He finally looks at it before sighing again and shaking it once, firmly.

"Leo Denton," he says gruffly.

He raises his eyes to meet mine, and I have to catch my breath for a moment, because, wow, that year-eleven girl was totally wrong. Leo's eyes aren't crazy at all; they're beautiful, hypnotic, like looking through a kaleidoscope almost—sea green with amber flecks around the pupils.

“Can I help you?” Leo asks.

I realize I'm staring.

“Er—yes—sorry,” I stammer, dragging my eyes away from his. “It's just that my friends over there and I . . .”

I point to Essie and Felix. Helpfully, Essie has plastered her top lip to her gums and Felix has flipped his eyelids inside out.

“Er, well, we were wondering if you'd like to eat lunch with us?”

I hold my breath. Leo is looking at me like I've got two heads.

“No thanks,” he says finally.

“We're not weird, honestly.” I glance back at Essie and Felix.

“Well, we are a bit . . .”

“Look, thanks, but no thanks. I'm done anyway.”

And with that, Leo stands up, dumps his tray on the cart, picks up his Coke, and heads for the door.

I amble back to our table.

“He wasn't interested,” I report.

“What?” Essie cries, outraged.

I shrug and sit down.

“Psychopaths do tend to be loners,” Felix muses.

“He didn't seem very psychopathic,” I point out.

“They never do,” Felix replies loftily.

I crane my neck to look out the window but Leo has already disappeared from view.

“Olsen alert! Olsen alert!” Essie starts to hiss.

“Where?” I say, turning my attention back to the table, instinctively sitting up straight.

“Behind you. Over by Harry’s table.”

I slowly turn around in my seat. And there he is. Zachary Olsen. Otherwise known as the love of my life.

I have loved Zachary Olsen ever since we shared the same wading pool, aged four. The fact I was once in such close proximity to his semi-naked body is sometimes too much to bear. The fact he clearly has no recollection that our semi-naked bodies ever shared a wading pool is even worse. Zachary is everything I am not—a half-Norwegian love god complete with shaggy blond hair and tanned six-pack. He’s captain of the soccer *and* rugby teams. He’s crazily popular. He *always* has a girlfriend. He basically stands for everything we Non-Conformists claim is wrong with the world. And yet I am completely in love with him. Unfortunately he doesn’t appear to know I’m alive.

Today he has his arm slung around Chloe Hollins’s shoulder, indicating she is his current girlfriend (death to Chloe) and is laughing at something Harry has just said. Even Zachary’s fraternizing with the enemy does little to dampen my love for him. He could probably torture kittens and rob old ladies at gunpoint and I’d still adore him.

I watch as he and Chloe saunter out of the cafeteria, looking smug and sexy. Essie reaches across and gives my hand a squeeze. Which says it all really. I am a hopeless case. In about a billion different ways.