



VIVA, MY MOTHER, IS KNEADING JERGENS LOTION INTO HER skin until it soaks through her pores. The cream turns from white to clear as she works it into her heels. She pumps the bottle with a squish and rubs her elbows and hands, her neck, and the parts of her back she can reach under her T-shirt. “Beauty depends upon a strict routine,” she sighs, patting a potion from a dark purple jar under her eyes. “Men will never know all we go through.” Then she swipes Vaseline over her lips before reaching for her bedtime cigarette.

“Okay.” She drops the script beside me on her way out the door. “We’ll do it again when I get back.”

Every night we run the dialogue for the next day. My mother does the boys’ parts in quick bursts, the way Chris and Jericho would say them, while I try to squeeze the right words from my brain. Tonight it’s scene 15: me and the boys build a crow’s nest.

In the next room, there are little kids—it sounds like three brothers—wrestling. Each time they thud against our wall they

yell, “Off the ropes!” I’ve always wanted a big brother—the kind who would pull our dog in a red wagon and stick up for me against bullies on the playground. I get to have a big brother in this script. Chris Tate plays TJ, and I play Norah. TJ sticks up for Norah against our stepdad, but we don’t get a dog or a wagon.

Other than the thin walls, the Beachcomber Resort is pretty nice. The doors open up to the outside landing. My mother likes to watch TV sets flicker in the rooms across the pool while she smokes. She says she likes to guess at what people are watching. I might have a good ten minutes to close my eyes.

The door clicks, waking me from a shallow sleep. My mother shakes her smoky hair into the room. “Ready?”

I lift my head and turn a page in my yellow script to make her think I’ve been practicing. On the nightstand, pink and blue scripts with ripped and curled corners lie under Viva’s coffee cups. It’s hard for me to learn script changes. Thankfully we’ve been filming the yellow version for weeks, so I’m finally all right with it. For the most part.

“You’d better get all the way through this time. No stopping,” Viva says.

I flip the bedsheets over my legs.

“Seriously, Joss.” She nudges me with her knee and picks up the script. “Let’s do this before you fall asleep. You haven’t even brushed your teeth yet.”

I force my tired self to sit up. Filming three scenes today

wasn't exactly a day at the beach, even though we are at the beach. I couldn't wait to get here to shoot outdoors. Filming for two months inside a dark studio in Brooklyn gave me cabin fever, as Viva said. But we've been in Montauk for a week now, and I haven't played in the water once. I've barely dipped my toes in it. And I haven't been to Montauk Lighthouse even though Terrance, my director, promised to take me there. If I buy a postcard of Montauk Point for a keepsake, it'll be a lie because all the postcards are pictures of the lighthouse.

"Okay." Viva holds the script and clears her throat. "All we'll have to do is climb up here every morning, and we'll be able to see right away how the waves are," she reads Chris's line. "No more trekking our boards all the way down to the beach at six in the morning when the water's flat."

"We'll never have to walk down to the shore again," I say my line and yawn. "Can we please finish this in the morning?" I ask my mother. "I'm so done right now."

"You have five days left on this shoot, and *then* you'll be done."

I lie down and curl into a little ball.

"Sit up." Viva catches my ankle, but I kick away and grab at the sheets to cover myself.

"I don't want to do it anymore." I clutch my head. I'll focus better in the morning.

She slams the script on the desk. "You don't wanna *do* it anymore?"

I shouldn't push my luck, but my crankiness is taking over.
"No!"

"No?" She pulls my blankets off, leaving me cold. "Why are we here, then, huh? If you don't wanna *do* it anymore?" She swings around the room, pulls my suitcase off the dresser, and throws it onto the bed.

"What are you doing?" I sit up against the headboard.

She's grabbing pajamas off the bed, snatching sneakers up from the floor and dirty clothes off a chair.

"Pack your things!" Viva yells as she throws everything into the bag. "You don't wanna do it anymore? So don't."

I shield myself with the pillow. "That's not what I meant!"

"You think I do this for *me*? You think I enjoy sitting around all day long watching everybody treat you like you're Shirley Temple? You don't think I have better things to do with *my* life?" She runs to the kitchenette and pulls the cereal boxes, chips, and canned soup off the counter. "I could be developing my business idea right now and selling it to stores all over the country. Nobody else is making dancewear that doubles as shape-wear." She shoves the groceries into the suitcase on top of underwear and magazines. "But no. I'm here securing a future for you, and you don't wanna *do* it anymore?"

I groan into my pillow. "I just want to go to sleep!"

"Well, good. Now you can sleep all you want. At *home*." She slaps the suitcase shut. "And you can go to sixth grade and sit in the Reading Resource Room for the whole year if that's what you want."

I stare at her, shocked. That's the meanest thing she can say to me without flat-out calling me dumb. I wait for her to apologize and take it back. But her hard eyes are miles and miles away from being sorry. The thought of the Reading Resource Room makes me sick—those faded cartoon wall signs of kids reading under blankets, at picnics, at the beach—BOOKS ARE FUN!

Viva straightens her shoulders and shoves the suitcase toward me. "Pack!" She grabs her purse and keys off the dresser and storms out of Beachcomber room 204 and down the wooden stairs.

When my mother acts crazy, I do as she says. Crazy beats cranky any night. I kneel on the bed and stuff my bags with Cap'n Crunch and string cheese, jeans and sweatpants. Two loud honks snap me to my feet. The suitcase, with shirtsleeves and a cheddar popcorn bag sticking out, can only zip so far, so I lug the sloppy bag out the door and down the steps in my bare feet, leaving the script behind.

I cross in front of our truck. The heat from its headlights feels like movie lights. I stop and soak up the warmth for a second, and the lines I'd been memorizing tumble from my lips. "All's we need now is a pair of binoculars. Then we can see clear through to the lighthouse. Don't you think?" I whisper and wait for Viva to turn the engine off.

"Let's go!" my mother yells. The horn shakes my whole body and vibrates in my chest.

I hurl my suitcase into the truck, and then I push empty water bottles and burger wrappers aside in the passenger seat.

With pebbles and sand stuck to the soles of my feet, we pull out in silence toward the road, where two guys from our movie crew are walking up from the beach.

“Well, if it isn’t Viva and Joss Byrd. Where are you two going at this hour?” one of them asks, but my mother only looks forward and drives ahead.

Six . . . seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . I measure our distance from the resort by counting the streetlamps. Viva is playing chicken, and I don’t know how to win. Am I supposed to jump out? Or pretend not to care and let her drive into the night until she decides enough is enough? I’ll be sleepwalking on set tomorrow. She’ll blame me even though it’ll be her fault.

Thirteen . . . fourteen . . . fifteen . . . sixteen . . . We pass stables and motels, a gas station, a diner, froufrou-la-di-da Long Island houses with glass walls that face the ocean, and driveways behind vine-covered gates. Maybe she means it, and we’re really going home. Maybe she wants to remind me of what it’s like to be a nobody just to teach me a lesson. If I don’t show up to work in the morning no one will ever hire me again.

Viva wouldn’t dare. She wouldn’t dare.

Twenty-two . . . twenty-three . . . When I was six, my mother decided to chase a hunch and took us on a car trip. In every way, that drive was the exact opposite of this one.

Thirty . . . thirty-one . . .

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"I can feel it, Joss. It's a sign. A sign. Untitled Feature Film: Open Call for Girls, Ages 5-7." My mother tears the ad from the newspaper and slaps it on the kitchen table.

"What are the odds I'd see this today? I mean, when do I ever actually read the newspaper, right?" She crouches as if she's about to tell me a secret. "I only buy it for the coupons."

She circles the bottom of the ad while dialing the phone. "Hey, Viva here. Sorry, but I'm not coming in today. Yeah . . . my kid's sick." She winks at me. We're in cahoots. But I'm not sure what for. "I don't know. Something with a lot of mucus."

I make a face.

Viva sticks out her tongue. "I should probably take her to the doctor."

The ad has a drawing of a movie camera in the middle. I look it over as my mother pretends to write down the number for a doctor.

"Take the books out of your backpack and put some snacks in," she says, hanging up the phone.

"Why?" I ask, already smiling. "I'm not going to school?"

"No. We're driving to New York. You're gonna audition for this movie. And you're gonna get it, too. Don't you feel it?" my mother says, searching the kitchen for her keys.

For some reason I picture myself singing and dancing with a cane. "Okay!" Skipping school is all right by me. I empty my bag down to the last dirty penny and shove my whole box of Lucky Charms inside it.

“You didn’t drink anything yet, did you?” She shuffles me out the door. “’Cause we’re not stopping till we get there, baby!”

At the Lobster Roll, my mother pulls into the parking lot; late-night diners are stepping out of the restaurant patting their bellies. There must be chowder and oyster crackers in there. I imagine Terrance Rivenbach and Peter Bustamante, my director and executive producer, sitting inside with bibs on. I want to run in and tell them that Viva’s kidnapping me, that it isn’t my idea to go. I imagine them sending my mother away but letting me stay. The waiter would give me a bib, and Terrance and Peter and me would clink lobster claws together as Viva drove away. I’d stay in the hotel room by myself and go to the set alone and shoot my scenes without her watching me. I could breathe without her telling me the right way to do it.

My mother pulls a cigarette from the sun visor and lights it in her mouth, so I roll my window down and stick my head out. I can see all the stars I rarely ever looked at until we came to Montauk Point. *I see you now, stars. Do you see me? I was a nobody. But I’ve been working so hard, so hard, to be one of you.*

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“We’re gonna find you the best agent in Hollywood.” My mother is talking too loudly for the library. She wants people to hear that I got the part of Tallulah Leigh, and I’m gonna be in a movie. “An agent for real actors, the serious ones—you know, like the

Fannings—kids who work with Sandra Bullock and Matt Damon. Not Disney actors.” She taps the keys on the computer and scrolls through pictures of kids with tiny words beside them. “We have to find someone big. Big! A real mover and shaker. And then we’ll be on our—Bingo!”

She smiles her jackpot smile and starts dialing her cell. It’s embarrassing when she turns on the speakerphone. The old man who’s reading a newspaper and the lady behind the horseshoe desk are staring at us.

“Creative Team Management.”

“May I speak with Doris Cole please?” My mother grabs my arm. “This is Viva Byrd, mother of Joss Byrd.” Wink. “She’s playing Tallulah Leigh in the film Hit the Road.”

“Please hold.”

My mother whispers, “She’s going to make you a star!”

“Ms. Byrd! This is Doris Cole. I’ve been expecting your call,” Doris says, because that’s the kind of mover and shaker she is.

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“So?” Viva says now, staring into the window of the Lobster Roll. “Where are we going?”

When I pull my head back inside and stare at my bare feet that don’t quite touch the mat, I feel poor—poor and sad and small. “Back to the hotel,” I answer, because I don’t want to be a nobody again, and if we go back to our apartment in Tyrone, Pennsylvania, I will be.

“And this is what *you* want?” she asks, exhaling heavy smoke out the window.

I want to feel full and rich inside, the way I feel when the French toast on set is soft and warm, made especially for me, and when a wardrobe girl gives me ankle boots and designer jeans with the tags still on, even when I know they aren’t for keeps.

I look back at the road. “Yes.”

Viva dangles her cigarette over the steering wheel. “Will I ever have to force you to do the work again?”

I shake my head.

She turns to face me; there are creases around her mouth I never noticed before. “I can’t hear you.”

“*No.*”

She pelts her cigarette like a dart out the window. Dust whirls into the air when she turns the truck around.

Twenty-seven . . . twenty-six . . . twenty-five . . . On the way back to the Beachcomber, I count the lampposts backward and hope that when I get down to zero, this night will subtract into nothing, too.

I remember that first time we spoke with Doris Cole over the speakerphone. She told us that her clients are the “cream of the crop.” She said, “No pageant princesses, no jazz hands, just real kids with honest-to-goodness talent.” By the end of that first phone call, Viva and Doris and me were all on a first-name basis. “Partners.” That’s what my mother called us.

And I was rising to the top. I just hope that someone lets me know the second I get there because it's gotta be better than this.

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Wouldn't you know that now that I'm in my pajamas, I'm not sleepy anymore. I've already brushed my teeth and washed my face, so now I'm just running the water to sound busy. It's all I can do to get some privacy. The bathroom is the only alone time I get around here. I poke around Viva's makeup bag and use a little bit of her lip balm from a tiny red tin. If there's an expiration date for makeup, it's definitely passed. The blush and eye shadow don't have covers, and her lipsticks have mismatched caps. I don't know why she shaves the pencils into the bag instead of into the trash.

Finally I open the door. Viva pats the space beside her on her bed. "Come." I guess we're cool again; we're back to normal. But I wait for a second. I'm not that easy to win back. "Aw, come on, crawl in," she says.

Even though my mother has brushed her teeth, her whole being still smells like cigarettes. I settle in next to her and think about how she might seem so much younger if she didn't smoke or if she ran errands in workout clothes and a ponytail like some of the other mothers, instead of jeans and high heels and lots of makeup. Sometimes I leave magazine pages around the house with pictures of "On-the-Go Celebrity Moms" who look

fit in yoga pants and shop at a store called Whole Foods, but Viva doesn't get the hint.

"Whaddaya say we take our spending money and have ourselves some of that lobster tomorrow night?" she asks in a gravelly voice.

Nodding into her chest, I curl against her shape.

"Didn't that place look yum? We could get dressed up, you could get a Shirley Temple, I could get a nice wine. We can people watch. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

The name Shirley Temple makes me cringe. I don't think my mother even remembers half the things she says when she's angry.

"Oh, I know what else we could do," she says soothingly as she reaches for her laptop. Inside her T-shirt, her heavy, loose boobs fall toward the mattress.

When my first movie came out, critics called me the "next Tatum O'Neal." Since I didn't know who that was, Doris told us to study Tatum O'Neal in a movie called *Paper Moon*. That's what Doris said—not "watch" but "study." That made it sound real important. Right away, I didn't think I'd like the movie because it was in black and white. But when I took a good look at Tatum mouthing off line after line after line without missing a beat, I could've sworn that she was in color. I've studied *Paper Moon* so many times that I know all of Tatum's lines. She's the best actor in the movie, even better than her own dad, who's in it, too.

To be honest, I would've been happy to be called just an okay actor instead of the next Tatum O'Neal. Critics really put the pressure on.

"Fully charged. We're in luck." My mother wakes the DVD. It starts right back up from where we left off. We bought our laptop when I got my first job. It's definitely time for a new one.

"You see that spark in Tatum's eye? That's what won her an Oscar." My mother's comments weave in and out at the usual places. I've memorized her lines just as good as Tatum's. "There's the scene . . . right there. The gold standard. Such a big attitude in that little body."

I press my head deep into my pillow. Tatum's close-up is all tears and freckles.

"She's so scrappy. That's what everybody sees in you."

That's why you have to work as much as you can . . .

"That's why you have to work as much as you can while it's still cute to be scrappy. We have to ride this wave as long as possible."

Just ride it and ride it and ride it . . .

"Just ride it and ride it and ride it."

Doris says that puberty can be the end of a child actor. Girls who stay petite and flat can play young parts for a very long time. But if you've seen my mother, who's tall and definitely not flat, you know that probably won't happen for me.

The laptop settles on my mother's stomach as she stretches her legs. "Tatum was lucky. It was easy for her to transition to

teen roles because she grew up beautiful. But you might, you might not. If we save every penny now you won't have to worry about it either way."

I'll worry no matter what. Savings or no savings, if I have to grow up at all, I'd like to grow up beautiful.

"And if you work enough now, you definitely won't have to struggle when you're my age. Look at those eyes . . . God, that Tatum . . ."

After I'd studied the movie too many times to count, Doris told me that *Paper Moon* could've been shot in color, but it was made in black and white on purpose, to be more believable. Who knew? That's another thing I learned from *Paper Moon* besides how to be scrappy: you can get away with anything if you do it on purpose. The way I figure it, as long as I keep a straight face, people will believe that I'm a real actor, when really all I am is a kid who wanted to skip school that first day.

"Nobody ever pushed me. Nobody ever thought I was worth pushing. You have something, Joss. You really do," Viva says, adding new words to her comments. "And the fact that you have these opportunities . . . well, who would've imagined?" She's braiding my hair like she used to when I was little. "I just don't want you to waste all of this. I wish you could understand that." She lets the braid loose and combs through it with her fingers. "Life's hard enough when you haven't got a talent. I should know. I don't want your life to be hard."

When I take a long, deep breath, I can make out the sweet

smell of my mother's lotion hiding beneath her stale layer of smoke. Tatum singing is the last thing I hear before I fall asleep. Her voice almost convinces me that everything will be just grand.

“Keep your sunny side up, up. Hide the side that gets blue!”

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"I'm so happy to meet you, Joss. I've watched Hit the Road a dozen times. You're so good in it. So good." Terrance Rivenbach, the famous director, hugs me with both arms. "Can I tell you a secret?" He has twinkly eyes; that's my favorite kind of face. All at once I'm nervous. I don't know how to talk to someone who's more handsome in person than he is on the Internet. "You're the only Norah I want." He winks.

Terrance's office is full of boxes. All that's out are file folders, pictures of his family, and a coffeemaker. "Let's sit down, Joss. Sorry. This is a new building. We're all just getting settled." We walk around the boxes to get to the chairs near the window. "How do you like LA?" He smiles kindly and hands me a warm bottle of water from a box.

I uncap the bottle but don't drink. "Fine."

"It's a long way from Tyrone, Pennsylvania. Think you'll want to come live here someday?" He tilts his head toward the window. "You're getting awfully busy filming movies."

"I guess." I peel the label off my water. I should tell him that it's

our goal—Viva’s and mine—to live in Beverly Hills. Our favorite houses are the ones with ivy up the sides. You can tell they’ve stood there since what Viva calls the Golden Age of Hollywood, which was when “darn” was a curse, people kept their clothes on, and the camera faded after kissing. Even if you just moved into your ivy house, you can pretend that you’ve had money since the Golden Age. But I don’t say any of that to Terrance.

“How do you like acting?”

It’s the one thing, the only thing that makes me special, I think. “It’s good,” I say. I’m failing the interview already. Damn.

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Every day in Montauk the cast-and-crew van shuttles us between the Beachcomber and our production basecamp and our filming location. This morning I have rehearsal first. Then I’ll tutor for a while before we shoot. Our driver is following the handmade TO SET signs that lead us through narrower and narrower streets of tiny beach houses. When we pull up to what’s supposed to be TJ and Norah’s house, the crew is hauling equipment to the backyard. I’m embarrassed straight off by this rickety place with a dirt driveway because everyone’s been saying that I’m perfect for the part of Norah. How can they tell I really am a dirt-driveway kid? (That is, if I had a driveway.) And I’m also embarrassed for Terrance because the character TJ is based on him as a kid; *The Locals* is about him, his actual sister, Norah, his actual evil stepdad, and his actual dumpy house. Why would somebody who’s rich want the world to know that he used to be poor?

“Uh-oh! Here comes trouble!” In the backyard, a happy Terrance holds his arms open. “Look out, Montauk!” He squeezes me so tight—the exact way he hugged me when we first met—that I can smell his aftershave and his morning coffee.

I squeeze him right back. “Morning, Terrance.”

“When are you going to start calling me TJ?” he asks. But I can’t call him that. TJ is a kid’s name—a boy with a rainbow lollipop.

If you’ve ever met Terrance Rivenbach you’d never guess he grew up in a shack. I can tell you one thing: the minute Viva and me dig our way out of the hole we’re in, we aren’t gonna look back. We’re in what my mother calls a “steaming pile of debt without a shovel.” It’s stupid that we’re in debt because we haven’t got anything good. I mean it—nothing. For such a long time, I’ve wanted this pair of chunky headphones that I can use on plane rides. But all Viva can say is, “What do you need those for? They’re ridiculous.” I want them because they would cancel out noise—her voice, for example—when I need my privacy.

Thanks to Viva’s ex-boyfriend, all we do have are empty plots of land because his master plan to build upscale beauty salons was a bust. We also have a hole in our bank account where there used to be my movie money. When my mother’s not screwing it up, I don’t mind earning money for us. I really don’t. I like being useful. It’s called being the breadwinner. But that’s what made losing my movie money feel ten times worse.

“Take a look at these.” Terrance hands me a sheet of pictures from my photo shoot the other day. Me and Chris were made up to look like an old photo of Terrance and his sister when they were little. “Here’s the original. And here’s you two,” he says, holding both photos.

“We look exactly like you!”

In the original, Terrance and Norah are in the middle of the street. He’s straddling his bicycle, and Norah, wearing rainbow shorts, is pinching her elbow and staring straight into the camera with a bubble wand between her teeth. In our new photo, me and Chris are positioned just the same.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Terrance points from his picture to mine. “This is going to be our poster.”

I look over at Chris. He’s by the snack table reading today’s call sheet, which tells the scenes we’re filming and in what order. “Hey, Chris! Cool, huh?”

“I know, right?” There’s dirt on his palm when he lifts his hand. Judging from the scrapes on Chris’s elbows and the smudges on his face, it looks like he’s been rehearsing already.

Rodney, the actor who plays our evil stepdad, keeps staring at me from inside the screen door. I smile at him, only because I’m used to being polite. But there’s no charming Rodney.

“You know he likes to stay in character.” Terrance slips the photos into a big Ziploc bag. “Just let him be.”

Rodney likes to stay in character so much that his name isn’t even Rodney. It’s Tom Garrett. But we aren’t supposed to use

that name at all; it even says “Rodney” on call sheets and memos where the rest of us have our real names.

He might only be acting, but Rodney’s still plenty scary. When my mother told me *The Locals* was about a girl who gets abused by her stepdad, I said, “No way. No how.” I didn’t want some strange man acting dirty with me. Good thing Viva felt the same. She said everybody draws the line somewhere. Plus, she figured a kid like me with a few movies in my pocket should have a say-so in my own career. So she and Doris fixed my contract so I wouldn’t have to do any pervy scenes. That was a major relief, especially the second I got a look at Rodney. According to Google, he used to be a pro football player. That explains his giant hands and his beer gut. I think that when athletes stop playing their muscles melt into their bellies.

Anyway, Viva said that the contract would protect me from “content of a sexual or violent nature as deemed by the minor’s parent and management.” She also told me that for once, I’d get to work with other kids on this movie. That sealed the deal for me, even if there is a pervy stepdad.

Terrance walks me over to a tall, fat tree that shades half the backyard. “Joss, for this scene, I want you to sit up here in this big old tree.”

“Yes!” I pat the tree like an old friend, excited to spend the day in it. It’s a heavy-duty scene, but more so for Chris. For me, it’ll be fun being up in the tree.

“You’ll watch TJ and Buzz drill the rungs into the trunk from up here,” he says. “And we’ll do some nice close-ups on you right before Chris gets roughed up.”

Chris is roughed up already. The medic is cleaning him up with alcohol pads.

“We’ll put some padding up here to make it comfortable,” Terrance says as I pull myself up by the low branches.

“Whoa, not yet.” He grabs hold of my arm. “Let’s save the climb for later. You’re not allowed to break your neck until after we wrap.”

“But it’s easy.” I look up through the flat leaves rustling above. “It’s not even that high.”

“It’s high enough.”

“Joss, you’re so lucky you get to be up in the tree!” says Jericho. He plays Buzz, TJ’s best friend. I thought the hair department was going to give Jericho a buzz cut, but I guess that’s not where the name comes from; he’s still shaggy as ever. “Look what I get! A saw!” Jericho lifts a rusty saw from against the tree and holds it for me to see.

“Hey, hey! Put it down!” Terrance yells, getting serious. “You have to get instructions on that first. There was a reason for the safety memo this morning. No props until I say so. If there’s any fooling around on this set, I’ll shut it down. That goes for all of you. Clear?”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.” Jericho lowers the saw back to the ground.

I don’t get Jericho. *The Locals* is only his first movie, but he

fools around all the time as if he's been acting forever. I'm never that comfortable on set. My theory is he's relaxed because he's a hobby actor. That's what I call a kid who's the opposite of a breadwinner—a kid who works for fun, not for money, which must be way less stressful. While I bring home the bacon, hobby actors bring home stories about famous people to tell around the dinner table. I can tell a hobby actor from a mile away. I've noticed Jericho's dad working with color-coded graphs on his laptop and heard him make business calls on "Tokyo Time." He also wears a watch that can go underwater. Jericho said so.

"For now, just play with the dialogue for a bit before I see it," Terrance says.

Viva is standing off to the side with the executive producer, Peter Bustamante. After three movies, I still don't know what a producer does. It's too late to ask, so I just pretend to know. But I'm plenty interested in any job where you walk around acting like the boss but never actually do anything. Peter doesn't work any equipment or even carry a script.

Viva gives me a wave. She likes to remind big-deal people that she's my mother. I wave back. I like to remind big-deal people that I'm a good daughter; Doris says that being pleasing on set is as important as being talented.

Tonight will be a fancy dinner night, for sure; Viva looks in a good mood. But before I can say *Lobster Roll*, Terrance passes me a green script. My stomach drops like a water balloon.

"What *is* this?" I ask, trying to give the papers back.

“The green revision,” Terrance says, handing the boys the same. “Rewritten as of five a.m. I was up all night, so let’s just get through this day, everybody.”

I scan through it for anything familiar, but everything looks different from the yellow pages I know. When I turn around for my mother, she’s at the craft service table slipping granola bars into her purse. She doesn’t even eat granola bars. There’s half a dozen already in our hotel room.

“Read through it a couple of times together,” Terrance says. “Just get used to the changes while I check the camera. Then I’ll take you through the blocking.”

“So . . . it looks like I start,” Jericho says, as if the new script is no big deal. “Okay, cool.”

Chris gives the green copy a quick look. Then he nods, ready just like that.

But I’m lost before we even begin. When Doris first sent me the script it was blue. Then when we started shooting it was pink and then yellow. I studied pink for weeks before I had to delete it from my brain. Now I’m ready for yellow. I know yellow. I can do yellow. But *green*?

“Okay . . .” Jericho clears his throat and reads, “I can’t believe you’re gonna have your own crow’s nest. Why didn’t we think of this before? This is *genius*.”

Chris reads next, as casual and cool as always. “All we’ll have to do is climb up here every morning, and we’ll be able to see right away how the waves are. No more trekking our boards all

the way down to the beach at six in the morning when the water's flat."

"I'm gonna be over here every day!" Jericho says in his raspy voice.

Around me, set decorators are stomping around laying down branches and tools, and production assistants are laughing into their walkie-talkies. Viva is on her phone now, shrugging and talking with her hands.

Jericho nudges me. "Joss, it's your turn . . ."

At school, my teacher gives me "extended time" for tests and quizzes. But on set there's no such thing as "extended time." There's only *now*. I track the page with my finger and search for an easy word that can help me find my place . . .

. . . *nest* . . .

we . . .

waves . . .

The boys are staring and breathing. I can hear the air through their nostrils. This is worse than school. If I don't say the right words, the boys will find out. Then the crew will find out. Then Terrance will find out.

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"What do you like the most about acting?" Terrance asks. His T-shirt is creased from being neatly folded. I bet he's got a closet of these, perfectly stacked.

“Anything at all?” he asks, turning his palms up. “What do you like about being on set?”

“Uh . . .” Finally, I peer up at him—at my favorite kind of face. “Not being at school?”

He laughs with his whole chest. I can’t tell if I’m funny to him in a good way or bad, so in a hurry, I think of something to add.

“I mean, I like not having to be me all the time,” I say before he counts me out. “I like being somebody else.”

“Why?” He leans forward and then away as if he’s trying to reel something out of me.

“I don’t know,” I say. But I do. I’ve known since the first time I set foot on a set. So I force myself to tell him because I didn’t fly all the way to LA for palm trees, and I can tell that he’s waiting for some magic words to let him know that I’m really the one. “It’s not always fun, I guess . . . to be me.”

Terrance isn’t laughing now. Instead, he’s looking at me as if I really am his sister when she was young and he was young and we’re meeting in a time-machine family reunion.

“Listen, Joss. I’m going to film a movie in a studio in Brooklyn and then I’m shooting the rest on Long Island where I grew up. How would you like to visit my hometown?” he asks.

I smile even though I don’t know what his hometown is like. “Okay.”

“I’ll take you to see Montauk Lighthouse.”

“Can we climb up it?”

“You bet, kiddo.” He taps my leg. “On my set you can do whatever you want.”

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The words bunch together on the page, one on top of the other. I squint. I hold them close and pull them far. I turn them sideways. But my brain won't straighten them. When I start to shake, so does the script. If people find out, they won't hire me anymore. They'll cast smart girls who can learn on the spot. Everyone is replaceable. Doris says so, even the "next Tatum O'Neal."

"You're here." Jericho points at the name *Norah*.

"I know where I am!" I drop my trembling hands.

"Sorry, I was just trying to help." Jericho raises his eyebrows. "Jeez."

"I don't need help," I snap and stare at Jericho's goofy T-shirt of a hotdog chasing a bun. The shirt isn't from wardrobe. It's his own. He's a stupid-shirt wearer.

Jericho lifts his script. "Great, then let's keep going."

"What are you, the director?" I ask, snottier than I ever thought I could be. It's all I can think of to do. Stall. Pick a fight.

Benji, the production assistant in charge of us kids, is making his way over to us.

"You guys. *Quit it*," Chris says, through his teeth. "Benji's coming."

"Didn't you know, Chris?" I've started something I can't stop. "It's only his first movie, but Jericho's the director now." I sound terrible. I don't want the boys to hate me, Chris especially. But so long as I'm yelling, I'm not rehearsing.

“If I *was* the director, I wouldn’t let you act like a brat just because you’re *Joss Byrd*,” Jericho answers, even louder than me.

“Cool it, Jericho. Leave her alone,” Chris says. “She’s just a little kid.”

I’m mad for real now. “I am *not* a little kid!” I yell. I’m not. I’m the most experienced actor here. I’m “wise beyond my years,” according to *Entertainment Weekly*. And if anyone’s a spoiled brat, it’s Jericho. Working, reading, making jokes—everything’s easy for him.

“Chill!” Jericho says.

“Hobby actor,” I whisper under my breath.

“Kids!” Benji lunges over to us. “Shh . . . Come on. Terrance is right there and so is the producer and so are your parents. I know you don’t want me to call them over here.”

“Yeah, Jericho,” I mumble.

“Yeah, *Joss Byrd*,” Jericho mumbles back.

“Stop saying my name like that!” I yell because I’d rather sound bratty than stupid.

“Hey!” Benji holds Jericho and me by the shoulders just as Terrance sprints up the driveway.

“What is going on?” Terrance asks, surprised. I guess the real Norah never shouted like this.

Me and Jericho glare at each other. He squints his eyes into little slits. If I lift my elbow I could clock him in the chin.

“I said no fooling around,” Terrance says. “We don’t have time for any of this.”

I relax back on my heels. Benji lets me go. Then Terrance

waves my mother and Jericho's father over. As I hold my breath, I think of ten different ways my mother might go Viva on me.

"Is something wrong?" Viva walks up with her hand over her phone. She looks from me to Terrance and back again. Her eyes widen when she notices the script in my hands—green.

Terrance touches my mother's arm. "Nothing's wrong, Viva. Nothing's wrong," he says, covering for me. That's the kind of brother Terrance is. "I'd just like you to take Joss to basecamp. I think I want the stunt coordinator to work some more with Rodney and Christopher."

I thank Terrance through mental telepathy. *Thank you, Terrance. I'm sorry for ruining rehearsal. I just didn't want to let you down, not when you picked me to be your very own sister.*

"Joss and Jericho should go to tutoring." Terrance eyes the two of us. "Then I'm sure they'll be ready to shoot this scene after lunch."

"Oh." Viva stares at the script. She clears her throat and clamps her fingers into the back of my neck. "Yes, they definitely will," she says, as if it's so simple. I don't know what I'm doing here. She should've been the actress.

3

“WE’RE CRUNCHED FOR TIME. SO LET’S SEE IF THIS HELPS. Read these over while I make the rest.” In my schooling trailer, Viva hands me a batch of index cards with my lines written on them.

“I don’t know.” I stare at my mother’s rushed, sloppy handwriting. “We’ve never used cards before.”

“Well, we’re trying it now,” she says. “Get your head on straight, and let’s do this. I’ll read for TJ and Buzz and then you flip to the next card.”

I bend the cards in my hands. “But it’s just the same lines except on smaller paper,” I argue. “What’s easier about that?”

“It’s less stuff to look at per page!” She smacks the cards with the back of her hand.

“But then how do I know who goes before me or who goes after me? I won’t even know who I’m supposed to look at.”

“Jesus!” She throws her arms up. “Can’t you just work with me here and give it a try, Joss? We don’t have forever to argue about it. We’ll skip lunch if we have to.”

“Hello? Ready for school?” Damon, my tutor, is rattling the door open.

I’ve never been more relieved to see him. “Yes, I’m ready.” I drop the index cards on the counter.

“Good,” he says. “I think we have a nice chunk of time to get some work done before lunch.”

“One minute, Joss.” Viva hands me the script and a marker. “Here. Highlight the rest of your lines while I explain things to Damon.”

I slump into my seat. Highlighting is on my list of least favorite things to do.

“We’re having sort of a rough morning,” Viva tells Damon.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He sets his overstuffed backpack down. Its weight shakes the whole floor. Damon is always ready for action. He tries to bring different things every day, like games or books I’m supposed to like (some have covers of a boy and his dog or kids wearing overalls and playing stickball. *Stickball?*).

“Anything I can help with?” he asks.

“As a matter of fact . . . yes.” She glances at me. “You see, Joss and I are in a bit of a bind. But I think that with your help we can get through it.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, Joss was hired to do a movie, and that’s the reason we’re all here, isn’t it?” she asks, without pausing for his answer. “Good. You’ve seen her films, right?” When Viva wants to impress someone she calls them films. When she wants to pretend

it's no big deal, she calls them movies. "Then you know she can act. But you also know how much she struggles." She glances at me disappointedly. If I had a dollar for every time she looked at me that way I wouldn't have to do this movie in the first place. "Obviously, she's not a reader."

I can sense Damon looking at me while I hide behind my script. He probably agrees that I'm dumb because I can also sense that he's giving me a sad face. I can read people even when I can't see them. I could tell my mother's mood by the back of her head ever since I can remember.

"You mentioned yourself that her schoolwork is already a challenge, and it's only the start of the year," Viva adds.

"She can do it, though," Damon says. "When she's calm and takes her time, she can."

I don't know if Damon means it or if he's just being nice, but it doesn't matter. How can I be calm and take my time on set when all Terrance expects is action?

"Time is exactly the issue," Viva says. "So far we've been able to manage her scenes by running lines every night, but there's a revision."

My mother shows Damon my green script and points out scene 15, but I'm distracted by something going on outside my trailer. Through the window I can see a crowd of noisy kids a couple of years older than me gathering around. A surfer girl, probably an eighth grader, in a striped bikini top and faded cut-off shorts, is balancing an orange surfboard twice her size on

her head. “You’ve been here all week,” she says. “How much longer do you expect us to put up with this? This sucks! You can’t claim the ocean. You can’t claim *nature*.” Her tan and her hair that matches wet sand make her look like she was born in the ocean, was raised in it, and is now queen of it.

I’ll get to surf for our last scene of *The Locals*. I’ve never surfed before. I hope I can look half as cool as this girl. I also hope I can stay as flat as she is when I’m her age. Her chest is as flat as her board.

The surfer girl’s scabby, blond-streaked friends start pounding their boards on the ground. They’re gonna start either a song or a war.

“Yeah! This is a public beach!”

“This is bootleg!”

“The ocean is our temple, man!”

They must be the locals—the *real* locals.

There are postings along the beach that say something like, *Due to film production on these dates, there will be no surfing between the orange signs*. Like a pop-up city, our production has taken over the entire beach parking lot and turned it into our production basecamp. At basecamp we have our dressing trailers back-to-back; we can hear each other’s TVs and toilets. One time I heard Chris sing “Happy Birthday” to his mother on the phone, which made me want to hug him through the wall. I also heard Rodney hacking up a loogie and spitting it into the sink, which made me want to barf. Wardrobe and the hair and

makeup trucks are parked in an L-shape. This way, we can walk quickly from one to the next. The production offices are in trailers, too, including Terrance's office and Peter Bustamante's. Their doors say Director and Executive Producer. There's trucks for the cameras and others for lighting and all our gear. (I don't know what all the rolls of glow tape and switchboards and steel poles are for, but trust me: in the end they make a movie.) By the surfer kids' faces, it's obvious that us taking over their beach at the end of September isn't making us very popular in town.

"Here's how this is going to happen," my mother says. "I know you have to report her schoolwork to her teachers. But what I'll do is, I'm just gonna sign off on all of her assignments." She pretends to sign her name in the air. "That way you don't have to worry about your paperwork. And on your end, you're gonna help Joss learn her lines."

The last time I was in school my class was working on persuasive arguments. One of the strategies is that you're supposed to point out the advantages for the other person even when you're looking to get something for yourself. My mother would've gotten an A.

"I trust you'll keep this to yourself, for life or longer." She lowers her voice, for nobody's sake.

Me and my mother are pros at keeping my school problems to ourselves. Doris doesn't even know. We want to stay at the very top of her client list. The last thing we need is for her to peg me as some sort of problem.

“Uh, Mrs. Byrd . . .”

“Ms. And please, call me Viva, already.”

“Viva, I appreciate the challenge you’re up against here. It must be an enormous pressure to make a movie. I’m sure. But I’m an educator. And I’m required to cover three hours of academics a day.” He pats the textbooks on the table. “Anyway, I’m not an acting coach. I don’t know anything about movies. I just graduated from college. I took this job to teach actual subjects. Sixth grade is a lot more demanding than fifth. Joss has a unit on geometry, and she has the Egyptians to study, and homework for English—”

“A Terrance James Rivenbach autobiographical screenplay is English. Joss needs this more than she needs *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret.*”

Teachers are always busting my butt to read that. They think if any book will get me reading, that might be the one. Good thing I never spent the effort since Viva doesn’t even think it’s worth it.

My mother doesn’t want to fire Damon. She likes him and so do I. I liked my tutor from my last job, too. She used to boil down my chapters to the bare bones and only make me answer the important questions. I requested her again, but she works on a TV series now, so I didn’t know who was going to walk through the door this time. I was worried I might get someone real strict. But me and Damon get along. He’s young, his hair is spiky, plus, he’s Asian. I know that doesn’t automatically make a person smart and hardworking, but for him it’s true.

“I’m sure there’s still room for schoolwork,” Damon says.

“No. No.” Viva shakes her head, getting down to business. No more *Ms. Nice Girl*. “Look, you’re a crew member here. This is how it works on set. You’re part of production. That means we all share the same goal, which is to make this movie.” Another strategy of persuasive arguments is to present the facts.

Damon inspects the script and flips the pages. “I’m really happy to be part of the crew, Ms. Byrd, uh, Viva. But I’m a teacher. I don’t think the movie should be *my* goal.”

Outside, the surfer girl is raising her voice at our crew about her rights as a “resident of Montauk and a citizen of the U.S.A.” I like all her bracelets. Maybe I can get some just like them as soon as we wrap; they’re rubber or rope or twisted strands of colored cloth. She’s lifting one foot now to scratch her heel with her big toe. Her bony hips jut out above her shorts. I wonder how the waves don’t snap her in half.

“Kids go to school to figure out what they’re going to be, right?” This is the clincher. Viva is getting to her most logical point.

“Well, that’s part of it—”

“Let’s face it. Joss isn’t gonna be a lawyer or an accountant or a doctor or anything. Luckily, she’s already doing what she’s gonna be. So let’s get on board here.” She waves her arm to welcome Damon aboard.

I might be behind in school, but I’m ahead in life. That’s what my mother always tells me. But it doesn’t feel that way when she lists everything I’m not going to be. Hiding behind

my script, I scan for *Norah* on page 68. One of my parts is, like, ten sentences long.

“Her school in Tyrone . . .” Viva sighs. “All they want to do is test her some more so that they can slap an official label on her. But Joss doesn’t need a label, Damon. She needs a career. Joss is an actress, not a dyslexic.”

“Your movie sucks balls!” the surfer girl yells. Then she turns with her board on her head and screams, “Hairy balls!” She walks ahead of the group by a good five steps, with the leash from her surfboard dragging along the ground. Now *that* girl is ahead in life.

Damon shakes his head. “But a label could help. Maybe Joss would get the support she needs.”

“Or it could give people a reason not to cast her,” Viva says. “We’re not taking that chance. We just have to work harder than everyone else. You’re not afraid to work hard, are you?”

“Of course not, Viva,” Damon says. “But I’m not sure if this is the—”

“Damon, Joss will do whatever it takes. But she just needs you to get her through it. Show him, Joss.”

They both stare at me like I’m a monkey in a lab.

I turn my head from the window. “Huh?” I didn’t expect this part of the persuasive argument: the demonstration.

“Read a little for him,” Viva says. I hate her for putting me on the spot. But this is the deal I made. I promised she wouldn’t have to force me to do the work again.

“That’s not necessary, Viva,” Damon says kindly. “She reads for me every day. Don’t you, Joss?”

“No, no,” my mother insists. “You should see what a colossal embarrassment this shoot is going to be if you don’t help us. Joss, go ahead.” It’s like she’s asking the monkey to point from ball to block to banana.

I clear my throat to read because I was the one who made Viva turn the truck around. And as embarrassing as it is, I also know that this will get Damon to help me because as soon as I look at the page, the letters will start to float and the words will mash one on top of the other.

But before I start, I look out the window again. The surfer girl, who’s leading her pack out of the parking lot, does two things at once that I can only dream of doing: she balances her board on her head with one hand, and with her other hand, she flips our movie crew the finger.

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“I’m never going to learn the new lines by lunchtime. I’ll look like an idiot.” I sulk over the back of my chair and watch Damon as he reads through the new pages. “My mother’s gonna kill me,” I say, even though I’m afraid of so much more, like the whole world finding out that I’m a phony.

“Hang on, now. Nobody’s killing anybody,” Damon says. “Where’s the old script—the yellow?”

“Why?”

“I just want to check something.”

I pull the yellow script from my backpack.

Damon opens both versions in front of him on the sofa. “I knew it!” He brings me both copies and sets them on the table. “The dialogue is the same. It’s just switched around.”

“So?”

“So, that means you already know the words. All you have to do is learn them in a different order,” he says, as if it’s easy. “For example, Chris used to have the first line. But now Jericho does. Then it’s Chris and then Jericho again. You just have to respond to Jericho instead.”

“Whaaat?” I ask. How can I learn the actual lines when I can’t even understand this much?

“Don’t get frustrated. We haven’t even read it through yet.”

“But this scene is supposed to be snappy. The boys talk so fast, and I’m used to the old version.” I hold my head. I can practically hear Jericho mocking me again: *Joss Byrd*.

“Okay, take a breather.” Damon sits quietly and lets me mope. After a few minutes, he opens his laptop and taps the keys. “Maybe we should take a step back and explore our options, okay?”

“Yes, *please*,” I beg.

When I look outside, I see that the surfer kids have gone, but there’s a woman in a baseball cap and surf shorts pacing and talking on her phone. Something about her square face and her tight lips looks familiar. Maybe she just reminds me of someone

on TV. She must be stressed. I can tell by the way she's holding her neck and trying to get the kinks out. She's probably a surfer. We probably ruined her day off. Whatever her problem is, she should get over it because I bet I'm having a worse day than she is.

"Acting class . . . acting class . . ." Damon types the search words and then scans through the videos. "Donna Joy Carena's School of Acting . . . Acting Class for Beginners . . . Acting Class Fails . . ."

"Donna Joy Carena, let's see what you've got." Damon hits play.

Donna Joy has dandelions in her hair and bare feet. Her face is eighty but her frilly dress is for someone who's eight. "Imagine becoming your favorite flower. You're stretching, you're opening and opening and opening up toward the sun . . ." Donna Joy Carena stretches both arms toward the sky.

"No way," I say. "I'm not being my favorite flower."

"Agreed." Damon scrolls down the choices. He clicks on one video of a girl standing on a chair holding a script. The girl delivers one line and loses her balance. The chair tips, she falls onto the stage then slides into the orchestra pit. Damon laughs. "Sorry. Not what we're looking for . . . pretty funny, though."

This is a slippery slope. Me and Viva can watch videos of fat cats in sinks or tours of celebrity dream closets for hours and hours. We'll start after lunch on a Sunday afternoon and the next thing we know it's dark and time for dinner.

Damon clicks the arrow to the next page. “Yale Drama School?”

Yale sounds hard. “Nah.”

“Meryl Streep went there.”

I can’t remember who that is.

“No. You’re right. Too snooty. I went to Fordham. Much more down-to-earth.”

Fordham sounds hard, too. I knew Damon was smart.

“You should’ve taught regular school,” I say. He would’ve been happier teaching all those subjects to smart kids.

“I will, eventually,” he says, scrolling down the screen. “But I thought this’d be a good adventure.” Damon stops at a video called “Nailing the Scene with Vern LaVeque.” He looks at me hopefully. “Vern LaVeque? That name sounds like he knows what he’s talking about, right?”

“I guess.” We are the blind leading the blind, as Terrance says when his crew can’t seem to get their act together.

At the same time, me and Damon check the clock on the microwave. Two hours to go until lunch.

“Uh . . . we can skip part one, right?” Damon says. “You’ve already been in real movies.”

“Okay.”

He presses play for part two.

In front of a cheesy hand-painted mural of the ocean stands Vern LaVeque in a too-tight black T-shirt and an orange tan.

“So, the key to everything I’ve been saying is that the lines

are not what matter in a scene!” Vern LaVeque raises his arms above his students. “Let go of the lines. And let go of the fear!”

I sit taller and lean toward the screen. I thought I was the only one who felt any fear.

“The key to an effective scene is not reading! It is NOT READING! It’s LISTENING!”

“Score.” Damon turns over a piece of paper and picks up a pencil.

“So you better believe me when I say this because it is the plain truth. If you can listen”—Vern LaVeque points to his ears. Then he points to his body—“then you can act!”

Me and Damon smile at each other.

“You’re a good listener, aren’t you?” Damon asks.

“I listen all the time,” I say. Even when I don’t want to hear stuff, like Viva calling this shoot a potential colossal embarrassment, I’m still listening.

On his paper, Damon writes:

READING → LISTENING.

Vern LaVeque struts across the carpeted stage and points to his students. The veins on his arms rise as he flexes. “You know the words. You’ve been up to here with the words!” He holds his hand to his forehead.

“Tell me about it,” I say.

“So I want you to throw that script aside!” Vern LaVeque flings a script off his stool. The pages flap in the air and land on the floor like a lame bird. “You’ve gone over the lines inside

and out. Trust that they're in here." He points to his head. "Trust that you have them and focus on your partner. I want you to listen to your scene partner. Listen to him so carefully that you hear every word and every breath."

I think about Chris. When he's excited his voice crackles at the end of his sentences, and when he's upset he sighs real loudly before he speaks. I like listening to Chris.

"Listen to your partner, and allow his words to trigger your heart, your character's heart." Vern LaVeque clutches his chest dramatically. "Tap into your character's emotions and use them."

LISTEN → HEART, Damon writes.

I'm good with emotions. The *Hollywood Reporter* called me "fiercely emotional." They said I had "complete conviction." And Chris, if I'm being honest, already triggers my heart.

"I'm tapped into my emotions," I say softly.

"Yeah, you are!" Damon grins at me.

On the screen, Vern LaVeque looks into the camera like he's talking straight to me. "Feel like your character. And allow your heart to trigger the right words."

"Does that make sense to you?" Damon asks.

"I should listen closely to the boys. Then I'll feel how Norah would feel. And my heart will remind me what my line is," I say. "So it doesn't matter if the dialogue is in a different order!"

"You got it. That's exactly what he's saying." Damon and I high-five.

"So, what's the secret?" Vern LaVeque asks.

“Listening!” his students answer.

“Listening,” I repeat in my full voice.

“That’s right. LISTEN! Listen to your partner.” He points to people in the class. “Listen to what is happening around you. Listen and feel and react. Because acting is *reacting*.”

LISTEN → FEEL → REACT, Damon writes.

“Reacting!” I shout. “Acting is *reacting*!”

Vern LaVeque points from student to student. He stops, holds his chest, and lowers his head. “LISTEN to your character’s HEART, and the words will come.”

“Listen to Norah’s heart . . .” I close my eyes as if I’m praying. In a way, I am praying for this to work. “. . . and the words will come.”

“That, my friends,” Vern LaVeque says, “is what nailing the scene is about.”

“Please work. Please, please, please work.” I point from my ears to my heart to my mouth.

4

IF THE LOCALS HATE US FOR TAKING OVER THEIR “TEMPLE,” they probably can’t stand that we eat lunch in their real church basement. Whenever we’re down here I never remember we’re even in a church. There’re the usual statues: Mary in a half shell and Joseph (I think) and apostles (I’ve seen Jesus movies at Easter time). But none of us pay any attention because we’re too hungry to feel holy. I’ve only felt holy once. Viva took me to church when her friend’s baby got baptized. Even when the babies started to cry I couldn’t believe how peaceful it was in there. I wouldn’t mind going to church again, just to be able to sit with my mother for an hour in quiet.

Our caterers, Lights, Catering, Action!, cook up all of our food inside their catering truck. Then they set up a buffet lunch as if we’re at a wedding or something. The chef gets lots of complaints about too much salt or overcooked this or undercooked that. But I don’t know what all the moaning is about because at home a home-cooked meal is fish sticks and toast with

ketchup packets we collect from McDonald's. Here the buffet's got a beef station, a seafood station, cold pasta, hot pasta, four salads to choose from, a dozen dressings, chicken and mushrooms, roasted vegetables, paella, and something that looks like beef stew but isn't, but I'm sure it's good, too. If you ask me, the food truck is the greatest thing Hollywood ever created, besides *Paper Moon*. Seriously, how does all of *this* come out of *that*?

I don't get how so many actresses can be anorexic, especially when catering has a ravioli station on Fridays: there's cheese ravioli, mushroom ravioli, and lobster ravioli with a choice of sauces. What I get is marinara on the cheese ravioli, cream on the mushroom ravioli, and butter and garlic on the lobster ravioli. But that's on Fridays. Today is a rice pudding day. Finally, something's going my way. Rice pudding is a universal favorite. The strategy is to take your share of pudding before you line up for the real food because if you wait until after, there might not be any left.

"Joss!" Chris calls my name and rushes up behind me as I'm loading three little pudding cups on my tray. Why don't they just put the pudding in bigger cups? "I gotta talk to you," he says, no nonsense.

"I'll know the lines after lunch, okay?" I slice him like a paper cut. "Don't I *always* know the lines when we shoot?"

"What?" He crinkles his forehead. "No, no. It's not about that. I don't care about that," he says, taking four pudding cups for himself.

If this isn't about rehearsal, I don't know what it could be. I shouldn't have been so rude. I'm still touchy about the script, that's all.

"Ah! Rice pudding day!" Terrance calls from the back of the line. "No hoarding, ladies and gentlemen! One per customer!" he jokes, pointing at Chris. "I see you, Christopher Tate! That is a direct violation of catering code 421, section B!"

"Just get your food, and sit with me out back, okay?" Chris says, walking toward the back door.

"Okay." I try not to look surprised, but I am. We never eat together, just the two of us. Sometimes Chris eats with Jericho, to talk about how to get to the next level on a video game or to quote some TV show I've never heard of.

I thought it'd be easy to make friends with other kids who act. But it isn't, not when they think I'm Miss Thing when I'm not. When we got to Long Island, Chris asked if I wanted to go to Splish-Splash water park with him and Jericho. I wanted to go so bad. They were all excited about the Giant Twister—three slides that twist through the trees and end up in one pool. The three of us could've gone down at the same time. But, like a complete snob, I told them I didn't want to go because water parks are where you get pink eye and foot fungus. How could I tell Chris that I had to stay in to memorize lines because I'm dense? I couldn't.

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Jericho and Chris barrel into my schoolroom at our Brooklyn studio. They thump their heavy backpacks onto the table where I'm showing Damon this year's textbooks. Soon enough Damon will find out that books are not my claim to fame.

"Ding, ding! School's in!" Jericho says.

"Whoa, wait a second, guys!" Damon holds up a hand. "This isn't school for you."

I'm supposed to tutor alone. Viva told the producer that she wants me to have the best possible education. But really, me and my mother just don't want anyone to find out how slow I am.

"But Benji sent us," Chris says. "We're supposed to start tutoring today."

"It says school on the door!" Jericho points at the sign.

"Sorry. Not with me. You two have another teacher," Damon says. "I only have Joss."

"Your schoolroom is at the end of the hallway," I add. "The door says TJ & BUZZ'S SCHOOL."

"Oh . . ." Chris says. "Okay." He and Jericho pick up their things and leave.

It would be so cool if I could tutor with them. It's boring to do school alone day after day. But I don't want them to know my problems any more than Viva does.

"Why does she get her own private tutor?" I hear Jericho ask as they shuffle down the hall.

"I don't know," Chris says. "Probably because she's a big deal."

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“Hey, sit here.” Chris says, meaning with him on the back steps.

I might be blushing. I know it’s messed up to blush over a boy who’s supposed to be my brother, but usually when I’m alone with Chris we’re playing Norah and TJ. When I’m not acting, I can’t help it.

We set our trays between us, and I wait for Chris to speak.

“Man, that rehearsal . . .” He rubs his dirty forehead. “I practiced the fight with Rodney.”

I listen quietly and watch some bees buzzing over a garbage can.

“The stunt coordinator showed Rodney how to smack me and shove me and yell in my face,” he says, shoulders slumped.

For once I’m grateful to my mother. No yelling in my face or smacking or shoving for me. Chris has it tough. The movie wouldn’t work without rough scenes between him and Rodney. There’s no way around violent content for Chris.

“At one point he rubs my head into the dirt.” Chris takes a deep breath and pushes his salad around with a knife. (He eats a lot of salad for a boy.) “There’s a way to do it so it’s not real. But man, oh man . . . it’s *kind* of real. I mean, if I’m on the ground I’m on the ground, right?”

I want to wipe the dirt off his cheek, but I don’t dare. If I was pretty and fourteen and he thought of me as a girl instead of a “little kid,” as he called me, I would. But I’m not, and he doesn’t, so I won’t. This could’ve been one of those movie moments:

boy needs comforting. Girl is the only one who understands. Close up on both. His eyes. Her eyes. They lean closer. Will they kiss or won't they? But really it's just Christopher Tate and me sitting next to some bees at a stinking garbage can.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"It doesn't tickle, I'll tell you that. And of course we're going to have to do it, like, fifty times from every angle."

He's right. It might take all day to get it right. In my last movie, a fight scene took four hours.

"It'd be fine if Rodney would maybe, like, joke around or something with me at least. But he's always *in* it; he's always in the zone. It feels like he hates me in real life."

Rodney's stare through the screen door was mean enough for me. I can't imagine a punch, even a fake one.

"Why'd I ever say I would do this? I'm missing the first month of high school." He kicks a pebble that hits the garbage can square in the middle. "Last week was soccer tryouts. They'll never let me on now." Chris stabs a tomato slice, leaving the knife sticking straight up.

Right now I don't know what's harder: being an actor who hates school or being an actor who likes it. But me and Chris are one and the same in a bigger way; he needs to work. His folks and older brothers run a restaurant in Florida. I don't think it does very good.

"What if the only reason I was cast is because I look like Terrance in that picture?" Chris asks.

I don't know what to say. I've been wanting to bond more with Chris, but I was imagining spending a day at Dave & Buster's arcade.

"I've never done a drama before," Chris says. "Just comedies—stupid stuff, like riding a Razor scooter through the hallways and junk."

I've seen the movie he means—*Sixth Period Lunch*—but I don't say so because I've seen it more times than I want to admit. And when I found out we were going to work together I watched all of his scenes again.

Chris holds his head and lets out a loud sigh. "Ugh . . . I'm supposed to cry, too."

That's one part of the script that always stays the same: *TJ cries*. He's almost crying now. *Just hold on to that*, I want to tell him, but I don't want to interrupt the thoughts that are swirling around in his mind.

"I've seen *Hit the Road* and *Buy One, Get One*," he says, finally looking at me.

I stare at my rice. It doesn't affect me much when a hundred strangers watch my work, but I care what Chris thinks. Chris seeing my movies is kind of like him reading my diary, if I had a diary. I look so young in those movies. No wonder he thinks of me as a kid.

"I've seen you cry and scream and all that on-screen." He leans forward as if I've got the key to the universe. "How do you do that?"

In *Sixth Period Lunch*, Chris Razor scooted through the cafeteria, smiling at the girls. In this one part, he takes off his hat and puts it on the prettiest girl as he glides past her. I can't believe a boy like that wants advice from *me*. I just learned that acting is reacting from YouTube, so what do I even know?

"Well, uh . . ." I pick the dirt under my fingernails while I think about how to describe what I do. "I use my triggers."

"What are triggers?"

I peek at Chris. He's serious. He really wants my help. "Uh . . . they're bad stuff from my life," I say quietly.

He nods for me to go on. He doesn't care what my triggers are. He only wants to know how I use them, so I sit taller and explain.

"I ask for quiet fifteen minutes before a tough scene, block everything else out, and think about it real hard until I feel it behind my eyes and my face and in my throat." I hold my neck as I speak. "And then I bust it all out the second I hear 'Action.'"

Chris sits real quiet for a long time, biting the inside of his mouth. It's probably the dumbest thing he's ever heard, and he's wondering why he bothered asking me. He should ask Rodney how to get in the zone.

Chris laughs. "I think I'm going to need more than fifteen minutes."

I laugh with him. "Well, like the way you're feeling now. If you can bottle it up, then you can use it later."

“Oh, great.” He throws up his hands. “I don’t feel so bad anymore.”

“You can get yourself worked up again,” I say, secretly happy that I’ve made him feel better. “Use a trigger. Really. The more you practice doing it, the faster it works.”

He gives me a slight smile. “Okay. It’s worth a shot.”

We pick up our trays and head back inside. The basement is filled up now with our starved crew, and just as I predicted, the rice pudding cups are gone. But there’s some saint statue standing behind the dessert table with his arms open, praying for more.

We pass Rodney filling his tray. I can feel him watching me when I cross the room; it gives me the creeps. Poor Chris.

“Too hot outside?” Terrance asks as me and Chris join the table with the rest of the group.

“Bees,” I say.

“Yeah. Swarms,” Chris adds, and I feel like we’re in on something together.

“Well, be careful. If you get bit on the face, that’ll be it,” Viva says. She’s very into protecting my face, not for my safety, but for the camera.

“Not bit. *Stung*,” I say.

“Cool it, Smart-mouth,” she says, giving me the eye. “And cover your wardrobe.” She tucks my napkin into my collar and spreads it across my chest as if I’m a baby about to eat mashed carrots. My wardrobe is a tank top with a picture of a

rocket ship on the front. It's already dirtied on purpose, but it's not supposed to get dirty by mistake.

Just as we're getting settled, Rodney reaches across the table and snatches two of Chris's rice pudding cups as he heads to his seat. The grown-ups ignore it, but Chris closes his eyes and curses under his breath. I feel so bad that I give him one of my puddings as soon as Rodney turns his back. Let me tell you, pudding is the last thing that Rodney needs. He's plenty mushy around the middle, and don't even try to tell me he put on those pounds for his character.

"I got some extra potato salad. I know how much you like it, TJ." My mother passes Terrance the bowl. She started using his nickname when we first got to the studio in Brooklyn. She likes getting chummy with people from the start. But I'd feel disrespectful calling him TJ.

"Ah, thank you. Bonus," he says, mixing the potatoes with his corn. He passes me another napkin, since mine is around my neck. I grin at him. Terrance says that having meals together makes for a better movie because it makes us feel sort of like we're a family. He's right. This is the type of family I'd like, anyway.

The closest I ever had to a dad was Brian Shea Towson; he played my country singer dad in *Hit the Road*. We ate all our lunches together, too. I liked calling him Pops, even off set, which I guess is kind of like staying in character.

"Go easy there with the healthy stuff, Joss. What is that,

broccoli?” Terrance inspects my tray. “If you get too tall, we’ll have to recast you.”

Not funny. And there goes a perfectly nice lunch with my happy imaginary family. I stare at my buttered roll.

If I could stunt my growth so I could play a child forever, believe me, I would. I’m lucky I still look young enough to play Norah. Doris says that being small in Hollywood is the pot of gold. There’re a ton of parts until the awkward age. I’m living proof of that because I keep playing younger than I am. In *The Locals*, Norah is meant to be ten even though I’m twelve.

Terrance is talking to Christopher now, about the real day he tried to build the crow’s nest. “I want you to remember the excitement I felt at the beginning. That lookout was going to be my connection to the ocean, the one place I really loved. It was going to be my escape.”

Chris is pushing his food around as he listens. He’s under a lot of pressure, but at least he gets to talk with Terrance about his part. I don’t know how Norah felt about the crow’s nest or the ocean, and I don’t know what’s really in her heart. I’ve never played a real person before. I wish I could talk to her and know that I’m doing good enough.

“Terrance, when am I gonna meet the real Norah? You mailed my letter, right?” I say. Norah lives somewhere nearby. Damon helped me write a quick note asking her to visit the set. Terrance gave me her address to put on it.

“Don’t be pushy, Joss,” my mother says. “Sorry.” She squeezes Terrance’s arm and leaves her hand there.

“It’s fine.” Terrance winks at me. “I did mail it, kiddo. I’d love for Norah to come. But she’s very busy, my sister. She must be out of town.” Terrance drops his fork into his not-beef-stew and then he pokes me on the nose. I don’t mind if he treats me like I’m ten when we’re on set. But I wish he wouldn’t do that in real life, especially in front of Chris. “But she’s very proud of her mini-self. She really is.”

“Well . . . okay,” I say.

Just then I notice a plastic wristband on Terrance’s arm. Chris is wearing one, too. “Hey, what are those wristbands?” I ask.

“Chris and I went to the driving range last night.”

“We got unlimited refills—golf balls, not sodas,” Chris says.

“Oh.” Besides missing so many good times, another problem with turning down invitations is that after a while you stop getting invited altogether. “Then what about the lighthouse?” I ask Terrance. “When can you take me?”

“Joss, TJ has enough to do right now. Don’t go bugging him about sightseeing,” my mother says, even though Terrance had time for the driving range and the lighthouse was his idea in the first place. If Viva would stop kissing up to Terrance for two seconds, it’d be two seconds of pigs flying.

“But we’re supposed to take trick pictures that look like I’m holding the lighthouse in my palm. Terrance said he’d do them with me.”

“Let’s all nail scene fifteen first.” Terrance isn’t kidding even a little. “Then we’ll talk lighthouse. And Chris, don’t forget to cut the wristband off before the shoot.”

Chris is biting the inside of his mouth again. I can tell that Terrance is making him even more nervous, so I drop my napkin on the floor and pull him down with me.

“You know,” I whisper under the table. “They can give you tear drops.”

“They can?” he asks, surprised.

“Sure.” I cover my full mouth. “The makeup department’s got tears in a dropper. Plenty of actors use them.”

His face lights up. “Do you use them?”

“No . . .” I feel bad about that, for some reason. He looks so worried that I almost tell him I’ve been studying Vern LaVeque’s Master Class. Almost. “I don’t use them, but *everybody* does,” I say instead. “No one cares, anyway. No one cares how you get the shot, as long as you get it.” That sounds like something Viva would say, but it isn’t. That line is all me.