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Pirate Child

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by

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1.

"Think this'll be it?" I asked.

From the passenger side window, the world was a blur. Not because my mom and I were speeding down the 405 freeway at 80. No, we were at a dead standstill between the catering van in front of us and an expensive sports car behind, enjoying LA rush hour at seven in the morning. For miles, I could see the shimmering outlines of what I assumed to be cars stacked upon cars.

Because of my patch, the scenery—cinderblock walls with trees peeking their heads above—appeared to be whizzing by in grey and green smudges, none of it holding its shape, all blurring like it would to normal eyes when seen from a moving car window. And I was beginning to get frustrated with the not-funny joke of really being stuck in one place. The traffic gods had a twisted sense of humor, dragging out the trip that could culminate in my freedom from forced blindness.

My mom turned down the radio. "I hope so. But you never know."

I studied her in amazement. Though she was distorted, smeared colors with a little definition, I knew that her hair was cropped short in a boy's cut, that her eyes were green today because of her green mumu, that her face was slender, punctuated by a slender nose and slender lips. I knew that when she stood up, she would only better me by an inch and that other than the shapes of our bodies—short legs, prominent butts, long torsos, skinny, but muscular arms—no one would know she was my mother. I resembled my father's side, right down to the freckles and moles sprinkling my body. But that day, at that moment, I felt like neither a Harris nor a Gottschalk. That day I wanted to think only

positive thoughts and not fall prey to the pessimism that ran through my family's bodies like blood.

"No," I said. "It'll happen. Dr. Rosenbaum said that when I'm nine, I wouldn't have to wear my patch anymore. And I've been nine for a whole day already."

"We'll have to wait and see how you test."

"But he promised."

"Doctors don't make promises, Dani. And if Dr. Rosenbaum thinks you need to wear your patch for a few more months, then you'll suck it up and do what he says, like an adult."

"I'm not an adult," I mumbled, glaring at the mocking scenery.

"Exactly."

I wanted to tell her I had heard it all before. About school. About sports. About reading. And, most of all, my eye. But I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want my mom to morph into Mrs. Harris, the strict third grade teacher who never bent the rules. If that happened, we wouldn't get In N Out for lunch, I wouldn't be allowed to destroy the parking permit, and I would have to work on my homework the whole ride home. I planned to celebrate my successful escape from weird-dom with a milkshake and possibly even candy when we stopped at a gas station. Celebrating alone is like not celebrating at all—I wanted my mom to be excited too.

But what if we didn't even make it to UCLA on time? We had been sitting in traffic for forever. My un-patched eye wandered to the clock on the dashboard. I knew there were numbers there. I could tell they were blue, that there were three of them, but

that was it. They were small and their color made it even harder for me to focus on one number individually. Like the scenery, they laughed at me, dancing up and down in a bright blob. I wanted to rip my patch off, unshackling my good eye so I could show the numbers who was smarter, better, bigger. But that wasn't an option. I was helpless and blind again, just like I was for two hours every day.

"It's 7:15." My mom pointed at the clock. She knew I couldn't read it and spared me the embarrassment of having to ask like a five year-old. "And your appointment is at?"

I felt my mom's eyes on me. If I continued to pout, Mrs. Harris would be sure to visit, so I said, "8:45."

"And that gives us how much time to get there?"

"Forever," I said, without thinking. I knew my mom's eyebrows knit, her mouth frowned—the look of Mrs. Harris. So I counted quick in my head, hiding my fingers between my body and the car door. "An hour and a half?" My body tensed in anticipation. If I answered right, maybe my mom would reappear. If I answered wrong…

"Excellent." She smiled. "You're getting better. Good job."

We checked in at 8:40 with Grace, the receptionist who had been working for Dr. Rosenbaum since before I showed up at seven days old. She was blonde and very stylish, very LA in a curve hugging skirt, shiny shirt, and tippy high heels. As if we were at the doctor's office in Taft, she knew who we were and all about our family. She gave a busy, big city office the homey feeling that made both children and parents comfortable. After

she and my mom shared some pleasantries, we found an empty bench. The room was already packed with families.

My mom and I seemed to be the only pair waiting. Everyone else traveled in packs of four or five—the two parents, the child-patient, an older or younger sibling, and sometimes grandparents as well. The child-patients were easy to spot with glasses covering squinty eyes or for the less lucky like me, eye patches and glasses and only one squinty eye. Though I couldn't see them in detail, I had been there so many times over nine years that I knew what it all looked like. I had learned to rely on past experiences more than my sight alone.

The waiting area was divided in half by the check-in desk. One half belonged to Dr. Rosenbaum and the other to a doctor I never met. And, like a treat for good behavior for the younger kids, at both ends of the room stood playhouses.

Easily ten feet tall, ten feet wide, and seven feet deep, these were the light at the end of a long car ride for the younger kids. Each had a tile roof, yellows flowers in purple and green window boxes, green and blue trim. Inside, each was two storied. On the ground floor were three compartments: one with a zipper puzzle on the wall, one with a window, and one with a slightly sloped incline leading to the second story. Up there was a single room with several windows where little patients could feel bigger than their parents, larger than their medical problems, like the rulers of a world composed of leather chairs, magazines, crying babies, and medical equipment designed to peer beyond the physical. If only for the briefest of moments, we could look down on all and feel in control—at least until we were beckoned by a mom or dad or older brother to get down.

And then we had no choice but to exit the large room onto a platform and, after turning a corner, gliding down a carpeted slide—sometimes on our bottoms or, for the more adventurous, on our bellies—until *clump*, our feet or hands hit the floor.

But being nine, I now felt too old, too mature to partake in such childish pastimes. I was, after all, there to move beyond the mold of every other child-patient and I felt an eye patchless, ordinary looking child wouldn't need to look down on the rest of the world when you fit into it so seamlessly. Why make yourself stand out more than necessary?

To practice being ordinary—I looked to the adults as role models more than the group of children I was leaving behind—I grabbed a magazine off the side table. *Country Living* wasn't something I was too interested in, so instead of reading the articles, I studied the pictures of flowering fields, gingham pillows on a suede couch, the perfect table settings, superbly cooked lamb on the bone. All of it was more a mish-mash of colors and loosely held shapes, and in this office I felt no shame for holding the magazine only inches from my good eye.

My mom, a novel open on her lap, peered up at me. "Interesting read?"

I nodded and crossed my legs. Oh, so adult of me. "The flowers are pretty."

"They're poppies, the California state flower."

I nodded again and turned the page several times until I found another good picture—a mountain scene. I sighed and flipped almost to the end before finding a photo of a barbeque.

"Here," my mom said. "Let me see that."

Because I was bored and every minute seemed like an hour and I could stare at half-seen pictures for only so long, I handed the magazine to my mom. She laid it in her lap and picked through the other magazines on the side table closest to her until she found a *Highlights*. Opening that, she flipped to the hidden picture section. Putting the *Highlights* back in *Country Living*, she handed them back to me. It would look like I was reading the adult magazine, I realized and smiled.

"My lips are sealed," she said and went back to her novel.

I glanced around the room. Nobody seemed to be looking at me, from what I could see. Shrugging, I studied the picture. It appeared to be a lumberjack chopping a piece of wood with an axe, that much I could tell. But the hidden pictures were trickier. On the next page it listed ten smaller objects hidden within the picture. And for me it was even harder than simply concentrating enough to let my eyes find the smaller objects. I had to squint my bad eye, get the page four inches from my face and, as if I could feel the objects sticking out, I used my finger to trace along the paper. Focusing on that, I could make the image stand still long enough to really see what it was. A banana, a fork, a baseball. One by one I went through the list using the same technique until I found all ten items. It was a considerable amount of work—my brain always ached afterwards—and I knew I took at least twice as long as other kids, but I did it. And that was what mattered.

"Danielle?"

I looked up. Grace stood near one of the twelve foot tall mahogany exam room doors. "In here. Dr. Rosenbaum will be in to see you in a few minutes." Without waiting, she shuffled off back toward her desk, a line of patients awaiting her.

I set both magazines on a side table and walked to the room, my mom trailing behind. Entering, I went immediately to the patient's chair—a large, leather square chair standing a foot off the ground with a metal step to rest your feet. My head hit only three-fourths up the back of the chair. My feet dangled. To my right was a makeshift plastic desk with a container overhead holding hundreds of black and red-rimmed round pieces of glass. To the side was a control panel that would tell the TV monitor across the room, not only what letters to show, but how large they should be. Next to the writing surface was a sink with pedals that controlled the water.

To my left were all the medical contraptions, protruding from one main stand—like a metal octopus. Just beyond, against the side wall, were two chairs, one in which my mom took up camp.

Across the room from me sat the TV monitor and below, each in a clear plastic compartment, three mechanical animals. A dog, a pig, and a cow. Cords ran from their butts to plug into the wall. When I was younger, if I behaved and cooperated without too many tears and tantrums, I would get to pick one of the animals and with a push of a button, Dr. Rosenbaum would bring it to life. I always looked forward to that magical moment of witnessing stuffed animals come to life.

I swung my feet back and forth, my slip-ons hanging on my toes for dear life. "Think this'll be it?" I asked.

My mom closed her book, a finger marking her spot. "Like I said earlier, we'll have to wait and see."

I nodded. I wanted to ask why she wouldn't give me a definite answer, but Mrs. Harris had yet to show up. I studied the room. Nothing had changed in nine years, even the rolley chair Dr. Rosenbaum sat in—black with a tiny, perfectly round seat, like it wasn't meant to encourage long term sitting.

"Mom," I said. When she looked up, I continued, "Can I sit in the rolley chair?"

I could see her thinking in my mind, her eyes examining the chair and then me. "I don't see why not. Just don't break anything and scootch yourself out into the middle of the room"

"Okay." I sat and pushed myself away from the makeshift desk with both feet, the chair gliding along the marble floor without any protest. And I spun myself around.

Everything passed by in blooms of blurs—tans, blacks, and a green. Suddenly, I could hear my mom laughing, her strong hands turning me. Faster and faster until each bloom erupted into a flower—like fireworks—over and over and over. The world was alive. My head felt light and any second I would burst into my own fire. But I jerked to the side and almost fell over, the chair's interrupted movement transferring to my still spinning body.

"What—"

"Go get in the chair," my mom said, her voice flat and business like.

I stood, and more wobbled than walked back to the patient's chair. When the world stopped gyrating, Dr. Rosenbaum smiled down at me.

"Hello, Danielle," he said in a deep and smooth voice. He looked as he always had—black hair cropped close to the head, parted on the side. His rimless spectacles gave

his brown, friendly eyes an exciting glint. His nose was long with the slightest hook pointing to his constant smile and teeth that were too white, too straight to be real. He wore a white lab coat, a white button-down shirt and a tie—always sporting some geometric pattern. “You’re getting so big,” he smiled as he wheeled the chair out of the middle of the room. He sat. “These chairs are fun, aren’t they?”

I nodded, smiled, and glanced over at my mom. “Sorry, Dr. Rosenbaum. She was bored,” she said.

He shook his head and held up a hand. “I have never objected to children having fun.” He turned to the desk and opened my chart. After going through all the basic questions—any flashers or floaters, any itching or watering, how old was I now, what grade would that put me in—he dropped his pen and met my gaze. “You know what today is?”

As if I was still spinning on that chair, my limbs vibrated with excitement, muscles contracting with the thought. My vision blurred, filling with water. “I get to stop wearing my patch?” I asked, instead of stating it, because the small possibility of being denied, of being the butt of a cruel joke, bubbled in my tummy. Like my mom said, we would have to see.

Dr. Rosenbaum removed his glasses and, laughing, he said, “You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes!” I blurted out.

Both adults laughed.

“She’s been counting down the days for months now,” my mom said.

Dr. Rosenbaum nodded. “Now, Danielle. You know we have to test your vision first just to double check that your eye is strong enough to compete with your other, stronger eye.” He kept constant eye contact and, when my body dropped, he said, “Don’t be disappointed. I’m 99.9 percent sure you will leave here patch free. Okay? Ready to test your vision?”

“Ready.” I stole a glance at my mom and she shrugged. Adults always had to burst my balloon. Maybe or possibly or we’ll see or let’s do some test. Never a good, strong, solid yes (no not even being an option in my mind). It was tiring, never knowing anything for sure.

The lights lowered and Dr. Rosenbaum asked me to remove my glasses. “Since you already have your patch on, we’ll start with the right eye.” He pressed a few buttons on the controller and instantly, four black shapes I knew to be letters appeared. “Go ahead and try to read these.”

I sat up straight and closed my patched, good eye. Squinting, I fought the urge to lean forward. Four letters, I told myself, start with the first. Though it blurred into the next, I could tell it had a curve and a straight side. Distance always complicated things. “The first is a B,” I mumbled. But wait, I thought. “Or a D.”

“Good,” Dr. Rosenbaum said. “Try the next.”

I glanced at my mom. She smiled and nodded. Okay, I was on the right track. The second letter had a straight side, no curves. “L,” I said.

“Look at it again,” Dr. Rosenbaum said.

“Um.” I bit my bottom lip. If not L, then, “It’s a T?”

"And the third?"

The third and fourth letters looked like one, Siamese-twin letter. They were attached and I couldn't tell where one ended and the next began. I saw two straight sides and a curve. But was it the third letter? I took a deep breath. "I see a R."

"Okay. One more."

My mom's face seemed to be flat—no nodding or smiles—leaving me on my own. I still saw two straight sides and gave one to the R, so I needed another letter with no curves, but a straight side. "F?" I asked.

"Good," Dr. Rosenbaum said. "Go ahead and sit back. And take your patch off."

With a huff, I leaned back. Again, the adults were stalling, not being happy or sad, not telling me if I got an A or F. I took my glasses off and set them in my lap. Using a finger, I picked at the corner of the patch stuck to my temple. Once I had enough of a flap to grab, I slowly peeled it off. The last time I would ever have to remove a patch, I thought. It didn't sting. It didn't even pull at my eyebrow. In less than three seconds, I was transformed from looking like an invalid, to resembling a normal, everyday child. I blinked several times, allowing my good eye time to adjust to the low light. First in half and then in fourths, I folded the patch and stuck in under my thigh.

"Mom?" I asked, holding out my glasses. As she stood and crossed the room, I raised my eyes. No waving lines, objects shape-shifting, colors bleeding into each other. A chair was a chair. A pen was a pen. My hands were my hands. Dr. Rosenbaum wrote in my chart silently. My mom took my glasses without a word.

Where were the cheers? The confetti? The congratulations cake? I just took my patch off for the last time of my entire life. Did nobody else understand what that meant? That I'd be able to blend in playing soccer. Meeting new people I wouldn't have to put up with their snickers and rude questions. I wouldn't have to carry around boxes upon boxes of odd, tan colored patches. Other kids could go through my backpack and desk without making comments. Teachers wouldn't have to watch the clock for me, no longer needing to remind me to patch-up. I wouldn't run into door frames, kick chairs I didn't see, trip over my own feet when the ground wasn't perfectly flat. In a matter of three seconds I went from being a weirdo to being nothing special at all.

"All right," Dr. Rosenbaum said, pressing buttons on the TV controller. "Read as far down as you can."

Crossing my arms, I read the standard eye chart flawlessly, all the way down to the teeny-tiny letters.

"Good." He raised the lights and slid in front of me, still seated. From the base of the metal octopus, he withdrew an object that looked like a flashlight, only instead of emitting a big beam of light, it focused into a pin point. "Look at the TV." I did and Dr. Rosenbaum flashed the light back and forth, first in my bad eye and then in my good eye.

He put that away and slid one of the octopus arms over in front of me. It held a hollow silver square built out of four poles. In the middle, facing me, was a chin rest covered in thin white paper. With a quick flick of his wrist, Dr. Rosenbaum removed the top paper. "Go ahead and rest your chin here."

I leaned forward, placing my chin and forehead in their correct spots. Dr. Rosenbaum leaned in, too, placing his eyes to the refracting lens. He clicked a light into place. Blue instantly filled my right eye. Shining down from somewhere inside the machine, the light hit a mirror, reflected into my eye, which then reflected a large, magnified view of my eye to Dr. Rosenbaum's.

"Your contact is dirty. And scratched."

Without any commands or sounds, he shined the blue and white light in my left eye as well. Finally, he slid the machine back into its resting place and took a few notes.

I glanced at my mom. She raised her eyebrows and crossed her fingers, which made me smile. After hours of skepticism, at last she seemed a bit hopeful. Maybe not bouncing off the walls with excitement, but I took what I could get.

"Well," Dr. Rosenbaum said. He took his glasses off in a slow, overly-dramatic way. Your lens needs to be cleaner. Dr. Weissman would be disappointed. And if you keep wearing it when it is this dirty, you will get an eye infection. I don't want any unnecessary problems to impede your progress."

My mom put in and took out my contact lens for me every day. She washed it, too and I knew she followed the cleaning procedure exactly, but when I was constantly rubbing and poking my eye, there was never a chance for it to stay as pristine as it was when my mom dropped it in my eye in the morning. We were told every visit that I needed to be careful, that I was playing a game of chicken with infection, but sometimes, no matter how hard we tried, my lens would get dirty.

I kept nodding. Yeah, sure, my mom would need to wash my contact better. Dr. Weissman would give my mom and me a long lecture and go over cleaning procedures again. Yes, an eye infection would be bad. Okay. But what about my patch? To keep from tapping my fingers, I placed my hands under my thighs. And? I wanted to scream. Get to the point. At the rate he was talking, humans would grow wings before he got to the good stuff.

"And I want to take a moment to congratulate—"

Me? Smiling, all my muscles tensed like I was bracing for a bomb. Finally, congratulations to me for being such an outstanding patient all these years, for letting everyone under the sun poke and prod me, for never complaining when a test hurt. And because of all that? No more patch.

"—your mom." Dr. Rosenbaum swiveled his chair around and grinned at my mom, whose eyes found her hands in her lap. "Because of all your hard work and dedication to your daughter, I can say proudly as Danielle's doctor that you have been a dream parent. That E system you created, we now use with several other patients. You make sure Danielle is patched when she is supposed to be. You even made her read and play sports with the patch."

I wanted to shake my head, to tell Dr. Rosenbaum most of those things—like playing sports or reading with my patch—were not meant to be applauded, unless torture was the overall goal. Please. If my mom had been a "dream parent" I would have done nothing but watch TV and eat candy all day.

Dr. Rosenbaum turned and looked at me, very serious. “Someday, you’ll understand what your mom has done for you.”

I nodded. And?

“Danielle, your vision has improved the most out of any patient in my career. 20/60 is a dramatic difference from when you were ten days old. And I know your mom didn’t do it all. I know you had to work, too. And because of your hard work, you are done. You don’t have to wear a patch anymore.”

Dr. Rosenbaum continued to talk, but I didn’t hear any of it. In my head, I was dancing, sparklers were going off, confetti bombs exploded, cake was flying, angels were singing, my mother sobbed with joy. After nine years, I was free. But all I could do, in that exam room with barking animals I was too old to care about, was smile.

2.

I was born at 9:30 P.M. on May 10, 1987. My parents settled on Danielle Marie Harris, named after no family members like my older brother, Tommy, but a name worthy of a nickname—Dani. And that’s who I’ve been since my mom first held me wrapped in the hospital issue pink blanket.

Five days later, I was taken to the pediatrician and though I had ten toes and ten fingers, two arms and two legs, there was something wrong. When the pen light was shined in both my eyes, the right one didn’t reflect it back. My eyes were supposed to shine red, and when my mom saw only my left eye glow, she thought I was blind. How would I grow up normal only seeing half of what others saw? Would I be able to run and play? Would I be able to read and write? Would my brain not develop properly? Would I

need special teachers, special care-takers? Was even more wrong? Maybe this was a symptom and not the real problem. Raising a child was hard enough. Raising a child with a disability seemed impossible. It had all been a ruse, her perfect little bundle of joy was flawed. Nothing is worse than feeling like the wool was pulled over your eyes.

At eight days old, I had my first eye appointment at Jules Stein Eye Institute at UCLA. Dr. Rosenbaum said I had a cataract—the lens of my right eye calcified so much so that it was bone. No light reached my retina, no signals fired to my brain. But this was good news. It was only one eye and didn't invade my body beyond that. I was still a healthy baby, though the useless lens would have to come out.

Two days after my diagnosis, I was put under anesthesia. Dr. Rosenbaum made an incision around the top of the iris, peeled back my eye and extracted the cataract, leaving a gaping hole where layers upon layers of scar tissue would grow that wouldn't affect the development of my eye or vision. After smoothing out my eye, three stitches were used to sew it up and a metal patch was taped in place over my right eye.

After surgery, the doctors told my parents there might be limitations, that I might never catch a ball or ride a bike. They weren't sure how much vision I would regain, even with the help of a corrective lens, or what caused the cataract. Maybe a tumor or a degenerative disease, no one knew.

My parents didn't care. My mom said that I would catch a ball, ride a bike. My dad upped the ante, not only would I catch a ball and ride I bike, but I would do it all ten times better than any kid my age.

I would be raised on determination.

I began wearing a soft contact lens, with the help of Dr. Weissman, when I was twenty days old, and by the time I was twenty-one days old, I was a contact lens popper-outer. I would go through at least three a month, besides the expected need for new lenses, having to be refitted and the power adjusted because of growth. My parents tell me they used to spend hours in parking lots, parks, and grocery stores searching on hands and knees for the elusive lens. They didn't understand why I was so determined to make their lives difficult, but I wasn't rubbing my eye out of spite. Having a foreign object forced on me several times a day when I wasn't able to do more than what was necessary to survive—eat, sleep, make dirty diapers, cry when bothered—upset me, as it would any baby. The lens wasn't comfortable and my primal instincts took over, telling me to eliminate the irritant. Like sneezing when your nose tickles or scratching an itch, I was a servant to firing synapses.

Eventually my parents bought insurance to cover the cost of replacement lenses and I was switched to a rigid gas permeable lens that was the prettiest color of sky blue.

The first three years of my life I was required to wear a sticky, tan eye patch three hours a day over my good, left eye, the idea being that without the dominance of my good eye, my right eye would be forced to focus and work and grow. The challenge, for my parents, was managing to have me patched and awake for three consecutive hours. The moment my eye was covered, I'd fall asleep, leaving my mom with a choice: either let me sleep and try again later or wake me up and deal with the bawling and grumpiness. She usual chose the latter.

Everything passed in a haze of doctor appointments and play dates until I was four. While my parents worked hard—my mom dealing with Tommy and me and my dad working on his doctorate—I just existed.

3.

I sat on the plaid sofa, legs crossed under my pink, ruffled nightgown. Waking from naps was hard. I knew what was coming and balled my hands into fists and rubbed my eyes furiously.

"Don't pop your lens out," my mom called from the kitchen, her head bobbing up and down like a jack-in-the-box.

After dragging me out to the couch, my mom had told me to put my head back and look up. With her thumb and index finger on one hand, she pried my right eye wide open, and with the hard, blue lens balanced on the index finger of her other hand, she placed the curved piece of gas permeable plastic on my eye. The trick, she says now, was to do this when I wasn't quite coherent, to keep the whining and wiggling to a minimum.

I had asked her for a piece of microwaved bologna and while she was distracted, I set in motion my form of escape—the lens didn't hurt, but having something forced on you was never pleasant, especially when it was stuck in your eye. It would have worked too, except that I made a low gurgle of pleasure every time I rubbed my eyes, and to her, this sound was an alarm she could hear from anywhere in the house. Contact lenses were expensive, combined with the drive down to UCLA and the days off of work, my mom had developed a bat like sense of hearing.

Defeated, I gave my eyes two more good passes and dropped my fists. “Can I call Jessica after?”

With the bologna curled into a bowl on a paper plate in one hand, and a sippy cup of apple juice in the other, my mom padded across the room. “No hissy fits and we’ll see.” She handed me the plate, setting the capped cup on a side table.

“For how long?” Like pulling the plastic open tab on a new CD, I peeled the thin layer of skin off the curved meat and held up the perfect circle, peering at my mom through it as she pulled an eye patch from her pocket.

“It won’t matter if you keep playing with your food.” I stuffed the bologna in my mouth. “Put your head back,” she said, and as I did so, she removed the back of the patch and positioned it over my left eye and gently pressed down, while I rubbed my greasy fingers on the couch. “All right. Finish lunch and then we’ll start.” Standing, my mom smoothed my sleep-rumpled hair before walking out of the room.

Now I couldn’t see anything clearly. But I still managed to eat. The pink blob looked appetizing in my lap. I ripped it in half and crammed it in my mouth.

Looking around the room, half-blind, I couldn’t make out the brick fireplace ten feet in front of me. It looked red, but had no shape—a blur of what I knew to be brick. It blended into the white wall behind it, the fireplace a scab, the plant next to it a green and brown scar. I knew there was a love seat off to the side between the fireplace and me, but it blended into the brown carpet, the pale blue plaid non-existent. The carpet and wall had no division, bleeding into each other, a boring, neutral colored tie-dye. Our dog, Maggie, a Newfoundland weighing a hundred pounds, lay on the floor below me, a black mass,

like a mole, mixing into the carpet. The archway to the kitchen, where I could hear my mom puttering around, looked like nothing—a never ending tunnel of white with random splotches of color, a splash of green there, a dab of red here. My hands looked like clubs except for when I spread my fingers and the background color leaked through.

But I didn't know this was wrong. I figured everyone saw a dog out of one eye and a black blob out of the other. Sure, Tommy didn't wear a patch, but for all I knew, he had when I wasn't around. No one in my life, not my family, my friends, or their family ever said anything to me about being different. They didn't treat me different. My parents never held me back from any activities. I didn't yet know there were categories—normal or weird—all I knew was that I was a girl who, when I had my patch on, had a hard time keeping up with other kids, that I might run into a wall or a door jam, but that did equate to being different—all kids fall and some are slower than others. And I was lucky to not know the difference, to not set myself apart so early in life.

I ate the other half of my lunch, wiping off the grease I managed to get on my face with the back of my hand.

"Ready Freddy," I hollered through my bologna, setting the plate on the couch next to me.

My mom materialized and grabbed the plate. "This will stain the couch. Careful." I watched what I knew to be her, but what appeared more like an amoeba move across the white space. Her shape, swimming through the tie-dyes, came to rest near the wound of the fireplace.

And then something new popped into existence—a black smudge in front of mom-blob— like a magician pulling a quarter out of your ear. It was the dreadful E. Literally, a cut-out of a capital E, laminated, and about twelve inches tall by eight inches wide. My mom had made several at school, handed them out to my eye doctors, and with their okay, began practicing with me. She would sit on the fireplace and position the E to the left, right, up, or down and from the couch, I would point the same way as the E. The point was to force my bad eye to work, to see and because of the repeated use of my eye every day, my vision had no choice but to improve—like conditioning for a sport. We did this four days a week for three years, until I was able to recognize letters, and it had such an impact on the growth and improvement of my vision, that my doctors adopted the same method for testing, even recommending it to other parents with young, vision impaired children.

I didn't hate practicing, but after a half an hour of straining to see, guessing became tedious. And at four, tedium meant throwing a fit. Fits meant an angry mother and an angry mom meant stern words. And stern words, of course, meant a spanking. From the spanking, anything could have happened, even compliance on my part.

"Ready?" My mom's voice asked from across the room. She sat in her usual place for this activity—on the fireplace.

I nodded and sighed. Running around outside, barefoot, was what I was really ready for. But I wouldn't be allowed to do that until I suffered through the E.

"Well?"

Squinting, I focused on the black blemish. Because of the three legs and space between them, which looked blurry and all smeared together, I pointed toward the ceiling.

"Good. Now which way?" She spun the blemish and the legs lost their definition, like fan blades whirling on high.

"I don't know," I whined, extending the word know out for a few seconds. "It's just a blob."

"Concentrate. Stop rubbing."

Reluctantly, I dropped both fists from my eyes and into my lap. One of the downsides of thinking everyone else is as blind as you, is not realizing all can see exactly what you're doing, that you're not blurry like they are to you.

"I can't see it." I stuck my bottom lip out and scratched at my eye patch.

"Then guess. Let's go." I whimpered and flopped on my side. "Danielle. Want a time out?" I rolled over and stared at the tan of the couch. "You keep this up, you'll get a spanking and won't get to play with Jessica."

She always did this, starting with a simple threat that didn't scare me, and escalating until she hit a nerve. I hated spankings, but they were quick and only stung for a few minutes after. Not being allowed to play was like dying. It lasted forever and was irreversible. It not only punished me, but Jessica too, and I knew she was at home waiting for my call or knock.

My body stiffened. I sat up. Without even looking at the E, I pointed to the left.

"Focus and try again."

I squinted and leaned forward. Only the sliver of white showing through the blur of black told me it was really facing the ground. I pointed down.

"Good job. And now?"

It went on like this for another half an hour—whining, threats, threats, unwilling obedience—until I was freed. With my mom's help, I wiggled into a pair of shorts and a tank top. With my patch still on, I navigated the hallway and corners of the house from memory, like someone would at two in the morning without turning lights on. I dashed through the door and danced down the driveway, my mom calling behind me to be home before sunset.

My parents didn't find Taft until 1984 and only moved from Simi Valley because my dad got a Principal's job at Conley Elementary School. By this time, my mom had her teaching credential and found a job teaching sixth grade at Elk Hills School, which served the town of Elk Hills—made up of ten or so mobile homes and decaying and almost uninhabitable track houses built for the oil workers of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Most of the children she taught were "drug babies" and had learning, mental, or physical disabilities.

They bought a house in a new track of homes off of State Route 33, behind the Recreation Center and next to a mobile home park, the beginnings of what is now known as Taft Heights. A house meant for a young family, single story, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a large backyard with grass and a dog-eared fence. They planted an almond

tree in the front yard, cucumbers in the window boxes, flowers lining the wide, easy sloping stairs and driveway.

The rest of McKinley Street was eventually built and by 1987, all the houses were full of young families with children. The adults, on any given Saturday afternoon would barbeque in a random backyard, drinking beer and wine coolers, the kids playing in the hose, tossing water balloons, chasing in a game of tag

The muted blurs of inside transformed into a brilliant white haze outside. The concrete of the sidewalk was hot on my feet as I ran past house after house. Running made the tie-dye of green and black and blue and white hop all around me, shifting, swirling, nothing standing still. The world skipped with me and I saw beyond it all. A tree wasn't just a tree. One step it looked like a horse and with the next, like a car. The sidewalk undulated, a normally unseen obstacle course, and I dipped and dodged and jumped, making it through scratch-free. Houses had faces. The old man Heinz's in a constant growl, the windows slanted down, the door-nose long and pointed, the knocker a wart on its tip. The sky, a blue only the sky can be, was deep and endless. Birds darting across were music notes, matching their songs. With my eye patch on, nothing simply was and because of that, I was lucky, my mind forced to constantly create and recreate, my world a never-ending metamorphosis.

After passing three houses set far back and up a slope, I rounded the curve and saw the white picket fence bordering the Millers front yard. Their house, too, was set atop the slope, but instead of a gradual climb, their lawn seemed to rise instantly at a sharp

angle. Chopping the grass in half were several cement stairs and at the top, a porch with a bench swing. With my patch on, the grass undulated like a snoring monster, the stairs chains keeping it from destroying the neighborhood.

I scurried up the front steps like a dog, on all fours. This was the safest way to conquer stairs since I couldn't see each individual step, and bent over, gravity was less likely to let me pitch backward like a rag doll. I reached the patio and stood. The door, a robin's egg blue, looked like a smear of finger paint on a white stucco canvas and when I raised my fist to knock, I misjudged the distance and rapped on air. I held my hand out in front of me as if I were signaling someone to stop and scooted forward until my palm made contact with the smooth wood. Balling my hand in a fist, I rested my knuckles on the door before cocking my wrist to knock. This was a practice I developed as soon as I could walk because often times I would go to grab things like a cup or the handle of a drawer and catch only air, so by laying a hand on it first, I saved myself the frustration of multiple attempts.

The door opened and in front of me stood someone tall, like an adult. Its hair was honey colored and looked like a golden crown. I couldn't make out the face or any other details besides the pink of its clothes.

"Hi, Dani." The voice was female and had to be Mrs. Miller's.

I took a shot and said, "Hi, Mrs. Miller."

"Jessica is napping, but she can come over when she wakes up."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Be careful going down the steps."

"I will." I turned and sat. Going down was the tricky part, but I had developed a method for that, too. I pushed myself forward, my bottom barely scrapping along the cement, like the crab walk, until one of my feet fell over the edge of the first step. I placed one and then the other foot down on that step, so I was sitting at the top. Inching my butt forward, I felt the ledge and slowly let my butt fall down a step. My feet found the next step and my butt followed. I did this until I reached the bottom, which I knew because the dark asphalt of the street stretched like the ocean out in front of me.

Standing, I looked over my shoulder at the grass monster. I had tamed it so many times, but still I felt proud because I knew it could have thrown me to my death if it felt so inclined. I saw the gaping hole above the stairs disappear back into the blue smear—Mrs. Miller had watched my descent, like a guardian angel.

I followed the sidewalk back around, waving at the faces of each house I passed. Like boats on the horizon, I noticed people-shaped squiggles wading through the asphalt ocean. They must have just come outside because I hadn't spotted them earlier. I was curious and veered off the sidewalk, testing with my toe to find the edge before stepping down into the gutter. After only three steps, I banged into a squiggle that turned out to be a boy, my brother to be exact. I could tell from his blonde hair and orange shirt—he had it on before I took my nap earlier in the afternoon.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

Tommy glanced at me only briefly before turning back towards the other kid standing further down the street. "What does it look like?" he said over his shoulder.

Tommy held a brown blob in one hand and it seemed to be eating his hand. If I had never seen it before, I would have been totally confused, and, just then, as if to prove my point, Tommy lifted the brown blob in the air and it popped. That sound was unmistakable—Tommy was playing catch.

"Playing catch," I said, as if I had solved a riddle.

Tommy's upper body jerked forward and I knew he tossed the ball back down the street. "Yeah. And you aren't allowed to play with us. Go inside."

This was something else I was used to—being told no and shooed away. It was a constant with Tommy. I always wanted to be included and he never wanted me around. Unfortunately for him, when I tattled, our mom and dad would always tell him to let me play. I'm sure this annoyed him, having to drag his little sister around and watch her, but it made me happy.

"Can I watch?" I eased closer to him.

"Watch out," Tommy squealed and before I knew what was happening, I was pushed sideways. I fell to my knees. Numbness was the first thing I noticed, but it was fleeting. Sharp pain screamed from my knees and hands. Lying down, I whimpered, staring at, but not seeing, my hands. They were in front of me because I was holding them up to examine, but they were flat discs with no definition. I couldn't tell if I was actually hurt, if I was bleeding, or if rocks were stuck under my skin. Not knowing was worse than knowing because anything was possible. I could be missing fingers or ripped the meat of my palms clean off. It hurt and I was scared and shocked and frustrated. Within seconds, my whimpers turned to tears.

Tommy appeared at my side. I felt him brush off my hands, then grab them, lifting me to my feet.

"You're okay," he said softly. "You're not even bleeding. Sorry."

The boy form Tommy was playing with lumbered up. From his height, I knew he was Kale, who lived across the street. "Nice tackle," he laughed.

And that made me mad. I could handle Tommy knocking me down for my own safety, especially since he said sorry, but Kale laughing at me was just mean. And there was nothing more I hated than people being mean.

"Shut up," I screamed, snot leaking into my mouth. "Kale-the-big-fat-whale. You're a big meanie." I drew my fisted hand back, but Tommy grabbed my arm before I could hit Kale.

"You're feisty," Kale said.

"Turd," I shot back, sniffling.

Tommy stood between us. "You can watch, Dani. Just stay on the curb."

I still wanted to punch Kale, but was led to the curb by Tommy and pushed down to my bottom. I couldn't see my knees in enough detail to assess the damage Kale had caused. My patch felt wet from crying and when I shook my head, tears sloshing back and forth inside it with the movement, like leaky goggles when you finish swimming. I could peel it off, see my knees, and risk a spanking, or I could leave it be, imagine what my knees looked like, and not get into anymore trouble. But what else is there to live for if not risk?

I picked a corner of the patch loose and leaned my head forward, tears streaming out and down the side of my face. Using my index finger and thumb, I grabbed the loose corner, held my breath, and ripped it off. The sting disappeared as I rubbed my eye and I let the held air escape in a rush through my nose.

"Mom's going to be mad you did that," Tommy called from the street.

Shrugging, I said, "I know." He shrugged too and I turned back to my patch. I folded in half first and then in half again and put it under my bottom. I'm not sure why I thought sitting on it would make it disappear, but that's what I always did.

The world slowly came back into focus as my left eye adjusted to the light. Trees were trees, houses were only houses. I could follow the baseball through the air and into Tommy's glove and then back into Kale's. Things were simply things again, everything losing that morphing magic when seen through a normal eye. I had a feeling of both anticipation and loss. I couldn't wait to stop the itching and pulling at my skin, but I knew I would only see the every day, the boring, and that always made me hesitate, if only for a moment.

My knees had a few rocks stuck to them and both were scraped lightly, but Tommy had been right, I wasn't bleeding. My hands didn't fare as well—the heels of both were scratched and bleeding, if only slightly. I licked them and grimaced and licked them again.

When I looked back up, Jessica was running down the sidewalk. I waved and she waved back, picking up speed. She skidded to a stop and plopped down next to me. We

were wearing identical outfits; mine a size bigger since I towered over Jessica by a few inches.

"I went to your house," I said, watching Tommy throw a pop up to Kale.

"I know. You knock loud," she grinned.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Did I wake you up?"

Jessica shook her head. "I never went to sleep. Momma shut my door and I played with My Little Ponies. I heard you knock and got back in bed till Momma came in to get me."

"Wanna play with our buckets?"

Jessica nodded and we stood. Holding hands, we skipped up the driveway and into my house.

Inside, my dad was watching TV and my mom was grading papers from a summer school class she was teaching. Both looked up at us.

"Dani! Jessica-messica!" my dad hollered and then focused back on the TV.

"Where's your patch?" my mom asked, face already set in a don't-lie-to-me look.

I held my hands out, showing her the scraps. "I fell and cried. It got all wet." I walked over to her and she grabbed one of my hands.

My mom studied my wounds. "Next time, come get a new one. You need to wear the patch if your eye is going to get any stronger."

Nodding, I asked, "Can we use the hose and buckets?"

"Stay in the backyard. I'll bring you towels." My mom glanced down at the stack of papers in her lap. "Don't leave the hose running if you're not using it."

"Okay," I squealed. And grabbing Jessica's hand, I yanked her through the house and into the backyard.

Five minutes later, we were in our underwear, both soaked to the bone. In the summer, the ground would get so hot that water would only come out warm at its coolest. That day, the water was running hot, and we took turns spraying each other. We would brace ourselves for its impact and squeal and dance in place because, when the water hit us, our skin would prickle and bumps would rise. We were bright red, not from the sun, but from the water burning our skin. Because we knew the water would burn, we had first filled up two flat, wide buckets, playing in the hose while they cooled down, like a pot of boiling water left to cool on the stove.

I turned the hose off on the side of the house and ran back to Jessica. "I call the red one," I screamed as I turned the corner.

"I call the blue one," Jessica yelled back.

We moved so that we stood behind our respective buckets. "I'm a mermaid with long pink hair and a green tail. My name is Pretty and I'm a princess." I stared at Jessica, waiting for her to say what she looked like.

"I," Jessica said, hesitantly, "want to be a dog."

"No. There aren't dogs in the ocean."

She thought for a moment, shivering, the sun setting, disappearing behind the house. "Then a lobster-dog. Named Spot. I'm your best friend. And the king's favorite lobster-dog."

"And I'm his favorite daughter." And when Jessica nodded, I said "Ready Freddy?"

"Ready." We stepped into our buckets, one foot at a time, and with each step, I could see the ocean over taking us, the rainbow coral, schools of fish darting by. I looked at Jessica and she had changed into a lobster-dog, with a lobster's body and a dog's legs, tail, and head. She was red with black and white spots.

My arms looked the same, only my legs were fused and a scaly, shiny green tail grew over my feet and up to my thighs. Jewels in reds and oranges dotted my tail and a swim suit top made of the same appeared. As I moved through the water, my hair floated around my shoulders in a cotton candy pink with strands mixed in that were hot pink and glittery.

"Let's go, Spot. The king wants to see us," I said, and with each word, bubbles escaped from my mouth.

We had an adventure, deciding together that a pack of evil octopi were trying to invade the king's coral castle. We took up arms—sword fish—against them and together, without help from anyone other sea creatures, we conquered the eight-legged beasts, sending them fleeing in clouds of their own ink. Just as we were being knighted, a voice broke the spell, sending the waves of creation crashing out into the grass, our underwater world disappearing as quickly as we had called it forth.

"Girls, I have towels! Come dry off."

I stood up in my almost dry bucket—swimming had caused most of the water to spill over—and held my arms out. My mom wrapped me and then Jessica as tight as

presents with beach towels. While we played, the sun had dropped from the sky, though it didn't take any of the heat with it.

"Jess, your mom called and wants you to run home. You're having tacos for dinner. And we're having stroganoff."

I cringed. "Can I eat with Jessica?"

Jessica, gathering her clothes, paused and we both looked at my mom expectantly. "Not tonight. I think you two can handle a few hours apart. And you," she turned her gaze on me, and I knew it wasn't going to be good, "need a bath. To wash some of the summer off of you."

Moving even faster with the threat of a bath, Jessica scurried over to the sliding glass door, her arms full of clothes. "See you tomorrow," she said, before heaving the door open and disappearing.

"Bye," I called after her, while my mom unwrapped me and attacked my hair with the towel.

"Let's put your clothes on to eat and then it'll be bath time."

And that's what we did, only I didn't eat much. Noodles, to me, were gross like worms, and the chunks of beef without the sauce looked like our dog Maggie's poop, but with the sauce, they resembled barf. I did eat some frozen peas and carrots and, because I was threatened with no play time in the morning, I suffered through five whole bites of the wormy vomit.

After, I was lead to the bathroom and sat down on the closed toilet.

"Time to take your contact out," my mom said, arranging the appropriate cleansers, tablets, and cases on the counter. She washed her hands. "Head back and look up."

I did as told and saw two fingers aiming for my eye. Just like when putting in the contact lens, my mom held my eye open and squeezed my top and bottom eyelids together, pressing down on my eye at the same time. This forced the contact to pop up just enough to where my mom could peel it off my eye with another finger.

While she did this, I closed my good eye and could actually see the contact lens lose its suction on my eye. Everything would become even blurrier than before. Nothing had any definition except color. I had no depth perception and couldn't tell what was close and what was far away. Everything disappeared into both sameness and nothingness. For me, that first minute every night without my contact lens was the only time I ever became frightened. I could handle the dark because I knew my mom and dad and brother were there somewhere, but in the blurs, no one existed. And nothing is worse than being alone.

Immediately, I would open my good, left eye and let the rush of relief spread from my head to my toes.

"I know, I know," my mom cooed. "It's over for now." She kissed me on the forehead and turned to the sink, dropping the lens into one of its many containers. I assume she always thought it hurt, removing the contact lens, but it didn't and at four, I couldn't verbalize my fear, what it always felt like that instant the world disappeared.

She plugged the drain in the tub and ran the hot water and, while she did this, I rubbed at my naked eye, gurgling in relief.

The lens didn't consciously bother me while it was on, but every time it was removed, it felt like my eye could finally breathe. Blinking, my eyelid didn't push anything up or down as it did the lens. It rode low on my pupil, so that a quarter-moon sliver sat below the green of my eye and showed blue against the white sclera. It would adjust with each blink of my eyelid, starting high, where it was supposed to always rest, when I first opened my eye and instantly sliding down lower the longer I waited between blinks. You could actually see the lens move if you were to watch me blink. The absence of the plastic was always a welcome relief.

"You know," my mom began, looking down at me with her hands on her hips, "someday you're going to have to take care of your contact all by yourself. Even putting it in and taking it out."

I smiled at the thought of being that big. "That's a long ways away."

"Maybe," my mom said. "Time to get in the bath. I'm going to find your brother so I can bathe you two at the same time. Do you want any Barbie's or My Little Ponies to play with?" She opened the door to the bathroom. I nodded, and she said, "Okey dokey. Go on and get in. Tommy and I will be right back." She shut the door behind her.

And, as I always did when I was alone and without my contact, patch, and glasses, I alternated closing my eyes. First the bad one and then the good one and each time only my bad eye was open, my heart would race just a little faster.

4.

For the first four years of my life, my dad was in the doctoral program at the University of La Verne studying Education, besides being the Principal at Jefferson Elementary School in Taft. I only have a few memories of him at home during those years—draining my parents' waterbed, watching TV, napping on the couch.

In 1991, my dad finished school, earning his Ph. D. He wanted to move out of Taft, to go somewhere for a better job. My parents bought a house in Mammoth Lakes that same year, where we already had a summer cabin. My dad had been going up to Mammoth with his father since he was a boy and less than a year before he died, Grandpa Harris bought a cabin across the road from Horseshoe Lake. Because of that, and all of his memories, Mammoth was special to my dad. He wanted to raise Tommy and me there, for us to grow up fishing and hiking in the summer, skiing and snowshoeing in the winter. My parents already had the house, so it made sense to leave the flat, dry oil fields of Taft for tree-covered, lake-filled Mammoth. The only problem, he didn't have a job lined up. And neither did my mom.

I can imagine my dad's resigned job search across California, his half-hearted interviews while he dreamed about Mammoth the way his father had. In a confined, hot and cramped office he sat in a suit and tie, answering "What if" questions asked by school boards. As they droned on he nodded and nodded, wondering what the temperature was on the mountain, if a crafts fair was going on in the parking lot of the grocery store, if the front tire of Tommy's bike was still going flat. He knew where he wanted to be and nothing is more frustrating than dreaming the impossible dream.

While he was doing that, my mom, Tommy, and I moved out of the house on McKinley Street. My parents listed it before my dad had a job, figuring it would take all summer to find a buyer, only to get several offers right away. We had a garage sale and managed to get rid of almost all of Tommy and my bedroom furniture and a few other odds and ends like baby clothes and toys we had since outgrown.

In the summer of 1992, when I was five and preparing to start school, we went to live in Mammoth. Mammoth had been my second home and, suddenly, it became my only home.

Like most houses in that area, our home on Grindelwald Street was two stories, with the kitchen, living room, and dining room upstairs and all of the bedrooms down—heat rises and in the mountains, people want the heat where they spend most of their time.

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Being the new kids in town, Tommy and I kept to ourselves. Like sleeping bag worm wars, we would create games—sliding down the stairs on sleeping bags, building forts, playing baseball with pinecones, living in a tent in the backyard.

One day we were home alone.

"I'm bored," I whined, watching TV with Tommy. I was lying belly down on the carpet kicking the floor over and over with the balls of my feet. That morning, my mom had me wear my patch early and, before she left to go grocery shopping, she let me rip it off because being half-blind without adult supervision would only lead to disaster.

Tommy was sprawled on one of the blue floral couches that came with the house. The cushions were as comfortable as cardboard, the few matching, loose pillows like sacks of rocks.

"Then go do something," he said. "And stop kicking the ground so loud."

I glanced at him and then at the TV, holding my feet in the air. I wanted him to play with me, but knew if I asked, he'd say no. It had happened before and I had to do something to get his attention. Smiling, I brought both my feet down at the same time, hard. The resulting bang made me smile even bigger. I lifted my feet and slammed them down again.

"Stop, Dani," Tommy said. "I'm trying to watch this." He didn't even flinch, eyes still locked on the TV.

I alternated feet, kicking the floor as hard as I could. It hurt, but then most things worth doing hurt. My face scrunched with the effort and I was so absorbed in being annoying, it shocked me when one of those rock pillows slammed into the side of my head. Screeching, I grabbed my cheek and fell onto my side. "Ow," I howled.

Tommy swooped down off the couch, scooping the pillow up. "Well," he said, "stop then."

I kept on moaning, even though the pain had started to subside. I had him just where I wanted—all of his attention on me. I elevated from a low groan to a high-pitched squeal.

"I'll hit you again."

I didn't look up, but could detect the hint of a smile in his voice. Mission accomplished. I kept making noise. And bam. He brought the pillow down on my side and then down on my head, and back down on my side. I couldn't help it and started to giggle.

I had to get to my feet and find a pillow. I pushed myself around, until I could see Tommy's feet. I reached out, got both my hands around his ankles and pulled. Trying to reach a pillow before he got back on his feet, I dove for the couch, landing on my stomach, knocking the air out of me. Heaving, struggling for breath, I found the corner of a pillow. And just in time.

Tommy, both hands on his pillow, lifted it up behind his head and brought it arching down on mine, but it only bounced off of my pillow.

"Too slow." Laughing, I rolled off the couch. I swung and hit him in the back. With a grunt, he turned and bull-rushed me, knocking me to the floor. We both frantically whacked at each other with the pillows, laughing and grunting and panting.

Tommy fell over sideways. "Time out," he breathed and for the next few minutes, we lay on the floor, grinning, heaving, eyeing each other, waiting to see who would make the first move.

Finally, I stood, cradling my pillow. Instinctively, Tommy cocked his to the ready position, like a tiger stalking its prey he followed my every move. I took a step and he took a step. I moved my pillow and he moved his pillow. And that gave me an idea. What if I…

In one fluid motion I planted my feet and swung, only I saw his pillow careening toward my head and I flinched, dropping my pillow to protect my face with my hands. “Stop,” I screamed. To my surprise, he did, pulling his pillow back only a moment before it would have smacked me in the nose.

Confused, Tommy asked, “What?” pillowing falling to his side. “Are you hurt?”

I was going to shake my head no, but then why did I ask him to stop?

“Are you hurt?” he asked again.

“I have to pee,” I blurted, standing still like I had grown roots.

We stared at one another until Tommy said, “Hurry up.”

“Okay.” And a bit bewildered, I walked across the room to the small bathroom.

The bathroom, the third in the house and only one upstairs, had a red sink with a backsplash done in white tiles with red chili peppers. The shower curtain was black with peppers, the toilet seat cover was red, the hand towels stitched with peppers. Naturally, we called it the ugly bathroom.

I entered and went through the motions, lifting the toilet seat cover, pulling down my shorts, and sitting down. But I really didn’t have to go. As I sat there, I thought. I didn’t know why I lied. Lies were bad—my parents said so, the TV said so, even Tommy said so—but I didn’t want to be made fun of. I lied and it saved me. Tommy didn’t question me, couldn’t read the fib in my face. How could something that kept me from getting hit in the face be wrong? I was baffled and decided I had to try it again. Maybe it was a fluke. Possible, yes, but it still needed to be tested. And, with that decided, I stood and flushed.

Tommy chucked my pillow at me when I was back in his sight. “Ready?” he asked, standing in attack position. I nodded and the pillow battle resumed. We parried and blocked, sometimes connecting with a belly or leg or head.

“We’re going to keep going till you say I win,” Tommy panted.

And like I imagined a super hero would, I shot back, “Never,” with my nose held high. Only with my head titled all the way back, I couldn’t see the pillow coming. Tommy slammed his pillow into my neck and chin, and like when Daffy has been hit with the anvil, I saw stars, spun in a half circle, and dropped to the floor.

“Oops. Are you okay? I didn’t mean—“

I shook my head. “I’m okay.” But that was another lie. I tasted blood, must have bit my lip when the pillow collided with my jaw. If I whined, or cried, the game would be over. Essentially, I’d be telling Tommy he won. The game started on my terms and it was going to end on my terms.

My tongue hurt and my neck ached and simply knowing I was bleeding made me want to whine or cry or say something, but no. I jumped to my feet and swung, whacked, sliced with my pillow. The element of surprise was on my side. I managed to knock Tommy to the ground where I pummeled him until his giggles turned to grunts.

“Stop,” he said. “Stop!”

But I kept on pounding him with my rock pillow. “Say I win,” I said, pillow poised above my head. He hesitated, so I brought it down once more.

“Fine, fine. You win. Just stop.” Curled in the fetal position, his head tucked under his arms, I couldn’t quite hear him.

"Huh?"

He glanced up at me and, seeing my pillow harmlessly at my side, he said, "You win. Geez. Crazy."

I tossed my pillow on his stomach and skipped back to the couch. Not only had I won, but got the TV clicker to boot.

Too bad victory tasted like blood and smelled like lies.

A few weeks later, around midnight, I awoke with a start. I had to pee. Bad. Looking around my room, everything seemed as if it was ready to attack in the darkness. As if I had a patch on, everything took a new life—the canopy over my bed looked like a ghost, all my stuffed animals lining rows and rows of shelves on all four walls had evil eyes, fangs, and hungry, growling tummies. The closet door across the room was ajar and who knew what was lurking, waiting to pounce. Not to mention what was lying under my bed. The worst sort of monsters, with twenty hands with extra long, yellow curly nails and hair made of snakes. Once they had me, I'd be chopped up for a stew, or, even worse, be farmed out to other families to be a live doll where they would fawn over me, touching and hugging and kissing me. The bathroom was all the way down the dark, shadow coated hall. I had enough trouble using that bathroom during the day, and if it was scary with lights on and doors open, it would be impossible in the eerie silence of midnight.

I needed to go, but was paralyzed. I told myself things I knew my mom would say—that I was being silly, monster aren't real, turn a light on, be a big girl—and finally psyched myself up enough to leap from my bed to the PVC pipe bench my dad had made

And then something jangled in the hall. With the heightened senses of fear and adrenaline, I listened, body ridged. I heard it again and it sounded closer. Tears came. Jangle, jangle, jangle. It was right outside my door. The noise reverberated through the silent house and then it was in my room. I squealed and squatted, putting my arms over my head for protection. The monster jangled up to me, and poked me with a slimy finger. But then I heard it sit and pant. Hesitantly, I peeked out from my cocoon of safety and saw Maggie staring, panting at me. She poked me with her nose. Her collar jangled with the movement. I patted her head and felt the fear dissolve.

Sniffling, I stood and was amazed to find the ache in my bladder had disappeared. My thighs felt wet though. Feeling the bench with a finger, it was also wet. I had peed my pants before, but that was when I was only four and knew no better. I was a big kid now and more was expected of me. I didn't want to be spanked, but I also knew I should get my mom, tell her what happened. But she was all the way across the hall. Surviving the dark twice in the same night seemed unlikely. So I did the only logical thing—I told Maggie good night and crawled back into the safety of my big bed, wet nightgown and all. Within seconds I was fast asleep.

The next morning I opened my eyes to see my mom standing at the end of my bed with her arms crossed. She look down at the bench and carpet, and back at me. Her thin eyebrows arched into triangles, what I now think of as her hackles.

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. And it all came back. Monsters, fear, jangling, Maggie. I gulped, finally squeaking out, "Morning."

“Have an accident?” Only her lips moved and I knew this was not good. “I come in to say good morning only to find a stain and that unmistakable smell.”

“Um,” I began, but didn’t know where to finish. Instead, I let my eyes fall to my lap. And I stuck a finger in my mouth, like a dog with an itch, I gnawed on the cuticle.

“Come here. Look.” I didn’t move and she barked, “Let’s go.”

With a sigh, I slid off my bed, never taking my eyes off the floor, and padded over to my mom. I stopped with a few feet of open air between us, my equivalent to a safety net.

“Well?” She bent at the waist to look into my face. “What happened?” And just then, Maggie trotted into my room and sat next to my mom, who scratched her behind an ear.

I had to say something, but I didn’t want to admit I had been afraid. Being a big girl meant everything to me, it was what I identified with, and having accidents and then admitting to them would strip me naked, show me for what I really was—a little girl scared of the dark. My eyes found Maggie.

“It wasn’t me—“

“Take your finger out of your mouth. Look at me. Don’t mumble.”

I withdrew my finger and wiped it on my nightgown. Instead of looking into my mom’s angry, truth-seeking eyes, I, again, focused on Maggie. “ It wasn’t me. It was Maggie.” I pointed at her to get the full effect, to prove it was, in fact, the dog that had peed on the bench under the cover of night.

My mom glanced at Maggie before turning to the bench. “You’re telling me,” she began, “that Maggie, a hundred pound dog, hopped up here just to pee? That’s your story?”

Well, when she put it that way, it did sound a bit suspect. But there was no one else to blame. I nodded because saying something else would only be doubly suspicious.

In the hall, Tommy wandered by, saw the party, and walked in my room. He took in the scene—the urine stain and stench, my mom’s accusing face, my own guilty posture, Maggie as the innocent observer—and he had to ask, “What’s wrong?”

My mom said, “Dani is claiming that Maggie is the one who peed on her bench.”

“She’s lying. Maggie would’ve broken it if she climbed up there.”

“Dani?”

I had never felt as stuck in a corner as I did then. Tommy was right. My mom knew it, knew that I had lied. There was nothing I could do, but stare at the floor.

“Fine. You have nothing say?” I studied the carpet. “Okay. Go get the wooden spoon.” My head snapped up and, with pleading, already watering eyes, I met my mom’s. “You want to lie to me, then you want to be punished. Go.”

As if floating in a dream, I moved out of my room and down the hall. If there was one thing I wished we had sold at the garage sale in Taft, it was the wooden spoon, bruiser of naked bottoms and destroyer of a child’s pride. I hated that spoon and everything it stood for—my mom’s power of punishment, the understanding I had done something bad, knowing I had to pay my penance. Like being told in a public place that I would be “dealt with later, at home” that walk of doom only made it worse. The

anticipation of the pain, the stinging that would last all day, the sharp smack of wood connecting with soft tissue would echo in my mind for weeks was all horrible, but the worst was that Tommy would probably get to watch. He would revel in my cries and my pleadings for mercy. He would tease me about it for days to come, ask if the dog had also peed on the couch, or maybe on the roof. To him, I was going to be a sniveling liar, with a nose as long as a telephone wire.

By the time I made my way upstairs, retrieved the spoon from its holy place among the other cookware, and was making the final descent on my room, tears were coming hard.

"Here," my mom commanded and I handed the spoon over. "Let's go. Nightgown off and undies down." I hesitated, sniffling, and she grabbed my arm, pulled me close. In one quick motion, she had me stripped. She turned me around so I faced the wall.

"You know better than to lie. No child of mine will ever, ever lie to me or anybody else ever again. You know better." She didn't yell, but kept her voice to a low, even growl.

As she drew the spoon back, I wondered what Tommy was thinking, if he was enjoying himself. Then, the spoon made contact with my right butt cheek, and the combined shock of the instant sting and the smacking sound wiped my brain clean. All there was left to do was howl and dance in place.

I got five more spankings before I was thrown in the tub. When I was clean and freed, Tommy waited on the stairs for me.

"You couldn't come up with anything better?"

I glared at him. "Shut up."

"If you're going to lie, at least be smart about it."

I pushed past him and ran up the rest of the stairs, doing the only thing I knew—escaping. But Tommy's advice must have sunk in somewhere, because, from that summer forward, I would lie to almost everyone about everything, except for my mom, if it could be helped.

5.

At some point that summer my dad was offered and accepted a position as Superintendent and Principal at Hughes Elizabeth Lakes Union School district in the small, hill town of Lake Hughes, five hours south of Mammoth and an hour and a half south of Taft. The town was spread out over several miles and everything was built on a rise. To get to each neighborhood, it was always a climb.

My parents bought a yellow, box-of-a-house that sat at the top of a steep hill. It was two stories, with all the living space on the second story with a large room and garage on the first floor. The drive-way sloped down from the street to the garage at almost a ninety degree angle and was laid in a rough cement with ridges and swirls throughout.

Unlike Taft, there weren't any fences or sidewalks in Lake Hughes, and only one street light. The houses were separated by at least fifty yards each. On one side of our house was a large, open field where gourds and wildflowers grew and, if you dug deep enough, red clay could be found. The backyard was a steep hill almost always overgrown

with tall weeds and bushes with stickers. It was a neighborhood of open wilderness, if dried brush, tumble weeds, and no trees count. The wind would blow up to a hundred miles an hour some days on that hill and it's a miracle that house always stayed stuck and didn't blow away like Dorothy's.

That fall, I started kindergarten at HELUS, a K-8 school with less than five-hundred students, where my dad worked and my mom taught fifth grade. She had started the year out there as a long-term sub, but was eventually hired full time. Tommy was in a third and fourth grade combo class.

The first half of the year passed without incident. I learned to count to one-hundred, knew my alphabet and colors, and could draw a decent representation of the human body. I became the friend of Katie Knickerbocker, another small blond girl who liked to dig in the sand with me. Nobody made fun of my glasses or eye patch. It was a good time.

Then my mom started to work full time. She was down in the portable trailers at the other end of the campus and I knew that. All I'd have to do was tell Miss Cass I wanted my mom and she would let me wander down the road to my mom's room. Sometimes it would take me an hour to get down there—zigzagging up and down stairs and hills, wandering through the playground—other days I'd march straight down the road. This drove my mom crazy from the get go. She couldn't believe my teacher would just let me walk off. My mom put her foot down, told my teacher to stop sending me her way.

So, instead, I would ask to go see my dad. Miss Cass would write me a pass and I'd go to the office and bug the secretary and if he wasn't in that office, I would be sent to the district office behind the main office where all the business people and administrators worked. There, Sylvia, a blond with the softest voice, and Karen, a red head who lived down the street and worshipped Elvis, worked with my dad. They would all stop to chat with me. But like my mom, my dad only put up with my visits for a week or two until he, too, asked my teacher to keep me in the room.

After that, it all went downhill. It'd always start right before morning recess. I would walk up to Miss Cass and tug at the long skirt of her dress. "Yes, Dani?"

Smiling, I asked, "Can I go see my mom?"

Miss Cass shook her head, her gray perm so stiff with hairspray it didn't move. "No. Remember, your mom wants you to stay here with your class. Go get ready for recess."

Not fazed, I asked, "Can I go see my dad?"

"No. Go get your jacket for recess."

I'd stomp my foot, cross my arms and burst into tears. Not simply crying, but a full-blown temper tantrum. The bell would ring and all the kids would rush outside, except me. I would stay in the same spot until Miss Cass grabbed my hand and led me outside. Actually feeling freedom just beyond my grasp, I amped it up and screamed, "I want my mom" over and over, all the while bawling and sniveling. In her weak attempt to comfort me, Miss Cass would push me up against her legs and rub my back. That only made me more furious so I would yank at her dress, scream, and cry at the same time.

Of course, this never worked because she had been told by my dad, her boss, to keep me there no matter what. And it happened so often that the other kids learned to ignore me. I would be shoved to the side of the class, left to cry by myself, while Miss Cass continued that day's lesson.

Toward the end of the year, I mellowed out and managed to rejoin kindergarten society. To this day, neither I nor my parents know exactly why I cried so much. My mom thinks it was because she went back to work. My dad says that I was just playing games. I tend to think I simply hated being told no, that I really didn't miss my mom so much as I wanted to wander around school by myself, and when my demands weren't met, I'd throw a fit.

Around the same time I began to cry at school, Tommy and I were signed up for AYSO soccer. Because Lake Hughes wasn't a big enough town to have its own league, we were driven to Quartz Hill a few days a week for practice and on Saturdays for games. Quartz Hill, located between Lake Hughes and Lancaster, was generally where the graduating eight graders would go for high school. It was at that high school where we played soccer.

My team was the Hornets and we had green shorts with green and gold jerseys. We played soccer how you would expect a bunch of five year-olds to do so—in a large cluster, everyone chasing after the ball. And it was there, during practice, that I faced the first funny looks and questions in regards to my eye and patch.

We were running late and both my mom and I forgot about my glasses and patch. It was important for my bad eye to have the visual power boost of my glasses, to force my eye to work during school, but sports were the one exception to the patch and glasses rule—being mostly blind in a fast-paced, physical game with crazy, free range six year-olds is asking for disaster, for not only me, but for the other kids, too. Unfortunately, when you are so used to wearing something day-in and day-out, you can forget it even exists.

I hustled trough the dirt parking lot and joined the team for our warm up laps. We stretched and then lined up for a shooting drill. I was toward the back of the line and two boys in front of me kept whispering and throwing suspicious glances my way. I peered over my shoulder to find what they were so interested in and saw nothing but other teams practicing.

I tapped one of the boys on the shoulder and when he turned, I asked, "What are you guys looking at?"

He opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water. His buddy wasn't so hesitant. "Your eye. It's weird. Is it missing or something?"

That was the last thing I had expected. At school no one ever said anything, and I didn't realize I was different. But there were two boys pointing at me and laughing.

"No," I spat. "My eyes are just like yours. Stupid." I glared at them until they turned back around. Nobody said anything else to me all practice, but the seeds had been sown. Was I weird? Was I really that much different from everybody else? I thought

about it for awhile, but thank goodness I was young enough that my attention span to dwell wasn't more than a few seconds.

6.

School was starting in a week and my mom wanted to save herself a sick day, so I sacrificed one of my last days of summer of 1993, sitting in one of Dr. Rosenbaum's exam rooms. My mom sat in one of the two designated parent-chairs and I sat in the patient's chair, swinging my sandaled feet back and forth.

"How much longer?" I asked, whining, itching at the corner of my patch. When my mom put it on before we left Lake Hughes, I had been in the downstairs room running around with Maggie, working up a good sweat. Now the dried saltwater caught in the adhesive felt like my dad's day-old whiskers scratch-scratching my skin.

"I don't know. And the next time you ask, my answer will be the same."

"I'm hungry." I folded my hands over my growling stomach for effect.

"Me too. If you stop complaining, you can pick where we eat."

This was our routine. I'd whine until an offer for silence was made. Sometimes it was for food, the UCLA parking permit, an offer of a stop at a bookstore for a new book, or, when I had really pushed it, the threat of "wait till we get home," whispered in a low, hoarse voice, which translated into "stop now or you'll be spanked till it hurts to sit". On this particular trip, I got lucky and knew I'd better shut up or else.

Just as I opened my mouth to agree, the door swung open and in walked Dr. Rosenbaum, his white coat fluttering in his wake as if he had flown in to rescue me from my own stupidity.

"Hello Danielle, Mrs. Harris." He nodded to us both before sitting down and opening my chart. "How is everything?" Turning, he glanced at my mom, to me, and back at my mom.

I looked at her, too, used to her speaking for me. "Good. She hasn't lost a contact in awhile, so we're happy about that. She's reading. Everything is normal."

Dr. Rosenbaum nodded, his eyes falling back on me. "You're getting ready to start the first grade?"

I nodded.

"And how was it at school last year wearing your patch?"

I blinked at my mom and scratched my temple.

"It was surprisingly easy. The teachers and aides always made sure she wore her patch," my mom answered.

"What-" Dr. Rosenbaum's gaze intensified, his eyes locked on my face. "What I need to know is did anyone tease you?"

Lifting my legs, I sat on my hands and admired the shininess of my leg hair under the fluorescent light. It wasn't that I didn't want to answer; I knew my mom would tell him the truth. But that I didn't know real teasing. Sure, some boys asked me about my patch, but no one else had. Ever. Not at school or around town. The thing adults don't seem to realize is how accepting young children are. I wore a patch part of the day at school and that was that. All my classmates didn't think anything of it. I was the kid with the patch and glasses who cried a lot. Just like the boy who was tall, the girl with braids—nothing special.

"No," said my mom. "She has friends from school and from soccer."

I could feel their eyes on me, knew they wanted me to speak. But what could I say when I didn't really know what the question meant? Shrugging, I stayed silent.

"My concern, as you grow older Danielle, is that other kids will start to make fun of you because of your patch. Because you will look differently than everyone else." Dr. Rosenbaum's voice bounced off of me, hitting my mom square in the face. I was worried about me now, being hungry and bored and annoyed of my itchy patch, but my mom heard what I couldn't.

"This is something other children you treat have encountered?" My mom asked, voice bursting with her own painful memories. She had been a band geek, had carried a purse full of rocks as protection that she actually had to use. I didn't know any of this, and her voice scared me because it wasn't the confident, strong voice of my mother. And if teasing was bad enough to morph my mom into a shadow of her normal self, I knew it had to be bad. But even then, that thought was chased away by my growling tummy.

"Unfortunately, yes. But one of my patient's mothers had an ingenious idea that might help Danielle's class accept her patch, to help them think of her patches as theirs."

"Okay."

A week later, I stood in Mrs. Maple's classroom in a new dress, my hair combed, my skin fresh from the forced bath the night before. Being the first student in the room, I staked out a corner seat by the door, that way I'd have an excuse to hop up out of my seat every time someone knocked. The room looked as if a rainbow had exploded, bright

colors on the bulletin boards, the carpet, cubbies, all broken up by tables set up in a three-sided square, with two chairs at each table. In the middle of my claimed table was a red plastic box, which I instantly began rummaging through, picking out my new pencil, box of crayons, and safety scissors.

My mom looked thin and pretty in her first-day-of-school slacks and sweater, holding out a new box of patches to Mrs. Maple. In a long, broomstick-pleated polyester skirt and long, loose tank top Mrs. Maple appeared shapeless, an amoeba, allowing the child's mind to morph her into whatever we needed her to be—mother, friend, enemy. I always imagined her as my parents' friend, not my mother's co-worker or my father's employee. Her daughter was the same age as Tommy and it was well known she had a problem with laxatives, was an aspiring model, which always made me feel sorry for Mrs. Maple, that her parenting skills were a constant topic among the other teachers.

"Her doctor thinks it'll help the other kids embrace her eye patch," my mom said, handing Mrs. Maple the box of patches.

Nodding, she said, "Okay. We'll decorate them first thing this morning."

"And Dani needs to wear the patch—"

"From eleven until the end of the day. I know, Lisa. Don't worry. Everything is under control."

My mom walked over to me and brushed her fingers through my hair. "All right. Have a good day Princess. Come down to my room after school." She kissed the top of my head and pushed her way through the door. It closed with a click behind her.

Thirty minutes later, the room was full of twenty 6 year-olds in their finest, with new backpacks and shoes, pencils and crayons, the room a-buzz with excitement and fear.

Next to me sat Katie Knickerbocker, my best friend from Kindergarten. She also wore a new dress, her hair in pig-tails.

In the middle of the square, Mrs. Maple cleared her throat. The room fell silent. "Welcome to first grade! I'm Mrs. Maple and I'm so happy to have you all in my class. The first thing we are going today is color." Smiles bloomed all over the room. "But," Mrs. Maple held up a finger, "we're not doing it just for fun. This is a special project to help one of our classmates." She turned and held her hand out in my direction. "Dani wears a new eye patch everyday and, to make it fun for everybody, we thought everyone of you could decorate a patch. Each day, she will pick a new one, until she has worn everybody's artwork."

My mom had explained the reasons behind this idea several times, but I was still skeptical. Why would I want to wear patches boys had drawn on? And what if they were ugly? Would I really have to walk around wearing them? And what about when I went to the grocery store or to Mervyn's?

Mrs. Maple passed out one patch to each child. "Please be thoughtful in what you draw. Don't draw anything you wouldn't want to wear. And no scribbling. Try to be neat as possible. Take your time." She worked her way around the room, finally handing one to Katie and then to me. "You'll have about thirty minutes to color your best work of art."

"What do you want me to draw?" Katie asked, her crayons lumped in a pile next to the bare patch.

I shrugged. "Something cute. I'm gonna draw a flower."

"That sounds pretty. I'll draw one, too."

And we both colored in complete concentration, which was necessary since the patch wasn't a normal shape, but a combination of a circle and oval, like a fat pear. I drew a yellow circle in the middle with petals shooting out at all angles, the ones on the oval half longer and sharper. I colored each a different color. It wasn't neat, but would suffice, since I already knew I would never be an artist. Katie's patch had a tulip-esque flower on a stem, buried in a mound of dirt with a half-sun in one curve and a bird flying by in another.

"I don't like brown," she explained, pointing at the dirt, "so I made it purple."

"It's pretty. And," I leaned over, whispering in her ear, "I'll wear yours first."

We both laughed conspiratorially, and, when I sat up straight, Sara Foot stood in front of us, Nicole hovering behind, a permanent shadow. They each held out an eye patch.

"Have fun wearing mine," Sara said.

"And mine," Nicole echoed.

In unison, they dropped the patches and, as they floated to the table, turned on their heels, giggling. Holding hands, they skipped back to their table across the room.

Katie picked up both patches. She frowned and held them out so I could see. Both were colored completely black.

"That's mean," Katie breathed.

Nodding, I was a bit baffled. Sara and I had never really even spoken to each other. We had maybe had a shoving match at the drinking fountain in Kindergarten, but other than that, we had left each other alone. But, if she wanted war, then war I would give her. She was mean and mean was not allowed.

I stood. My heart pounding, I grabbed their patches and marched up to Sara and Nicole's table. "I'm going to tell on you," I said, my voice a higher-pitched version of my mother's.

Sara and Nicole grinned at me. "Do it. It's the first day. No one ever gets in trouble on the first day." Sara brushed her long, dark hair out of her face. Everything about her demeanor screamed challenge.

I knew I couldn't punch her in the face like I would if she were Tommy; I had to be slyer. "No, I won't tell Mrs. Maple, I'll tell my dad." Both girls' jaws dropped. They were scared, scared of getting called into the principal's office, scared of having been mean to the principal's daughter. "But," I paused for dramatic effect, relishing my power, "if you throw your stupid, ugly patches away, I won't cry or tell anybody." I dropped the patches on their table.

Nicole practically pounced on one, Sara stared at the other. Slowly, she raised her eyes. The room fell away. Nicole disappeared, and then Katie, until finally, only Sara and I were there. She crossed her arms, I did too. She squinted her eyes, I did too. Fine. If she wanted to play, then I'd play. With a shrug everything fell back into place.

"Mrs. Maple," I whined, loud enough for the whole class hear.

Sara groaned, smacked her hand over one patch and crumpled it in her fist. "Fine," she said, standing so quickly her chair toppled over.

Mrs. Maple materialized next to me. "What's the problem girls?"

I stared at Sara. She stomped over to the trash can, Nicole on her heels.

"Girls?"

"No, we were just playing," I said, smiling as Sara sat back down with a huff.

"Okay then. Back to your seats."

With a last smile at Sara and Nicole, I skipped back to my table.

Minutes later, everybody's art was collected and shut away by Mrs. Maple, back into the eye patch box.

When eleven o'clock finally came, we were working on math, writing from 1 to one-hundred. Katie and I were counting together, doing our best to each write the numbers facing the right way.

"Dani," Mrs. Langlotz, the room aide, tapped me on the shoulder. "It's time to put on your patch. Want to come pick one?"

"Yeah," I said, excited to wear a patch for the first time in my life.

I followed Mrs. Langlotz over to a kidney shaped reading table. She opened the box and poured the patches onto the table, separating them so I could see each individually. Some were pretty with rainbows and kittens, some were different, one with a big green eyeball starring back at me, and some were ugly with daggers and swords and monsters and blood. I knew they were colored by boys and I'd wait till I had no choice before wearing their cootie-ridden patches.

"I want to wear," I pushed them around until I found Katie's, "this one." Holding it up triumphantly, I handed it to Mrs. Langlotz. As she peeled off the backing, I removed my glasses and squeezed my eyes tightly shut. I could feel Mrs. Langlotz place the patch over my left eye, pressing the circular edge to my temple and the oval edge to the bridge of my nose.

"All done. Go finish writing your numbers."

I opened my eyes slowly, allowing my brain time to prepare for the onslaught of blurs. Nothing looked the same, the room now a rainbow-colored finger painting with splotches of tan skin I knew to be my classmates. Looking down at the table, I found my glasses floating in a turbulent sea of brown, the purple calling to me like a life preserver. Putting them on didn't help much, only magnifying the swirls of color so they appeared bigger than I knew they really were.

My first steps back to my seat were wobbly. Until now, I had memorized the spaces I spent most of my time in, so I could navigate them mostly blind with only a minor spill here and there, but I had never been in this room with only my bad eye to rely on and I suddenly felt overwhelmed, the kaleidoscope world shifting rapidly with each movement.

"Here," Katie's voice reached my ears as her hand grasped mine.

"Thanks," I whispered. She lead me back to our table, relief sweeping over me when I sat, the room settling back into its stationary correctness.

"We were on fifty-three. Here's your pencil," Katie said, pressing my pencil into my right hand. She pointed at my paper. "Write fifty-four here."

"Okay. Fifty-five comes next," I said, focusing all my powers of sight on the spot where her finger pointed. The paper we used had several set of large lines in the faintest of blue, and I almost pressed my nose to the paper so I could make them out. Concentrating, I slowly drew a 5 and 4 right next to each other. "Is it between the lines?" My bad eye fell on Katie's face. Her eyes looked like black slashes, her lips a deep red line, her cheeks, chin, forehead a mass of a fleshy blob.

"Sorta," she said. "Fifty-five is next?"

"Yeah," I said. Pointing at the spot where I guessed I had written fifty-four, I wrote fifty-five next to it. Spacing was tricky. Without the use of my good eye, I depended on my contact lens and the bifocal in my glasses to create some semblance of depth perception. Not being able to tell how far my paper was from the tip of my pencil, I often would jab the paper with it, not only breaking the lead, but leaving rips in the paper. If I was careful, with my nose brushing the paper, I could place my pencil on what I had previously written, slide it over a tad, and then write what came next, but this only worked when I was careful and six year-olds are rarely that careful. And if my mom or Mrs. Maple were watching over my shoulder, I was absolutely not allowed to lean close into my work, because that "defeated the purpose and didn't make my bad eye work as hard as it needed to"—in other words, they thought that was cheating. So, most assignments I completed while wearing my patch were sloppy with rips, dots of lead, and words and numbers written on top of each other.

Katie and I had made it all the way to seventy before Sara and Nicole reappeared in front of us. I knew who they were without having to really see them—Sara's hair hung

in the bright classroom like a black hole, and if Sara was there, than Nicole would be, too.

"You dropped this," Sara said and before I had time to figure out what she was talking about, something hit me in the forehead. The girls broke down laughing. "When someone throws something at you, you're supposed to catch it," Sara said matter-of-factly, like I was the stupidest person alive. Still laughing, they walked away.

My hand pressed on my forehead where the object hit. "What'd she throw?" I asked Katie.

"This," she said, dropping something long, skinny, and black on my paper.

A black crayon. Sara threw a black crayon at my face. She waited for me to get a patch on, so she knew I wouldn't have time to see what she was doing. And what could I do now? My head didn't hurt. Only Katie and Nicole were witnesses. If I told, Sara would say it was an accident. Unless Katie corroborated my story. But she was too honest to lie and Mrs. Maple would see right through us. I was at a loss.

"Okay, class. Time to clean up for lunch," Mrs. Maple said from the front of the classroom.

Revenge would have to wait.

After school, I dragged my mom to my classroom to show her all the colored patches. Like Mrs. Langlotz, she spread them out on a table.

"Oh, they're all so nice. Which one did Katie do?"

I pointed at the one stuck to my face. "I picked hers first."

"Of course. And which one did you do?" She touched each patch as she examined it.

"The flower one."

"Point it out to me."

I leaned forward, trying to distinguish one patch from the next, but it was impossible. The tan of each bleed into the next and in seconds, all I saw was one big patch. "I—"

But my mom wasn't paying attention to me. She had been counting. "Dani, why are there only seventeen patches? The box was brand new. There should be nineteen here."

Uh oh. I had forgotten about Sara and Nicole throwing away their patches. And waste was not acceptable, not when only twenty patches came in a box and I had to wear one every day. I had used some on dolls once and learned then patches were not play things, and here I was, caught wasting more because Sara and Nicole had ruined two. And I was the one who made them throw the patches away. Me, not them, not Mrs. Maple, only me.

"What happened to two patches?"

I couldn't say I told kids to toss theirs because I thought they were ugly. Just like I couldn't admit to my mom that I was scared of the dark. There was nothing I could do but lie. Save myself and screw the other.

"Two girls threw theirs away."

"Why?"

"They said my patches are stupid and ugly and they didn't want to color." Phew. That sounded reasonable. No names were given, so no one could be interviewed to verify my story. Everyone was better off, especially my own bum.

"Which girls?"

"Um. I don't know. Girls." I hung my head, wishing to disappear, to evaporate into thin air like they did in *Star Trek.* Beam me up, Scotty.

"Danielle. You tell me who or I'll assume it was you. And I know you know better than to waste patches."

"Sara and Nicole." What else could I say? I could feel the wooden spoon, hear the smack as it met with my backside. If someone had to be sacrificed, better them than me.

For the next couple of weeks, I held my breath. I was sure, at any moment, my mom would call me a liar, bend me over, and have at me with the wooden spoon. Or Mrs. Maple would ask Sara and Nicole about throwing away my patches and then they would seek vengeance. But nothing ever came of it. No one ever mentioned the mystery of the missing patches and the tightness of expected punishment finally eased. Sara and Nicole drew pretty pictures the next time a new box was opened. And we mostly left each other alone, except for the random name calling here or shove in line there.

I was delighted to wear my classmates' art work. Everyone every day couldn't wait for eleven o'clock to see which patch was picked, the artist always calling "It's mine" with pride, no matter how ugly it really was.

7.

A few months later, I sat in the backseat of Ms. Knickerbocker's Blazer, Katie buckled in next to me. We were on our way to a classmate's house for his birthday party. Brandon was turning seven, the oldest in our first grade class.

"Dani?" Ms. Knickerbocker's eyes froze on mine in the rearview mirror. "Why aren't you wearing your patch?"

I pushed my face-engulfing purple glasses up on my nose. "My mom said I didn't have to wear it to the party."

"As long as you have permission."

My parents made everyone even remotely involved in my life aware of my eye problems and, like spies, they reported back to headquarters listing my every move.

The car pulled up to a low, ranch style house situated on the side of a hill. Red and black balloons were tied to the fence lining the yard and taped to the garage and front door.

Katie and I unbuckled and made the great leap from the Blazer, wrapped presents in our arms. The Blazer drove off before we even took two steps down the long, angled driveway.

At the front door, we gazed up at a big paper cut-out of an ugly, unshaven pirate wearing a red and black stripped ensemble. A black eye patch covered one of his eyes and one of the parrot's eyes resting on his shoulder. The balloons, which seemed so festive from the street, bore white skull and cross bones.

Katie knocked on the door. It opened and we were ushered in. Treasure chests overflowing with gold coins, crabs, ships, starfish, and thirty children were scattered everywhere, a cheaper version of Disneyland.

The presents were taken from our hands and we were herded to the backyard. From the porch awning hung a pirate ship piñata, complete with cannons and masts.

Brandon's father stood on a chair. "Brandon gets first swing, but everyone has to wear," he pulled something from a back pocket, "eye patches!" He swung a black, plastic and cloth eye patch around in the air, finally fitting it over an eye, the strap wrapped around his head. Brandon's mother began to pass them out.

I stood in the middle of the crowd, between Katie and Sara. Brandon's mother worked her way through the crowd and when she was in front of Katie, handing her an eye patch, Sara giggled.

"Brandon's mom?" Sara asked so sweetly I felt my tummy turn.

"What dear?"

"Dani," she pointed at me, "doesn't need a patch."

"But sweetie, everyone has to wear one. It's the rules." She held my patch by its string, dangling it in my face. By now, the room had quieted, everyone watching and listening.

"Oh, I know. But she doesn't need one. She already has her own." Sara reached out and snatched my patch from the lady's fingers.

I felt my face get red, the burn radiating out all the way down to my toes. My contact felt dry in my eye and I blinked fast, pushing my glasses further up on my nose. I

glanced at the woman, waiting. Waiting for a reproach, for her to tell Sara to apologize, for her to banish Sara to the moon so I would never have to share air with her again.

But she only smiled. “Well, I guess it would be hard to wear one with those glasses.” She patted Sara and me on our heads, and continued passing out eye patches.

If I had known any bad words, I would have called Sara a bitch, a whore. But I said nothing. Sara always won and never got in trouble. What did I expect? Conversations began around me; jokes were told I didn’t hear. Everyone lined up to take their one-eyed whack at the ship. I didn’t move and was eventually shoved to the corner for my own safety, out of the way of the half-blind kids with a baseball bat.

I wanted my mom. I wanted my dad. I even wanted my brother. And while I stood there pining, holding back tears of anger at the unfairness, Brandon smashed in the bow of the boat and it rained candy, the others rushing forward in a wave, falling to the ground, squealing as a seagull does when it battles others for a piece of stale bread.

Katie swam her way over to me, hands full of loot, face shining with the excitement of sugar. “Want any? You can have first pick.” She held her bowled hands out to me.

I shook my head. “I want my mom.”

Katie nodded, dropping all the candy at my feet. She found Brandon’s mom, tugged on her shirt, and asked to use the phone.

At home, I crawled into my mom’s lap, pushing the novel she was reading out of my way.

“Have fun?” She asked, gently lifting my glasses from my face and setting them on the end table.

I shook my head and a hot torrent of tears poured out onto my mom’s t-shirt.

“That much fun, huh? Want to tell me what happened?”

I shook my head once more, letting the sobs shake me, letting my mom’s fingers comb through my hair.

“If something happened, Princess, you need to tell me.”

I was crying too hard, only managed a choked “Sara is mean” before breaking down even further.

My mom lifted me off her chest, holding me so she could look into my eyes. “Dani, kids are mean. Life is hard. That’s just how it is. For you, nothing will ever be easy. I’m sorry. If I could, I would make life a piece of cake for you and I wish I could, but I can’t. The sooner you learn and accept this, the less people like Sara will be able to hurt you. But when people do, I’ll be here for you. I’m sorry, Princess.” She let me fall back into her where I cried myself to sleep.

I don’t remember being angry at her for those words, or hurt she wasn’t on my side. I don’t remember them bouncing around in my head for days afterwards. They just sunk in like a needle, pricking my being, so that, from that moment on, I never told her or my dad or my brother about any of the teasing. I simply dealt with it on my own.

That spring, we all were seated on the floor doing our usual morning routine—calendar math, the weather, saying the alphabet, counting to one-hundred—when music drifted in through the open windows.

Mrs. Maple looked surprised, holding a finger to her lips. “Shh. Everyone hear that?” The strumming of a guitar sped up and increased in volume.

The class took a collective breath, all of us nodding, some fast with the excitement, others, like me, slowly, unsure of what was about to happen. I usually knew the school secrets like when we were going to have a fire or earthquake drill, when assemblies were, what visitors would be dropping by from overhearing my parents’ morning and evening chats. And I was sure music hadn’t been mentioned by either my mom or dad and, as a child who thrived on routine, not knowing what was about to happen frightened me—the I’m-losing-control-over-what-is-happening-and-nothing-is allowed-to-occur-unless-I-knew-about-it twenty-four-hours-ahead-of-time fright. Handing over the reins only meant you were going to get bucked off the horse, and I hated hitting the ground without my pre-approved permission.

I entwined my arm with Katie’s, interrupting her enthusiastically bobbing body.

“What’s going on?” I asked her.

Working her way back into her rhythmic nod of approval, she said, “It’s Marilyn Macaroni.” Katie looked at me like I should be excited too, and when I responded with a frown, she shrugged and craned her neck to see the door.

The strumming grew louder and louder and faster and faster. Everyone around me vibrated as if they were drawn tight and being plucked by phantom fingers. My heart

raced. No one had said anything about a Marilyn Macaroni haunting the school today. Sweat slicked my hands and sandaled feet. My mouth went dry, my tongue numb. The hairs on my legs stood on end, pulling every pore, wanting to dash for safety. Mrs. Maple calmly strode to the classroom door and turned the knob. As she pushed the door open, the music crescendoed and, like the calm before a storm, went silent. I didn't want to look, but something had a hold and wouldn't let me go. Before I could close my eyes to say my last words, a head appeared from around the door jam. With a painted-white face, a red-tipped nose, a single green circle on each cheek, Marilyn Macaroni smiled, bouncing her head from side to side, sending her black braids swaying.

A clown. Marilyn Macaroni was a clown. My heart slowed, my pores relaxed. She skipped through the door.

"Hi-ya kids! Ready to sing?" And without waiting for an answer she kicked it in high gear, playing her guitar and singing *This Land Is Your Land.* She danced her way to the front of the room, her white skirt with black dots and white billowy blouse puffing up and down around her body. She was rather monochromatic compared to what I always thought a clown should be, but who I was to judge, having never seen a real live clown before.

She sang a few more songs, made animal balloons, and told a story with puppets. All the while, I was in deep concentration, wondering if she had checked in at the front office, if my dad knew she was here. I couldn't relax, not completely, not enough to sing along or ask for a balloon poodle. Katie was enraptured next me, bliss radiating from her. The only thing that made it bearable was my lack of blindness. If Marilyn Macaroni had

come in the afternoon, when I was patched, I might have actually ran for cover thinking a musical ghost was attacking. But that never entered my mind that day, the other stresses consuming me so wholly that when we were released for morning recess and I saw Marilyn Macaroni exit, I sighed, which must have sounded more like a moan of agony.

Katie, still next to me, patted my back. “It’s okay. We’ll see her again.”

Out on the playground, Marilyn Macaroni was surrounded by kids, one in particular that held her tight around the middle. The idea of hugging a stranger, especially a clown stranger, made my tummy ache. “Who is that?” I asked Katie, pointing.

“Christina Zych. She’s a second grader. Marilyn Macaroni is her mom. She’s nice I guess. Kids call her The Wild Thing cause she’s so hyper.”

As if she knew we were talking about her, Christina waved at us. Katie waved back, but I was in awe. She looked like a wild thing, her hair a long, frizzy afro backlit by the morning sun setting her head ablaze. Her eyes seemed to pop from her head, her skin pulled taught against her bones from smiling so big. She wore patterned shorts and a contrastingly patterned shirt, something even I knew then was a fashion faux pas. Her wave traveled down her arm to her torso, so that she was flopping back and forth, banging into her clown-mom every other second, like a flag caught in a wind storm. I was both intrigued and scared out of mind—what an odd family, a clown and The Wild Thing.

“My mom and Marilyn Macaroni are friends cause my sister and Christina’s older sister are best friends,” Katie said.

“She’s weird like you.” Sara’s voice made me jump. She sneaked up on us, probably eavesdropping. “I heard she eats like a hundred pounds of sugar a day.”

I shook my head. “Naw-uh. That’s not possible.”

“It is too, weirdo.”

“You’re the weirdo, weirdo.” I glared at her. “And a meanie.”

Sara snorted and, with a flip of her hair, stomped off to where Nicole was waiting, near the classroom.

“Let’s go play on the bars.” I felt Katie’s hand grasp mine, felt her tug me in the opposite direction, but my mind stayed there, with The Wild Thing giving herself whiplash.

8.

I was getting new glasses. My old ones, with a thick, pinkish plastic frame, were becoming dated as the 90s pushed on.

Dr. Rosenbaum sat on the roller chair in the middle of the exam room. The lights low from testing the power of my vision, he looked from my mom to me as he spoke. “Her vision is getting better, 20/150, but I need to see how strong it is corrected. And, since you want new glasses, we can use the results to our advantage.”

He glided across the floor, stopping in front of me. Standing, he swiveled one of the octopus arms in front of me. It held what looked like a large metal masquerade mask, about two inches thick. The side that he gently pressed against my face was covered in a sterile-looking white plastic, but the other side, where Dr. Rosenbaum got to play, was

covered in knobs and switches and numbers—reminding me of something I'd seen on *Inspector Gadget*.

"Now, I want you to look at the letters on the screen. I am going to block your left eye so I can test only your right eye for now. I am going to switch the power of the lenses you look through. I want you to tell me which makes the letters easier to see. Okay?"

I nodded. I had done this before, but maybe since I could actually name the letters now, he felt obliged to speak to me like a conscious being. After a second, I realized he couldn't see me behind the mask and said, "Okay."

Dr. Rosenbaum flipped a switch or turned a knob because something inside the mask clicked and, the vision in my left eye went white with a solid lens while the vision in my right eye became sharper, just barely. "Alright Danielle. Which is better, number one or," the lens flipped and clicked, and the letters on the screen went blurry, "number two? I'll do it again. Number one," a flip and a click and sight, "or number two?" Another flip, click, and no more sight.

This was easy. "One," I said.

"Good. Now, number one or number two?" Going faster, the lens flipped and clicked, flipped and clicked. "Or, are they the same?"

I paused, biting my lip, and shoved my hands under my thighs. I didn't know I had the option of them making the letters look the same. I said, "Uh," and before I could finish my thought, he flipped and clicked the lens again.

"Look at it again. Take your time. Number one or number? Or are they the same?"

The letters were still black marks on a white screen, neither one nor two making them any more clear. “The same?” I asked, because I wasn’t really that sure.

“Hm. That’s what I thought. You know what, I want to do this a different way. Go ahead and sit back.”

I was good at following directions and sat back. My mom shrugged, silently telling me she was confused to.

Dr. Rosenbaum held out what looked like an extra large, double-sided spoon, or a really small kayak paddle. I knew this device—solid black plastic on end and ribbed red plastic on the other. It was used to block the vision in one of my eyes, so the other could be tested. Like a portable patch. “Cover your good eye and look at the letters on the screen. Good. Now I am going to do the same exam we were just doing, only with hand-held lenses. So, tell me which is better, number one,” he held a red metal-rimmed lens the size of a quarter in front of my eye—mini magnifying glasses—“or number two?” He switched the lenses. “Or are they the same?” After a second look through each, I decided two was stronger.

We went on like this for what felt like a year. Each time he switched lenses, he would spend several minutes picking two out from a collection of at least two hundred that were held in a case above the small writing desk. Some were rimmed in red, some in black.

“Okay. Good job. You are such a good patient,” Dr. Rosenbaum smiled. He turned to my mom. “The reason it took so long is because I had to change the power of

the bi-focal as well, so instead of just having either distance or reading glasses, she will have both in one pair. It costs more money, but your insurance should cover it."

"That sounds good," my mom said, her voice weak from not speaking for so long.

It was summer. My mom, Tommy, Maggie, and I were at the house in Mammoth—my dad had to stay home because of work during the week, but he was all ours on weekends.

To keep us busy, my mom enrolled us in swimming lesson at the local athletic club. I loved it. Swimming was a no-patch activity and, besides bumping into the walls from time to time and the chlorine irritating my contact, I was free to be as goofy as I wanted, teaching all the other kids in the class how to do underwater somersaults.

Tommy's class was actually swimming laps in different strokes, though we never really knew what stroke he was supposed to be doing. He always looked like he was trying to drown.

On the weekends, we rode bikes as a family all over Mammoth and Mammoth Mountain—the mountain used for skiing in the winter converted into a map of zigzagging bike trails of all difficulty levels during the summer. I never had to wear my patch doing this either.

But when we weren't swimming, riding bikes, or hiking, my mom made us read—at least an hour a day. And this I was expected to do with my contact in my right eye, a patch over my left, and my glasses as the cherry on top.

I had surpassed picture books before I began Kindergarten, because my parents were afraid of my eyesight making reading hard, they started teaching me early. I don't remembering learning, just all of sudden, in pre-school, reading books to my mom, to Maggie, to the grasshoppers in our front yard, to anything I believed was conscious enough to understand. I used to drive babysitters nuts, shouting every word on every sign I saw, making their quick trips to the bank or to McDonalds a practice in patience and praising, the chant of, "Good job," having to be repeated over and over because, if they ignored me, I'd continue to scream the same word until a response was given.

By the summer of 1994, I was reading chapter books. Reading wasn't the hard part—I loved the stories and characters— but seeing the print was. Black smudges upon black smudges covered each page, like ants, each blotch undistinguishable from the next. But I needed to know what was going to happen next in the *Pee Wee Scouts* series and so I devised a solution.

Lying down was the optimal position, either on my back or side, it didn't matter. I would open the book, fold it over so only one page stared back, and then hold it only a few inches from my bad eye, enabling me to focus on one word at a time, until the entire page was conquered. Behind my patch, I would close my good eye tight. By doing so, I removed the white-padded part of the patch from my visual field—otherwise, while trying to focus on words, my brain would superimpose the inside of the patch over the page I was trying to read, making it even harder for me see what I wanted. Think of it like placing a flower stencil over an area of wall. All that remains visible of the wall behind the stencil is what appears in the cut-outs for the flower, making it impossible to

see the wall as a whole. Essentially, my good left eye, whenever I had my patch on, acted like a stencil in my visual field, adding an extra layer of white over whatever I saw through my bad right eye. To keep this from happening, I had to close my left eye, especially when focusing on anything detailed, like type. And if I felt like being difficult and completely blind, all I had to do was close my bad eye and leave my good, patched eye open, flooding my brain and visual field with white. This usually happened when someone was giving me directions—instead of listening, I would close my bad eye and stare at the inside of my patch for a few seconds and then switch, closing my good eye and opening my bad back to the world, then switch again and again and again, white, world, white, world, until the person speaking to me fell silent, at which time I would ask, "What?" Most people, other than my parents, didn't know what I was doing, so they always felt sorry for me and would repeat themselves as many times as I wanted, a game I enjoyed because I always won.

But reading was serious business. My mom had signed Tommy and me up for a competition at the library, whoever read the most books by the end of July got a prize basket that included, among other things, a gift card to the local hardware store. And there, in the upstairs half of the store sat the most intriguing thing in the world—a purple and pink dart board. For a half-blind child that seems comical, to want to throw darts, but I never thought about not having any depth perception and if I wanted to do something, I did it. So why couldn't I be a dart player?

I had already read double the books Tommy had, and was in first place, according to the star chart at the library. My mom told us it was time to read and when I ran upstairs

with my book, got settled on the couch, and opened from the last place I left off, I discovered I had already finished it.

"Mom," I shouted so she could hear my downstairs, "I finished my book."

Tommy sat on the other couch, his arms folded, his book resting in his lap. "Mom I finished my book," Tommy said in a high-pitched voice, mimicking me. "Reading is stupid. I hate it." He chucked his book across the room, or at least I assumed because, though I couldn't tell it what it was, something blurred in an arch across the room and landed with a solid thud.

"I'm going to tell Mom," I said. We were constantly being lectured on how to treat borrowed books, and throwing them was definitely on the not-to-do list.

Tommy stood up. "No you won't."

"Mom," I shouted again. But before I could finish my sentence, Tommy was on top of me, pressing his knees into my belly. I coughed, trying to shove him off of me, but he held my arms down. There wasn't much more I could do than kick my legs, because even if I had the use of my arms and hands, I had my patch on and Tommy wasn't more than a heavy blob hovering over my face, his body shifting like a mirage each time I kicked and squirmed.

"You tell Mom, and I'll make sure that dart board you want magically goes missing." His grip tightened on my arms. "Promise."

"Promise," I croaked.

Tommy eased off of me, picked up his book, and sat on the couch. My mom appeared at the top of the stairs, just as my lungs finished refilling with air.

"You finished another one?" She asked me, sitting down next to my feet.

I nodded.

"Good for you! Then go out and play, while Tommy and I read."

Tommy moaned.

"Can I take my patch off?" I asked. "So I can ride my bike to get a new book?" The library was just a few streets away, on the edge of our neighborhood, and Tommy and I were always going there by ourselves to play on the playground, or, in my case, to read without the restrictions of my patch, when my mom wasn't around.

"No. We'll go later this afternoon. And you know you need to keep it on so your eye can grow strong. Stay close, please."

With a sigh, I stood, leaving my book on the couch in my place. Navigating the stairs was tricky, but my body memorized the movement of going up and down them, so in a few seconds, I was down the stairs, out the front door, and standing in the middle of the driveway, already bored.

There wasn't much I could do with my patch on, so I decided to go for a walk, up the street instead of down, away from the library, a path I rarely ever took. I couldn't make out any of the houses, but knew they were there. As I walked, I spun in circles, making the blurs even blurrier. I don't know how far I had walked when someone shouted, "Watch out!"

I stopped dead, listening, when something smashed into me from behind, knocking me to my knees. Something pink skidded past me and, a second later, I was laid out, what felt like another person lying on top of me. Breathing hard, I pushed it off of

me and got to my feet, panic filling my body. I needed to see what just happened, see if I was bleeding, see who or what had been on top of me. But I couldn't, not completely, not with my patch on. The thing on the ground looked like a person—tan skin, black hair, blue clothes. Over my shoulder, a pink contraption lay off the side of the road.

"I'm sorry," the shape sprawled on the ground said. A girl's voice, so I knew she was a she. "Are you okay? I yelled and tried to miss you, but it all happened so fast." She moved and stood and I realized she was wearing a blue helmet, the black straps wrapping around her featureless face. "Here," she said, a tan line protruding toward me, "they must have fallen off when I hit you."

I didn't move, confusion getting the best of me. I knew she was a girl and she had run into me and knocked me over. She didn't seem that much taller than me, so I knew she wasn't an adult. I stared at what she held out to me, afraid to reach for something I couldn't see.

"These are your glasses aren't they? Can you see? Here." She placed my glasses on my face, which didn't help improve things much. "What's wrong with your eye?"

I was used to that question and she seemed nice enough, giving me my glasses and asking if I was okay. Answering couldn't hurt anymore than being knocked over did.

"I'm blind in one eye. My patch helps my eye grow strong."

"Blind? That's really cool. Can you see me?"

I shrugged. That was always a hard one to answer. I could see, yes, but not very well, and I didn't know how to express that—no one had given me a stock answer like they had for the questions about my patch. "Kinda," I said.

"That's cool."

We stood in the street staring at each other for a few seconds, neither of us sure what to do. It wasn't everyday you met someone by running them over.

"Sorry I hit you," she finally said. "I'm just learning to ride a bike and stopping is hard, especially when I'm going fast." She moved, her body losing half it's height. "You're bleeding," she said at my knees before standing up straight. "My house is just around the corner. You can come over and get cleaned up if you want."

I was bleeding? Glancing down at my knees, there was red snaking its way down my shins. I didn't know how far I was from home, I hadn't paid enough attention. Would I be able to make it back before bleeding to death? My mom had said to stay close, and if I showed up hours later bleeding, she would know I hadn't been cautious enough, and I was sure that would merit a spanking. Either way, I was in trouble.

"Okay," I said.

"Cool," she breathed. "My name is Mona." Moving quickly, she retrieved what I now knew to be her bike from down the road. She walked it back to me. "Follow me."

In only a few minutes, we were inside her house, inside a bathroom, where she cleaned my knees with what felt like a washcloth.

"If my mom asks, I wasn't on my bike. You just fell."

I had no problem lying, but I always had a reason, so she had to have one too. "Why?"

"Cause I'm sick, really sick. And if she knew I was out there by myself, I'd never get to ride my bike ever again."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm on dialysis. My kidneys are bad and I need new ones." She threw the washcloth in the sink with a splat.

"What's dialysis?" I didn't know, I didn't even know what kidneys are, let alone how rude it I was being. People asked me about my eye all the time and I was always told to answer, so I figured it was the same for her.

"Come on. I'll show you." I stood and ran into the back of her. She had stopped moving without any warning. "But you can't see, can you?"

"I can. Just not real well with my patch on."

"Can you take it off?"

"Um." My mom had said not to, but I was already overdue for a spanking, so what could it hurt? "Yeah." I took my glasses off with my left hand and ripped my patch off with the other.

Light flooded my brain and after blinking a few times, Mona came into focus. Her skin was a pale yellow, almost as if she were lit from the inside by a light bulb. Her black hair was thinning, wisps reaching her shoulders, which were as thin as her hair. Her eyes seemed to bulge from her head, her lips nonexistent. I couldn't help but think of her as a scarecrow and, for the first time in my life, I regretted taking my patch off.

She smiled. "Your eyes are pretty. Follow me."

This girl, who didn't complain about falling off her bike, looked as if each leg would break with every step she took. I followed her down a hallway and into what she called the great room. And great it was. Three windows as tall as the raised ceiling lined

the wall facing the neighborhood. The room, and entire house, was made out of rough hewn logs, the floor covered in marble. In one corner, across the room from a home theater and next to the pristine kitchen, stood a grey monstrous machine with dials and switches and a screen and several clear plastic tubes tied off in loops. Next to it was a pink arm chair. She motioned for me to sit, and I did.

"Dialysis is where they take all the blood out of my body, run it through this machine, and then put it back in me. These tubes are hooked to my arm and suck out all my blood." I must have looked horrified because the next thing she said was, "It's not that bad. Better than being dead. I can't go to school or anything, but that means I get to sleep in." She smiled what should have been a comforting smile, but only made me more uneasy, like she was preparing to steal my blood. "It's cause my kidneys are bad and need to be replaced. I'm on the list, so someday soon I should be all fixed."

I nodded, trying to smile back. Escape was on my mind more than anything, and I needed to bust out before the machine drained me and ate my kidneys too.

"I need to go home." I didn't give an excuse and I didn't wait for her to say anything. I spotted the stairs across the room and bolted, hoping the front door would be at the bottom.

It was and, once outside, I ran down the road and turned the corner back onto Grindelwald Street. I was at the highest point of my street and could see my house, so I took off running, not stopping until I slammed the door behind me.

I thought I had narrowly escaped death, lucky to be alive with kidneys and blood. It wouldn't be until later when I realized what my real luck was.

9.

My mom and I sat in an exam room of my other eye doctor—Dr. Weissman. Technically, he was my contact lens specialist, but he performed all the same test Dr. Rosenbaum did, without the satisfaction of dancing animals at the end of my visit. He looked a lot like Dr. Rosenbaum with dark hair, kind eyes, and a white lab coat.

The wait was never long and we had only been in the exam room a few minutes before Dr. Weissman glided in.

"Good morning, Danielle. Mrs. Harris." He shook both of our hands. "How was the drive?" Directing the question at me, I shrugged and looked at my mom.

"Not too bad. We beat most of the traffic," my mom answered for me. And we had, leaving Taft at 5:30 so we could make it to UCLA by 8.

"Good," Dr. Weissman said. "Now, any flashers, floaters, itching, mucus?"

My eyes still on my mom, I said, "No."

"Good. Any changes in vision or with the lens?"

"No."

"Good. Nothing new to report?"

As I was about to answer no, my mom said, "Yes, actually. She has new glasses. Dr. Rosenbaum changed them several months ago."

"The ones she has on?"

My mom nodded.

"Did you get them here?"

"No. We took the prescription to a place closer to us, a Lens Crafters I think."

"Good. I am going to need those to test the power." Dr. Weissman gently lifted the glasses off of my face.

And I was happy to be rid of them. I hated my glasses. They always slid down my nose, my bangs would get caught in the hinges, and, when I had them on over my patch, the itching would be unbearable, the tiny bit of pressure from the nose pieces tugging the patch and my skin every which way. Having new frames was nice, especially because they were purple, but other than that, wearing them was torture.

Dr. Weissman dimmed the lights in the room and the exam began. I read letters with each eye covered. He looked at the fit of my contact lens through a contraption I can only imagine magnified everything seen through it. He removed my lens and passed it on to someone "in the back" for a good polishing. I read letters on the screen again, though through my bad eye they all were scribbles.

"Good. Now I want to check your pressure. Lean back and look up," he said.

I pressed my head against the back of the seat and looked up, without moving my head, at the ceiling tiles dotted with constellations of holes.

"This is going to numb your eyes, as I am sure you know by now. The drops are yellow, so don't be frightened by your yellow tears." He opened my eyelids, one at a time, gently with two fingers, squeezing one drop into each eye. By now, I was a pro and drops, fingers, plastic parts didn't bother me or my eyes. "Good. Dab at your eyes and in a few moments we can begin the test."

I took an offered tissue from Dr. Weissman and blotted the extra liquid leaking out of the corners of my eyes. Yellow as bright as a banana peel soaked the cloth in star-

shaped spots. My eyes began to feel heavy and I blinked rapidly to keep them from succumbing to gravity—popping out of my head and rolling across the floor in their own game of marbles. My eye lids seemed to barely do the job, they felt too small, too thin.

Dr. Weissman swung an arm of the octopus apparatus around. “Place your chin here.” I did, resting it on the white, chin-shaped hammock, my forehead pressing against a plastic strap. Clicking instruments around, Dr. Weissman pushed into place a small metal stick, on top of which was a funnel shaped pressure gauge. It looked like the tip of a frosting bag used to decorate cookies and cakes with flowers, only plastic and grey, with tiny numbers written all around the smaller end. He moved his face in close to mine. “Focus on my ear. Big eyes and no moving.”

I stared at his rather large ear as he slid the funnel closer and closer to my waiting eye. I couldn’t feel it make contact, because of the numbing drops, but as if someone had dropped a pebble in a smooth lake, ripples radiated out from the funnel, Dr. Weissman’s ear momentarily waving back and forth.

“Good, Danielle. Stay still. Perfect. Now the next one. Focus on my ear.”

Before I had time to wave back at his ear, ripples rushed through my good, left eye, the plastic funnel lifted just as quickly as it had landed.

Dr. Weissman swung the arm out of the way, slide over to the small desk next to the chair I sat in, and wrote in my chart.

My mom gave me a thumbs up and rubbed her belly, silently telling me she was hungry. I nodded in agreement.

"Well," Dr. Weissman cleared his throat. "The pressure in the right eye is much higher than in the left. In the left eye the pressure is nine, which is normal, but in the right eye the pressure is twenty-one. And that is way too high, so high, if left untreated, it would start to affect the visual field, creating small blind spots at first, but eventually causing total blindness."

I didn't understand most of what he said, but knew it was bad because he was hunched forward, his eyebrows knit together. And he was using big words, something doctors did when they didn't want me to comprehend and why would he want to keep good news from me? Only the bad kind was shrouded in large words and complicated body language.

"What can we do to lower the pressure?" My mom asked, her body and face mirroring Dr. Weissman's. Something horrible was happening to me—my mom's ever present pleasant doctor mask shattered into worry.

"To treat glaucoma, drops are usually prescribed. But I can't do anything, it is out of my field of expertise. The best next step is to get my finding confirmed by Dr. Rosenbaum and then he can refer Danielle to a glaucoma specialist. She's young and we're catching it early, so there really isn't anything to worry about, not those long-term affects anyways. Let me get Danielle's lens and we can wrap this up." Dr. Weissman exited the room.

"What's wrong?" I asked, thoroughly confused. One moment my mom was worried and the next she wasn't. Was I supposed to be scared, too?

"You might have something called glaucoma, in your bad eye. It has to do with pressure and can be fixed with eye drops. I'm sure everything will be fine. There's nothing to worry about, yet." My mom smiled and nodded, as though she were convincing herself more than me.

I still didn't understand. The only kind of pressure I knew about was committed by peers, and was something only older kids had to worry about. Was someone trying to make my eye do something bad? Was it me causing the pressure problems? I scratched my head and then stopped. I didn't want to push the pressure any higher. Could scratching my head do that?

"Am I doing something bad?" I asked finally, grasping at the thin hairs of understanding the unknowable.

My mom laughed. "No, Princess. None of this is your fault. And none of it could have been stopped or fixed if you tried. It is what it is. But we will do everything under the sun to make it as good for you as possible. Don't worry. You just live your life."

10.

"Dani!"

Katie's voice reached my ears a second before she engulfed me in a hug. I hadn't seen her all summer and hugged back hard.

"We're in the same class," I said, releasing her from my grip.

"Ms. Christenson's. I know. Hopefully we can sit next to each other." Katie smiled and moved to the side. "Christina's in our class, too. We'll have fun together."

My jaw dropped. The Wild Thing was in my class? “Weren’t you in the second grade last year?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me, making me forget to say hi and nice to meet you and let’s be friends. The one thing always expected of my brother and me was to be polite, but I had never met anyone who was held back and like an exotic food, I wanted to poke and prod her until I understood what she was.

Christina smiled a crazed smile, baring all her teeth, her brown eyes just as wide. She wore a blue tie-dyed shirt and short combination and unlike our pulled back, brushed by our mother’s hair, Christina’s was as free as a tumble weed, some sections waving and standing on end, other pieces flat and plastered to her skull.

“Sorta, I was. I’m not really being held back. My birthday is in December and so I really started school a year earlier or something, so really I’m not being held back. And I know all the smart stuff you guys haven’t learned, so really I’m still ahead. Except math. Math is hard.” Christina blurted all this out in one breath and sucked air deep in her lungs when she finished. “Your dad’s the principal?”

I nodded. “And the Superintendent. He’s the boss of everyone.” It was important for everyone to know my dad had two jobs—the two most powerful positions in the entire school. And that, though I never stated it directly, some of his power transferred to me, that I could get people in real trouble. Everyone in my grade except Christina knew this, and I thought it fair I warn her.

“Okay,” Christina said, not fazed at all. “Let’s go play on the grass.”

We had been standing in front of our new classroom, on the other side of the blacktop from the kindergarten and first grade classrooms, watching all the big kids roam

the halls. This was new territory for us and Katie and I weren't sure what the rules were, so we stood glued to the walls, out of harm's way.

"We won't get in trouble?" Katie asked, eyes wide.

I didn't like deferring to Christina as the expert, but she had spent all last year here.

"No—"

"You're such babies," Sara said, interrupting Christina. Nicole and Celina stood on either side of her, all three with their hands on their hips. "Are you worried about being spanked by Daddy?" She directed the question at me.

I pushed my glasses up on my nose, my mind searching for some stinging remark to spit back. I was rusty from a summer of only dealing with Tommy and his rough housing. Punching Sara would have felt good, but it was only the first day of school and I really didn't want to be spanked. I opened my mouth to say something, anything.

"The only spanking that's gonna happen is the one the ground's gonna give you when I knock you out," Christina growled, stepping forward so she stood nose to nose with Sara.

"Oh, no. It's The Wild Thing. I'm so scared of your lice." Sara burst out laughing. Nicole and Celina sneered for added effect. "Let's go, girls. They're all pathetic," Sara said before turning and sauntering off down the hall.

"What butt faces," Christina breathed. Shrugging, she said, "Let's go play before the bell rings." Grabbing Katie's hand, she led her across the hall and out onto the grass. "Come on, Dani."

Hesitating, I replayed what had just happened. Christina had stood up for me and then took the brunt of Sara's anger, without even stuttering or second guessing herself. She didn't even know me, and still stuck her neck out for Katie and me. Maybe, just maybe, a friendship between us would be possible after all. The Wild Thing was different, but she was also kind and smart, someone I wanted on my side.

Christina and Katie spun in circles, their arms out wide like propellers. If Christina was as wild as everyone said, then she would be fun, and I needed more fun in my young life, to act as a counter-weight against hours spent sitting in doctor's offices.

I skipped out to the grass and turned round and round.

Weeks went by and without even knowing how it happened, Christina and I became best friends.

Most our time spent together was outside of school. She would come over to my house in the afternoons or on the weekends if her mom needed to run errands or had a party to work as Marilyn Macaroni and I would spend time at her house whenever she wasn't at mine. If we weren't one place, we were at the other.

Christina's house was on the outskirts of town—past the lake, the school, the convenience store (the only grocery in town), the Hard Rock Café, and miles of flat land ending in a horizon filled with hills. Past all of that stood the Zych house.

A big climbable tree stood in the middle of the sparsely grassed front yard, a roughly hewn wood fence the only demarcation between the public road and their private

land. A dirt road cut the land in half and traveled next to the house and well beyond, straight out to the hills we always dreamed about climbing.

The house was a perfect square with white stucco and maroon trim. It was so small Christina and I could run around it in less than a minute, the only obstacles stickers and foxtails pricking our bare feet.

In the backyard, built against another fence separating their land from their neighbors, was the chicken coop and just beyond that, was Christina's dad's C-train—a large corrugated metal shipping container usually seen on ships or trains or driving down the freeway at fifty miles-an-hour on the back of a semi. He had a workshop of some kind inside, but it was strictly off limits and that wasn't a rule Christina was willing to break.

One Saturday afternoon my parents dropped me off before driving into Lancaster to go grocery shopping. Because they were letting me spend the night, I didn't have to wear my patch or my contact lens, both would have been too much trouble for Christina's parents to deal with. And sleeping with it in was out of the question since the gas permeable material would cut off the oxygen supply to my eyeball, essentially suffocating it. So, I was a happy, blind camper.

Purple duffel bag in hand, I skipped down the dirt path to the front door, waving at my parents after I knocked. As I heard the tires of the station wagon crunch over rocks, the door flung open. Christina grabbed my arm and yanked me inside.

We stood in total darkness.

"The aliens have landed," Cristina whispered in my ear. "You must dress to shield your brain from their rays. Follow me."

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I saw that both couches were covered in tin foil, as well as Christina, wrapped like a gas station burrito. None of this surprised me. Christina's imagination was something unreal and untouchable, and the real reason our friendship worked so well. She made up storylines, played the starring role, designed costumes, and directed. I simply followed along, feeding off of her energy and enjoying living in the moment.

She tiptoed between the coffee table and fireplace, her arms dangling at her sides, back hunched, neck turned sideways. "Walk this way. So we blend in with them."

I did as I was told, knowing I looked like a fool. Christina was a dancer—Jazz, Tap, and Ballet, her specialty. Her movements had a grace to them, her toes pointing out, her wrists cocked, her fingers just so. Ingrained in her since she could stand, every step she took emanated a new dance move learned yesterday, as though she were gliding to unheard music, keeping time to her own beat.

We made our way through the living room and into the hall. To our right was the bedroom she shared with her older sister Margo, and to our left the hall turned, her parents' bedroom door tucked in the corner.

"There is a safety basket just beyond our reach. Inside you will find your shielding armor. Wrap yourself up good. Be ready when I return." Christina dashed around the corner and I heard a door shut. The only place for her to go, besides the door-less kitchen, was the bathroom and, sure enough, the distinct tinkle sound met my ears.

I turned the corner and spotted the plastic wicker laundry hamper where I knew all of her old dancing costumes were stored. Opening the lid, an extra large roll of tin foil

poked out from the middle of glittery skirts, polka dotted pants, and stretchy leotards. I yanked the roll out and, just as I was about to spread the foil down the hall to roll myself up in it, the toilet flushed and Christina reappeared.

"Here, quick." She took the roll out of my hands and ran circles around me until I was her twin burrito. Tape materialized in her hands. She ripped a few pieces off and patted them in place over the foil. "Perfect. Time to—"

A high-pitched wail made us jump. It sounded like a hungry infant, and seemed to grow louder and louder.

"Christina?" I asked, thoroughly terrified and ready to be done playing aliens, especially if it involved real aliens.

"My name is Oink. And yours is Squeak. That was the aliens. They're getting closer. Come on. Hurry!"

She took off through the kitchen and out the side door, me on her heels. The sun winked goodbye above the distant hills. The sky was orange and purple and red and cloudless. The air was cold and our tin foil armor did little to keep the chill out.

Another wail pierced the twilight.

"Hurry! They're gaining on us!"

Christina was barefoot and, thankfully, I hadn't had time to take my slip-ons off, but keeping up was hard. She floated above the dirt. I stepped in every hole and on every rock on that stretch of dirt road. She kept going and going, the distance between us growing and growing.

A yowl practically bit my heels.

This game wasn't fun anymore. My heart beat hard against its bone cage. My lungs were at their bursting point. I didn't want to die or be probed or taken away to another planet. There were books I still wanted to read and borrowing subtraction to master and video games on Tommy's Sega I wanted to beat.

When I looked up, Christina was gone. I skidded to a stop and whirled in a complete circle. She was gone, poof, just like that. Did the aliens get her first? Were they playing a trick, rounding us up like a herd of cattle so we would stumble right into their hands, antennas, stubs, whatever aliens had at the ends of their arms?

We had run past the C-train, farther out on their property than I had ever been.

A howl made me jump. And another and another.

I was surrounded. This was Christina's game, pulled from the depths of her mind and now she was gone and I was soon to follow. The sky darkened. My tin foil crunched with my every movement—I couldn't even try to be invisible.

Another scream cut through me and this time, it sounded so close my ears rang with it.

I took a few more steps, my breathing even heavier than it had been when we were running. This wasn't fun anymore. I wanted to go home.

"Dani."

I held my breath. Was that Christina?

"Dani, over here."

I turned and found I was staring at a large weeping willow.

"In here. Hurry before they find you."

A hand popped out of the graying leaves, calling me forward.

Yet another wail lighted a fire under my butt and without much thinking, I dove for the hand. Landing on my belly, I crawled on my elbows, eyes squeezed shut. I felt the tin foil rip, could hear it tear away, but desperation propelled me forward.

"Dani, stop!" Christina yelled.

I froze. "Are we safe? I don't wanna die."

She laughed. "Open your eyes. We're fine."

I opened my bad eye first, figuring if something bad were going to happen, I'd rather it go down without my complete comprehension of what was attacking. But nothing happened. I opened my good eye. In front me, sitting cross legged was Christina, her armor shredded like I knew mine was. She grinned.

"Welcome to the safety pod. In here, nothing can harm us. We're really safe."

Sitting up, I saw we were in the dome of leaves, the sky peeking through in purple blooming flowers. It was peaceful, quiet, warm, the light breeze blowing branches back and forth in a hushed lullaby. I felt safe.

"Can I take my armor off?"

"Yeah. We completed our mission."

I helped unravel Christina and she helped unravel me. Combined, we made a soccer ball sized tin foil projectile.

"Hold on to that," Christina said. "We might need it to get back."

After a while, we decided it was dinner time and headed for home. Outside the tree, the howls started up again and, like a defibulator, my heart beat out of my chest.

“They’re nothing to be scared of, really,” Christina said when I grabbed her arm. “Look over there, next to the chicken coop.”

Staring at us, its tail open wide, with moonlight shining off of him in majestic purples and blues and greens, stood a large bird. It wailed like a baby, as if to prove Christina’s point.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A peacock. That one is a boy cause it has the pretty tail feathers.”

I had been over to her house several times and had never seen or heard the peacocks before. “When—“

“Our neighbor brought them home a few days ago. He can’t control them and they cross from his property to ours. Really annoying, especially at night. My mom says we can’t be mean to them cause they’re not ours.” Christina bent over, picked up a rock, and hurled it at the bird. We heard the rock hit the ground close it, and, with a yowl, the bird ran deeper into the yard, its tail feathers splayed behind like a motor. “But I really hate them. Stupid birds.”

It was good to know we were never in any true danger. But in all that commotion, I forgot to ask what my parents always wanted me to when I arrived anywhere.

“Are either of your parents here?”

Christina opened the side door and we walked into the kitchen.

“Um. My dad’s in his workshop I think. My mom's out in Hollywood all week working on a movie and Margo is somewhere.”

At least her dad was home, if not actually in the house with us. I don't know if my parents would have let me stay if they had known, but most times I was over there, only Margo or her dad was home, since her mom, when she wasn't a party clown, worked as a script supervisor for Jim Carrey movies. We had survived the alien attack and I knew we could handle a night alone.

And like every night I was there, we had lettuce and ketchup for dinner. Christina didn't like utensils, so we always ate with our fingers, sitting on the floor.

Before bed, we played with her American Girl dolls and drew pictures with crayon on the bottom of the top bunk in her room—the one thing I knew we were okay doing. I drew an alien bird and a stick person calling for help. Christina wrote our names and drew a heart around them. We fell asleep listening to the birds' cries.

11.

That spring, in Ms. Christenson's class we began doing show and tell every Friday. Everyone had to bring something to share and that Friday afternoon, I brought a two foot tall pink bunny stuffed animal.

Because I sat in the front, I always had to go first. Normally, this was a point of stress for me, but I was so excited to share my bunny—the king of my stuffed animal collection—that I hopped to the front middle of the room.

"What did you bring to share today, Dani?" Ms. Christenson asked from her perch in the back of the room. From overhearing my parents, I knew she used this time to grade papers, and that was thought as a cop-out, as being a lazy teacher, but of course, us kids

didn't mind it. I also knew she wasn't married and still lived with her parents, something that was odd for thirty-something woman, but again, I knew a lot I wasn't supposed to.

I held up my bunny. "This is a bunny I got from the Easter bunny. He's pink and has a green bow. And he's soft and cuddly. I like him a lot."

"All right," Ms. Christenson sighed. "Any questions for Dani?"

Several hands shot up in the air, Katie and Christina's among others. I called on Katie first.

"What's his name?" She asked.

"Um, Mr. Bunny I guess. I never named him."

"Okay. Pick someone else."

I called on Christina.

"Does he hop?" She asked.

"Um, only when no one's looking." I smiled. I liked that thought. Maybe all my stuffed animals had parties while I was at school. I hoped they did, because otherwise they had really boring lives.

"Is there anything actually neat about that stuffed animal? I mean, I know you can only see out of one eye." Sara asked, her lips pursed in satisfaction.

"Sara, don't be rude," Ms. Christenson murmured.

I hadn't called on her, but Ms. Christenson must have while I dreamed about stuffed animal parties. Either way, I had to answer her question. She didn't think he was neat, didn't think I could actually see him. I had to show her, prove to her that he was

worth my show and tell time. And if she wanted to make fun of my patch, then so be it. I'd just tell my dad what she said.

"He's neat because of where I found him." I paused, making sure everyone was paying attention. Ms. Christenson even looked up. "I found him in the toilet. All soaking wet and stinky. I washed him and brought him back to life. That's why he's neat."

Christina and Katie had big smiles and Sara didn't. I had done a good job, made my bunny worth everyone's time.

"Go ahead and pass him around," Ms. Christenson said.

I handed my bunny to Anthony, who sat behind me. "Ew," Anthony said a bit too loudly, "he even smells like toilet."

"Let me see," said Nick. When he got the bunny, he smelled it and cried, "Yuck!"

As my bunny made the rounds, everyone dug their noses in the pink fur and sniffed, each commenting on his stink, even Sara, who made the worst face and loudest exclamation. I didn't know he reeked and hadn't even thought of that possibility when I grabbed him from my bed earlier that morning. I wanted to stop them, to say my bunny couldn't smell because I took care of him, but it was too late. I was the one who said he was found in a toilet and toilets smell like toilets and if I protested, everyone would know I lied. There was nothing I could do but watch him be passed around.

After school, I was rolling down the hill in front of the RSP room, my bunny watching from the curb. I liked to do this with my patch on. It gave all the already blurry images movement, like they were dancing, dancing only for me. Like I was the only person in the entire world that could make trees and buildings and cars dance. I had

power rolling down that hill because the second I laid still, everything would go back to its normal boring stasis, still blurry, but still nonetheless.

Just as I hit the bottom and rolled to a stop, my mom appeared above me.

"Get up," she said, her voice too steely, too teacherly, to mean anything good.

I stood and wobbled in place. "I know I'm not supposed to get my clothes all grass stained," I said. That's what she had to be upset about because what else was there?

"You know what Ms. Christenson told me in the office?"

Uh oh. When caught in a lie, the best thing to do is lie some more.

"No. I didn't do anything bad today."

"That's it. Keep up the lying. It'll only make me spank you more."

"But, I—" Tears dribbled down my cheeks. I didn't want to be spanked. So maybe lying wasn't the best move.

"Don't you say a word. Just listen. Your teacher told me you had a good show and tell and then you told a story that couldn't possibly be true. That you found that bunny in the toilet. And every kid in the entire class proceeded to smell it. Would I let you own a toy you found in a toilet, Danielle? Would I?"

I shook my head.

"Exactly. That is dirty and you are not a dirty child. And the worst part is, your teacher actually thought I let you bring a nasty toy to school. Your lie embarrassed me, Danielle Marie. You embarrassed me. This is where I work. You do not embarrass me or your father in our place of employment. Do you understand?"

I nodded, wiping hard at my tears.

“Let’s go.” She grabbed my arm and dragged me through the parking lot towards our station wagon. “Open the door, get in, and pull your shorts down.”

I hesitated. Was she really going to spank me in public, at my school? If she only knew what Sara said, how she pushed me to lie.

“But, Mom. Sara said—”

“I don’t care what anyone tells you. You have to be the bigger person. Lying makes you the worst kind of person there is, worse than anyone who ever says anything bad to you. You need to learn to rise above, to be better than them. Get in. Now.”

I opened the door and laid down on the seat, my tummy pressing into the soft upholstery.

“Shorts.”

With some effort, I wiggled both my shorts and undies down to my knees. Waiting was the worst part. My tears multiplied in anticipation.

“You will never, ever embarrass your family again. And you will learn to be the bigger person.”

She leaned over me.

I gripped the edge of the seat as sobs gripped my body.

Her breath was hot on my lower back.

I started to choke on my mucus.

Her open palm hit me hard, the sound reaching me before the sting. Again. And again. And again.

Then it was over.

My mom yanked my clothes back into place. “I expect better out of you from now on. Watch your feet.” I rolled on my side and curled in a ball. My mom slammed the car door and walked up the stairs toward the office.

Tears pooled next to my cheek. She didn’t understand what it was like, how hard it was to listen to Sara and not react. All I wanted was to share my bunny, not tell lies. And if it had been any other kid in the class, Ms. Christenson wouldn’t have called their parents, but I was a teacher’s child, the daughter of her boss and, because of that, was held to a higher standard, an unfair, impossible level of perfection. I wasn’t an overachiever. I had to fight just to keep up with the others. Didn’t that allow me some room for error?

The sting on my backside calmed, as did my tears. I had never been spanked in public before, but at that moment I was so overcome with anger, so infuriated that no one understood, that that thought barely registered. I fell asleep dreaming genies existed, wanting to waste a wish on this day, to get a do-over, to go back and tell Sara to shut up because that, although punishable, wouldn’t have warranted a spanking.

12.

I sat in the corner of Dr. Caprioli’s office, slip-ons flat on the floor, legs curled under my butt. We had been to see Dr. Rosenbaum a few weeks before, and he seconded Dr. Weissman’s assessment of my eye pressure, recommending that I begin seeing a glaucoma specialist.

My mom walked towards me, clipboard and insurance cards in her hands. She plopped in the tan leather seat next to me, hair rising with the sudden movement of air, a bright pink dolphin and sea horse sponge painted dress tucked between her legs.

"Your kinda crowd." She laughed and grabbed her faded fanny pack from my lap.

I pushed my glasses up on my nose, the kind that covered my face, my bangs concealing my forehead. I looked around through bangs, bifocal, and contact, happy that I was patch-free for the time being.

The man sharing an arm rest with my mom looked to be about ninety, his skin falling from his bones, freckles faded into liver spots. Next to him sat his wife, her white hair a perfect puff, cane resting on a polyester-clad knee.

"We're in the right place?"

My mom nodded, pen checking the no boxes for all the health questions, me never having had a heart attack, stroke, sex, or any breathing and/or urinary problems.

"The receptionist said you're the first seven year old she's ever seen here. Maybe a world record."

I grunted and glared at a pumpkin shaped old man wearing an orange sweater easily two sizes too small. He quickly shifted his gaze from me to the floor.

"She said you need to do a Field of Vision test first and then you can see the doctor. Any marriages I don't know about?"

"Mom!" I laughed. "That's gross."

"You think that now. Just wait ten years."

Ten years seemed like a lifetime away, so I shrugged. My foot was falling asleep and I repositioned myself, numb foot now bouncing up and down off of the brown-with-age carpet.

The pumpkin stuck his nose in the air at me. I tapped my foot faster.

Secretly, I hoped my world renowned foot stink was on its way to the pumpkin. I wafted with all my might, using my Bill Nye the Science Guy skills, pushing the air in his direction with my feet. Tommy had proved it worked with farts, so why not sweaty feet.

My mom returned the clipboard to the receptionist. Her back turned, I stomped both my bare feet on the carpet. I wasn't used to being around so many elderly people and their disapproving glances made me as uncomfortable as it did make me want to cause trouble. But doctor offices were the last place I wanted to get spanked, now that I knew my mom wouldn't hesitate just because we were in public.

My mom came back to our seats.

"There's at least ten charts ahead of you. This is going to take forever." She grabbed her fanny pack and smiled. "But at least I brought these." She unzipped the front pocket and allowed the snack sized serving of Oreo's to peek out. "Let's go sit in the hall. It's less crowded."

I shoved my feet back into my permanently damp shoes, pulled out my spandex shorts wedgie, and followed her to the exit. As I passed the pumpkin, I gave my best smile, only receiving a grunt in return.

We sat in the hallway between the waiting room and the small dilation room. Through the windows on either side I could see grey and white heads, some still, some bobbing.

"We could read."

"I don't like it here. It's all old people." I crossed my arms.

"They do smell funny, huh?"

"Like Auntie Merle."

She laughed.

A man in teal scrubs walked out of the dilation room and stopped in front of us.

"Daniel Harris?"

"Danielle?" My mom emphasized –yell at the end of my name.

"Dan*yell*, yes."

My mom stood and I followed suit.

"I'll take you back for the Field of Vision." He spoke directly to my mom.

"She's ready." She nudged me forward a bit. "I'm not the patient."

The man shifted his gaze to me, not trying to hide his surprise. "Right. Well, follow me." He turned on his heel and walked back through the dilation room, the old people not noticing me, their pupil's saucers.

We passed through a narrow hallway and entered a dark room. The walls were lined with computers close to the door, the rest of the room broken into six cubbies, three on either side and shoved against the walls. Each closed off with an accordion partition.

We followed the man, a technician I would learn later, to the last cubby on the right side. He pushed the panel open.

"You sit here. I'll be right back." He turned, bumping into my mom. "Sorry. Uh—" Glancing around, he rolled over a chair from a corner, "and you can sit here."

It was obvious he didn't have to deal with mothers very often.

I spun the chair back and forth. A large square, computer like contraption stared at me, the center an oval-shaped cut-out, equal height with my head.

"You're not going to come in?" I wasn't used to her not being in the room with me and I was nervous. I had never done a Field of Vision test before and needed her reassuring presence.

"I don't think there's room. Maybe he'll leave the screen open."

The technician reappeared. "This is going to test if you have developed any blind spots in your field of vision, from the glaucoma." He put a hard plastic eye covering over my left eye, tightening the band at the back of my head, pulling some hairs with it.

I was amazed, gazing into this smooth white oval, like seeing the inside of an egg.

"You are going to see little white lights quickly appear and then disappear. When you think you've seen one," he handed me a grey miniature mouse-like clicker, "press the button. But only when you see the lights."

I glanced at my mom. She had inched her way forward in the chair, so she could look over my shoulder. She smiled and nodded.

"Now, the most important part is to stare only at the orange light in the center of the field. Do you see the light?"

I nodded.

“Good. The orange light is a camera, so your mom is going to be able to see if your eye is wandering on this screen out here. Don’t let it follow the lights. We’ll start with your right eye. Each session should take three minutes. Ready?”

I nodded again and placed my chin on the plastic chin rest. The egg lit up.

My mom scooted away from me, her focus on the small computer screen on the side of the wall.

The first dot of light was huge and right next to the small orange light. I pressed the clicker. To my surprise, it made a high pitched chirping sound, like a mouse in distress. The white dots appeared and vanished within seconds of each other and it was hard to keep my eye from chasing after them. I knew I wasn’t focusing well and my mom tried to help since she could see what my eye was doing.

“ Dani, stay on the orange light. No. Good, good. No. Concentrate. There you go, good. Wait, no, no, no. Okay. Good. Keep there, perfect. Hey, no.”

She carried on like this for all six minutes, my eyes wanting to follow the lights and my finger wanting to make the mouse scream even without the presence of the dots. All in all, we left the technician frustrated, my test not nearly as accurate as he would have liked.

We were back in the hallway, even more old people stuffed into the waiting room.

“How much longer till the doctor?”

“Weeks, I bet.”

My mom pulled a bag of cashews from her fanny pack. She offered and I took a handful.

"You need to do your homework."

"I will."

She handed me a Pee Wee Scouts book. "Read to me."

I opened the book at the folded page. Reading was better than math and if I complained, she probably would have pulled out a subtraction worksheet.

I had read and read and read, finished my math, and wrote my spelling words five times each before we were put in an exam room.

The door swung open after only a few minutes of waiting and a man with slicked back black hair entered, bringing with him the odor of cooked celery. His bulging brown eyes and his long straight nose gave him the appearance of a frog and a duck. I was half expecting him to quabbit when he opened his mouth.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Caprioli." He didn't even look up from the chart before sitting down and washing his hands. "You are?" He turned to my mom and pointed.

"Mrs. Harris, Dani's mom." My mom gave me an Elvis lip twitch.

"Dani? Daniel?"

"Dan*yell*." She shifted her body weight in the unpadded grey chair.

Dr. Caprioli's eyes focused on me, growing in size.

"Hi, Danielle. I'm Dr. Caprioli. It says here you are only seven?"

I nodded.

"And you were born with a cataract and now you have developed glaucoma." He stared at me like I had five eyes and each had an interesting defect. "Well, we'll get you all squared away today. But first we need to find out what your pressure is."

He dimmed the lights and performed the same tests as my other two doctors, finding that I did, indeed, have a slight case of glaucoma. I was given a steroid drop to use once a night and an appointment for three months later.

But the fact that glaucoma, as explained by Dr. Caprioli, could cause blindness if left untreated didn't soar over my head as it had when Dr. Weissman explained the exact same thing months earlier. Not only was I already blind in my bad eye, but I could become even blinder. All that work and all those patches my mom had forced on me could be for naught. I could wake up one morning to nothing—it would be like that moment when my contact lens is removed and I am stuck in a world of blankness—but forever, all-consuming, black hole blankness, the kind that never goes away. Those steroid drops would be my only defense against the dark and like a man praying to hold on for one more day, I would use them religiously.

13.

The summer between second and third grade passed unlike any other. My mom, Tommy, and I went to Mammoth and my dad visited when he could. There was reading and bike riding and fights with Tommy.

One day I was bored and, knowing patch time was looming, I happened to wander off up the street. Before I knew it, I was standing in front of Mona's house. Its big picture windows were so clean they reflected the tree tops across the street. Each log reminded

me of Tommy's Lincoln Logs only real and huge. Now I know it's worth millions of dollars, but back then it seemed like a shiny wrapper hiding sadness and sickness, somewhere even I knew my dirty knees and uncombed hair wouldn't be welcome.

Something beyond me, maybe my ignorance or wishful thinking, pushed me to ring the doorbell. The day was so silent I could hear the chimes echo in the house. I stood there on what most likely was a very expensive doormat, waiting. Seconds and then minutes passed.

I thought no one heard the loud doorbell and I stood back and shouted, "Mona."

But still, no one came.

They must have moved, I thought. It had been a whole year, so that made sense. Or they went on vacation. Or they were out at the movies. Or grocery shopping. Or on a hike. Anything could have been possible.

"I'll come back tomorrow," I said, standing in the middle of the cul-de-sac.

Walking back home, I knew I wouldn't go back, that there was no back to go to. And as my mom placed a patch on my face, I realized I didn't have it that bad. At least I'd wake up tomorrow and be around if any nonexistent friends showed up wanting to play. At least I had that.

I was in one of Dr. Rosenbaum's exam rooms, my mom perched on her usual chair.

Dr. Rosenbaum was writing notes in my chart, the only sound the scratch of his pen. He had already performed the usual tests, in the usual order.

"Danielle," Dr. Rosenbaum looked up. "How old are you now?"

I looked at my mom. This was an unusual question. My birth date was written on the top of every page. I saw it every time I saw my chart. But still, my doctor asked me a question. "I'm seven," I said.

He wrote a few more lines. When he looked up, he removed his glasses. "You are wearing your patch five hours a day. Is that correct?"

Glancing at my mom, I mirrored her nod.

"Your vision has improved leaps and bounds. You and your mom have worked hard."

I continued to nod. I had never thought of it as work. Wearing my patch and contact lens and glasses wasn't something I could choose not to do. My mom made me, whether I liked it or not.

"I think," Dr. Rosenbaum continued, "you can go down to only wearing your patch three hours a day."

A smile bloomed on my face. This would mean, if I put my patch on at three in the afternoon, I wouldn't have to wear it during school. I could start third grade patch-free. I could sit in the back of the room. I could play on the bars during afternoon recess. I wouldn't have to deal with Sara and Celina and Nicole. This was the best news I had ever heard.

"Of course, at least two of those hours should be during school, so your right eye continues to work. I want your vision to improve as much as possible." Dr. Rosenbaum had turned to my mom while he spoke. I quietly hoped she wasn't listening, but knew my

mom was always listening, especially when my eye was concerned. “How does that sound?” He asked me.

What else could I say? No, I only want to wear my patch after school? No, I want to sit in the back of the classroom? No, I want to do all of my school work as easily as possible, with my good eye?

“Good,” I said.

“And, in a few years, if everything goes according to plan, you won’t have to wear a patch anymore. I know that sounds really good, huh?”

“Yeah, it does,” I said. But years sounded like years—a long, long time. I couldn’t imagine what I’d be doing in a month, let alone years. It was too far away to get excited about, something that might happen in what felt like a lifetime.

On the drive home, I thought I’d at least ask, “Do I have to wear my patch at school?”

My mom, eyes on the road, snorted. “What do you think?”

And that was that.

In late winter of my third grade year, Christina and I were taking turns riding my bike. It was Saturday and my mom had mercifully let me wear my patch in the morning before Christina came over, so we could spend that afternoon doing whatever we wanted without having to take my patch into consideration.

"I'll ride down the street and then you can ride it back to my house. Just run next to me," I told Christina. The wind was blowing hard in our faces and we had to yell to hear each other.

"Don't go really fast," she said.

I nodded. Pushing off with one foot, I balanced on a pedal with my other. And I was off. Riding into the wind was hard work and I couldn't have gone fast if I wanted to. Christina kept up without a problem.

At the dead end of the street, where it abruptly fell away to dirt and weeds and gourd plants, I stopped. Across the field, on top of another hill, rows of houses stood. The hills looked like stepping stones where a giant must have skipped from one to the next, laying down foundations and streets and fence lines as he went.

Christina took the bike. "I'll just wait here for you to get back," I said, breathless from fighting the wind.

Christina hopped on the bike and flew down the street.

I turned and wandered down the driveway of the last house on the street. It was made of brick and belonged to one of my dad's secretaries, Karen, and, because I had been to her house hundreds of times with my parents, I always acted as if this was an okay place to play and explore. They had a large Koi pond and I wanted to poke at the huge fish.

"I'm coming!" I heard Christina shout.

Spinning, I was going to walk back out to the street, but found myself standing toe to toe with a gigantic crow. On one of its legs was a purple tag. It cawed and hopped toward me.

"Hi, bird," I said.

It hopped a few more hops closer and cawed again. I backed up. Clearly it wasn't going to let me pass. No, it kept cawing and hopping, closer and closer. I kept backing up until I smashed into the garage door.

"Dani?" Christina stood in the middle of the street. She had dropped the bike and looked frightened. "What is it doing?"

"I don't know," I said.

As if my voice was a trigger, the bird charged. I cut to my left and stopped. The bird turned and eyed me.

"Go get my mom," I told Christina. It wasn't every day I was stalked by a crow. I had seen them all over, usually camped out on the streetlights and phone poles, and they had always seemed harmless. But when one is checking you out as if you'd make a great mid-afternoon snack, its beak sharp and pointed, glinting in the sun, with the wind puffing its feathers, a mere bird starts to resemble a lion. I had a bad feeling about this.

Christina left the bike and took off running.

Awesome, I thought, knowing I could be bird food by the time she even reached my house. I backed away slowly for the safety of the street. But the crow followed, cawing and licking its beak.

"Leave me alone," I shouted. "Please?"

Just as I was going to turn and run for my life, the bird charged, its wings flapping, up and down, up and down. Its cawing grew louder and it lifted off the ground. As if zeroed in like a missile, the bird aimed for my head. I froze.

Caw, caw, caw was all I heard before I felt the pain. The bird wasn't after my face, but something in my hair. A barrette. It sunk its talons into my scalp.

Screaming, flapping my arms as if I might fly away, I ran in circles. The crow sunk its claws deeper in my scalp, its beak poking at the barrette and yanking. Pain seared my entire body. I kept running and screaming and waving my arms while the bird pulled and tugged and wrenched tufts of hair from my head. Finally, it got the barrette and pushed off for flight.

And the crow was gone.

I stopped and felt my head. The bird left with my barrette and like I had been robbed and made the butt of a very terrible, very strange joke, the tears ran fast and hard. I stumbled home, banged in through the front door, and charged up the steps.

My mom and Christina stood in the kitchen—the picture of calm. Did they miss the memo about the killer crow?

My mom burst out laughing and immediately covered her mouth with a hand. "I'm sorry," she choked.

I could tell Christina was hiding a grin.

I almost died and they were trying not to laugh? Sniffling, I wanted to yell, to describe what had happened, to say I never appreciated life more. But all that came out was a long and whiney, "Mom."

She reached out and pulled me toward her. With her laughter under control, she asked, “What kind of bird was it?”

“A crow.”

“Oh, princess. I’m sorry. I thought it was a little bird and you girls were just playing a game. I’m glad you’re okay. Does your head hurt?”

I could feel her fingers on my scalp. “A little.” Adrenaline had kicked in and masked the pain.

“You got some marks and a lot of hair missing,” she said.

“Why would a bird do that?” Christina asked.

“Cause it’s mean,” I said.

14.

At morning recess on Monday, Katie, Christina, and I were on a mission—to find more recruits for our A Crow Landed On My Head Club. Katie and Christina were honorary members, since neither had the special distinction of actually being clawed in the scalp, like me. My rules were pretty simple:

1. A crow had to have landed on your head at least once.

   Or

2. I liked you.

To test the criteria, we approached a girl named Krystal. She was skinny with scraggly dark hair and bony knees. I thought she was interesting since she owned a pet pig.

"Krystal," Christina said, "Dani was wondering if you'd really like to be in our A Crow Landed On My Head Club."

She lit up like the fields when they're on fire in October. "Yeah. That sounds like fun."

Katie stepped forward. "There are conditions."

Krystal's fire waned. "Okay?"

"Has a crow ever landed on your head?" Cristina asked.

"Um, no."

"Are you Dani's friend?"

"Sure. Yeah."

Katie and Cristina turned to me. "Since a crow hasn't specialized you like one has to me, and I'm not sure I like you, it's a—" I paused and scratched my chin. Katie, Christina, and Krystal watched me with tense faces and I realized I had them wrapped around my fingers like puppets, like Sara with Nicole and Celina. The power was intoxicating. I could say yes and Krystal would be happy. Or I could say no and crush her dreams. Decisions, decisions. I had been in Krystal's position, on the other end of Sara's rule several times and she never took mercy on me, so why should I have mercy on anybody else? "No. Not today," I said. Krystal frowned and her eyes found the ground. Shrugging, I turned and walked away and when Katie and Christina stood there apologizing, I clapped my hands. "Let's go," I said, very impatient.

And like good disciples, they scurried after me. We walked all over the playground turning people down. It was great, being the boss, wielding the power of the

crow. But then we ran into Sara, Celina, and Nicole outside the bathrooms. I was fully prepared to invite and reject them like I had everyone else, only Sara beat me to the punch.

"You're a liar," she said, hands on her hips.

I mirrored her posture, ready for a showdown. "You're a liar for calling me a liar," I shot back.

"That's not how it works."

"Is too. Because I said so."

"That doesn't work either."

"I'm not lying and you are. So it does too."

"You're stupid crow story is just like the one about that stupid ugly bunny. All lies. You're a liar."

"No. Both happened. I was there and you weren't, so how do you know?"

"Ms. Christenson told me it was a lie."

"She doesn't even know about the crow."

"No, the bunny story. She told me you were lying."

"Liar!"

"Liars burn in hell with the devil."

"Sucks for you."

"No one believes you anymore cause you're such a big fat liar."

"It takes one to know one. Stupid!" I screamed. "Let's go. Liars make me sick." Christina and Katie followed me around the dirt track. Maybe the bunny story was a lie,

so what? A crow really had landed on my head. I was missing the hair to prove it. I decided to prove to Sara that people believed me and the only way to do that was to make my club as big as the universe. Krystal said she wanted to be in my club, so I'd start by recruiting her.

Next to the swings, I asked her, "You still want to be in my A Crow Landed On My Head Club?"

She shook her head. "That didn't even happen. And isn't even possible. So, no, I don't want to be in your fake club."

My jaw dropped. Less than ten minutes had passed since she said she would be in my club and now she didn't believe me?

"Fine," I said. "I'll find some cool people."

Krystal shrugged and started counting for her turn on the swings.

We approached all the people I had already turned down, and everyone said they didn't believe me. I was flabbergasted. I would have understood if they said no because I was mean the first time around, but that wasn't what was happening. The issue was that they didn't believe me, that they thought I was lying. So I had told a few tall tales about toilet bunnies and pink dolphins and giving my dad more power than he really had. They believed me then. Why not now?

Later that day I asked my mom if she believed me.

"I heard your screams flying on the wind. I saw your scalp. Of course, I believe you," she said.

"No one at school does."

"Dani, how many lies have you told your friends?"

I shrugged. Probably close to a million, but I thought it better to not admit.

"Exactly. People can only believe you for so long, Princess. Maybe this is something you should learn from?"

I shrugged again. The truth was so boring. What was interesting in talking about homework or TV or playing with the dog? Fairies and mermaids and kings and queens and rainbow colored animals were so much more amazing. And it's not like I had been forcing people to believe my lies. They chose to. That wasn't my fault.

"Try to tell the truth to your friends from now on. That way, when something extreme does happen, no one will have a reason to question you. I promise it'll make life a whole lot easier." My mom leaned over and kissed me on the top of the head. "And anyways, I know it happened and you know it happened. We'll make it our little secret. Okay?"

I nodded and made a silent promise that I'd try and be better.

15.

My mom and I waited in one of Dr. Weissman's exam rooms. We had been at UCLA since eight that morning when I saw Dr. Rosenbaum. At nine I had an appointment with Dr. Caprioli and now it was three in the afternoon—we were both worn out, hungry, and, above all, grumpy.

I had been patched earlier in the day during the wait at Caprioli's office and had annoyed my mom to no end—I kept talking and whining nonstop until she scolded me in a room full of old people with dilated eyes. And now, with my good eye free, I could tell

just how tired she was, her face drawn, head resting against the wall with her eyes closed. Silence was my best option.

After ten minutes, Dr. Weissman entered, muttered a hello, and began the exam, testing my vision in both eyes. He then used one of the octopus arms to refract light in each eye. When he shined the light in my bad eye, he shook his head and made a tisk-tisk sound.

Up until this point, my mom still sat with her eyes closed, but at Dr. Weissman's disapproving noise, her eyes popped open, her attention zeroed in.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Dr. Weissman, without looking up from examining my eye, said, "The lens is extremely dirty and scratched. Are you still washing it every night?"

"Of course."

He sat back and turned to face my mom. "Are you sure?"

I saw my mom's body stiffen and her face become taut. Out of all the visits, Dr. Weissman picked the worst day ever to question her. I knew this wouldn't end well—for any of us.

"Of course," my mom said again. "You tell me it must be cleaned every night, so it gets cleaned every night. I even bought an electric cleaner, so I wouldn't scratch the lens scrubbing it with my fingers."

Dr. Weissman nodded. "And you wash your hands before taking the lens out, cleaning it, and putting it in in the morning?"

"Of course. Do you think I want her eye to get infected? Do you know how much money that would cost in prescriptions and missing work and gas and co-payments? I'm not about to do anything to jeopardize my daughter's health or my wallet."

She had a point. I saw her constantly washing her hands, even when she was just looking in my eye to find a stray eyelash or remove a glob of eye gunk. And my mom was frugal, always using coupons or shopping certain places for sales. She didn't throw money away, using every last drop of saline solution in the bottle before buying more.

"Okay," Dr. Weissman said. "Something is not being done properly. Danielle's lens should not be this dirty or this scratched. If she continues to wear the lens in this state, she will get an eye infection and it will cost money." Before my mom could speak, he turned back toward me. "Danielle, are you touching your eye or itching it a lot?"

Uh oh. It was something I would do unconsciously. I would be reading or watching TV and suddenly realize I was itching my eye. I never made the choice beforehand to do it, it just happened. And sometimes things would get in my eye and irritate it, like dust or eyelashes or cloth fibers, and if this happened when my mom wasn't around, I would slide my contact lens back and forth across my eyeball with my index finger until tears formed and washed the irritant away. What else was I supposed to do?

I couldn't verbalize this to Dr. Weissman, though. He intimidated me and it was always safer to say nothing than say too much.

"Sometimes," I said. My mom gave me a nod of approval for telling the truth, mostly.

“Lean your head back,” Dr. Weissman said. I did and, with both his index fingers, he popped the lens out of my eye.

Everything to the right of me instantly disappeared into a chaos of smears and blurs. Without the help of my lens, my bad eye was blind. What once was a sink looked like a gash of silver against the tan blotch of the wall. Even my own shoulder and arm and hand were deformed into smears that mingled and mixed with the white of the marble floor—as if my limbs had melted and were pools of tan goo. The only saving grace when my lens was removed was my good eye, which took on double the work, giving me vision on my left side. When staring straight ahead, I could see all in front and to the left of me, but when things crossed over into the field of vision on my right, they blurred into tie-dyes. But, without my lens, my bad eye could breathe. My eyelid could blink unhindered by the piece of plastic sliding up and down, up and down with every movement. Like taking your shoes and socks off at the end of a long day, it felt liberating.

“I am going to get this polished.” Dr. Weissman swopped out of the room.

“He must be having as long a day as we are,” my mom said.

I didn’t want to fan the flames or get burned, so I nodded, opting to keep my mouth shut.

A while passed before Dr. Weissman reappeared with my newly polished lens and a few sample bottles of cleaner.

“I want you to try a new cleanser and enzyme soak for Danielle’s lens. This is powerful stuff and should help with the grime build up. But, there is nothing we can do

for the scratches. Danielle, you can't itch your eye or ever touch your lens. I know that it is hard, but you don't want an infection."

I nodded my agreement. I would try to not bother my contact lens, more than I usually did.

He continued to explain the new cleanser to my mom and how she had to put two drops of cleanser of the lens, rub it around in the palm of her hand for a minute, rinse the lens with saline solution, and then submerge it overnight in an enzyme soak, which came in tablets that had to be crushed and mixed with saline solution every night. In the morning, all she had to do was rinse the lens well and place it on my eye. It sounded like a lot of work to me and I was happy I wasn't the one responsible for it.

Before we left, Dr. Weissman told me to lean my head back so he could put my lens back in. Instantly, my world was shapes and forms and figures once again. I could see the pattern on the marble floor and the ridges in my finger nails. The polished lens felt invisible on my eye—like nothing was even there. Every time this happened, it never ceased to amaze me how uncomfortable my contact was when it was dirty, how much I could feel it sliding around on my eye like sand paper. But, you never know how much pain or discomfort you are in until it disappears and in only a few days, I would be able to feel my lens once again, and the cycle would start all over again, the smoothness of the polished lens simply a faint memory.

16.

I stayed on the straight and narrow, so to speak, for the next couple of months. I left Sara alone and she left me alone, until I befriended Krystal. I wanted to meet her pig and the only way to go about that was by being invited over.

I never did get that far, but one day during PE, I was walking laps with her and I apologized for being mean. I did feel bad about rejecting her that first time around, and told her so.

"Yeah," she said. "And I'm sorry I said I didn't believe you about the crow. I do. I only said that cause Sara told me she'd be my friend if I did. But she lied."

As if I passed through a tunnel of ghosts, my hair stood on end. So it was Sara who made everyone call me a liar. Well, lies were not tolerated anymore. And liars deserved to be punished.

I had been reading a book about secret admirers and had the most perfect, best idea ever.

That day after school, I was in my dad's office doing my homework, and, when the coast was clear, I put my homework aside to write a letter.

Dear Sara,

I watch you from far away every day. You are so pretty and perfect. I love your hair, your eyes, and your butt. I want to meet you in person. If this is okay, meet me by the drinking fountain at the beginning of morning recess. I want to kiss your face.

Love,

Your Secret Admirer

It was simple and to the point. Most of the boys I knew were simple, so it seemed perfect. I had my patch on and that tended to cause my handwriting to slant, so it looked kind of funny, but it would do.

I left my dad's office and wandered back to my classroom. Peeking through the windows, I didn't see Mrs. Leader—the room was empty, but unlocked. It was a golden rule not to enter an empty classroom, but sometimes rules had to be broken, especially in service of the greater good.

I rushed in and placed the letter, folded in thirds, in Sara's mailbox. Since we took our work home every afternoon, I knew she would notice the paper in her box in the morning. I dashed out and was back in my dad's office, the whole thing taking less than five minutes.

"Katie, Christina!" It was the next morning and I had been waiting by our classroom door for them to finally show up. "Today is going to be a good day." I explained my plan.

"That's kinda mean," Katie said.

"She'll never know it was us," I said.

"I'm in," Christina smiled.

“Fine. But if we get in trouble, I’m telling on both of you.” Katie crossed her arms.

When the bell rang and we came in the class, I watched Sara spot the letter in her mailbox. She read it and blushed. Celina and Nicole wanted to read it, too, but she wouldn’t let them.

It was too easy, like stealing candy from a candy factory. The minutes dragged by. I couldn’t help but imagine what her face would look like, how she might cry or get angry or fall to the ground with a broken heart, and how good that would make me feel. I wanted something dramatic to happen, but, no matter what, I knew it all would be worth it.

Finally, recess arrived. Christina, Katie, and I sprinted up to the playground and hid behind a huge tree that faced the water fountain.

“I don’t like this,” Katie said.

“Just think of all the times she’s been mean to you,” I said. It definitely worked for me.

“But she’s never been mean to me.”

“Hasn’t she been mean enough to me and Dani? You’re one of us, so if she’s been me to us, she’s been mean to you.” Christina had amazing peer pressure ability.

“Here she comes. Quiet.” I was shaking with excitement and felt like I might pee my pants.

Sara approached the drinking fountain alone. No one else was around. She hovered a few feet to the side of the brick monstrosity. It had five spouts and enough

mold growing around each to give the entire town asthma. It smelled like feet that had been wrapped in trash bags and then run a marathon, the exact way I felt about Sara, only classified in a smell. She crossed her arms and frowned.

Behind the tree, we were statues, barely breathing.

She stayed near the drinking fountain all fifteen minutes of recess, and when the bell rang, she stomped her foot and looked near tears.

"Come on," I said. "Act natural."

We walked from behind the tree and right past Sara, who was still glued to her spot. I couldn't help it. She looked so sad, so disappointed that I couldn't pass up the chance to kick her when she was down.

"There's no reason to cry. I'm sure he's too ugly for you anyways." I laughed and then Christina laughed, but Katie seemed like she wanted to hug her.

Understanding dawned on Sara's face, but we kept on walking and if she said anything, she didn't say it loud enough to reach us.

I expected a confrontation and was disappointed when the end of the day came without so much as a comment. After I put my patch on, I even deliberately bumped into her desk, but still, she said nothing. Maybe she never did because then Celina and Nicole would have known something was up, and I'm sure she didn't want to share her whereabouts from that morning.

But she knew it was me and I wanted some kind of reaction, some kind of confrontation. She couldn't get off that easily after turning everyone against my club. I had words that needed to be shared and I thought that maybe if I wrote her another letter,

she would be so outraged she might explode, giving me the perfect opening to explode on her.

Quickly, I penned another letter and thought I had gotten lucky—the classroom looked empty again. But as I slipped the folded letter in Sara's mailbox, Mrs. Leader materialized behind me. If I had been smart, I would have held on to the letter and made up some excuse for being there, but I froze, leaving the letter hanging half out of Sara's mailbox.

"What are you doing?" Mrs. Leader asked, eyeing the letter.

"Nothing. I, uh, I was leaving Sara a note. It's a game we're playing."

"I know you know you're not supposed to be in this room when I'm not here." She reached out and snatched the letter, unfolding it gently, as if it might explode.

"I'm sorry. I was only going to drop that off and leave. I wasn't going to touch anything." I watched her eyes move back and forth and her face take on the form of a scowl.

"What were you planning? Somehow I doubt you were going to meet her at the drinking fountain."

I shrugged. Lying had always come so easy for me, but now, when I needed a whopper the most, I was tongue-tied.

"That's what I thought. Dani, this is a really mean, nasty thing to do to someone. How would you like someone to do this to you?"

I shrugged again. No one else would have done it because no one else was smart enough to think about it, I thought.

"I should make you write lines or sit recess. But I think, in this case, the best way to punish you is to tell your mom what you were up to. That way, she can make you sorry for what I caught you doing. Go and do your homework. If I ever catch you up to this again, or in my room by yourself, you will write lines until your hands fall off. Understand?"

I waited all afternoon and night for the wooden spoon to appear. Sure the sky was going to fall or my house would explode with my parents' anger, I sat in my room, tense with anticipation, jumping at every sound outside of my closed bedroom door. But the wooden spoon never came, the stars stayed in the sky, and there were no fireballs. Neither my mom nor dad ever said anything to me. I guess Mrs. Leader got busy and forgot, or just never ran into either of my parents that afternoon.

Whatever happened, Sara left me alone the rest of the year and I returned the favor. I never felt bad about what I did and if I had actually been punished, I'm sure I would have only been mad I got caught. Even today, I feel justice was done. No one was there to act as my champion so I took care of myself—just like my parents expected.

One weekend, my brother and I were bored. We had wasted my patch free morning playing video games and wanted something fun to do. One of our favorite cures for boredom was sliding down the long set of stairs that lead to the big, empty room and the garage. We would use the cushions from the couch, stack them up at the bottom, and then slide down the stairs, landing in a heap of cushions and limbs.

The cushions were in place thanks to Tommy, all we needed was something to slide down the stairs on, to use as a buffer between our bottoms and the rough, brown carpet.

"Let's use our red sleeping bags," I said. The same ones we used in Mammoth every summer for our worm fights. They were slippery and would not only glide down the stairs, but go fast. I knew this because we had used them in the past.

"Mom said not to use those for this. Remember?"

I did. She said we were going to ruin them and that they were too good to be used for stair-sliding. My parents bought them at REI and they were special cold-graded, camping sleeping bags. But we never went camping because we had the house and cabin in Mammoth. At least we'd be using them, I figured. "She's outside. We'll put them back before she comes in. She'll never know. We've done it before." And we had, but that was when our parents were in Lancaster grocery shopping and we knew we had at least two hours to get everything back in place. This was risky, but that made it all the more fun.

Tommy, in the sixth grade, towered over me. If he wanted to disagree, he'd win easily. He usually always did, but this time he caved.

In less than two minutes, I was sitting on my red sleeping bag on the top stair. With Tommy's help, I pulled the excess up over my knees, which were pressed against my chest, as if I were in a bob sled. With my patch on, I was completely red and I thought it looked like I was bleeding bad and sitting at the mouth of a dark cave. I couldn't see the shape of each individual step—they all melted together into a brown slope like the body of a slide. The white walls on either side seemed too dark and curved,

creating a shadowed tunnel. At the bottom, I knew the cushions were there, but I couldn't see that far. With the adrenaline rush of defiance for using the sleeping bags combined with the scariness of preparing to thrust myself down a dark tunnel that seemed to never end, my heart pounded wildly and my palms sweat, making my grip on the nylon slip.

"Ready?" Tommy asked.

I gulped and held on tight. "Ready," I said.

Tommy gave me a shove and off I went, sliding down the stairs, my butt thudding on each step. The walls zoomed past in dark and light white swirls. Suddenly, the cushions loomed large and looked like a mass of tan rock. I braced for impact, holding my breath and clenching my teeth. Smack! My feet hit first and my forward motion propelled me into a standing position, my chest and face slamming into the cushions placed specially for this against the wall.

Laughing, I sat down and then rolled over. When I looked back up the stairs to get Tommy's rating of my landing, I saw what appeared to be two people-blobs. I expected Tommy's form to be there, but then who was the other?

"Didn't I tell you not to use your good sleeping bags?" My mom's voice bounced off the walls and sounded like it had come out of a bull horn. "Get up here and get the wooden spoon."

I froze. My mom was supposed to be outside, weeding and planting flowers, but she was at the top of the stairs, no doubt glaring down on me, her body in a posture of disapproval.

I had known we might get caught—that increased the fun factor by a million—but I hadn't thought we actually would. The last thing I wanted was to be punished. It had been such a good morning and I wanted to watch Tommy play his video games—he was so close to beating the boss and missing the finale would flush those hours spent watching clean away, like waste down the toilet.

"Let's go," my mom boomed.

Hanging my head, I crawled up the stairs on my hands and feet, feeling each step before climbing to the next. It was a slow process, the silence pressing on me like an anvil. Finally, I reached the top step and, standing up straight, took the two steps into the kitchen. I couldn't see individual drawers, but I knew by memory where everything was. Feeling my mom's eyes on my back, I pulled the right drawer open and peered inside. This was the designated cooking utensil drawer and everything was dark—black or silver—except the wooden spoon, which was buried under a layer of items that were used every day. I moved the dark objects around until, like a penny in a haystack, the light brown of the spoon appeared. With a deep breath, I grabbed it and handed it to my mom.

"Thomas, I would think if anyone knew better, it'd be you." There was a flurry of activity and then the sharp sound of wood on flesh.

I expected to hear Tommy grunt like he always did, but instead he laughed. He laughed so hard, I couldn't hear the smacking sound of the spoon.

"Think this is funny?" she asked.

I was scared. She sounded angrier than normal, and I could feel the waft of air from her moving arm on my face. Tommy's laughter grew louder and louder. I was

shaking, unsure of what to do, unsure of what was happening. Tears brimmed, but instead of falling, they clung. Then I started to laugh, I don't know why—I was terrified because at any moment, it would be my turn and I wouldn't even be able to see it coming. Some force was at play at the top of the stairs that afternoon. Something grabbed hold of Tommy, and then of me, and we laughed together.

The movement stopped and we still laughed.

"Fine," my mom said, her voice strained. "If this is a joke, I guess you are too old to be spanked."

We fell silent, breathing hard, but waiting—waiting for the catch.

"No TV for the rest of the week, for either of you." I heard the drawer open and close. "Put everything away and find something to read." My mom's form moved across the room. She stomped down the stairs and the door open and closed.

I stood still for a long while, confused and scared she would come back to finish up on me. But she never did.

"Are you going to help or stand there like a dumb rock?" Tommy asked. I must have looked genuinely frightened because he said, "It's done. Mom's outside, but we better get this cleaned up before she comes back in." He threw the sleeping bags at me, hitting me in the face. I shook my head, gathered them up and carried them back to my room, dropping them on the floor in my closet, acting and moving out of habit, not needing sight.

I spent the rest of the day in my room, waiting for my mom to change her mind. But she never did.

I'm still not entirely sure what happened that day to make Tommy laugh. Maybe he truly thought our mom's anger was funny, or he was reacting to the fact that he was eleven years old and still being spanked. I don't know. I laughed out of fear, an uncontrollable survival instinct to do like others—Tommy was laughing, he was older than me, he was influential, and so I laughed too. Since then, I have asked my mom why she gave up on that particular day and she said it wasn't worth it anymore, that it wasn't punishment in our minds, that it was too much work getting angry enough to get the spoon out in the first place. But if we had known that day how much worse my mom's disappointing looks and whispered, "Well, then—" would be, we would have never laughed.

17.

I stood beside an enormous airplane with Katie, Christina, and seven other kids from our third grade class. We had a week left of school, this field trip a culmination of our studies of space. Our tour guide, a man with a pregnant belly, elephant ears, and a halo of barely there black hair droned on.

"Here at Dryden Flight Research Center, as a part of NASA, we get the honor to test fly the X-31. This is one of two...."

We had stopped at the bathroom before entering the airplane hanger, and my hands were still damp from washing them. I stuck one out to Katie and Christina, whispering, "Ask me where I'm from."

"Where are you from?" They echoed, shaking my hands.

"The planet of Orangutan. Ask me what we eat."

"What do you eat?"

"Pancakes and toilet paper. Ask me what we wipe with since we eat the toilet paper."

Katie and Christina giggled, glancing at each other before asking, "What do you wipe with?"

It was too perfect and I laughed loudly, causing the tour guide to fumble his speech. "Our hands," I squealed, tightening my grip on theirs, laughing even harder as they struggled to pull away.

"Eww! Gross!" They screeched, yanking my arms, trying to shake themselves free. I resisted even more, they flailed even more, and we ended up in a heap on the concrete floor, rolling around and crying out in sheer pleasure.

"Excuse me."

I rolled over Katie, causing her to grunt and we cracked up all over again.

"*Ladies*. Excuse me."

We fell silent immediately at the sound of Mrs. Leader's voice. I got on my hands and knees and glanced up into Mrs. Leader's face. Her emerald eyes shined with anger, and I knew if I stared directly into them, I'd turn to stone—there'd already been too many close calls this year. We stood quickly, assuming the guilty pose, hands clasped in front of us, heads bowed, eyes on our slip-ons.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Grant, you had to put up with these *children*," Mrs. Leader said. I knew she was glaring at us, hands on hips, shaking her head in disappointment. "Dani." I slowly raised my head, thankful that my sheet of bangs created a barrier

between Mrs. Leader's eyes and my own. "Just think what your parents will say when I tell them about this, especially your father. Think about it." I nodded, pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose. "Now. Apologize to Mr. Grant. Sincerely, please."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Grant," we mumbled in unison.

"Now. Walk. No gift shop for you three."

We shuffled out of the hanger into the blazing high desert sun. Mrs. Leader told us to sit on the cement, our backs against the side of the hanger.

"Apology letters will be written by you girls tonight. Understand?"

The sun shined directly on Mrs. Leader's back and, while I nodded at her dark silhouette, I noticed a man a few feet away kneeling on the pavement. He seemed to be folding some kind of sheet and after hours of boring tours and no-fun tour guides, talking to a real live astronaut would make the whole trip, even punishment, worth it.

"Now. I am going to go direct gift shop traffic. Do not move." Mrs. Leader walked around us and back into the hanger.

"Geez, Dani," Christina whined next to me. "If she calls my mom, I won't be allowed to be your best friend anymore."

I batted her threat away as if it were a fly and stood, pulling out my spandex shorts wedgie.

"What're you doing?" asked Katie, tears running down her cheeks. "She's gonna come back." Her voice shook with fear, but I ignored that, too.

"Look." I pointed at the man. Mrs. Leader was gone and, glancing around, I didn't see any other adults. We could easily sneak a few yards away from the curb

without getting into anymore trouble. “Let’s go talk to him.” I turned to Katie and Christina, shaking my head when they didn’t move. I knew I wouldn’t be spanked and I could handle any grounding or things being taken away. My mom even decided my patch could wait until after the trip, and wasting time with good vision sitting on a curb in the sun made no sense. There was no way I’d get caught and, besides, I was already in trouble, so what was the point of behaving now?

I skipped over to the man, his hunched back reminding me of a turtle. He wore a tan jumpsuit and crouched over a red, white, and blue nylon-like sheet. When I got close, he stood and shaded his eyes. “You should be sitting over there with your friends. I know you’re in trouble.”

“Oh no, we’re not. Are you an astronaut?”

He laughed and shook his head. “I’m a pilot. I test fly the planes.”

“Really? That’s so neat.” With my index finger, I slid my glasses further up on my nose.

He laughed again in a short burst.

“What’re you doing?”

“This,” he gestured towards the striped sheet, “is my parachute. I’m packing it for my flight.”

I took two steps forward and squatted, studying the parachute. It just lay there, so I asked, “What’s it supposed to do?”

His feet appeared next to me and he crouched down to my level. “This is supposed to slow my descent to the ground, were something to happen to my plane and I

had to escape." Noticing my blank look, he clarified, "It lets me fly to the ground slowly instead of falling fast and out of control. It would save my life."

I turned my attention back to the parachute and reached out to touch it when Katie called, "Dani, Mrs. Leader's coming." I hopped up, smiled at the pilot, and ran back to the curb just in time.

That night, after writing an apology letter, having TV taken away by my mom, and a disappointed head shake from my father, I was sent to bed early. Tommy crept in later and fell into his trundle bed with a thump, waking me.

"Stupid," I moaned. "Try and be quiet."

I could hear him adjusting the covers, punching his pillow. "Try not to get in trouble."

"It wasn't my fault." I flipped over so that my head hung off the edge of the mattress and I could look directly down at Tommy in his bed on the floor.

"Mmm hmm." He had his stuffed bunny, Floppy, tucked in the crook of his arm.

"Tommy?"

His breathing slowed. "Huh?"

"You want to fly with me tomorrow?" I turned onto my back and listened to the wind whistling at the window above my bed.

"Mmmm."

I took that as a yes. Falling asleep, I imagined the wind bursting through my window and picking me up, the pilot driving the current like he would a fighter jet, his parachute fluttering behind in a red, white, and blue cape of safety.

“Last night you said you would.” I stomped my sandaled foot, the wind grabbing the dust particles, carrying them away.

Tommy sat in a pile of dirt in the open field next to our large box of a house. He had dug himself down into the moist soil where the reddish brown clay was hidden. Next to him lay a pile of fist-sized clay balls that I knew he planned on using in a game of war with the dog food-eating boy next door. Their games always ended with the side of the house plastered in splats of clay, when my mom would materialize and make them hose and scrape until the wall was yellow again.

Tommy chucked a wad of clay at me, missing my shoulder by a few inches. “Call one of your little friends,” he said.

“They’re grounded. Please, Tommy. I have a good idea.”

“To fly?”

I nodded. “Come on.”

He lifted himself out of his bunker and followed me across the lot onto the sloped driveway, where our parents stood painting the front door canary yellow.

“What do you think?” My dad asked, setting his roller down in the paint tray and stepping back to admire his work.

“I like it,” I said, receiving a hair ruffle for the right answer.

“Why does it have to be so bright?” Tommy tilted his head as if viewing it from another angle would tone it down.

"Some real estate guy on TV said bright front doors attracted more buyers," my mom said.

Tommy's body went rigid. "Buyers of what?"

"I got the Superintendent job in Taft. We're going to move back when the school year's over." My dad picked the roller back up, soaking it in yellow before lifting it to the door. "Remember? We talked about it when I decided to apply."

I didn't remember and neither did Tommy. This phantom conversation would have made sense, and then his declaration would have been less freight train like, but neither of us knew what he was talking about.

"I don't remember talking about that," Tommy said.

"At dinner, a few months ago. We asked you guys what you thought about moving back to Taft," my mom said.

"No," Tommy said.

In fact, that had been their plan all along—to return to Taft. My dad had come to Lake Hughes to get experience as a Superintendent, and now that he had it, he was ready to leave the hippy hill town. They never told us that, and, I don't remember ever having a family discussion about the move. But, despite the surprise, I was excited, if a little apprehensive. I remembered life in Taft as an endless play date. I knew Jessica still lived there, so I'd have a friend at school. Sure, I'd be leaving Christina and Katie, but along with them would be Sara and her friends, and, in the briefest moment, I realized I would be rid of her—forever. But what about my eye? Even with Jessica as a ready-made friend, I'd be new to all the other kids, which would pin a bull's eye on my back. Add my

patch and glasses and contact lens in the mix and I'd be sure to be the class loser. Everyone at HELUS had lived with my eye for years and it was nothing new, and leaving the safety of the familiar was scary. I had a fifty/fifty shot of either being accepted or rejected, but somehow, for some reason, the new was more exciting, shinier and full of possibilities, and that outweighed the dullness of the known.

"That's unfair. You never asked us," Tommy said.

My mom opened her mouth to speak, but I interrupted, ready to get this show on the road. "Can we use some blankets?" I asked.

My mom paused and readjusted her gaze, from Tommy to me. "For?"

"She wants to fly," Tommy said flatly, rolling his eyes.

"Hmm, okay. In the downstairs room. Be careful." She was indulging us, probably because of the big news. But a yes was a yes.

Not waiting for her mind to change, I dashed through the garage, my steps a little lighter than usual with the excitement of moving. I slammed through the door and skidded to a halt in the downstairs room. This was supposed to be Tommy's bedroom, but he was too afraid of the coyotes entering through the doggy door at night. So he camped out in my room instead.

A stack of folded blankets lay on the bed. I grabbed the light pink cotton one we usually used at the beach and handed Tommy a tablecloth that was almost the same yellow as the front door.

"Now what?" asked Tommy, his thin face all of a sudden long and tired.

"We're going to make a parachute. Are you okay?" I spread my blanket out on the floor.

"I'm playing with you, so no."

I whirled around, punching him in the stomach. His blanket fell to the floor. I picked it up and spread it out next to mine. As I was bent over, aligning the corners of the two blankets, Tommy bull-rushed me, knocking me on my head. I caught myself, somersaulted to my feet, and dove for his legs. He hit the floor with a solid thud, screaming with each pinch of my thumb and forefinger on his hairy legs. Squirming away, he lifted me by my middle and threw me onto the bed. I laughed, his hands tickling my stomach.

"We need to," I breathed, "tie the corners together."

He fell on the bed next to me, his smile big, braces glittering in the filtered sunlight from the window. "Let me do it. I know good knots from Boy Scouts." He double knotted two pink corners to two yellow corners. "I know." He stood, hands on hips. "Then we can tie a corner to our ankles and wrists and jump off the cliff in the field."

"Umm." I had only planned so far as the blankets, figuring we'd jump off the bed or maybe down the stairs. But I couldn't be a wuss, even if it included a cliff. "Okay."

We dragged the blankets out through the garage, up the driveway, and across the lot, our parents following out of curiosity.

The second we stood out in the open field, the wind tore at our makeshift parachute, ripping my half out of my hands. My mom caught it from behind me and we all walked to the ledge.

"You're going to jump?" asked my dad.

"Yup," answered Tommy, his flat topped head held high. He didn't seem at all nervous, but I was having second thoughts. "We're going to tie the blankets to us."

"Hmph," my mom snorted. I'm sure she was surprised by our ingenuity. "Here." She grabbed my wrist and tied one corner of the pink blanket around it. My dad did the same for Tommy with the tablecloth. They knotted the two leftover corners to our ankles.

"I think if you two hold hands with your free ones, and we keep the blankets bunched behind you until you jump, you might actually float."

"Fly, Dad. We're flying," I corrected him.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You might fly."

"Maybe if you get a running start and then jump, it'll propel you up and out," my mom added from above me.

Tommy and I backed up about ten feet. He grabbed my free hand. My parents held tight to their half of the makeshift parachute.

"On three we run." Tommy stared at me until I nodded. "And hold your arms out wide when we jump. One."

My heart raced.

"Two."

My palms were sweating, my feet slipping in my sandals.

"Three."

We moved in unison, sprinting, arms pumping, legs churning towards the ledge. Our parents must have run with us, releasing the blankets when we hit the edge and leapt. I pushed with my legs and threw my arms wide open, Tommy's hand no longer entwined with mine. My feet hung in mid air, kicking at nothing, but somehow helping hold me there. The wind jerked us backwards and caught in the blankets. For a few seconds we hung in the air, suspended between earth and sky, past and present.

I held my breath and opened my eyes wide. The grass waved below cheering us on. A bird soared in circles out in the distance, laughing because it knew what we didn't—that we were mere mortals. But still I felt weightless. The wind pounding my body, I felt like Zeus in the heavens, the pilot of the plane we call Earth. And in that moment, nothing mattered. I felt free.

But gravity grew tired of amusing us. As if Hades tugged at our ankles, we fell, slamming into the side of the hard clay cliff. Tumbling like dirt clods, we rolled to a stop a few feet down the hill, the dehydrated grass flattened beneath us, blankets twisted around our bodies.

"Whoa," I breathed, sitting up slowly.

Tommy rolled onto his back and stomped both feet hard into the ground.

"You hurt?" I asked, panic forcing me to my feet.

The grass waved with the shake of his head. "I don't want to move," he whispered. He untangled his hands and wiped the tears from his eyes. "It's stupid. Taft's stupid. Dad's stupid. I don't want to move."

I sat next to him. Tommy never cried, even when he got spanked or skinned his knee, so I said the only thing that made sense, “Want to do it again?”

He sniffed, kicked the ground once more and stood, shaking the dirt, stickers, and grass from his shirt and shorts. He looked at me. “You have crap in your hair.” He hiked back up the hill, dragging me along with him.

18.

Summer for Tommy and me was just like all the others. We went to Mammoth with my mom and it felt like nothing was going change, until my mom sat us down one afternoon and asked, “Where do you want to go to school this fall? You can start at HELUS and then transfer to Taft when we buy a house, or start at Taft and we can commute every day until we buy a house.”

I had my patch on and couldn’t read my mom or brother’s faces. I wasn’t able to base my reaction on Tommy’s or to see which my mom would have preferred, since I’m sure she gave some hint away through her facial expressions as she spoke.

Instead, I thought about Jessica and how much fun we would have and then about Christina and Katie and how much I would miss them. I was so used to being in a school where everybody knew about my eye. Starting a new school would mean having to answer questions about my eye and my patch and my glasses and my contact lens, but that thought wouldn’t come until later, when it was too late to run back to my comfort zone.

“Taft,” I said.

Tommy stayed silent next to me on the couch. I could tell he was sitting on his feet, but that was it. For all I knew, Tommy and my mom were communicating soundlessly, coming to agreement I couldn't have an opinion about because I was blind.

After several seconds, my mom said, "Thomas, what do you want?"

"I don't want to move. I think this whole thing is stupid and unfair."

"But we are moving, no matter what you think. Your dad has already signed a contract. This is a done deal. Where do you want to go to school?"

"Why don't we just move to Taft now and be done with it?"

"Because we need to sell our house first so we can afford to buy another one."

Our house in Lake Hughes was already on the market, but no one was buying in the area. My parents hoped to make some kind of profit off of the house and use that money as a down payment on a house in Taft and, until that happened, we would have to continue living in Lake Hughes.

"So we're going to have to go to school in Taft sometime this year, no matter what?" Tommy uncurled his legs and leaned forward. He was smart and I was sure he was thinking hard about the situation, weighing his options, making a pros and cons list.

"Yes," my mom said. "I've applied for teaching jobs in the area, so your dad and I will both be working there, not at HELUS."

"Then why do we even have the option of going there? It makes no sense to be in school in one town why you guys are working far away in another."

It sounded like he was leaning towards agreeing with me, so I nodded to support him.

"Okay, then," my mom said. "That answers my questions." She stood and then Tommy stood, so I did too. I watched my mom's blob move across the room and disappear into the kitchen. Sitting back down, I imagined what it would be like playing with Jessica again and how much fun we would have.

I spent the rest of the summer living in my own imagination, acting out games I was sure Jessica and I would play.

My dad's new job started in July and our house in Lake Hughes was still on the market, so my parents decided my dad would rent an apartment in Taft during the work week and come home on the weekends—pretty much the same thing he had been doing when we were in Mammoth.

My mom was hired at Maricopa Unified School District, as a second and third grade teacher. This was a great opportunity for her, since Maricopa was only seven miles away from Taft and she would have never been able to get hired in the district my dad now ran—something about spousal favoritism is how they had explained it to Tommy and me.

The apartment my dad moved into had a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchen, with no room for children. So, my mom, Tommy, and I drove the hour and a half back and forth twice a day from Lake Hughes to Taft, and Taft to Lake Hughes once school started. It sounds like a lot of driving, but I spent most of that time reading or sleeping, so for me, it felt more like teleporting than anything else.

A few weeks before school actually started, we were back in Lake Hughes. I was sitting at the kitchen table playing with a pottery wheel and some clay. So far, with my patch on, I had managed to mold a ball into an oval and to spray clay-laced water all over the table and myself. My mom had taken a pottery class at some point and she had said she would help me, but then the phone rang. Without having to say, I knew it was Mrs. Miller, Jessica's mom, just by the way her voice went up several octaves.

"Hello," she said. "Uh huh. Oh, no. Is she okay?" Her face paled to the color of my clay splatter. I took my foot off the pedal and listened, my eye on my mom. Though I couldn't see her expressions in detail, I knew she was frowning and massaging her forehead. "Okay. So she won't be able to go to school? Uh huh. Alright. I'll tell her. Tell Jess we hope she feels better soon. Okay. Bye."

"What's wrong?" I asked

My mom took a deep breath. "Jessica was hit by a car yesterday. She was crossing the street with her brothers on their bikes and a car ran into her." As I opened my mouth, she stopped me. "She's fine. She's in the hospital with a broken pelvis and some bruises and scratches."

"She's not dead?" I asked. I heard her tell me what had happened, but that went in one ear and out the other. Now that I was prepared for the answer, it would sink in.

"No. She's alive and will be okay in a few months."

"Months?" School was starting in less than two weeks. My parents asked for me to be in the same class as Jessica at Taft Primary so I would have an automatic friend. If

months meant what I thought it did, then I'd be starting school as a real new kid, not knowing anybody and with nobody to introduce me to people.

"She will be in the hospital a long time. And once she heels, she will have to go to some physical therapy to help her walk. So she might not be back in school until late September at the earliest."

"But what about me?" Jessica was supposed to be there for me, to make my transition easier, so that I would be happy. Me. My. I. Empathy wasn't a feeling I would know until I was much older, and, until then, everyone was on the Earth to serve me.

"Danielle Marie. You are not the center of the universe. You'll survive. It's Jessica who you should be worried about." Leave the reality checks to my mom. But she could have told me this everyday for a year and it still wouldn't have sunk in. I only knew what I saw and felt and thought and worrying about other's point of views sounded like a lot of work. I could barely transform a ball into an oval, let alone feel for others.

I nodded, still concerned for only myself. But that was a ways away and at that moment, I needed help making a bowl. "Will you help me?" I asked.

My mom moved behind me and took my hands in hers.

I don't remember seeing Jessica in the hospital, though my mom tells me we did. I don't remember visiting her at her house once school started. The only thing I remember about her from that time was that she told me her good friend was Amber Pease and that Amber would be my friend too.

19.

My dad was in charge of dropping Tommy and me off at school on our first day, since it was also the first day of school for my mom. We started at Lincoln Junior High. Tommy was a seventh grader, moving from an extremely small school that switched classes only three times a day, to a bonafide Junior High with seven periods and seven different teachers, one for each subject. He had to be nervous, but when we left him standing in the main hall, the polished-to-perfection brown floor reflected a confident, if shy, boy, ready to find his old friend Jeff Miller and to tackle the day. Like me, Tommy knew when to suck it up and just keep going—no matter what, to just keep going.

Next my dad drove me several blocks over to Taft Primary. When we entered through the office, all the ladies smiled at my dad and said they were so happy to meet me. One even offered to walk us to my new classroom, which was all the way down the main hall, the closest room to the cafeteria. The lady excused herself, leaving my dad and me staring at the closed wooden door.

"You ready?" He asked.

"As ready as I am for a hernia," I said. I didn't know what a hernia was exactly, but I had heard it alluded to a lot in conversations between my parents and other adults, and I knew that word was like a magic button, always capable of making my dad bust up.

He looked down his nose at me, his mustache twitching. "Only on Uranus," he said. And then the best thing that day happened. My dad laughed.

It started in his belly as a rumble, as if he had indigestion, his hands would grip his middle in surprise. Then a deep roar poured from his lips. Squinting, he'd take several deep, lung shattering breaths that sounded like a pack of seals fighting for a sunny spot

on a rock. His belly would rumble and again, he'd roar. His head was thrown back, and the sound bounced off the linoleum floor, ricocheted off the metal lockers lining the entire hall, and rebounded off the ceiling back to floor. All the way down the corridor, parents and kids alike fell silent and turned our way. "Uranus," he grunted, and, slapping his thigh, he worked himself back up to the seal sound, back down, and back up once again.

I smiled and let his laugh wash over me like the sun after coming out of a cold movie theater. I wasn't ready to start at a new school all by myself. I wasn't ready to have to answer questions about my eye, about my contact, about my patch. Jessica was supposed to be there to help smooth things out, to help prove to the other kids that I wasn't a weirdo. If I were back at HELUS, I'd be in a room full of familiar faces and I'd know who to turn to and who to stay away from. My eye and patch would have been nothing new. But now I stood at the entrance to uncharted territory. I was worried about finding a friend, but more concerned about fingering the bully. There would always be at least one meanie head and like I finally did at HELUS, I'd need to get the upper hand.

"Oh, alright," my dad said. "You're pretty funny. Let's get this over with." He turned the knob and opened the door.

The room was bright and colorful. Triangular flags from the ceiling forming a square and, mirroring the flags, the desks were arranged to form a square, with a row of desks on the inside, where us fourth graders would sit, because this was a 4-5 combo class. I knew there would be older kids in my class and it terrified me more than Sara

ever did. Big kids were smarter and quicker and meaner and traveled in bigger packs. It was like I was being handed to them on a silver platter.

"Why, hello Dr. Harris." A tall, lean, athletic looking woman stood from behind the teacher's desk shoved in a corner. She had her hair cut short, like my mom's, and instantly I decided I liked her just because of that.

"It's a beautiful day," my dad said. He moved to the side, so she could see me. "This is my daughter Dani. And I heard she's going to be in your class this year."

"That's right. Hi Dani. I'm Mrs. Peaveyhouse." She stuck her hand out and I shook it because what else was I supposed to do? "I'm so sorry about Jessica. I know you guys were hoping to start the year together. But I promise all the other students will be just as nice to you."

I nodded. She could promise all she wanted, but she wouldn't be on the playground with us or in the bathrooms or the cafeteria. Promise, shromises.

"Okay, princess. I need to get to work, too. Have a good day." My dad bent over, kissed the top of my head and hugged me. "Don't forget about your patch. See you this afternoon." And then the door opened and he was gone.

"You put your patch on at one, right?" Mrs. Peaveyhouse asked.

I had planned on not telling her or anyone and seeing how long I could go without having to wear it, but of course my parents told everyone all the details. It made me mad. I figured I'd make friends first and then reveal my inner demon-patch-eye-problems when they already liked me for me. Then I would be accepted and all would be rainbows and kittens. But no. I was going to have to work extra hard to make friends.

I nodded.

"Do you have them in your backpack?"

I nodded again.

"You can put a patch on yourself?"

I nodded. I had been practicing all summer, under my mom's close supervision and had mastered correct placement, even without a mirror.

"Okay, great. Go ahead and pick out a seat from the short row in the middle. That's where all of you fourth graders will sit. The bell is going to ring soon and I'll go pick everyone up from our lineup spot on the stairs. I'll make sure someone shows you where it is at morning recess." The bell rang just as she finished speaking. Without another word, she left the room.

Normally, I would have picked an end desk, but I wanted to force the other kids to have to talk to me, so I sat right spank in the middle. I took a deep breath and opened my desk. The top lifted up and was connected to the metal tub/storage space by hinges.

As I closed my desk, the door opened and my new classmates filed in. They were silent and tall and serious. Like they all knew where they were supposed to go, they filled desks, put their things away and sat with their hands folded.

On one side of me was a girl and on the other, a boy. I don't remember how many of us fourth graders were in there, but it wasn't more than six and one of the desks was left empty. I assumed it was Jessica's and instantly my longing for a familiar face grew tenfold.

"Okay, class. I want to know who all of you are. Of course I know most of you, but it seems fair for everyone to introduce themselves so we're all on a level playing field. Here's how this is going to work: say your first and last name and then tell us something you love to do. I'll go first. My name is Mrs. Peaveyhouse and I love playing and coaching volleyball and basketball." Mrs. Peaveyhouse nodded to a tall boy sitting at one of the corner desks. He said his name and favorite sport. A kid sitting next to him took his turn and so on, until all the fifth graders had said their piece.

"Okay fourth graders. Your turn. Amber you start."

I perked up. Did she just say Amber? The girl Jessica told me to meet was named Amber.

"Hi. My name is Amber Pease and I like karate." She smiled shyly—everything about her felt shy—her tiny nose, brown eyes, brown hair. It seemed like she wanted to blend in and not be noticed, the way she focused on the top of her desk, not making eye contact with anyone. I knew how she felt and I decided we were going to be best friends, whether she wanted to be or not.

The girl sitting next me introduced herself and then it was my turn. I used the same tactic as Amber and spoke to my desk, "My name is Danielle Harris, but most people call me Dani. And I like to, uh—" What did I like to do? Go to the doctor? I sure went a lot but didn't particularly like it. I played soccer and liked that. I liked doing arts and crafts. I liked playing with friends and my brother. I liked dogs and cats. But I said, "Read." And without realizing it, without intending to, I classified myself as a nerd. Only

geeks actually admitted to like reading. I was not only the new girl, but the new nerdy girl. So much for not getting teased.

"And," Mrs. Peaveyhouse said from the front of the room, "Dani has very interesting, neat eyes. Do you want to tell the class about it?" Our eyes locked. Oh, no. She really wanted me to come out and say I'm blind in one eye, will you be my friend? I shook my head viciously. I wasn't ready to be pointed out for my differences. We'd only been in school for ten minutes. Why couldn't I be normal and blend in like Amber for at least that long? "Okay," she said. "Well Dani was born with an eye problem and she is almost blind in one eye." Everyone in the room was staring at me. I could feel their gazes tearing me apart, an arm for the boy over there and a patch of my hair to the girl sitting behind me, their brains thinking of jokes and mean nicknames and ways to make me fall and be embarrassed. "In order to help make that eye strong, she will wear a patch the last hour of class every day. And," Mrs. Peaveyhouse's voice dropped to a mean, sinister, threatening octave, "everyone of you will support her in her fight to gain better sight. You will not make fun of her. You will not call her names. You don't need to ask her any mean questions. She is just like the rest of us and deserves the same amount of respect, patch or not. Everyone understand?" Heads bobbed up and down around the room. "Okay. Next to introduce themselves."

I didn't hear the last few say their names or what they liked. It was like a tornado touched down and bowled everyone but me over. Never had a teacher ever threatened an entire class on my behalf. I was both in awe and more ashamed of my eye than ever before. Mrs. Peaveyhouse was scary and laid down the law to make it easier for me, but I

was even more worried now because of that. Everyone knew they would get in trouble if they said anything, anything at all, to me, and that didn't seem like the most promising way to gain friends. I was not only the nerdy new girl, but the nerdy new girl who could get you in trouble at the drop of a pencil. At least she saved the little bit of news about my dad being her boss. If that came out, I'd have a repellent force field a mile wide around me.

The morning passed in a haze. I couldn't think of anything but my patch and how morning recess was going to go. I'd never not had any friends and to suddenly become the loner meant my life was over. This first day of school was going to set the tone for the rest of my academic career and I couldn't spend it alone and isolated. Leaning forward, I peered down the row at Amber. Hopefully she was as shy as seemed.

The bell rang. Mrs. Peaveyhouse dismissed us and everyone filed out into the hall. Because of the way the school was built, all the classrooms on the street side of the building had no access to the playground, so we had to walk down the hall toward the cafeteria and exit through double doors. Aides stood in the halls and we all walked as fast as humanly possible because, if caught running, you would get five minutes on the wall, no questions asked.

At the end of the pack walked Amber. I had been stalking her and slowed down to barely a crawl, nonchalantly appearing beside her. I was not going to spend this recess by myself and unfortunately for Amber, she came highly recommended.

"Hi, Amber," I said, falling into step with her. She looked at me and then quickened her pace. "I'm Dani. Jessica Miller says hi and she told me you'd be my

friend." Direct and to the point. If anything, I wanted to guilt her into tolerating me. She knew what had happened to Jessica and how could she possibly deny the wishes of a hospitalized child? "Can I play with you?"

Amber pushed through the doors. The sun blinded us and we both blinked, waiting for our eyes to adjust. When she finally headed down the stairs, I followed. She walked over to the basketball courts and I followed. She walked to the sand box and I followed. She walked past metal picnic tables. I followed. She skipped along the fence separating the playground from the street. I skipped too. All recess that's how it went. She never spoke to me and I didn't say anything to her. I mimicked her every move like a shadow. She knew I was behind her, but still, she just let me follow. It wasn't how I wanted it to go—I figured we'd jump rope or play tag or hang from the monkey bars together—but it was better than standing in a corner by myself.

The afternoon zoomed by and at lunch recess Amber and I picked up where we left off. The day was bearable, until one o'clock came.

We were working individually on math placement tests. Mrs. Peaveyhouse noticed the hour and walked over to my desk.

"Dani, it's patch time. Do you need any help?"

I shook my head. Mrs. Peaveyhouse didn't seem to be going anywhere, so under her supervision, I fished the smashed box of patches out from my backpack. I removed one and put the box back, making a mental note to throw them out of the car window on our drive back to Lake Hughes. I took my glasses off, peeled off the back of the patch, exposing the adhesive. I held it out in front me, getting the thinner side angled correctly

so it would wrap around the bridge of my nose. Finally, I pressed the thin side to my nose and stretched the patch over my eye. The patch ate half my face and I had a permanent line across my nose where the adhesive tore my skin and my right eyebrow was noticeably less hairy than my left, from those fine hairs being yanked out of my skin everyday when I removed my patch.

"That was easy," Mrs. Peaveyhouse said.

I nodded. Sure it was, but now the room swam, everything, everyone looked as if I were watching them from under water. Mrs. Peaveyhouse had no distinct features. All the kids faces were turned my way (I assumed they had watched the patch placement procedure with interest), but they didn't have eyes or mouths or noses—they were skin-colored blotches with darker spots strategically placed, representing their eyes and mouths and noses. The flags hanging from the ceiling held their shape and color, only the definition of each flag blurred into the white ceiling and white walls behind. There was definite improvement in my sight, I knew it more than anybody, because I could tell a face was a face and the chalkboard was a rectangular and the flags were triangles. Before, each of these things blurred so much into the space next to them that they were nearly unrecognizable. I moved around rooms on faith, faith that things were what they were when I could see, that they were in the same spots as always, that people were really people and not blob-monsters trying to eat me. But now, being in completely new surroundings, I could still function and navigate because I could see what was what. Items held their shape and didn't move when I moved. Even reading was a lot easier. I still had to hold papers and books close to my face and follow along with my fingers, but

my brain understood what an A looked like in both my good and bad vision. I no longer had to stare at individual letters and then add them up to equal a word, but could make out words and entire sentences with only one sweep of my bad eye. This change had happened so gradually over so many years that until I was in the fourth grade, I never knew my eye was growing stronger. Sure Dr. Rosenbaum and Dr. Weissman had been telling me all the time how much I was improving, but until I was patched in a new place, a place I could not have navigated by memory in the dark, the change never registered. It was like I was seeing out of my bad eye for the first time in my entire life and if that meant having to move and have no friends and being a weirdo, then so be it. I could see.

Mrs. Peaveyhouse didn't know what was going on inside of me, that I was so close to being in tears my nose was already running in anticipation. "If you can see well enough, I'd like you to go down to the library and take a reading test so we can get you some library books checked out. There's an aide in the hall and she will take you down there."

I nodded and made it to the door without hesitation. I didn't hold my hands out in front of me for protection, I just walked. I could see the knob and I grabbed and turned it on my first try. And, sure enough, an aide was there waiting for me. "Follow me," she said. As we worked our way down the hall, I saw lockers and backpacks on the floor and numbers on doors and the lights on the ceiling. "Sit here," she told me. I looked down at a round table and pulled a chair out and sat. As I was waiting for whatever was supposed to happen next, I noticed a line of tiny kids coming towards me. I watched them with the intense interest of a scientist studying a new species of animal. They all had their hands

behind their backs. Some had on strappy sandals, some wore tennis shoes. Two girls were dressed exactly the same. They all had name tags hanging from around their necks. I saw all of that with my bad eye. I knew I was smiling, but I couldn't help it. I could see. But then, as they passed within inches of me, I noticed all their faces were turned in my direction, that they all wore expressions of curiosity. They were studying me as much as I was studying them. Then one little boy pointed and asked, "What's wrong with her face? Why is she missing an eye?" And a teacher or aide or parent said, "She's wearing an eye patch like a pirate. All she needs is a parrot and a peg leg." Some of the kids laughed.

As soon as I had accepted my patch, accepted that it had been helping me, giving me vision I otherwise would have never had, someone stole it away. I was a pirate again, something to witness and ogle, to point at, to ask questions about, to make assumptions of. I was once again an eye patch and not a child with two ears and brain in between.

I wanted to go home and never come back. I wanted my mom to tell me I was normal, my dad to call me princess, my brother to punch me in the arm and call me a wuss, my dog to cuddle and sleep with. I wanted to run away or go push that kid or call that adult an idiot. But instead, I stayed glued to my seat and read out loud to the librarian when she finally materialized. She was surprised I could read so well, way beyond my grade level, even with only one eye. She told me I should be proud. I nodded and said thank you and then the day was over.

When my mom and dad asked how my day went, I didn't tell them about Amber or being able to see or the little kid pointing. I said it was good and left it at that.

For the next couple of weeks, I didn't leave the safety of my classroom when I had my patch on. In there, no one said anything to me, no one asked any questions. I didn't make any friends, and continued to stalk Amber at recesses, but being left alone was better than being the center of any kind of attention, positive or negative, because I could just be.

20.

My mom and I sat, once again, in an exam room of Dr. Rosenbaum's at UCLA's Jules Stein Eye Institute. He had already been in and tested my vision and my glaucoma and looked at my contact lens. Right before he excused himself, he said my glaucoma was under control, that the one drop I put in my eye every night had dropped the pressure significantly so there wasn't an immediate concern about damaging my optic nerves, as long as I kept up with the eye drops. The exam seemed to be over, so neither my mom nor I knew why he had told us to wait.

After ten minutes, he swept back into the room. "Sorry about that." Sitting down, he rolled his chair so he sat half way between my mom and me. "From looking at your charts, Danielle, I noticed you will be nine in May. You've only been wearing your patch two hours right?" My mom and I both nodded. "Okay, perfect. I think, because your vision has improved so much you can get away with wearing it for only an hour from now on. It doesn't matter if it's at school or not, as long as it's an hour you're busy and interacting with things. You can't put it on and nap for an hour and call it a day." We nodded in unison again. "Good. Over the years we have found out that most eyes stop growing after the age of nine, meaning that once you reach nine years of age, your vision

won't be able to improve much more than it already has, since your eye will then have reached its full adult capacity."

I was trying to follow him and listening and paying attention more than I usually did, but he kept talking and it felt like he was speaking more to my mom than me and every time that happened, I assumed my mom understood enough for the both of us.

"So, what I am trying to say is that when you come back after your ninth birthday, depending on your vision, we might be able to say goodbye to the eye patches once and for all. Also, now that your eye is almost done growing, we might want to start to consider replacing your contact lens with an implant. It is standard procedure to do so in adults who get cataract surgery, but we couldn't when you were a baby, since you had so much growing to do." He paused and looked at my mom. "What do you think?"

My mom focused on me as she spoke. "I think we've had a lot of success with the patching and the contact lens and I don't want to do anything to ruin the vision we've all worked so hard for. Maybe in a few years, after Dani has had time to think about it. Then she can make the call when she's older."

Wait, I thought. I was confused. Normally, I tried as much as possible not to speak during my eye doctor appointments because it was always safer to be a silent obedient child, but I thought my mom might be saying no to the possibility of not having to wear my patch anymore, and that seemed really unfair.

"Are you talking about my patch?" I asked. I could already feel myself getting upset, a ball of unformed arguments and sobs forming in my throat.

"No," my mom said. "I was talking about getting a lens implant. I want you to be able to make that decision, not me."

I nodded and took a deep breath, swallowing that ball, happy I asked before reacting.

"And that sounds reasonable," Dr. Rosenbaum said. "So let's make an appointment for sometime in mid-May, after your birthday."

We left the exam room and as my mom was scheduling the appointment with Grace, I thought about what it would like to be free from patches. I'd never have to walk around half-blind or read half-blind or watch TV without really seeing all that was happening. I could play soccer without having to schedule patch-time around practices. I could meet new people and they'd never know something was wrong with me. I would be normal.

It was October, so that meant seven months until my birthday and potential normalness. It was a long ways away, but having to only suffer an hour of patch time a day would make the wait a little more tolerable. And I'd take anything I could get, no matter how small.

21.

Jessica had been back in school for a few weeks and things got better every day. Amber started talking to me with Jessica around and we'd spend recesses playing basketball or playing on the bars. I didn't have to wear my patch at school anymore, except on days when I had soccer practice or, later, softball practice. Then I would wear it the last hour of the day at school so I could fully participate at practice because, if there

was a thing my parents were more serious about than school, it was sports. I made friends outside of school because of soccer and softball and I never, ever let my depth perception disadvantages show, even if it meant focusing so hard on the ball, I'd run into my own team mates.

Months passed. My parents bought a house a street over from the house I had lived in as a baby. The Millers lived a few streets over and Tommy and I spent all of our time with them. I don't remember moving. It was as if I woke up one morning in a different room and a different bed. I was going to a different school and had different friends. Everything changed in the blink of my half-blind eye and, as children are often capable of, I changed too, and fit well into my new surroundings.

The new year came and with it, yet another new school. It was 1997 and class size reduction was put in effect in California classrooms and if schools wanted the money offered from the state, they had to reduce classes from twenty- five or thirty students to no more than twenty. My dad had been working on making classes smaller since he started working for Taft City School District in July of 1996. In order to have enough classrooms to accommodate the smaller classes, all five elementary schools went from being K-5 to only K-3, with the exception of Roosevelt Elementary School, which would no longer have any other grades except fourth and fifth. The switch was planned to happen over Christmas break, so all the fourth and fifth grade teachers moving to Roosevelt had adequate time to set up their classrooms. Certain classes were broken up and new teachers were hired so that there were no more than twenty students per teacher. Luckily for me and my combo class, we already had less than twenty kids, so all we had

to do was get accustomed to a new classroom and school, unlike others who were placed in rooms where they knew no one. Parents criticized the district and my dad for forcing the move in the middle of the year, but the budget was already tight and passing up a chance for more money from the state would have been careless on my dad's part. Many, many new jobs were created but, like everything else in the world, the negatives scream louder than the positives. Even today, Roosevelt remains only a fourth and fifth grade school, which means it all apparently worked out well enough, since after my dad retired, no one even mentioned going back to how it was before 1997.

School continued on as usual. Everyone settled into their new classes and classrooms. Parents calmed down. And time passed, as it tends to do.

It was finally May. On Friday the ninth, we went out to play kickball the last hour of class. I had softball practice that afternoon, so I had no choice but to wear my patch, though I left my glasses in the classroom since they'd only get in the way. The only thing that made me wear it without throwing a fit was the fact that next week, on Monday, I was going back to UCLA. So this was the last day I would have to wear my patch at school and if that meant being picked last for teams, then that's what it meant.

The team I was on was losing by two and we were fielding, hoping to keep them from scoring anymore. Mrs. Peaveyhouse pitched for fairness, and I stood way out in center field for the same reason. With my patch on I had zero depth perception and was therefore useless. Staying out of play was the only positive thing I could do for my team. I couldn't see who was kicking and I couldn't see who had the ball, who was on base. I

couldn't see anything except the holes in the grass and the plugs that belonged in those holes from aeration. Jessica stood off to my side. I could see her shape and hear her voice. We were counting grass plugs in unison.

"Bases loaded," a boy hollered from somewhere in front of me.

"Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven," Jessica and I chanted. "Fifty-eight, fifty-nine," I said, noticing that Jessica's voice no more echoed mine. I looked up.

"Dani!" Jessica screamed.

I turned. As if in slow motion, I saw the red ball seconds before. It took my brain those moments to deduce what the red spot growing bigger and bigger was, the kickball, I thought, but it was too late. I didn't even get my hands up. The ball collided with my face, the force of it knocking me off my feet. I landed on my butt and sat there, dazed, still trying to understand what had just happened.

"Get the ball," a kid shouted.

"Hurry," someone else screamed.

"No," others yelled in chorus.

I brought my grass covered hands to my face—it felt like my nose was running, a lot. I touched my upper lip and instinct told me to look. Sure enough, blood the deep red color of the ball was smeared on my finger.

Everyone was still shouting.

Jessica appeared at my side. "Are you okay?" She asked. And then she answered her own question. "Your nose is bleeding bad. Come on." She stuck out a hand and helped me to my feet. "Her nose is bleeding," she said loudly, I assume to Mrs.

Peaveyhouse, but I had stopped forcing my bad eye to focus. The world fell back to how it used to be always—blurs and blobs and smears and tie-dyes.

"Take her to the bathroom," Mrs. Peaveyhouse said.

"All you had to do was catch the ball," said a boy.

"It's not hard. If you were paying attention you could've stopped a grand slam," another boy said.

Jessica steered me across the field. I tried to turn to see the boys speaking, but Jessica kept a strong arm around my shoulders. Even if I had been able to turn around, I was so dazed, my eye was in such shock, that I would have only seen skin colored scars among all the green.

Jessica got me to the bathroom and handed me paper towels. "Look up," she said. "And push on the sides of your nose. It'll make it stop bleeding."

I did as she said, but pressing too hard hurt. The blood ran and ran. It soaked into my shirt and was warm as it ran down my chest. The paper towel soaked through and Jessica handed me more.

"Don't listen to those stupid boys," she said. "Even if it had been kicked at me, I wouldn't of been able to catch it. They're just mad we lost so bad."

I nodded, which made the blood splash onto my shorts and thighs. I would have caught it if it weren't for my stupid patch. I let everyone down. They didn't even want me on their team, but Mrs. Peaveyhouse made everyone play, no matter what. As if karma for my handicap, the blood came and came. Nobody understood. Nobody knew what I saw when I put my patch on, how limited my vision was and how much work it was to

focus and try just to see a face or a wall. They didn't understand that I had no way of judging distances, that they could have stood two feet in front of me and tossed a ball and I still wouldn't have been able to catch it. They took their vision for granted, like everyone. They didn't know what it was like to not be able to see in detail, to not see petals on a flower or wrinkles on adults' faces. They could read signs from ten or twenty feet away and I had to practically touch my nose to the metal. They could jump rope anytime and play hopscotch whenever and a catch a ball they weren't expecting. I was a prisoner to my patch, my hands tied, my feet shackled. I followed the rules and the hill I had to climb kept growing, slopes going almost vertical, and yet I still didn't have any safety ropes or climbing picks. The end was so near and the year had been good. No one made fun of me to my face. No one asked mean questions. Until the last day of my sentence. If only they knew what it was like.

I coughed. Something was stuck in my throat and I started gagging. Warmth filled my mouth. I bent over and spit a large blood clot onto the tile floor.

"Are you okay? Should I get Mrs. Peaveyhouse?" Jessica asked.

I shook my head. The paper towel had soaked through a while ago and I let the blood drip from my chin. With stained fingers, I ripped my patch off and dropped it on the floor.

"Why did this happen to me?" My voice bounced around in the empty bathroom.

"You couldn't see—"

"No. I mean all of it. Why was I the one born with stupid eyes? It's so unfair." And because I didn't have enough bodily fluids flowing already, I cried. I let the sobs

take my body over. I didn't care who heard. I wailed and choked on more blood and spit and screamed and let my lungs lose all their air, forcing me to gulp and heave and pant.

I had never asked that question before. I had never even thought my eyes were unfair or a burden. The doctors and patches and drops and contact lenses and glasses had always existed. There was no me without them. We were one in the same. I developed my identity around them, like a bullet that is never removed, I grew enveloped until there was no more them, only me. My eyes were who I was and I didn't want to be that person anymore. I wanted to be normal. My eyes were poison and I felt like I was dying.

I don't know how long Jessica and I sat on the floor in the bathroom. At some point the blood stopped flowing. I rinsed off the best I could in the sink and then we walked home. Two more days. I kept saying it over and over—only two more days. 22.

My birthday came and went. My mom and I drove down to UCLA and I was freed, finally, from a life of being half-blind.

When we got home, the first thing I did was run to the upstairs bathroom I shared with my brother. Something needed to be done before it all was really, really over.

In a free-standing storage cabinet, I opened the top door. There, neatly stacked in a tower were three boxes of patches. I set them on the counter and, from under the sink pulled out two more boxes. Gathering them in my arms, I passed the bathroom trash can, walked downstairs, passed the kitchen trash can, and walked down the smaller set of stairs into the family room.

My mom, sitting on the couch, eyed me and my full arms as I approached the sliding glass door. “Here,” she said. Standing, she slide open the door.

I walked by her and out into the backyard. Sunning herself on the peach patio surrounding the pool was Maggie and when I marched by her, she heaved herself up and followed me.

The gate leading to the back alley was rod iron and, because of a poor job, the bricks lining the top of the cinderblock wall always rubbed against the gate when opened. I squatted and opened my arms, letting the boxes clatter to the cement and, after I undid the gate’s latch and threw all my weight against the iron bars several times, the gate swung open.

I turned to collect my boxes and, when I stood with my arms full, saw that Maggie had beat me down the stairs. “I’m coming,” I said and walked down into the alley.

There, I stared at the large, black, circular garbage can looming over me by at least a foot. I dropped the boxes on the ground and, with both hands, managed to get the large lid flipped back enough so it stayed open. Turning to Maggie, I asked, “Ready?” To which she replied by sitting down next to me. I nodded, “Me, too.”

I didn’t make any speeches or curse those who made fun of me. I just held the first box in my hand. For nine years, for as long as I could remember, for as long as I had been alive, that box ruled my every day. The fear of it appearing in the middle of class, the shame of having to let the teacher stick it over my only seeing eye, the embarrassment as I bumped into chairs or classmates or tripped over invisible obstacles everyone else

saw, the never-ceasing itch and tug of adhesive against my skin, the hissy-fits thrown because I just wanted the awful thing off, the subtle pirate jokes of strangers, the vast whiteness my good eye was forced to stare at, the stretching of skin as I yanked it off, the rubbing of my good eye when it was finally allowed to breathe, the folding in fourths, the world coming back into focus, and the dread of the next day.

But no more. I was free from it all, could blend in and never be noticed. Cocking my arm back, I hurled the box into the trash can. It bounced off the inside of the lid and disappeared into nothingness. Gone forever.

I picked up a second box and chucked it in. A third, a fourth. It felt good to see them fly through the air and be gone. Like none of it had ever happened. I had never been a pirate child, an odd ball, a weirdo. Holding the last box in my hands, I smiled. I took three steps, stood on my tippy-toes and balanced the box on the edge of the trash can.

The last evidence of my former life, a childhood that I could say never happened, swayed back and forth on the ledge—a teeter-totter of nine years. With a finger I nudged it over into the darkness.

And that was that.

"Come on," I said to Maggie and she followed me up the stairs. Slamming the gate shut, I turned and headed back inside, to begin my new, mundane life.