



what we keep
is not always what will stay



AMANDA
COCKRELL

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1

I am not a religious fanatic. I want to say that right off. It's just that ever since I got lost looking for the bathroom at church when I was little, and found a statue of St. Felix down in the basement, I've talked to him.

He's down there because we aren't supposed to pray to him, since he's one of those saints the modern church thinks might have been just a product of somebody's imagination, which is embarrassing if you've been asking him to intercede with God for you. But he looked, I don't know, friendly. Like someone I could tell things to. I'm fifteen now and I've been talking to him since I was nine. He's life-size, and has gray hair and a gray beard and a kind of white gown with maybe a red and blue cross on the front, but he's really faded and you can't tell for sure. The name "Felix" is carved into the base, by his feet. I looked him up in a *Lives of the Saints* book and I think he's Felix of Valois, but he might be one of the other Felixes—there have been lots, some of them even more dubious than Felix of Valois. Nobody knows where the statue came from. It looks hand-carved, and some early parishioner probably made it. Nobody pays any attention to him now. I dust him once in a while, while I talk to him.

He's like having a diary in invisible ink. From my lips to his ear, as my grandfather says, and no one can ever read what I've written. I told him when Noah Michalski tried to put his hand up my shirt at a church dance and then told the entire planet I'd let him, which I hadn't; and when my cat died; and when my mother decided she was going to divorce Ben, who's a perfectly good stepfather that I've had since I was eight.

"Ben says Mom will come around," I told Felix. I leaned against the dusty old wall and picked paint flakes off it. There was more dust dancing around in the

light from the window over his head, like an extra halo. “Mom gets like this every summer,” I told him. “Like she wants to migrate or something, and then she settles down in the fall. But I don’t remember her ever being this bad.” Usually she just goes to Big Sur for a week and writes poetry. Mom teaches English at Ayala Middle School, where they all think she’s terribly cool because she has this head of wild red hair and wears arty clothes. I look a lot like her, except for having dark hair and my dad’s Latino coloring, but for some reason all that wild hair that looks arty on her just looks dorky on me.

“I told Mom that Ben is the nicest guy I know,” I said to St. Felix. “And she said you can’t stay married to somebody just because they’re nice.”

St. Felix looked sympathetic. I flopped down on the floor at his feet, poking with a finger at his carved sandals. “I remember when they got married. I was the flower girl. I had a big basket of rose petals.” I looked up at St. Felix. “People are supposed to hate their stepfathers. I *like* Ben. He’d probably have adopted me if we could have found my real father and proved he’s dead. You’d think my mother would want to set me a good example. How am I supposed to find a boyfriend with an example like that?”

I poked at his sandal some more. “I haven’t spoken to her since she said she was leaving Ben and we had a big fight over it. I don’t know how long I can hold out. It’s not easy not talking to your mother.” It felt good to tell someone that, even a statue, since I couldn’t say it to Mom if I wasn’t speaking to her.

And then, the next day, Mom moved out and went to my grandparents’ house. For a whole week now she’s been calling and pestering me to move there with her. I’m still living at Ben’s. Ben’s house is where I’ve lived since I was eight, and I’m not going anywhere. I’ve managed to hold out not speaking to Mom, too pig-stubborn to say one word to her when she tries to talk me into going to my grandparents’ house. Then she orders me to come, then threatens to call the police and have them *bring* me there. I’m mad, but I’m sort of enjoying how nuts it’s driving her.

She finally came over here to argue about it some more while Ben and Grandma Alice and I were having dinner. Grandma Alice is Ben’s mother, and she moved in with us last month, not long before Mom moved out. Grandma

Alice offered to move out again but Mom said that wasn't the problem, she would rather have Grandma Alice than Ben. She said it right in front of him, but he just grinned at her. Grandma Alice says there may be things I don't know.

So Mom walked into the dining room as if she'd never left and started talking to me while I was buttering my potato. "Angela, I am your mother, and I will make the decisions as to what is best for both of us. You need to stop behaving in this childish fashion."

No, I don't, I thought. *You need me to*. I cut my potato into tiny little bites, which Mom hates because she read somewhere that it's a sign of an eating disorder—which I don't have, but which she thinks I might develop at any moment, like a pimple on my nose.

"Sylvia," Grandma Alice said, "maybe it's best to let Angie have a little time."

"No reason she can't stay here," Ben said, spearing another piece of steak.

"Of course she can't stay here," Mom said.

I got up while they were arguing and took my plate to the kitchen, and then went out the back door before Mom noticed. I figured I could get several blocks away before Mom got around to wondering why I was still in the kitchen.

Our house—well, Ben's house—is right downtown. It's not much of a town. There's only one stop light. I ducked under the big live oaks that shade the library and jaywalked across Ayala Avenue to my church, St. Thomas Aquinas. It isn't one of the famous California missions that Father Serra founded, but it's almost as old. I like it lots better than the new church Mom goes to. It's always cool and dim at St. Thomas's, even if Mom does think it has mice. It smells like incense, and the adobe walls and the stations of the cross are all dark from the candle smoke.

It was dusk when I headed out and St. Thomas's was dark inside, just the glow of the candles in the chapel that people light to thank the Virgin for something, or to ask her to keep their husband safe in the army or make him faithful or let them win the lottery. I skirted by them, thinking maybe on the way out I'd light one for Mom to get some sense.

The stairs down to the basement are gloomy; they always make me think a nun is going to pop out at me wearing one of those old-fashioned habits, or some ancient padre from the colonial days will dodder past, speaking Spanish, but

there's never anyone down there. As I reached the bottom step, I saw St. Felix in the light from the one little high-up window. He looked tired, and kind of gloomy too. Whatever he was wearing looked like the mice had gnawed it, and it was more faded than ever. I felt around for the light switch and turned it on. St. Felix looked back at me and scratched his beard, and I screamed.

"Oh, hell," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Who are you?" I backed away.

"Felix." He pointed at his feet. "It's on my pedestal."

I stared at him. I could have sworn it *was* St. Felix. He had on this sort of white bathrobe thing, and sandals—Birkenstocks, I think. His hair was gray and sort of shaggy like Felix's. And he stepped down off St. Felix's pedestal, and there wasn't anybody else on there.

"There's all kinds of people upstairs," I said. "People come down here all the time."

"No, they don't," he said. "But I'm not gonna hurt you. Are you still fighting with your mom over the divorce?"

"How do you know that?" I demanded.

He looked hurt. "What? You think we don't pay attention to people who pray to us? It's not like I have lots of people down here, lighting candles and gilding my halo."

"You don't have a halo," I told him.

He felt around in the air over his head as if it had just gone missing. "Hmmm. I expect they don't manifest well."

I knew I was probably trapped in the basement of St. Thomas's with a lunatic, but where had the statue gone? "You aren't St. Felix," I told him.

"I'll prove it." He sat down on a wooden box labeled NATIVITY, ODD PIECES. "For starters," he said, "do *not* hang around with that Michalski boy. All that fifteen-year-old boys have on their minds is getting in some girl's underwear."

I could feel my face going hot. It's one thing to tell something like that to a statue; it's another to have the statue turn into a live actual man.

"Second, your mom is divorcing your stepdad and you don't like that. And, three, you got *nice* hair."

Oh, God. I remembered telling him when I got my first period. He was a

statue. Then.

It was halfway a relief when it occurred to me that all the things he was talking about were stuff I'd told him recently. "If you're St. Felix, what's my father's name? Not Ben, my real father."

My mother gets married and divorced when she hasn't got anything else to do. She married her first husband, whose name I don't even know, when she was sixteen, but her parents had it annulled. Lots later she married my father in a nuptial Mass, which didn't work any better than the Las Vegas wedding had because all Mom got out of that marriage was me.

"Gil Arnaz," Felix said.

I tried to remember the last time I had talked about Gil Arnaz. It *might* have been while I was talking about the divorce. I edged past him to look around the broom closet door, which was standing half open. A ratty old blanket and a backpack were on the floor with an empty can of spaghetti. There was probably enough room to sleep in there if you took out all the old mop buckets and moth-eaten cassocks, which somebody had done.

"You've been listening to me!" I said.

"Well, sure. You've been talking to me."

"I've been talking to St. Felix!"

He smiled. His teeth were snaggly. "It was nice. Nobody else has talked to me in a long time."

"You're not St. Felix!"

He pointed a finger at me. "If I'm not, then where is he?"

"If you are, how come you're suddenly alive?"

He looked like he was actually trying to figure that out. "I guess God finally decided I wasn't a saint."

I rolled my eyes.

"On the other hand," he said kind of thoughtfully, "it gets real hard to be a saint when somebody's trying to kill you. I think God was expecting too much. What do you think?"

"I think if Father Weatherford catches you down here, he'll call the police."

"Are you going to tell him?"

I absolutely did not believe this man was St. Felix. And in any case, nobody

ever tried to kill St. Felix of Valois, who led a very boring life at his monastery—although he once found the Blessed Virgin and her angels in the chapel ringing the bells for him when he overslept.

“I can ask God to change your mom’s mind about the divorce,” the guy said. “I don’t think he actually listens to me, but if you want me to, I’ll ask.”

I pictured myself telling Father Weatherford about him. I’d have to explain about the statue being gone and why I’d been coming down here and I’d sound like those people who see the Virgin Mary in a cheese sandwich. Before I could make up my mind, I heard someone walking around upstairs in the chapel, which has a tile floor. I ran up the stairs and out the side door, and left St. Felix to fend for himself.

Mom was gone by the time I got back. Grandma Alice and Ben were in the kitchen scraping plates and giving bites off their forks to the Todal, who is a giant dog named for the monster in *The Thirteen Clocks*, which was Mom’s favorite book when she was little. The Todal was the size of a calf when we got him, when he was ten weeks old. No one knows exactly what he is. He leaned against Ben, looking soulful and hoping for the rest of my potato.

“The coast is clear,” Ben said. “Where’d you disappear to?”

“Just out for a walk.” I didn’t feel up to telling anyone about the guy in the church basement. Mom would freak if she knew, and want me to carry mace, and Ben would probably call the cops. I didn’t think the guy was dangerous, though. I know that’s stupid, to assume some random man who’s been sleeping in the church basement and claims he’s a saint is harmless, but I did anyway. I’ll probably be abducted by aliens before I’m twenty.

Ben was watching me, looking worried. He’s more worried about me than he is about Mom, I think. It drives me crazy that he’s so casual about her leaving—does he *want* her to divorce him?

“Have you started getting your stuff for school together?” he asked, reminding me that there’s less than a month of summer vacation left, a dismal thought. “Backpack and everything? Do you need new clothes? Do we need to shop?”

“Have you considered the possibility that Sylvia will go ape if you take Angie shopping?” Grandma Alice asked him.

“I can take myself,” I said. “I can take the bus to Ventura.” Ayala only has one department store, where you can buy things that look like they came out of the *Farmer’s Almanac*. I absolutely did not want to go shopping with Mom, and I couldn’t picture Ben hanging around the Juniors section in Macy’s.

Ben frowned at the bus idea.

“I can go with Lily,” I said. “She just got her license.” Lily is my best friend.

“Does Lily have a car?”

“We can take her dad’s.” I slid out of the kitchen and into my room, hitting Lily’s number on my cell. I had it on silent, and I’d stacked up five missed calls from Mom since dinner.

“People get very strange over custody issues,” Lily said seriously when she picked me up the next day in her parents’ old Volvo.

“It’s not as if Ben could get custody,” I grumbled. “She’s just freaking because I won’t talk to her.”

“You’d be freaking if she wouldn’t talk to you,” Lily pointed out.

What I like about Lily is that she takes everything seriously, even though she can be a goof. She never tells me I shouldn’t do something, she just makes what she calls “suggestions,” and when I do it and it turns out to have been a disaster, she never says she told me so. She also has absolutely straight blond hair that she winds up into a knot and sticks a pencil through, and it stays. I don’t know how. Mine is a mess of curls and it still won’t do the pencil thing. Lily is sixteen already, but she’s in tenth grade with me because her parents lived in a monastery in Nepal until she was seven and they just never got around to putting her in school there. They’re a little casual that way. Her family moved to Ayala when we were in middle school and we’re both such weirdos that we were destined to be friends. Neither of us has any clue how to deal with people our own age since we’re both only children and were raised by wolves. Arty, intellectual wolves.

“Ben gave me his credit card,” I told Lily. “I don’t think it’s even an account that Mom’s on. That’ll make her mad, too.”

“Are you trying to make her mad?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“Constructive.” Lily swung the Volvo around the corner.

When she stopped for the light by the post office, I saw him. It was St. Felix of whoever-he-was. He was walking from St. Thomas’s toward the Spanish-style arcade that runs through Ayala’s one-block shopping district. He was still wearing that old bathrobe thing, but I could see he had jeans on under it.

I poked Lily. “Who’s that?”

“Someone who’s not taking his medication?” she suggested.

We watched him go past the drug store, the bathrobe flapping around his legs. Lily turned the Volvo left and forgot about him, but I craned my neck around to see if I could see where he went.

We spent the afternoon trying on clothes and counting up how many people we know whose parents are divorced, which was depressing.

“Okay, count how many aren’t,” Lily said, inspecting a pair of khakis in the three-way mirror.

“Yours aren’t. That’s one.” I pulled a too-tight shirt back over my head. I have Mom’s shape, which is top-heavy. Tank tops that look great on Lily, who is thin and ethereal, make me look like a hooker. On the other hand, I have good legs and a perpetual, non-cancer-inducing tan. I piled my hair up on my head to see what it would look like and decided it made me look like Chiquita Banana.

“Yours aren’t yet,” Lily said firmly. “You have to figure out *why* she wants a divorce. Then you’ll know what you’re up against.”

“She doesn’t have a reason,” I said. “As far as I can tell.”

“Trust me. She does.”

“There’s got to be something I can do. If I was in a sitcom, I would. Courageous, sensible teen shows parents the light.”

“There’s a philosophy for you—TV as a guide to life.”

“Or I could consult a psychic.” That would work about as well as anything else I’ve tried so far.

Lily took my hand and stared at my palm. She crossed her eyes. “I see tall dark stranger, many lovers, career in moving peectures,” she said in a really horrible accent.

“For Mom? That’s what I’m trying to prevent.”

“No. For you. Take mind off. Also ice cream.”

A double-cherry/coffee ice-cream-cone fix only lasts thirty minutes, but it's great while it's working. I also swear I saw Felix again, with a cone in his hand, while Lily was backing the car around.

2

It's a lot harder to think someone away than it is to think them up. I avoided St. Thomas's, even on Sunday, but after that night I started seeing St. Felix everywhere. I saw him in the park at Bowlful of Blues, talking to a woman selling batik jackets. I saw him at Domenico's Pizza washing out garbage cans. I saw him in Safeway buying cigarettes. Each time, he smiled at me but didn't say anything. He was always wearing his old white bathrobe over jeans and a T-shirt. Nobody ever seemed to say anything about that.

On the other hand, Ayala is used to practically anything. The Theosophists started a foundation here in the 1930s and they imported peacocks that run wild all over the East End now. All kinds of Hollywood people live here—big celebrities, not just people like Ben, who's a screenwriter. Mostly we're polite and pretend we don't recognize them. Plus there are all the tourists and the acupuncturists and aromatherapy shops and pet psychologists. So, given all that, maybe a guy in a bathrobe isn't worth commenting on.

The time I saw him in Safeway, I almost gave him the no-smoking lecture, since he'd already butted into *my* life. Maybe he could tell—he smiled again and slid behind a shelf of soup, and I didn't see him again for a few days. I even began to wonder if I was nuts and he really didn't exist, especially when I mentioned him to Lily and she didn't remember him. Then, just when I thought he was a figment of my imagination, I saw him having coffee with my mom.

They were at Bert's Used Books, under a eucalyptus tree at a table by the cash register. Bert keeps everything except the best books on outdoor shelves, with little fiberglass roofs over them in case it rains, which it hardly ever does. The guy had his robe on, and his backpack was under the table by his feet. He was

talking, waving his hands around, and Mom was listening, her fingers under her chin and a little smile on her mouth.

I just stood there between the science fiction and the mysteries and gaped at them, and then I took off before they saw me.

I hung around outside, cruising the twenty-five-cent shelves by the sidewalk where if you want something after hours you throw a quarter through the fence. When Mom came out, she was by herself. I let her get a little way down the block and then I ran after her.

“Mom! Who is that guy?”

She jumped when I grabbed her arm, and then she glared at me. “I thought you weren’t talking to me.”

I gave her what she calls *that look*, as in *don’t give me that look*. “Who is he?”

“He’s ... I met him in the history section at Bert’s. He’s just someone I have coffee with.”

“Why?”

She gave me back the look and then she sighed. “Angie, you really don’t have the right to question me like that.”

“What’s his name?” I demanded.

“Felix.”

“It’s not.”

“Why shouldn’t it be?”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. “He’s creepy,” I said.

“He’s had a rough time,” my mom said. “He has post-traumatic stress disorder, I think.”

“You mean from a war?”

“Probably. He just wants someone to talk to. And so do I. Things aren’t easy right now.”

I thought about saying that was *her* fault, and then I thought about Grandma Alice saying maybe there were things I didn’t know. Mom says you should never start a relationship with someone whose troubles are greater than your own. She should know. I just hoped she remembered that right now.

“You weren’t at Mass on Sunday,” Mom said, dodging the issue.

“Didn’t feel like it,” I muttered.

“Feeling like it isn’t the point.”

“Anyway, how do you know?” Mom goes to Our Lady of Good Counsel, the new church.

“Wuffie told me.”

Wuffie is my grandmother—Mom’s mother—but one of those grandmas that don’t want to be called Grandma and instead pick out something like Wuffie or Foofoo, so they sound like you got them at the pound. Wuffie still goes to St. Thomas’s, and I should have known she would rat me out.

“All right, I’ll go next week,” I said.

“Good. Well ...” Mom hesitated, as if she expected me to say something else, but I couldn’t think of anything that didn’t sound petulant.

“Ben misses you,” I said.

Mom sighed. “Oh, honey, sometimes you can’t make things work the way you want them to.” She sounded less angry and sadder than she had in front of Ben. “Well. Well, I’d better go. I left vegetables in the car.” She raised her hand as if she was going to hug me and then turned it into a sort of wave. “See you.” She turned and walked down the block to her car. Her red hair made a wild cloud around her head, bobbing along behind her as if it were alive. I ran my fingers through my own hair and discovered I had a eucalyptus bud stuck in it.

The next day I looked for Felix and didn’t see him so I went back to St. Thomas’s. I had some idea I’d find the statue in some back room there, and the guy’s stuff all over the basement floor because it was obvious he wasn’t really St. Felix. I was right about all of it but the statue. The pedestal was still sitting there with nobody on it. I poked around in the various closets and storage rooms and found old brass altar vases and a stack of hymnbooks that mice had chewed, but that’s all. Except for the guy, who was sitting on the floor by the pedestal, mending a frayed cord on a hot plate. He jumped when I came in, and looked relieved when he saw it was me.

“They’ll catch you,” I told him. “There are shelters you can go to.”

“I like it here.”

“Why were you at Bert’s with my mom?”

“Your mom?”

“Looks like me. Lots of red hair. Don’t say you weren’t.”

“That’s your mom? I was interceding.”

“You weren’t.”

“I was working up to it. I will now, if you want.”

“I want to know where the statue went. That was *my* statue.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I don’t know how it happened. All of a sudden, here I was.”

“It did *not* happen like that,” I said, furious.

He looked like he was trying to remember. “It might have,” he said finally. He bent his head over the cord again.

The sun was coming through the window at the top of the stairs, leaving a little pool of light at the bottom. I sat down on the last step. “You know, that stuff I told St. Felix was private,” I said.

“Everyone has secret lives,” he said. “Everybody running around with all kinds of horrors inside.”

“Well, not horrors ...”

“No, not you. Think about that and how that means you’re one of the lucky ones. Not like that kid who used to be in your mom’s class, the one she was telling me about.”

“Who?”

He bent his head over the cord. “He went to Afghanistan and got his leg blown off the first week. He got out of the hospital yesterday.”

“His leg? Who?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t tell me his name.”

“His name’s Jesse Francis,” Mom said.

I’d called Mom when I got back to Ben’s. Ben was in his study, and Grandma Alice was washing lettuce in the sink.

I remembered Jesse Francis. Ayala is a small town. “He’s barely old enough to be in the army!” I said to Mom. “What was he doing in Afghanistan?”

“His father signed for him to join when he was seventeen.” Mom knows nearly everybody whose kids she’s taught. “It’s such a hard age, seventeen,” she said quietly. “And how did you hear about it?”

“Some of the kids,” I said. I wouldn’t have to pretend—something like that would be all over town. When I looked down at the *Ayala News* on the table, it was on the front page. His truck had been blown up by an Improvised Explosive Device, which is what they call a homemade land mine. It blew his whole leg off. I could feel my stomach contracting into a knot.

Grandma Alice potted in with the place mats. “Awful,” she said when she saw the paper. “Set the table, okay?”

I put the phone back in the kitchen and got plates. At dinner Grandma Alice lit the candles and said a blessing because it was Friday night. She and Ben are Jewish and so is Mom’s dad, my Grandpa Joe, but Mom and Wuffie both got some kind of special dispensation to marry them, and agreed to raise the kids Catholic. That’s okay with me. I figure that with a background like that, you either have to be an atheist or just pick something. And I wouldn’t be a good atheist. The idea of random chaos is too scary.

Grandma Alice made matzoh ball soup with homemade chicken broth. I would be Jewish just for matzoh ball soup, but tonight at first it felt like eating lead slugs. Or real ones. I didn’t know Jesse Francis, not really. He dropped out the year before last and he’s four years older than me. But all I could think of was what it would feel like to have your leg explode. After dinner, I went back to St. Thomas’s and slipped down the stairs.

“You were right,” I said to Felix. “How could they let a seventeen-year-old kid volunteer to go to Afghanistan?”

“Same way they always have. Wars are fought by kids. Kids are who’s expendable.” He looked really sad in the light from the one dusty bulb.

“His *father* signed so he could go!” I was indignant. “How could somebody’s father do that?”

“He thought it was the patriotic thing to do.” Felix’s face had gotten closed up, like a cupboard someone had locked.

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

I sat down on the stairs again. I hated to admit it, but it was kind of nice having him talk *back* to me. And weird. I found myself wanting to say things to him, as if he really was St. Felix. Maybe Mom felt that way about him. I didn’t

like that idea much. “Mom is going to get back with Ben, you know,” I said.

He looked up at that. “Yeah, probably.”

“That hot plate will blow the fuses here,” I told him. “This place has wiring that’s really scary.”

“You know about wiring?”

“Wuffie got my Grandpa Joe to come look at it, and that’s what he said.”

“Is your grandpa an electrician?”

“He’s a history professor, but he’s retired.”

Felix smiled then. “We all want to fix stuff we don’t understand.”

I had to laugh. “Grandpa Joe exploded a toaster once.”

“I’ll try not to explode the basement. You figure God’s got his eye on it, he’ll put the fire out?”

“I hope so,” I said.

Walking back to Ben’s in the dark, I wondered how much God really keeps an eye on things like that. I got the feeling that there were layers of things I couldn’t see, floating on top of each other. Maybe it was the live oaks. They have strange gnarly branches and are mostly really big and old. They look like something might be living in them—dryads or something, not just owls. Once I saw a peacock in one. The Chumash, the people who lived here in the valley before the Spanish came, lived on the acorns. They believed their dead people went away over the Channel Islands off the coast in a blue light and you could hear the door of the Underworld banging closed behind them if you listened. I wondered if that was what the explosion had sounded like to Jesse Francis.

On Sunday I went to church because Wuffie came and picked me up. At least she hasn’t tried to get me to come live with her and Mom. She doesn’t approve of the divorce, either.

It was the Sunday before Labor Day, and Father Weatherford was dedicating the Mass to the new school year to get us off on the right foot.

“There’s someone living in the basement here,” I said to Wuffie as we settled in our usual pew.

“I know, dear,” she whispered back. “Your mother told me.”

“*She* knows? And you haven’t said anything?”

“Poor man. I think Father Weatherford may know, but the parish council won’t like it so he pretends he doesn’t. But haven’t you noticed how *clean* everything is?”

I hadn’t, but now that I looked around, I could see that someone had painstakingly cleaned all the separate panes in the stained glass windows. You have to do that with a Q-tip to get the edges. And the statues of the Virgin and St. Thomas looked brighter. The Altar Society at St. Thomas is all old ladies; their eyesight isn’t that good and they can’t reach the tops of anything. Father Weatherford won’t let them use a ladder for fear one of them will fall off and break her hip. I imagined Felix cleaning those little glass panes one by one and wondered how long it had taken.

After church, Lily and I had plans to go up to the river to swim. About twenty people were holding a peace vigil in front of the park when we drove through town. They were just standing there with anti-war signs. The hardware store across the street had a big flag banner and a bunch of yellow ribbons in the display window, and the manager was standing outside, glaring at the people with the signs.

“Did you know Jesse Francis?” I asked Lily.

“Not really.”

“Mom says he’s coming back to finish his senior year of high school. How weird is that?”

“That’s beyond weird. High school would be like living on Mars after you’d been in the army, I’d think. Didn’t he already get his GED?”

“Mom says Jesse’s mother told her he just sits in his room and draws mazes in his journal and she’s hoping that if he goes back to high school he can figure out how to be a kid again.”

“Man, I doubt it,” Lily said.

“Yeah, I don’t see how you could either. But Mom says colleges like to see a diploma and not a GED, and that’s why he decided to go back.”

“And I thought you weren’t talking to your mom.”

“We have negotiated the terms of a truce,” I said. “She doesn’t try to get me to live at Wuffie’s house and I don’t nag her about Ben.”

“If she actually gets divorced, *that’s* going to get a little bizarre.”

“Yeah. Mostly I’m hoping it means she’s not really going to go through with it.”

“Is she seeing anybody else?” Lily asked.

“She has coffee with a homeless guy who lives in the basement at St. Thomas’s. I don’t really think you can count that.”

“No,” Lily agreed. “You can’t count that.”

I hoped you couldn’t. When we got to the river, the swimming hole was full. Some kids we knew were climbing up to jump off the big tawny rocks that jut out over the water. We kind of half waved at them—one of them was Noah Michalski—and spread our towels out on the bank. Lily waded in and I followed her, pushing out into the cool water. It was too murky to see the bottom, but it’s over your head in the middle. Lily floated on her back with her pale hair spreading out around her, waving its tendrils in the current. A shower of manzanita leaves drifted down on my head and I looked up to see Noah Michalski hopping up and down and making ape noises.

“Mature,” I said, and he just laughed. Noah is really cute, but he’s an idiot. He has blond hair and green eyes and a sort of Superman curl over his forehead, and all he thinks about is sex and exploding things. He acts like he still likes me. I can’t imagine why, because I told him I wouldn’t spit on him if he was on fire. When I fall in love it will be with someone I can trust, not someone who will trash me to make himself look like a stud. And then I won’t leave him for some stupid reason like Mom keeps doing.

I flopped onto my back like Lily and closed my eyes, just drifting on the surface of the water, paddling with my hands a bit now and then to keep from floating downstream out of the pool. A bunch of little kids were running up and down along the bank throwing gravel on each other. I could smell somebody else cooking hot dogs. The sky was that bright robin’s egg blue with the sun not even thinking about going down behind the mountains, as if it would stay up there all summer, and summer wouldn’t end.

3

But on Tuesday of course we were in school—so much for never-ending summer. At least I'm not going to the school where Mom teaches anymore. I'm looking forward to buying Twinkies from the vending machine without getting a long, soulful discussion about healthful eating. On the other hand, in middle school we were the big kids, and now we're back to being at the low end of the food chain. I was pleased to see that Noah Michalski isn't looking nearly as cocky as usual, either.

Lily elbowed me. "Isn't that Jesse Francis?"

Jesse Francis looked like someone had taken the kid from the paper and overwritten him entirely with someone else who just looked like him. He was tall, with dark hair cut short and an Adidas jacket that might have belonged to him before he went into the army. He had on baggy khakis and you couldn't see which leg was missing, but from the way he walked, I thought it was the left one. He looked not quite balanced, as though he was still learning to use the artificial leg. He had a pink piece of paper in his fist and was peering at it as if it might be in code. Everybody made a little space around him. Finally he said to a senior, "Hey man, where's the Multipurpose Room?" and the senior pointed.

"That's what they renamed the cafeteria last year."

"Thanks, man." Jesse nodded and headed that way, while the senior stood looking after him as if he had just talked with somebody famous or scary or both. A bunch of senior girls stared at him as he went by, too, and went into an Urgent Discussion Huddle as soon as he'd turned the corner.

By the time we found our homeroom and got our schedules untangled and had lunch, the day was pretty much over. None of the teachers ever expect to get

anything done the first day. Lily's in most of my classes and we both have Drivers' Ed, even though Lily already has a license. Drivers' Ed is what you take in the tenth grade no matter what. I wonder if they're making Jesse Francis take Family Living with the rest of the seniors. That's the class where they have them carry a raw egg around all day and pretend it's a baby.

Turns out that Jesse Francis is in my art class. He was sitting by himself on the first day, folded up on a stool with his elbows on his knees. The studio is about half student desks and half stools at the work table. I was late and everybody else had dumped their bookbags and stuff into the empty seats and no one looked inclined to move their stuff for me, so I climbed up on the stool next to Jesse.

He gave me a grave nod. He has huge dark eyes under dark brows and his skin looks like it's stretched just a little too thin on his face. I nodded back.

Mr. Petrillo, the art teacher, said that we were going to do freehand sketches of this apple—he held it up—just to get limbered up. So we did that, while he walked around the room looking at our apples.

“Nice line ... think *shape*, remember, this thing is round ... don't try to photograph it, child, loosen up ... you, too, it's not a blueprint ...”

I snuck a look at Jesse's apple. It looked as if he had drawn it without ever lifting the pencil off the paper, just run the point around and around some real apple that wasn't visible to anybody else.

“That's really cool,” I whispered. “How did you do that?”

He shrugged. “It's just a trick.”

Mr. Petrillo liked it. He pinned it up on the board as one of the ones that had captured the essence of apple.

“What are you doing in beginning art?” I whispered.

He shrugged again. “I needed an elective.” He kind of smiled. “It's better than marching band.”

“Oh my God, I would think so,” I said, and then thought that might not have been the best thing to say. But he cracked a smile.

“The leg makes me walk funny.” He lurched his shoulders from side to side like Frankenstein.

I didn't try to pretend not to know what he meant. Everybody in school knows,

and he knows they know. “And the uniforms are dorky,” I suggested.

“And the uniforms are dorky.”

“Angie, a little more attention to your drawing, please,” Mr. Petrillo said.

We didn’t talk anymore that day, but the next day when I saw him in the hallway, he grinned at me and gave me a little wave. I was kind of flattered he remembered me. Then at lunch we saw him sitting at a table by himself, a stack of books at his elbow, reading *Modern U.S. History* and eating soup out of a microwave cup. He still had that sense of empty space around him. I saw a couple of boys head for his table and then sort of bend around it at the last minute like they were being deflected by some kind of invisible force field. The only other person eating lunch by himself was the D.A.R.E. officer. I raised my eyebrows at Lily. We hadn’t staked out any lunchroom turf yet, and don’t really belong to any recognized group.

“Sure.” Lily hefted her tray and we plopped down across the table from Jesse. He looked surprised.

“We’ll go away if you want,” I said.

“Why do I want you to go away?”

“We’re just sophomores,” Lily said.

He kind of smiled. “What’s your name? I know this one.” He nodded at me.

“Lily Reinder.”

“Reindeer?”

Lily rolled her eyes. Everyone always does that. She spelled it for him.

“I’ll just call you Rudolph.”

“You’ve got soup on Dwight D. Eisenhower there,” Lily said.

He glanced down at the book and picked a noodle off the page. He’d doodled a little wandering maze pattern all around the border of the picture.

“They’ll charge you for the book if you write in it,” I told him.

“Looking out for me?”

I could feel my cheeks go hot. I must have sounded like a doofus, about twelve.

“It’s okay, I probably need somebody to,” Jesse said.

I thought maybe he did. I could feel the gaggle of senior girls at the next table giving us the X-Ray Vision stare, but none of them had sat down next to him.

Something made a huge bang and a thump and we all jumped. Not that there isn't enough noise in the cafeteria to rattle hell already, but this was not a usual noise. I stood up on my chair because everybody else was standing up too, but I still couldn't see. Mrs. Richardson, the principal, was pushing her way through the crowd with an exasperated look on her face, and the D.A.R.E. officer was putting down his cheeseburger. The big trash can with the swinging lid that sat by the kitchen door was on its side, and there was gunk everywhere—with Noah Michalski sitting in the middle of it, chili running down his ears. The bang had apparently been the can going over with Noah in it. A little red-haired junior was staring at the garbage on her khaki skirt like she was about to cry, and two senior boys were looking around as if they had just happened to be by the trash can at the wrong time and hadn't really tried to stuff Noah in it on a dare.

Noah's face was bright red and he looked furious. He jumped up and shouted something I couldn't catch, except for the words "blow you all away—" And that's when all hell broke loose. The D.A.R.E. officer snapped to attention and grabbed him by the arm. The fourth period bell went off, and then the fire alarm bell on top of that, and then there were campus security cops all over. Someone started giving totally unintelligible instructions over the intercom. I climbed off my chair and saw that Jesse was flat on the floor, under the table.

"Line up!" someone yelled. Jesse didn't move. I bent down and shook him, and his face was pure white when he looked up at me. He got to his feet and lined up with the rest of us without a word, and we all marched out into the parking lot. There were sirens going off now, and cop cars rolling into the lot, and we all stood around waiting for someone to tell us what to do next, and speculating.

"It's a bomb threat."

"Nah, that kid had a gun."

"Someone pulled the fire alarm."

"Dude, I swear, a gun—I saw it."

Jesse had some of his color back. We were standing under a pepper tree at the end of the lot. He leaned back against it and exhaled slowly while a Channel 10 News van rolled by us.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

“Oh, Christ. I didn’t think I would do that.”

“Do what?”

“Hit the floor like a fool. I thought it *was* a bomb.” He looked around us carefully, like he still wasn’t sure, but he said, “Now everybody will know I’m a headcase.”

“Considering it’s Noah, it might have been a bomb,” Lily said. “He got suspended last year for blowing up one of those big cans with a cherry bomb.”

“It wasn’t his fault this time,” I pointed out. “Those seniors started it.” And then Noah, of course, being Noah, had to say something stupid and send everyone into a panic.

Exciting stuff gets around a small town fast. Car after car was pulling into the lot, and the school rent-a-cops were stopping them and trying to tell them nobody had been shot, but the cars were full of parents and they weren’t listening.

“Nobody was paying attention to you,” I said to Jesse. “They were all too busy gawking at Noah.”

He shrugged. It hunched his shoulders up like a bird sitting in the rain. “Doesn’t matter.” But he looked like it did. “My shrink says I’m not supposed to worry about what people think. I was there, and they weren’t. I’m me and they’re not.” There was a tic beside his right eye. He shot a glance at Noah and said, “Asshole.”

That was when Ben and Mom showed up, at the same time in separate cars, and screeched to a halt right next to each other.

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