

"ELECTRIC... STACCATO BURSTS
FILLED WITH HUMOR AND TRAGEDY."
—JODI PICCOLI

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

JOHN GREEN

NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR OF LOOKING FOR ALASKA

ALSO BY JOHN GREEN

Looking for Alaska

An Abundance of Katherines

Paper Towns

Will Grayson, Will Grayson

WITH DAVID LEVITHAN

JOHN GREEN

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

TO ESTHER EARL

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As the tide washed in, the Dutch Tulip Man faced the ocean: “Conjoiner rejoinder poisoner concealer revelator. Look at it, rising up and rising down, taking everything with it.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Water,” the Dutchman said. “Well, and time.”

—PETER VAN HOUTEN, *An Imperial Affliction*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is not so much an author's note as an author's reminder of what was printed in small type a few pages ago: This book is a work of fiction. I made it up.

Neither novels nor their readers benefit from attempts to divine whether any facts hide inside a story. Such efforts attack the very idea that made-up stories can matter, which is sort of the foundational assumption of our species.

I appreciate your cooperation in this matter.

CHAPTER ONE

Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death.

Whenever you read a cancer booklet or website or whatever, they always list depression among the side effects of cancer. But, in fact, depression is not a side effect of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really.) But my mom believed I required treatment, so she took me to see my Regular Doctor Jim, who agreed that I was veritably swimming in a paralyzing and totally clinical depression, and that therefore my meds should be adjusted and also I should attend a weekly Support Group.

This Support Group featured a rotating cast of characters in various states of tumor-driven unwellness. Why did the cast rotate? A side effect of dying.

The Support Group, of course, was depressing as hell. It met every Wednesday in the basement of a stone-walled Episcopal church shaped like a cross. We all sat in a circle right in the middle of the cross, where the two boards would have met, where the heart of Jesus would have been.

I noticed this because Patrick, the Support Group Leader and only person over eighteen in the room, talked about the heart of Jesus every freaking meeting, all about how we, as young cancer survivors, were sitting right in Christ's very sacred heart and whatever.

So here's how it went in God's heart: The six or seven or ten of us walked/wheeled in, grazed at a decrepit selection of cookies and lemonade, sat down in the Circle of Trust, and listened to Patrick recount for the thousandth time his depressingly miserable life story—how he had cancer in his balls and they thought he was going to die but he didn't die and now here he is, a full-grown adult in a church basement in the 137th nicest city in America, divorced, addicted to video games, mostly friendless, eking out a meager living by exploiting his concertastic past, slowly working his way toward a master's degree that will not improve his career prospects, waiting, as we all do, for the sword of Damocles to give him the relief that he escaped lo those many years ago when cancer took both of his nuts but spared what only the most generous soul would call his life.

AND YOU TOO MIGHT BE SO LUCKY!

Then we introduced ourselves: Name. Age. Diagnosis. And how we're doing today. I'm Hazel, I'd say when they'd get to me. Sixteen. Thyroid originally but with an impressive and long-settled satellite colony in my lungs. And I'm doing okay.

Once we got around the circle, Patrick always asked if anyone wanted to share. And then began the circle jerk of support: everyone talking about fighting and battling and winning and shrinking and scanning. To be fair to Patrick, he let us talk about dying, too.

definition of *life*. Still, I agreed to go—after negotiating the right to record the 1.5 episodes of *ANTM* I'd be missing.

I went to Support Group for the same reason that I'd once allowed nurses with a mere eighteen months of graduate education to poison me with exotically named chemicals: I wanted to make my parents happy. There is only one thing in this world shittier than biting it from cancer when you're sixteen, and that's having a kid who bites it from cancer.

Mom pulled into the circular driveway behind the church at 4:56. I pretended to fiddle with my oxygen tank for a second just to kill time.

“Do you want me to carry it in for you?”

“No, it's fine,” I said. The cylindrical green tank only weighed a few pounds, and I had this little steel cart to wheel it around behind me. It delivered two liters of oxygen to me each minute through a cannula, a transparent tube that split just beneath my neck, wrapped behind my ears, and then reunited in my nostrils. The contraption was necessary because my lungs sucked at being lungs.

“I love you,” she said as I got out.

“You too, Mom. See you at six.”

“Make friends!” she said through the rolled-down window as I walked away.

I didn't want to take the elevator because taking the elevator is a Last Days kind of activity at Support Group, so I took the stairs. I grabbed a cookie and poured some lemonade into a Dixie cup and then turned around.

A boy was staring at me.

I was quite sure I'd never seen him before. Long and leanly muscular, he dwarfed the molded plastic elementary school chair he was sitting in. Mahogany hair, straight and short. He looked my age, maybe a year older, and he sat with his tailbone against the edge of the chair, his posture aggressively poor, one hand half in a pocket of dark jeans.

I looked away, suddenly conscious of my myriad insufficiencies. I was wearing old jeans, which had once been tight but now sagged in weird places, and a yellow T-shirt advertising a band I didn't even like anymore. Also my hair: I had this pageboy haircut, and I hadn't even bothered to, like, brush it. Furthermore, I had ridiculously fat chipmunked cheeks, a side effect of treatment. I looked like a normally proportioned person with a balloon for a head. This was not even to mention the cankle situation. And yet—I cut a glance to him, and his eyes were still on me.

It occurred to me why they call it *eye contact*.

I walked into the circle and sat down next to Isaac, two seats away from the boy. I glanced again. He was still watching me.

Look, let me just say it: He was hot. A nonhot boy stares at you relentlessly and it is, at best, awkward and, at worst, a form of assault. But a hot boy . . . well.

I pulled out my phone and clicked it so it would display the time: 4:59. The circle

filled in with the unlucky twelve-to-eighteens, and then Patrick started us out with the serenity prayer: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* The guy was still staring at me. I felt rather blushy.

Finally, I decided that the proper strategy was to stare back. Boys do not have a monopoly on the Staring Business, after all. So I looked him over as Patrick acknowledged for the thousandth time his ball-lessness etc., and soon it was a staring contest. After a while the boy smiled, and then finally his blue eyes glanced away. When he looked back at me, I flicked my eyebrows up to say, *I win.*

He shrugged. Patrick continued and then finally it was time for the introductions. “Isaac, perhaps you’d like to go first today. I know you’re facing a challenging time.”

“Yeah,” Isaac said. “I’m Isaac. I’m seventeen. And it’s looking like I have to get surgery in a couple weeks, after which I’ll be blind. Not to complain or anything because I know a lot of us have it worse, but yeah, I mean, being blind does sort of suck. My girlfriend helps, though. And friends like Augustus.” He nodded toward the boy, who now had a name. “So, yeah,” Isaac continued. He was looking at his hands, which he’d folded into each other like the top of a tepee. “There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“We’re here for you, Isaac,” Patrick said. “Let Isaac hear it, guys.” And then we all, in a monotone, said, “We’re here for you, Isaac.”

Michael was next. He was twelve. He had leukemia. He’d always had leukemia. He was okay. (Or so he said. He’d taken the elevator.)

Lida was sixteen, and pretty enough to be the object of the hot boy’s eye. She was a regular—in a long remission from appendiceal cancer, which I had not previously known existed. She said—as she had every other time I’d attended Support Group—that she felt *strong*, which felt like bragging to me as the oxygen-drizzling nubs tickled my nostrils.

There were five others before they got to him. He smiled a little when his turn came. His voice was low, smoky, and dead sexy. “My name is Augustus Waters,” he said. “I’m seventeen. I had a little touch of osteosarcoma a year and a half ago, but I’m just here today at Isaac’s request.”

“And how are you feeling?” asked Patrick.

“Oh, I’m grand.” Augustus Waters smiled with a corner of his mouth. “I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up, my friend.”

When it was my turn, I said, “My name is Hazel. I’m sixteen. Thyroid with mets in my lungs. I’m okay.”

The hour proceeded apace: Fights were recounted, battles won amid wars sure to be lost; hope was clung to; families were both celebrated and denounced; it was agreed that friends just didn’t get it; tears were shed; comfort proffered. Neither Augustus Waters nor I spoke again until Patrick said, “Augustus, perhaps you’d like to share your fears with the group.”

“My fears?”

“Yes.”

“I fear oblivion,” he said without a moment’s pause. “I fear it like the proverbial blind man who’s afraid of the dark.”

“Too soon,” Isaac said, cracking a smile.

“Was that insensitive?” Augustus asked. “I can be pretty blind to other people’s feelings.”

Isaac was laughing, but Patrick raised a chastening finger and said, “Augustus, please. Let’s return to *you* and *your* struggles. You said you fear oblivion?”

“I did,” Augustus answered.

Patrick seemed lost. “Would, uh, would anyone like to speak to that?”

I hadn’t been in proper school in three years. My parents were my two best friends. My third best friend was an author who did not know I existed. I was a fairly shy person—not the hand-raising type.

And yet, just this once, I decided to speak. I half raised my hand and Patrick, his delight evident, immediately said, “Hazel!” I was, I’m sure he assumed, opening up. *Becoming Part Of The Group.*

I looked over at Augustus Waters, who looked back at me. You could almost see through his eyes they were so blue. “There will come a time,” I said, “when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this”—I gestured encompassingly—“will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that’s what everyone else does.”

I’d learned this from my aforementioned third best friend, Peter Van Houten, the reclusive author of *An Imperial Affliction*, the book that was as close a thing as I had to a Bible. Peter Van Houten was the only person I’d ever come across who seemed to (a) understand what it’s like to be dying, and (b) not have died.

After I finished, there was quite a long period of silence as I watched a smile spread all the way across Augustus’s face—not the little crooked smile of the boy trying to be sexy while he stared at me, but his real smile, too big for his face. “Goddamn,” Augustus said quietly. “Aren’t you something else.”

Neither of us said anything for the rest of Support Group. At the end, we all had to hold hands, and Patrick led us in a prayer. “Lord Jesus Christ, we are gathered here in Your heart, *literally in Your heart*, as cancer survivors. You and You alone know us as we know ourselves. Guide us to life and the Light through our times of trial. We pray for Isaac’s eyes, for Michael’s and Jamie’s blood, for Augustus’s bones, for Hazel’s lungs, for James’s throat. We pray that You might heal us and that we might feel Your love, and Your

peace, which passes all understanding. And we remember in our hearts those whom we knew and loved who have gone home to you: Maria and Kade and Joseph and Haley and Abigail and Angelina and Taylor and Gabriel and . . .”

It was a long list. The world contains a lot of dead people. And while Patrick droned on, reading the list from a sheet of paper because it was too long to memorize, I kept my eyes closed, trying to think prayerfully but mostly imagining the day when my name would find its way onto that list, all the way at the end when everyone had stopped listening.

When Patrick was finished, we said this stupid mantra together—LIVING OUR BEST LIFE TODAY—and it was over. Augustus Waters pushed himself out of his chair and walked over to me. His gait was crooked like his smile. He towered over me, but he kept his distance so I wouldn’t have to crane my neck to look him in the eye. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Hazel.”

“No, your full name.”

“Um, Hazel Grace Lancaster.” He was just about to say something else when Isaac walked up. “Hold on,” Augustus said, raising a finger, and turned to Isaac. “That was actually worse than you made it out to be.”

“I told you it was bleak.”

“Why do you bother with it?”

“I don’t know. It kind of helps?”

Augustus leaned in so he thought I couldn’t hear. “She’s a regular?” I couldn’t hear Isaac’s comment, but Augustus responded, “I’ll say.” He clasped Isaac by both shoulders and then took a half step away from him. “Tell Hazel about clinic.”

Isaac leaned a hand against the snack table and focused his huge eye on me. “Okay, so I went into clinic this morning, and I was telling my surgeon that I’d rather be deaf than blind. And he said, ‘It doesn’t work that way,’ and I was, like, ‘Yeah, I realize it doesn’t work that way; I’m just saying I’d rather be deaf than blind if I had the choice, which I realize I don’t have,’ and he said, ‘Well, the good news is that you won’t be deaf,’ and I was like, ‘Thank you for explaining that my eye cancer isn’t going to make me deaf. I feel so fortunate that an intellectual giant like yourself would deign to operate on me.’”

“He sounds like a winner,” I said. “I’m gonna try to get me some eye cancer just so I can make this guy’s acquaintance.”

“Good luck with that. All right, I should go. Monica’s waiting for me. I gotta look at her a lot while I can.”

“Counterinsurgency tomorrow?” Augustus asked.

“Definitely.” Isaac turned and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Augustus Waters turned to me. “Literally,” he said.

“Literally?” I asked.

“We are literally in the heart of Jesus,” he said. “I thought we were in a church basement, but we are literally in the heart of Jesus.”

“Someone should tell Jesus,” I said. “I mean, it’s gotta be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart.”

“I would tell Him myself,” Augustus said, “but unfortunately I am literally stuck inside of His heart, so He won’t be able to hear me.” I laughed. He shook his head, just looking at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Augustus half smiled. “Because you’re beautiful. I enjoy looking at beautiful people, and I decided a while ago not to deny myself the simpler pleasures of existence.” A brief awkward silence ensued. Augustus plowed through: “I mean, particularly given that, as you so deliciously pointed out, all of this will end in oblivion and everything.”

I kind of scoffed or sighed or exhaled in a way that was vaguely coughy and then said, “I’m not beau—”

“You’re like a millennial Natalie Portman. Like *V for Vendetta* Natalie Portman.”

“Never seen it,” I said.

“Really?” he asked. “Pixie-haired gorgeous girl dislikes authority and can’t help but fall for a boy she knows is trouble. It’s your autobiography, so far as I can tell.”

His every syllable flirted. Honestly, he kind of turned me on. I didn’t even know that guys *could* turn me on—not, like, in real life.

A younger girl walked past us. “How’s it going, Alisa?” he asked. She smiled and mumbled, “Hi, Augustus.” “Memorial people,” he explained. Memorial was the big research hospital. “Where do you go?”

“Children’s,” I said, my voice smaller than I expected it to be. He nodded. The conversation seemed over. “Well,” I said, nodding vaguely toward the steps that led us out of the Literal Heart of Jesus. I tilted my cart onto its wheels and started walking. He limped beside me. “So, see you next time, maybe?” I asked.

“You should see it,” he said. “*V for Vendetta*, I mean.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll look it up.”

“No. With me. At my house,” he said. “Now.”

I stopped walking. “I hardly know you, Augustus Waters. You could be an ax murderer.”

He nodded. “True enough, Hazel Grace.” He walked past me, his shoulders filling out his green knit polo shirt, his back straight, his steps lilting just slightly to the right as he walked steady and confident on what I had determined was a prosthetic leg. Osteosarcoma sometimes takes a limb to check you out. Then, if it likes you, it takes the

rest.

I followed him upstairs, losing ground as I made my way up slowly, stairs not being a field of expertise for my lungs.

And then we were out of Jesus's heart and in the parking lot, the spring air just on the cold side of perfect, the late-afternoon light heavenly in its hurtfulness.

Mom wasn't there yet, which was unusual, because Mom was almost always waiting for me. I glanced around and saw that a tall, curvy brunette girl had Isaac pinned against the stone wall of the church, kissing him rather aggressively. They were close enough to me that I could hear the weird noises of their mouths together, and I could hear him saying, "Always," and her saying, "Always," in return.

Suddenly standing next to me, Augustus half whispered, "They're big believers in PDA."

"What's with the 'always'?" The slurping sounds intensified.

"Always is their thing. They'll *always* love each other and whatever. I would conservatively estimate they have texted each other the word *always* four million times in the last year."

A couple more cars drove up, taking Michael and Alisa away. It was just Augustus and me now, watching Isaac and Monica, who proceeded apace as if they were not leaning against a place of worship. His hand reached for her boob over her shirt and pawed at it, his palm still while his fingers moved around. I wondered if that felt good. Didn't seem like it would, but I decided to forgive Isaac on the grounds that he was going blind. The senses must feast while there is yet hunger and whatever.

"Imagine taking that last drive to the hospital," I said quietly. "The last time you'll ever drive a car."

Without looking over at me, Augustus said, "You're killing my vibe here, Hazel Grace. I'm trying to observe young love in its many-splendored awkwardness."

"I think he's hurting her boob," I said.

"Yes, it's difficult to ascertain whether he is trying to arouse her or perform a breast exam." Then Augustus Waters reached into a pocket and pulled out, of all things, a pack of cigarettes. He flipped it open and put a cigarette between his lips.

"Are you *serious*?" I asked. "You think that's cool? Oh, my God, you just ruined *the whole thing*."

"Which whole thing?" he asked, turning to me. The cigarette dangled unlit from the unsmiling corner of his mouth.

"The whole thing where a boy who is not unattractive or unintelligent or seemingly in any way unacceptable stares at me and points out incorrect uses of literality and compares me to actresses and asks me to watch a movie at his house. But of course there is always a *hamartia* and yours is that oh, my God, even though you HAD FREAKING CANCER you give money to a company in exchange for the chance to acquire YET MORE CANCER. Oh, my God. Let me just assure you that not being able to breathe?

SUCKS. Totally disappointing. *Totally.*”

“A *hamartia*?” he asked, the cigarette still in his mouth. It tightened his jaw. He had a hell of a jawline, unfortunately.

“A fatal flaw,” I explained, turning away from him. I stepped toward the curb, leaving Augustus Waters behind me, and then I heard a car start down the street. It was Mom. She’d been waiting for me to, like, make friends or whatever.

I felt this weird mix of disappointment and anger welling up inside of me. I don’t even know what the feeling was, really, just that there was a *lot* of it, and I wanted to smack Augustus Waters and also replace my lungs with lungs that didn’t suck at being lungs. I was standing with my Chuck Taylors on the very edge of the curb, the oxygen tank ball-and-chaining in the cart by my side, and right as my mom pulled up, I felt a hand grab mine.

I yanked my hand free but turned back to him.

“They don’t kill you unless you light them,” he said as Mom arrived at the curb. “And I’ve never lit one. It’s a metaphor, see: You put the killing thing right between your teeth, but you don’t give it the power to do its killing.”

“It’s a metaphor,” I said, dubious. Mom was just idling.

“It’s a metaphor,” he said.

“You choose your behaviors based on their metaphorical resonances . . .” I said.

“Oh, yes.” He smiled. The big, goofy, real smile. “I’m a big believer in metaphor, Hazel Grace.”

I turned to the car. Tapped the window. It rolled down. “I’m going to a movie with Augustus Waters,” I said. “Please record the next several episodes of the *ANTM* marathon for me.”

CHAPTER TWO

Augustus Waters drove horrifically. Whether stopping or starting, everything happened with a tremendous JOLT. I flew against the seat belt of his Toyota SUV each time he braked, and my neck snapped backward each time he hit the gas. I might have been nervous—what with sitting in the car of a strange boy on the way to his house, keenly aware that my crap lungs complicate efforts to fend off unwanted advances—but his driving was so astonishingly poor that I could think of nothing else.

We'd gone perhaps a mile in jagged silence before Augustus said, "I failed the driving test three times."

"You don't say."

He laughed, nodding. "Well, I can't feel pressure in old Prosty, and I can't get the hang of driving left-footed. My doctors say most amputees can drive with no problem, but . . . yeah. Not me. Anyway, I go in for my fourth driving test, and it goes about like this is going." A half mile in front of us, a light turned red. Augustus slammed on the brakes, tossing me into the triangular embrace of the seat belt. "Sorry. I swear to God I am trying to be gentle. Right, so anyway, at the end of the test, I totally thought I'd failed again, but the instructor was like, 'Your driving is unpleasant, but it isn't technically unsafe.'"

"I'm not sure I agree," I said. "I suspect Cancer Perk." Cancer Perks are the little things cancer kids get that regular kids don't: basketballs signed by sports heroes, free passes on late homework, unearned driver's licenses, etc.

"Yeah," he said. The light turned green. I braced myself. Augustus slammed the gas.

"You know they've got hand controls for people who can't use their legs," I pointed out.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe someday." He sighed in a way that made me wonder whether he was confident about the existence of *someday*. I knew osteosarcoma was highly curable, but still.

There are a number of ways to establish someone's approximate survival expectations without actually *asking*. I used the classic: "So, are you in school?" Generally, your parents pull you out of school at some point if they expect you to bite it.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm at North Central. A year behind, though: I'm a sophomore. You?"

I considered lying. No one likes a corpse, after all. But in the end I told the truth. "No, my parents withdrew me three years ago."

"Three *years*?" he asked, astonished.

I told Augustus the broad outline of my miracle: diagnosed with Stage IV thyroid cancer when I was thirteen. (I didn't tell him that the diagnosis came three months after I

got my first period. Like: Congratulations! You're a woman. Now die.) It was, we were told, incurable.

I had a surgery called *radical neck dissection*, which is about as pleasant as it sounds. Then radiation. Then they tried some chemo for my lung tumors. The tumors shrank, then grew. By then, I was fourteen. My lungs started to fill up with water. I was looking pretty dead—my hands and feet ballooned; my skin cracked; my lips were perpetually blue. They've got this drug that makes you not feel so completely terrified about the fact that you can't breathe, and I had a lot of it flowing into me through a PICC line, and more than a dozen other drugs besides. But even so, there's a certain unpleasantness to drowning, particularly when it occurs over the course of several months. I finally ended up in the ICU with pneumonia, and my mom knelt by the side of my bed and said, "Are you ready, sweetie?" and I told her I was ready, and my dad just kept telling me he loved me in this voice that was not breaking so much as already broken, and I kept telling him that I loved him, too, and everyone was holding hands, and I couldn't catch my breath, and my lungs were acting desperate, gasping, pulling me out of the bed trying to find a position that could get them air, and I was embarrassed by their desperation, disgusted that they wouldn't just *let go*, and I remember my mom telling me it was okay, that I was okay, that I would be okay, and my father was trying so hard not to sob that when he did, which was regularly, it was an earthquake. And I remember wanting not to be awake.

Everyone figured I was finished, but my Cancer Doctor Maria managed to get some of the fluid out of my lungs, and shortly thereafter the antibiotics they'd given me for the pneumonia kicked in.

I woke up and soon got into one of those experimental trials that are famous in the Republic of Cancervania for Not Working. The drug was Phalanxifor, this molecule designed to attach itself to cancer cells and slow their growth. It didn't work in about 70 percent of people. But it worked in me. The tumors shrank.

And they stayed shrunk. Huzzah, Phalanxifor! In the past eighteen months, my mets have hardly grown, leaving me with lungs that suck at being lungs but could, conceivably, struggle along indefinitely with the assistance of drizzled oxygen and daily Phalanxifor.

Admittedly, my Cancer Miracle had only resulted in a bit of purchased time. (I did not yet know the size of the bit.) But when telling Augustus Waters, I painted the rosiest possible picture, embellishing the miraculousness of the miracle.

"So now you gotta go back to school," he said.

"I actually *can't*," I explained, "because I already got my GED. So I'm taking classes at MCC," which was our community college.

"A college girl," he said, nodding. "That explains the aura of sophistication." He smirked at me. I shoved his upper arm playfully. I could feel the muscle right beneath the skin, all tense and amazing.

We made a wheels-screaming turn into a subdivision with eight-foot-high stucco walls. His house was the first one on the left. A two-story colonial. We jerked to a halt in his driveway.

I followed him inside. A wooden plaque in the entryway was engraved in cursive

with the words *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, and the entire house turned out to be festooned in such observations. *Good Friends Are Hard to Find and Impossible to Forget* read an illustration above the coatrack. *True Love Is Born from Hard Times* promised a needlepointed pillow in their antique-furnished living room. Augustus saw me reading. “My parents call them Encouragements,” he explained. “They’re everywhere.”

His mom and dad called him Gus. They were making enchiladas in the kitchen (a piece of stained glass by the sink read in bubbly letters *Family Is Forever*). His mom was putting chicken into tortillas, which his dad then rolled up and placed in a glass pan. They didn’t seem too surprised by my arrival, which made sense: The fact that Augustus made me *feel* special did not necessarily indicate that I *was* special. Maybe he brought home a different girl every night to show her movies and feel her up.

“This is Hazel Grace,” he said, by way of introduction.

“Just Hazel,” I said.

“How’s it going, Hazel?” asked Gus’s dad. He was tall—almost as tall as Gus—and skinny in a way that parentally aged people usually aren’t.

“Okay,” I said.

“How was Isaac’s Support Group?”

“It was incredible,” Gus said.

“You’re such a Debbie Downer,” his mom said. “Hazel, do you enjoy it?”

I paused a second, trying to figure out if my response should be calibrated to please Augustus or his parents. “Most of the people are really nice,” I finally said.

“That’s exactly what we found with families at Memorial when we were in the thick of it with Gus’s treatment,” his dad said. “Everybody was so kind. Strong, too. In the darkest days, the Lord puts the best people into your life.”

“Quick, give me a throw pillow and some thread because that needs to be an Encouragement,” Augustus said, and his dad looked a little annoyed, but then Gus wrapped his long arm around his dad’s neck and said, “I’m just kidding, Dad. I like the freaking Encouragements. I really do. I just can’t admit it because I’m a teenager.” His dad rolled his eyes.

“You’re joining us for dinner, I hope?” asked his mom. She was small and brunette and vaguely mousy.

“I guess?” I said. “I have to be home by ten. Also I don’t, um, eat meat?”

“No problem. We’ll vegetarianize some,” she said.

“Animals are just too cute?” Gus asked.

“I want to minimize the number of deaths I am responsible for,” I said.

Gus opened his mouth to respond but then stopped himself.

His mom filled the silence. “Well, I think that’s wonderful.”

They talked to me for a bit about how the enchiladas were Famous Waters Enchiladas and Not to Be Missed and about how Gus's curfew was also ten, and how they were inherently distrustful of anyone who gave their kids curfews *other* than ten, and was I in school—"she's a college student," Augustus interjected—and how the weather was truly and absolutely extraordinary for March, and how in spring all things are new, and they didn't even once ask me about the oxygen or my diagnosis, which was weird and wonderful, and then Augustus said, "Hazel and I are going to watch *V for Vendetta* so she can see her filmic doppelgänger, mid-two thousands Natalie Portman."

"The living room TV is yours for the watching," his dad said happily.

"I think we're actually gonna watch it in the basement."

His dad laughed. "Good try. Living room."

"But I want to show Hazel Grace the basement," Augustus said.

"Just Hazel," I said.

"So show Just Hazel the basement," said his dad. "And then come upstairs and watch your movie in the living room."

Augustus puffed out his cheeks, balanced on his leg, and twisted his hips, throwing the prosthetic forward. "Fine," he mumbled.

I followed him down carpeted stairs to a huge basement bedroom. A shelf at my eye level reached all the way around the room, and it was stuffed solid with basketball memorabilia: dozens of trophies with gold plastic men mid-jump shot or dribbling or reaching for a layup toward an unseen basket. There were also lots of signed balls and sneakers.

"I used to play basketball," he explained.

"You must've been pretty good."

"I wasn't bad, but all the shoes and balls are Cancer Perks." He walked toward the TV, where a huge pile of DVDs and video games were arranged into a vague pyramid shape. He bent at the waist and snatched up *V for Vendetta*. "I was, like, the prototypical white Hoosier kid," he said. "I was all about resurrecting the lost art of the midrange jumper, but then one day I was shooting free throws—just standing at the foul line at the North Central gym shooting from a rack of balls. All at once, I couldn't figure out why I was methodically tossing a spherical object through a toroidal object. It seemed like the stupidest thing I could possibly be doing.

"I started thinking about little kids putting a cylindrical peg through a circular hole, and how they do it over and over again for months when they figure it out, and how basketball was basically just a slightly more aerobic version of that same exercise. Anyway, for the longest time, I just kept sinking free throws. I hit eighty in a row, my all-time best, but as I kept going, I felt more and more like a two-year-old. And then for some reason I started to think about hurdlers. Are you okay?"

I'd taken a seat on the corner of his unmade bed. I wasn't trying to be suggestive or anything; I just got kind of tired when I had to stand a lot. I'd stood in the living room and

then there had been the stairs, and then more standing, which was quite a lot of standing for me, and I didn't want to faint or anything. I was a bit of a Victorian Lady, fainting-wise. "I'm fine," I said. "Just listening. Hurdlers?"

"Yeah, hurdlers. I don't know why. I started thinking about them running their hurdle races, and jumping over these totally arbitrary objects that had been set in their path. And I wondered if hurdlers ever thought, you know, *This would go faster if we just got rid of the hurdles.*"

"This was before your diagnosis?" I asked.

"Right, well, there was that, too." He smiled with half his mouth. "The day of the existentially fraught free throws was coincidentally also my last day of dual leggedness. I had a weekend between when they scheduled the amputation and when it happened. My own little glimpse of what Isaac is going through."

I nodded. I liked Augustus Waters. I really, really, really liked him. I liked the way his story ended with someone else. I liked his voice. I liked that he took *existentially fraught* free throws. I liked that he was a tenured professor in the Department of Slightly Crooked Smiles with a dual appointment in the Department of Having a Voice That Made My Skin Feel More Like Skin. And I liked that he had two names. I've always liked people with two names, because you get to make up your mind what you call them: Gus or Augustus? Me, I was always just Hazel, univalent Hazel.

"Do you have siblings?" I asked.

"Huh?" he answered, seeming a little distracted.

"You said that thing about watching kids play."

"Oh, yeah, no. I have nephews, from my half sisters. But they're older. They're like—DAD, HOW OLD ARE JULIE AND MARTHA?"

"Twenty-eight!"

"They're like twenty-eight. They live in Chicago. They are both married to very fancy lawyer dudes. Or banker dudes. I can't remember. You have siblings?"

I shook my head no. "So what's your story?" he asked, sitting down next to me at a safe distance.

"I already told you my story. I was diagnosed when—"

"No, not your cancer story. *Your* story. Interests, hobbies, passions, weird fetishes, etcetera."

"Um," I said.

"Don't tell me you're one of those people who becomes their disease. I know so many people like that. It's disheartening. Like, cancer is in the growth business, right? The taking-people-over business. But surely you haven't let it succeed prematurely."

It occurred to me that perhaps I had. I struggled with how to pitch myself to Augustus Waters, which enthusiasms to embrace, and in the silence that followed it occurred to me that I wasn't very interesting. "I am pretty unextraordinary."

“I reject that out of hand. Think of something you like. The first thing that comes to mind.”

“Um. Reading?”

“What do you read?”

“Everything. From, like, hideous romance to pretentious fiction to poetry. Whatever.”

“Do you write poetry, too?”

“No. I don’t write.”

“There!” Augustus almost shouted. “Hazel Grace, you are the only teenager in America who prefers reading poetry to writing it. This tells me so much. You read a lot of capital-G great books, don’t you?”

“I guess?”

“What’s your favorite?”

“Um,” I said.

My favorite book, by a wide margin, was *An Imperial Affliction*, but I didn’t like to tell people about it. Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book. And then there are books like *An Imperial Affliction*, which you can’t tell people about, books so special and rare and *yours* that advertising your affection feels like a betrayal.

It wasn’t even that the book was so good or anything; it was just that the author, Peter Van Houten, seemed to understand me in weird and impossible ways. *An Imperial Affliction* was *my* book, in the way my body was my body and my thoughts were my thoughts.

Even so, I told Augustus. “My favorite book is probably *An Imperial Affliction*,” I said.

“Does it feature zombies?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Stormtroopers?”

I shook my head. “It’s not that kind of book.”

He smiled. “I am going to read this terrible book with the boring title that does not contain stormtroopers,” he promised, and I immediately felt like I shouldn’t have told him about it. Augustus spun around to a stack of books beneath his bedside table. He grabbed a paperback and a pen. As he scribbled an inscription onto the title page, he said, “All I ask in exchange is that you read this brilliant and haunting novelization of my favorite video game.” He held up the book, which was called *The Price of Dawn*. I laughed and took it. Our hands kind of got muddled together in the book handoff, and then he was holding my hand. “Cold,” he said, pressing a finger to my pale wrist.

“Not cold so much as underoxygenated,” I said.

“I love it when you talk medical to me,” he said. He stood, and pulled me up with him, and did not let go of my hand until we reached the stairs.

* * *

We watched the movie with several inches of couch between us. I did the totally middle-schooly thing wherein I put my hand on the couch about halfway between us to let him know that it was okay to hold it, but he didn't try. An hour into the movie, Augustus's parents came in and served us the enchiladas, which we ate on the couch, and they were pretty delicious.

The movie was about this heroic guy in a mask who died heroically for Natalie Portman, who's pretty badass and very hot and does not have anything approaching my puffy steroid face.

As the credits rolled, he said, “Pretty great, huh?”

“Pretty great,” I agreed, although it wasn't, really. It was kind of a boy movie. I don't know why boys expect us to like boy movies. We don't expect them to like girl movies. “I should get home. Class in the morning,” I said.

I sat on the couch for a while as Augustus searched for his keys. His mom sat down next to me and said, “I just love this one, don't you?” I guess I had been looking toward the Encouragement above the TV, a drawing of an angel with the caption *Without Pain, How Could We Know Joy?*

(This is an old argument in the field of Thinking About Suffering, and its stupidity and lack of sophistication could be plumbed for centuries, but suffice it to say that the existence of broccoli does not in any way affect the taste of chocolate.) “Yes,” I said. “A lovely thought.”

I drove Augustus's car home with Augustus riding shotgun. He played me a couple songs he liked by a band called The Hectic Glow, and they were good songs, but because I didn't know them already, they weren't as good to me as they were to him. I kept glancing over at his leg, or the place where his leg had been, trying to imagine what the fake leg looked like. I didn't want to care about it, but I did a little. He probably cared about my oxygen. Illness repulses. I'd learned that a long time ago, and I suspected Augustus had, too.

As I pulled up outside of my house, Augustus clicked the radio off. The air thickened. He was probably thinking about kissing me, and I was definitely thinking about kissing him. Wondering if I wanted to. I'd kissed boys, but it had been a while. Pre-Miracle.

I put the car in park and looked over at him. He really was beautiful. I know boys aren't supposed to be, but he was.

“Hazel Grace,” he said, my name new and better in his voice. “It has been a real pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Ditto, Mr. Waters,” I said. I felt shy looking at him. I could not match the intensity of his waterblue eyes.

“May I see you again?” he asked. There was an endearing nervousness in his voice.

I smiled. “Sure.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked.

“Patience, grasshopper,” I counseled. “You don’t want to seem overeager.”

“Right, that’s why I said tomorrow,” he said. “I want to see you again tonight. But I’m willing to wait *all night and much of tomorrow.*” I rolled my eyes. “I’m *serious,*” he said.

“You don’t even know me,” I said. I grabbed the book from the center console. “How about I call you when I finish this?”

“But you don’t even have my phone number,” he said.

“I strongly suspect you wrote it in the book.”

He broke out into that goofy smile. “And you say we don’t know each other.”

CHAPTER THREE

I stayed up pretty late that night reading *The Price of Dawn*. (Spoiler alert: The price of dawn is blood.) It wasn't *An Imperial Affliction*, but the protagonist, Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, was vaguely likable despite killing, by my count, no fewer than 118 individuals in 284 pages.

So I got up late the next morning, a Thursday. Mom's policy was never to wake me up, because one of the job requirements of Professional Sick Person is sleeping a lot, so I was kind of confused at first when I jolted awake with her hands on my shoulders.

"It's almost ten," she said.

"Sleep fights cancer," I said. "I was up late reading."

"It must be some book," she said as she knelt down next to the bed and unscrewed me from my large, rectangular oxygen concentrator, which I called Philip, because it just kind of looked like a Philip.

Mom hooked me up to a portable tank and then reminded me I had class. "Did that boy give it to you?" she asked out of nowhere.

"By *it*, do you mean herpes?"

"You are too much," Mom said. "The book, Hazel. I mean the book."

"Yeah, he gave me the book."

"I can tell you like him," she said, eyebrows raised, as if this observation required some uniquely maternal instinct. I shrugged. "I told you Support Group would be worth your while."

"Did you just wait outside the entire time?"

"Yes. I brought some paperwork. Anyway, time to face the day, young lady."

"Mom. Sleep. Cancer. Fighting."

"I know, love, but there is class to attend. Also, today is . . ." The glee in Mom's voice was evident.

"Thursday?"

"Did you seriously forget?"

"Maybe?"

"It's Thursday, March twenty-ninth!" she basically screamed, a demented smile plastered to her face.

"You are really excited about knowing the date!" I yelled back.

"HAZEL! IT'S YOUR THIRTY-THIRD HALF BIRTHDAY!"

"Ohhhhhh," I said. My mom was really super into celebration maximization. IT'S

ARBOR DAY! LET'S HUG TREES AND EAT CAKE! COLUMBUS BROUGHT SMALLPOX TO THE NATIVES; WE SHALL RECALL THE OCCASION WITH A PICNIC!, etc. "Well, Happy thirty-third Half Birthday to me," I said.

"What do you want to do on your very special day?"

"Come home from class and set the world record for number of episodes of *Top Chef* watched consecutively?"

Mom reached up to this shelf above my bed and grabbed Blueie, the blue stuffed bear I'd had since I was, like, one—back when it was socially acceptable to name one's friends after their hue.

"You don't want to go to a movie with Kaitlyn or Matt or someone?" who were my friends.

That was an idea. "Sure," I said. "I'll text Kaitlyn and see if she wants to go to the mall or something after school."

Mom smiled, hugging the bear to her stomach. "Is it still cool to go to the mall?" she asked.

"I take quite a lot of pride in not knowing what's cool," I answered.

* * *

I texted Kaitlyn, took a shower, got dressed, and then Mom drove me to school. My class was American Literature, a lecture about Frederick Douglass in a mostly empty auditorium, and it was incredibly difficult to stay awake. Forty minutes into the ninety-minute class, Kaitlyn texted back.

Awesomesauce. Happy Half Birthday. Castleton at 3:32?

Kaitlyn had the kind of packed social life that needs to be scheduled down to the minute. I responded:

Sounds good. I'll be at the food court.

Mom drove me directly from school to the bookstore attached to the mall, where I purchased both *Midnight Dawns* and *Requiem for Mayhem*, the first two sequels to *The Price of Dawn*, and then I walked over to the huge food court and bought a Diet Coke. It was 3:21.

I watched these kids playing in the pirate-ship indoor playground while I read. There was this tunnel that these two kids kept crawling through over and over and they never seemed to get tired, which made me think of Augustus Waters and the existentially fraught free throws.

Mom was also in the food court, alone, sitting in a corner where she thought I

couldn't see her, eating a cheesesteak sandwich and reading through some papers. Medical stuff, probably. The paperwork was endless.

At 3:32 precisely, I noticed Kaitlyn striding confidently past the Wok House. She saw me the moment I raised my hand, flashed her very white and newly straightened teeth at me, and headed over.

She wore a knee-length charcoal coat that fit perfectly and sunglasses that dominated her face. She pushed them up onto the top of her head as she leaned down to hug me.

"Darling," she said, vaguely British. "How *are* you?" People didn't find the accent odd or off-putting. Kaitlyn just happened to be an extremely sophisticated twenty-five-year-old British socialite stuck inside a sixteen-year-old body in Indianapolis. Everyone accepted it.

"I'm good. How are you?"

"I don't even know anymore. Is that diet?" I nodded and handed it to her. She sipped through the straw. "I do wish you were at school these days. Some of the boys have become downright *edible*."

"Oh, yeah? Like who?" I asked. She proceeded to name five guys we'd attended elementary and middle school with, but I couldn't picture any of them.

"I've been dating Derek Wellington for a bit," she said, "but I don't think it will last. He's such a *boy*. But enough about me. What is new in the Hazelverse?"

"Nothing, really," I said.

"Health is good?"

"The same, I guess?"

"Phalanxifor!" she enthused, smiling. "So you could just live forever, right?"

"Probably not forever," I said.

"But basically," she said. "What else is new?"

I thought of telling her that I was seeing a boy, too, or at least that I'd watched a movie with one, just because I knew it would surprise and amaze her that anyone as disheveled and awkward and stunted as me could even briefly win the affections of a boy. But I didn't really have much to brag about, so I just shrugged.

"What in heaven is *that*?" asked Kaitlyn, gesturing to the book.

"Oh, it's sci-fi. I've gotten kinda into it. It's a series."

"I am alarmed. Shall we shop?"

We went to this shoe store. As we were shopping, Kaitlyn kept picking out all these open-toed flats for me and saying, "These would look cute on *you*," which reminded me that Kaitlyn never wore open-toed shoes on account of how she hated her feet because she felt her second toes were too long, as if the second toe was a window into the soul or something. So when I pointed out a pair of sandals that would suit her skin tone, she was

like, “Yeah, but . . .” the but being *but they will expose my hideous second toes to the public*, and I said, “Kaitlyn, you’re the only person I’ve ever known to have toe-specific dysmorphia,” and she said, “What is that?”

“You know, like when you look in the mirror and the thing you see is not the thing as it really is.”

“Oh. Oh,” she said. “Do you like these?” She held up a pair of cute but unspectacular Mary Janes, and I nodded, and she found her size and tried them on, pacing up and down the aisle, watching her feet in the knee-high angled mirrors. Then she grabbed a pair of strappy hooker shoes and said, “Is it even possible to walk in these? I mean, I would just *die*—” and then stopped short, looking at me as if to say *I’m sorry*, as if it were a crime to mention death to the dying. “You should try them on,” Kaitlyn continued, trying to paper over the awkwardness.

“I’d sooner die,” I assured her.

I ended up just picking out some flip-flops so that I could have something to buy, and then I sat down on one of the benches opposite a bank of shoes and watched Kaitlyn snake her way through the aisles, shopping with the kind of intensity and focus that one usually associates with professional chess. I kind of wanted to take out *Midnight Dawns* and read for a while, but I knew that’d be rude, so I just watched Kaitlyn. Occasionally she’d circle back to me clutching some closed-toe prey and say, “This?” and I would try to make an intelligent comment about the shoe, and then finally she bought three pairs and I bought my flip-flops and then as we exited she said, “Anthropologie?”

“I should head home actually,” I said. “I’m kinda tired.”

“Sure, of course,” she said. “I have to see you more often, darling.” She placed her hands on my shoulders, kissed me on both cheeks, and marched off, her narrow hips swishing.

I didn’t go home, though. I’d told Mom to pick me up at six, and while I figured she was either in the mall or in the parking lot, I still wanted the next two hours to myself.

I liked my mom, but her perpetual nearness sometimes made me feel weirdly nervous. And I liked Kaitlyn, too. I really did. But three years removed from proper full-time schoolic exposure to my peers, I felt a certain unbridgeable distance between us. I think my school friends wanted to help me through my cancer, but they eventually found out that they couldn’t. For one thing, there was no *through*.

So I excused myself on the grounds of pain and fatigue, as I often had over the years when seeing Kaitlyn or any of my other friends. In truth, it always hurt. It always hurt not to breathe like a normal person, incessantly reminding your lungs to be lungs, forcing yourself to accept as unsolvable the clawing scraping inside-out ache of underoxygenation. So I wasn’t lying, exactly. I was just choosing among truths.

I found a bench surrounded by an Irish Gifts store, the Fountain Pen Emporium, and a baseball-cap outlet—a corner of the mall even Kaitlyn would never shop, and started reading *Midnight Dawns*.

It featured a sentence-to-corpse ratio of nearly 1:1, and I tore through it without ever

looking up. I liked Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, even though he didn't have much in the way of a technical personality, but mostly I liked that his adventures *kept happening*. There were always more bad guys to kill and more good guys to save. New wars started even before the old ones were won. I hadn't read a real series like that since I was a kid, and it was exciting to live again in an infinite fiction.

Twenty pages from the end of *Midnight Dawns*, things started to look pretty bleak for Mayhem when he was shot seventeen times while attempting to rescue a (blond, American) hostage from the Enemy. But as a reader, I did not despair. The war effort would go on without him. There could—and would—be sequels starring his cohorts: Specialist Manny Loco and Private Jasper Jacks and the rest.

I was just about to the end when this little girl with barretted braids appeared in front of me and said, "What's in your nose?"

And I said, "Um, it's called a cannula. These tubes give me oxygen and help me breathe." Her mother swooped in and said, "Jackie," disapprovingly, but I said, "No no, it's okay," because it totally was, and then Jackie asked, "Would they help me breathe, too?"

"I dunno. Let's try." I took it off and let Jackie stick the cannula in her nose and breathe. "Tickles," she said.

"I know, right?"

"I think I'm breathing better," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well," I said, "I wish I could give you my cannula but I kind of really need the help." I already felt the loss. I focused on my breathing as Jackie handed the tubes back to me. I gave them a quick swipe with my T-shirt, laced the tubes behind my ears, and put the nubbins back in place.

"Thanks for letting me try it," she said.

"No problem."

"Jackie," her mother said again, and this time I let her go.

I returned to the book, where Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem was regretting that he had but one life to give for his country, but I kept thinking about that little kid, and how much I liked her.

The other thing about Kaitlyn, I guess, was that it could never again feel natural to talk to her. Any attempts to feign normal social interactions were just depressing because it was so glaringly obvious that everyone I spoke to for the rest of my life would feel awkward and self-conscious around me, except maybe kids like Jackie who just didn't know any better.

Anyway, I really did like being alone. I liked being alone with poor Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem, who—oh, come on, he's not going to *survive* these seventeen bullet wounds, is he?

(Spoiler alert: He lives.)

CHAPTER FOUR

I went to bed a little early that night, changing into boy boxers and a T-shirt before crawling under the covers of my bed, which was queen size and pillow topped and one of my favorite places in the world. And then I started reading *An Imperial Affliction* for the millionth time.

AIA is about this girl named Anna (who narrates the story) and her one-eyed mom, who is a professional gardener obsessed with tulips, and they have a normal lower-middle-class life in a little central California town until Anna gets this rare blood cancer.

But it's not a *cancer book*, because cancer books suck. Like, in cancer books, the cancer person starts a charity that raises money to fight cancer, right? And this commitment to charity reminds the cancer person of the essential goodness of humanity and makes him/her feel loved and encouraged because s/he will leave a cancer-curing legacy. But in *AIA*, Anna decides that being a person with cancer who starts a cancer charity is a bit narcissistic, so she starts a charity called The Anna Foundation for People with Cancer Who Want to Cure Cholera.

Also, Anna is honest about all of it in a way no one else really is: Throughout the book, she refers to herself as *the side effect*, which is just totally correct. Cancer kids are essentially side effects of the relentless mutation that made the diversity of life on earth possible. So as the story goes on, she gets sicker, the treatments and disease racing to kill her, and her mom falls in love with this Dutch tulip trader Anna calls the Dutch Tulip Man. The Dutch Tulip Man has lots of money and very eccentric ideas about how to treat cancer, but Anna thinks this guy might be a con man and possibly not even Dutch, and then just as the possibly Dutch guy and her mom are about to get married and Anna is about to start this crazy new treatment regimen involving wheatgrass and low doses of arsenic, the book ends right in the middle of a

I know it's a very *literary* decision and everything and probably part of the reason I love the book so much, but there is something to recommend a story that *ends*. And if it can't end, then it should at least continue into perpetuity like the adventures of Staff Sergeant Max Mayhem's platoon.

I understood the story ended because Anna died or got too sick to write and this midsentence thing was supposed to reflect how life really ends and whatever, but there were characters other than Anna in the story, and it seemed unfair that I would never find out what happened to them. I'd written, care of his publisher, a dozen letters to Peter Van Houten, each asking for some answers about what happens after the end of the story: whether the Dutch Tulip Man is a con man, whether Anna's mother ends up married to him, what happens to Anna's stupid hamster (which her mom hates), whether Anna's friends graduate from high school—all that stuff. But he'd never responded to any of my letters.

AIA was the only book Peter Van Houten had written, and all anyone seemed to know about him was that after the book came out he moved from the United States to the

Netherlands and became kind of reclusive. I imagined that he was working on a sequel set in the Netherlands—maybe Anna’s mom and the Dutch Tulip Man end up moving there and trying to start a new life. But it had been ten years since *An Imperial Affliction* came out, and Van Houten hadn’t published so much as a blog post. I couldn’t wait forever.

As I reread that night, I kept getting distracted imagining Augustus Waters reading the same words. I wondered if he’d like it, or if he’d dismiss it as pretentious. Then I remembered my promise to call him after reading *The Price of Dawn*, so I found his number on its title page and texted him.

Price of Dawn review: Too many bodies. Not enough adjectives. How’s AIA?

He replied a minute later:

As I recall, you promised to CALL when you finished the book, not text.

So I called.

“Hazel Grace,” he said upon picking up.

“So have you read it?”

“Well, I haven’t finished it. It’s six hundred fifty-one pages long and I’ve had twenty-four hours.”

“How far are you?”

“Four fifty-three.”

“And?”

“I will withhold judgment until I finish. However, I will say that I’m feeling a bit embarrassed to have given you *The Price of Dawn*.”

“Don’t be. I’m already on *Requiem for Mayhem*.”

“A sparkling addition to the series. So, okay, is the tulip guy a crook? I’m getting a bad vibe from him.”

“No spoilers,” I said.

“If he is anything other than a total gentleman, I’m going to gouge his eyes out.”

“So you’re into it.”

“Withholding judgment! When can I see you?”

“Certainly not until you finish *An Imperial Affliction*.” I enjoyed being coy.

“Then I’d better hang up and start reading.”

“You’d better,” I said, and the line clicked dead without another word.

Flirting was new to me, but I liked it.

The next morning I had Twentieth-Century American Poetry at MCC. This old woman gave a lecture wherein she managed to talk for ninety minutes about Sylvia Plath without ever once quoting a single word of Sylvia Plath.

When I got out of class, Mom was idling at the curb in front of the building.

“Did you just wait here the entire time?” I asked as she hurried around to help me haul my cart and tank into the car.

“No, I picked up the dry cleaning and went to the post office.”

“And then?”

“I have a book to read,” she said.

“And *I’m* the one who needs to get a life.” I smiled, and she tried to smile back, but there was something flimsy in it. After a second, I said, “Wanna go to a movie?”

“Sure. Anything you’ve been wanting to see?”

“Let’s just do the thing where we go and see whatever starts next.” She closed the door for me and walked around to the driver’s side. We drove over to the Castleton theater and watched a 3-D movie about talking gerbils. It was kind of funny, actually.

When I got out of the movie, I had four text messages from Augustus.

Tell me my copy is missing the last twenty pages or something.

Hazel Grace, tell me I have not reached the end of this book.

OH MY GOD DO THEY GET MARRIED OR NOT OH MY GOD WHAT IS THIS

I guess Anna died and so it just ends? CRUEL. Call me when you can. Hope all’s okay.

So when I got home I went out into the backyard and sat down on this rusting latticed patio chair and called him. It was a cloudy day, typical Indiana: the kind of weather that boxes you in. Our little backyard was dominated by my childhood swing set, which was looking pretty waterlogged and pathetic.

Augustus picked up on the third ring. “Hazel Grace,” he said.

“So welcome to the sweet torture of reading *An Imperial*—” I stopped when I heard violent sobbing on the other end of the line. “Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m grand,” Augustus answered. “I am, however, with Isaac, who seems to be decompensating.” More wailing. Like the death cries of some injured animal. Gus turned his attention to Isaac. “Dude. Dude. Does Support Group Hazel make this better or worse? Isaac. Focus. On. Me.” After a minute, Gus said to me, “Can you meet us at my house in, say, twenty minutes?”

“Sure,” I said, and hung up.

If you could drive in a straight line, it would only take like five minutes to get from my house to Augustus’s house, but you can’t drive in a straight line because Holliday Park is between us.

Even though it was a geographic inconvenience, I really liked Holliday Park. When I was a little kid, I would wade in the White River with my dad and there was always this great moment when he would throw me up in the air, just toss me away from him, and I would reach out my arms as I flew and he would reach out his arms, and then we would both see that our arms were not going to touch and no one was going to catch me, and it would kind of scare the shit out of both of us in the best possible way, and then I would legs-flailingly hit the water and then come up for air uninjured and the current would bring me back to him as I said *again, Daddy, again*.

I pulled into the driveway right next to an old black Toyota sedan I figured was Isaac’s car. Carting the tank behind me, I walked up to the door. I knocked. Gus’s dad answered.

“Just Hazel,” he said. “Nice to see you.”

“Augustus said I could come over?”

“Yeah, he and Isaac are in the basement.” At which point there was a wail from below. “That would be Isaac,” Gus’s dad said, and shook his head slowly. “Cindy had to go for a drive. The sound . . .” he said, drifting off. “Anyway, I guess you’re wanted downstairs. Can I carry your, uh, tank?” he asked.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, though, Mr. Waters.”

“Mark,” he said.

I was kind of scared to go down there. Listening to people howl in misery is not among my favorite pastimes. But I went.

“Hazel Grace,” Augustus said as he heard my footsteps. “Isaac, Hazel from Support Group is coming downstairs. Hazel, a gentle reminder: Isaac is in the midst of a psychotic episode.”

Augustus and Isaac were sitting on the floor in gaming chairs shaped like lazy *Ls*, staring up at a gargantuan television. The screen was split between Isaac’s point of view on the left, and Augustus’s on the right. They were soldiers fighting in a bombed-out modern city. I recognized the place from *The Price of Dawn*. As I approached, I saw nothing unusual: just two guys sitting in the lightwash of a huge television pretending to kill people.

Only when I got parallel to them did I see Isaac's face. Tears streamed down his reddened cheeks in a continual flow, his face a taut mask of pain. He stared at the screen, not even glancing at me, and howled, all the while pounding away at his controller. "How are you, Hazel?" asked Augustus.

"I'm okay," I said. "Isaac?" No response. Not even the slightest hint that he was aware of my existence. Just the tears flowing down his face onto his black T-shirt.

Augustus glanced away from the screen ever so briefly. "You look nice," he said. I was wearing this just-past-the-knees dress I'd had forever. "Girls think they're only allowed to wear dresses on formal occasions, but I like a woman who says, you know, *I'm going over to see a boy who is having a nervous breakdown, a boy whose connection to the sense of sight itself is tenuous, and gosh dang it, I am going to wear a dress for him.*"

"And yet," I said, "Isaac won't so much as glance over at me. Too in love with Monica, I suppose," which resulted in a catastrophic sob.

"Bit of a touchy subject," Augustus explained. "Isaac, I don't know about you, but I have the vague sense that we are being outflanked." And then back to me, "Isaac and Monica are no longer a going concern, but he doesn't want to talk about it. He just wants to cry and play *Counterinsurgency 2: The Price of Dawn*."

"Fair enough," I said.

"Isaac, I feel a growing concern about our position. If you agree, head over to that power station, and I'll cover you." Isaac ran toward a nondescript building while Augustus fired a machine gun wildly in a series of quick bursts, running behind him.

"Anyway," Augustus said to me, "it doesn't hurt to *talk* to him. If you have any sage words of feminine advice."

"I actually think his response is probably appropriate," I said as a burst of gunfire from Isaac killed an enemy who'd peeked his head out from behind the burned-out husk of a pickup truck.

Augustus nodded at the screen. "Pain demands to be felt," he said, which was a line from *An Imperial Affliction*. "You're sure there's no one behind us?" he asked Isaac. Moments later, tracer bullets started whizzing over their heads. "Oh, goddamn it, Isaac," Augustus said. "I don't mean to criticize you in your moment of great weakness, but you've allowed us to be outflanked, and now there's nothing between the terrorists and the school." Isaac's character took off running toward the fire, zigging and zagging down a narrow alleyway.

"You could go over the bridge and circle back," I said, a tactic I knew about thanks to *The Price of Dawn*.

Augustus sighed. "Sadly, the bridge is already under insurgent control due to questionable strategizing by my bereft cohort."

"Me?" Isaac said, his voice breathy. "Me?! You're the one who suggested we hole up in the freaking power station."

Gus turned away from the screen for a second and flashed his crooked smile at Isaac.

“I knew you could talk, buddy,” he said. “Now let’s go save some fictional schoolchildren.”

Together, they ran down the alleyway, firing and hiding at the right moments, until they reached this one-story, single-room schoolhouse. They crouched behind a wall across the street and picked off the enemy one by one.

“Why do they want to get into the school?” I asked.

“They want the kids as hostages,” Augustus answered. His shoulders rounded over his controller, slamming buttons, his forearms taut, veins visible. Isaac leaned toward the screen, the controller dancing in his thin-fingered hands. “Get it get it get it,” Augustus said. The waves of terrorists continued, and they mowed down every one, their shooting astonishingly precise, as it had to be, lest they fire into the school.

“Grenade! Grenade!” Augustus shouted as something arced across the screen, bounced in the doorway of the school, and then rolled against the door.

Isaac dropped his controller in disappointment. “If the bastards can’t take hostages, they just kill them and claim we did it.”

“Cover me!” Augustus said as he jumped out from behind the wall and raced toward the school. Isaac fumbled for his controller and then started firing while the bullets rained down on Augustus, who was shot once and then twice but still ran, Augustus shouting, “*YOU CAN’T KILL MAX MAYHEM!*” and with a final flurry of button combinations, he dove onto the grenade, which detonated beneath him. His dismembered body exploded like a geyser and the screen went red. A throaty voice said, “MISSION FAILURE,” but Augustus seemed to think otherwise as he smiled at his remnants on the screen. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and shoved it between his teeth. “Saved the kids,” he said.

“Temporarily,” I pointed out.

“All salvation is temporary,” Augustus shot back. “I bought them a minute. Maybe that’s the minute that buys them an hour, which is the hour that buys them a year. No one’s gonna buy them forever, Hazel Grace, but my life bought them a minute. And that’s not nothing.”

“Whoa, okay,” I said. “We’re just talking about pixels.”

He shrugged, as if he believed the game might be really real. Isaac was wailing again. Augustus snapped his head back to him. “Another go at the mission, corporal?”

Isaac shook his head no. He leaned over Augustus to look at me and through tightly strung vocal cords said, “She didn’t want to do it after.”

“She didn’t want to dump a blind guy,” I said. He nodded, the tears not like tears so much as a quiet metronome—steady, endless.

“She said she couldn’t handle it,” he told me. “I’m about to lose my eyesight and *she* can’t handle it.”

I was thinking about the word *handle*, and all the unholdable things that get handled. “I’m sorry,” I said.

He wiped his sopping face with a sleeve. Behind his glasses, Isaac's eyes seemed so big that everything else on his face kind of disappeared and it was just these disembodied floating eyes staring at me—one real, one glass. "It's unacceptable," he told me. "It's totally unacceptable."

"Well, to be fair," I said, "I mean, she probably *can't* handle it. Neither can you, but she doesn't *have* to handle it. And you do."

"I kept saying 'always' to her today, 'always always always,' and she just kept talking over me and not saying it back. It was like I was already gone, you know? 'Always' was a promise! How can you just break the promise?"

"Sometimes people don't understand the promises they're making when they make them," I said.

Isaac shot me a look. "Right, of course. But you keep the promise anyway. That's what love *is*. Love is keeping the promise anyway. Don't you believe in true love?"

I didn't answer. I didn't have an answer. But I thought that if true love *did* exist, that was a pretty good definition of it.

"Well, I believe in true love," Isaac said. "And I love her. And she promised. She *promised me always*." He stood and took a step toward me. I pushed myself up, thinking he wanted a hug or something, but then he just spun around, like he couldn't remember why he'd stood up in the first place, and then Augustus and I both saw this rage settle into his face.

"Isaac," Gus said.

"What?"

"You look a little . . . Pardon the double entendre, my friend, but there's something a little worrisome in your eyes."

Suddenly Isaac started kicking the crap out of his gaming chair, which somersaulted back toward Gus's bed. "Here we go," said Augustus. Isaac chased after the chair and kicked it again. "Yes," Augustus said. "Get it. Kick the shit out of that chair!" Isaac kicked the chair again, until it bounced against Gus's bed, and then he grabbed one of the pillows and started slamming it against the wall between the bed and the trophy shelf above.

Augustus looked over at me, cigarette still in his mouth, and half smiled. "I can't stop thinking about that book."

"I know, right?"

"He never said what happens to the other characters?"

"No," I told him. Isaac was still throttling the wall with the pillow. "He moved to Amsterdam, which makes me think maybe he is writing a sequel featuring the Dutch Tulip Man, but he hasn't published anything. He's never interviewed. He doesn't seem to be online. I've written him a bunch of letters asking what happens to everyone, but he never responds. So . . . yeah." I stopped talking because Augustus didn't appear to be listening. Instead, he was squinting at Isaac.

"Hold on," he mumbled to me. He walked over to Isaac and grabbed him by the

shoulders. “Dude, pillows don’t break. Try something that breaks.”

Isaac reached for a basketball trophy from the shelf above the bed and then held it over his head as if waiting for permission. “Yes,” Augustus said. “Yes!” The trophy smashed against the floor, the plastic basketball player’s arm splintering off, still grasping its ball. Isaac stomped on the trophy. “Yes!” Augustus said. “Get it!”

And then back to me, “I’ve been looking for a way to tell my father that I actually sort of hate basketball, and I think we’ve found it.” The trophies came down one after the other, and Isaac stomped on them and screamed while Augustus and I stood a few feet away, bearing witness to the madness. The poor, mangled bodies of plastic basketballers littered the carpeted ground: here, a ball palmed by a disembodied hand; there, two torsoless legs caught midjump. Isaac kept attacking the trophies, jumping on them with both feet, screaming, breathless, sweaty, until finally he collapsed on top of the jagged trophic remnants.

Augustus stepped toward him and looked down. “Feel better?” he asked.

“No,” Isaac mumbled, his chest heaving.

“That’s the thing about pain,” Augustus said, and then glanced back at me. “It demands to be felt.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I did not speak to Augustus again for about a week. I had called him on the Night of the Broken Trophies, so per tradition it was his turn to call. But he didn't. Now, it wasn't as if I held my phone in my sweaty hand all day, staring at it while wearing my Special Yellow Dress, patiently waiting for my gentleman caller to live up to his sobriquet. I went about my life: I met Kaitlyn and her (cute but frankly not Augustinian) boyfriend for coffee one afternoon; I ingested my recommended daily allowance of Phalanxifor; I attended classes three mornings that week at MCC; and every night, I sat down to dinner with my mom and dad.

Sunday night, we had pizza with green peppers and broccoli. We were seated around our little circular table in the kitchen when my phone started singing, but I wasn't allowed to check it because we have a strict no-phones-during-dinner rule.

So I ate a little while Mom and Dad talked about this earthquake that had just happened in Papua New Guinea. They met in the Peace Corps in Papua New Guinea, and so whenever anything happened there, even something terrible, it was like all of a sudden they were not large sedentary creatures, but the young and idealistic and self-sufficient and rugged people they had once been, and their rapture was such that they didn't even glance over at me as I ate faster than I'd ever eaten, transmitting items from my plate into my mouth with a speed and ferocity that left me quite out of breath, which of course made me worry that my lungs were again swimming in a rising pool of fluid. I banished the thought as best I could. I had a PET scan scheduled in a couple weeks. If something was wrong, I'd find out soon enough. Nothing to be gained by worrying between now and then.

And yet still I worried. I liked being a person. I wanted to keep at it. Worry is yet another side effect of dying.

Finally I finished and said, "Can I be excused?" and they hardly even paused from their conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of Guinean infrastructure. I grabbed my phone from my purse on the kitchen counter and checked my recent calls. *Augustus Waters*.

I went out the back door into the twilight. I could see the swing set, and I thought about walking out there and swinging while I talked to him, but it seemed pretty far away given that *eating* tired me.

Instead, I lay down in the grass on the patio's edge, looked up at Orion, the only constellation I could recognize, and called him.

"Hazel Grace," he said.

"Hi," I said. "How are you?"

"Grand," he said. "I have been wanting to call you on a nearly minutely basis, but I have been waiting until I could form a coherent thought in re *An Imperial Affliction*." (He said "in re." He really did. That boy.)

“And?” I said.

“I think it’s, like. Reading it, I just kept feeling like, like.”

“Like?” I asked, teasing him.

“Like it was a gift?” he said askingly. “Like you’d given me something important.”

“Oh,” I said quietly.

“That’s cheesy,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” I said. “No. Don’t apologize.”

“But it doesn’t end.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Torture. I totally *get it*, like, I get that she died or whatever.”

“Right, I assume so,” I said.

“And okay, fair enough, but there is this unwritten contract between author and reader and I think not ending your book kind of violates that contract.”

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling defensive of Peter Van Houten. “That’s part of what I like about the book in some ways. It portrays death truthfully. You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence. But I do—God, I do really want to know what happens to everyone else. That’s what I asked him in my letters. But he, yeah, he never answers.”

“Right. You said he is a recluse?”

“Correct.”

“Impossible to track down.”

“Correct.”

“Utterly unreachable,” Augustus said.

“Unfortunately so,” I said.

“Dear Mr. Waters,” he answered. “I am writing to thank you for your electronic correspondence, received via Ms. Vliegenthart this sixth of April, from the United States of America, insofar as geography can be said to exist in our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity.”

“Augustus, what the hell?”

“He has an assistant,” Augustus said. “Lidewij Vliegenthart. I found her. I emailed her. She gave him the email. He responded via her email account.”

“Okay, okay. Keep reading.”

“My response is being written with ink and paper in the glorious tradition of our ancestors and then transcribed by Ms. Vliegenthart into a series of 1s and 0s to travel through the insipid web which has lately ensnared our species, so I apologize for any errors or omissions that may result.

“Given the entertainment bacchanalia at the disposal of young men and women of your generation, I am grateful to anyone anywhere who sets aside the hours necessary to read my little book. But I am particularly indebted to you, sir, both for your kind words about *An Imperial Affliction* and for taking the time to tell me that the book, and here I quote you directly, “meant a great deal” to you.

“This comment, however, leads me to wonder: What do you mean by *meant*? Given the final futility of our struggle, is the fleeting jolt of meaning that art gives us valuable? Or is the only value in passing the time as comfortably as possible? What should a story seek to emulate, Augustus? A ringing alarm? A call to arms? A morphine drip? Of course, like all interrogation of the universe, this line of inquiry inevitably reduces us to asking what it means to be human and whether—to borrow a phrase from the angst-encumbered sixteen-year-olds you no doubt revile—*there is a point to it all*.

“I fear there is not, my friend, and that you would receive scant encouragement from further encounters with my writing. But to answer your question: No, I have not written anything else, nor will I. I do not feel that continuing to share my thoughts with readers would benefit either them or me. Thank you again for your generous email.

“Yours most sincerely, Peter Van Houten, via Lidewij Vliegenthart.”

“Wow,” I said. “Are you making this up?”

“Hazel Grace, could I, with my meager intellectual capacities, make up a letter from Peter Van Houten featuring phrases like ‘our triumphantly digitized contemporaneity’?”

“You could not,” I allowed. “Can I, can I have the email address?”

“Of course,” Augustus said, like it was not the best gift ever.

I spent the next two hours writing an email to Peter Van Houten. It seemed to get worse each time I rewrote it, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Dear Mr. Peter Van Houten
(c/o Lidewij Vliegenthart),

My name is Hazel Grace Lancaster. My friend Augustus Waters, who read *An Imperial Affliction* at my recommendation, just received an email from you at this address. I hope you will not mind that Augustus shared that email with me.

Mr. Van Houten, I understand from your email to Augustus that you are not planning to publish any more books. In a way, I am disappointed, but I’m also relieved: I never have to worry whether your next book will live up to the magnificent perfection of the original. As a three-year survivor of Stage IV cancer, I can tell you that you got everything right in *An Imperial Affliction*. Or at least you got *me* right. Your book has a way of telling me what I’m feeling before I even feel it, and I’ve reread it dozens of times.

I wonder, though, if you would mind answering a couple questions I have about what happens after the end of the novel. I understand the book ends because Anna dies or becomes too ill to continue writing it, but I would really like to know what happens to Anna's mom—whether she married the Dutch Tulip Man, whether she ever has another child, and whether she stays at 917 W. Temple, etc. Also, is the Dutch Tulip Man a fraud or does he really love them? What happens to Anna's friends—particularly Claire and Jake? Do they stay together? And lastly—I realize that this is the kind of deep and thoughtful question you always hoped your readers would ask—what becomes of Sisyphus the Hamster? These questions have haunted me for years—and I don't know how long I have left to get answers to them.

I know these are not important literary questions and that your book is full of important literary questions, but I would just really like to know.

And of course, if you ever do decide to write anything else, even if you don't want to publish it, I'd love to read it. Frankly, I'd read your grocery lists.

Yours with great admiration,

Hazel Grace Lancaster

(age 16)

After I sent it, I called Augustus back, and we stayed up late talking about *An Imperial Affliction*, and I read him the Emily Dickinson poem that Van Houten had used for the title, and he said I had a good voice for reading and didn't pause too long for the line breaks, and then he told me that the sixth *Price of Dawn* book, *The Blood Approves*, begins with a quote from a poem. It took him a minute to find the book, but finally he read the quote to me. "Say your life broke down. The last good kiss / You had was years ago."

"Not bad," I said. "Bit pretentious. I believe Max Mayhem would refer to that as 'sissy shit.'"

"Yes, with his teeth gritted, no doubt. God, Mayhem grits his teeth a lot in these books. He's definitely going to get TMJ, if he survives all this combat." And then after a second, Gus asked, "When was the last good kiss you had?"

I thought about it. My kissing—all prediagnosis—had been uncomfortable and slobbery, and on some level it always felt like kids playing at being grown. But of course it had been a while. "Years ago," I said finally. "You?"

"I had a few good kisses with my ex-girlfriend, Caroline Mathers."

"Years ago?"

"The last one was just less than a year ago."

"What happened?"

"During the kiss?"

“No, with you and Caroline.”

“Oh,” he said. And then after a second, “Caroline is no longer suffering from personhood.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I’d known plenty of dead people, of course. But I’d never dated one. I couldn’t even imagine it, really.

“Not your fault, Hazel Grace. We’re all just side effects, right?”

“Barnacles on the container ship of consciousness,” I said, quoting *AIA*.

“Okay,” he said. “I gotta go to sleep. It’s almost one.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay,” he said.

I giggled and said, “Okay.” And then the line was quiet but not dead. I almost felt like he was there in my room with me, but in a way it was better, like I was not in my room and he was not in his, but instead we were together in some invisible and tenuous third space that could only be visited on the phone.

“Okay,” he said after forever. “Maybe *okay* will be our *always*.”

“Okay,” I said.

It was Augustus who finally hung up.

Peter Van Houten replied to Augustus’s email four hours after he sent it, but two days later, Van Houten still hadn’t replied to me. Augustus assured me it was because my email was better and required a more thoughtful response, that Van Houten was busy writing answers to my questions, and that brilliant prose took time. But still I worried.

On Wednesday during American Poetry for Dummies 101, I got a text from Augustus:

Isaac out of surgery. It went well. He’s officially NEC.

NEC meant “no evidence of cancer.” A second text came a few seconds later.

I mean, he’s blind. So that’s unfortunate.

That afternoon, Mom consented to loan me the car so I could drive down to Memorial to check in on Isaac.

I found my way to his room on the fifth floor, knocking even though the door was open, and a woman's voice said, "Come in." It was a nurse who was doing something to the bandages on Isaac's eyes. "Hey, Isaac," I said.

And he said, "Mon?"

"Oh, no. Sorry. No, it's, um, Hazel. Um, Support Group Hazel? Night-of-the-broken-trophies Hazel?"

"Oh," he said. "Yeah, people keep saying my other senses will improve to compensate, but CLEARLY NOT YET. Hi, Support Group Hazel. Come over here so I can examine your face with my hands and see deeper into your soul than a sighted person ever could."

"He's kidding," the nurse said.

"Yes," I said. "I realize."

I took a few steps toward the bed. I pulled a chair up and sat down, took his hand. "Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said back. Then nothing for a while.

"How you feeling?" I asked.

"Okay," he said. "I don't know."

"You don't know what?" I asked. I looked at his hand because I didn't want to look at his face blindfolded by bandages. Isaac bit his nails, and I could see some blood on the corners of a couple of his cuticles.

"She hasn't even visited," he said. "I mean, we were together fourteen months. Fourteen months is a long time. God, that hurts." Isaac let go of my hand to fumble for his pain pump, which you hit to give yourself a wave of narcotics.

The nurse, having finished the bandage change, stepped back. "It's only been a day, Isaac," she said, vaguely condescending. "You've gotta give yourself time to heal. And fourteen months *isn't* that long, not in the scheme of things. You're just getting started, buddy. You'll see."

The nurse left. "Is she gone?"

I nodded, then realized he couldn't see me nod. "Yeah," I said.

"I'll see? Really? Did she seriously say that?"

"Qualities of a Good Nurse: Go," I said.

"1. Doesn't pun on your disability," Isaac said.

"2. Gets blood on the first try," I said.

"Seriously, that is huge. I mean is this my freaking arm or a dartboard? 3. No condescending voice."

"How are you doing, sweetie?" I asked, cloying. "I'm going to stick you with a needle now. There might be a little ouchie."

“Is my wittle fuffywump sickywicky?” he answered. And then after a second, “Most of them are good, actually. I just want the hell out of this place.”

“This place as in the hospital?”

“That, too,” he said. His mouth tightened. I could see the pain. “Honestly, I think a hell of a lot more about Monica than my eye. Is that crazy? That’s crazy.”

“It’s a little crazy,” I allowed.

“But I believe in true love, you know? I don’t believe that everybody gets to keep their eyes or not get sick or whatever, but everybody *should* have true love, and it should last at least as long as your life does.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I just wish the whole thing hadn’t happened sometimes. The whole cancer thing.” His speech was slowing down. The medicine working.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Gus was here earlier. He was here when I woke up. Took off school. He . . .” His head turned to the side a little. “It’s better,” he said quietly.

“The pain?” I asked. He nodded a little.

“Good,” I said. And then, like the bitch I am: “You were saying something about Gus?” But he was gone.

I went downstairs to the tiny windowless gift shop and asked the decrepit volunteer sitting on a stool behind a cash register what kind of flowers smell the strongest.

“They all smell the same. They get sprayed with Super Scent,” she said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, they just squirt ’em with it.”

I opened the cooler to her left and sniffed at a dozen roses, and then leaned over some carnations. Same smell, and lots of it. The carnations were cheaper, so I grabbed a dozen yellow ones. They cost fourteen dollars. I went back into the room; his mom was there, holding his hand. She was young and really pretty.

“Are you a friend?” she asked, which struck me as one of those unintentionally broad and unanswerable questions.

“Um, yeah,” I said. “I’m from Support Group. These are for him.”

She took them and placed them in her lap. “Do you know Monica?” she asked.

I shook my head no.

“Well, he’s sleeping,” she said.

“Yeah. I talked to him a little before, when they were doing the bandages or whatever.”

“I hated leaving him for that but I had to pick up Graham at school,” she said.

“He did okay,” I told her. She nodded. “I should let him sleep.” She nodded again. I left.

The next morning I woke up early and checked my email first thing.

lidewij.vliegenthart@gmail.com had finally replied.

Dear Ms. Lancaster,

I fear your faith has been misplaced—but then, faith usually is. I cannot answer your questions, at least not in writing, because to write out such answers would constitute a sequel to *An Imperial Affliction*, which you might publish or otherwise share on the network that has replaced the brains of your generation. There is the telephone, but then you might record the conversation. Not that I don’t trust you, of course, but I don’t trust you. Alas, dear Hazel, I could never answer such questions except in person, and you are there, while I am here.

That noted, I must confess that the unexpected receipt of your correspondence via Ms. Vliegenthart has delighted me: What a wondrous thing to know that I made something useful to you—even if that book seems so distant from me that I feel it was written by a different man altogether. (The author of that novel was so thin, so frail, so comparatively optimistic!)

Should you find yourself in Amsterdam, however, please do pay a visit at your leisure. I am usually home. I would even allow you a peek at my grocery lists.

Yours most sincerely,

Peter Van Houten

c/o Lidewij Vliegenthart

“WHAT?!” I shouted aloud. “WHAT IS THIS LIFE?”

Mom ran in. “What’s wrong?”

“*Nothing*,” I assured her.

Still nervous, Mom knelt down to check on Philip to ensure he was condensing oxygen appropriately. I imagined sitting at a sun-drenched café with Peter Van Houten as he leaned across the table on his elbows, speaking in a soft voice so no one else would hear the truth of what happened to the characters I’d spent years thinking about. He’d said he couldn’t tell me *except in person*, and then *invited me to Amsterdam*. I explained this to Mom, and then said, “I have to go.”

“Hazel, I love you, and you know I’d do anything for you, but we don’t—we don’t have the money for international travel, and the expense of getting equipment over there—

love, it's just not—”

“Yeah,” I said, cutting her off. I realized I'd been silly even to consider it. “Don't worry about it.” But she looked worried.

“It's really important to you, yeah?” she asked, sitting down, a hand on my calf.

“It would be pretty amazing,” I said, “to be the only person who knows what happens besides him.”

“That would be amazing,” she said. “I'll talk to your father.”

“No, don't,” I said. “Just, seriously, don't spend any money on it please. I'll think of something.”

It occurred to me that the reason my parents had no money was me. I'd sapped the family savings with Phalanxifor copays, and Mom couldn't work because she had taken on the full-time profession of Hovering Over Me. I didn't want to put them even further into debt.

I told Mom I wanted to call Augustus to get her out of the room, because I couldn't handle her I-can't-make-my-daughter's-dreams-come-true sad face.

Augustus Waters-style, I read him the letter in lieu of saying hello.

“Wow,” he said.

“I know, right?” I said. “How am I going to get to Amsterdam?”

“Do you have a Wish?” he asked, referring to this organization, The Genie Foundation, which is in the business of granting sick kids one wish.

“No,” I said. “I used my Wish pre-Miracle.”

“What'd you do?”

I sighed loudly. “I was thirteen,” I said.

“Not Disney,” he said.

I said nothing.

“You did not go to Disney World.”

I said nothing.

“Hazel GRACE!” he shouted. “You *did not* use your one dying Wish to go to Disney World with your parents.”

“Also Epcot Center,” I mumbled.

“Oh, my God,” Augustus said. “I can't believe I have a crush on a girl with such cliché wishes.”

“I was *thirteen*,” I said again, although of course I was only thinking *crush crush crush crush crush*. I was flattered but changed the subject immediately. “Shouldn't you be in school or something?”

“I'm playing hooky to hang out with Isaac, but he's sleeping, so I'm in the atrium

