

This was the start of a period that blurs as I try to recall it. Incidents seem to cascade and merge. Events become feelings, feelings become events. Head and heart are contrary historians.

The Hot Seat session was never aired. Mr. Robineau destroyed the tape. Of course, that didn't stop every moment of it from being reported. In fact, most of the students knew about it by the time school opened next day.

What I recall then, when the last detail had been spilled, is a period of whispers and waiting. Tension. What would happen now? Would the jury's open hostility spill over into the classrooms? How would Stargirl react? Answers were expected on the following day, Valentine's Day. On previous holidays-Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Groundhog Day-Stargirl had left a little something on each desk in her homeroom. Would she do likewise this time?

The answer was yes. Each member of Homeroom 17 found a candy heart on his or her desk that morning.

There was a basketball game that night; that I do remember. The biggest game of the year. The Electrons had breezed through the regular season undefeated, but now the second season was about to begin: the play-offs. First the districts, then the regionals, and finally the state tournament. We had never even made it to the districts, but now visions of championships danced in our heads. The Electrons- champions of all Arizona! We would settle for nothing less. First hurdle in our way was Sun Valley, champions of the Pima League. The game was played Valentine's night on a neutral court in Casa Grande. All of Mica, it seemed, emptied out and headed for the game. Kevin and I went in the pickup. From the moment the Mica mob entered the gym, our cheers rattled the rafters. The big green M on Stargirl's white sweater flounced as she spun and leaped with the other cheerleaders. I spent as much time watching her as I did watching the game. She cheered when we scored. When Sun Valley scored, she did not. Something inside me felt better.

But not for long. We were losing. For the first time all year, we were trailing at the end of the first quarter. In fact, we were getting smoked, 21 to 9. The reason was no mystery. While Sun Valley's team was not as good as ours, they did have one thing we did not: a superstar. A kid named Ron Kovac. He stood six-foot-eight and averaged thirty points per game. Our players looked like five Davids flailing against Goliath.

Sun Valley's lead had increased to nineteen points midway through the second quarter. Our once-raucous fans were stunned into silence, and that's when it happened. The ball was loose in the middle of the floor. Several players from each team dived for it. At that moment Kovac was running past, trying to avoid the divers, and his right foot came down on a prone player's sneaker-so it was told in the newspapers the next day. At the time, it happened so fast no one saw it, though several people said they heard a sickening crack, like a twig snapping. All we knew was that suddenly Goliath was on the floor writhing and screaming, and his right foot looked all wrong, and the Sun Valley coaches and trainer and players were sprinting across the floor. But they were not the first. Stargirl,

somehow, was already there.

While Kovac's own cheerleaders sat gaping and stricken on their bench, Stargirl knelt on the hardwood floor. She held his head in her lap while the others attended his broken leg. Her hands moved over his face and forehead. She seemed to be saying things to him. When they carried him away on a stretcher, she followed. Everyone-both sides- stood and applauded. The Sun Valley cheerleaders leaped as if he had just scored two points. Ambulance lights flashed in the high windows. I knew why I was applauding, but I wondered about some of the other Mica fans. Were they really standing in tribute, or because they were happy to see him go?

The game resumed. Stargirl returned to the cheerleaders' bench. Without Kovac, Sun Valley was a pushover. By early in the second half we took the lead and went on to win easily.

Two nights later we lost to Glendale. Again we fell farther and farther behind as the first half went on. But this time there was no turnaround in the second half. This time the Electrons faced not one but five players better than themselves. This time no opponent broke an ankle, though I'm sure in our desperation some of us secretly wished for it.

We were shocked. We couldn't believe it. And then, as the seconds of the fourth quarter ticked by, we did believe. The cheers from across the gym were like volleys of arrows piercing our grand delusion. How could we have been so stupid? Did we really think that little Mica, undefeated in its own third-rate league, could ever stand up to the big- city powerhouses around the state? We had been lured into great, foolish expectations. Suckered. We were devastated. It had been so wonderful to be winners. And so right for us. Winning, we had come to believe, was our destiny.

And now...

As the Glendale coach sent in the scrubs to mop us up, Mica girls wept. Boys cursed and booed. Some blamed the officials. Or the nets. Or the lights. The cheerleaders, to their credit, kept on cheering. They looked up at us with glistening eyes and mascara tracks on their cheeks. They pumped their arms and shouted and did everything that cheerleaders are supposed to do, but their gestures were empty, their hearts not in it.

Except for Stargirl. As I watched her intently, I could see that she was different. Her cheeks were dry. There was no crack in her voice, no sag in her shoulders. From the start of the second half on, she never sat down. And she never again looked at the game. She turned her back on the court. She stood and faced us and gave not an ounce of herself to the jubilation across the gym. We were losing by thirty points with a minute to go, but she cheered on as if we had a chance. Her eyes blazed with a ferocity I had never seen before. She shook her fists at us. She flung her defiance at our gloom.

And then her face was bloody.

A Glendale player had just dunked the ball and Kevin pounded my knee with his fist and I looked to see Stargirl's face suddenly a bloody mask and I was on my feet screaming, "NOOOOO!"

But it wasn't blood. It was a tomato. Someone had splattered her face with a

perfectly thrown ripe tomato, and as the clock expired and the Glendale fans poured onto the court, Stargirl just stood there, her great eyes staring up at us in utter bewilderment through the pulpy red gore. Spouts of bitter laughter erupted among us, even some applause.

The next morning at home I found the card. It was in a school notebook that apparently I had not opened for several days. It was a valentine, one of those little cut-out third-grade sorts, showing a blushing little boy and a girl with mary jane shoes and a big red heart between them and the words "I LOVE YOU." And as third-graders-and high-schoolers-often do, the sender had signed it in code:

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She gave everybody in school a card. That was my first thought.

When I saw Kevin at school, I was about to ask him, but I pulled back. I waited until lunch. I tried to be casual. I slipped it in with the only thing that mattered that day. The school was in mourning. The game. The loss. The tomato. Oh yeah, incidentally, speaking of Stargirl: "Did you happen to get a card?"

He looked at me funny. "She gave them to her homeroom, I heard."

"Yeah," I said, "that's what I heard, too. But was that all? Didn't she give them to everybody else?"

He shrugged. "Not to me. Why? You get one?"

He was looking away across the lunchroom, biting into his sandwich, yet I felt he was grilling me. I shook my head. "Oh no, just wondering." Actually, I was sitting on the card. It was in the back pocket of my jeans. Meanwhile, all eyes in the lunchroom were on Stargirl. I think we half expected to see traces of red still clinging to her face. She sat at her usual table with Dori Dilson and several other friends. She seemed subdued. She did not play her ukulele. She did not play with her rat. She just ate and talked with the girls at her table.

As the lunch period was ending, she got up but did not head straight for the exit. Instead she detoured in the direction of my table. I panicked. I jumped up, grabbed my stuff, blurted "Gotta go," left Kevin with his mouth hanging, and took off. Not fast enough. Halfway to the door I heard her behind me: "Hi, Leo." My face got warm. I was sure every eye was turned to me. I was sure they could all see the card in my pocket. I pretended to look at the clock. I pretended I was late for something. I ran from the lunchroom.

I lurked in the shadows for the rest of the day. I went straight home after school. I stayed in my room. I came out only for dinner. I told my parents I had a project to do. I paced. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. I stared out the window. I laid the card on my study desk. I picked it up. I read it. I read it. I read it. I played "Hi, Leo" over and over in my head. I tossed darts at the corkboard on the back of my door. My father called in, "What's your project, darts?" I went out. I drove around in the pickup. I drove down her street. At the last intersection before her house, I turned off.

For hours I lay under my sheet of moonlight. Her voice came through the night, from the light, from the stars.

Hi, Leo.

In the morning-it was a Saturday-Kevin and I went together to Archie's for the weekly meeting of the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone. There were about fifteen of

us. We wore our fossil necklaces. Archie wanted to discuss the Eocene skull he was holding, but all the others could talk about was the game. When they told Archie about the tomato, his eyebrows went up, but other than that, his face did not change. I thought, This is not news to him, he already knows.

Archie spent the whole session that way, nodding and smiling and raising his eyebrows. We dumped our disappointment on him, the devastation of the loss. He said very little. When it was over, he looked down at the skull in his lap and patted it and said, "Well, this fellow here lost his game, too. He was winning for ten million years or so, but then the early grasses started growing up around him, and he found himself in a different league. He hung in there as well as he could. He scored his points, but he kept falling farther and farther behind. The opposition was better, quicker, keener. In the championship game, our boy got annihilated. Not only didn't he show up for class the next day, he never showed up, period. They never saw him again."

Archie lifted the snouted, fox-size skull until it was side by side with his own face. A good minute passed as he said nothing, inviting us into our own thoughts. Faces staring at faces staring at faces. Tens of millions of years of faces in a living room in a place called Arizona.

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Monday. Lunch.

This time I stayed put when Stargirl came toward my table on her way out. My back was to her. I could see Kevin's eyes following her, widening as she came closer. And then his eyes stopped, and his mouth was sliding toward a wicked grin, and it seemed like everything stopped but the clink of pans in the kitchen, and the back of my neck was on fire.

"You're welcome," I heard her say, almost sing.

I thought, What? but then I knew what. And I knew what I had to do. I knew I had to turn around and speak to her, and I knew she was going to stand there until I did. This was silly, this was childish, this being terrified of her. What was I afraid of, anyway?

I turned. I felt heavy, as if I were moving through water, as if I were confronting much more than a tenth-grade girl with an unusual name. I faced the gaudy sunflower on her canvas bag-it looked hand-painted- and at last my eyes fell into hers. I said, "Thanks for the card."

Her smile put the sunflower to shame. She walked off.

Kevin was grinning, wagging his head. "She's in love." "Bull," I said.

"She is mucho in love."

"She's goofy, that's all."

The bell rang. We gathered our stuff and left.

I wobbled through the rest of the day. A baseball bat could not have hit me harder than that smile did. I was sixteen years old. In that time, how many thousands of smiles had been aimed at me? So why did this one feel like the first?

After school my feet carried me toward her homeroom. I was trembling. My stomach had flies. I had no idea what I was going to do if I saw her. I only knew I couldn't not go.

She wasn't there. I hurried through the hallways. I ran outside. The buses were loading. Cars were revving. Hundreds of kids were scattering. For months she had been everywhere, now she was nowhere.

I heard her name. Her name. The same two syllables, the same eight letters that I had been hearing all year, and suddenly the sound struck my ear with a ping of pure silver. I drifted sideways to overhear. A group of girls was chattering toward a bus.

"When?"

"Today. After school. Just now!"

"I don't believe it!"

"I don't believe it took so long."

"Kicked off? Are they allowed?"

"Sure. Why not? It's not her school."

"I would've kicked her off long ago. It was treason."

"Good riddance." I knew what they were talking about. It had been rumored for days. Stargirl had been kicked off the cheerleading squad.

"Hi, Leo!"

A chorus of girl voices calling my name. I turned. They were in front of the sun. I shaded my eyes. They sang in unison: "Starboy!" They laughed. I waved and hurried home. I could never have admitted it, but I was thrilled.

Her house was two miles from mine, behind a little ten-store shopping center. Archie had told me where. I walked. I didn't want to ride. I wanted to be slow about it. I wanted to feel myself getting closer step by step, feel the tension rising like fizz in a soda bottle.

I did not know what I would do if I saw her. I knew only that I was nervous, afraid. I was more comfortable with her as history than as person. Suddenly, intensely, I wanted to know everything about her. I wanted to see her baby pictures. I wanted to watch her eating breakfast, wrapping a gift, sleeping. Since September she had been a performer-unique and outrageous-on the high school stage. She was the opposite of cool; she held nothing back. From her decorated desk to her oratorical speech to her performance on the football field, she was there for all to see. And yet now I felt I had not been paying attention. I felt I had missed something, something important.

She lived on Palo Verde. For a person so different, her house was surprisingly ordinary, at least by Arizona standards. Single story. Pale adobe. Clay-red pipetile roof. Not a blade of grass in the small front yard, but rather barrel and prickly pear cacti and clusters of stones.

It was dark, as I had intended, when I got there. I walked up and down the other side of the street. It occurred to me I might be mistaken for a prowler, so I walked around the block. I stopped into Roma Delite for a slice of pizza. Gulped down only half of it, hurried back out, couldn't relax when her house was not in sight. Couldn't relax when it was.

At first it was enough just to see the house. Then I began to wonder if she was inside. I wondered what she could be doing. Light came from every window I could see. There was a car in the driveway. The longer I hung around, the closer I wanted to be. I crossed the street and practically dashed past the house. As I

went by, I scooped up a stone from the yard. I went up the street, turned, and looked at her house in the distance.

I whispered to the salt-sprinkled sky, "That's where Stargirl Caraway lives. She likes me."

I headed back toward the house. The street, the sidewalks were deserted. The stone was warm in my hand. This time I walked slowly as I approached. I felt strange. My eyes fixed on a triangle of light in a curtained window. I saw a shadow on a yellow wall. I seemed to be drifting, footless, into the light.

Suddenly the front door opened. I dived behind the car in the driveway and crouched by the rear fender. I heard the door close. I heard steps. The steps matched the movement of a long shadow cast down the driveway. My breath stopped. The shadow stopped. I felt both ridiculous and weirdly, perfectly placed, as if crouching by that car was precisely what life had in store for me at that moment.

Her voice came from beyond the shadow. "Remember when you followed me into the desert that day after school?"

Absurdly, I debated whether to answer, as if doing so would-what? Give me away? I leaned into the smooth metal of the fender. It never occurred to me to stand, to show myself. Hours seemed to pass before I finally croaked, "Yes."

"Why did you turn around and go back?"

Her tone was casual, as if she held conversations every night with people crouching behind the car in the driveway.

"I don't remember," I said.

"Were you afraid?"

"No," I lied.

"I wouldn't have let you get lost, you know."

"I know." A little shadow detached itself from the larger one. It came toward me, wavering over the pebbled driveway. It had a tail. It wasn't a shadow. It was the rat, Cinnamon. Cinnamon stopped at the tip of one of my sneakers. He stood, looking up at me. He put his front paws on top of my sneaker and nosed into the laces.

"Are you getting acquainted with Cinnamon?"

"Sort of."

"Are you lying?"

"Sort of."

"Are you afraid of rats?"

"Sort of."

"Do you think I'm cute? If you say sort of, I'll tell Cinnamon to bite you."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I think you're cute." I thought of adding "sort of" just to be funny, but I didn't.

"Do you think Cinnamon is cute?"

The rat had climbed fully onto my sneaker now. I could feel his weight. I wanted to shake him off. His tail spilled onto the driveway. "No comment," I said.

"Oh my, hear that, Cinnamon? No comment. He doesn't want people to know he thinks you're cute."

"I think you're getting a little carried away," I said.

"I certainly hope so," she said. "Nothing's more fun than being carried away.

Would you like to carry Cinnamon away for the night? He loves sleep-overs."

"No thank you." "Oh." Her voice was mock-pouty. "Are you sure? He's no trouble.

He hardly takes up any room. All you have to feed him is a Mini Wheat. Or two grapes. And he won't poop on your rug. Will you, Cinnamon? Go ahead, stand up and tell him you won't. Stand up, Cinnamon."

Cinnamon stood on my sneaker. His eyes shone like black pearls.

"Doesn't he have the cutest ears?"

Who notices a rat's ears? I looked. She was right. "Yeah," I said, "I guess he does."

"Tickle him behind his ears. He loves that."

I swallowed hard. I reached down with the tips of my two forefingers and tickled the tiny, furry spaces behind the rat's ears. I guessed he enjoyed it. He didn't move. And then, surprising myself, I moved one fingertip in front of his nose, and he licked me. It had never occurred to me that rats do that. His tongue was half the size of my little fingernail. I would have guessed it was rough, like a cat's, but it wasn't; it was smooth.

And then he was no longer on my foot—he was on my shoulder. I yelped. I tried to swat him off, but he dug into my shirt with his fingernails. Meanwhile, Stargirl was cracking up. I could see the shadow shaking.

"Let me guess," she said. "Cinnamon jumped onto your shoulder."

"You got it," I said.

"And you're thinking about how rats are supposed to go for people's throats."

"I wasn't," I said, "but now that you mention it..." I clamped my hands around my neck. I felt something in my ear. Whiskery. I yelped again. "He's eating my ear!"

Stargirl laughed some more. "He's nuzzling you. He likes you. Especially your ears. He never meets an ear he doesn't love. By the time he's done, that ear of yours will be clean as a whistle. Especially if there's some leftover peanut butter in it." I could feel the tiny tongue mopping the crevices of my left ear. "It tickles!" I felt something else. "I feel teeth!"

"He's just scraping something off for you. You must have something crusty in there. Have you washed your ears lately?"

"None of your business."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to get personal."

"I forgive you."

All was quiet for a while, except for the snuffing in my ear. I could hear the rat breathing. His tail drooped into my front shirt pocket.

"Do you want to confess now?"

"Confess what?" I said.

"That you're actually starting to like having a rodent poking around in your ear."

I smiled. I nodded, dislodging the rat's nose for a moment. "I confess."

More silence, tiny breathing in my ear.

"Well," she said at last, "we have to go in now. Say good night, Cinnamon."

No, I thought, don't go.

"I still have another ear," I said.

"If he does that one, he'll never want to leave you, and I'll be jealous. Come on, Cinnamon. Time for beddy bye."

Cinnamon went on snuffing.

"He's not coming, is he?"

"Nope."

"Then just take hold of him and put him on the ground." I did so. As soon as I put the rat down, he scooted under the tailpipe and out of sight on the other side of the car.

The shadow withdrew. I heard the front door open. Light gushed out. "Night, Leo."

"Night," I called.

I didn't want to leave. I wished I could curl up right there on the driveway and go to sleep. I had been crouching for a long time. It was a chore just to stand. I was halfway home before I could walk right.

17

Just two weeks before, I had found out she knew my name, and now I was loopy with love. I was floating. I floated up the white light that washed my sheets and slept on the moon. In school I was a yellow balloon, smiling and lazy, floating above the classrooms. I felt a faint tug on my string. Far below, Kevin was calling, "You're in love, dude!" I merely smiled and rolled over and drifted dreamily out a window.

This state lasted until lunch, when suddenly I became self-conscious. I was certain that everyone in school knew. They would be waiting for me, turning as I entered the lunchroom, staring. I was uncomfortable in the spotlight, always had been. I was happy to stay behind the camera and let Kevin take the bows out front.

So I hid for those thirty-five minutes in the gym equipment room. I sat atop a rolled-up wrestling mat, kicking a volleyball against the opposite wall. I had nothing to eat-I had intended to buy-but I wasn't hungry.

After school we found each other, not that we had to look.

She took Cinnamon from her bag and put him on her shoulder. "Shake paws with Leo, Cinnamon."

Cinnamon and I shook paws.

"Do you believe in enchanted places?" she said.

"You talking to me or the rat?"

She smiled. She dazzled. "You." "I don't know," I said. "I never thought about it."

"I'm going to show you one."

"What if I don't want to see it?"

"You think you have a choice?"

She grabbed my hand and almost pulled me off my feet, laughing out loud, and we flew across the school fields, swinging hands for all the world to see.

We walked for miles, out past the business park, MicaTronics, the golf course, into the desert. "Look familiar?" she said.

By now, Cinnamon was riding my shoulder. And I was carrying the ukulele, strumming nonsense. "It's where we came that day," I said.

She gave a snort. "We? I was coming out here, you were half a mile behind."

She poked my shoulder. "Sneaking after me." She poked me again, hard this time, but her eyes were twinkling. "Stalking me."

I acted horrified, hurt. "Stalking? I was not stalking. I was just lagging behind a little, that's all."

"Following me."

I shrugged. "So?"

"Why?"

I could feel a million reasons, but there were no words to express them. "I don't know."

"You liked me."

I smiled.

"You were smitten with me. You were speechless to behold my beauty. You had never met anyone so fascinating. You thought of me every waking minute. You dreamed about me. You couldn't stand it. You couldn't let such wonderfulness out of your sight. You had to follow me." I turned to Cinnamon. He licked my nose. "Don't give yourself so much credit. It was your rat I was after."

She laughed, and the desert sang.

To the person who expects every desert to be barren sand dunes, the Sonoran must come as a surprise. Not only are there no dunes, there's no sand. At least not the sort of sand you find at the beach. The ground does have a sandy color to it, or gray, but your feet won't sink in. It's hard, as if it's been tamped. And pebbly. And glinting with-what else- mica.

But you don't notice the ground much. What you notice are the saguaros. To the newcomer from the East, it's as simple as that. The desert seems to be a brown wasteland of dry, prickly scrub whose only purpose is to serve as a setting for the majestic saguaros. Then, little by little, the plants of the desert begin to identify themselves: the porcupiny yucca, the beaver tail and prickly pear and barrel cacti, buckhorn and staghorn and devil's fingers, the tall, sky-reaching tendrils of the ocotillo.

We walked a weaving line around the plant life, up and down washes and gullies, the Maricopas looming lavender in the distance.

"When you turned and ran that day," she said, "I called after you."

"You did?"

"I whispered."

"Whispered? How'd you expect me to hear?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just thought you would."

I strummed the uke. I squared my shoulders. Giving a rat a ride improves the posture.

"You're shy, aren't you?" she said.

"What makes you think that?"

She laughed. "Were you embarrassed when I pulled you along after school today? All those kids looking?" "Nah."

"Are you lying?"

"Yeah."

She laughed. I seemed to be good at making her laugh.

I glanced back. The highway was out of sight. "Do you have the time?" I said.

"Nobody has the time," she said. "The time cannot be owned." She threw out her arms and twirled till her multicolored skirt looked like a pinwheel taffy. "The time is free to everyone!"

"Sorry I asked," I said.

She hung her sunflower bag on a cactus arm and cartwheeled toward the Maricopas. Crazy, I felt like joining her. I told myself I couldn't because I was loaded down with a ukulele and a rat. I picked up her bag and followed. When she decided to walk like a normal human again, I told her she was goofy. She stopped, turned to me, and bowed grandly. "Thank you, good sir." Then she took my arm as if we were strolling down a promenade and she said, "Scream, Leo."

"Huh?"

"Just throw your head back and let it all out. Scream your ears off. Nobody will hear you."

"Why would I want to do that?"

She turned her astonished eyes on me. "Why wouldn't you?"

I pointed to Cinnamon. "If he screams first, then I will." And I changed the subject. "Are we ever going to get to this enchanted place?" I felt silly just saying the words.

"Just a little farther," she said. I humored her. "So how do you know an enchanted place when you come to it?"

"You'll see," she said. She squeezed my hand. "Did you know there's a country with officially designated 'enchanted places'?"

"No," I said. "Where would that be? Oz?"

"Iceland."

"Imagine that."

"I'm ignoring your sarcasm. I think it would be neat if we had that here. You'd be walking or riding along, and there would be this stone marker with a brass plate: 'Enchanted Site. U.S. Department of Interior.'"

"We'd litter it up," I said.

She stared at me, her smile gone. "Would we?"

I felt bad, as if I had ruined something. "Not really," I told her. "Not if there's a Don't Be a Litterbug sign."

A minute later she stopped. "We're here."

I looked around. The place couldn't have been more ordinary. The only notable presence was a tall, dilapidated saguaro, a bundle of sticks, in worse shape than Archie's. The rest was gray scrub and tumbleweed and a few prickly pears. "I thought it might look different," I said.

"Special? Scenic?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"It's a different kind of scenery," she said. "Shoes off."

We pulled off our shoes.

"Sit."

We sat, legs crossed. Cinnamon scampered down my arm and onto the ground. Stargirl shrieked, "Stop!" She scooped up the rat and put him in her bag. "Owls, hawks, snakes. He'd be a tasty meal."

"So," I said, "when does the enchantment start?"

We were sitting side by side, facing the mountains.

"It started when the earth was born." Her eyes were closed. Her face was golden in the setting sun. "It never stops. It is, always. It's just here."

"So what do we do?"

She smiled. "That's the secret." Her cupped hands rested in her lap. "We do nothing. Or as close to nothing as we can." Her face turned slowly to me, though her eyes remained closed. "Have you ever done nothing?"

I laughed. "My mother thinks I do it all the time."

"Don't tell her I said so, but your mother is wrong." She turned back to the sun.

"It's really hard to do nothing totally. Even just sitting here, like this, our bodies are churning, our minds are chattering. There's a whole commotion going on inside us."

"That's bad?" I said.

"It's bad if we want to know what's going on outside ourselves."

"Don't we have eyes and ears for that?"

She nodded. "They're okay most of the time. But sometimes they just get in the way. The earth is speaking to us, but we can't hear because of all the racket our senses are making. Sometimes we need to erase them, erase our senses. Then-maybe-the earth will touch us. The universe will speak. The stars will whisper."

The sun was glowing orange now, clipping the mountains' purple crests.

"So how do I become this nothing?" "I'm not sure," she said. "There's no one answer to that. You have to find your own way. Sometimes I try to erase myself. I imagine a big pink soft soap eraser, and it's going back and forth, back and forth, and it starts down at my toes, back and forth, back and forth, and there they go-poof!-my toes are gone. And then my feet. And then my ankles. But that's the easy part. The hard part is erasing my senses-my eyes, my ears, my nose, my tongue. And last to go is my brain. My thoughts, memories, all the voices inside my head. That's the hardest, erasing my thoughts." She chuckled faintly. "My pumpkin. And then, if I've done a good job, I'm erased. I'm gone. I'm nothing. And then the world is free to flow into me like water into an empty bowl."

"And?" I said.

"And...I see. I hear. But not with eyes and ears. I'm not outside my world anymore, and I'm not really inside it either. The thing is, there's no difference anymore between me and the universe. The boundary is gone. I am it and it is me. I am a stone, a cactus thorn. I am rain." She smiled dreamily. "I like that most of all, being rain."

"Am I the first one you've brought out here?"

She didn't answer. She faced the mountains, bathed in sun syrup, her face as still and peaceful as I've ever seen a face.

"Stargirl-"

"Shhhh."

That was the last sound either of us made for a long time. We sat side by side, lotus style, facing west. I closed my eyes. I tried to be perfectly still-and promptly found out that she was right. I could immobilize my arms and legs, but inside me it was rush hour in downtown Phoenix. I had never been so aware of my breath

and my heartbeat, not to mention other assorted grumblings and gurglings. And my head-it just wouldn't close down. Every question, every stray thought from miles around came wandering into my brain, sniffing about, scratching at my attention.

But I tried. I tried the eraser, but it wouldn't even wipe out the first toe. I tried to imagine I was sawdust blowing away with the wind. Swallowed by a whale. Dissolving away like Alka-Seltzer. Nothing worked. I could not make myself disappear.

I peeked. I knew I wasn't supposed to, but I did. Clearly, she had erased herself. She was gone. She was serenity. Her lips faintly smiling. Her golden skin. The glowing thread-ends of her hair. She seemed to have been dipped in sunlight and set here to dry. I felt a pang of jealousy, that she could be sitting next to me and not know it. That she could be somewhere most wonderful and I could not be there, too.

Then I saw the rat. He had crawled out of the bag. He was sitting on it much as we were, his front paws-I kept thinking of them as tiny hands, they were so human-like-dangling before him. He, too, was not moving. He, too, was facing the sunset, his pelt the color of a new penny. His peppercorn eyes were fully open.

I knew it must have been a trick she had taught him, or imitative rodent behavior. Still, I couldn't help thinking there was more to it, that the whiskered little fellow was having an experience of his own-which might include digestion in a critter's stomach if Stargirl's fears came true. As quietly as possible, I reached over and scooped him up. I held him in both hands. He did not struggle or squirm, but resumed facing the sunset with his tiny chin resting on my forefinger. In my fingertips I could feel his heartbeat. I drew him closer to my chest. I dared any varmint to come near.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for another try at enchantment. I don't think I succeeded. I think Cinnamon was a better eraser than I. I tried. I tried so hard I almost squeaked, but I could not seem to leave myself, and the cosmos did not visit me. I could not stop wondering what time it was.

But something did happen. A small thing. I was aware of stepping over a line, of taking one step into territory new to me. It was a territory of peace, of silence. I had never experienced such utter silence before, such stillness. The commotion within me went on, but at a lower volume, as if someone had turned down my dial. And an eerie thing happened. While I never did totally lose awareness of myself, I believe I did, so to speak, lose Cinnamon. I no longer felt his pulse, his presence, in my hands. It seemed we were no longer separate, but were one. When the sun fell behind the mountains, I felt it as a faint coolness on my face. I don't know how long my eyes were closed. When I opened them, she was gone. Alarmed, I jerked around. She was standing off a ways, smiling. Evening had come. While my eyes were closed, the mountains' dusky lavender had drifted over the desert.

We put on our shoes. We headed for the highway. I expected her to interrogate me, but she did not. One moment the moon was not there, and then it was, then one bright star. We walked across the desert hand in hand, saying nothing.

We were alone. We were the only ones in school.

At least that's how it seemed in the following days.

As I went about my day, I felt her going about hers. I sensed her movement, her presence in distant parts of the building. Walking the halls between classes, I didn't have to see her, I knew she was there: unseen in the mob heading my way, about to turn a corner five classroom doors down. I homed in on the beacon of her smile. As we approached each other, the noise and the students around us melted away and we were utterly alone, passing, smiling, holding each other's eyes, floors and walls gone, two people in a universe of space and stars. And then one day I began to discover that we were more alone than I had dreamed.

It was a Thursday. Normally on that day, after third period, Stargirl and I would pass each other on the second floor around the teachers' lounge. We would smile and say hi and continue on our way to our separate classes. On this day, impulsively, I fell in alongside her.

"How about an escort?" I said.

She grinned slyly. "Anybody in mind?" We touched little fingers and walked on. Her next class was on the first floor, so we went down the nearest stairway. We were walking side by side. That's when I noticed.

No one spoke to us.

No one nodded to us.

No one smiled at us.

No one looked at us.

A crowded stairway, and no shoulder, no sleeve brushed us.

Students climbing the steps veered to the railing or wall. Except for Stargirl jabbering in my ear, the usual raucous chatter was absent.

Mostly what I noticed were the eyes. Faces turned up from the steps below, but the eyes never connected with us. They went right on through us as if they were gamma rays. Or they nipped our ears and rattled off among the walls and other eyes. I had an urge to look down at myself, to make sure I was there.

At lunch I said to Kevin, "Nobody looks at me."

He was staring at his sandwich.

"Kevin!" I snapped. "Now you're doing it."

He came up laughing. He looked me square in the eyes. "Sorry."

Usually there were others at the table. Today there was only us. I leaned across my lunch. "Kevin, what's going on?"

He looked off, then back to me. "I was wondering when you'd notice. Kinda hoping you wouldn't."

"Notice what?"

He stalled by taking a bite of tuna salad sandwich. He took his time chewing. He drank orangeade from a straw. "First of all, it's not you."

I pulled back. I held out my hands. "It's not me. What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's who you're with."

I sat there, blinking, staring at him. "Stargirl?"

He nodded.

"Okay," I said. "So?"

He stared at me some more, chewed, swallowed, sipped, looked away, looked back. "They're not talking to her."

The words didn't stick. "What do you mean? Who's `they'?"

He cocked his head at the sea of tables and eaters. "Them."

"Who them?" I said, too unhinged to laugh at my grammar.

He wet his lips. "All of them." He shrugged. "Well, almost." His eyes drifted over my shoulder. "There're still two girls sitting with her."

I glanced back. At the height of Stargirl's popularity, kids had been pulling chairs from other tables to squeeze around hers. Now it was just Stargirl, Dori Dilson, and a ninth-grader.

"So," I said, "exactly what is going on?"

He sipped from his straw. "The silent treatment is going on. Nobody's talking to her."

It still wasn't sticking. "What do you mean, `nobody's talking to her'? What, did everybody have a meeting in the gym and vote on it?"

"It wasn't that official. It just happened. Got up steam."

I gaped at him. "When? When did it start? How? Why?" I was beginning to screech.

"I don't know exactly. After the basketball stuff, I guess. That really ticked off a lot of people."

"The basketball stuff."

He nodded. "The basketball stuff," I repeated dumbly.

He put down his sandwich. "Leo, don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. Cheering for the other team? What did you think, people thought that was cute?"

"It was her, Kevin. It was harmless. Weird maybe, but harmless. It was her."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah, well, I guess that's what I'm saying. It's not just one thing she did. It's everything. Don't tell me you never noticed. Remember a certain tomato?"

"Kevin, a couple of months ago everybody stood and cheered in the auditorium when she won the oratorical contest."

"Hey"-he gestured defensively-"tell them."

"One person threw the tomato. One."

Kevin snickered. "Yeah, and a thousand wanted to. Did you notice the cheers when it happened? People blame her. For the team losing. For our undefeated season going down the toilet."

I wasn't sure Kevin was still talking about "them."

"Kevin-" I felt myself pleading. "She was only a cheerleader."

"Leo"-he was pointing-"you asked me what was going on, I told you." He stood up and took his tray to the belt.

I stared at his empty chair until he returned.

"Kevin...the Happy Birthday songs, the Valentine cards, all the nice things she does for people...doesn't that count for something?"

The bell rang.

He got up. He gathered his books. He shrugged. "I guess not."

For the rest of the day, and the next and the next, I grew increasingly paranoid. Walking with her in and around the school, I was intensely aware that the nature of our aloneness had changed. It was no longer a cozy, tunnel-of-love sweetness, but a chilling isolation. We never had to veer, never had to make way for someone else; everyone made way for us. Hallway crowds fell away from us. Except for Hillari Kimble. Whenever we passed her, she tilted toward us with a gloating smirk on her face.

As for Stargirl, she didn't seem to notice. She jabbered constantly in my ear. While I smiled and nodded to her, frost formed on the back of my neck.

19

"The Amish in Pennsylvania have a word for it."

"What's that?" I said.

"Shunning."

I was at Archie's. I had to talk to someone.

"Well, that's what's happening."

"The shunnee, so to speak, has gotten himself in dutch with the church, so he's excommunicated. The whole community is in on it. Unless he repents, nobody speaks to him for the rest of his life. Not even his family."

"What?!"

"That's right. Not even his family."

"What about his wife?"

"Wife. Kids. Everybody." His pipe had gone out. He relit it with a stick match. "I believe the idea is to drive him away. But some stay, continue working the farm, having dinner. If he passes the salt to his wife, she ignores it. If the bishop had his way, the pigs and chickens would ignore him. It's as if he doesn't exist."

I nodded. "I know the feeling."

We were on the back porch. I stared out at Se&#241;or Saguaro.

He said, "Does it happen to you when you're not with her?" "No," I said. "At least I don't think so. But when I'm with her, I feel like it's aimed at me, too."

A small pipe cloud left the corner of his mouth. He smiled sadly. "Poor dolphin. Caught in a tuna net."

I picked up Barney, the Paleocene rodent skull. I wondered if someone would be holding Cinnamon's head 60 million years from now. "So, what should I do?"

Archie waved his hand. "Oh, well, that's the easy part. Stay away from her: your problem's kaput."

I sneered. "Great advice. You know it's not that easy."

He did know, of course, but he wanted me to say it. I told him about the valentine, the night in her driveway, the walk in the desert. The question that came to mind then sounded silly, but it persisted: "Do you believe in enchanted places?"

He took the pipe from his mouth and looked straight at me. "Absolutely."

I was confused. "But you're a scientist. A man of science."

"A man of bones. You can't be up to your eyeballs in bones and not believe in enchanted places."

I looked at Barney. I ran my fingertip along the hard line of his two- inch jaw, rough like a cat's tongue. Sixty million years in my hands. I looked at Archie.

"Why can't she be..."

He finished for me: "...like everybody else?"

He stood up and stepped down from the porch onto the desert-for his back yard, except for the shed where he kept his digging tools, was the desert. Nature did the landscaping. I put down Barney and joined him. We ambled toward Se&#241;or Saguaro.

"Not like everybody else," I said. "Not exactly. Not totally. But... Archie..." I stopped. He stopped. I turned full-face to him. My thoughts and feelings were a wild, conflicting jumble. After staring stupidly at him for a long time, I blurted, "She cheers for the other team!" Archie pulled the pipe from his mouth, as if to better digest my words. He raised one finger in the air. He nodded solemnly.

"Ahh, yes."

We resumed walking.

We walked on past the toolshed, past Se&#241;or Saguaro. Occasionally I picked up a stone and flung it toward the purple Maricopas.

Archie said, almost in a whisper, "She's not easy to put into words, is she?"

I shook my head.

"An unusual girl," he said. "Could see that from the first. And her parents, as ordinary, in a nice way, as could be. How did this girl come to be? I used to ask myself. Sometimes I thought she should be teaching me. She seems to be in touch with something that the rest of us are missing." He looked at me. "Hm?" I nodded.

He turned the mahogany bowl of his pipe upside down and rapped it with his knuckle. A small stream of ash spilled onto a thicket of dead mesquite.

He pointed the pipe stem at me. "You know, there's a place we all inhabit, but we don't much think about it, we're scarcely conscious of it, and it lasts for less than a minute a day."

"What's that?" I said.

"It's in the morning, for most of us. It's that time, those few seconds when we're coming out of sleep but we're not really awake yet. For those few seconds we're something more primitive than what we are about to become. We have just slept the sleep of our most distant ancestors, and something of them and their world still clings to us. For those few moments we are unformed, uncivilized. We are not the people we know as ourselves, but creatures more in tune with a tree than a keyboard. We are untitled, unnamed, natural, suspended between was and will be, the tadpole before the frog, the worm before the butterfly. We are, for a few brief moments, anything and everything we could be. And then..."

He pulled out his pouch and repacked his pipe. Cherryscent flew. He struck a match. The pipe bowl, like some predator, or seducer, drew down the flame.

"...and then-ah-we open our eyes and the day is before us, and"-he snapped his fingers-"we become ourselves."

Like so many of Archie's words, they seemed not to enter through my ears but to settle on my skin, there to burrow like tiny eggs awaiting the rain of my maturity, when they would hatch and I at last would understand.

We walked in silence. Yellow blooms had appeared on a cactus, and for some reason that made me incredibly sad. The purple of the mountains flowed like

watercolor.

"They hate her," I said.

He stopped. He looked intently at me. He turned me around and we headed back. He put his arm around my shoulder. "Let's consult Señor Saguaro." Shortly we were standing before the derelict giant. I never understood how the Señor managed to convey a sense of dignity, majesty even, considering his stick-rickety, see-through skeleton and the ridiculous, leathery crumple of hide about his foot, his fallen britches. Archie always spoke to him with respectful formality, as to a judge or visiting dignitary.

"Good day, Señor Saguaro," he began. "I believe you know my friend and charter member of the Loyal Order of the Stone Bone, Mr. Borlock." He whispered an aside to me: "I'm a little rusty, but I think I'll use Spanish now. He prefers it on delicate matters." He turned back to the cactus. "Parece, Señor Borlock aquí; es la víctima de un 'shunning' de sus compañeros estudiantes en el liceo. El objeto principal del 'shunning' es la enamorada del Señor Borlock, nuestra propia Señora Niña Estrella. Está en búsqueda de preguntas."

As Archie spoke, he looked up toward the elf owl hole. Now he turned back to me and whispered, "I asked for questions." "Questions?" I whispered. "What about answers?"

But he was turning from me, tilting his head toward the great cactus, his finger on his lips-"Shh"-his eyes closed.

I waited.

At last he nodded and turned back to me. "The esteemed Señor says there is only one question."

"What's that?" I said.

"He says it all boils down to this-if I'm translating correctly: Whose affection do you value more, hers or the others'? The Señor says everything will follow from that."

I wasn't sure I understood the Señor any more than I understood Archie half the time, but I said nothing, and I went home. In bed that night, as the moonlight reached high tide under my chin, I realized that in fact I understood the question perfectly. I just didn't want to answer it.

20

Twice a week the results of the state basketball tournament were posted on the plywood roadrunner in the courtyard. The surviving teams were into the sectionals now; then would come the regionals; then, with only two teams left, the big show, the Arizona state championship. Glendale, the team we had lost to, got bitter, masochistic attention on the roadrunner with scores in foot-high numerals, as they continued to win and move through the tournament.

Meanwhile, Stargirl was involved in a tournament of her own, the oratorical contest. As Mica High's winner, she qualified for the district "talk-off," as the Times called it. It took place in the auditorium of Red Rock High School, and lo and behold, Stargirl won that, too. Next stop was the state finals in Phoenix on the third Friday in April.

In my homeroom, when the announcement came over the PA about Stargirl

winning the district title, I was about to let out a cheer, but I caught myself. Several people booed. Getting ready for the finals, Stargirl practiced on me. Most often we went into the desert. She did not use notes, nor did her words seem memorized. Each time she gave the speech, it was different. She seemed to insert new material as it popped into her head. She matched her words so perfectly that the speech was not a speech at all, but one creature's voice in the wild, as natural as a raven's caw or a coyote's howl at midnight.

I sat cross-legged on the ground, Cinnamon sat on me. We listened in rapture, and so, I half believed, did the tumbleweed and cacti, the desert, the mountains, all listening to the girl in the longfalling skirt. What a shame, I thought, to pack her performance into a schedule and present it to rows of plush-back seats in an auditorium. Once, incredibly, an elf owl landed atop a saguaro not ten feet from where she was speaking. It paused for a full minute before ducking into its hole. Of course, we did other things, too. We walked. We talked. We rode bikes. Though I had my driver's license, I bought a cheap secondhand bicycle so I could ride with her. Sometimes she led the way, sometimes I did. Whenever we could, we rode side by side.

She was bendable light: she shone around every corner of my day.

She taught me to revel. She taught me to wonder. She taught me to laugh. My sense of humor had always measured up to everyone else's; but timid, introverted me, I showed it sparingly: I was a smiler. In her presence I threw back my head and laughed out loud for the first time in my life.

She saw things. I had not known there was so much to see.

She was forever tugging my arm and saying, "Look!"

I would look around, seeing nothing. "Where?"

She would point. "There."

In the beginning I still could not see. She might be pointing to a doorway, or a person, or the sky. But such things were so common to my eyes, so undistinguished, that they would register as "nothing." I walked in a gray world of nothings. So she would stop and point out that the front door of the house we were passing was blue. And that the last time we had passed it, it had been green. And that as near as she could tell, someone who lived in that house painted the front door a different color several times a year.

Or she would whisper to me that the old man sitting alone on the bench at the Tudor Village shopping center was holding his hearing aid in his hand, and he was smiling, and he wore a coat and tie as if he were going somewhere special, and pinned onto his lapel was a tiny American flag.

Or she would kneel down and pull me down with her and show me the ants, two of them, lugging the lopped leg of a beetle twenty times their size across the sidewalk, as might two men, were they strong as ants, carry a full-grown tree from one end of town to the other.

After a while I began to see better. When she said "Look!" and I followed her pointing finger, I saw. Eventually it became a contest: who would see first? When I finally did it-said "Look!" and pointed and tugged her sleeve-I was as proud as a first-grader with a star on his paper.

And there was more to her seeing than that. What she saw, she felt. Her eyes

went straight to her heart. The old man on the bench, for example, made her cry. The lumberjack ants made her laugh. The door of many colors put her in such a snit of curiosity that I had to drag her away; she felt she could not proceed with her life until she knocked on such a door.

She told me how she would run the Mica Times if she were the editor. Crime would be on page 10, ants and old men and painted doors on page 1. She made up headlines:

ANTS HAUL MONSTER LOAD

ACROSS VAST, BARREN WALK

MYSTERY SMILE: OLD MAN

NODS OFF AT TUDOR VILLAGE

DOOR BEGS: KNOCK ME! I told her I wanted to be a TV director. She said she wanted to be a silver-lunch-truck driver.

"Huh?" I said.

"You know," she said, "people work all morning and then it's twelve o'clock. The secretaries in the offices walk out the door, the construction workers put down their hard hats and hammers, and everybody's hungry, and they look up and there I am! No matter where they are, no matter where they work, I'm there. I have a whole fleet of silver lunch trucks. They go everywhere. 'Let Lunch Come to You!' That's my slogan. Just seeing my silver lunch truck makes them happy." She described how she would roll up the side panels and everyone would practically faint at the cloud of wonderful smells. Hot food, cold food, Chinese, Italian, you name it. Even a salad bar. "They can't believe how much food I fit into my truck. No matter where you are-out in the desert, the mountains, even down in the mines-if you want my silver lunch service, I get it to you. I find a way."

I tagged along on missions. One day she bought a small plant, an African violet in a plastic pot on sale for ninety-nine cents at a drugstore.

"Who's it for?" I asked her.

"I'm not exactly sure," she said. "I just know that someone at an address on Marion Drive is in the hospital for surgery, so I thought whoever's back home could use a little cheering up."

"How do you know this stuff?" I said.

She gave me a mischievous grin. "I have my ways."

We went to the house on Marion Drive. She reached into the saddle pack behind her bicycle seat. She pulled out a handful of ribbons. She chose a pale violet one that matched the color of the tiny blossoms and stuffed the remaining ribbons back into the seat pack. She tied the violet ribbon around the pot. I held her bike while she set the plant by the front door.

Riding away, I said, "Why don't you leave a card or something with your name on it?" The question surprised her. "Why should I?"

Her question surprised me. "Well, I don't know, it's just the way people do things. They expect it. They get a gift, they expect to know where it came from."

"Is that important?"

"Yeah, I guess-"

I never finished that thought. My tires shuddered as I slammed my bike to a halt. She stopped ahead of me. She backed up. She stared.

"Leo, what is it?"

I wagged my head. I grinned. I pointed to her. "It was you."

"Me what?"

"Two years ago. My birthday. I found a package on my front step. A porcupine necktie. I never found out who gave it to me."

She walked her bike alongside mine. She grinned. "A mystery."

"Where did you find it?" I said.

"I didn't. I had my mother make it."

She didn't seem to want to dwell on the subject. She started pedaling and we continued on our way.

"Where were we?" she said.

"Getting credit," I said.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's nice to get credit."

The spokes of her rear wheel spun behind the curtain of her long skirt. She looked like a photograph from a hundred years ago. She turned her wide eyes on me. "Is it?" she said.

21 On weekends and after dinner, we delivered many potted violets. And CONGRATULATIONS! balloons. And cards of many sentiments. She made her own cards. She wasn't a great artist. Her people were stick figures. The girls all had triangle skirts and pigtails. You would never mistake one of her cards for a Hallmark, but I have never seen cards more heartfelt. They were meaningful in the way that a schoolchild's homemade Christmas card is meaningful. She never left her name.

But finally, after much pestering from me, she did tell me how she knew what was going on in people's lives. It was simple, she said. She read the daily paper. Not the headlines or the front page or the sports page or the comics or the TV listings or the Hollywood gossip. What she read were the parts that most people ignored, the parts without headlines and pictures, the boondocks of the paper: the hospital admissions, the death notices, the birthday and wedding announcements, the police blotter, the coming events calendar.

Most of all, she read the fillers.

"I love fillers!" she exclaimed.

"What are fillers?" I said.

She explained that fillers are little items that are not considered important enough to be a story or to have a headline. They're never more than one column wide, never more than an inch or two deep. They are most commonly found at the bottoms of inside pages, where the eye seldom travels. If the editors had their way, they would never use fillers. But sometimes a reporter doesn't write quite enough words, and the story doesn't reach all the way to the bottom of the page. The paper can't have a blank space there, so the editor dumps in a filler. A filler doesn't need to be "news." It doesn't need to be important. It doesn't even need to be read. All it's asked to do is take up space.

A filler might come from anywhere and be about anything. It might tell how many pounds of rice a typical Chinese person eats in a lifetime. Or say something about beetles in Sumatra. Or the filler might come from down the street. It might

mention that so-and-so's cat is missing. Or that so-and-so has a collection of antique marbles.

"I search through fillers like a prospector digging for gold," she said. "So that's it?" I said. "You read the papers?"

"No," she said, "that's not all. There's also the place where I get my hair cut. I always overhear good stuff there. And of course there're bulletin boards. Do you know how many bulletin boards there are in town?"

"Sure," I said facetiously, "I count them every day."

"So do I," she said, not kidding. "So far, I'm up to forty-one."

Offhand, I couldn't think of one, except the plywood roadrunner. "What do you learn from bulletin boards?"

"Oh...somebody just opened a business. Somebody lost a dog. Somebody needs a companion."

"Who advertises for a companion?" I said. "Who needs one that bad?"

"Lonely people," she said. "Old people. Just somebody to sit with them for a while."

I pictured Stargirl sitting in a dark room with an old woman. I couldn't picture myself doing the same thing. Sometimes she seemed so far from me.

We were passing Pisa Pizza. "There's a bulletin board in there," she said.

It was just inside the door. It was smothered with business cards and notices. I pointed to one that said "Odd Jobs-Ask for Mike," call this number. "So what's that tell you?" I said, with more challenge in my voice than I intended.

She read it. "Well, it could be that Mike lost his regular job and can't find another, so he's hiring himself out. Or even if he has a regular job, it's not enough to make ends meet. He's either not very neat, or he can't afford a whole piece of paper.

This is just a scrap."

"So what would you do for him?" I said.

"Oh, I don't know. My parents might have an odd job they need done. Or maybe I do. Or maybe I could just send him a card." "What kind of card would he get?"

"A Keep-your-chin-up card." She poked me. "Hey, want to play a card game?"

I had a feeling she wasn't talking about poker. "Sure," I said.

She said she invented it. "All you need is your eyes and one other person. I pick somebody on the street, the mall, a store, wherever, and I follow them. Say it's a her. I follow her for fifteen minutes, not a minute more. I time myself. The game is, after fifteen minutes of watching her, I have to guess what kind of card she needs."

"But how can you get it to her?" I said. "You don't know where she lives."

"True. That's as far as it goes. That's why it's just a game. It's just for fun." She snuggled into me. She whispered in my ear, "Let's play."

I said sure.

She said we needed a mall. I usually steered us away from the Mica Mall-too many silent-treatment MAHS kids hanging around there. We drove ten miles to the Redstone Mall. It was a Saturday afternoon.

We picked out a woman. Lime-green skort. White sandals. We guessed her age was early forties. She was buying a soft pretzel- regular, salted-at Auntie Anne's. She carried the pretzel in a little white paper bag. We followed her into Suncoast

Video. We overheard her ask for When Harry Met Sally. They didn't have it. She passed Sonoma, then came back and went in. She wandered about, touching pottery with one fingertip, feeling surfaces. She stopped before the dinner plates. She lifted one with a French café painted on it. "Van Gogh," Stargirl whispered. The lady seemed to think about the plate, even closed her eyes, holding it to her chest with both hands, as if feeling vibrations. But then she put it back and walked out. On to Sears. Lingerie. Bedclothes. I was uneasy, spying from behind a rack of frilly somethings. She was flipping through nightshirts when time ran out.

Stargirl and I conferred in the corridor. "Okay," she said, "what do you think?"

"I think I feel like a stalker," I said.

"A good stalker," she said.

"You first," I said.

"Well, she's divorced and lonely. No wedding ring. Wants somebody in her life. A home life. She wishes she were Sally and her Harry would come along. She would make him dinner and snuggle with him at night. She tries to eat low-fat foods. She works for a travel agency. She took a free cruise last year, but all she met on the boat were creeps. Her name is Clarissa, she played the clarinet in high school, and her favorite soap is Irish Spring."

I boggled. "How do you know all that?"

She laughed. "I don't. I'm guessing. That's what makes it fun."

"So what card would you send her?"

She put her finger to her lips. "Hmm...to Clarissa I would send a While-you're-waiting-for-Harry-be-good-to-yourself card. How about you?"

"I would send a"-I mulled over the phrasing-"a Don't-let-Harry-catch- you-flicking card."

Now it was her turn to boggle. "Huh?"

"Didn't you see her pick her nose?" I said. "In Suncoast?"

"Not really. I saw her hand go to her nose, like she was scratching it or something."

"Yeah, or something. She was picking, that's what. She was quick and sneaky. A real pro."

She gave me a playful shove. "You're kidding."

I held up my hands. "I'm serious. She was standing in front of the comedies. Her finger went in and when it came out there was something on it. She carried it around for about a minute. And then, just as she was leaving Suncoast, when she thought nobody was looking, she flicked. I didn't see where it landed." She stared at me. I raised my right hand and put my left over my heart. "No lie."

She broke out laughing, so loudly I was embarrassed. She grabbed my arm with both hands to keep from collapsing. Mallwalkers stared.

We carded two others that day: a woman who spent her whole fifteen minutes feeling leather jackets-we called her Betty-and a man we called Adam because of his huge Adam's apple, which we renamed Adam's pumpkin. No more pick-'n'-flickers.

And I did have fun. Whether it came from the game or simply from being with her, I don't know. I do know I was surprised at how close I felt to Clarissa and Betty

and Adam after watching them for only fifteen minutes.

Throughout the day, Stargirl had been dropping money. She was the Johnny Appleseed of loose change: a penny here, a nickel there. Tossed to the sidewalk, laid on a shelf or bench. Even quarters.

"I hate change," she said. "It's so...jangly."

"Do you realize how much you must throw away in a year?" I said.

"Did you ever see a little kid's face when he spots a penny on a sidewalk?" she said.

When her change purse was empty, we drove back to Mica. Along the way she invited me to dinner at her house.