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We fought daily, Kevin and I.

My main job as producer was to recruit people for the Hot Seat. After I signed someone up, Kevin began researching the person, getting his questions ready. Every day he asked me, "Did you sign her up?"

Every day I answered no. He got frustrated.

"What do you mean, no? Don't you want to sign her up?"

I told him I wasn't sure.

His eyes bugged out. "Not sure? How can you not be sure? We high- fived in the lunchroom weeks ago. We were thinking Stargirl mini- series, even. This is a Hot Seat from heaven."

I shrugged. "That was then. Now I'm not sure."

He looked at me like I had three ears. "What's there to be not sure about?"

I shrugged.

"Well then," he said, "I'll sign her up." He walked away.

"You'll have to find another director, then," I said.

He stopped. I could almost see the steam rising from his shoulders. He turned, pointed. "Leo, you can be a real jerk sometimes." He walked off.

It was uncomfortable. Kevin Quinlan and I usually agreed on everything. We had been best friends since arriving in Arizona the same week four years before. We both thought the prickly pear cactus looked like Ping-Pong paddles with whiskers, and that saguaros looked like dinosaur mittens. We both loved strawberry-banana smoothies. We both wanted to go into television. Kevin often said he wanted to be a sleazy talk show host, and he wasn't kidding. I wanted to be a sports announcer or news anchor. We conceived Hot Seat together and convinced the faculty to let us do it. It was an instant hit. It quickly became the most popular thing in school.

So why was I balking?

I didn't know. I had some vague feelings, but the only one I could identify was a warning: Leave her alone.

In time "Hillari's Hypothesis" (so called by Kevin) about Stargirl's origins gave way to other theories. She was trying to get herself discovered for the movies.

She was sniffing fumes.

She was homeschooling gone amok.

She was an alien.

The rat she brought to school was only the tip of the iceberg. She had hundreds of them at home, some as big as cats.

She lived in a ghost town in the desert.

She lived in a bus.

Her parents were circus acrobats.

Her parents were witches.

Her parents were brain-dead vegetables in a hospital in Yuma.

We watched her sit down in class and pull from her canvas bag a blue and yellow ruffled curtain that she draped over three sides of her desk. We saw her set out a three-inch clear glass vase and drop into it a white and yellow daisy. She did and undid this in every class she attended, six times a day. Only on Monday mornings was the daisy fresh. By last period the petals were drooping. By Wednesday the petals began to fall, the stem to sag. By Friday the flower hung down over the rim of the waterless vase, its dead stump of a head shedding yellow dust in the pencil groove.

We joined her as she sang "Happy Birthday" to us in the lunchroom. We heard her greet us in the hallways and classrooms, and we wondered how she knew our names and our birthdays.

Her caught-in-headlights eyes gave her a look of perpetual astonishment, so that we found ourselves turning and looking back over our shoulders, wondering what we were missing.

She laughed when there was no joke. She danced when there was no music. She had no friends, yet she was the friendliest person in school. In her answers in class, she often spoke of sea horses and stars, but she did not know what a football was.

She said there was no television in her house.

She was elusive. She was today. She was tomorrow. She was the faintest scent of a cactus flower, the flitting shadow of an elf owl. We did not know what to make of her. In our minds we tried to pin her to a corkboard like a butterfly, but the pin merely went through and away she flew.

Kevin wasn't the only one. Other kids pestered me: "Put her on the Hot Seat!" I lied. I said she was only a tenth-grader and you had to be at least a junior to be on Hot Seat.

Meanwhile, I kept my distance. I observed her as if she were a bird in an aviary. One day I turned a corner and there she was, coming right at me, the long skirt softly rustling, looking straight at me, surrounding me with those eyes. I turned and trotted off the other way. Seating myself in my next class, I felt warm, shaken. I wondered if my foolishness showed. Was I myself becoming goofy? The feeling I had had when I saw her around the corner had been something like panic.

Then one day after school I followed her. I kept at a safe distance. Since she was known not to take a bus, I expected the walk to be short. It wasn't. We trekked all over Mica, past hundreds of grassless stone-and-cactus front yards, through the Tudorized shopping center, skirting the electronics business park around which the city had been invented a mere fifteen years before.

At one point she pulled a piece of paper from her bag. She consulted it. She seemed to be reading house numbers as she walked along. Abruptly she turned up a driveway, went to the front door, and left something in the mailbox.

I waited for her to move off. I looked around-no one on the street. I went to the mailbox, pulled out a homemade card, opened it. Each tall letter was a different painted color. The card said: CONGRATULATIONS! It was unsigned.

I resumed following her. Cars pulled into driveways. It was dinnertime. My parents would be wondering.

She took the rat from the bag and put it on her shoulder. Riding there, the rat faced backward, its tiny triangular face peeping out of her sand-colored hair. I could not see its beady black eyes, but I guessed it was looking at me. I fancied it was telling her what it saw. I fell farther back.

Shadows crossed the streets.

We passed the car wash and the bike shop. We passed the country club golf course, the biggest spread of green grass until the next golf course in the next town. We passed the "Welcome to Mica" sign. We were walking westward. There was us and the highway and the desert and the sun blazing above the Maricopa Mountains. I wished I had my sunglasses.

After a while she veered from the highway. I hesitated, then followed. She was walking directly into the setting sun, now a great orange perched atop the mountain crests. For a minute the mountains were the same dusky lavender as her sand-skimming skirt. With every step the silence grew, as did my sense that she knew-had known all along- that she was being followed. Or more, that she was leading me. She never looked back.

She strummed her ukulele. She sang. I could no longer see the rat. I imagined it was dozing in the curtain of her hair. I imagined it was singing along. The sun lay down behind the mountains.

Where was she going?

In the gathering dusk, the saguaros flung shadows of giants across the pebbled earth. The air was cool on my face. The desert smelled of apples. I heard something-a coyote? I thought of rattlesnakes and scorpions.

I stopped. I watched her walk on. I stifled an impulse to call after her, to warn her...of what? I turned and walked, then ran, back to the highway.

4

At Mica Area High School, Hillari Kimble was famous for three things: her mouth, The Hoax, and Wayne Parr.

Her mouth spoke for itself, most often to complain.

The episode that became known as Hillari's Hoax took place in her sophomore year, when she tried out for cheerleading. Her face and hair and figure were right enough, and she surely had the mouth-she made the squad easily. And then she stunned everyone by turning it down. She said she just wanted to prove that she could do it. She said she had no intention of yammering and bouncing in front of empty bleachers (which was usually the case). And anyway, she hated sports.

As for Wayne Parr, he was her boyfriend. Mouthwise, he was her opposite: he seldom opened his. He didn't have to. All he had to do was appear. That was his job: appear. By both girls' and boys' standards, Wayne Parr was gorgeous.

But he was more-and less-than that.

In terms of achievement, Wayne Parr seemed to be nobody. He played on no sports team, joined no organization, won no awards, earned no A's. He was elected to nothing, honored for nothing-and yet, though I did not realize this until years later, he was grand marshal of our daily parade.

We did not wake up in the morning and ask ourselves, "What will Wayne Parr wear today?" or "How will Wayne Parr act today?" At least, not consciously. But on some level below awareness, that is exactly what we did. Wayne Parr did not

go to football and basketball games, and by and large, neither did we. Wayne Parr did not ask questions in class or get worked up over teachers or pep rallies, and neither did we. Wayne Parr did not much care. Neither did we.

Did Parr create us, or was he simply a reflection of us? I didn't know. I knew only that if you peeled off one by one all the layers of the student body, you would have found at the core not the spirit of the school, but Wayne Parr. That's why, in our sophomore year, I had recruited Parr for the Hot Seat. Kevin was surprised. "Why him?" Kevin said. "What's he ever done?"

What could I say? That Parr was a worthy subject precisely because he did nothing, because he was so monumentally good at doing nothing? I had only a vague insight, not the words. I just shrugged.

The highlight of that Hot Seat came when Kevin asked Parr who was his hero, his role model. It was one of Kevin's standard questions.

Parr answered, "GQ."

In the control room, I did a double take. Was the sound working right?

"GQ?" Kevin repeated dumbly. "Gentleman's Quarterly? The magazine?"

Parr did not look at Kevin. He looked straight at the camera. He nodded smugly. He went on to say he wanted to become a male model, his ultimate ambition was to be on the cover of GQ. And right there he posed for the camera—he had that disdainful model look down pat—and suddenly I could see it: the jaw square as the corner of a cover, the chiseled cheeks, the perfect teeth and hair.

That, as I say, took place toward the end of our sophomore year. I thought then that Wayne Parr would always reign as our grand marshal. How could I have known that he would soon be challenged by a freckle-nosed homeschooler?

5

The call came from Kevin on a Friday night. He was at the football game. "Quick! Hurry! Drop whatever you're doing! Now!"

Kevin was one of the few who went to games. The school kept threatening to drop football because of low attendance. They said ticket receipts were barely enough to pay for electricity to light the field.

But Kevin was screaming on the phone. I jumped in the family pickup and raced to the stadium. I bolted from the truck. Kevin was at the gate, windmilling his arm: "Hurry!" I threw the two-dollar admission at the ticket window and we raced for the field. "See better up here," he said, yanking me into the stands. It was halftime. The band was on the field, all fourteen of them. Among the students it was known as "The World's Smallest Standing Band." There weren't enough of them to form recognizable letters or shapes—except for a capital "I"—so they didn't march much at halftimes of games. They mostly stood. In two rows of seven each, plus the student conductor. No majorettes. No color guard. No flag and rifle girls.

Except this night. This night Stargirl Caraway was on the field with them. As they played, rooted in their places, she pranced around the grass in her bare feet and long lemon-yellow dress. She roamed from goalpost to goalpost. She swirled like a dust devil. She marched stiffly like a wooden soldier. She tootled an imaginary flute. She pogoed into the air and knocked her bare heels together. The cheerleaders gaped from the sidelines. A few people in the stands whistled. The

rest-they barely outnumbered the band-sat there with What is this? on their faces.

The band stopped playing and marched off the field. Stargirl stayed. She was twirling down the forty-yard line when the players returned. They did a minute of warm-up exercises. She joined in: jumping jacks, belly whumps. The teams lined up for the second half kickoff. The ball perched on the kicking tee. She was still on the field. The referee blew his whistle, pointed to her. He flapped his hand for her to go away. Instead, she dashed for the ball. She plucked it off the tee and danced with it, spinning and hugging it and hoisting it into the air. The players looked at their coaches. The coaches looked at the officials. The officials blew their whistles and began converging on her. The sole policeman on duty headed for the field. She punted the ball over the visiting team's bench and ran from the field and out of the stadium.

Everyone cheered: the spectators, the cheerleaders, the band, the players, the officials, the parents running the hot dog stand, the policeman, me. We whistled and stomped our feet on the aluminum bleachers. The cheerleaders stared up in delighted surprise. For the first time, they were hearing something come back from the stands. They did cartwheels and backflips and even a three-tier pyramid. Old-timers-or as old as timers got in a city as young as Mica-said they had never heard such a racket.

For the next home game more than a thousand people showed up. Everyone but Wayne Parr and Hillari Kimble. There was a line at the ticket window. The refreshment stand ran out of hot dogs. A second policeman was called in. The cheerleaders were in their glory. They screamed up at the bleachers: "GIMME AN E!" The bleachers screamed back: "EEEE!" (We were the Electrons, in honor of the town's electronics heritage.)

The cheerleaders ran through all their routines before the first quarter was over. The band was loud and peppy. The football team even scored a touchdown. In the stands heads kept swinging to the edges of the field, to the entrance, to the streetlamp-lighted darkness behind the stadium. The sense of expectation grew as the first half came to a close. The band marched smartly onto the field. Even they were looking around.

The musicians did their program. They even formed a small, lopsided circle. They seemed to linger on the field, drawing out their notes, waiting. Finally, reluctantly, they marched to the sideline. The players returned. They kept glancing around as they did their warm-ups. When the referee raised his arm and blew his whistle for the second half to begin, a sense of disappointment fell over the stadium. The cheerleaders' shoulders sagged.

She wasn't coming.

On the following Monday, we got a shock in the lunchroom. Bleached blond and beautiful Mallory Stillwell, captain of the cheerleaders, was sitting with Stargirl. She sat with her, ate with her, talked with her, walked out with her. By sixth period the whole school knew: Stargirl had been invited to become a cheerleader and had said yes.

People in Phoenix must have heard us buzzing. Would she wear the usual skirt and sweater like everyone else? Would she do the usual cheers? Did all the

cheerleaders want this, or was it just the captain's idea? Were they jealous? Cheerleading practice drew a crowd. At least a hundred of us stood by the parking lot that day, watching her learn the cheers, watching her jump around in her long pioneer dress.

She spent two weeks practicing. Halfway through the second week she wore her uniform: green-trimmed white V-neck cotton sweater, short green and white pleated skirt. She looked just like the rest of them.

Still, to us she was not truly a cheerleader, but Stargirl dressed like one. She continued to strum her ukulele and sing "Happy Birthday" to people. She still wore long skirts on non-game days and made a home of her school desks. When Halloween arrived, everyone in her homeroom found a candy pumpkin on his or her desk. No one had to ask who did it. By then most of us had decided that we liked having her around. We found ourselves looking forward to coming to school, to seeing what bizarre antic she'd be up to. She gave us something to talk about. She was entertaining.

At the same time, we held back. Because she was different. Different. We had no one to compare her to, no one to measure her against. She was unknown territory. Unsafe. We were afraid to get too close.

Also, I think we were all waiting to see the outcome of an event that loomed larger and larger with every passing day. The next birthday coming up was Hillari Kimble's.

6

Hillari herself set the stage the day before. In the middle of lunch, she got up from her table and walked over to Stargirl. For half a minute she just stood behind Stargirl's chair. Silence everywhere except for tinklings in the kitchen. Only Stargirl was still chewing. Hillari moved around to the side.

"I'm Hillari Kimble," she said. Stargirl looked up. She smiled. She said, "I know."
"My birthday is tomorrow."

"I know."

Hillari paused. Her eyes narrowed. She jabbed her finger in Stargirl's face. "Don't try singing to me, I'm warning you."

Only those at nearby tables heard Stargirl's faint reply: "I won't sing to you."

Hillari gave a satisfied smirk and walked off.

From the moment we arrived at school the next day, the atmosphere bristled like cactus paddles. When the buzzer sounded for first lunch, we leaped for the doors. We swarmed into the food lines. We raced through our choices and hurried to our seats. Never had we moved so fast so quietly. At most, we whispered. We sat, we ate. We were afraid to crunch our potato chips, afraid we might miss something.

Hillari was first to enter. She marched in, leading her girlfriends like an invading general. In the food line, she smacked items onto her tray. She glared at the cashier. While her friends scanned the crowd for Stargirl, Hillari stared ferociously at her sandwich.

Wayne Parr came in and sat several tables away, as if even he was afraid of her on this day.

Stargirl finally came in. She went straight to the food line, blithely smiling as

usual. Both she and Hillari seemed unaware of each other. Stargirl ate. Hillari ate. We watched. Only the clock moved. A kitchen staffer stuck her head out over the conveyor belt and called: "Trays!" A voice barked back: "Shut up!" Stargirl finished her lunch. As usual, she stuffed her wrappings into her paper bag, carried the bag to the paper-only can by the tray return window, and dropped it in. She returned to her seat. She picked up the ukulele. We stopped breathing. Hillari stared at her sandwich. Stargirl began strumming and humming. She stood. She strolled between the tables, humming, strumming. Three hundred pairs of eyes followed her. She came to Hillari Kimble's table-and kept on walking, right up to the table where Kevin and I sat with the Hot Seat crew. She stopped and she sang "Happy Birthday." It was Hillari's name at the end of the song, but true to her word of the day before, she did not sing it to Hillari-she sang it to me. She stood at my shoulder and looked down at me, smiling and singing, and I didn't know whether to look down at my hands or up at her face, so I did some of each. My face was burning. When she finished, the students burst from their silence with wild applause. Hillari Kimble stomped from the lunchroom. Kevin looked up at Stargirl and pointed at me and said what everyone must have been thinking: "Why him?" Stargirl tilted her head, as if studying me. She grinned mischievously. She tugged on my earlobe and said, "He's cute." And walked off. I was feeling nine ways at once, and they all ended up at the touch of her hand on my ear-until Kevin reached over and yanked the same earlobe. "This keeps getting more interesting," he said. "I think it's time to go see Archie."

7

A. H. (Archibald Hapwood) Brubaker lived in a house of bones. Jawbones, hipbones, femurs. There were bones in every room, every closet, on the back porch. Some people have stone cats on their roofs; on his roof Archie Brubaker had a skeleton of Monroe, his deceased Siamese. Take a seat in his bathroom and you found yourself facing the faintly smirking skull of Doris, a prehistoric creodont. Open the kitchen cabinet where the peanut butter was kept and you were face to fossil face with an extinct fox. Archie was not morbid; he was a paleontologist. The bones were from digs he had done throughout the American West. Many were rightly his, found in his spare time. Others he collected for museums but slipped into his own pocket or knapsack instead. "Better to sit in my refrigerator than disappear in a drawer in some museum basement," he would say. When he wasn't digging up old bones, Archie Brubaker was teaching at universities in the East. He retired at the age of sixty-five. When he was sixty-six, his wife, Ada Mae, died. At sixty-seven he moved himself and his bones west, "to join the other fossils."