

BIONIC

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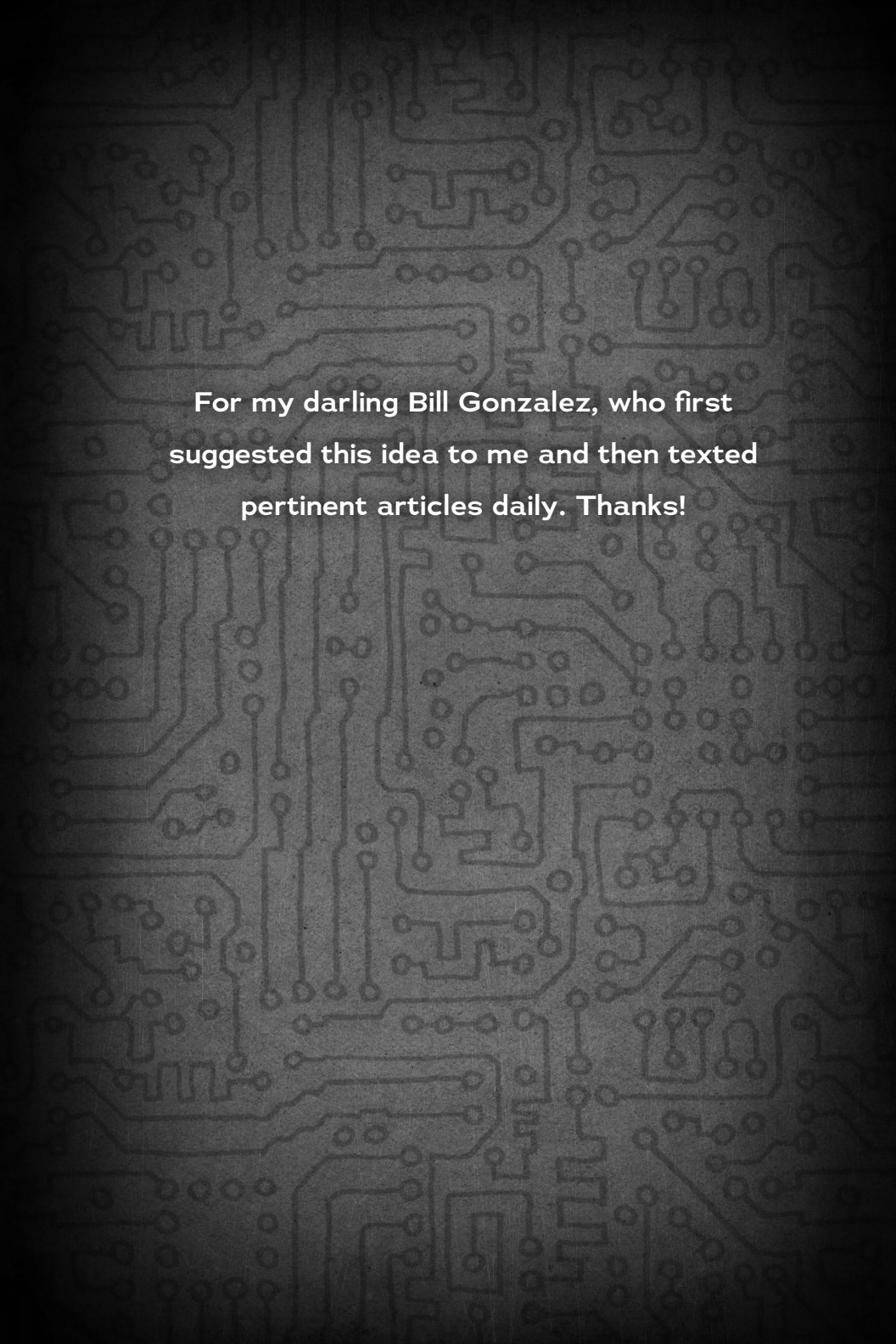
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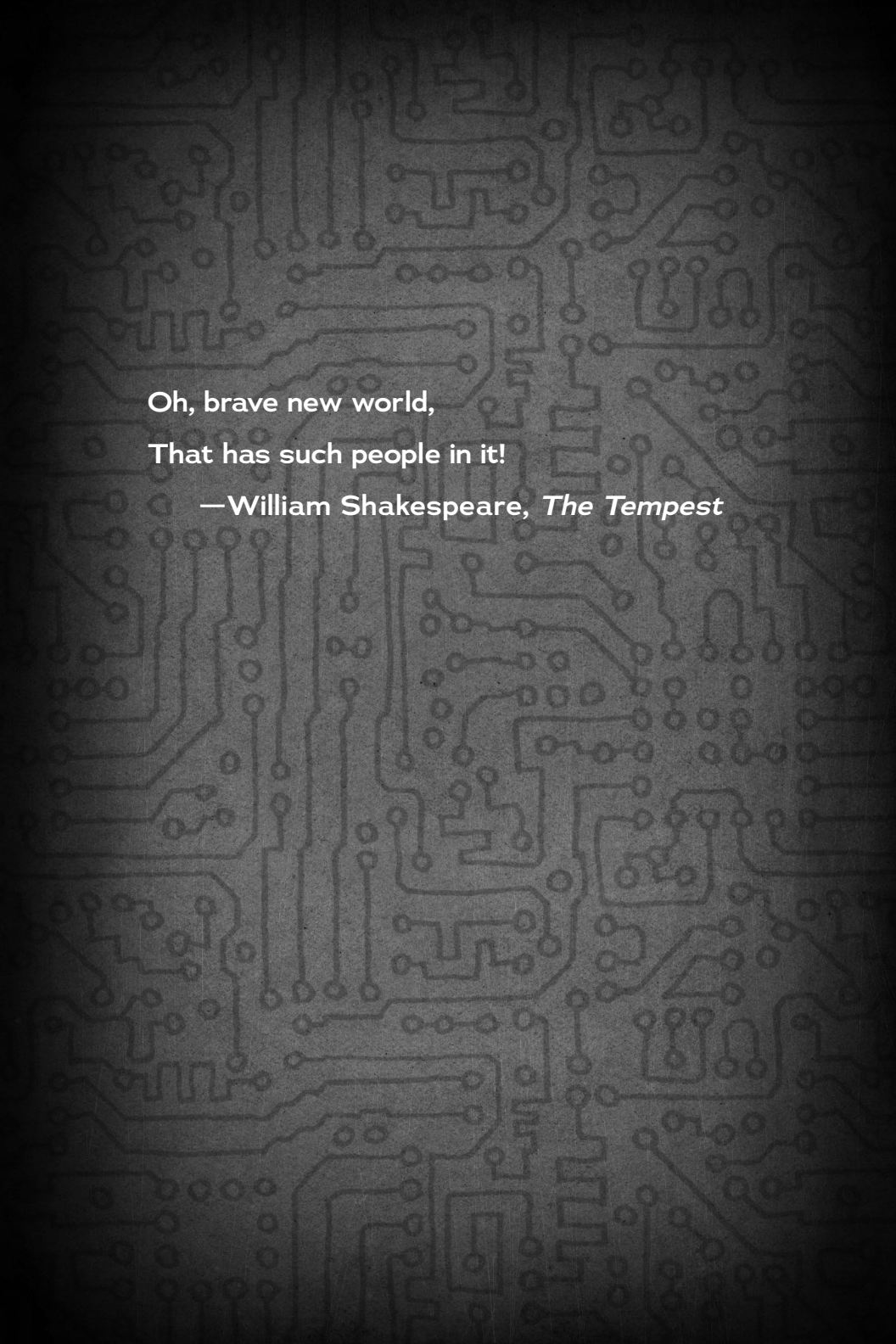
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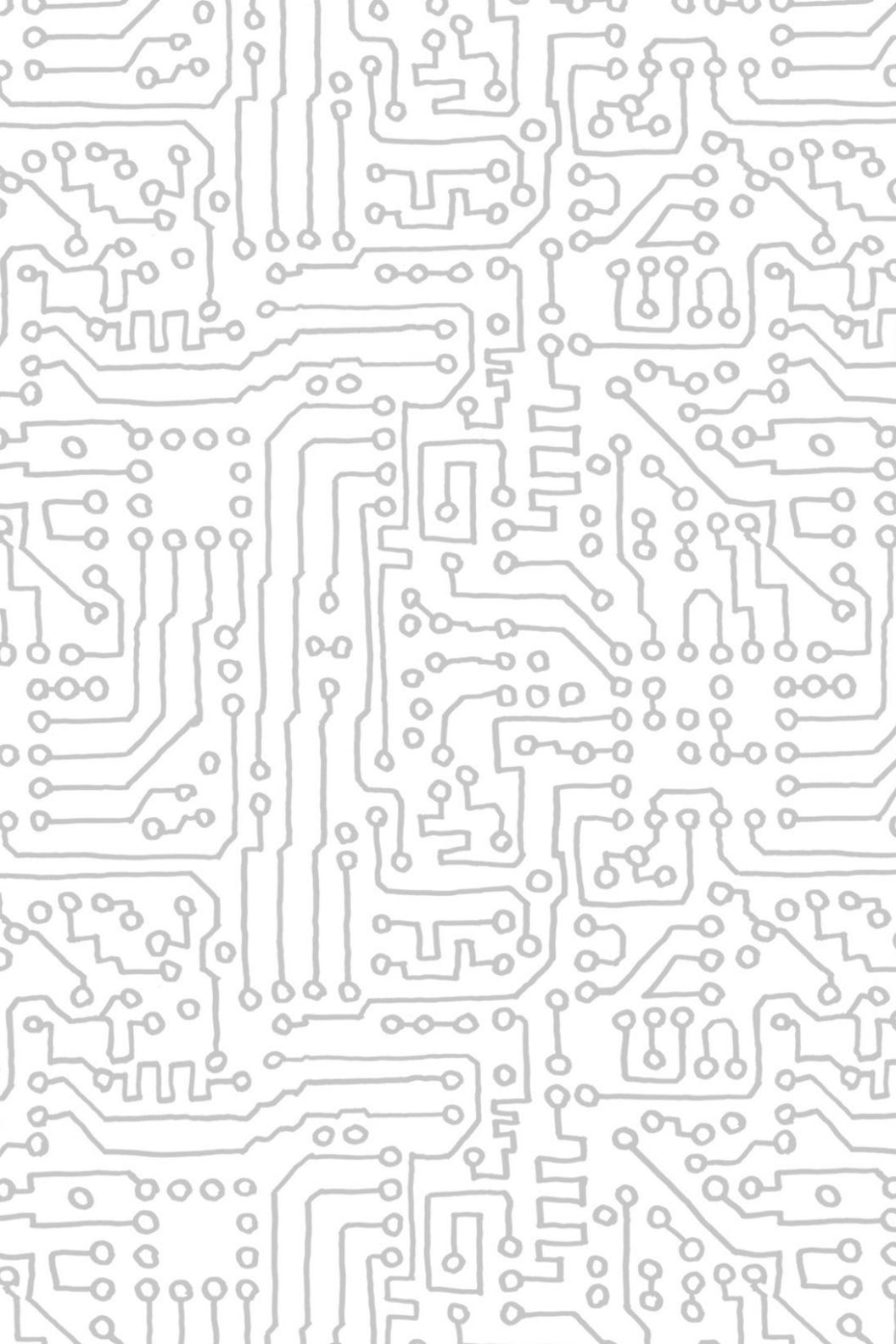


For my darling Bill Gonzalez, who first suggested this idea to me and then texted pertinent articles daily. Thanks!



Oh, brave new world,
That has such people in it!

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*



I shift on the balls of my feet and lean toward the action on the field. The inside of my face guard mists with sweat as I watch Leanna hurtling over the midfield line, cradling the ball in the net of her stick. The other team's defense is close on her. We had such a solid lead in the first half of the game, but it's dwindled to a tie and gone into overtime. I can feel the tension of the game curling my shoulders, and I push them down, breathing deep.

"Mira!" Leanna shouts, and whips the ball over. Catching it, I see a clear shot, so I slam the ball past the goalie.

Yes! Tie broken! Finally! Moon Valley High wins it!

My team erupts into joyous shouts. Before I even know what's happening, they hoist me onto their shoulders and carry me around the field. My cheeks ache from smiling as I pump my lacrosse stick victoriously.

This feeling—it's the same thing I experience on stage, singing and playing guitar with my band, Electric Storm. That adrenaline rush, the wild enthusiasm of the audience, the sense of being a part of a bigger being that can make music out of nothing. It's magic! But maybe if I can have lacrosse, I won't miss

performing. No. Who am I kidding? I'll miss being part of Electric Storm like crazy.

At the end of our last game, Coach Sanders pulled me into her office. I'd scored the winning goal then, too, and was relieved. Usually I'm one of the best players on the varsity team—but I'd been so off my game, and worried that I wasn't pulling my weight. Coach said I was wrong, that I did have a shot at a lacrosse scholarship, if I'd only buckle down with practicing and schoolwork. She said the band was distracting me from the things I'd need to get ahead. She insisted I quit Electric Storm.

From across the field, I catch Coach Sanders's warning expression. Going berserk over a win isn't considered good sportsmanship. Immediately, I jump down. My teammates follow my lead as we hurry over to line up for the handshake with the other team.

The moment I'm off the line, Coach Sanders takes hold of my upper arm and leans in. "See the scout from Penn State over there?" she says, pointing with her chin. "She asked about you. I told her I expect great things. You're on her list of girls to watch."

"Ohmigosh, that's awesome!"

"You bet," Coach Sanders agrees.

Some of the girls on the team wear ribbons on their upper arms to show that they're already committed to certain colleges. I haven't been approached with an offer yet. But my performance

has been so much better this year than last year. This interest from Penn State is huge. It's finally happening!

"They're division one in the Big Ten," Couch Sanders says. "Keep playing like this and I think you'll have an offer by next month. Were you planning on applying to Penn State?"

Syracuse University and Penn State are my boyfriend Jason's and my top two choices. They have everything we want: division one teams, great academics, and a perfect location, far enough from home, but not so far that we have to fly. "I've already applied," I tell her.

Coach Sanders smiles at me, maybe for the first time ever. "Thatta girl! How are your grades?"

"Above average," I say truthfully. "A's and B's."

"Get 'em higher," she says. "Make this last quarter all A's. Beginning of senior year, too. You quit that band, right?"

I nod, though my heart sinks a little. When we formed the band, my friends Niles, Tom, and Matt dreamt about becoming rock stars. But we also just loved to play—enough to devote hours to practicing and talking people into letting us perform at parties, weddings, you name it. "Tonight's my last gig."

Coach Sanders holds me in a narrowed, skeptical stare.

"Honest!" I say.

"I hope so!" she says with a warning edge to her voice. "From now on you are about lacrosse and schoolwork and nothing else."

My hand shoots up as though I'm being sworn in at court. "Only lacrosse and schoolwork from now on," I say. I mean it, too! To blow off this chance would just be stupid. There and then I promise myself to fully commit to getting into Penn State.

The late bus pulls into the parking lot, snapping me back to reality. If I don't make the bus I run the risk of missing my younger brother Zack's bus, and I need to watch him until Mom gets home.

I jog across the field toward my bag, which contains my change of clothes. I'll have to take my stick with me. There's not even time to stow it in my gym locker.

"Aren't you changing, Superstar?" Taylor asks. "We're going to the diner."

"Can't," I say without slowing down. "I have to be somewhere."

Taylor falls into step with me. "You're not going to band practice, are you? I thought you quit."

"Who told you that?"

"Jason."

Wait . . . why is Taylor talking to Jason?

"Oh, when did you see him?" I ask.

"Like, yesterday?"

Jason is allowed to talk to whomever he wants. It just seems

odd to me. I didn't think they were that friendly. At least not on Jason's side.

"No, I quit the band," I say.

"That must be hard for you," Taylor says brightly. She's put on that fake smile I've seen her wear so often. "Now you can only be a superstar in one area instead of two."

I slide my eyes at her. Was that meant as some sort of dig? I never can tell if she doesn't like me or just says dumb things, because she says it all with a smile.

"I'm just kidding, of course," Taylor says, still smiling.

...

"No! No! I can't eat that." Zack clamps his fingers into fists and pounds the sides of his legs. He glares at the tuna salad sandwich on the kitchen table as though he's Superman and I've just served him a plate of Kryptonite.

Okay. I run through all the variables in my head. I've seen my bother eat tuna a thousand times before, so it's not that. And I made it with the squishy white bread that he loves. "I didn't put carrots or celery in the tuna," I tell him. "It's plain with extra mayo, the way you like it."

"It's wrong," he insists.

I try to always be patient with Zack, but my voice rises in frustration. "What's wrong about it?"

Zack goes into his all-too-familiar *I'm not listening* mode,

turning his head away from me. When he draws in his lips and narrows his eyes like he's doing now, he looks more like an old man than an eleven-year-old boy.

“Just eat the tomato soup, then,” I coax him.

He shakes his head and continues to stare through the doorway into the living room. By now I kind of understand how he thinks. The soup goes with the sandwich as part of a whole meal, and the sandwich is somehow unacceptable, rendering the entire meal no good. Autism has a logic all its own.

Suddenly I see where I've gone wrong.

Lifting the plate from the table, I return to the counter and make a new sandwich. This time, though, I cut it on a diagonal, the way they do it at the Moon Valley Diner. It's the way Mom always does it here at home, too.

When I set the recut sandwich on the table—success! Without a word, Zack settles down to eat. I sit beside him, relieved, and consume the rejected sandwich.

What goes on in his head? He knows everything about insects and yet struggles through school, even with the help of an aide and outside tutors. Most of the time he's in his own world and then, out of nowhere, he's unexpectedly affectionate—for a brief while, anyway. Like he is right now, as he gives me a quick, wordless hug before making a beeline for the couch and a thick book titled *Lycaenids: From Chrysalis to Maturity*.

I dash upstairs to shower off the sweat and grime of the game. I wish there was time for a nice long soak in a bath, but I want to get ready for Electric Storm's last gig and don't want to leave Zack by himself so long.

My ripped, faded jeans are the ones I always wear when I perform, and once I pull on my T-shirt and scuffed boots, I'm dressed and ready to go. When I get downstairs, Zack is doing his homework at the coffee table. It takes all my self-control not to text Mom and tell her to hurry up.

Instead I text my best friend, Emma, to remind her about the show tonight. She wanted to come, but it's farther away than most of our other gigs and she said she might not be able to find a ride, which I totally understand.

The second Mom walks through the door, I'm on my feet, grabbing my bag.

"Did you two have something to eat?" she asks.

"Of course," I tell her, as she pulls me into a hug. "See you tonight!"

She tells me to break a leg, and as I run out the door I see her settle on the couch with Zack. "So, what's new with the lycanids?"

...

When I get to Matt's house, his mom's van is idling in the driveway. The guys are leaning against it. "Sorry! Sorry!" I say before anyone speaks.

But there's not a lot of conversation as we load up the last few pieces of equipment, just some grunting. It's hard to tell whether it's better or worse than when I had to tell them I was quitting.

"We don't want anyone else!" Niles cried.

"Who else would do that weird little dance move?" Matt put in.

"What dance move?"

"You know," Niles said as he started stretching and writhing. Was that an impression of me?

I punched him on the shoulder. "I never do that!"

"Sure you do—during the drum break in 'Urban Creep.' It's cool."

My face warmed and I hoped I wasn't blushing. "That break is so long. I have to do something."

"Where are we going to find someone else like you?" Matt asked.

This, of course, was *exactly* what I wanted to hear—that they couldn't go on without me, that no one else could ever replace me.

Matt threw himself over his drums, pretending to sob in loud rolls of fake crying, and Tom joined him. Niles, though, looked like he might *really* cry, even though he didn't.

Just thinking about it makes me start to choke up. This is really happening. Tonight's my last time playing with these guys.

My phone buzzes as Matt closes the trunk of the van, and it's a text from Jason. **I'll be there tonight with some of the guys. Good luck on your last show.**

I decide to shake off the funk I'm in. The band is great, but not if it stops me from going to college and getting out of this town someday.

Thanks, I text back. **Big news. Penn State here we come!** I'm finally focused on my future and know what I have to do. I'm eager for this last Electric Storm gig to be over so I can pour myself into my schoolwork and lacrosse.

The guys climb into the van ahead of me and I sit up front next to Matt. This is our usual arrangement, since I'm the best at using the map app on my phone.

Matt barely listens to the directions because he knows how to get to Yonkers. But when we have to find Midland Avenue, he gets nervous. I can tell from how tightly he grips the wheel while a thin vein in his forehead pulses. Now we're in unknown territory.

"In six hundred feet, turn right," my phone instructs in its robotic female voice.

"How am I supposed to know how far six hundred feet is?" Matt snaps.

"It's coming up soon," I say as the program counts down the footage. "Turn here!"

Matt curses as he sails past the street.

“Hang a U-turn at this gas station,” I suggest.

Matt swears again, peering over his shoulder to where he should have taken us. “Okay,” he mutters, barely slowing down as he whips the van into the Shell station.

But he’s too fast. And he doesn’t realize that a gas tanker is backing up.

“Matt! Stop!”

Crunching metal explodes around me. Shielding my head, I cower into the seat.

Matt’s forehead slams into the steering wheel. From the backseat, Niles clasps my arm for a second but his hand is thrown off as the van spins.

It bashes into the truck again. It’s tilting! The van is tipping.

We’re going over!

Matt’s limp hand slaps my cheek when we hit the cement. My face is pressed on the window and the cracked glass slivers my skin.

A car slams into us, spraying more glass. Searing, unbearable pain consumes me. I let out an agonized scream that merges with Niles and Tom’s tortured swearing from the backseat.

A jagged piece of bloody steel from the door pierces my thigh and now it sticks out the other side.

The rancid odor of hot rubber. Black smoke.

A shrillness wails.

...

Sirens. Swirling red light. A sudden surge of cool air as a mask goes over my nose and mouth. That's good. A gentle voice asking questions. I turn my head toward it. Agony. Too much pain. Can't stay like this! Leaving . . .

...

I sit in a kayak in the middle of Lake Oscawana, near our house. The sky is indigo streaked with vivid pink. Ribbons of golden light cross it. No one else is on the lake. I'm not rowing, just sitting there with the paddle laid flat in front of me. A pleasant warm breeze ruffles my hair.

The first time I paddled my own kayak, I was five.

My mother's voice booms across the surface of the water. "When Mrs. Frederick C. Little's second son arrived, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse." The words are the opening of the book I loved most when I was small, *Stuart Little*. She reads on and on for a long time as I sit in the kayak, listening.

A lovely day.

"I love you, Mira."

I'm so tired. Everything around me starts to fade. All I want is to sleep . . . sleep . . . sleep . . . and sleep. To disappear.

Leaving.

...

Where have I been? It's confusing. I was gone and now I'm back on the lake. I lie on the raft attached to buoyed ropes in the little-kiddie beach. Small kids splash and laugh on the shore. They're too far away for me to see clearly.

Gazing up into the brilliant blue sky I hear a voice coming from a cumulus cloud. Sitting up, I wonder who's speaking.

"They say maybe you can hear me, Mira, so, here goes. I'm in the room upstairs from this one. I'll probably go home today or tomorrow. I'd have come to see you sooner but they only let me out of bed today."

Niles.

"I had a punctured lung and I'm in a cast up to my hip, but I'll be all right. Matt fractured his nose and has some horrible burns. The second car went on fire. We were lucky it wasn't the fuel truck. Really lucky. We wouldn't be here at all right now if that had exploded. Tom broke some ribs, and has some cuts. They say the person in the passenger seat always gets hurt the worst, and you did. We're all so . . ."

The voice, Niles, trails off, which is a relief. I'm glad everyone's going to be fine. I feel fine. Super relaxed, actually. But I don't want to hear about broken bones and burns right now. I'd rather stare at the lake.

...

Zack reads to me from his book on butterflies. Normally that would bore me, but out here on the lake everything is interesting: lightweight sailboats gliding by; gentle breezes rippling the surface of the water; dragonflies darting everywhere.

Zack's voice pours out of the clouds like honeyed sunshine. I'd like to see him but he's hiding behind the clouds.

I never realized how soothing Zack's voice is. I picture the butterflies emerging from their cocoons, like newborns, wet with new life, spreading their gorgeous wings.

...

I tread water as three fish swim circles around me, jumping above the surface of the sparkling lake. They take turns reading *Frankenstein* and all sound like Jason.

"You'll need to have this read for the AP lit comprehensive test at the end of the year," says a silvery-green fish, bobbing his head.

A blue-green fish jumps before he speaks. "You won't be here forever. You should be prepared."

"Come on! Wake up, Mira!" the third, slightly boggle-eyed fish shouts.

...

My hair fans out around me. Lake water splashes into my face. I've discovered that if I pull both my arms behind my head, my toes rise. If I lower them, they sink. It's sort of a fun game,

watching them rise and fall. I recall learning that this has to do with finding my personal center of gravity.

I like the sound if it. If I find my center of gravity I will be able to float endlessly.

After a while, though, the water no longer hits my face. I stop floating and tread the ever-diminishing water as the lake gets lower and lower. Soon I am stranded on cracked, arid earth.

The bright blue sky blisters like old wallpaper. I can see behind it.

Florescent light explodes everywhere. The drone of machinery fills my ears.

My mother is there. She sleeps, curled in a chair. A stone-faced nurse enters the room and becomes wide-eyed before she hurries out.

My body is on fire. My head is being slammed against a cement wall. My mouth won't release the scream trapped inside it.

Take me back to the lake.

I want to go back to the lake. I'll find my center of gravity.

And I'll float endlessly.

...

Under water, watching the lake go by above me.

...

Woke up back in the hospital room but no one knows I'm here. I hear them bustling around, though. I want to alert someone that I'm back, but I can't speak. My eyes won't open, either.

Emma sits beside me. I know she's there but she doesn't know I know. "Don't cry," I want to say as she lays her forehead on my arm and sobs. But I can't because . . . I just can't.

...

Mom is beside my bed and she softly sings a song that I haven't heard her sing since I was small. "Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me . . ." She sings more and hesitates. I know the line she's trying to recall.

"Jingle jangle," I whisper.

Silence.

What's happening? My eyes slide open and Mom is bent over me, staring.

"Doctor!" Mom shouts. "I need a doctor!" She grips my hand. "Stay with me, Mira! Stay awake!"

The pain is too awful. I can't.

Let me go back to the lake!

"Stay awake," Mom begs.

"Doctor!" Mom shouts, pounding buttons over my bed.

...

MAY

The hospital room is where I live now. Morning and night I'm here, drifting in and out of sleep. I can't remember the way back to the lake.

...

My room is soft with gray light. It's either very early or getting dark. I see myself reflected in the TV near the ceiling at the end of my bed.

I'm wrapped in bandages . . . but something's very wrong with the shape of me. Where is my arm?! It feels like it's there but it's not.

I just can't see it. That's all! The glare bouncing off the TV set is covering it. My cell phone is on the nightstand to the right of my bed. I want to text Jason and Emma to tell them I'm awake, so I stretch forward to pick it up.

Why can't I reach it? It's too far away. I stretch farther.

My hand isn't even near the phone. I should be seeing my hand next to the phone, fingers stretching. It doesn't make sense! I don't understand.

And then I *do* understand.

My right arm is gone.

My right arm is gone!

I can feel it but it's not there.

With my left hand I pound the call button above my bed.

A nurse hurries in with another woman, a doctor wearing a white coat and stethoscope. I don't realize how truly, mind-meltingly freaked out I am until I start jabbering hysterically, all the while gesturing wildly with my left arm.

"You've had a terrible accident," the doctor says kindly as she takes the needle the nurse hands her. "And this is all very shocking. It's a lot to absorb. I'm going to give you a shot to help you calm down, help you to rest."

I can't rest! I want my arm. I'm enraged and the fury injects a jolt of crazy energy that lets me sit up and grab the doctor by her wrist. "Get me my arm!" I shout. It comes out as an animal growl. I must seem insane. Maybe I am.

Another nurse grips me while the doctor injects something into my vein. Writhing, I struggle to escape my body.

I want out! OUT!

But I relax almost immediately.

Calm.

I drowse.

Of course, I still need to ask where my arm has gone, but my tongue has grown fat and lazy.

I hope I'm going back to the lake, but I don't see it anywhere anymore, not even in my dreams.