

February 16



Jill

*“I am all girl.”*

It’s my own voice I hear as I lie in bed half-awake, half-asleep. In my dream, I’m walking barefoot through the woods behind my house. It’s fall, and the flame-colored leaves float softly downward. Out of nowhere, a Ferris wheel appears and I get on without a ticket.

“I am all girl.”

I say it because my body is betraying me.

In my dream, the colorful autumn day becomes night. The Ferris wheel speeds up, breaks free of its foundation and rolls through the darkened woods. Shearing tree branches with loud splintery crunches, it rolls toward the black lake at the edge of the tree line.

From deep within me, behind organs, beneath muscles, a jagged pain is born.

“I am all girl!”

I open my eyes to the real night, the thick molasses darkness of it. But it’s only when I spot the red numbers of my clock

that I'm sure I'm awake: 4:27 a.m. The pain is building to a sure and steady climax and I don't know who I am.

Jack or Jill.

"I am all girl!" I squeeze through clenched teeth.

There's a land mine exploding outward from my stomach and lower spine.

I'm not supposed to wake up in the middle of things. All of this is supposed to happen while I sleep. I shove my hand beneath the sheets, praying, hoping the transformation is nearly complete, but when I reach lower, there it is—limp, smooth and insistent.

Jack.

He's supposed to fade in the night and I'm supposed to wake up fully constructed. Instead, I have his *thing* to contend with and a deep ache that, now that I think of it, is not exploding outward but sucking inward like a vortex.

"I am all girl."

That's my mantra. I use it to forget. But it does nothing to ease the pain.

The muscles of my abdomen spasm and I squeeze Jack's thing in response, as if he were doing this to me—the sadistic jerk. I know that's not true. Grabbing the pillow with my other hand, I press it to my face.

"I am all girl," I growl. I don't want to scream, but I can't stop myself.

"I . . . !"

I'm lost now, a rudderless ship on a wild and cruel ocean.

"Mom!"

I know she can't help. No one can.

"Mom!"

The bedroom door opens; then the bed sags with Mom's weight. Her perfect brown bob is sleep-mussed and her pale face bears deep pillow wrinkles.

"Shhh," she says. "It's okay, honey. 'I am all girl.' Say it."

"I am all girl."

I want to absorb relief from these words or from the forced calm of my mother's face, but relief never comes. Looking past her, I spot Dad hovering in the doorway, disheveled as always and chewing on his thumbnail. No relief there either.

Then the split begins.

At the base of Jack's thing, the pain gathers to a diamond point. I grab Mom's cool hand and squeeze. My flesh punctures from within. Then, zipperlike, it tears itself open. I throw my head from side to side.

"I." Gasp. "Am." Gasp. "All." Gasp. "Girl!"

"It's okay," Mom says. But I hear the strain in her voice. She's starting to panic too.

The split now complete beneath Jack's quivering thing, I try to pull my legs together. I don't know why. Protective instinct, I guess. But I can't control my legs or anything else. My body is in control, orchestrating its mal proceedings from the angry vortex at the base of my spine.

The vortex sucks harder now, pulling at my bones, my muscles, retracting my thighs, melting the firm stomach until it's

soft and feminine. My body remakes itself with no mercy, sanding the crisp edges from my jawbone, deflating the gentle biceps, brutally inflating my breasts.

“I am all girl!” I scream, all sense gone.

“Shhh,” Mom says. “Breathe, baby.”

But every breath is a new gut wound. The bones of my ankles rearrange themselves in miniature. Even my toes protest the change. Unthinkingly, I clench Jack’s thing with my sweaty hand and force the breath out in an angry rhythm.

“That’s right,” Mom says. “Breathe.”

With what’s left of my brain, I can still remember, I can still think. Jackthoughts, Jackfears, Jackdesires. He’s angry. At me. At Mom. He doesn’t like chunky peanut butter and she keeps feeding it to him. He wants a new pair of boxer briefs and some Elvis DVDs. He wants us to turn the Internet back on.

“I am all girl!”

I clench Jack’s thing harder now and it slips weakly from my slick palm into the sucking mouth of the vortex.

And then it’s gone.

All of it.

Not just Jack, but the pain too. That’s the merciful afterthought of this wicked hullabaloo. The pain doesn’t fade slowly the way it builds. It evaporates in a euphoric instant.

I look up at Mom’s ever-calm face backlit from the hall light spilling through the open door. She whisks a strand of hair from her eyes, then touches my cheek with the backs of her fingers. “Plan B?” she says.

“Not now,” I say. “Too tired.”

I lift my head to look at Dad. His greasy hair and guru beard connect in a continuous circle of grunge around his frightened face. He’s the same mess he has been for years. But I’m so blissed out on post-agony, I can’t help but love the guy.

“Sorry, Dad,” I say.

“It’s okay, honey.”

But he’s still chewing on his thumbnail because it’s not okay and he knows it. It’s never going to be okay either. Not for him, not for me. Not for any member of the McTeague household.

Within this house is a monster, a freak, a slave to the calendar and my own lunatic hormones. Before every menstrual cycle—every phase of the moon, if you want to be romantic about it—I am savagely transformed from girl to boy for four full days, then wickedly reshaped into girlflesh again. Most of the time, I sleep right through it. Most of the time.

“Good night,” I say. “I’ll do Plan B in the morning.”

Within seconds, I’m out.

Four and a half hours later, my eyes open to the bleak February light straining to pass through my bedroom’s frosty windows. Sinking low beneath the down comforter, I cocoon myself for an extra moment. But when dim memories of the night before begin to intrude, I peel the comforter back and begin the rituals of Plan B.

Not the contraceptive, dummy. Believe me, if I could have prevented Jack’s conception, I would have been all over that. Plan B is my four-step method for minimizing the overall maleness of his existence.

The first step is to fix an image of my female face in my mind's eye. I do this by sitting upright in bed and facing the mirror above my dresser. I stare at my too-small eyes, my wide cheeks. I am not beautiful, but that's not the point. I am female. That's what matters. Straining to banish judgment, I absorb the image.

In Step Two, I lie down, close my eyes and begin my mantra: "I am all girl." Silently, I repeat the phrase in time with my breathing. It's like this: Breathe in, think: *I am*. Breathe out, think: *all girl*. Meanwhile, I envision a black dot in the center of my forehead. That's the third eye. If I maintain focus and calm, the black dot inflates like a balloon until it engulfs my whole head. That's the meditative state.

In Step Three, I project Jack's four days onto the blackness as if it were a giant movie. Then, before I can absorb any of the details, I make the image fade to black.

In Step Four, I paste the mirror image of my own face onto the blackness. It's dim at first, but as I repeat the mantra in rhythm with my breathing, it sharpens and brightens until I see a crystal clear image of my imperfect female face. At that moment, I know it's safe to open my eyes. Whatever transpired during Jacktime is erased, forgotten, swallowed up by the vortex with his limp thing. That's Plan B. Pretty brilliant, huh?

Sitting up on the bed, I take a big disgusting whiff of myself, then head straight for the shower. Jack doesn't bathe. I wrote him a note about it once and he wrote back that since he has to endure *my* PMS for the duration of his phase, I

should cut him some slack on hygiene. I guess that makes sense in boy logic. I run the shower hot and steamy, then lather up to begin the de-stinkification.

I'm not saying I'm a genius or anything, but you have to admit that Plan B is a deeply non-dumb invention. We cobbled it together after the nightmare transformations began at the tender age of fourteen. By "we," I mean mostly me and my mom. Dad had already begun his slide into that mal universe of yoga, hair growth and transcendental meditation he now occupies from his headquarters in our basement. But that's another story. You know what Dad's initial response to my crisis was? "Let's all meditate toward acceptance."

Acceptance schmacceptance. If you're blind, you can talk about acceptance. If you're deaf or paraplegic or have any number of comparably tolerable conditions, you can talk about acceptance. What I have is not acceptable.

Nor is this oil slick masquerading as my hair. Jack takes greasy to a new level. I squirt out half a bottle of shampoo and let it sit on my head as I shave my stubbly legs. I have four full days of neglect to deal with in here.

So anyway, back to Plan B. Medical science had nothing to say on the subject of my bewildering condition, so when the gazillionth hospital visit resulted in yet another round of incredulous stares from a roomful of medical skeptics, Mom and I decided to do our own research. We spent hours and days and weeks and months online and at the library. We read medical journals written in jargon so technical you had to

read other books just to understand them. We learned so much about the human body, we could have performed open-heart surgery on each other. And you know what the grand conclusion of all this research was? “You’re on your own, sweetheart.”

Those were dark days, I can tell you. Dad had moved into the basement by then. Mom was experimenting with estrogen therapy. On herself! And I was hiding out in my room lest anyone discover the mortifying truth about my cyclical “condition.”

Then one day, while spiraling down the Google rabbit hole, I stumbled on a Web site for people who use self-hypnosis to erase painful memories.

My wheels started turning.

You see, we’d already decided to hide my condition from the outside world when it became clear that medical science was basically useless. Mom even went to the principal of Winterhead High with a phony doctor’s note and a story about how I needed blood transfusions every four weeks for a severe iron deficiency, thus smoothing over my periodic absences from school. I figured since we were obliterating the condition from the public record, why not obliterate it from my own memory? I’ll admit, it was a crazy idea, as evidenced by the fact that it drew Dad out of his basement yoga hole to donate his newfound expertise on transcendental meditation. Oddly enough, it was the perfect addition. He even came up with the mantra “I am all girl.”

I’ve been doing Plan B for three years now, and it works so well I no longer have any recollection of my days as a boy. It’s

like hitting the delete button on my memory. Bam! Four days disappear.

Told you it was brilliant.

As I step from the shower into the warm embrace of a clean white towel, I am smooth, degreased and stink free.

I stand in front of my overstuffed closet to wait for inspiration. Per usual, I’ve woken up with my period, so I select my extra stretchy black jeans. Then I add a white lace top and a burgundy velvet jacket. I’m about to head downstairs for breakfast when I remember a critical incident from the day before Jack arrived. It happened in chem lab.

Mom knocks on the door. “French toast’s ready.”

She always makes French toast on my first day back.

“Wait, Mom.” I open the door. “Cell phone?”

She removes it from the front pocket of her beige pants. “We should just have this thing fastened to the side of your face, you know.”

“Funny.” I take it from her and close the door. Then I call my best friend, Ramie. She picks up on the second ring.

“I need your advice,” I tell her.

“It’s Saturday,” she says. “Do I have to be wise?”

“I’ll settle for non-dumb,” I say. “When can you get here?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“On whether I can excavate your closet,” she says. “I’m working on some new ideas.”

When Ramie says “new ideas,” start worrying. She’s obsessed with fashion. Not “mindless status fashion,” as she calls

it, but “serious editorial fashion,” whatever that is. She once came to school wearing her father’s gray business suit *underneath* a 1940s vintage swimsuit. That’s Ramie.

“Deal,” I say. “Just get here.”

Ramie arrives half an hour later and rips me away from the remains of my French toast. She’s armed with a stack of Italian *Vogues*, so we head straight up to my room. I love when my first day back falls on a Saturday so I can spend some quality girl time with Ramie. It’s like pounding one final nail into Jack’s coffin.

Spreading the magazines out on my bed, she sits among them and starts flipping through the November issue. Without looking up, she says, “Treatments go okay?”

“Piece of cake,” I say. The “treatments” are my fictional blood transfusions. Ramie stopped pumping me for details about them when I told her I did not want to be “defined by my illness.”

After a round of furious page flipping, Ramie looks up from her magazine and evaluates my outfit. “You need to rethink that jacket,” she says.

I smooth my hands over the velvet jacket, which fits me like a glove, then have a look in the mirror above the dresser. “Why? It’s deeply flattering.”

“It’s too fitted.” She lies on her stomach and eyeballs me while flipping through her magazine at warp speed. “So, what’s the deal?” she says.

I sit on the bed and leaf through the June issue. “Well,” I say. “It turns out I have a bit of a senior prom issue.”

She stops flipping. “How can you have a prom issue? It’s only February. Prom isn’t for another . . .” She starts counting out the months on her fingers.

“Four months.” I point to the calendar above my desk. “One hundred and twenty-six days, to be precise.”

Ramie stares at the calendar, on which I’ve written the remaining days until prom night in every single square. “Uh, Jill,” she says. “You need help.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

“Dude, I meant professional help.” She returns to her magazine. “Ooh, ooh,” she says. “Look at this.” She slides it across the bed. It’s opened to a crazy picture of a model layered with acres of clashing Aztec prints.

“She looks fat,” I say.

“It’s volume, Jill.” She pulls the magazine back to her side of the bed. “Skinny is over. It’s all about volume.”

“Uh-huh.” The only good thing I can say about the picture is that it was shot in the desert. Someplace hot. I hate winter. It dominates so much of the calendar here in Massachusetts, they named my town Winterhead. How depressing is that?

Ramie turns the page slowly to a DPS, which stands for double-page spread in the fashion industry. “Now that’s what I call styling,” she says. Then she peels all five feet ten inches of her fat-free body off the bed and stands before my open closet. She pulls out a white corset dress. Laying it on the bed, she

pulls off her cruddy beige sweater, which causes her D-cup boobs to bounce beneath her pink alligator shirt. When I called her “fat free,” I forgot to mention the boobs. Ramie’s built like a bombshell. She lays the cruddy sweater on top of the white dress and says, “Counterpoint. It’s all about counterpoint.”

“I thought it was all about volume.”

“They’re not incompatible, smart-ass.” From the back pocket of her baggy jeans, she pulls a wide rainbow-striped ribbon and cinches the sweater at the waist with it. “So, do I have to beat it out of you or are you going to tell me about this prom issue?” She goes to my closet and drops to her knees to excavate the crate of accessories I keep on the floor.

“Okay.” I move all the magazines to my desk to make room for her experiment in contrapuntal styling. “So, last week in chem lab,” I say, “Steven Price asked me to the prom.”

Ramie twists her head over her shoulder to look at me. “Steven Price?”

She looks really pretty when she does that, so I make a mental note of it. It may come in handy later when I need to look alluring. “Yup,” I say. “We were washing beakers and he just blurted it out.”

Ramie stands up with a giant hair clip and uses it to cinch the waist of the sweater lying on the bed. “Hmm,” she says. “You’re not secretly in love with Steven Price and about to tell me this is deeply good news, right?”

I slump on the bed next to the outfit. “He’s a really, really super nice guy but—”

“You don’t have to say it.” Ramie bunches up the sleeves of the cruddy beige sweater. “Geeks are deeply cool now, but somehow Steven manages to be just geeky. What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Gosh, Steven, don’t you think it’s a little early for that?’ ”

“Ouch,” Ramie says.

“I know.” I tie the beige sweater in a knot at the midriff in an attempt to minimize its influence on the outfit as a whole. “The last thing I want to do is hurt Steven’s feelings,” I say. “We’ve been lab partners for two years.”

“Uh-huh.” She adjusts the ribbon’s bow just left of center, then decides against it and rips it off.

“Mom says guys like Steven Price are good to keep track of for later use,” I say. “But for right now—social death.”

Ramie just stares at me.

“I know. But that’s Mom for you. Anyway, the whole sad incident got me thinking about the fact that I have no boyfriend, no prospects and no strategy in place to ensure a successful prom experience.”

“Hmm” is all Ramie comes up with. Then she returns to the closet floor, where an ecosystem of forgotten clothes has taken root. I suppose I should mention that Ramie thinks the prom is stupid. Ramie thinks all high school traditions are stupid.

She stands up holding a bright paisley scarf and lays it across the ugly beige sweater. “There.” She backs away from the outfit and squints at it. Then she rips off her pink alligator shirt and squeezes her D-cup boobs into the B-cup corset dress. “Zip me,” she says.

I get the zipper an inch up her back. “Can you breathe?”

“Nope,” she says. “Keep zipping.”

She sucks in her stomach and I tug the zipper half an inch higher. “That’s it.”

I stand back as she pulls on the beige sweater and ties it at the breastbone.

“You have to be willing to suffer for your art,” she says.

“Uh-huh.”

As fun as it is watching Ramie bust out of my corset dress, I’m distracted by my prom issue. You see, once I started worrying about the prom, a certain someone I had previously not noticed suddenly made himself intriguingly visible to me. It was as if the universe itself were summoning its awesome powers to save me from prom malness.

I take a deep breath. “So, Rames,” I say. “What do you think about Tommy Knutson?”

“Tommy Knutson?” she says. “You mean that weird guy from Brazil?” She grabs a pink down vest from my closet.

“New York,” I tell her. “I think he moved here from New York.”

“Oh. I heard Brazil,” she says. “But then I also heard L.A. He’s kind of mysterious, right? Doesn’t talk much?”

“No,” I say. “But he’s been doing sticky eyes with me.”

“Really?”

“We’re in H Block calculus together,” I tell her. “He sits one row over and two seats in front of me, and last week he started doing it.”

“Uh-huh.” She zips the puffy pink vest over the outfit.

“I’m not talking furtive glances either,” I say. “I’m talking one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three. Once, I counted all the way to five.”

“You count?” She hands me the rainbow ribbon and sticks her arms out to the side. I tie the ribbon around her waist. “Higher,” she says. “Empire.”

I hike the ribbon up, leaving the puffy down vest to bulge beneath it like a pregnant belly.

“So that’s what this is all about?” Ramie says. “You want to go to the prom with Tommy Knutson?”

“Right now I consider him Candidate Number One.”

Ramie hands me a white cashmere beret and I tuck her wild black bramble hair into it.

“He is non-ugly,” she says.

Believe it or not, that’s a big statement coming from Ramie. She’s given up on guys until she gets to college, where she fully intends to have an affair with a professor. A *European* professor. No, I’m serious. That’s her plan.

“Before you commit, though,” she says, “let me do some digging.”

I panic. “Ramie, you cannot under any circumstances let Tommy Knutson know I have any interest in him.”

“Spot me some credit, Jill. I said digging, not blabbing.” Ramie turns to the side to evaluate her profile. “Uh, Jill, do you see something wrong with this picture?”

I check out her profile. “Yeah, Rames. You look like a whale.”

“Not that, dummy.” She points to her beret. “White hat.

White dress. It's too matchy matchy." She rips off the beret and shakes out her wild hair.

"Yeah, Rames. That was the problem with the look. You've definitely nailed it now."

She turns from side to side to examine the full heft of the mal outfit. Somehow it's managed to make even her skinny legs look fat.

"Chubby Chic?" I say.

I'm joking, of course, but Ramie, psycho that she is, gets that look in her eye.

"No way," I say.

She nods slowly. "Yes, Jill. Yes." She grabs both of my shoulders and looks down on me from her extra six inches. "Chubby Chic. That's perfect."

"You are *not* wearing that."

"Oh, yes I am."

I try to untie the rainbow ribbon around her waist, but she pushes my hand away.

"I am leaving here today with this outfit," she says. "And I am wearing it to school on Monday."

She will too. She'll walk around all day looking like a pink Michelin Man and try to spread the rumor that Chubby Chic is the new black. Weirdest part? Within the week, she'll have a few imitators.

"Hey, you know," she says, "maybe you should pull a Steven Price on Tommy Knutson."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, make your own preemptive strike."

"You mean, ask Tommy Knutson to the prom?"

"Why not?"

I sit on the edge of the bed. "I never thought of that. It wouldn't be too forward, would it?"

"Guys love it. Take the lead. Why should you wait around for him?"

For Ramie to claim any expertise on what guys love is a bit of a stretch. She's not exactly a hot property at Winterhead High. Don't get me wrong. There isn't a guy at the school who wouldn't *do* Ramie. But I can't think of a single one who would *date* her. As Mom never tires of reminding me, I'd be much more popular if I "reconsidered my loyalty to that girl." But I'm not about being popular. To be honest, the fact that I'm able to live any semblance of a normal teenage life is a surprising bonus, given my potential for catastrophic humiliation. Besides, with Ramie as my BFF, no one can honestly accuse me of being anything but comparatively ordinary.

There is a knock on the door, and Mom breezes right in.

"Hey, Mom," I say. "How's the spying?"

Mom hovers in the doorway. "I was going to heat up some soup for lunch, sweetie. Will Ramie be joining us?" She does not look at Ramie as she says this. Mom once called Ramie a "worshipper of chaos." When I told Ramie, she thought it was cool and threatened to tattoo it on her butt cheek.

"Mom," I say. "We just ate breakfast."

"I know, sweetheart. I want to know how much to defrost." Without making eye contact, she gives Ramie's outfit the up and down. "Jill, is that your dress?"

“It’s okay,” I say. “I’m deeply over it.”

Ramie grabs the stack of magazines from my desk. “I’ve got to run. I’ll let you know what I find out about you-know-who.”

“Cool,” I say.

Mom’s eyes follow Ramie as she flees down the hallway and disappears down the stairs.

“Was that the down vest you absolutely had to have and would die if you didn’t get for Christmas?”

“She’s not stealing it, Mom. She’s just borrowing it.”

Mom tugs at the sleeve of her cashmere sweater, then inclines her head at me.

“What?” I say.

“So, you’re concerned about the prom?”

“I’m not concerned, Mom. I just want to go with Tommy Knutson.”

She narrows her eyes at me.

“What!” I say.

“If he wants to go to the prom with you, sweetie, he’ll ask.”

“What if he’s shy?” I say.

Mom sucks in this gigantic breath, like I’ve asked her to explain something deeply obvious. Then she pulls out a paperback, which I’ve just noticed tucked under her arm, and hands it to me.

“*The Guide?*” I say.

Mom nods. “We didn’t have this book when I was your age. We had to improvise.”

The subtitle is *Timeless Tips for Landing Mr. Right*. I have a quick flip through it.

“Men are different,” Mom says. “The sooner you learn that, the better.”

“I don’t care about men, Mom. I’m focusing on one man. Tommy Knutson. The rest of them can spontaneously combust as far as I’m concerned.”

I put the book on my desk and start picking up the rejected clothes Ramie has flung about my room, including her own, which she’s left in a pile.

Mom crosses her arms and leans against the doorjamb. “I know it’s hard to believe,” she says, “but even at the ripe old age of seventeen, you may not know everything there is to know.”

“All right,” I say. “I’ll read it.”

She fires one last condescending glare at me, then leaves. On the one hand, I’m not inclined to take Mom’s advice on men. It’s not like her marriage to Dad is anything to brag about. They’ve barely spoken since Dad assumed sole occupancy of our basement. On the other hand, if her stories are to be believed, by the time she graduated from college in Ye Olde Early Eighties, Mom was dripping with “prospects.” No less than six guys proposed to her. Six guys!

And she chose Dad. That’s the bewildering part. But then, he used to be normal. He used to be a corporate lawyer until he ditched his career on “the eve of partnership, for God’s sake,” to use Mom’s oft-repeated phrase. Mom worked two jobs to put him through law school, so she has an understandably bad attitude about that particular decision. As you’ve undoubtedly guessed by now, my parents are annoyingly complicated. I try not to think about it.

So anyway, I go to my desk and glance at the first tip, which is “become a being like no other.” I’m fairly certain I already *am* a being like no other, but the authors have something else in mind. To them, becoming a being like no other means sipping rather than slurping your drink, pausing between sentences, and—I am not kidding here—“if your hair falls into your face, comb it back from the top of your head in a single graceful sweep.”

I turn to my left and practice the move in the mirror above my dresser. It looks deeply fake at first, but when I practice it a few times, it starts to look natural, and I have to admit, there’s something surprisingly elegant about it. It beats sticking your hair behind your ears or, worse, wearing a barrette.

I keep reading. Most of the tips involve variations on the theme of playing hard to get. Things like ending a conversation quickly and never calling a guy on the phone. I can’t help wondering, though: if everyone who reads this book follows its advice, won’t we become beings *just like* every other?

I close the book and look up at my calendar. I now have one hundred and twenty-six days to get Tommy Knutson to ask me to the prom. That may sound like a long time to you, but I don’t even have a strategy yet. I pick up Mom’s book again. It’s a place to start, right?

march 14

●  
**Jack**

Let me tell you something about Jill. The girl’s life is a friggin’ fairy tale. I swear she wakes up to the sound of woodland creatures whistling a happy tune at her window. Oh, but it’s not all sunshine and roses, right? “Boo friggin’ hoo, Steven Price asked me to the prom when I really really really want to go with Tommy Knutsack.”

Well, listen up, Little Jilly Wets-her-pants, when your biggest problem is conning some lazy-eyed schmuckwit into asking you to the prom, you can excuse the rest of us for withholding our sobs. Some of us have *real* problems to contend with.

All right, Jack, chill out. Take a few deep breaths.

Sorry. I don’t mean to rant. I’m in a bad mood. I’m always in a bad mood when I wake up. It’s hormonal. Jill, the lucky bitch, gets three full weeks per cycle to live her stupid life. I get four days. Four *premenstrual* days. How many dudes have that complaint?

But don’t go spilling any tears for me. I’ve got this under control. Jill may have her Plan B rituals. Well, I have Plan Jack rituals. They go like this:

Wake up, check that I'm all in one piece, if you know what I mean, then haul my naked ass out of bed. Jill's been decent enough to sleep naked at the end of her phase ever since I informed her what it felt like to wake up with my nuts twisted into a thong strap. Yes, I have to tell Jill these things. I have to leave her little notes because of all that Plan B stuff she does to obliterate me. I'm telling you, the girl knows *nothing* about my life.

Which means she doesn't know how much *I* know about hers.

So anyway, first thing I do after taking a monster piss in our private bathroom is check the calendar on which Little Anal Annie has dutifully crossed out all the days that have passed. Then I lie right back down to begin my own form of meditation.

Of course, I skip the "I am all girl" crap. I go right to the black dot. It's always there, right in the middle of my forehead where Jill left it. But instead of using it to erase things, I do the opposite. I envision myself squeezing through it like a snake into a rabbit hole. Then I project Jill's last three weeks onto the blackness like a superfast movie and take detailed mental notes of the good parts. I'm not sure she'd appreciate the gory detail in which I record the things she does, says, thinks, lies about, smells, touches and dreams. Would you?

Don't be judgmental, though. Jill's life—that petty, grade-grubbing, Ramie-worshipping life—constitutes my only experience of the outside world. I can't afford to forget things.

That's how it has to be. I'm a realist. I understand the ways

of the world. I have no interest in parading our "condition" around like a circus act. Besides, as long as Plan B keeps working, I don't have to worry about them finding a cure. Oh, don't be naive. They'd snuff me like a rabid dog if they could. They tried to. That was Plan A.

Honestly, the fact that "Mom" (and, believe me, I use the term loosely) never came after me with a scalpel is a small miracle. That woman is nuts. You should have seen her reaction on the day I finally woke up. No, not the day Gail Girliepants grew a dick. I'm talking about the day the dick developed an autonomous sense of self. Don't ask me how this transpired. I'm not a shrink. All I know is that in May of our sophomore year, almost a year after the cycling had begun, I stopped feeling like Jill with a penis and started feeling like me.

That was a messed-up day. At dinner I told Mom and Dad I wanted to be called Jack, not Jill, because, you know, I was a guy. You should have seen the look on Mom's face. She jammed her fork into her mashed potatoes and said no way. I should just knock that off right now. The fact that I was suddenly, you know, *alive*, meant nothing to her. In her eyes, I was nothing more than an ugly wart on a pretty girl's cheek. She and Dad talked about locking the bedroom door, even handcuffs. What if I escaped? What if I roamed the neighborhood like the bogeyman? What if I ruined their precious Plan B?

Mom and Dad eventually came to their senses. Well, Mom did. Dad's senses have been MIA for three years now. She decided against handcuffs and door locks and settled for a sturdy parental filter on the Internet. Big miscalculation. I hacked

through it in two days, set up a MySpace page and started downloading epic amounts of porn. It was a short-lived victory, though. When Mom found out—who knows how—she canceled the Internet altogether. The next day, she canceled the phone service. Now only she and Jill have cell phones and Mom keeps both of them with her lest I get my dirty hands on one and make pornographic prank calls. Which I would. Believe me.

Mom and I formed a tense truce after that. I stopped trying to leak my hideous self into the outside world. She bought me books, CDs and Nintendo. But things were never the same. I wasn't her child anymore. I was an unwanted houseguest. A *dangerous* unwanted houseguest. After a while, I started having dinner in my bedroom. She didn't mind. She was glad to be rid of me. Dad was harder to read. He always had this guilty look on his face as if he was about to say something but didn't know how to phrase it. What was I supposed to make of that?

I hardly ever leave my room anymore, except to raid the fridge. Sometimes I bump into Dad in the kitchen, but for the most part, he stays in his basement and I stay in my room. When I need something from the outside world, I leave a note for Jill. She's pretty cool about getting me stuff: books, DVDs, that kind of thing. She's all right, I guess. I just wish she wasn't so boring.

It's an issue for me because, like I said, her life is my only window to the outside world. It'd be nice if the girl would cut me some slack and, I don't know, vandalize something, flip off

a teacher or maybe experiment with lesbianism. Something. Instead, I'm forced to live vicariously through the tedious non-adventures of Marjorie Model Citizen.

But what can I do? I try to make the best of it. When life gives you lemons, and all that.

So anyway, on March 14, after taking a piss and noting that only one hundred and one days remain to get Tommy Knutcase to ask us to the prom, I lie down, summon the black dot and squeeze through the rabbit hole of Jill's life. I won't bore you with the complete details. Suffice it to say, it goes something like this:

Saw Ramie in a bra . . . speed-read Mom's *Guide* book . . . broke a fingernail . . . tripped over Tony Camere in front of a bunch of football players . . . got Mrs. Wainwright to raise my A- to an A on my *Red Badge of Courage* paper . . . almost wet myself in calculus when Tommy Knutjob looked at me . . . secretly picked my nose in Spanish class . . . practiced Ramie's alluring over-the-shoulder glance in the mirror.

Riveting stuff, right? Bear with me. There is one theme from Harriet Ho-hum's *Adventures in Snoozeland* that always gets my juices flowing. I spend extra time remembering those sections. I savor every luscious, forbidden detail. If Jill ever knew about this illicit pleasure of mine, she'd freak out. Heck, it scares *me* sometimes. There's something so taboo about it. But what can I do? I'm a flesh-and-blood guy. Just because no one knows I exist, it doesn't mean I don't have needs. In fact, I'm having a need right now. Time to leave Barbara Boredom a note with a new request.

march 18



Jill

*Ninety-seven days until prom night.*

I wake up with the transformation cleanly behind me, do my Plan B rituals, and take down the handwritten note Jack has taped to the mirror. “Dear Jill,” it reads. “Need more porn.”

Ick. But I keep reading. “You don’t want my dirty mind wandering where it tends to wander, so do us both a favor and get the warden to bring back the Net. Thanks. Jack.”

I thought it was mal sharing my bedroom with a smelly boy. Sharing it with a smelly boy who asks me for porn is an extreme dimension of mal.

There’s a knock on the door.

“You up?” Mom says.

I open the door and Mom’s in full work mode: she’s wearing a beige wool-blend pantsuit with regrettably tapered-leg trousers I still have not been able to talk her out of. Her hair is blown and sprayed into strict stasis. But her face brightens into a big warm smile, which creases the corners of her eyes.

“What day is it?” I say.

“Sunday,” she says. “I’m taking Pamela’s shift today.”

I nod, cross off the four previous days on my calendar.

She ruffles my hair and says, “French toast?”

I nod.

When she’s gone, I shower, throw on some jeans and a T-shirt, then head downstairs.

Normally, Dad eats breakfast in his basement yoga hole, but the smell of maple syrup warming on the stove always brings him up. He lurks in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. “Hey, pumpkin,” he says.

“That’s an unusually festive ensemble,” I say.

Dad’s fashion sense is disgusting on his best days, but today he’s wearing heavy green slipper socks, turquoise swimming trunks with a giant bleach stain on the right leg and a holey Three Stooges T-shirt somebody gave him for his birthday a thousand years ago.

“Wait a minute,” I say. “Dad, have you been scavenging the Goodwill bag?”

He curtsies and says, “Waste not, want not.”

Believe it or not, this passes for joviality in the McTeague household.

Dad and I pull out our chairs and have a seat under the fluorescent glare of the breakfast nook while Mom pours the syrup into the little Pilgrim gravy boat and joins us.

“You feeling okay this morning?” he asks.

“Aces,” I tell him. I spear two slices of French toast and drag them to my plate.

There’s frost on the little window over the steel kitchen sink,

and the trees in the background are gray and bare. A typical crappy day in Winterhead. But inside, things are nice and cozy, with Dad's ever-present oniony aroma creating an unusual counterpoint to the homey smell of hot butter and maple syrup.

"So," I say. "Jack wants you guys to bring back the Internet."

Dad drops his fork with a clatter and Mom freezes with the gravy boat mid-pour. They hate when I bring up Jack.

"Why?" Mom blinks about a thousand times as she says this.

I'm a fairly creative person, but it is way too early to make something up, so I just come out with it. "He wants porn. He said if he doesn't get it, his mind will wander somewhere I don't want it to. Don't ask me what that means. I don't want to know." I pour myself some OJ.

Dad starts tugging on his beard, then jabs his fork into the platter of French toast and drags a piece back to his plate.

I look at Mom, whose face has reverted to its normal state of robotic calm.

"Loan him your father's," she says. "He's got a stack of old *Hustlers* hidden in a box downstairs. Next to his hockey equipment."

I do not look at my dad. I think I will never look at my dad again. But through my peripheral vision, I can see his knuckles whitening around his fork.

Mom chews her tiny mouthful while smiling that robot smile, as if this were all perfectly normal. Then she pours herself another cup of coffee. "Don't worry about it, sweetheart."

She empties half a packet of Sweet'n Low into her Relax, There's a Woman on the Job mug. "All boys do it." She stirs her coffee and takes a dainty sip. "They're only a baby step above chimps."

Dad's white knuckles release the fork, letting it drop again to the plate.

Mom slices off a corner of her French toast, pops it in her mouth and winks at me.

"Mom," I say. "I am not giving him Dad's . . . magazines." I can't even say the words "porn" and "Dad" in the same sentence.

"Well, I'm not bringing the Internet back into this house," Mom says. "Not after last time."

"I think Jack learned his lesson after that," I say. "He's been good, right?"

Mom levels a cold gaze at me like I'm being naive, but sometimes I think she enjoys assuming the worst about Jack. About all men, actually.

"Well, what should we do?" I say. "Jack says he needs it."

Mom gives Dad a wide-eyed look like she's expecting him to come up with an idea, but Dad hasn't come up with an idea in years. Dad is an idea-free zone. I lower my head and sneak a sideways glance at him. He keeps his eyes on his plate while he stabs a piece of French toast and makes it bleed syrup. When he glances up at Mom, waves of silent hatred propagate between their eyes. Mom's smile never wavers. She can propagate hate waves while smiling, doing her nails, cooking dinner, you name it.

After a few seconds of frigid standoff, Mom lays her fork and knife across her plate. “Fine,” she says. “I’ll pick up some magazines after work. Okay?” Though she looks at me while she says this, it’s clearly directed at Dad for being basically a nonentity in this household.

“Thanks, Mom,” I tell her.

She waves her hand dismissively, then knocks back the rest of her coffee. “I’ve got to get to the office.” She takes her plate to the sink, dumps the remains in the rubbish, gives it a quick rinse and puts it in the dishwasher—all without a single wasted motion. Then she breezes out of the kitchen as if we have not just discussed pornography over French toast.

That leaves me and Dad.

The phone rings and I leap from the table, vowing to engage in a lengthy chat with whomever is on the other end, even if it’s Auntie Billie.

“Hey, Jill.”

It’s Ramie, bless her.

“Guess what?” she says.

I take the phone out of the kitchen and slump into the beige sofa in the living room. A “guess what” from Ramie could mean anything.

“I got into FIT,” she says.

“Nice one!” I say. “Not that I’m surprised, you little genius, you.”

FIT is the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City.

“I wish you were coming with me,” she says.

“Tell me about it,” I sigh.

I’d give anything to go away to college, but unfortunately, Plan B will not work in a dorm, so I’m stuck with deeply mal Groton College, which is a Christian college in Winterhead.

“It’s not too late,” Ramie says. “You could apply for second semester. I could take care of you, drive you to your treatments and stuff. We could be roomies.”

Yeah, *that* would work.

I haven’t ruled out the possibility of transferring to a commutable school in Boston at some point, but Mom thinks I should stay close to home, at least for the first year.

“Ramie,” I say. “I am going to Groton to find Jesus.”

“Is he missing?”

Truthfully, college is not something I like to think about. The future, in general, is a big ball of scary. When I imagine what it will be like when I can no longer reasonably live at home, I tend to break out in hives. Not that I want to be one of those losers who never moves out. It’s just that Mom and I haven’t figured out how to evolve Plan B into Plan C: Independent Living. Mom thinks we should shelve worrying about that for a later date. I’m on board with that.

“Rames,” I say. “I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks,” she says, but it’s dripping with moroseness.

“Well, don’t spoil the fun, dude. You’re going to FIT and I’ll deeply visit you.”

“Promise?”

“Duh. So anyway. College schmollege, what have you got for me?”

“Right,” she says. “Phase One of the Tommy Knutson Project is complete.”

“Shhh. We’re not calling it that,” I remind her. “It’s called Project X.”

I can hear Dad’s forlorn fork and knife tapping the plate as he finishes his French toast in solitude.

“Well, I’ve got video,” Ramie says. “Want to come over and practice?”

“First things first,” I say. “What have you learned about our prime target?”

“He’s not a drug dealer,” she says.

“Excellent.”

“Thought you’d like that,” she says. “Additionally, he was never a prostitute on Hollywood Boulevard.”

“What?” I almost fall off the sofa. “I never heard that one.”

“Yeah,” she says. “The guy comes with a complete set of false rumors. I’m skimming this data from a sea of gossip and innuendo.”

“But you’re sure they’re false?”

“Absolutely,” she says. “I got most of my reliable intel from some kids in his art class who say they don’t talk to him much anymore.”

“Why not?” I say.

“Unknown,” she says. “They got all shruggy and evasive when I asked. I have to say, Jill, the guy does have a quasi-mysterious loner-type vibe.”

“Is that bad?”

“Could go either way.”

“You mean, maybe he’s so superior to his fellow students,” I say, “that he has no need of their deeply inferior companionship?”

“Or,” she says, “he’s on the verge of shooting up the school. Yeah, that’s what I mean.”

I hear myself swallow. But I deeply do not think Tommy Knutson is *that* type of loner. His eyes are too kind.

“Oh,” Ramie says, “and apparently, he had some sort of devastating relationship in New York with an older girl named Tinsley.”

“Tinsley?”

“It’s a rich girl’s name,” she says, “which is good news, given what we’re about to turn you into.”

“Good point.”

I hear Dad screech his chair and take his plate to the dishwasher.

“So, you want to come over and practice?” Ramie says.

“There in fifteen.” I hang up and return the phone to its cradle in the kitchen.

“Gotta run,” I tell Dad.

I do not look at him when I say it. By now, I’m pretty much committed to never looking at him again.

Now, I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that Project X (a.k.a. the Tommy Knutson Project) is the second-greatest achievement of the McTeague household (with Plan B holding steady in the number one spot). Ramie and I fine-tuned Project X before Jack’s phase while holed up in my bedroom for a

nacho-fueled all-nighter. Mom thought we were cramming for a Spanish test. At least she pretended to think that. She approves of neither Ramie's existence nor my obsession with Tommy Knutson but has, for some reason, chosen to back off. Most likely, she has me under twenty-four-hour surveillance and is pretending to butt out because Project X centers around her *Guide* book. You see, we have turned Mom's book into an action plan. How? By transforming me into a being like no other. According to *The Guide*, this is supposed to trigger the hunter instinct in men, thus compelling them to propose marriage or, in my case, a date to the prom. And since "being like no other" is a euphemism for "aloof, unattainable snob," Ramie and I have decided to use as our role model Alexis Oswald, a.k.a. Lexie, the Rich Bitch.

Lexie is, by a wide margin, the aloofest and unattainablest girl at Winterhead High. All her friends go to private school, but her gazillionaire parents make her go to public school because they have political opinions on the subject. Lexie has never voluntarily spoken to anyone at Winterhead High. Nevertheless, she's made the guys' Top Five Most Doable list four years running. So has Ramie. I got honorable mention once, along with twenty other girls.

So, while I was away getting my "blood transfusions," Ramie got sneaky with her cell phone camera and recorded Lexie strutting through the hallways of Winterhead High. I suppose I should point out that Ramie does not approve of *The Guide*. It's "archaic" and "objectifying" and "antifeminist"

and a whole host of other things she assures me I will care about when I achieve her exalted state of enlightenment. She's only participating in the Tommy Knutson Project—I mean, Project X—because it's an opportunity to attempt "rebranding," which is a concept she read about in British *Vogue*. She said that turning me into Lexie Oswald is like turning the Gap into Chanel. Then she apologized and bought me some expensive mint tea because I am *not* the Gap.

When I get to Ramie's house, she ushers me right upstairs.

"What happened to Chubby Chic?" I ask her. "You're wearing skinny jeans again."

She sits me down on her ancient lumpy brass bed and grabs her laptop, where she's downloaded the Alexis Oswald footage. "Yeah," she says, "I've had a rethink of Chubby Chic." She sits cross-legged next to me on the thick down comforter and clicks her video software. "Turns out Chubby Chic is not as paradigm shifting as I thought, given the overall lardassification of the American public."

"Lardassification?"

She adjusts the screen brightness. "Yeah. My new word of the week. What do you think?"

I sit cross-legged on the bed. "It's nice, Rames. Sensitive, you know, to fat people."

"Right," she says. "Good point. Anyway, here is the lovely and talented Alexis Oswald." She clicks Play with a flourish, and Lexie's grainy butt and legs begin moving in and out of focus through the crowded hallway near the art room at

Winterhead High. “It’s a little jerky,” Ramie says. “A cinematographer I am not.”

We examine Lexie’s walk from a variety of angles and determine that there are exactly four main elements to her overall presentation:

1. Shoulders erect
2. Head tilted back
3. Eyes focused on the distance
4. Hips utterly stationary

That last element is the biggest challenge. I’m sort of bow-legged and my hips tend to sway of their own accord. To achieve Lexie’s snooty, stick-up-the-butt walk, Ramie has to grab on to both of my hips and hold them steady while I shuffle back and forth in front of her bed.

“Stop swaying!” she says.

But my hips won’t obey.

She lets go and says, “Watch me.”

She stands by the ancient hissing radiator under the frosty window and tries the walk herself.

“Ramie,” I say. “You walk like a trucker.”

She stops in front of the antique beveled mirror above her white dresser, backs up and clomps toward it again. “Mal,” she says. “You’re right. I never realized how unfeminine I am.”

“Yeah, well, your boobs make up for it. Anyway, let’s focus on me here.”

After several tries, I manage to tame my wayward hips by

clenching my buttocks and forcing my feet to point outward like a duck.

Ramie sprawls on the bed with the laptop at eye level and checks my walk against the Lexie footage.

“No, no, no,” she says. “You look like Frankenstein. Your upper body is too stiff.”

I stop at her window and shake out my legs and arms. “I think I’m cramping up. Do I at least have the bottom half down?”

“Do it again!” she says.

I take a deep breath, clench my buttocks and duckwalk the three strides to her dresser, watching my reflection the whole way.

“Actually,” she says, “that’s not bad. You look constipated, but if you loosen up your shoulders and relax your face, it won’t be so mal.”

Mastering the upper body is much easier and comes with the discovery that “looking down your nose at people” is not a metaphor but an actual posture. With her cell phone, Ramie videos me walking a few short laps; then I join her on the bed and we compare it to the Lexie footage.

“Pretty good,” she says. “I feel myself hating you.”

“Yes,” I say. “But you respect me, don’t you? I intrigue.”

Ramie raises an eyebrow.

“What?” I say.

“Nothing.” She closes the laptop and sits up.

I sit up too. “Ramie!”

She sighs. “You’re not exactly approachable like this.”

“Do you have Alzheimer’s?” I say. “That’s the whole point. It’s not about being approachable. It’s about becoming a ‘high-status’ woman.”

“Right,” she says. But there’s doubt in her eyes.

“Ramie,” I say. “I need you on board with this. If you have concerns, I need to know them now.”

“Nope,” she says. “I’m on board. You become an uptight snob. Tommy is bound to want you.”

“Aloof, not uptight.”

“Right. You become an aloof snob, while I dig for signs that Tommy is growing wild with desire to hunt you.”

I drop my head into my hands.

“Well, I’m sorry,” she says. “But you have to admit this is a pretty non-sane philosophy.”

“Who cares?” I tell her. “As long as it works.” I pull myself off the bed and walk over to her assortment of vintage trench coats hung from a row of wooden hooks. Above them is a framed photo of Greta Garbo smoking a cigarette and looking all classy. Talk about a high-status woman.

“Look,” I tell her. “I’ve tried it the other way, being friendly, being approachable. It’s not getting me a date with Tommy Knutson, is it? Boys are different.”

“You sound like your mother.”

“Shut up,” I say. “It’s just a fact, Ramie. It’s science. If we want them to act on their natural male instincts as hunters, we have to play our part as—”

“Gatherers?” she says.

“No!” I say. “As prey.” I grab the belt from one of the trench

coats and start fiddling with it. “I thought you were on board with this. You got the Lexie footage.”

Ramie cocks her head as she sizes me up.

“What?” I say.

“This isn’t just about getting a prom date, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“You heart him.”

“I do not.” I look down and start winding the belt around my finger. “He’s just a decent prom prospect, you know, being new and kind of a loner.”

“Jill,” she says, “if it were only about getting a prom date, you could have said yes to Steven Price.”

“Are you psychoanalyzing me?”

Ramie nods.

I wrap the belt around my finger even tighter.

“Look at you,” she says. “You’re in a severe state of Tommy positiveness. You’re Tommified. You’re a Knutsonian.”

“Are you finished?”

“Your finger’s purple.”

“Ow.” I unwrap the belt and shake out my hand. “All right,” I say. “Maybe I kind of, sort of heart him a little bit.”

“I knew it!” she says. “Well, this changes everything.”

“Why?”

“Because!” she says. “It’s not a lame prom strategy anymore. It’s a bona fide slurpy love thing.” Ramie smiles giddily and hugs her pillow. “It’s so cool.”

“It is not,” I say. “I have to act like he doesn’t exist, Ramie. Like he’s a black hole.”

“A deeply peculiar dilemma,” she says.

“Ramie, you can’t bail out on me. Not now.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she says. With renewed vigor, she picks up the cell phone and points it at me. “All right, let’s do this thing.”

I back up to Ramie’s radiator, straighten my shoulders, tilt my head back and walk the Lexie walk.

Curse my stupid heart. It was only supposed to be about the prom.

Monday, March 19. Ninety-six days until prom night. Look out, Winterhead High. The new and improved, ingeniously re-branded Jill McTeague has arrived. Butt clenched, shoulders erect, I glide through the teeming hallways. Nose scornfully aloft, I make eye contact with no one. In fact, my gaze is so focused on the distance that I overshoot my homeroom door and Ramie has to drag me inside by the belt loop.

But by the time D Block Spanish rolls around, I am in command of the Lexie Oswell walk and am starting to feel the mojo of this new attitude. Mercifully, Tommy is absent, which means I have the whole day to practice my new persona.

To aid in the transformation, I have taken a page from Plan B and composed a new mantra: “I am a busy girl with a rich, full life. I am confident, strong and beautiful, and any man would be lucky to have me.” I repeat this silently to myself as I glide through the drab gray hallways of Winterhead High, where my graceless peers scurry to and fro. I am above them all. I am just out of reach. I am . . .

A being.

Like.

No other.

I’m so good at this act, I forget to turn it off when I meet Ramie for lunch and she has to whack me on the shoulder and say, “Snap out of it, bitch.”

You do not condescend to Ramie Boulieaux.

Day One of Project X swims along, well, swimmingly. But on Day Two, Tommy finally appears. It’s just after homeroom, and I’m heading to history class when I spot his pale chiseled face and brown shoulder-length hair in the distance behind a cluster of giggling freshgirls. His white button-down shirt is loose and open just one button at the collar, revealing, even from three classrooms away, the tender notch at his collarbone. I’ve never gotten close enough to smell Tommy Knutson, but I’m sure he smells like heaven. Angels do, you know. And the way he moves. He’s like a stingray—graceful and smooth amid the chaotic frenzy of dizzy fish all around him. He, not I, is the being like no other.

And I’m staring at him! I take a deep breath, close my locker and pull my pale blue cashmere sweater down over the waistband of my black jeans. Eyes on the distance, head tilted back, I shoulder my backpack and head toward him. My pulse races as I sense him getting closer to me. I clench my butt cheeks and focus more intently on the art room at the end of the hallway. But just ahead and to the right of me are Jed Barnsworthy and his cluster of toady boys loitering, per usual, by the special needs room for another round of teasing the

developmentally disabled kids. Jed lives two houses down from me, but I don't speak to him anymore unless absolutely necessary. Now, though, in a freak confluence of events, Tommy approaches me just as I approach Jed, and for a brief but tragic moment, we are all drawn into a hideous Jed Barnsworthy vortex.

"Hey, McTeague," Jed says. "What's with the stupid walk? Something lodged up your ass? Need me to dig it out?" He laughs like a hyena.

My heart races, but I keep my pace constant, eyes front. Through peripheral vision, I see Tommy Knutson stop and face Jed. Then I hear laughter. Snarling, toady-boy laughter. Plus laughter from other sources I'm too shaken to identify. Stifling the urge to run, I continue gliding away, past the trophy case toward the art room.

Does Tommy say something to Jed? Does he notice my unshaken calm in the face of social disgrace? I will never know. I duckwalk down the hall until there is nowhere to go but into the art room, despite the fact that I need to be in history class, which is on the other side of the school. The sophomore students gathering their India ink and styluses look at me in confusion, but I don't care. I can't risk having Tommy Knutson spot me peering out of the classroom like a scared mouse. I am above all this, you see. I am a high-status woman, and this kind of juvenile nonsense does not concern me.

I wait for the late bell, then hightail it out of the art room. At the special needs room, which wormy Jed Barnsworthy has mercifully vacated, I turn right down the North Wing, skidding

on my gold flats. Dodging other stragglers, I slip into history class just as Mr. Bennett is about to close the door.

"Thanks for joining us, Jill," he says.

Do I respond? No. I take my seat and make eye contact with no one. Project X requires one hundred percent commitment. It is not for dabblers.

By the end of Week One, evidence of Project X's success begins to trickle in. Lindsay Siggersall and her cheerleader pals are spotted mocking my new walk in the cafeteria to thunderous laughter from nearby tables. Daria Benedetti, my Spanish study buddy, pulls me aside after class to ask if I'm mad at her. At first I feign ignorance so as to keep up the act, because Daria has very loose lips. But it's too hard to lie to a friend, so instead, I apologize profusely and explain Project X. She understands, having spent her entire sophomore year pining for senior basketball star Lawrence Fogerty, who wound up impregnating an Esswich girl and skipping town a week before graduation.

By the middle of Week Two, the evidence is overwhelming. I have replaced Alexis Oswell as the coldest girl at Winterhead High. There are even rumors that my new attitude has something to do with my "mysterious absences." The words "brain tumor" are bandied about. But the full price of Project X doesn't become clear to me until one day in chem lab.

Steven Price and I are heating a saline solution over our shared Bunsen burner when he starts swallowing compulsively, which is a nervous tic. I know from Wikipedia that you're not supposed to draw attention to someone's nervous tic, so I sigh happily and say, "So, how are things, Steven?"

He shoots me a frightened look, then scowls and returns his gaze to the Bunsen burner.

“Steven,” I say. “Look, I’m sorry if I’ve been—”

“It’s okay,” he says. “No biggie.”

He makes a big show of concentrating on the solution bubbling in the beaker.

“Steven, listen. There’s a reason I’ve been . . .”

He looks up and waits for me to finish. But I never do. Steven undoubtedly thinks my new frigidity is the result of his preemptive prom attack. I want to dissuade him, but I can’t tell him about Project X. He’ll think I’m ridiculous. Plus he’ll never forgive me for choosing Tommy Knutson over him.

“Nothing,” I say.

He looks down again and swallows three times in a row. For a short but desperate moment, I want to abandon Project X or at least make an exception for Steven. I want to throw my arms around him, hug all his nervous tics away and tell him how special and wonderful he is.

But that is not what a *Guide* girl does.

Instead, I stare at the bubbles in our beaker, then look up at the clock and pray for a fire drill to slice off the remaining twenty-two minutes of chem lab.

Like I said. *One hundred percent commitment*. Not for dabblers.

I have alienated everyone: friends, acquaintances, even a few teachers, who, it seems, are not above maligning me in the faculty lounge within earshot of chatty students. Project X is a success.

But (and yes, it’s a big one) Ramie has gleaned no news

about Tommy Knutson. If my new status as aloof snob—I mean, a being like no other—is, in fact, driving him wild with desire to hunt me down like prey, the lad is keeping it to himself. He has asked no one why I don’t look at him in H Block calculus anymore. He has indicated to no one that he has noticed a change in my behavior. And, more critically, he has said nary a peep on the subject of the prom, which is beginning to loom like a storm cloud full of lightning. The boy is, to use Ramie’s term, “a total data abyss.”

So one day, I enter the cafeteria, doing my snooty walk, and approach Ramie and Daria, the only people I am permitted to speak with.

“My butt is killing me,” I say.

Daria makes room for me and I sit next to her.

“Yeah,” she says. “And everyone’s starting to hate you.”

“Really?”

Ramie pulls out her cell phone. “I can confirm new artwork in the North Wing boys’ room.” She shows me the picture—a graffiti drawing of a stick figure with what looks like a firecracker exploding from its butt. Underneath it is written “Her Royal Highness, Jill McTeague.”

“That’s good news?” I say.

Ramie snaps her cell phone shut. “They didn’t do it when you were nice.”

I take out my own cell phone, look at the date and do a quick calculation. “Eighty-seven days till zero hour,” I say. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up.”

Ramie sips from a bottle of Italian soda. “The thing is,” she

says, “with this *Guide* business? It’s more of a filtering system than an attainment strategy.”

I take out my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. “Expand.”

“I mean, it’s fine if you can wait all your life for a guy who’s so obsessed he’ll hunt your snobby ass down and propose marriage, but—”

“It’s not proactive, is it?” I say.

Daria steals a potato chip from me. “Yeah, well, the whole *Guide* philosophy is a lesson in enforced passivity.”

I glare at Ramie, because that was deeply not a Daria thought.

“What?” Ramie says. “You have to admit she has a point. I mean, how’s Tommy supposed to give you what you want if he has no idea what that is? Bit of a problem, no?”

“No,” I say. “The problem is one of focus.”

Ramie and Daria exchange doubtful looks. Obviously, they have been bad-mouthing Project X behind my back, the dirty traitors.

“Think about it,” I say. “I’m broadcasting my high status to everyone. But that’s like putting up a billboard and just hoping the right customer drives by. I should be aiming my high status directly at Tommy Knutson.”

“Like a weapon,” Ramie says.

“Exactly.”

“But how?” Daria says.

Ramie inhales sharply as if a lightbulb has just gone off. “By getting him alone,” she says.

“Without violating *The Guide*,” I clarify.

Daria sucks her teeth. “Deeply challenging.”

“Deeply, deeply,” Ramie says. “But not impossible. Jill, what are your thoughts on skiing?”

“Apathetic to hostile,” I say. “Rames, you know I don’t ski.”

“Reconsider that,” she says.

Thus was born Operation Swoon.

Winterhead is practically in the Arctic. We have our own ski slope. It’s not the Alps or anything, just a smallish hill anchored by a wooden shack that rents skis and serves hot cocoa. We call it the Bump. But did I spend every single wintry day of my childhood going up and down this glorified snowdrift? No. I took cooking classes inside, where it was warm. Damn my lack of foresight.

So guess who loves skiing with a passion that, in Ramie’s snooped lingo, “approaches religion”? You guessed it. Tommy Knutson. And guess where Tommy Knutson spends his weekends?

The Bump.

All day Saturday. All day Sunday. He even teaches beginner skiing to little kids on Wednesday afternoons. How adorable is that?

For a smaller mind, this not-inconsiderable deviation in our respective interests might signal a stumbling block to prom-related coupling. Not for the talented trio of Jill McTeague, Ramie Boulieaux and Daria Benedetti.

Here’s the plan.

Daria will wait in my Nissan in the Bump parking lot, on the lookout for Tommy Knutson’s silver Prius, which, according to

Ramie's sources, always arrives between nine-thirty and eleven-thirty every Saturday and every Sunday. As soon as she spots it, she'll call my cell phone and Ramie and I will take up first positions. Ramie will be stationed inside the cocoa shack. I'll be outside by the ski racks. When Tommy comes out to put his skis on, I'll toss him a big warm smile and wave. I know. I know. Not a *Guide* move at all. Be patient.

Now, Tommy, who has never been on the receiving end of so brash and unfeminine a gesture from me, will be confused. *Is she waving at me?* he'll wonder. *Wow! What a gorgeous smile.* Etc., etc. Then, being a gentleman, he'll wave shyly in return.

Here's where it gets interesting. I'll sigh exasperatedly and wave an even bigger wave, then crank up the smile into a full-blown laugh. (I've practiced this transition with Ramie and her cell phone camera. I'm not Julia Roberts or anything, but so long as I don't squint, I can achieve something in the vicinity of Julia brilliance.) This is meant to confuse Tommy. *What's she laughing at?* he'll wonder. *Is my fly down? Am I emboogered?* Out of politeness, he'll wave back and laugh nervously along with me.

That's when we turn the screws on him.

Using my finely manicured right pointer finger, I'll beckon him toward me while shaking my head as if he were a very naughty boy. (I've practiced this look extensively so as to avoid the allure-killing scowl.) Tommy, bewildered now by this totally unprecedented breach of the common laws of aloof femininity, will glance behind him to make sure that I am not, in fact, beckoning someone else. Then, being a gentleman and

not incurious as to my intentions, he'll walk somewhat hesitantly toward me.

When he is halfway there, we'll unleash the Grand Twist.

Ramie, all flustered, will run out of the cocoa shack, cell phone in hand, and plunk herself right between Tommy and me. "So sorry, darling," she'll say. Air kiss. Air kiss. "I wasn't ignoring you. I was on the phone with the fashion editor from *Paris Vogue*." (Ramie insisted on that part.)

Now picture the tableau: Ramie and I united at last and Tommy Knutson feeling utterly foolish for thinking that I was so brazen a girl as to beckon him to me. But lest you think the plan ends here, there is one final turn of the screw.

Ramie and I will walk away, leaving an embarrassed Tommy Knutson behind. Then Ramie, klutz that she is, will drop a ski glove and turn to retrieve it. What do I do? Oh, only unleash the alluring over-the-shoulder glance. Head downward, gaze upward to enlarge the eyes and evoke a sense of innocent vulnerability, I'll look not *at* Tommy Knutson, but just past him. Poor Tommy, overcome now with a love he can barely comprehend for this being like no other, will simply collapse in the snow.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is Operation Swoon.

It takes the passive approach of Mom's *Guide* book and sharpens it into a deadly weapon, all the while preserving the underlying principle of hunter and prey that makes femininity so powerful and mysterious a force.

So Saturday morning rolls around. It's ten-fifteen and Ramie and I have downed three cups of cocoa in the insufficiently heated cocoa shack while Daria waits in my Nissan for Tommy

Knutson to make his promised arrival. I'm swanked out in Ramie's pale pink ski suit with green figure-flattering stripes. My hair is blown perfectly straight and my makeup is light and natural. I've got lip gloss, blush and eyeliner stashed in the pockets of my coat for touch-ups. Ramie, sporting last year's blue ski suit, stares longingly through the steamy little window at the dozen or so skiers going up the rope tow and down the slope.

At 10:47, she turns from the window and says, "I just timed Sarah Mecklenburg. I swear, we can get up and down in under three minutes. That's plenty of time to get into first positions."

From the hard wooden bench where I've sat anxiously for going on two hours, I remind Ramie that I do not ski.

"It's barely an incline, Jill," she says. "Little kids make the run on their very first lesson." She reaches into her tight back pocket and pulls out a wad of twenties.

"What are you doing?" I say.

She walks over to Norm, the ski rental and day pass guy, who sits in a little closet in front of an army of upright skis. "Two day passes, please," she says.

Norm glances up from his car magazine and looks at me questioningly.

"I'm not skiing," I tell him.

"She's just nervous," Ramie says. "Two day passes, please."

Norm palms the twenty. "It's your money," he says. Then he hands Ramie two day passes.

Ramie peels her day pass from its backing and sticks it to

her jacket. "I can't believe you've never even tried it, Jill. You should deeply come to Sugarloaf with us."

She tries to hand me the day pass, but I pivot away and face the smelly popcorn machine. "Why would I want to go to Sugarloaf, Ramie? Why would I want to spend *more* time outside?"

"Because winter is so much more fun if you ski."

"Winter is for suckers." I cross my arms over my chest.

Undaunted, Ramie peels my day pass from its backing and slaps it over my left boob.

"Ouch."

"There," she says. "Now you have to ski."

"Gee, Rames, I guess you got me there. It's not like I can just sit here and ignore the sticker."

"Exactly." She grabs my arm and tries to drag me off the bench.

I hold firm with my other hand. "Get off me, you psycho."

Ramie lets go and stamps her foot on the wooden floor. "I can't believe you want to just sit here and wait for—"

I leap up and slap my hand over Ramie's big fat mouth. "Ramie, we promised 'Melissa' we'd be waiting in the cocoa shack when she got here. Remember?"

She tears my hand from her face and squeezes it hard. "I'm sure 'Melissa' will understand if we take one eensy weensy run on the Bump. After all, we must look like a couple of idiots sitting here waiting for 'Melissa' when we could be skiing." She flicks her eyes to Norm.

Norm is staring at us, mouth opened, but only vaguely intrigued.

As much as I hate to admit it, Ramie's right. Norm must know Tommy. It'll be suspicious indeed if we sit around in the cocoa shack until Tommy arrives.

"Fine," I say. "One time."

Ramie bounces in glee, then goes to Norm and rents me a pair of skis.

Let the record show that it was under the influence of too much cocoa that I made what will undoubtedly stand as one of my top five worst decisions.

The rope tow is out of the question. I am simply not grabbing on to that high-speed rope-burn machine to get dragged uphill at a million miles an hour with a pair of chopsticks bolted to my feet. But so zealous is Ramie to make a skier out of me that she risks her own cred to teach me how to use the much kinder J-bar—basically a hunk of metal shaped, as the name would suggest, into a J and hanging from a very slow-moving rope tow. We have the J-bar to ourselves because, as Ramie explains, "only bed-wetting babies have ever been seen on the J-bar."

Now, the secret to successful J-bar mastery amounts apparently to one golden rule: Don't Sit Down.

"Whatever you do," Ramie says, "just lean against the bar like this."

Ramie demonstrates by positioning herself between two slow-moving and widely spaced J's, then lets one tap her just above the tailbone. She then holds on to the upright part of the

J and lets it carry her slowly up the hill. After a few seconds, she skis away from it and back toward me.

"Easy as pie," she says. "Your turn."

I wait for a J to pass, then slap my big dumb skis into position.

"Keep them straight," she says.

I straighten my skis into a perfect parallel, then look over my shoulder until I feel the J-bar tap me just above the tailbone. Grabbing the upright bar with my right hand, I cling to the horizontal bar with my left.

"Keep your skis straight!" Ramie shouts.

I straighten them out and slowly, very slowly, the J-bar carries me up the hill. To my right, rope-tow jockeys point and snicker at me. Like it's some big accomplishment to hold on to a piece of rope.

"I'll meet you up there!" Ramie shouts.

I don't turn around or acknowledge her because I'm focused on leaning, not sitting, while keeping my skis perfectly, mathematically parallel. Plus I'm gripping both bars of the J as if my life depended on it. Eventually, Ramie passes me on the rope tow and blows me a kiss.

That's when tragedy strikes.

I raise my left hand from the horizontal bar to wave at her when, lo and behold, the bar slips past my tailbone. Gripping it firmly, I try to adjust it back into position but it keeps sliding down the backs of my thighs. Before I know it, I'm toppling backward over the J-bar. My head and shoulders land in the snow. The horizontal bar snags behind my knees, and in the

struggle to slide my legs off, my skis crisscross and somehow get stuck together.

Slowly, very slowly, the J-bar hauls me up the hill like a side of beef.

I struggle to jerk my legs off the bar but can generate no traction against the slick snow sliding beneath my back and head. Dropping my ski poles, I grab the bar and try to push it forward beyond my knees, but the moving surface beneath me and the natural wobble of the J-bar prevent any progress. My blush slips out of my coat pocket and slides backward down the hill.

Beaten, I lay back and stare at the stubborn X of my conjoined skis against the blinding white sky. At the top of the hill, an assortment of gears grind each J-bar through a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn to send it back down the hill.

My right boob vibrates.

Scrambling out of my ski gloves, I unzip my jacket and dig out my cell phone. My lip gloss tumbles free.

“First positions!” Daria says.

“Oh mal.”

“He’s . . . hold on,” she says. “He’s getting out of the car and heading for the cocoa shack. Are you in positions?”

The whish of snow beneath my head and the clang of my conjoined skis against the upright bar almost drown out Daria’s voice. Using all my strength, I try to yank my skis apart, but they won’t budge. Lifting my butt off the snow in an improvised pelvic thrust, I succeed only in dislodging my

eyeliner from the pocket and launching it in a low arc over my head.

“Daria,” I say, “listen to me. We have to abort!”

“What? Why?” she says.

“Get to the cocoa shack now!” I tell her.

At the top of the hill, the J-bar lurches violently but fails to slough me off.

“Look!” someone yells.

My J sweeps through the switching gears with a clamorous grinding of metal, then reverses direction to head downhill.

“Where are you?” Daria’s tinny voice shouts in my ear. I can hear her getting out of my car and crunching through the gravel parking lot.

As the J heads downhill, it begins to rise off the ground.

“Oh, no,” I say.

“What?” Daria says. “What’s happening?”

First my back, then my neck, and finally my head are lifted off the ground.

Through the cell phone, I hear the telltale squeak of the cocoa shack door. “Where are you?” Daria whispers.

Dangling now from the backs of my knees, my skis still married in their infernal X, I try not to look at the snowy ground ten feet below. Clumps of wet snow slide from my neck through my upside-down hair.

“Daria,” I say. “Listen to me. I don’t care what you have to do to make this happen, but you cannot let Tommy Knutson out of the cocoa shack! Do you understand?”

"I'm in the cocoa shack now," she whispers. "Where are you?"

As the J-bar carries me downhill, Ramie skis past me with an astonished look on her face.

"He's talking to that Norm guy," Daria says. "What do I do?"

"Abort!" I say. "Abort mission!"

"How do we abort?"

The J-bar starts to lower toward the ground. That's when I notice that everyone on the Bump has stopped skiing and is pointing in horror at my airborne carcass.

"Jill!" Ramie screams. At the bottom of the hill, she yanks her boots out of her skis and clambers up toward me.

"Get me down!" I yell to her. Into the phone I say, "Daria, are you aborting?"

Ramie shuffles quickly beneath me. "My God," Ramie says. "Are you talking to Daria?" She wraps her arms around my thighs and tries to yank them free. "How on earth did you . . ." She pulls at my left ski, but it won't budge. "Hold on." She jams her fist into the boot mechanism and rips my left foot free. I topple over backward, but impossibly, my right ski catches on the upright bar.

"What the hell!" Ramie says.

The J-bar drags me downhill by the ankle while Ramie, clinging to my right leg, clomps alongside in her ski boots.

"Daria?" I say. "Where are you? Where's Tommy?"

"Oh mal," Daria says.

Jamming her fist into my right boot mechanism, Ramie yanks my boot out of the ski and I tumble free just as the

J-bar heads into the switching gears to reverse itself back up the hill.

I lie in the cold snow and take exactly one relieved breath, then bring my cell phone to my ear. "Daria?"

There is a pause. "Um," she says. "I'm sorry. I didn't know how to abort."

I peel my head up from the snow and stare at the twenty or so people standing in a loose semicircle at my feet.

Among them are Daria and Tommy Knutson.

Tommy steps forward and drops to his knees in the snow beside me. "Are you all right?" he says.

His breath fogs the cold air and smells of peppermint. I don't answer him.

I feel Ramie's hand on my shoulder. "Jill?" she says, dropping to her knees.

Tommy looks at Ramie. "You think she's in shock?"

Ramie shrugs. "Jill," she says. "Are you hurt? Can you hear me?"

Ramie's breath does not smell of peppermint.

Somehow (it's all a bit of a blur) Ramie and Tommy get me up and we trudge past the murmuring crowd in our ski boots. Clumps of wet snow slither between my jacket and sweater.

Once we're in the cocoa shack, Tommy sits me down on one of the wooden benches while Ramie, improvising, hangs back with Daria to flirt with Norm. She means well, but dear lord, is she on drugs or something? I can't be left alone with Tommy Knutson in this state. Operation Swoon is in shambles. We need an exit strategy!

Tommy sits next to me. “You’re sure you’re okay?” he says.

I shake some snow from my totally ruined hair and try to repeat my mantra about being a busy girl with a rich, full life, etc., but I can’t focus with Tommy so close to me. “Yes,” I say. “I think I’m . . . Yes. I’m . . . Yes.”

Tommy nods and waits for a more content-rich response.

I try to think of something that’s both witty and aloof, but all I come up with is “I hate skiing.”

Tommy’s face darkens.

“I mean . . .,” I say. “I mean, I don’t really—”

Tommy laughs. “Don’t worry,” he says. “You’re not the J-bar’s first victim.”

I giggle stupidly, then clear my throat, straighten my posture and turn away to look at the popcorn machine in the corner.

“But you are its most theatrical,” he says.

Turning slowly back to him, I realize I have inadvertently launched the alluring over-the-shoulder glance. Ramie flashes me the thumbs-up sign, so I decide to go for it. Inclining my head downward, I gaze upward just past Tommy at Ramie and Daria. Ramie makes the okay sign, to which Daria nods in agreement.

Tommy follows my gaze to Ramie and Daria, who quickly return to flirting with an unimpressed Norm.

“Did you hurt your neck?” Tommy says.

I freeze for a second, then slowly, casually abort the move and return my gaze to the popcorn machine. “No,” I say. “It’s fine. Do you know what time it is?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tommy point to a clock directly above the popcorn machine.

I laugh awkwardly and say, “Of course.” Then I meet his gaze for a nanosecond, glance away and say, “I have to go now. Thanks for your help.” I stand up, look at Ramie, point to my wrist and, with a head bob, indicate that it’s time to go. I’m seconds from a clean getaway when I feel Tommy’s warm fingers around my wrist. “Hey, Jill,” he says.

For a moment, I dare to hope that the hunter has at last awoken.

He stands up and pulls me toward the smelly popcorn machine. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Um,” I say. “Sure.”

He releases my wrist, glances sneakily over my shoulder at Ramie and says, “What’s her deal?”

“Huh?” I clear my throat. “What do you mean?”

“Your friend Ramie,” he says. “She’s been asking people all kinds of questions about me, like am I gay and have I ever been in jail.”

“What?” I say. “I can’t believe she’d—”

“Yeah,” he says. “Some kids in my art class told me.” He taps his knuckles idly on the splintery cocoa shack wall. “They thought she was doing it on your behalf.” He smiles with only half his mouth.

I stare dumbly at Ramie, who furrows her brow at me in utter confusion. Daria keeps tapping her on the arm and mouthing, “What? What’s happening?”

When I flick my eyes back to Tommy, he’s smiling this

enormous Cheshire cat smile at me. After holding my gaze for an excruciating three Mississippis, he narrows his eyes, smirks and says, “Hey, by the way, if you hate skiing, what were you doing on the J-bar?”

Gulp.

I glance at Ramie and Daria, wondering how to blink the Morse code for SOS. All they do is stare back, confused. I’m on my own here. Operation Swoon is in tatters. No abort protocol, no exit strategy, and my mission partners may as well not exist. Shuddering with another shift of wet snow down my back, I take a deep breath and improvise a response.

“Gee, Tommy,” I say. “I’m not sure what you’re suggesting, but it sure sounds like you have a rich fantasy life.”

He absorbs my frigid stare for a moment, then looks down and laughs shyly. What an amateur.

“Anyway,” I say. “Thanks for your help. See you in H Block.” With as much grace as it’s possible to muster in ski boots, I clomp my way toward the cocoa shack door.

“No, you won’t,” he says.

I stop and face him. “Pardon?”

“You won’t see me in H Block,” he says, “because you never look at me anymore.” He walks toward me. “I’m flunking that stupid class. You were the only thing I liked about it. Now you give me the cold shoulder. What’s that all about?”

“You’re flunking?” I say.

He nods. “Tell you what. I’ll teach you how to ski if you help me pass calculus. I mean, you were here to learn how to ski, right?”

The Cheshire cat smile again. He’s toying with me!

But, on the other hand, I think he’s just made a semi-romantic overture. This is good news. I should accept his offer. This is mission accomplished, right? Mouth opened, I stare at Tommy, but I can’t figure out how to say yes. My hair’s a wreck and I’m still stinging from my public humiliation on the J-bar.

“I don’t know,” I find myself saying. “I’m a very . . . I’m a busy girl.” I turn away and clomp right out the cocoa shack door. I do not wait for Tommy’s response. I do not wait for Ramie and Daria. I do not even retrieve my shoes from under the bench where I’ve left them. I crunch my heavy ski boots through the gravel parking lot and grab the driver’s-side door of my Nissan. It’s locked.

“Damn it,” I mutter to myself. Daria has the keys.

A painful ten seconds later, Daria and Ramie burst through the door and walk briskly toward me.

“Keys, Daria,” I say.

I hold up my hand and she digs them out of her jeans pocket and throws them to me. I catch them, open the door, get in and start the engine. Ramie slides into the front seat and Daria gets into the back.

“Oh my God,” Daria says. “You left your shoes inside.” She puts her hand on the door handle.

“Forget it,” I say.

I throw the car in reverse and back out. In the rearview mirror, I spot Tommy Knutson standing in the cocoa shack doorway. Our eyes meet for a terrifying half a Mississippi, then I gun it and leave the Bump and its infernal J-bar behind me.