

“Heartbreaking, soul-sustaining, and all-around beautiful.”  
— Rebecca Stead, author of the Newbery Medal winner *When You Reach Me*

# See You at Harry's



JO KNOWLES

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*For Scott—*

Thank you for being my  
protector, dreamer, adventurer,  
and sometimes partner in crime.  
But mostly for being my brother  
and all that means.

I miss you.

THE VERY BEST DAY OF MY LIFE, I threw up four times and had a fever of 103 degrees. I was pretty sure I was going to die, and sometimes by the look on my mom's face every time she took my temperature, I think she was pretty sure, too. It was all because of Random Smith, a boy in school who never had a lunch. I'd given him a bite of my sandwich and all of my crackers, he looked so hungry. Growing up, my mom wasn't the kind of mom who said never drink from the same cup as someone else. That stuff didn't occur to her. So I'd given him a sip of my milk, too.

But in addition to being hungry all the time, Random was also usually sick. People never knew what he had, so they always just said he had "some random thing"—which they all thought was hilarious but I just thought was mean.

That day at home, my mom spent every minute with me. My older sister and brother were at school, and my dad was working at my parents' restaurant. I was eight and had never been home alone with just my mom before, at least not all day and definitely not with her full attention. The house was so quiet, except for us two. My mom got into bed with me and read *Charlotte's Web*. It took all day and at the end, we both cried and shared a tissue.

When we finished sniffing, my mom adjusted herself in the bed so she could look at me. "Fern," she said softly. "Do you know why I named you Fern?"

I nodded, looking at the drawing of the girl on the cover of the book.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because Fern is one of your favorite characters?"

"And why is that?"

I shrugged.

"Because Fern cares," she said. "From the moment you were born, I could tell you had a special soul. I knew you'd be a good friend. A hero."

I looked at my chest and tried to feel my soul buried in there, deep in my heart.

"It's true," my mom said. "Not everyone would share a sandwich with Random Smith."

I smiled, feeling my soul stir a little.

My mom took my hand and kissed it. "I'm proud of you, honey," she said. "I know you're miserable now, but you made a little boy feel like he matters. And I hope you think it was worth all this."

I nodded slowly, thinking about Random and his dirty face and stinky unwashed hair. I wondered if he was home sick, too, and if he had a mom next to him on his bed, reading to him all day and telling him he was special. But then I started to feel like I was going to throw up again. So I turned over on my side and my mother rubbed my back in slow, tiny circles, humming a lullaby I barely remembered, with fingers on my back I hardly knew. She was always so busy cooking and cleaning and working at the restaurant and basically just taking care of everything else.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember that feeling, because somehow, even then, I had a hunch that I might not feel it again.

Two days later, my mom got Random's bug. But instead of getting better, she kept throwing up. Every morning she was sick, sick, sick. And then finally, after what felt like weeks and weeks, she

my dad sat us all down and told us the news. My mom was going to have a baby.

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Now Charlie sits in the back of my mom's station wagon between Holden and me. He's three years old and thinks no one's looking when he picks his nose, which is way too often. My mom and sister are in the front, arguing about how many hours my sister has to work at the restaurant to help "contribute" to the family. Since Sara couldn't get into any good colleges, she's doing a gap year by staying at home and working at my parents' restaurant. All her friends went off to college, so on top of everything else she's lonely and grumpy and not much fun to be around.

"Tell me again why you're dragging us to the restaurant, Mom," Holden says, leaning as far away from Charlie as he can in case he decides to fling one of his finds in Holden's direction.

"I told you it's a surprise," my mom answers.

"Yay!" Charlie reaches for my ear. He loves playing with people's ears when he's not picking his nose or talking to Doll, the plastic baby he found in the memory trunk in my closet, where I put all my old toys and which was supposed to be private.

"Stop it," I mutter, flicking his sticky hand away.

Doll sits on his lap, facing forward, her naked bottom balanced on his knees.

"You need to put some clothes on her," I tell him.

He giggles and makes her dance naked in the air.

When my parents told us my mom was having a baby, they said we kids could pick a name together. My favorite book at the time was *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. We all agreed that we had to have a new brother, one like Charlie would be OK. We thought he'd be destined to be the kind of kid who'd get picked to ride in the great glass elevator. The sweet kid. The smart kid. The *quiet* kid. So far, it seemed like our Charlie wasn't quite filling the bill.

"Mom?" Holden asks again. "Is this a *Dad* surprise?"

"It better not be," Sara answers. She fidgets with her dreadlocks and flips down the sun visor so she can look at herself in the mirror. Sara's trying to be a Dead Head, like my parents were before they had us kids. Only the Grateful Dead doesn't even exist anymore, so I don't know what that's all about.

"I don't know exactly what your father has planned," my mom says. "But please, kids, try to humor him, OK?"

Humoring my dad means humiliation for us.

The last time my dad had a surprise, it involved the most embarrassing family/business Christmas card in history. My dad and mom dressed up as Santa and Mrs. Claus, and Holden, Sara, and I were forced to be elves. Charlie was Rudolph, but he kept pulling off his red nose so he couldn't pick at the real one underneath it.

Charlie reaches for my ear again.

"Stop it!" I yell.

"Fern, please. He only does it because he loves you," my mom says.

"I love you, Ferny," Charlie says in his extra-baby voice.

"Whatever," I say, looking out the window.

"Whatevuh," Charlie repeats.

"Please don't teach him that, Fern. It's bad enough coming from you."

I sigh and stare out the window. I can feel Charlie reaching Doll out to dance at me, but I ignore him.

"Whatevuh," he makes Doll whisper in my ear. Charlie has trouble pronouncing his *r*'s except

when he says my name. My mom says this is the greatest compliment Charlie could possibly give me for working so hard to say my name correctly. I guess it's true, but Charlie is so annoying so often, it's hard to feel flattered.

"I just want you to know," Holden says to my mom, "if this has anything to do with the annual Christmas card, I'm telling you right now, there is no way I'm wearing elf ears again."

Charlie pulls Doll away from me and reaches for Holden's ear.

"Listen," my mom says, all serious. "I'm sure whatever your dad has planned will be fine. He loves you. He's just trying to do what he thinks is best for the business."

"What about what's best for us?" Sara asks.

"It's all the same. If the business does well, then we do well," my mom says, quoting one of my dad's familiar lines.

Sara crosses her arms. "Whatever," she says.

My mom just sighs, and we continue to drive in silence, except for Charlie's quiet singing of "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" in Doll's left ear. I lean my head against the window and watch the neighborhood houses swim by, wondering if all families are as frustrating to live with as mine.

WHEN WE GET TO THE RESTAURANT, my dad hurries over to us with a huge grin on his face. “Finally! Who took you so long? The photographer will be here any minute. Quick, kids, put these on.”

We’re still in the parking lot as he hands us each a neon-colored T-shirt. I notice that he’s careful not to unfold them so that we can’t see the drawing on the front. I don’t know why, since he’s sporting his own neon-yellow T. As soon as he hands out all the shirts, his chest is in full view and so is the horrible design — a huge dinosaur sitting on top of a badly drawn image of our restaurant. The dinosaur is eating an ice-cream cone, and drips are slipping down the front window. Little faces peer out the window around the drips. I think they are supposed to be ours.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Sara says. “Seriously, Dad?”

My mom gives her a warning look.

“What?” my dad asks as he helps Charlie pull an electric-blue shirt over his head.

“We *all* have dinosaurs?” I ask.

“What’s wrong with dinosaurs? Kids love ’em. Right, Charlie?”

Charlie nods excitedly and roars.

“What do dinosaurs have to do with Christmas?” I ask. “These are for the annual card, right?”

“Come on, come on, come on. We don’t have time for dillydallying,” my dad says, ignoring my question.

I pull my own bright orange T over my head. It feels bulky over the T-shirt I’m already wearing. Sara puts hers on inside out. My dad is so busy fussing with Charlie, he doesn’t even notice.

“I can’t believe we have to do this,” Holden says, stretching his neon-green T-shirt out in front of him. “And why did I have to get green? It makes me look pale.”

My mom clears her throat in this way she has that means we’re supposed to look over at her without making it obvious. We all look and watch as her right hand, which is in a fist, slowly unclenches and she stretches out five fingers.

Holden, Sara, and I exchange glances. We wait.

My mom sighs and slowly unclenches her other fist. Five more fingers. That’s ten bucks each we keep our mouths shut and cooperate.

We’re in.

I don’t know when my mom turned to silent bribery to prevent family conflicts, but it seems to work. It’s not that we want to disappoint my dad. We know he means well. But why do his ideas always have to be so lame and humiliating? And why does the humiliating part always have to include us?

We all follow my dad to the front of the restaurant, where he starts to position us under the front window just as a van pulls into the parking lot blasting the Grateful Dead. It’s “Uncle John’s Band,” Charlie’s favorite, and he immediately starts shaking his bum.

“They’re here!” my dad yells.

Sara fidgets with her dreadlocks again. “At least they have good taste in music.”

“Everyone, this is Eric,” my dad says when the photographer walks over to us. “And Sky,” he says, gesturing to a woman wearing a head scarf.

“I love your hair,” Sky says to Sara.

“Uh, that’s not a regular camera,” Holden points out when Eric lifts the camera to his shoulder.

“That’s the surprise!” my dad yells. “Surprise! We’re making a commercial! Isn’t that great?”

“Yay!” Charlie yells, and runs over to hug Eric’s legs.

We all look at my mom. “Um, wow, honey!” she says. “I had no idea!” She makes an apologetic face at us, but she knows very well there is no amount of money that is going to make us be OK with *this* plan.

“That’s why it’s a *surprise!*” my dad says. He’s beaming, as if this is the best idea he has ever had. “OK, OK. Let’s get set up.” He puts his hands on my shoulders and walks me backward so I’m standing under the huge sign in front of the restaurant. “You look terrific, sweetheart!” he says in my ear. His stale coffee breath is particularly pungent.

“Holden? You next. Right here beside Ferny.”

“I want Ferny!” Charlie whines. He grabs hold of my legs so tightly, I almost fall over.

“Watch it!” I yell. “And don’t call me Ferny!” I hate that name.

“Daddy said it first!”

“You’re not Dad!”

“Stop it, Fern,” my mom says. “He’s paying you a compliment.” Any time Charlie bugs me and complain about it, my mom tells me I should be flattered. Flattered because he’s the only one in the family who ever pays any attention to me? I don’t think she gets how insulting that is.

My dad continues to line us up so that finally Sara, Holden, and I are squeezed in between my mom and dad. My dad picks up Charlie and perches him on his shoulder.

“I’m not doing this,” Sara says, stepping out of line.

“Now, look, honey,” my dad says. “I’m paying these people a lot of money. And with any luck we’ll get it back tenfold when the business starts booming.”

“I don’t want business to boom. That’s just more work for me.”

“More *money* for you, sweetheart,” my dad says through gritted teeth. “You want your own car to take with you to college next year?”

My sister perks right up. “Seriously?”

My dad nods. “Now try to look happy.”

Sara gets back in line, and we all plaster on our happy faces.

“Just try to act normal,” Eric says, fiddling with the camera lens.

“That’ll be a first,” Holden mumbles.

“That’s us, one big normal family,” I whisper back.

“Hush, you two,” my mom hisses.

“Harry, you ready?”

We all look at my dad. His name is George.

“Ready when you are!” my dad says.

Eric holds up his hand and counts silently on his fingers. Five, four, three, two, one, then points at my dad.

“WELCOME TO HARRY’S!” my dad booms.

Holden’s sweaty arm rubs against mine. My mom is stiff behind me. I hope the camera zoomed in on my dad because I think I cringed when he started talking. I try to smile as he lists off the most popular flavors of ice cream we sell.

“. . . and our most popular, *Dinosaur Crunch!*”

I hear Charlie chomp like a dinosaur. My dad laughs way too loud, then clears his throat. “I

YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TO HARRY'S, YOU HAVEN'T BEEN TO HEAVEN!" he yells.

~~Sky motions for all of us to wave. Charlie flaps his arm frantically and shouts, "See you Hawee's!" in his worst baby voice yet.~~

I think my ears are bleeding.

"Aaaaand cut," Eric says.

My dad tosses Charlie in the air. "Great line, buddy!" he yells. "Should we do another take, Eric?" I'm not sure how that came out.

"Nah, Harry. It was perfect. We'll cut anything that doesn't look quite right and pan in on some scenes I'll take inside. I'd like to film some customers eating cones, sundaes — stuff like that."

"Sure, sure, sure," my dad says. "Right this way." We all follow him into the restaurant, which is half empty. Right away I can tell my dad has planted "customers"— our regular employees and the kids or little sisters and brothers. They all say hi to my dad like he's a local hero, though I notice none of them call him by his real name.

My dad never corrects people when they call him Harry. He says it's good for business because people like to think they're talking to the guy the restaurant is named after (who was actually my grandfather). I'm pretty sure this drives my mom a little nuts, but she doesn't say anything. My mom almost never yells or gets upset. Whenever she looks like she might start to lose it, she heads up to my dad's stuffy office and shuts the door so she can meditate. There's a sign on the door that she flips around before she closes and locks it. On one side, it says, *Please knock*. On the other, it says, *Mom finding her inner peace. Come back later*. I'm not really sure what would happen if we interrupted her during meditation, and I don't really want to find out.

Charlie follows Eric around for the next hour while he films people eating burgers and licking ice-cream cones. Sara, Holden, and I sit at one of the booths.

"I can't believe this," Sara says for like the hundredth time as we watch the film crew. "Thank God I'm out of high school. I would never live this one down."

"Oh, thanks a lot," Holden says. "I'm just *starting!* I have enough stacked against me already. Now this?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Just forget it."

But I think I know.

I lean back in the booth and sigh. "We're doomed," I say.

Sara shakes her head. She doesn't even bother to try to cheer us up because she knows we're right.

The bell on the front door tinkles, and Random Smith walks in. He's wearing a T-shirt that says GLOW on it, and I wonder what it's supposed to mean. Ran is always wearing T-shirts with sayings on them that don't quite make sense to me. Last year, he gave me one for my birthday that said *real*. I think he was upset that I never wore it. I smile at him as he comes up to the table and waves the way he always does — elbow at his waist, hand swishing back and forth like a windshield wiper. Like a robot.

"Hey, Fern," he says.

"Hey, Ran." When I slide over, the back of my thighs stick to the red vinyl seat and make a disgusting sound. Honestly, could my life get any more embarrassing?

A few things about Ran have changed since our days of swapping germs:

1. His mom, who was really sick from cancer back then, won her battle, and she and Ran's dad started an online T-shirt company that makes a ton of money.
2. Ran shaved his head when his mom lost all her hair from chemotherapy, and he just decided he liked being bald. So now his head is shaved really close. I don't think most people could pull this off, but Ran is a very no-nonsense kind of person, and he doesn't really care what other people think. Also, it actually looks pretty good.
3. Despite his weirdness, Ran became my best friend. With his mom all better, he also stopped being so messy and sick all the time, which is a good thing, because being his best friend meant I was sick almost just as much.

Sara winks at me and I blush.

"What's going on?" Ran asks, taking in the scene.

"My dad is ending our lives as we know it," I say.

"TV commercial," Holden explains.

Ran cringes just as Charlie comes racing across the room and hugs him.

"Hey, little man," Ran says. They do their special handshake, which involves rubbing palms together. I don't think Ran knows or else cares how risky it is to touch Charlie's hands. No one knows where they've been — but most likely in some pretty disgusting places.

"Wanna sundae?" Charlie asks.

"Yeah!" Ran follows Charlie to the ice-cream counter, and they disappear behind it. A few minutes later, they return with a huge banana-split bowl filled with every topping we sell. They each have a spoon but share the bowl.

"That's disgusting," Sara says.

Charlie and Ran ignore her and go to town. Miraculously, they eat the whole thing. When they finish, Charlie's mouth has an almost-perfect chocolate circle around it that slowly drips down his chin. He looks just like the dinosaur on his T-shirt.

Ran carefully wipes his mouth with a napkin from the dispenser on the table. Then, instead of getting a new one, he just folds it over and wipes Charlie's mouth for him. Charlie beams.

In the distance, my dad tries to get the line cooks behind the counter to say, "See you at Harry's" but they look kind of confused. Instead, Charlie yells it from our table.

I hide my face in my hands.

"What's wrong?" Ran asks with his familiar bewildered look.

"Can't you tell how lame this commercial is going to be?" I ask him.

"Well, yes," he says slowly. "But that's not *your* fault."

"Since when does it matter if an embarrassing moment is your fault or not?" I ask him. "Do you not remember the elf cards? It took months for me to live that down."

"Only because you let it bother you," he says calmly.

"Whatever," I say, staring at the orange letters on his T-shirt. GLOW. Yeah. Why is it so easy for Ran to just glow, when I'm the one wearing the neon T-shirt?

“LET’S GET OUT OF HERE,” Sara says when we finally can’t listen to my dad anymore. “Ran? You need a ride home?”

“I have my bike,” he says. “Thanks for the ice cream, little man.” He does his handshake with Charlie again. This time their hands sort of stick, and Ran has to wipe his on his jeans.

“See you later, Fern.” He gives me an odd salute before he turns to leave.

In the car, Holden turns around from the front seat and grins at me. “So, Fern. What’s with Random, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ran? He’s looking pretty cute these days.”

Sara eyes me in the rearview mirror. “Yeah, Fern. What’s up with that?”

“Um, I don’t control people’s metamorphoses.”

Charlie makes Doll look at me with her unchanging surprised expression.

“Where’d you learn *that* word?” Holden asks.

I shrug.

“So, anyway, are you two going to be more than just friends? I could see him looking at you that special way.” Holden raises his eyebrows.

“Random and Ferny sitting in a tree . . .” Sara sings.

Charlie makes Doll dance.

“I think it’s time for all of you to shut up now,” I say.

“Bad word!” Charlie says, hitting me with Doll’s head.

“Ow! Knock it off.” I push Doll away and look out the window.

The truth is, I don’t really know how I feel about Ran. When he smiles at me as if I am more than his childhood best friend, sometimes it makes me happy. Sometimes it makes me scared.

“If you don’t snatch him up, someone else will,” Holden says.

“Like you, Mr. Faggypants?” Sara reaches over to pinch Holden’s cheek. “Better watch out, Fern.”

Holden hits Sara’s hand away. But she just laughs. “Chill out — I’m only joking.”

“I can’t believe you,” he says, turning away from her to glare out the window.

“You people need to lighten up,” Sara says.

At the stop sign just before the turn to our house, Holden jumps out of the car, slams the door, and starts walking.

“Oh, please,” Sara says. “No one can take a joke.”

“Your jokes aren’t funny,” I say. “You hurt his feelings.”

“Well, he better grow a thicker skin soon if he’s going to survive high school.”

“Why?”

“Because he wears who he is on his impeccably ironed J.Crew sleeve — that’s why. I mean, he looks like the quintessential fag.”

“What’s a fag?” Charlie asks.

“A boy who likes boys instead of girls,” Sara says.

“And it has nothing to do with how someone dresses!” I yell.

“Except in Holden’s case,” Sara says calmly.

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“I know you think you’re funny, but you’re not. And stop saying that word!”

“Just telling it like it is, Ferny.”

I wish Sara could be more like the Sara she was named after from *A Little Princess*. That Sara nice to everyone. Even the mice in the attic. This Sara seems to find it necessary to look for everyone’s weak spot. And then stomp on it.

When we get home, Charlie runs around the yard with Doll, throwing her in the air, then catching her and kissing her.

An hour or so later, my dad drops my mom off. He’s all excited about taking the delivery truck to someplace for another surprise. My mom gives me and Sara a look that tells us to zip it, but even she seems pretty wary.

“Holden ran away!” Charlie says as my dad pulls back out of the driveway.

“What?” my mom asks, dropping a bag of groceries. “Where did he go?”

“Faggypants, faggypants,” Charlie sings, walking around my mom in a circle as he traces his finger across her legs.

“Stop it, Charlie. That’s not nice.” She looks at me and Sara accusingly. “And who taught him that lovely word?”

I can’t believe she has to ask.

“I was only joking around,” Sara says.

“Which way did he go?”

“He got out at the stop sign on the corner,” I say.

“Sara, take Charlie inside and give him a snack. Fern, go find your brother, would you, honey. You’re the only one who seems to be able to bring him back.”

Holden is always running off in a huff, and I am always the one searching for him and bringing him home. Holden’s named after the main character in *The Catcher in the Rye*. I wasn’t supposed to read it until I’m older, but I snuck my mom’s paperback copy out of her room last year. The pages were all soft from her reading it so many times. The book is about this boy who’s depressed because he thinks everyone he knows is a phony, so he runs away. I understand why my mom likes the book and all, but I personally think it was a big mistake to name your kid after a boy who tries to kill himself, even if he is thoughtful and brilliant. My favorite parts in the book are when the main character talks about his little sister, Phoebe. Sometimes I think I’m a little like Phoebe to our Holden. Because in the book she’s the one he goes back for. And that’s sort of like me. Only I have to go looking for him first.

I find Holden sitting under the huge pine tree in our next-door neighbor’s yard. They’re never home so it’s a good hideout. He showed it to me when Charlie was born and I used to get upset and jealous. I felt like I went from being a shadow to being completely invisible. Holden told me the tree cavity would always be our special place that no one else in our family would know about.

“Knock, knock,” I say, standing just outside.

“Who’s there?” Holden asks.

“Boo.”

“Boo who?”

“Don’t cry.” I bend low under the bottom boughs and crawl under. It’s cool and smells like

Christmas.

~~“I don’t know why you bother coming after me,” he says, picking at the rubber on the sole of his sneakers the way he always does.~~

“I’m your sister. That’s my job.”

“And Mom sent you.”

“I would’ve come anyway.”

He buries a piece of shoe rubber under some brown dried-up needles.

“So, you coming home soon?” I ask.

“I dunno. I kind of like it under here. It needs some decorating, but . . .”

“Holden? Is it true, what Sara said?”

“That I’m too sensitive? No.”

I nudge him. “Come on, you know what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I wait for him to really answer, but he doesn’t. He just sits there with his arms crossed over his knees. If it’s true, I wonder what that must be like. To know you’re different. To know some people are going to hate you because of it.

We’re quiet under the pine, smelling Christmas in summer and listening to the traffic on our street pick up as people start getting home from work. It’s my favorite thing about Holden, being able to sit quietly together and not talk. Just think together and not have to say a single word. But today, for the first time, I feel something floating between us, a question I’m sure I know the answer to. I feel the weight of the answer separating us for some reason I don’t understand. If it doesn’t matter to me, why should it matter to him?

“I don’t care if what Sara said is true,” I tell him quietly, hoping my words will make the floating thing go away.

He takes a deep breath that sounds like it hurts. I wait for him to say something, but he just sits there, staring at the pine needles. And it almost feels like the floating thing has swallowed him up, leaving me all alone.

ABOUT A WEEK LATER, my dad waves a puffy manila envelope at us and calls a mandatory family and staff meeting at the restaurant. He rounds us all up in his office. It's the hottest day of the summer, I think August. And the office is packed with our family, the wait staff, the cook, and the line crew. We're all crammed into the tiny room in the attic among cardboard boxes, paper products, and my mom's meditation stuff. A dusty old fan buzzes hot air at us from the one window in the room. Instead of cooling anyone off, it just blows the stinky mixture of body odor, kitchen grease, and my dad's coffee breath. I think I'm going to throw up.

My dad opens his laptop and holds up a disc that he handles as if it could crack at any moment. "Just arrived today!" he says, smiling like a maniac. "I haven't even viewed it myself!"

My mom makes a tiny noise. I think it's actually a whimper. One of the new cooks is standing on her meditation cushion. She closes her eyes, and I can tell she's taking a deep breath. I am pretty sure she's going to have a hard time finding her inner peace any time soon.

Charlie claps his hands.

I breathe through my mouth to keep from gagging on the growing smell.

"Here we go, here we go," my dad says quietly as he slips the disc into the computer.

"Go, go, go!" Charlie yells. He hugs my dad's knee.

An image of the Harry's sign on top of the restaurant comes into view, then the camera pans lower to show us all standing there.

"Woo-hoo!" someone in the back of the room yells.

Holden moans.

"Shhh," my dad says, and the room gets quiet.

On the screen, my dad is listing all the ice-cream flavors we sell at Harry's. The camera zooms in on our faces. Charlie is inspecting my dad's ear as he talks. I see myself cringe in the corner of the screen and feel myself do it again. There are a few shots of inside the restaurant while my dad's voice over talks about how great it is to be running a second-generation business and how he's made every attempt to preserve the authentic feel of the place. I glance over at my mom, who shows no expression at all. Sara told me that when my dad inherited the restaurant, my mom wanted to renovate the place and sell organic vegetarian dishes, but my dad said the business would never survive and that he couldn't bring himself to destroy his own dad's dreams of making Harry's truly famous one day. I guess my mom must have thought that was a noble-enough reason because whenever my dad comes up with these business schemes, my mom is always at his side.

"There's Mona! There's Patrick!" the staff shout as the camera pans to various staff members.

"Shhh," Charlie says with his wet finger to his lips.

I see Ran with Charlie behind the counter, holding up the sundae they made. My stomach flutters when Ran smiles at the camera, and I feel myself blush. I look around, as if anyone could actually tell what just happened. But Holden nudges me and winks, and I realize maybe someone can.

The scene flicks back to our family standing in front of the sign and my dad mentioning heaven. Then it zooms right into Charlie's dirty angel face when he says, "See you at Hawee's!" at the top of his lungs.

The screen goes black, and then the store hours appear in neon-green text.

~~There are cheers, but I barely hear them. I am already imagining how this will play out at school.~~

It is not a good scenario.

“Well?” my father asks, turning in his swivel chair to face us.

“Again!” Charlie cheers, pointing to the screen.

My dad tousles his hair.

“Born actor!” someone says.

Holden snorts.

“Fern, honey, remind me that we have to contact Ran’s parents and get them to sign a release form so he can be in the ad. I’d hate to cut that scene. It’s nice to have some diversity.”

“Di-what?” Charlie asks.

I roll my eyes. “It means Dad wants to use Ran because he has darker skin than the rest of us.”

“Oh, Ferny,” my dad says, tucking in his enormous T-shirt where it keeps coming untucked because it’s too small and only emphasizes how huge his belly has gotten. “I’m not *using* him. It’s just a nice coincidence. Just like Mona.”

Oh, my God. I can’t believe he just said that. Mona, who is Chinese American, is a waitress who has worked at the restaurant for a million years and used to babysit us all the time, too. She just shrugs. Everyone always just shrugs when my dad says something stupid. *He means well*, my mom always says. Whatever.

“So,” he says to everyone else, “the first ad will air at the end of the month! Just in time for the fall tourists. Just you wait. Just you wait! They’ll be flowing through the doors.”

A quiet, sarcastic *great* sweeps through the stifling room. My dad seems to be the only one interested in increasing business at Harry’s. I think everyone else just sees a busier restaurant as more work. Most of the people who work here are what my mom calls strays. People who are down on their luck. People she thinks she can help save. I think it’s the only part about owning the restaurant that she really likes — being able to help give people jobs, even though waiting and bussing tables is hardly good time.

“Well, back to work, work, work!” my dad says cheerfully.

A few people roll their eyes behind his back. I see my mom notice and cringe. My poor dad. The thing is he really does mean well. He’s just . . . a little intense. Sometimes I look at the old photo albums my mom keeps to see that he wasn’t always like he is now, so obsessed with the business and making it busier. My sister loves to tell the story of how before they had us kids, my parents followed the Grateful Dead on tour and camped out in people’s fields and stuff. But then my grandparents die and my dad inherited the business. And soon after that, my mom got pregnant. I think Sara is secretly devastated that Jerry Garcia, the lead singer, died, because she is obsessed with their music, and I’m sure she would love to camp out in strangers’ fields, too. But I just like hearing the stories and looking at the pictures because my parents look so happy and relaxed in them. And it makes me think that they could be that way once, maybe someday they will be again.

A FEW DAYS LATER, we're in the kitchen helping my mom with dinner when the phone rings. When my mom hangs up, she tells us that we have to go out to the driveway for some sort of surprise from my dad.

"What now?" Holden asks.

"I'm sure it's not that bad," my mom says.

Sara and I sigh at the same time.

"Why do you guys always have to assume the worst?" my mom asks.

"Do you really have to ask?"

"Oh, Fern, don't be so negative."

"Should we all put our T-shirts on in case the camera crew is coming to the house?" Sara asks.

Charlie, who is already wearing his, pats the dinosaur on his tummy.

"Let's just get outside," my mom says.

We all follow her out to the driveway. Charlie takes my hand and swings it back and forth. Even though his hand is sticky, it feels kind of nice that he picked my hand to take instead of my mom's or Sara's. He looks up at me and smiles. "I like supwises."

"Not this kind," Holden mumbles.

Charlie frowns. I squeeze his hand to reassure him, even though I have to agree with Holden.

In the distance, we hear the familiar roar of the ice-cream truck.

"Daddy!" Charlie yells. He lets go of my hand and starts to run down the driveway.

"Charlie, get back here!" My mom runs after him and pulls him onto the grass.

My dad honks the horn and swings the truck into the driveway.

"Oh. My. God," Sara says.

I stare at the side of the truck with my mouth open. My mom drags Charlie back up the driveway but stops halfway and turns when she sees the looks on our faces. Charlie wriggles out of her grip and runs back to me as my dad comes around to us from the other side of the truck, beaming.

We all stand beside the truck and stare. Even Charlie is speechless.

"Well?" my dad finally asks. He's smiling bigger than I think I've ever seen. "Whaddaya think?"

The ice-cream truck used to say *Harry's Homemade Ice Cream and Family Restaurant* on its fancy scrolled letters. Now the words are gone, and instead there is a giant photo of Charlie's face. He's licking an ice-cream cone in his dinosaur T-shirt. The front of it is covered with blue ice-cream drips and so is his chin. His long curls hang in his face so he looks like a girl. To the right of his face there's a giant cartoon speech bubble that says in enormous letters SEE YOU AT HAWEE 'S! Yes, it's spelled that way.

No one says a word.

My dad steps over to the truck and pats Charlie's enormous face. "Well, gang? Pretty great huh?"

Charlie steps closer to the truck to get a better look. He blows a raspberry at his face, then turns around and shakes his bottom at it. I don't know what that means, but if I had to guess, it's Charlie's way of saying he looks ridiculous.

My dad ruffles Charlie's hair. "How's it feel to be famous, kiddo?"

~~Charlie head-butts my dad's leg.~~

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"Wow, honey," my mom finally says.

*Wow, honey* could mean so many things. My mom has become an expert at using phrases that way. In her head, *Wow, honey* could mean:

1. "That is the craziest most ridiculous thing I have ever seen in my life! But I won't say so out loud because I don't want to upset you!" *or*
2. "How wonderful! Our child's face is on the side of a truck and now every looney-tunes pervert will know what he looks like! But I won't say so out loud because I don't want to upset you!" *or*
3. "Gee, I really thought I'd seen the worst of your ideas, but you continue to blow my mind by outdoing yourself! But I won't say so out loud because I don't want to upset you!"

But in my dad's head, it probably just means, "Wow. Exciting!"

So my mom gets to be sort of honest, and they don't get in a fight.

"It's all about brand recognition," my dad explains. "Everyone will love the commercial, but it's Charlie they'll remember. We've got to help them make the connection."

Holden and I swap looks. Charlie is a brand? The thought of my little brother's face riding through town every day with that stupid speech bubble makes me feel sick to my stomach.

I guess my dad was right about *brand recognition* because within a week of the ad coming out and the truck being on the road, people start recognizing Charlie at the restaurant.

"Look! It's that cute little girl on TV!" people say when they see him.

My dad never corrects them. Charlie doesn't, either. He just giggles and blows raspberries at them. And if the person is really excited, he does the bottom shake, too. While I admit this is kind of hilarious, it's also a little weird and embarrassing. Ran says this is what makes Charlie so cool. Because Charlie accepts who he is and doesn't care about *gender* issues.

I point out to Ran that Charlie is only three and doesn't even know what *gender* is.

"That's what I mean," Ran tells me.

Did I miss something?

No one besides my dad would have expected that an ad with a sweaty fat man and his awkward looking family waving under a big sign could draw such a crowd, but that's what happens. They come in and beg Charlie to "say it." But Charlie always refuses.

"He's shy," my dad explains, leading them over to the ice-cream counter and encouraging them to try the "Super Smacker Sundae," which is the most expensive item on the ice-cream menu.

When my dad suggests printing up T-shirts with the Charlie image from the truck, my mom finally puts her foot down. "I don't want strangers wearing his face on their chests," she says. And even my dad has to admit when you put it like that, it's kind of creepy.

But business keeps picking up anyway. My dad buys more spots for the ad, and pretty soon all we have to do is turn on the TV and when the commercial breaks come on, so do we. My friend Cass tells me someone even put it on YouTube. We suspect my dad, but when we grill him, he acts all innocent and says, "What's YouTube?" But the comments, which are all things like "Ben & Gary can't hold a candle to Harry's!" pretty much give him away. My dad refuses to get their names right. Sometimes he refuses to say Jerry. Or sometimes he refuses to say Ben. But he never says both the correct names together. I think it really kills him that they have such a cool company, with tie-dyed T-shirts and stuff that is so much a part of what my parents *used* to be, what my mom *wanted* them to be. Instead, we sell lame dinosaur T-shirts. My dad would never admit this, of course. But I can tell.

Every time I see the commercial, I'm horrified at the sight of us in our pathetic T-shirts. My dad has no sense of style. The only one who looks remotely cool is Holden, who somehow manages to appear calm and oddly above the T-shirt he's wearing. I swear, Holden could be a model. Only in our town, people don't become models. In our town, the closest you get to fame is being on local TV with your family wearing ugly T-shirts while your dad sweats and your mom smiles in a strangely vacant way as if she had to go somewhere else in her mind just to get through the moment. And then your three-year-old brother says, "See you at Hawee's" in the most obnoxious voice known to mankind.

And that is definitely *not* the kind of fame you want.

Ever.

ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL, Holden and I wait for the bus together. I'm so nervous that I keep swallowing in an attempt to avoid throwing up. I wish Ran were here waiting with us. He never worries about stuff like the first day of middle school. He'll probably wear his black T-shirt that says *CHILL* in electric-blue letters.

My stomach twists. *Chill*, I tell it.

Holden stands on the edge of the road at the end of our driveway, finding stones to kick across the street. He's good at it. He has this way of stomping down at the edge of a stone and sending it flying all the way across. I stand next to him and give it a try, but I end up stomping on the stone and hurting the bottom of my foot.

"That's just sad," Holden says to me, then kicks another one.

This is the first time Holden and I have ever taken the bus together. Middle-school students and high-school students share buses because both schools are in one big building — middle school on the first floor, high school on the second.

We hear a truck engine, and he stops kicking and looks up the road. "God, I hate the bus," he says. "I can't believe we have to take it."

"What's so bad about the bus?" I ask.

He shakes his head and looks for another rock. "Bunch of losers," he mumbles.

Sometimes I think Holden imagines a whole other world for himself, being part of this other life of rich kids from the private school nearby who treat our restaurant like another McDonald's and not a place you can only afford to go to for a special treat, like most people around here. I bet he imagines driving to Boston to go school shopping instead of having to shop at the crummy outlet mall near our house.

"Fern," he says, expertly kicking another stone across the road. "I need you to promise me something."

"OK," I say. Holden likes me to promise stuff. He's always making me swear to things, like not telling anyone (especially Sara) about the shoe box he keeps full of cutout J.Crew models wearing outfits he tries to copy.

"You have to sit at the front of the bus, behind the driver."

"Isn't that where all the nerds sit?"

He looks up the street again, all tense. "Nah. It's not like that on this bus. Trust me. All the losers sit in the back."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I swear. So when we get on, sit in the second or third row behind the driver. No matter what. Don't pay attention to where I sit, OK? Act like you don't even notice me."

"But — why?"

He won't look at me. "Listen. There's stuff . . . stuff you don't understand. People are horrible enough in grade school. But in middle and high school? Those same jerks will look like your best friends compared to the new crop. You have to figure out how to survive. Sitting at the front of the bus is one way. Pretending you don't know me is another."

“Why not know you?” Holden looks so cool and put together, I can’t imagine not wanting to be seen with him.

He sighs. “I just have a feeling. OK?”

I give him the tell-me stare. This is what we call the face-down. It’s when we look each other in the eye to see if we’re being straight. When our eyes meet, I can see how hard it is for him not to turn away. He looks scared.

“OK,” I say. “I promise to sit at the front.”

Brakes squeak in the distance, and the top of the bus appears at the end of the road. It looks like a big yellow monster peeking up over a hill. When it stops in front of us, the door folds open. Holden makes me go first. The bus driver looks down at us as we climb the steep steps onto the bus. She has a woolen blue and gold ski hat on, which are our school colors. But instead of our school name, it says *trudy trudy trudy* all around it. She nods but doesn’t say hello. There’s sweat beaded at her forehead. I wonder why she’s wearing the hat if she’s so hot. Maybe she doesn’t have any hair underneath. Maybe she has cancer and lost all her hair like Ran’s mom. I look away from her and scout out a seat.

The first two seats behind the driver are taken, so I slip into the empty third. I don’t turn around to watch Holden, but I can see him in the driver’s huge mirror. He’s going toward the back, where Holden said the losers sit.

The second he sits down, two boys in the seat behind him cuff his ears. Holden’s face turns bright red.

I can’t help it. I swing my head around, desperately wanting to help. But he gives me a dead glare that says, *Turn around. Now.* I quickly face forward again, but I can’t help watching in the mirror. He stares hard out the window as the two boys lean over the seat and say things in his ears I can’t hear. The bus lurches forward, my heart breaking a bit more with each bump in the road. Every time I hear laughter behind me, I cringe.

After a few stops, a girl I’ve never met before sits next to me. I think she’s older. She doesn’t say hi, and neither do I. I squeeze the straps on my backpack and try to focus on the dark green vinyl seat in front of me instead of the bus driver’s mirror. There’s a rip in the seat and someone wrote *F school* below the rip. There’s some sort of glue on the rip to try to keep it from tearing anymore, I guess. *school*, I repeat in my head. *F those boys back there.*

When we get to school, I know Holden won’t want me waiting, so I follow the crowd inside and start looking for my homeroom.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and swirl around.

“Hey, Fern,” Ran says. He smiles the way he always does when we meet up. A certain smile that’s just for me.

“Hey,” I say.

“You seem sad.”

I look down at his chest because I know if our eyes meet, I will cry.

I was wrong about his chill T-shirt. Instead, he’s wearing a light-green one that says *be in purple* in purple letters.

He doesn’t take his hand off my shoulder. I wish I could say the words that describe what I’m feeling. But all I can think of is *hurt*.

Our friend Cassie comes over to us and blushes as soon as Ran looks at her. When Ran underwent his transformation from strange sick kid to cool, very cute, and mysteriously-odd-but-in-an-acceptable-way kid, Cassie and every other girl in my class fell in love with him. I think of any other girl, Cassie would have had the best chance because:

1. Cassie is really pretty but doesn't act like she knows she is, even if she does.
- 
2. Cassie is nice to everyone, including pre-transformation Ran and me.
  3. Like Ran, Cassie is always in a good mood.

Unfortunately for Cassie, she made the mistake of calling him Randy at lunch last year, and even since he's sort of looked at her in a suspicious way.

"Hey, guys," she says.

"Hey," we both say. She doesn't notice anything is wrong with me. Probably because she's staring at Ran.

"Come on," Ran says. "Let's sit together."

Cassie looks like she might pee her pants in glee. We follow him into our homeroom, where everyone is talking and looking at each other at the same time. Some faces I recognize and some I don't. We sit in the back row, in the corner. I blink to keep from crying and try to take deep breaths. A group of girls in the front stare at Ran, then whisper to each other. Ran is so busy taking notes in his new daily planner, he doesn't even notice.

*BE, I think. Just BE.*

AFTER SCHOOL I TAKE MY SAME SEAT on the bus. When Holden gets on, he doesn't even look at me as he heads straight to the back. Sure enough, the same boys sit behind him again. They lean forward and ping his cheek with their fingers. They make kissy faces behind his back. I think about Sara's word. *Fag*. And wonder how many times he's heard it hissed in his ear.

When the bus stops at our driveway, I get off first and start walking. I don't wait for Holden, knowing I'm supposed to pretend I don't notice him. As soon as the bus pulls away and the sound of the engine drifts off, I turn to face him. I don't know what I'm going to say, but when I look in his watery eyes, I keep my mouth shut. There's a welt on his left cheek. He walks right by me, past the front walkway, and around the side of the house. I follow, keeping the same distance he put between us on the bus. He disappears into our neighbor's yard and into the pine-tree cave.

When I reach the cave, I stand outside, waiting to be invited in. Waiting and waiting.

"Go home," the cave says.

I bend down to peek inside. His forehead rests on his knees so I can't see his face. But I can tell from the sound of his cracked voice that he's been crying.

"No," I say.

I wait some more.

"Fine," he finally says.

I bend down and crawl in. The familiar smell welcomes me. I sit next to him and look up at the hundreds of crisscross branches above us. They're like interlocking fingers protecting us from the world.

"Well," he says quietly, "how was *your* first day?"

I sigh and think about the rush of my first day of middle school. It was pretty much like any first day of school, except that it was in a new place with twice as many people and every time I had to change classes, at least one person pointed at me and someone else would say *The Line* in a high-pitched, fake-Charlie voice. When Ran was with me, he acted like he didn't hear anything. I figured I should follow his lead, since no one knows better than Ran how to deal with people giving you a hard time for stuff that is out of your control.

"As expected," I finally say. "You?"

"Pretty much."

"How many people said it to you?" I ask.

"Six, I think. You?"

"At least."

He shakes his head, and we're quiet for a while. But it isn't our usual comfortable quiet. I know the words I need to say aren't the kind we can share without speaking.

"Holden?" I finally say. "Why do you sit at the back of the bus if those jerks do that to you?"

He rubs out the design he was making in the needles with his fingers. "It's complicated."

"I'm not Charlie."

He shakes his head and leans back against the tree trunk, closing his eyes.

"Why do they hurt you?" I ask, leaning next to him.

He's quiet for a long time, then he finally sits up again and puts his back to me. His shirt covered with needles and pieces of bark.

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"I think you know," he says.

I watch the curve of his back rise and fall. I want to touch him and feel his breathing, but I'm afraid I'll feel the hurt. And it seems like a private thing he doesn't want to share. Or maybe he's just protecting me from it.

I think of Sara's words again and Charlie's singsong echo.

"It's not a good reason," I say.

"No?" He finally turns to me, and I can see the truth in his tears.

"I don't think it is," I say. "People are so stupid."

He smiles a little. "So you don't care? That I'm . . . you know."

I roll my eyes. "Why would I care? Why should anyone?" But I wonder why neither of us can say the word. *Gay*, I think. *You're gay*. I know what that means. But I don't know how he knows he is, how it feels, or why people hate him because of it.

"Fern," he says. "You're not like anyone. Other people, they don't get it."

I shrug. "They're idiots."

Holden puts his arms over his bent-up knees and rests his chin on them. "Yeah."

"We have to do something. We could tell Mom and Dad."

"No. Can't you see Mom marching down to the school and causing a scene? And Dad would . . . don't know what Dad would do. Try to teach me how to fight or something. Be a man. They'd want to know *why* it happened. And then we'd have to talk about me being . . ." He pauses and pulls at the rubber on his shoe.

"You can say it," I whisper.

Slowly, he looks up at me. I search his eyes and give him the tell-me stare. He breathes in and out a few times.

"Gay," he says.

I put my hand on his knee. "It doesn't matter," I tell him again. "It doesn't change anything."

He moves his leg away. "It's one thing telling you, but I just don't think I'm ready to officially come out yet, you know? I know Mom will be fine with it. But Dad . . ."

"They love you. They can help."

"I don't need anyone's *help*," he says, moving even farther away from me.

I lean back against the tree and breathe in Christmas again.

"Yes, you do," I whisper.

My mom always thought I'd be a good friend. A hero, like the *Charlotte's Web* Fern. I would like to be Holden's hero. I really would. I would like to stay his Phoebe forever, so he always has someone to come back to. But when he moves away from me this way, I feel like he's taking a step toward leaving us for good.

BACK AT HOME, Sara and my mom are in the kitchen, blasting Grateful Dead tunes and making homemade pasta while Charlie sits on the counter, playing with a ball of dough. There are bits of dough in his hair.

“Ferny!” he yells when he sees me.

“Hi, honey,” my mom says, easing a long sheet of dough out of the machine. “Could you set the table?”

“How was school?” Charlie asks, all serious.

My mom folds the pasta and starts to feed it back into the machine. “Oh, right! How was it, Ferny? Did you like your classes?”

Sara eyes my outfit. “I take it Holden helped you get ready?”

I look down at my shirt, which I admit is a bit more dressy than what I’d normally wear. Holden forced me to buy it when we went clothes shopping for school.

“What?” I ask her.

“You’re twelve, not twenty.”

I give her a sneer.

“Snake!” Charlie yells. He holds up a dough snake and makes it wiggle through the air.

“Nice, Charlie!” my mom says, forgetting all about me. “What’s his name?”

I grab the stack of dishes and bring them to the table. Instead of going back to the kitchen, I go to my room and spread my homework out on my bed and get to it.

I’m almost done when I hear Charlie’s squeaky voice.

“Hi, Ferny,” he says, standing in the doorway.

“Hey, Char.”

“Wanna play?”

“I’m doing homework.”

“I can help.”

“I don’t think so.”

He steps into my room anyway. He’s holding Doll, who’s wearing one of his old worn-out onesies that is way too big for her. Charlie walks over to the foot of my bed and sets Doll down so she’s staring at me.

They wait.

I try to ignore them, but Charlie does this loud breathing thing that drives me crazy. Also, Doll kind of freaks me out with her permanent surprised smile and dirty face.

“Are your hands clean?” I ask.

He holds them up, his fingers spread wide. They’re still a little wet.

“OK.” I move some of my books out of the way, and he climbs up.

“I wanna go to school,” he says.

“School is overrated.”

“Huh?”

“Look. All little kids want to go to school. And kindergarten is pretty great. But it just goes

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