

The Chalk Artist

1

Grendel's Den



Her long hair curtained her face as she sat marking papers. Drunk graduate students surrounded her, but she didn't even look up. Rock pounding, dishes clattering, this was Grendel's in winter, the old Cambridge dive, loud, warm, and subterranean, half a flight down from Winthrop Street. A green lamp lit every table, a hundred mirrors hung on paneled walls. Collin watched her reflection from every angle. She looked so elegant and out of place.

She came on Tuesday nights, and sometimes Thursdays too. She would order a Mediterranean salad and start grading papers. She was slender, fair, her eyes dark and shining, as though she knew some secret—she alone. Whenever he got close enough, he looked over her shoulder. Her handwriting was precise, her pen purple, extra fine. Once she glanced up and nearly smiled. You realize, he told her silently, if I drop something it's your fault. If I break a plate, it's all because of you.

He saw guys leering, even if she didn't. "Everybody's looking at her," he told Samantha, the bartender.

Sam said, "Yeah, but mostly you."

Collin was twenty-three, bright, artistic, and unhappy. He had just left college for the second time, and although he had good reasons, his mother was upset with him. His ex-girlfriend Noelle was out of patience. His father was in the navy; he had not seen or even heard from the man in seven years. Collin had thought of enlisting, mostly to travel, but he had grown up on a street where signs in the front yards read *WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER*. He never did enlist. He didn't go anywhere.

He worked at a bar and went out drinking afterward. Even if he'd enjoyed college and respected his instructors, even if he had excelled at Web design and programming, he didn't have time to go to class. He was busy collecting tips and partying, waking up in other people's beds. Sometimes he despised himself; not often. Sometimes he decided to get serious, but he kept working nights and sleeping in, and hanging with his high school friends, and all of this became a full-time job; youth itself was his vocation.

For this reason, the girl's diligence fascinated him. She sat for hours grading at her table, and she was so young—way too young to be a teacher. She should have known better than to sit alone down there. Few came to work at Grendel's, and those who tried, didn't get much done. They would open their computers and close them gratefully when drinks arrived. This girl did not respond to guys circling her table. She looked royal in her cardigans and trailing scarves and calfskin boots. He sketched her on his order pad. The princess of solitude, with a crown.

One Tuesday, when she started packing up, her coat slipped off the back of her chair, and Collin ran to catch it for her. She stood to go, and he realized how tall she was, almost his height. He was close enough to see the gold flecks in her eyes, the freckles dusting her face. He held his breath as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. Then she thanked him, and rushed off.

"Nice," teased a waitress named Kayte. "Could you catch my coat too? Before it touches the ground?"

Collin watched for the girl on Thursday while he carried out chicken wings and plates of stuffed potato skins. He served foaming Guinness, caught bits of conversation: *Seriously? How much did that cost? I feel guilty but . . .* The Who pounding. Students wailing, “*The exodus is here.*” Busy night and no free time, but Collin kept watching until Sam started flicking ice at him from behind the bar. “Who’re you waiting for?”

“Shut up.”

“So you admit it.” Sam was tiny but in your face. She was compiling a book of vintage cocktails.

“I’m not admitting anything.”

True, Collin wondered about the teacher. He speculated about her at Broadway Bicycle School, where he taught wheel changing, tire patching—basic repair. She had sounded American, but he decided that she came from Paris. Or London. He said, “Inflate the tube and listen.” Maybe Barcelona.

On Monday he colored backdrops for the theater company he had founded with his roommate, Darius. Working with wet chalk on old-fashioned rolling blackboards, he drew slender trunks and arching branches, layered cherry blossoms, white and pink. The edge of his chalk crumbled. He rubbed white and red together with his thumb, and he thought and thought about her. Sometimes she glanced up and she was looking at him, he was sure of it. The next second he would think, No, that can’t be true. Daydreaming about her, he felt lighthearted, amused. His fantasies were so chaste and so persistent. She was always sitting at her table, just out of reach, and he liked her there—although he was intensely curious. What was she doing all alone? A girl like that would have a boyfriend. There had to be some story. A long-distance relationship—but she didn’t look lonely. He wanted to know her. Or at least to hear her name.

There were days she never even crossed his mind. He spent a weekend with Noelle. They went to a party and stayed out late dancing, and then they went to her place and he began undressing

her. She laughed, and he knew why. Now that they'd sworn off each other their bodies were so eager.

Late the next day they woke stale and headachy, annoyed with themselves. Even so, Darius's girlfriend, Emma, had four tickets to Lady Lamb the Beekeeper in Davis Square, and so they went. All that time, Collin didn't think about the girl, until Lady Lamb bent over her guitar, her long hair curtaining her face. Then suddenly he imagined the girl watching him. He saw himself through her eyes and he was cheap, and aimless. He felt poor, as well, although he didn't consider himself poor. He considered himself free.

The next week, he was taking orders for a party of six when she materialized again. He looked up, and there she was, already seated in Kayte's territory. He was not getting off early, but when he saw the huge stack of papers on her table, he made a secret deal with her. If you keep at it until eleven, I'll walk out with you.

All night he watched her table, willing her to stay. When she began to stir, he murmured: "No, you don't. Keep working. You aren't going anywhere."

Ten forty-five, she pushed back her chair. From behind, he saw her shoulders shaking, and thought she must be sobbing, or choking. He rushed over. "Are you all right?"

When she looked up, she was laughing, not crying, and she showed him an essay. Curvy handwriting on lined paper, the title in bigger script: *Juliet: Shakespeare's Heroin*. "What do you think?"

A thousand ideas crowded his mind, none about her student's spelling, as he watched her add an *e*. "Are you really a teacher?"

She said, "I keep asking myself."

"You don't look like one."

She shook back her long brown hair and glanced up at him, amused. "What's a teacher supposed to look like?"

"Old," he told her. "Bitter."

“I’m bitter.”

“How long have you been teaching?”

“Three months.”

“Your students are that bad?”

She frowned as she looked down at her check. Annoyed? Or just figuring out the tip?

He said, “My friend Darius was thinking of directing *Romeo and Juliet*, but he couldn’t find a church.”

“He couldn’t get permission?” Already she was shouldering her bag, and standing up to go.

“He wanted to do it in a cathedral with stained glass and confessionals, but the only church interested was Unitarian.”

“Are you an actor?”

Jean-Philippe, the busboy, was trying to get by, and Collin stepped sideways. “I’m an actor and an artist.” He regretted the words as soon as he said them. He sounded pretentious. “Mostly chalk.”

She looked puzzled. “On sidewalks?”

“Yeah, but other places too. I do all the art for Theater Without Walls.”

“I’ve heard of them!”

“In the *Phoenix*?” He turned, glancing backward at Kayte. Cover for me, he begged her silently. She was shaking her head, but he knew she liked him. Just five minutes. My tips are yours! “Wait, let me walk you out.” He handed the girl a leaflet for *The Cherry Orchard*, a new production at the MIT tennis courts by Theater Without Walls. Art Director: Collin James.

“Tennis courts in December?”

“They’re indoor.” He led the way upstairs and opened the door for her. The snow around them lit the darkness. “I’m designing the lights . . . and the trees. I’m in it too.”

“You perform in Sennott Park, right?”

“We perform all over. We did *The Tempest* on a traffic island.”

“That’s it! I read about the car accident.”

“It was just one guy hitting a pole,” he said. “Nobody got hurt.”
She smiled.

“Come to *The Cherry Orchard*. I’ll get you a ticket. Give me your name and I’ll put you on the list.”

She didn’t say yes, and she didn’t say no. She just looked at him, and her eyes were so dark and bright that he drew closer, until she began to laugh.

“Or not.” He took a full step back.

“I wasn’t laughing at the play.”

“Why, then?” He had wild curly hair, black eyes, a quick, athletic body, a defensive look.

“I don’t know,” she said in some confusion.

“Come if you want,” he said coolly.

“Okay,” she said, automatically polite.

He didn’t ask her name; he pretended she was just a customer.

“Have a good night.”

2

The Orchard



Collin could not remember why Darius had insisted on the MIT Bubble. Maybe he'd assumed he could reserve all the courts. As it happened, the actors got just one. All through *The Cherry Orchard* they competed with the skid and squeak of athletic shoes, and the *thwack* of tennis balls. Sometimes a stray ball flew over from guys rallying just steps away.

The idea was no chairs. Everyone could walk freely so that, as the play progressed, the audience followed the action, advancing, retreating, and approaching the net. There was no set except for Collin's chalk orchard, his blackboards filled with blooming trees.

The other idea—all Darius—was to stage the play as farce. They had fought about this. "Dude," Collin had told Darius, "the lady returns to where her kid drowned and then finds out she's going to lose her house."

"Yeah, so?" Darius was a big guy, not as tall as Collin, but broader. Smart, and avant-garde, and something of a rainmaker, he came up with grants from the Cambridge Arts Council, permission to perform in public places.

"The play is sad," Collin said.

Darius dismissed this. “Yeah, the sad version is really overdone.”

In performance, Darius’s girlfriend, Emma, romped across the court, starring as the romantic Ranevskaya, who would lose her childhood home, her past, her everything. Emma was more folk-rock Mainer than Russian nobility to begin with, and when she spun around calling, “Goodbye, old house, old grandfather house,” you had the feeling she was excited to move on.

Pouring imaginary tea as the servant, Collin listened to the audience’s cautious laughter, and he wanted to dash his imaginary teapot onto the court and smash all his imaginary cups and saucers too. Where was the darkness in the play? Where were the shadows? In rehearsal Darius had conceded that some moments were bittersweet. Now, under rented lights, nothing bittersweet came through. No darkness, except for Collin’s seething servant, and Noelle, who played Ranevskaya’s daughter Anya.

Everyone wore street clothes instead of costumes, and Noelle dressed in a little undershirt and a pair of frayed jeans that fit her like a second skin. She was an ex-ballerina with spiky hair and a pierced tongue, and she was pissed. She had a lot of anger in general, but she was angry at Collin in particular. They’d had a huge fight the night before, during which she had said, among many other things, “First of all, I hate you. Second of all, you are one hundred percent bad for me, because the only thing you care about is the beginning and the end. You can never be in the middle; you can never actually be with someone or learn something or get something done, because you’re always starting and then leaving, which is why I hate myself after I’ve been with you.”

Even now, performing, he heard hostility in every one of Noelle’s lines. At the end of the play, she was brutal when she announced in her husky smoker’s voice, “The cherry orchard is sold, it’s gone, that’s true, but don’t cry, Mama.” Noelle was hard-core for an ingenue.

Collin was glad the girl from Grendel’s hadn’t come. Her laugh-

ter haunted him, because she had known then—she'd known in advance exactly how the play would be. Pretentious and amateurish all at once. Everyone watching related to or sleeping with the cast. After Act II, a couple of strangers wandered in, but they were carrying their racquet bags.

He could see the audience tiring, clustering near the baseline. They perked up when the estate was sold and all the characters said their goodbyes. As soon as Chekhov's characters began talking about the future, everybody started folding camping stools and gathering bags. People were already heading out when Collin flipped his blackboards over, one by one. The audience froze for just a moment as he revealed his chalk drawings on the other side. Jagged stumps, fallen petals, broken branches, a holocaust of trees.

"Don't touch the art," Collin's mother, Maia, told him at the party afterward. "Do you have pictures of that orchard?"

"Darius had the camera."

"Hey," Maia called out to Darius, who sat on a couch overflowing with actors. "Do you have photos of Collin's orchard?" She was unhappy with Collin and also fiercely proud, saving every scrap of art, celebrating each performance, inviting the whole cast to her winter solstice celebration. "That orchard was the best character in the play."

Darius raised his beer bottle.

Collin said, "Good thing he can't hear you."

"I'm your mother," said Maia. She meant, You think I care?

She was tall and young for a mother, darker than Collin, so they didn't quite match. What am I? he used to ask when he was little. Black Irish, his mother said. His father was Irish and she was Italian, French Canadian, and a little bit Native American as well. She worked at the Fletcher Maynard Academy, in the basement therapy room with swings and finger paints, giant inflatable balls. The

house was full of teaching prizes, clocks and plaques, two crystal apples from the district. She had posters too. WHAT DO TEACHERS MAKE? I MAKE KIDS WONDER. I MAKE THEM QUESTION . . . Collin had grown up with all these tributes, apples, and rainbows. He had been famous in school as Maia's son, and had played in her therapy room as a small child. There had never been money for babysitters, so he'd attended his mother's afterschool dance classes as well. Jazz, tap, and tango.

Now Maia's colleagues were arriving, and she served them borscht in honor of the Russian play. She ladled the thick magenta soup into bowls, and when she ran out of bowls, she handed mugs to Mrs. McCabe, the librarian, and Ms. Jamil, the occupational therapist. She found a "Mad Genius" mug for Mr. Cooperman, the fifth-grade science teacher, also known as Scienceman.

Yoga friends tramped up the porch of the triple-decker and left their boots in the stairwell. In socks they padded into the dining room, where Maia had covered the Ping-Pong table with rich fabric and flatbreads, quiche, empanadas, latkes.

Upstairs neighbors came in slippers. Lois, the art teacher from the second floor. Sage and her wife, Melissa, who grew tomatoes in window boxes on the third floor. Strawberry-blond Kerry O'Neil came from across the street, along with her twins, Aidan and Diana, suddenly sixteen.

"Can you believe it?" Maia asked Collin.

"How'd you people get so big?" said Collin. "Did I ever babysit you?"

They didn't answer. Aidan wolfed down his food and left, while Diana stayed, nibbling crispy spring rolls.

"Collin!" Lois exclaimed, because she had seen the show. "Your orchard!"

Lois's white hair was short and spiky, her vest hand-quilted, her earrings fashioned of the most precious Scrabble tiles, Z and Q. "When the production ends, what happens to your art?"

“Well . . .” Collin began.

“Don’t say it.”

Collin enjoyed saying it. Gentle, sentimental, Lois and Maia were crushed when he explained, “I’ll wash the boards and start something new.”

Lois tried arguing with him, but he couldn’t hear. Everyone was laughing over in the living room. Darius laughed so hard that he had to lean over Emma to defog his black-framed glasses.

The actors were talking about putting on a druggier, *Big Chill* Chekhov, like in a big house up in Maine. Meanwhile, the neighbors were discussing snow emergencies and parking bans, and how they were disappointed in the president. Troops still in Afghanistan, prisoners still rotting in Guantánamo. The economy still in the toilet. What good was he?

The battered oak floors thrummed with Crosby, Stills, and Nash. “Judy Blue Eyes,” “Marrakesh Express,” “Guinnevere.” Noelle was flirting with some woodworker named Austin. He was much taller than she was, so she rose up on her toes, *en pointe*, to look into his eyes.

Collin brushed past Noelle and said, “How’s the view?”

She ignored him, and he hated her. No, he didn’t hate her; he felt nothing. He felt dead.

Darius and Emma started dancing. Maia and Mrs. McCabe joined in, flushed with laughter and with wine, but Collin turned toward the front window to watch the snow. The little street was melting away, all the houses turning to gingerbread, white drifts icing porches and peaked roofs. He wanted to be out in it, away from everyone, especially himself. He pulled his jacket from the pile in the entryway, sat on the stairs and laced his boots.

When he stepped onto the porch he was so lonely he could almost see it like his breath. Impatient with himself, he seized the shovel propped up near the door, and began clearing the front steps. Working fast, he excavated a path to the street and started on

the sidewalk. It was still snowing heavily, but he was hot, and unzipped his jacket.

His mother stepped outside and watched him from the porch. "Oh, come on."

He didn't answer.

She sighed and disappeared into the house. A moment later, she returned in boots. She was holding a glass of wine.

"It's only natural to feel a letdown."

"Letdown from what? The performance wasn't any good."

"So then it's even more natural, because the play wasn't as great as the one in your head. That's art."

"That's life," he said.

"I've seen you and Darius do amazing stuff."

"It's *his* stuff. It's all about him."

"You'll get your chance."

Collin planted his shovel in the snow. "I'm not working with him anymore."

Her temper flared. "Right, that's the answer. Just give up."

"Nobody's interested in theater on traffic islands and indoor tennis courts."

"Who's nobody?"

"Nobody in the real world."

"The real world is overrated," Maia said.

"I wouldn't know."

"Your loss."

They stood in silence as the city plow thundered down the street, sparking tiny flames, metal scraping asphalt as it clattered past. Then Collin started shoveling again, heaping snow into the garden.

"Careful," Maia said. "My hydrangeas are somewhere under there."

"They're okay."

"They'd better be." She watched him for a moment in silence and then tried again. "Do you want my advice?"

“No.” He didn’t want advice. He wanted to escape. He wanted to break away, but he kept coming home, working with Darius, returning to Noelle. What was wrong with him? He could draw, but he drew only for Darius. He was a hired hand. No, just a hand! It wasn’t like Darius paid him.

He had cleared the sidewalk and now he carried his shovel up the steps. “It’s a play about regret.”

“I know.” Maia followed him.

“It’s about wanting what you can’t have,” Collin declared under the porch light. “Maybe that’s too obvious for Darius. He always gets what he wants, so he can’t even see it.”

Maia nodded. “I understand.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Mm-hm. What’s her name?”

3

Emerson



Loaded down with books and folders, Nina shouldered the heavy school door open. VISITORS REPORT TO THE OFFICE. THIS DOOR TO REMAIN LOCKED. OUR CHILDREN ARE OUR FUTURE. Dreading the day ahead, she backed her way into school.

Dread was not too strong a word for Wednesdays. She had to start with the wild ones, her American lit class. Students came unprepared. (They're kids, said Mrs. West, her department chair.) Some didn't come at all. (It's not about you, said Jeff, her Teacher-Corps mentor.) Nothing worked with these eleventh graders. Her lessons were too difficult, her readings too long, her assignments way too complicated.

"Good morning, Miss Lazare," said Mrs. West as they stood in the glass front office, signing in. All the teachers spoke to one another like that, as if afraid a student might overhear their given names. "Are you okay?"

Nina could only imagine how she looked—pale, sleep-deprived, floundering. Mrs. West, on the other hand, could walk the halls with total mastery, her midnight-blue manicure adorned with tiny crystal stars. Mrs. West was famous for her fingernails, for her lan-

guages, French and Haitian Creole, for her gorgeous singing voice, for her in-class performances of *Romeo and Juliet*. Above all, for her way with words. Nina had heard her harangue one boy into submission in the hall. “You can stand there and tell me that’s your best work, but you *know* that’s not true, so get your butt back in your chair and do it again. The end. That’s all!”

“I’ve got my eleventh graders,” Nina said.

“Don’t let up!” Part coach, part cheerleader, part preacher, Mrs. West admonished Nina, “If those kids test you—then you test them back!”

A sudden buzz and pulsing orange lights. A couple of boys had set off the metal detector, and the school’s police officers sprang into action. “Over here, you guys. Bags on the table. Keep the line moving.” Kids continued shuffling in with their backpacks, their headscarves, their puffy jackets, their attitudes. Nina joined them, climbing the chipped cement steps to her classroom, where she opened her desk and locked her purse inside.

Emerson High School was small, diverse, and experimental. There were no exams, only year-end portfolios in which students collected what they considered their best work. The school was open to everyone by lottery, but had a reputation for “out of the box” kids—those who were artistic, or autistic, those with learning differences, or special gifts, or both at once. Each student was required to keep a journal of personal discovery in a marbled composition notebook. Required personal discovery seemed like an oxymoron to Nina, but so did many other aspects of the school. “A community of learners” with metal detectors. A non-linear curriculum in a rectilinear 1930s building. The wiring was antique, the doorknobs brass. The basement flooded during rainstorms, and in places the roof leaked. There were computers in every classroom, but some rooms had no heat. There were no whiteboards, let alone SMART Boards. Blackboards were strictly black.

Nina took a deep breath and picked up her white chalk. *DO*

NOW, she wrote on the board. *List three adjectives Emerson uses to describe . . .*

“Miss?” Students were starting to drift in. “Miss?”

“Get out your packets,” Nina announced. There were no textbooks for Emerson’s English classes. Humanities teachers had to develop their own materials. “Turn to the essay ‘Nature.’ Where’s your reading?” she asked Xavier.

“I’m not exactly sure.”

“Miss.” Rakim approached the board. “I think the page was missing or maybe—”

“Let me see,” Nina said.

“I think my packet is defective or something like that.”

Nina found “Nature” for him. “Have a seat.”

“I looked for it,” he said.

“Rakim, please sit down.”

He raised his hands in mock surrender as he backed away. Two girls started giggling, and Rakim played to the gallery. “Okay. Okay!”

Some people had it—that mysterious rapport, the ability to catch a student’s gaze and hold it, to direct without seeming to direct, to take a joke and lob it back. Nina thought of her own high school teachers, charismatic Mr. Kincaid, witty Mr. Rousse. Was it a gift like perfect pitch, or something you could learn? She remembered the silence in Mr. Rousse’s classroom, the deliberate way he spoke, the way he made you wait for the next word. You shivered when he called on you.

She had done well in training. For five weeks at Bowdoin College in blackfly season, Nina had learned, in theory, to teach high school. After long days of role-playing, mini lessons, and crash courses in curriculum development, she would sit with other TeacherCorps recruits in a darkened lecture hall to hear testimonies of transformation.

Alumni perched on stools in front of the eight hundred trainees,

and, one by one, those alumni stood and walked into the spotlight to tell of raising test scores, breaking through. “Is there anything you can do in this world that’s more important?” asked one former fellow, now working at McKinsey. “Is there anything more valuable than the life of a child?”

All the alumni said that their students had taught them lessons they would carry with them their whole lives. Nina never doubted this, but as her own kids came in dancing, slouching, scuffling playfully, she hoped she could teach them something too.

“Miss, could you sign this?”

Leila was holding a pink slip.

“You’re dropping language arts?”

“Switching,” said Leila, a picture of innocence, framed by her white headscarf. “Mr. DeLaurentis thinks I’ll learn better with Mrs. West.”

Of course he does, Nina thought miserably. Mrs. West had been teaching almost thirty years. Nina had been trying for thirteen weeks. Mrs. West invented her own acronyms: OWL (Own it, Work it, Learn it). QUACK (Question Underlying Assumptions Critically and Knowledgeably). Nina was still trying to keep her kids in chairs.

She bent to sign her name, and felt for a moment as though she were signing a confession. *I’m a fraud. I have no idea. I’ve failed to reach you.* Everyone spoke about epiphanies and transcendent moments, the *Miracle Worker* of it all: teacher and student swept up in revelation, spelling into each other’s palms—touching the word, grasping the concept, feeling the rush of water. People didn’t talk so much about students switching out of your class.

“Okay.” She handed Leila the pink paper. “Go for it.”

“Thanks.” Leila ran out, and Nina shut the door behind her.

“Take out your notebooks,” she directed, as she took attendance. Sixteen students, eight absent, including one learning better with Mrs. West. “Write your three adjectives.”

“Three adjectives about what?” Rakim asked, and Nina realized that she hadn’t finished writing her *DO NOW* on the board.

“Three adjectives Emerson uses to describe . . . nature.” She scribbled the missing word.

“Can I borrow a—”

“Can I use a—”

Already two kids were up to sharpen pencils by the window.

A pregnant girl named Brynna asked, “Miss, where’s the bathroom pass?”

You just got here, Nina thought, as she searched her desk. “Three adjectives. Faheen, I don’t see you writing.”

“I’m thinking!”

Squeaking chairs, rustling papers. Always moving, always whispering, the class never settled. As soon as Nina shushed one conversation, another started. She needed to be everywhere at once, but she tried to focus on one student at a time as she walked between desks, reading over shoulders.

“Beautiful, gorgeous, natural. No, that’s not quite it. I want adjectives that *Emerson* uses about nature,” Nina told Diana, who looked up, insulted.

“Miss?” Brynna asked again.

Nina handed over the restroom key with its big block of wood attached and she began writing on the board the adjectives the students had found in Emerson: *tranquil*, *perpetual*, *transparent*.

“Is *theory* an adjective?” Chantal asked.

“Is it descriptive?”

“Yeah.”

“Give me an example of *theory* as an adjective.”

“Theory of relativity.”

“Excuse me?” Nina asked Marisol and Cierra. The girls looked up from their conversation as Nina began walking over, but she got distracted by Rakim writing furiously, filling in some worksheet for

another class. Shit. Nina had forgotten to collect homework. “Time out. Please hand in your short responses from last night. Rakim? Marisol? Pass them to the front. Cierra, did you hear me?”

Nine homework sheets came in, accompanied by at least five excuses.

“I was absent yesterday.”

“Miss, I didn’t get the assignment.”

“I never got the questions.”

Nina struggled to assert herself. “If you were absent, you’re still responsible.”

Unfortunately, when she was frustrated, her voice got quiet. Her kids continued writing, ripping pages out of notebooks, sharpening pencils, and talking, talking.

You had to get louder in this profession, not softer. You couldn’t just look disappointed. You were supposed to scream to show you cared. Mrs. West would cry out, “Listen up. I’m talking to *you*.” Across the hall, Ms. Powers stamped her foot. Mr. Allan could bugle like a moose. Nina’s emotions were all wrong, if that was possible. She wasn’t angry when kids didn’t do the reading. She was crushed.

“If you don’t understand, speak up!” she pleaded. “If you never got the questions, then come and get them from me.” For a moment, her class looked at her, gauging her annoyance. “I’m tired of excuses,” she added, but the chatter had started up again.

“You should all be on page thirteen of your packets. Rosie. Page thirteen?” Once more she walked up and down between the chairs. “Page thirteen,” she repeated. “‘Nature.’ Faheen, read the second paragraph for us, starting with ‘*Nature is . . .*’ I’m sorry, would you please sit down?” she told Sevonna, who was standing by the windows. She was a big girl scribbling on a tiny piece of paper, which she stuffed into the back pocket of her jeans. “Cierra? Marisol? Sevonna, would you please sit down? Please?” Nina repeated,

even as Faheen read slowly, “*Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue.*”

The sky outside was bright. From the fourth-floor window Nina could see Lincoln Playground, framed by black trees striped with snow. “Keep reading, Faheen.”

“*Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration.*”

“Marisol,” Nina said. “What does Emerson mean by *exhilaration*?”

“Don’t kick my chair, man,” said Rakim.

“I never touched your chair.” Xavier stretched out his long arms and legs and tilted back his own chair until he sat on a diagonal.

“It was on the homework. *Exhilaration.*” The noise level was rising, but Nina risked turning her back to write the word on the board, along with the words *transport* and *ecstasy*. She drew a line and then wrote *SUBLIME* as the header for these vocabulary words. “The Transcendentalists were interested in the sublime.” She spun around just in time to hear a crash and laughter, as Xavier and his chair slammed onto the floor.

“Ow! Fuck!” Xavier moaned good-naturedly, and took his time getting up again.

“Not in my class,” Nina said, and Xavier apologized for his language, but that took more time. Here she was, clock ticking, eight students absent, not to mention one in the bathroom, and she had covered three sentences.

“You deserve it.” Diana was talking to Xavier, but Nina thought Diana might as well have been speaking to her.

As a child, Nina had wondered why some teachers were so boring. Now she understood. They were bad actors—terrible at performing what they knew. Everything those teachers said fell flat, every lesson trailed off. First the class stopped listening. Then kids

began whispering, laughing, talking openly. Finally, they seized power for themselves. As a student she had seen it happen. Now she watched her students turn on her. Xavier's attempts at comic relief, Marisol's and Cierra's and Sevonna's disrespect. Diana's scorn, Brynna's exit into the real drama of the girls' bathroom. Clear-eyed, Nina watched her class spin away from her.

You don't look like a teacher, Collin James had said at Grendel's. How does a teacher look? Old, he'd said, and bitter. He was a flirt—she'd seen him with the waitresses—but he was right: Teachers had to be hard and spiky, barbed in self-defense. You had to be bitter, to deter kids from eating you alive.

Already the bell was ringing, and she was trying to explain the homework, even though she hadn't finished her lesson. Her class was racing out the door and Nina wanted to run after them. *Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes.* She would carry Emerson to them. Wait! You forgot this! But they were gone. Too late, too late. She'd lost her chance.

4

EverWhen



“Now!” Sword in hand, he ran through tall grass. “Jump!”
Together they bounded over rushing water.

The sky was darkening. Smoke clouded the landscape, smudging hills and trees. Faster and faster he ran, and she flew after him, blue hair streaming. No time to talk, no time to breathe. They raced to the edge of the Trackless Wood, which crackled with fire. Danger never stopped them. They kept running, weaving through the burning trees.

She was a Tree Elf named Riyah. He was a Water Elf, Tildor. They came from different realms, but for the past three nights they’d qwested, traded, and killed together. They had hunted basilisks, slain dragons, and retrieved two diamonds, which Riyah carried in the bag hanging at her waist. She was an amazing marksman, and beautiful, even for an Elf, her eyes huge, her body supple. Her breasts swayed as she ran, her quiver bouncing behind her.

Flaming branches crashed around them, the crack of falling trees—then something else—a ripping sound.

They whirled around to face a colossus with jagged teeth and claws, a shifting, seething monster, half man, half bear, tar black.

He rose up on his hind legs to seize them with clawed hands. They slashed him with their swords, but he reconstituted, oozing and bubbling. He snatched up his left hand and jammed it on again. Screaming with pain, he retrieved his severed leg and screwed it onto his own bloody stump.

“Can’t finish him with steel,” Riyah gasped.

“Shoot.”

“Arrows can’t penetrate.”

“Take a—”

“Let me!” The beast heaved up roaring and she sent her silver dagger into his eye. The colossus melted like a pile of burning tires. “Yes!” Breathing hard, she raised her arms in celebration.

A diamond glittered at the melting monster’s core. As Tildor plucked the jewel, a white nimbus glowed around him.

Riyah’s voice was hushed. “The third.”

Thorny branches overhead turned into talons, flaming twigs to ashen feathers. The forest phoenix woke, and Riyah and Tildor threw themselves onto the bird’s back. The landscape shifted under them as they soared into the air. With each wingbeat, the phoenix carried them over smoldering trees and moonlit fields, twisted sunflowers, stubble glowing with white frost. Wind whistled in their ears. “That’s the Keep.” Riyah pointed to stone towers in the distance.

“And there’s the—”

“Aidan?”

“Wait for me,” he told Riyah.

He hurried to his bedroom door.

“Aidan!”

He opened the door. “*What?*”

“Take off that headset.”

He obeyed and lost the music of the wind and air, the hoots of owls and beating wings, the sound of Riyah’s voice. Onscreen the phoenix soared over tangled woods and frozen ponds in the silver

winter night of EverWhen. Offscreen, only a computer on a desk, an unmade bed, a backpack open on the floor.

“Do you know what time it is?” his mother demanded. She was home from the night shift at the hospital and he was supposed to be getting ready for school.

Kerry snatched the headset from his hands. “Do you even know what day it is? Aidan? Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

He looked at her. Unprotesting, he sat down on his bed. Lately when his mother screamed at him, he listened. When she said EverWhen was sucking the life out of him, he didn’t argue. If she asked for remorse, he showed remorse. If she declared, You’re sixteen years old, you’re wasting your time, you’re failing school, he said he was sorry and promised to do better. He said whatever she wanted him to say, and all the time he kept his computer screen in view. The landscape dark and hidden, stars spelling out the name ARKADIA.

She worked so hard. He said, I know. She loved him so much. He bent his head. She asked what he thought she should do. He couldn’t think of anything. She asked whether he thought life was precious. He said yes.

But his mother defined life as singular. He rejected that. He didn’t live one life. He lived two. Was it his fault that he preferred the second? In EverWhen he was a healer and an Elvish prince, a leader of his company. He had a pile of gold, and a sword worth eighty marks, a magic ring, a diamond flask filled with a hatchling dragon’s blood. He had fashioned his own gear: chain mail, silver helmet, enchanted boots. He’d trained for transformation. If he wanted to run like a deer, he could become one. If he qwested underwater, he could be a beaver, otter, or eel. And now in EverWhen he fought with Riyah at his side. Meanwhile, in the outside world, he was just a skinny kid, blue-eyed, dirty-blond, ignored at school.

His friends were equally unpopular. Jack was a Water Elf, but in real life he took college-level math. Liam was an amazing warrior, but in real life he smoked so much pot Kerry refused to let him in the door.

Aidan's mother worried about drugs, and games, and bad influences—not to mention the transmission on the car, the second mortgage on the house. They lived in a two-family. Priscilla, the piano teacher, paid rent on the other side of the living room wall, but Kerry owned the place. If the roof leaked or the pipes burst, Kerry was responsible. She slept mornings and worked nights, and in her world every day was like the last. No quests awaited, no treasure maps arrived, no burning trees turned into birds, no cities into stone.

He knew he could outlast his mother because she was so tired. He let her confiscate his headset and joystick. He promised that he'd stop playing; he would get to school. When Kerry dragged herself to bed, he hunted up his other joystick and slipped back into EverWhen.

The sun was rising. Not the sun outside his window, but the sun inside the game, blood orange, melting frost and warming icy air. The colors were so clean and bright it took him a moment to adjust his eyes. Riyah was waiting for him in a thicket. She spoke, but without his headset he couldn't hear.

He typed into the chat box: sorry

After a moment, her answer appeared on the screen. you should be. But she turned toward him, beautiful as ever, in the glowing morning light. more?

cant

too bad.

later? he pleaded.

maybe

wheres the bird?

look

Joystick in hand, he turned his Water Elf around. Pivoting on-screen, Tildor searched the thicket.

Now Aidan saw the phoenix in new form, long feathers changed to white birches marked with what had been the bird's black eyes and claws.

!!!

i know!

His sister's alarm was beeping in the next room. He could hear Diana in the bathroom, flushing the toilet, starting her shower, getting ready for school.

I have to go

Riyah answered, bfn.

wait whats your name?

He waited and waited. He heard the water stop, the shower curtain slide on its metal loops, Diana thumping down the stairs, the kitchen cabinets, the jolt of silverware in the drawer.

Even as he gave up hoping, a word materialized onscreen: daphne

For a moment he just stared. He had never met a Daphne, and assumed the name was another alias. no, he typed, your real name

That IS my real name! Riyah folded her arms across her chest.

He took a breath. i want to see you.

What do you want to see?

He began to answer and then he stopped. Her question confused him. Did he want to see the girl who played with him at night? The one who said her name was Daphne? Or the archer, dagger-thrower, Riyah? It seemed spell-breaking to write, I want to know who you really are—and he wasn't sure if that was true. He wanted to play with Riyah forever. Not his school friends, or his old company. He wanted his headset back. He wanted to talk to her: I need to stay in EverWhen with you.

"Hey, Aidan." Diana was knocking.

"What?" Instinctively he shifted in his chair to block his screen.

She opened his door and stood before him in black jeans and a black sweatshirt. “You never took the recycling out.”

“Because it was your turn.”

“It wasn’t my turn. Check the calendar.”

“You check.”

“The truck’s already coming up the street.” She yanked his window shade, but it didn’t roll up. She pulled again, harder, and the shade only grew longer.

“Let go. I believe you.”

Too late. One final tug and his shade came crashing down. “Diana! God!” he whispered fiercely. “You’re going to wake Mom.”

Gray sky. Dirty snow. The orange recycling truck lumbered up Antrim Street under a small, cold winter sun.

u there? Riyah’s question floated onscreen.

“Are you taking it out?” Diana pressed.

“No! Get out of my room.”

The broken window shade billowed on the floor, but Diana did not apologize. She turned on him. “I can’t believe you’re playing again right after you promised Mom not to.”

“I said get out.”

“I’m going to tell her,” Diana said slowly as she backed away.

“Go ahead,” he said, but he knew she wouldn’t tell. They were close, or had been. They had a pact, and even now he trusted Diana. He knew his twin would not betray him.

Diana slammed the door, and the house rattled. He could hear his mother’s voice, “Aidan!”

He typed, *Invaded. I’ll comeback.*

Would you try another world?

RL???

another game

which one?

can you keep a secret?

“Aidan?” his mother called.

“I’m getting dressed.”

huge? Riyah asked.

what????

His screen faded to gray. The network hung. No, it only blinked. He and Riyah stood together as before, surrounded by white birches.

I have UnderWorld beta, she told him.

!!!!!! ru shitting me?

no I have it

noone has it

i do

how???

you want it?

YES

wanna play?

HOW WHERE WHEN?

you need black box

send!

not yet

when??

youwant it?

He pounded out his answer in frustration: Comeon
what can you do for me?