

BRAWN: THE FIRST FOUR CHAPTERS

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ABSTRACT

The question of genre may be unimportant when writing or reading fiction, but the marketplace continues to draw those dividing lines. Moreover, there are tropes and techniques to be learned from each discrete genre of fiction. The creative portion of this thesis consists of the first four chapters of Brian Beise's novel, *Brawn*. The introductory essay discusses the divisions of literary and genre fiction, and describes how borrowing elements from various genres informed the writing of *Brawn*.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Jena, and to my daughter, Lillian, both of whom inspire me to no end, and neither of whom hold it against me when I shut myself in the growlery to write.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Creative writing students and their teachers traditionally focus on literary writing and almost entirely ignore genre fiction. There is no shortage of reasons or explanations for the dividing line drawn between the two massive groups of fiction in academia, but in recent years that line has blurred in the contemporary fiction market, as literary and genre writers alike borrow elements from across the divide. In his book, *Writing 21st Century Fiction*, Donald Mass writes that bookstore shelves “are chock-a-block with literary crime, historical espionage, contemporary urban fantasy, magical women's fiction, dystopian young adult, and paranormal everything” (11). This introduction will discuss the blurring of that line, and examine how literary novels with heavy genre elements and genre novels with heavy literary elements informed and inspired my novel, *Brawn*.

Let us pause here to establish a vital and precarious definition. Though the exact wording varies, the *American Heritage Dictionary* and the *Oxford Dictionary* agree that literature consists of written works, especially those acknowledged for superior artistic quality. The *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms* gives basically the same definition, and adds a quote by Stopford A. Brook, who asserts “writing is not literature unless it gives to the reader a pleasure which arises not only from the things said, but from the way in which they are said” (125). While this definition may make intuitive sense, it relies on subjective judgment to distinguish literature from the rest of fiction.

Further muddying the water is the way bookstores typically categorize fiction. “Although sections have less meaning online and readers browse in ways less linear,”

writes Mass, “the segregation inherent in brick-and-mortar bookstores and publishers' catalogues remains with us” (11). Barnes & Noble provides a fiction & literature section and keeps genres like horror, science fiction, romance, and fantasy in their own smaller sections. This is done despite the definition of the term *genre*, given by *NTC's Dictionary* as “a type of literary work” (91). The fiction & literature section does feature the odd genre novel, but those are rare, established, critically acclaimed exceptions. The most common kind of fiction found in that section is in the realist, modernist style. “Literary” devices such as introspective narration, complex characterization, stylized prose, and a focus on character revelation or epiphany define these works much more than plot twists. The key difficulty here is that—depending on opinion—not all the books in that large section can be called literature, according to the definition given above. To summarize: the adjective *literary* denotes exceptional writing in any genre, but it often connotes a specific genre of realist, modernist storytelling.

Some critics take issue with the practice of graduating great genre works into the literary category. A detective novel such as Elmore Leonard's *Rum Punch* that transcends its genre may be of literary value, but journalist and novelist Lev Grossman argues it should not be removed from its genre. As Grossman (writing for *Time*) puts it: “As soon as a novel becomes moving or important or great, critics try to surgically extract it from its genre, lest our carefully constructed hierarchies collapse in the presence of such a taxonomical anomaly” (“Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle”). When critics characterize genre novels as being composed of careless, cliché-ridden prose, Grossman insists they are only writing about “*shitty* genre fiction. The writing in good genre fiction,” Grossman says, “is not at all uneven” (“Literary Revolution in the Supermarket

Aisle”). He makes the point that we should judge neither literary nor genre fiction by mediocre examples.

This essay is not an argument in favor of throwing together every type of novel into a massive section, but an exploration of how literary writers and genre writers alike borrow from other genres to reinvigorate their own work. Each genre at its best does certain things well, and writers hoping to create fresh work that is readable to a wide range of people can benefit from borrowing tropes and tricks from genres other than their own. This is what I did for my novel, *Brawn*.

Not all critics welcome the merry *mélange* of genre and literary fiction. James Wood (writing for *The New Yorker*) calls it a regression—a teetering back toward literary infancy. Of Donna Tartt’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Goldfinch* (a joyfully plotted bildungsroman truly worthy of the term *Dickensian*), Wood says that “the rapture with which this novel has been received is further proof of the infantilization of our literary culture: a world in which adults go around reading Harry Potter” (“The New Curiosity Shop”). Though Wood admits that Donna Tartt’s winding plots provide childish thrills, he adds the caveat that “misdirection is practiced evasion, and narrative secrets are tested by the value of their revelations” (“The New Curiosity Shop”). This inadvertently points to the true weakness of *The Goldfinch*, which is not the adventure genre element, but the labored, overlong ending.

In the book’s last pages all plot ceases and the narrator addresses the reader, musing about the meaning of the man’s life. These pages strive for the quiet epiphany trope that belongs to the modernist novel genre usually categorized as literary fiction. It is the weakest moment in an otherwise great novel. By insisting that plot-driven stories

are tested by the value of their revelations, Wood implies that a hybrid work like *The Goldfinch* can work, so long as its literary elements are as successful as its adventure genre elements. While I disagree with his analysis, I agree with this inadvertent implication.

In discussing books like *The Goldfinch*, Grossman writes that “Blue-chip literary writers—finding that after years of deprivation under the modernist regime their stores of plot devices are sadly depleted—have been frantically borrowing from genre fiction, which is where plot has been safely stockpiled for all these decades” (“Literary Revolution in the Supermarket Aisle”). Grossman himself plundered that stockpile for his trilogy of literary fantasy novels. In the first book, *The Magicians*, Grossman takes genre elements like a magic school, a gang of unruly students, a gateway to a magical land, talking animals, and a nearly invincible villain, and winds it all around a core literary story about a deeply flawed protagonist with glasses but no lightning scar.

The second book, *The Magician King*, deals with the same characters in the same magical world, but this time plays with the tropes and traditions of seafaring adventures like C.S. Lewis’ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and episodic quest tales like J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Grossman not only finds new and revealing contexts for his characters, but he also rejuvenates the adventure genre, interrogating and celebrating the tropes in equal measure. In the final book in his trilogy, Grossman does the same rejuvenating work on the classic heist story. A mysterious employer, a valuable object to steal, a team of hired specialists, a seemingly impossible job, a complicated plan, and sudden betrayals all feature in *The Magician’s Land*. Like in the other two novels in the trilogy, this last book functions fully as a piece of escapist, fantasy fiction, carrying the

reader out of the real world with thrilling plots and fantastic magic. At the same time, the book deals honestly with what happens to our childhood fantasies when we grow up, what happens to us when we hold onto them, resent them, and finally, forgive them. It's a theme a writer like Grossman could have explored in a more classically literary novel, but in choosing instead to bolster his moments of character revelations with diverting plot turns and flashes of innovative genre work, he puts his novels in conversation with books on both sides of the aisle—genre and literary.

Like Grossman, I used various genre tropes to move my novel along. The first third of *Brawn* is domestic. Liles believes Molly, the beautiful girl across the street, is being abused, and he wants to help her. His efforts are frustrated, though, by his own parents, Molly's withdrawn behavior, and his own timidity. The supernatural element of the novel is not yet revealed. In writing this section, I drew on elements from various novels in the YA genre, which often depicts domestic conflict between teenagers and parents, as well as unrequited longing and juvenile attempts at grandiosity. Both John Green's *Paper Towns*, a domestic mystery about a teenage boy searching for a runaway girl, and Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, a domestic romance about two teenagers who fall in love but grapple with barriers thrown up by the girl's abusive stepfather, informed the rhythm, tone, and plot twists of the first five chapters of *Brawn*.

The secret of Molly's brother's superpower is revealed at the end of act one. I was inexperienced writing supernatural or fantastical scenes, and feared the literary tone I had established so far might be irrevocably broken by the intrusion of this element. For help writing well in that genre, I turned to Neil Gaiman's novels *Neverwhere* and *American Gods*. In both of these books, regular people come into contact with supernatural

elements, and both times Gaiman manages to express the character's incredulity even as he moves the story forward into the new realm of fantasy. The narrative always bridges the initial realism and the magic of the rest of the book, making the transition easy for the reader, however disorienting it is for the protagonist. The first half of each of these books by Gaiman helped me craft that same sort of transition in *Brawn*.

Once the secret is out, Liles and Molly flee their hometown in search of answers and safety. This middle section of the novel was all flight and pursuit. For this portion, I looked to John Green's YA novel *Paper Towns*, which culminates in a road trip, and Tolkien's *The Fellowship of The Ring*, which focuses on a journey punctuated by obstacles and danger. Working in elements from those separate genres helped me keep an urgency and rhythm to the scenes that might otherwise have been wasted on the details and mechanics of Liles' and Molly's trip from point A to point B.

This middle section also involved some detective work, as Liles tries to unravel the mystery of Molly's brother and the origins of his power. He has these questions near the start of the book, and by the end he has the answers, but to put flesh on the bones of his search, I drew on the mystery genre. For help on how to seed clues earlier in the novel and create convincing scenes of clue finding, I turned to Tana French's detective novel *Faithful Place*. As I worked on the few scenes in which Liles interrogates or interviews suspects or sources, I read Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, and Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*. Key to the success of these books was planting the solution to the mystery early in the book. In later drafts, I used that formula so that the end of the novel reveals secrets left buried in the first half of the book.

There are several bursts of action and violence in my book, which is otherwise a

novel of conversation. For help executing those adventure genre scenes, I turned to Ransom Riggs' *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, a YA fantasy adventure novel. Riggs' book culminates in a fight with a supernaturally powerful villain. I drew significantly on that scene in helping me stage the climactic scene at the end of *Brawn*. Of course I wanted these action scenes to read as exciting. It was a key part of the overall adventure novel I was trying to build. At the same time I wanted to keep my characters human. I did not want my readers to start thinking of Liles and Molly as action heroes rather than people. Cormac McCarthy's thriller, *No Country for Old Men*, offered harrowing examples of action scenes that make the reader wish the violence would stop.

A key problem in writing *Brawn* was the prominence of video games in the life and thoughts of the protagonist. His experience with games colors how he thinks about Molly, how he tries to help her, how he fails, and even how he succeeds. Ernest Cline writes beautifully about video games in his science fiction novel *Ready Player One*, but that book takes place in a fictional future, rather than taking place in a contemporary culture. I wanted to write about video games in a way that was honest and specific, but that would not completely alienate literary readers.

After more drafts than should be counted, the solution to this problem was informed by Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning third novel. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* features elements of golden age comic book pulp adventures. Those elements punctuate the book's literary story, about young Jewish artists working in New York City during World War II.

The opening pages firmly establish a modernist tone. They take their time describing Sammy, one of the novel's two protagonists, in careful and clever language.

We are then whisked into the recent past and off to Vienna, where Joe, the second protagonist, escapes the tightening noose of Nazi occupation through a stunt daring enough for any golden-age comic book. During that chapter, in which Joe and his mentor investigate, pick locks, interview whores and senior citizens, and smoke darkly at tables with plans spread before them, the reader could easily believe he is partway through a lightweight adventure novel. Still, Chabon's excellent prose, slower, slightly indulgent pacing, and his focus on character revelations and epiphanies that keep Chabon's novel firmly rooted in the literary category.

Later in the novel, Chabon departs for entire chapters from his past tense literary narrative of war-time New York City to deliver the origin stories and adventures of the comic book heroes, heroines, and villains that his protagonists create. These chapters are just as cleverly written, but they indulge in pure dime-store escapism, offering the reader quick action scenes, curt characterization, and all the bravado and simplistic drama of the old comic books the novel explores and celebrates.

These bursts of pulp are pleasant in and of themselves, but they also situate the reader to understand and identify what it is that draws Kavalier and Clay so powerfully to the comic book medium. When Joe Kavalier's family is trapped in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, how can the young man resist retelling tales of the Escapist, a Houdini-like liberator of all oppressed people who punches Hitler in the teeth? On the other hand, these genre passages also serve as stark contrasts to the actual bursts of action that occur in novel. In the "real world" of the novel, a police raid ends not in crooks getting cuffed, but in sexual assault. Joe's younger brother flees Europe on an old ship, and drowns when the ship sinks. Enraged, Joe goes to war but only shoots one German, a scientist

who dies in his arms and leaves Joe alone and mysteriously heartbroken.

Late in the novel, Joe, a professional magician, realizes the allure of magic: its suggestion that broken things can be remade, that vanished things can reappear. The novel makes the same claim for comic books, and through its moments of genre indulgence, gives the reader evidence of that claim.

In writing *Brawn* from the perspective of a teenage gamer, I set out to do similar work with video games. I used *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* as a model for writing about such a specific art form and genre. The last present tense chapter in Chabon's novel follows the Saboteur, a villain created by Kavalier and Clay, as he attempts to bomb his enemy, the Escapist, as the hero performs a magic show. Reading the chapter, it soon becomes clear that the Escapist on stage is actually Joe Kavalier performing at a bar mitzvah, and the Saboteur is a Nazi supporter, angered by the anti-Nazi comic books Joe draws. It is the culmination of Chabon's playing with genre elements. The superhero narrative suddenly overlaps with the story of their creators, and the result is a violent and ultimately futile scene.

That trick led me to embrace Liles' obsession with video games, and to let it inform the shape of the novel. At every climax in the novel's action, Liles is presented with a problem to solve. Be it Molly's grief-stricken father with a gun or a super-powered boy panicking at the bottom of a pool, these problems challenge Liles' ability to think and act quickly. Those are skills developed in the countless hours he has spent gaming. The video game filter through which he sees the world is more problematic than it is helpful. It blurs his perception of Molly and her plight, and that filter must gradually be removed before Liles can properly see and even help Molly. By following Chabon's lead,

I worked the video game elements deep into my main character, so that when Mario came up, it fit the narration's perspective.

All this leads to the question of where my novel fits in these categories—whether *Brawn* is a literary novel with genre elements or a genre piece with literary aspirations. Although some established writers such as Neil Gaiman, Michael Chabon, Karen Russell, Margaret Atwood, and Ursula Guin can straddle categories, Mass notes that new novelists “cannot escape a choice of launching pads” (11). Happily, the publishing industry has coined just the right term for the ambiguous middle ground. Whether *Brawn* could be one of Grossman's “surgically extracted” genre novels or an example of Wood's “infantalized” literary fiction, its home, for now, is in the *upmarket fiction* category.

CHAPTER 2

BRAWN: THE FIRST FOUR CHAPTERS

CHAPTER ONE

At the moment Molly Brennan was shoved out her second-story window, Liles Fishrocket was just across the street playing a video game. Had he been there—maybe standing under the window ready to catch her—it would've been a chance to win Molly's attention the only way Liles thought possible. But he was busy hunting a digital pegasus, so the girl of his dreams plummeted unrescued to the ground.

Liles' belief that brute heroism was the best way to start a relationship with Molly probably got its start in *Super Mario Bros.*, the first video game he ever loved. He was six when he got it, and by then the game was already decades old, but Liles' father would only buy "electronic silliness" like that from a pawnshop, second hand. It came without the original box and with some other kid's name sharpied across the cartridge, but Liles prized it over anything else he had. He used a sandwich bag to keep it safe and clean.

With only thirty minutes of gaming allowed per day, it took him more than a week to conquer the first castle. When he did it—sending the guardian dragon tumbling into a lake of fire—he was shocked to learn that the game was not over. Not were there more castles ahead, but in one of them a princess was locked up and waiting for a hero.

So he forged ahead. He powered through punishing water levels, wove through labyrinthine dungeons, and dashed over oceans of deadly jumping fish—all before his seventh birthday. This was back when the words *Game Over* appeared often and without mercy. When Liles ran out of lives and continues, a sad diddy played, and he found

himself back at that first level—the one he'd once loved, but now saw as just the first step of a journey he'd never complete. Once he threw the Nintendo controller at the TV in frustration. That got him sent outside to get fresh air and stop behaving like a troll, and that was when he first saw Molly Brennan.

Not that he'd been unaware of his first-grade classmate. She lived just across the street, but he'd never really looked at her. Now she crouched in the middle of the road. Her long, black, braided hair bounced as she pulled at the manhole cover beneath her. She grunted with effort but the cover didn't budge, and it wasn't a huge leap for Liles to see her as a princess seeking an escape route. He hopped off the curb, the Mario music beeping in his head.

“Hey,” he said. Molly started, jerking her finger from the hole in the sewer lid.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry,” Liles said. “Sorry.”

“What?” she grunted.

Liles suddenly wanted to go back to his house.

“Why are you trying to lift that lid?”

“I wasn't,” said Molly.

“You were so.”

“Just to see what's down there, gosh.”

Molly tapped the lid with a toe. Only then did Liles realize she was barefoot.

Something about this made him nervous.

“It's too heavy,” said Molly.

“Maybe I can lift it,” said Liles.

Molly tilted her head and squinted at him.

“If I can’t, you can’t.”

Without another word Liles squatted over the sewer lid. He wedged two fingers into the small airhole. The thickness of the lid surprised him, but he gave the thing a tug anyway. He grunted and growled. The lid stayed put.

“I told you.” Molly giggled.

“Well you should help,” said Liles.

After a moment, he felt Molly grab his shoulders from behind.

“Ready?” she said, inches from his ear.

“Go!”

Liles pulled on the lid, and Molly pulled on him. The lid stayed in place, but Liles’ fingers slipped. He fell back, and his head hit Molly in the face. They landed side by side, but Molly immediately scampered up, her elbows scraped, her hand over her mouth and nose, and her eyes full of tears.

“Thanks a lot,” she sobbed. As she stomped away into her house, Liles lay in the street, wishing his dad would come early and run him over.

From then on Liles always noticed Molly on the bus and at school. He watched for a chance to do something useful for her, to help her out of trouble or danger. There she was, a pretty girl not in some castle, but on Chattanooga’s Northshore, just across Watterton Street. Liles learned that she was a good goalkeeper in soccer, that she was just okay at spelling, and that she never needed rescuing.

Her father took off when they were in second grade, but Liles didn’t feel capable of tracking down a runaway adult. Molly rolled her ankle on the soccer field in third

grade, and Liles would have carried her off to the nurse, but he was high up in the bleachers and someone's dad got to her first. When their fourth-grade English teacher asked Molly who fathered Hercules, Liles raised his hand as high as he could, more than willing to give the answer and save Molly from embarrassment. The teacher didn't call on him, though, and he sat powerless, waving both hands as Molly confessed she had not done the assigned reading.

Then Molly's mother was pregnant. Kids at school talked about who the dad could be, but no one had any good theories knew. That fall the baby boy was born with what Liles' mother heard were very serious complications. Liles was eleven, and could think of no way to help. Molly's mother died a few hours after the delivery. Liles spent the night playing *Zelda*, too excited and ashamed of his excitement to sleep.

He knew he should feel sad. His mother called it empathy, and he tried, but he couldn't help seeing the memorial service as a chance to be a kind of hero for Molly. He wore one of his father's ties, tried parting his hair with a comb, and clopped in his only dress shoes into his parents' bathroom to ask his father for some aftershave.

"I sure hope you didn't actually shave," said Chester into the vanity mirror, as he knotted his own tie.

"It's just for the smell," said Liles.

"I like your hair," said Chester. "You know there's no dancing at a funeral, though, don't you?"

"Dancing?"

"We're just going to pay our respects. It's not a party."

"Dad," Liles protested.

“This is real. It’s a real funeral for a real woman.” Chester’s voice trembled, and he pulled his tie hard, like a tourniquet cutting off the flow. When he spoke again, his voice was steady, even bored. “We’ll sit, listen, pray, and come back home. The end.”

Liles left the bathroom without cologne. He messed his hair until the part disappeared, and wondered if he’d just seen his father crying. Chester and Mrs. Brennan had both worked at the Nueturn plant, but not in the same area. Did he feel that way about all Nueturn employees?

The service was held on the south shore, in a red-brick church that looked like an *Age of Empires II* fortress. As they entered the sanctuary, Liles’ mother, Alison, pointed discreetly at a tall, thin man with a mustache sitting beside a woman just as thin, but without the facial hair.

“Is that Simon Brennan?” said Alison.

“Looks like it,” said Chester.

“He looks like a new man,” said Alison. “Put on some nice weight and everything.”

“That guy used to be even skinnier?” said Liles.

“There’s his new wife, then,” said Alison, leading the way along an empty pew.

“It was brave of him to come back for the children. Sweet, poor things.”

“It’s not brave to do what you have to do,” said Chester.

“That’s not true, Ches.” As they settled into their seats, Alison kept her eyes on the new Mrs. Brennan. “I wonder if he ran off for her or if he met her later.”

“Not our business,” said Chester.

“Hush,” said Alison.

Alison Fishrocket's hobby was people. She never forgot a name. She never waited in a line without learning all about the person behind her and the person before her. She gossiped out of curiosity, but also out of concern. To her, everyone in Chattanooga was a protagonist worth rooting for and knowing better. In more generous moments, Liles wondered if this could be part of the reason she'd married a widower in his sixties when she was just in her thirties. Maybe because he was so much older, he had more secrets and history for her to discover.

Looking at Mr. Brennan and the new Mrs. Brennan, Liles thought of two Great Danes taught to sit up and stuffed into clothes. He wondered if Mr. Brennan had abandoned his family for this lady, or if he met her out there on the run.

"They have a hard road ahead of them," said Alison. "Dr. Mathis was at the bank yesterday and was telling me."

"He shouldn't be telling you about patients," said Chester.

"It's out of concern," said Alison. "That poor little baby."

"Doesn't matter if it's out of concern," said Chester. "It's a violation."

As the Fishrackets shuffled along a back pew, Liles noticed that the casket beneath the altar was shut, and that Molly was not sitting beside her father or stepmother.

"Do tombs lock?" asked Liles.

"Hush," said Alison.

"It's a casket, not a tomb," said Chester.

"Why is it closed?" asked Liles.

Alison shushed him again, but then answered.

"Some families prefer privacy."

“I will,” said Chester.

“Could you please not talk like that?” said Alison. “We’re in church.”

“Church is a perfect place to talk like that.”

“Well then say ‘*would*,’ not ‘*will*,’ like your funeral is next Tuesday.”

Liles twisted around in his seat, scanning the pews for Molly. His whole class was there, sitting with their families, their fathers young enough to be Chester’s kids. Liles glanced at his father’s neck, where his spotted skin bunched above his collar, and was embarrassed.

When the service started, Molly still wasn’t in the sanctuary. Alison whispered at Liles to be still as Simon Brennan walked to the pulpit to deliver his eulogy. The microphone amplified the noise as he unfolded his typed speech and started to read a speech about regrets, divorce, and gathering rosebuds.

Liles twisted in his seat, scanning the sanctuary for a spot of black hair, maybe tied up in that high ponytail Molly preferred when she played sweeper in soccer.

“Be quiet,” said Alison.

“I didn’t say anything,” answered Liles.

“She means be still, boy,” said Chester.

“I don’t see Molly,” said Liles. “Maybe she needs help,”

“She definitely does not need to be disturbed, wherever she is,” said Chester.

Liles tried to sit still. His father had called him boy, which was a warning, but where was Molly? He peaked at a few of his classmates who played soccer and ate lunch with Molly. One of them would surely go looking for her. Then Liles would have nothing to do but go home and play video games, saving people who didn’t really exist.

Simon Brennan was saying that he chose orange juice now, in times of stress, and that every day, with the help of his wife, Ruth, he turned over a brand new leaf. When he turned the piece of paper over to keep reading, Liles lost his patience. He slipped from his pew and moved for the doors, ignoring his mother's whispered threats and knowing he would be punished. It didn't matter, though, if he got to see Molly.

The chairs flanking the church's empty foyer were the same color as the carpet, which was red. Liles wandered down a hallway full of locked doors until he came to one that stood ajar. He pushed through into a deep closet full of heavy-looking choir robes and brass baptismal dishes. Liles stepped inside and found Molly sitting among the robes. In her black dress, with her hair braided, and her back straight, she looked older than ten. In her lap she held her sleeping baby brother, just over a week old. The baby's face was red and sweaty, as if he'd just finished screaming.

She held a piece of paper in her hand, which she folded against her chest as Liles stepped into the closet. She looked at him, her eyebrows up like a waitress waiting for a drink order.

"Hi, Liles," she said. Liles could've climbed into his own casket right then, happy that Molly Brennan remembered his name.

"Hi," he managed.

"How are you?"

"Me?" he said. "I think I should ask how you are."

"Fine," said Molly.

"Shouldn't he be at the hospital?" he pointed to the infant.

Molly shook her head.

“He’s very healthy. Miss Ruth said my mom gave all the healthiness to him.”

“Oh,” said Liles. “Is Miss Ruth your new mom?”

“No,” said Molly.

“I heard my mom saying something about it,” Liles explained.

Molly blew gently on her brother’s red face. The baby didn’t seem to notice. The silence grew long and uncomfortable, so Liles spoke.

“What were you reading?”

“Will you shut that door?” said Molly, without looking up.

“Oh,” said Liles, “sure. Like, with me outside? I mean, do you want to be alone?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

He mustered more courage than he thought he had in him and shut the door with him inside, alone with Molly. He sat down across from her.

“This is Sheldon,” she said. “Want to hold him? He’s really heavy.”

Liles did not know how to hold a baby, but he leaned forward and Molly rolled the bundle into his arms. Sheldon Brennan was heavy, like the cool bowling balls with marble designs that were twice as heavy as the ones for kids.

“Is my dad done talking?” Molly asked.

“He wasn’t when I left.”

Molly rolled her eyes. When she spoke again, she seemed winded, pausing every few words to take a breath. She sniffled, and the uncomfortable silence reared up again. Liles fought it back.

“Is it your speech?” he said, nodding at the paper Molly held in her fist.

Molly shook her head.

“Why would I have a speech?”

“Oh. I don’t know. Your dad’s giving a speech,” Liles shrugged. Molly squinted at him, and it seemed to Liles she was suddenly a few feet closer to him. He felt his ears and cheeks burn.

“It’s a note from my mom,” she said.

“Oh yeah?”

“They gave it to me. Dad opened the envelope first, though.”

Liles looked down at the baby. He wasn’t sure if it was rude or polite to ask what the letter said. Molly spoke again before he decided.

“It doesn’t say much. Just to take care of him.” She pointed the folded note at the boy in Liles’ arms.

“To take care of him?”

“Yeah, if anything happened to Mom.”

“Oh,” said Liles. “Well, it looks like you’re doing a good job, so far.”

Molly flinched.

“You want to know a secret?”

Liles shrugged, by which he meant *yes I want to know everything about you*.

“My dad told me I could leave the sanctuary with the baby if he started to cry. So when we first got here, and people started coming in and talking to me, I started pinching Sheldon’s leg. To make him cry.”

Molly’s nose was running, so Liles looked away. He had no tissue and he hated himself for it.

“He wouldn’t cry, though,” she said. “So I pinched him really hard. And he still

didn't cry. My aunt said he's—" she thought of the word, "unresponsive, so I pinched and I twisted really, really hard, and finally he started crying and so I got to leave and he cried and cried."

She scooted close and lowered her head to kiss her brother, still in Liles' arms. Her bangs hid her face. If Liles hadn't leaned back, his nose would've been in her hair.

"Why'd you want to leave the service?" he asked when she sat up again.

"I don't know," she said, looking down at the note. It suddenly felt to Liles that he was eavesdropping. "When we got in here I tried to explain it, but I don't think Sheldon understands. He thinks I hurt him on purpose. I mean I did, but—I don't know when he'll be old enough to understand. But I wasn't trying to be mean."

"Just because you pinched him one time, that doesn't mean you won't take good care of him," said Liles.

She looked at him, her eyes dark with tears, and he knew he should scoot across the floor and let her head rest on his shoulder. Instead he sat where he was, useless. He remembered once the muscles in his mother's foot cramped after a long day standing at the bank, and all his father did was hold her hand and wait for the pain to pass.

At least Liles could do that, but his arms were suddenly tired. How much did newborns normally weigh? He grunted and adjusted his grip, terrified he might drop the baby.

"I told you he was heavy," said Molly, wiping her nose.

"He isn't to me," said Liles. Again his cheeks and ears burned.

Then she smiled—but just for a second. She flinched as if smiling hurt.

Liles pulled the baby against his chest and freed a hand. He ordered himself to

reach out across the closet and squeeze Molly's hand, but then someone pushed open the door, which hit Liles hard in the back of the head. He rolled out of the way and turned to see Molly's father standing in the hall, his scarecrow arms and legs crisscrossing the doorway.

"Molly, what're you doing?"

Sheldon screamed and wiggled.

"Who the hell is this?" Mr. Brennan looked down at Liles.

Molly shot to her feet, smoothing out her dress.

"He's my neighbor," she said, taking the baby from Liles. "Our neighbor, I guess."

Mr. Brennan took a deep breath—in through his nostrils and then out through clenched teeth.

"You need to get back into the service."

He pulled Molly by her shoulder into the hall.

Liles stood up.

"Hey," he said, and wished his voice were less squeaky. "Let go of her."

Mr. Brennan stopped. He looked at Liles with dim, gray eyes.

"What did you say to me?"

Before Liles could whimper a response, Molly tore away from her father and started down the hall, back toward the sanctuary. For a breath, Mr. Brennan stayed in the doorway, blocking Liles' only escape from the closet. Then he went after his daughter at a jog. Liles watched as the man caught up to Molly. When he laid his hand back on her shoulder, she didn't pull away.

Liles followed them back toward the sanctuary, and what should he have done for Molly? What would a hero have done? Certainly something other than giving in to tears and holding the bump on the back of his head. That's all Liles did, though. For leaving the service, he was grounded from video games for a week.

Molly stopped coming to school the following spring. She took classes online so she could help take care of her little brother, whose development—Liles heard—was severely impaired. Though he lived across the street and always kept an eye out, Liles didn't see Molly leave her house for six years.

#

As Liles grew, his dark eyes began to look less stupidly surprised and more alert. Though sports didn't work out for him (his JV soccer tryout ended with a ruptured eardrum and a half-hearted invitation from the coach to consider cross country running), he grew lean and coordinated. He wasn't exactly tall but when he didn't slouch, his shoulders were broad. As a sophomore he became aware that certain girls in his class might agree to date him. He never found the courage to ask, though. The games he played developed along with him. The digital damsels in distress grew more beautiful, and as he let himself imagine they were real, they mixed with Molly in his mind.

When his father insisted he get involved at school and leave the place better than he found it, he formed the Chattanooga Gamers Club. The CGC was meant to train and compete in multiplayer video game tournaments online. Liles was good enough, and he knew of several other serious gamers at his school. His mom made cookies for the first

meeting, which Liles ate as he sat waiting for someone—anyone—to show. When the roster remained just one name long, the CGC voted unanimously to disband.

From then on Liles skipped social events to wreck worlds and save princesses. He wrote reviews—planning to be the Roger Ebert of video game criticism—that were never published, and he composed emails to Molly Brennan that he never sent, since all he could think to write were retellings of his most exciting video game adventures.

#

It was a Monday evening midway through Liles' junior year in high school that his mother brought home the rumor of abuse going on in the Brennan home. Over macaroni and cheese with tuna, she mumbled to Chester that she'd seen Ruth Brennan at the bank with a big, fresh, black eye, and a not-very-discreet limp.

Alison always mumbled when she wanted to talk about something without Liles hearing. If the trick ever worked, it didn't anymore. Liles caught every word, but since Chester's hearing was going, he had to ask Alison to repeat herself. Then he dismissed the gossip with a grunt. But to Liles, it was a revelation.

There were three reasons Liles knew he was never going to walk across the street and invite Molly Brennan over for an afternoon of *Argonaut 3* firefights: first, he was too shy; second, he knew that girls rarely liked video games; and third, Molly never left her house. But what if her father really was abusive? That would mean Molly needed help, and Liles could be that help. And then what? Did he expect a hug? A kiss? The beginning of a beautiful friendship? A vow of marriage? That part of his hope remained vague and

exciting, like some secret video game level yet to be unlocked.

Too jittery to sleep that night, he rolled out of bed and into his desk chair to proofread his college application essay. So far it consisted of his name and the words *One experience that definitely changed my life was*. The essay prompt was clear enough, and in his life Liles had blown spaceships to dust, head-butted bricks until coins popped out, and jump-kicked multicolored ninjas who disappeared when defeated, all to rescue a planet or a princess or sometimes both. If he tried to think of a life-changing experience that didn't happen with a video game controller in hand, though, all he could think of were really good movies he'd seen.

The only experience he could claim that other sixteen year olds could not was the experience of having a father who looked more like a grandfather. Just a few weeks ago the Fishrackets had been out for dinner at the Terminal with Laura, Liles' middle-aged half sister, and a woman at a neighboring table noted how nice it was to see three generations eating all together. Having a cradle-robber for a father would not make a good essay, though.

Maybe he could write about knocking Molly's father through a wall. Before he could attack his neighbor, of course, he'd need to verify that Molly was actually in danger. To do that, he'd need a day of uninterrupted surveillance. His parents would notice him staring out his window all day if he tried a weekend, so it'd have to be a school day.

So in the morning, for the first time in his life, he faked being sick. He made gagging sounds over the toilet and then stumbled back to bed. His mom brought him a bucket and bottled water and left for the bank by eight, but his father didn't shuffle off to

his start bagging groceries until almost ten. He called it a hobby, not a job.

Finally alone, Liles rifled through his father's sock drawer, found the pair of dented binoculars—probably older than every house on the North Shore—and settled at his bedroom window to watch for a glimpse of Molly.

From his perch, he could only see so much through the branches of the oak tree that dominated his front yard. Liles used to climb the thing, but now he only thought of it when he slipped on piles of rain-soaked acorns or when his father forced him to rake the yard. Liles' mom said once that they should cut the tree down before it fell on the house in a storm, but Chester said nothing as old as the oak should be destroyed for convenience. He argued that the oak tree made their yard a nature preserve and a historical site. Liles raked the leaves and stomped on acorns without argument.

Not long into the stakeout, his dark TV across the room seemed to stare at Liles, and his thumbs twitched. He could spend these stolen hours cutting down pixelated Greeks and demigods, doing the kind of heroic deeds he wished he could do in real life. He'd have to face away from the window to game, though, and then he might miss Molly, so he kept his vigil. All that day he hardly turned away from the Brennan house, but Molly never emerged. The only slightly interesting thing that happened came just before dinner, when Molly's father took out the trash. Alongside two garbage bags he set a sad pile of polished wood that might recently have been a coffee table. Liles thought that broken furniture could be an indication of domestic violence, but it wasn't enough to send him over there in shining armor.

So he played sick again the next day. His parents were a bit less sympathetic this time, but his grades were good, and his attendance record just about perfect. His mother

threatened to take him to the doctor if he wasn't better by dinner, and kissed his forehead goodbye. His father informed Liles that the college application essay would be finished by the time he got home, or all video games were going to Goodwill.

By eleven that morning, Liles had begun to wonder if Molly ever left her house at all. Surely she would come out to check the mail. Surely she'd water the potted plants hanging above the porch. Surely her little brother—the reason she no longer came to school—would have to get out and run around. He must be almost seven by now; a kid that age would generate enough energy to power a city.

There was an idea. If it turned out Molly wasn't in danger, maybe Liles could go over and offer to babysit her brother or something. That wouldn't work, though. Liles had no experience taking care of kids that were handicapped, special needs, or retarded. He didn't even know the difference between the three. He was about to look it up online when his phone rang.

It was his father. Liles sighed as he answered the call.

“Have you killed all the creatures?” said Chester.

“I'm not playing video games, Dad.”

“Oh good. Are you feeling better?”

“I feel fine,” said Liles.

“Good enough to go back to school tomorrow?”

“We can only hope,” said Liles. He suspected he couldn't pull off a third sick day without ending up at the doctor's office.

“Then you must also feel good enough to get your essay done, right?”

“I'm working on it.” Liles figured that thinking about the essay counted as

working on it.

“Good boy,” said Chester. “What experience have you chosen?”

Liles left the window to pace the room.

“I’ll show it to you when I’m done if you want,” said Liles.

“I would love that, but I’d also like you to tell me now what you’re writing about.”

“Just stuff, Dad.”

“What stuff?”

Liles walked into the hall, scanning the pictures on the wall for inspiration. All he saw were dead or aging relatives.

“Liles, you’ll have to write essays all the time in college. I did it, and without a computer to help. Why is this so hard for you?”

Because I have nothing to write about. Because I’d rather watch for Molly than make up some crap about our trip to Florida changing my perspective on death and love and the universe. Liles felt all this and he meant it, but he said nothing.

Chester sighed. It came through the phone as a burst of static.

“You’ll choose an experience and write a first paragraph by the time I get home, which is about two hours from now. Yes?”

“Yes sir,” said Liles.

“Deal,” said Chester, and he ended the call.

Liles stomped back to his window. From there, he saw water dripping from each of the plants hanging above the Brennan porch. The door was shut and the curtains were still drawn, but Molly must have come out to water her mother’s plants. She’d been right

there on the porch. If she'd shown signs of being in danger, he'd missed them. Just as well, he decided. He couldn't even stand up to his father; what made him think he could do anything to protect Molly?

He tossed Chester's binoculars onto his bed and went to his computer. That's where he was a little while later—drinking coffee and reading his old review of *Crash Bandicoot*—when Molly's father returned early from work. Liles had just given up on his essay and turned on *Argonauts 4* for some myth hunting when something across the street crashed and shattered. He ran back to his perch and saw that the second-story window in the Brennan house had broken. Beneath that window, surrounded by shards of glass and splintered grids, her legs in the bushes and her back on the lawn, lay Molly.

CHAPTER TWO

The video games Liles loved best took killer reflexes and microsecond decision making to survive. Hesitation usually meant death by fireball, lightning bolt, or flying turtle. But as Molly bucked and kicked beneath her own shattered window, the wind knocked out of her by the fall, Liles stood and stared, too shocked to move.

Imagining Molly in danger had always been exciting. Seeing her hurt was not. She rolled onto her side and curled up in pain. Her blue shorts did nothing to hide the brown bruise that striped her left thigh.

Finally Liles wrenched his window open. Molly wasn't making a sound, but her little brother wailed somewhere inside the house.

Liles hadn't spoken to Molly since the church closet six years ago, and now all he could think to say was "Hey!"

Molly rolled onto her side and looked up at him. Liles wanted to jump from his own window and run to her, but then her father emerged from the house, his face and neck bright red, the sleeves of his collared shirt rolled up past his elbows. He pulled Molly from the grass and debris and stood up straight, bouncing her a bit in his arms. Looking around, he spotted Liles.

They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Liles ducked out of sight, like he'd done something wrong. As Simon Brennan swept Molly back into the house and kicked the door shut behind him, Liles hid under his own window like a helpless old man.

He stayed down there for nearly a minute, drumming on his kneecaps and

wondering why he was afraid. Here was his chance to rescue Molly. Simon Brennan must have pushed or thrown her out that window, and now he had her in there again. Was he tending to Molly's wounds? Promising never to get angry again? Or was he dragging her up the stairs to try murder by window just one more time?

Liles picked up his head. The debris scattered across the Brennan's yard was evidence. He had proof that Molly was in danger. He thought of Mario, Link, Master Chief, and of the nameless steampunk soldier he commanded in *Argonauts 4*, and that got him moving. He stumbled around his room, pulling off his pajamas, kicking his way into a pair of jeans, and scanning his possessions for a weapon. He didn't own a baseball bat. The legs of his desk looked dangerous enough. He pulled at one for a second, but breaking it off wouldn't be easy, and if he managed it his computer would fall screen-first to the floor.

His soccer cleats—worn once, never used for actual kicking—could scrape and claw, but he wasn't looking to annoy Mr. Brennan. He wanted to incapacitate the brute and get out of there with Molly. He realized then he would need to rescue Molly's little brother, too. That sounded less exciting to him, but it was what a hero should do.

His stapler was too small, his printer too fragile, and his participation trophy from first-grade teeball not actually made of anything heavy enough to hurt. He settled on wearing a soccer cleat like a badly-made boxing glove and tumbled down the stairs to face the abusive landscaper Simon Brennan.

The front door opened before he reached it, and Liles stopped just short of running headlong into his father. The blue of Chester's grocer's apron was interrupted by splashes and stains. In one hand he held a bag of groceries. He put up the other to halt

Liles.

“Wow. I can’t remember the last time you came running to the door to greet me. Feeling better, I guess?”

“Lots,” said Liles. He tried to slide through the door. Chester moved to block him.

“Where are you off to?”

Blood pounded in Liles’ ears. His adrenaline—normally activated only for particularly hairy *Argonauts 4* firefights—would not last long, and now his fragile father stood between him and Molly. It was tempting to knock this seventy-six-year-old man aside, especially since Liles had already wrestled him once and won.

He was only ten at the time, already deep into video games and hardly interested in sports. Dinner was over, and as Chester poured himself a second glass of wine, he suggested they watch the evening news. Liles’ mother said she wanted to watch a documentary on the search for Atlantis beneath the waves. Liles agreed.

With a wine-stained smile, Chester grabbed the TV remote and said he was in charge and that no one could stop him. He then looked at Liles, chuckling and waiting. Liles attacked. The old man held the remote too high for him to grab, so Liles went for his father’s legs, and they fell to the floor. Alison stepped over them, claimed the best spot on the couch, and cheered for Liles.

Chester was already seventy, and soon his laughter gave way to grunts of effort, and then the remote control didn’t matter anymore. It fell to the floor and the wrestling match continued.

The old man quickly wore out, and Liles got his knee onto his father’s back. Surely the god of the house was going easy on him. Liles turned his father’s arm like a

grounded tree branch still too green to snap, and Chester writhed under him. Alison said that was probably enough, that Liles was her hero. Then Liles leaned hard against the arm and his father screamed. It was a sudden sound, bouncing from roar to squeal. It was a scared sound, and a scary one.

Keeping her seat, Alison gently kicked Liles off of Chester. The old man didn't get up right away but held his shoulder a while. He whistled, his eyes shut tight.

"Well that hurt," he said, eventually. "That really hurt, champion."

Liles kept smiling because he wasn't sure what else to do. Fresh carpet burns stung his knees and elbows. He wondered what this victory could mean. Was he unnaturally strong, or was his father especially weak? He watched Chester struggle to his knees and then tip over again.

To Liles, pity was what heroes felt for villains who'd brought about their own demise. But as the Fishrackets sat together on the couch, watching the Atlantis special, Liles heard only his father's ugly, uneven breathing. He hoped he would never sound like that. He promised himself that he would always be strong.

Now here he stood, with Molly in real danger and Liles' old father blocking his way to her. Flexing the fist inside the cleat, Liles prepared to lie, a skill he'd never feared his parents enough to master.

"I'm just going outside," he said. "For air."

"Just going outside for air, what?" said Chester.

"Ches, move please," Alison called from behind her husband. It sounded to Liles like she was carrying something heavy. Of course his father would leave the heavier groceries for her.

“Just going outside for air, what, Liles?” said Chester.

“Sir,” said Liles. He juked, but the old man spread his arms and legs like a goalkeeper. The three Fishrackets stood in a row—the son trapped inside, the mother outside, and Chester in the middle, giving Liles his stern, leathery smile.

“Ches, let me in,” Alison grunted. Paper grocery bags rustled behind Chester.

“You forgot one of your cleats,” said Chester.

“Oh,” said Liles, digging for a lie and coming up with only the truth. “I just need one.”

“Aren’t you a little sick for soccer?”

“I don’t know.”

“Move it, Ches.”

“I’m parenting, darling.” Chester’s eyes didn’t leave his son. “So, you got your application essay done during your day of rest, didn’t you?”

“Almost,” said Liles.

“Almost, what?” said Chester.

Liles said nothing. He could just see the Brennan house over Chester’s shoulder. Molly might crash through another window any moment, if she wasn’t already dead somewhere inside the house. Eventually Chester ended the silence.

“Let me tell you a story, son.” He tilted his head back as if contemplating the universe, the way he always did when he was about to scold through storytelling.

“Not right now,” said Liles. “please.”

“There was once this kid who did pretty well in school,” said Chester, “though he really didn’t get involved. His parents worked hard to pay the bills and put clothes on his

back, and all they asked in return was that he get good grades, get into college, and that he leave his high school better than he found it. With me?”

“Ches,” Alison barked from outside.

“Then one day,” Chester went on, “this kid stayed home sick, or maybe not sick, and wasted an entirely good day—a day bought with the sweat and blood of his parents—on video games. Then, at the end of that long, lazy day, this kid just up and took off for the afternoon, suddenly all better, and without any explanation to his parents.” Chester leaned forward, the way he always did at this point in the scold-by-story formula. “And do you know the crazy part?”

A paper bag ripped behind Chester and groceries smacked to the sidewalk. Chester stepped aside, revealing Liles’ mother, now bending over broken eggs splattered across boxes of macaroni and several sets of the icy/hot patches that Chester used to treat pain in his back, neck, arms, calves, sides, feet, and wrists.

“Oh,” said Chester. “Sorry.”

“I told you to move,” said Alison. She shouldered by both Fishrocket men and hurried to the kitchen.

“I’ll clean it. I’m sorry.” Chester turned back to Liles, slouching, the zeal gone from him. “Anyway the crazy part is that kid is you, my own son, and so on and so on. You’re not going anywhere this afternoon until that essay is done.”

“Dad.”

“And probably not even then,” said Chester. “You stay home sick from school, you stay home for the day. Help your mother clean up those groceries.”

“Mr. Brennan just pushed Molly out of her second-story window,” said Liles.

Chester blinked at him. Alison leaned in from the kitchen.

“What did you say?” said Chester.

“Molly fell? Is she alright?”

“For now,” said Liles. “Mr. Brennan came and took her back into the house.”

“Mr. Brennan was there?” said Alison. She fumbled the rest of the groceries. “Did he look angry?”

“Ali, honey, call over there and check on Molly,” said Chester.

Alison looked at Chester. Liles watched his parents communicate silently and rapidly, like telepathic Thorians from *Mass Effect*, and wondered if they were disagreeing. Then Alison pulled out her phone and walked back out the front door.

“Liles, did you see this happen?” said Chester.

“Kind of. I heard it. When I got back to the window Molly was on the ground beneath the window.”

“But didn’t you say Mr. Brennan pushed Molly?” said Chester.

Liles nodded.

Chester looked at him for a moment. Then pointed at the soccer cleat on Liles’ hand.

“Were you going to go across the street with that? Like as a weapon?”

Liles pulled his hand out of the shoe.

“Honestly, boy,” said Chester, “we thought you’d outgrown this.”

It was never good when one of Liles’ parents started speaking in first person plural. He struggled against a sudden urge to slouch and study the carpet.

“What?” he said. “As if I’ve tried to save someone from being abused by her own

father before?”

“Simon answered,” said Alison, coming back inside. “He’s checking to see if she broke anything but she seems fine.”

“Good,” said Chester. “I was just about to tell Liles about the caterpillar.”

“Oh gosh,” said Alison. “Liles, you were seven, and I sent you out to get the mail. You found a caterpillar getting eaten up by ants.”

“The next thing we knew,” said Chester, “you were standing right there in the driveway, just wailing, holding a half-dead caterpillar in your hand, and with both your hands and arms covered in ants just chewing away at you.”

“Poor baby looked like he had chickenpox,” Alison laughed.

“Then there was the time your mother and I were arguing about something. We weren’t even yelling. At least I wasn’t.”

“Neither was I,” said Alison.

“And then here comes little Liles, stabbing his poor dad in the unmentionables with some plastic ninja weapon, telling me not to be mean to your mom.”

By the end of this second story, Liles’ adrenaline was gone. He felt his old, deeply rooted habit tugging him upstairs to escape into a video game—into an unambiguous war he could wage without second thoughts or parental involvement.

“More to the point,” Chester’s grin faded, “you’re running around assuming our neighbor Simon is some kind of monster who would throw his only daughter out a window.”

“I think that’s what he did,” said Liles.

“Ruth did have that bruised eye, Ches,” said Alison. Liles wanted to hug his

mother, but that would drain all that was left of his fighting spirit.

“Simon Brennan is a reformed man,” said Chester. “He and Ruth work hard to provide for those kids. You know that’s true, Ali.”

Alison nodded.

“That’s true, you’re right. It can’t be easy with poor little Sheldon and his problems, and with all that Simon has not had a drop to drink in years.”

“Wait,” said Liles, “Mr. Brennan’s an alcoholic?”

Chester closed his eyes.

“Ali,” he said.

“Sorry, sorry,” Alison looked at her husband and bit her thumb.

“A long time ago, yes, Simon was an alcoholic,” said Chester.

“Actually I think the way it works is that they’re always alcoholics,” said Alison. “It never goes away, but they become stronger than the disease. Mr. Brennan became stronger than his disease, Liles.”

“So,” said Liles, forcing forced himself to breathe deep, “Molly’s almost been killed and you’re just assuming her alcoholic father is innocent?”

“Ali,” said Chester, his jaw flexing under his loose cheeks, “would you mind starting dinner?”

When the Fishrocket men were alone in the doorway, Chester tapped his own temple hard enough that it made a sound.

“Use your head, son. Weird situations and emergencies are opportunities for you to make things better, to leave a situation better than you found it.”

“That’s what—”

“No,” Chester stomped his geriatric sneaker on the carpet. “I’ve known Simon Brennan for a long time. I knew him in his rougher years, and now I bag the man’s groceries. If he was off the wagon, I’d see evidence come down the checkout belt, wouldn’t I?”

“He could buy stuff at liquor stores,” said Liles.

“Do you know how few customers tip the boy that carries their groceries?” Chester pointed at his own chest, and Liles flinched at his father referring to himself as a boy. “Simon tips me every time he comes in, and never even lets me carry his bags to his car, even though it’s store policy that I do that.”

“Mom saw Mrs. Brennan with a black eye.”

“So what?” said Chester. “If you get a black eye, and someone sees you out, should they assume I beat you up?”

No one would ever believe such an old man could beat up anyone. Liles wanted to say this, but did not.

“I want you,” Chester poked Liles in the chest, “to start thinking less like a Super Luigi Brother and more like one of my Nueturn employees.”

“You’re not at Nueturn, Dad. Nueturn is no more.”

“The principle applies. If a worker sees something amiss, he or she informs his or her supervisor. You’ve informed me, now go clean up the groceries I made your mother drop.”

As Liles knelt over the crushed carton of eggs, he saw a few neighbors out on the road in front of the Brennan house, pointing at the glass and pacing. Liles’ window of opportunity had passed. Too frustrated to stop and get the dustpan or garbage can, he just

raked the mess all together with his hands.

“Son,” said Chester from inside, “is that all you saw? Molly falling?”

“I didn’t even see her fall, just saw where she landed,” said Liles.

“With Shelly being handicapped, the Brennans have a lot going on,” said Chester, almost mumbling. “Crying wolf could bring down social services and who knows what else on their heads. Don’t make things worse for a family that has it hard. Okay?”

Liles said nothing. He shoved the mess into his hand.

“When you’re done there,” said Chester, “go write that essay.”

#

For the rest of the afternoon, Liles jabbed at his computer’s keyboard. He tried to write about his failed attempt at saving that ant-eaten caterpillar as a life-changing experience, but could only think about three things: Molly’s bruised leg, the apparently reformed Simon Brennan, and Liles’ own father, too old to understand that video games don’t pickle brains, too weak to carry his own groceries in from the car, and too scared or tired to do anything about the violence going on across the street. At one point Chester entered the room without knocking and took both video game controllers from Liles’ bed without comment. Liles’ writing session was not successful.

He went to bed earlier than usual, and though he felt stupid doing it, he opened his window to listen for trouble across the street, just in case. Mr. Brennan had covered Molly’s window with nothing more than cardboard. When no cars were passing and the wind died down, Liles could hear Molly’s little brother crying or laughing; it was hard to

tell, the way he moaned and barked. The Brennan's trashcans were at the curb and propped between them was a thick, white, rectangular thing like a refrigerator door, only it was bent at its center, forming a ragged V. The plastic interior was cracked and the metal shell bowed like a car fender. Had Simon Brennan done that? He might have managed it with a hammer, but not easily. Maybe turning his rage on appliances was one way he kept from hurting Molly too badly.

Liles dozed eventually, but jerked awake at every slamming car door or barking dog. Sometime after dark, he awoke to the sound of voices outside. Two people were arguing, straining to keep their voices at a whisper. Liles could hardly see through the shadows and oak branches, but with the binoculars he saw—and had to stare to confirm it—his father across the street, at the Brennan's front door, arguing with Molly's step-mother.

Though he stuck his head clear out the window, gasping at the cold, Liles couldn't make out what they were saying. Ruth Brennan stood a heel taller than Chester, and was compensating for her restrained voice by stabbing her finger at Chester, and parrying and waving it like a torch to frighten a pack of wolves. Chester's hands were open at his sides. When he gestured up at the boarded window, Mrs. Brennan shut the door hard enough that Chester took a step back. He didn't knock or ring the bell then, but just stood a moment. It was as if he knew the door would open again, which it did, revealing Simon Brennan. Molly's father stepped over the threshold and spoke to Chester. The sound came to Liles only as a tone, like a low piano note suspended. Something in it sounded less aggressive than Ruth Brennan's hissing.

Liles could not see for sure through the tangle of branches, but it seemed Simon

actually put a hand on Chester's shoulder. Their conversation ended quickly, and Liles ducked back as his father crossed the street. Liles listened to his own front door open and close, and to his father's careful footsteps on the stairs. When the house was quiet, he rolled back to look out the window, wondering why his father had gone over so late, and why he'd argued with the step-mom, not the father. Just before or maybe while he slept, he thought he saw the eastern side of the Brennan house tremble, like one of Bowser's fortresses just before Mario knocks it down with dynamite. Liles forced himself to stay awake a little longer, but when the house kept still, he mistakenly decided he had imagined it.

He woke with a sore throat but didn't think he could try for another sick day. Instead he skipped breakfast so he could leave the house before his father got up. He stepped outside for the time—he realized—in more than twenty-four hours, and the cold air seemed to clear his mind. As he pulled his coat collar high to his ears, he began to accept the idea that he had overreacted the day before. Maybe Molly was just clumsy, and Liles needed to take it easy on video games. He had all but decided to cut back to three hours a day when he reached his bicycle.

His ride—the only vehicle he'd ever owned—was a girl's bicycle from the 1980s. The handlebars were pink, the frame white, the wheel spokes purple. It once belonged to his half sister, Laura, the only child to come from Chester's first marriage. Now a nurse in her late thirties, Laura Fishrocket lived alone in Roswell, Georgia. Chester had assured Liles he was free to save up his lawn-mowing profits and buy himself a new bike. Since Liles had video games to buy, he rode Laura's bike, expecting at any time for his parents to break down and buy him a road bike better suited to him. Four years on, that had still

not happened.

Just before he kicked his leg over the cheerful bike, he spotted a flap of paper stuck in the purple spokes of its front wheel. It was a scrap of notebook paper, unevenly torn from the spine. Unfolding it, he found a phone number, and just a few words in a neat, tight cursive:

Have you been spying on me? Please call at 11 a.m.

—Molly

CHAPTER THREE

Of all the phone companies that serviced the greater Chattanooga area, Chester Fishrocket insisted his family stay with the oldest, to which he'd mailed monthly checks for decades, and which required any customer hoping to make a cell phone call north of the Tennessee river to perform a mysterious sequence of steps and waving gestures with their phone to conjure the needed reception. So when second period ended at a quarter past eleven, Liles plowed through the congested school hallway out into the parking lot. Once there, he started walking, slowly tracing the outer border of the school and watching for a bar or two to pop up on his phone's postage stamp screen.

Liles had been at Brock School since sixth grade. The tuition was higher than at some colleges, but he had a scholarship, and his mother loved to brag about Chester's wise savings over the years. She meant to make Liles proud, but it just reminded Liles that his dad had twenty or thirty years on most of the other dads in the school.

The bricks of each building shone candy-apple red in sunlight and sober scarlet by night. Each was topped by turrets and battlements, as if the students might someday be forced to take to the roofs and defend campus from zombies or orcs. Liles loved pacing the campus, imagining how it might play as a map in *Argonauts 4*. Today he kept his eyes down, though, staring at his phone, watching for just a single bar of reception.

He was finally able to make the call at three minutes past eleven thirty. Reading the number from the crumpled note, he dialed with a trembling thumb. He was calling Molly Brennan. To talk to her. In all his giddiness cycling to school, and all the time he glared at the wall clock during AP literature and chemistry, he hadn't prepared any lines

for this conversation. The phone rang a second time. He tried to clear his throat and somehow choked.

“Hello?” said a voice on the other end of the line. Liles could’ve easily dialed the wrong number. It could’ve been Ruth Brennan, just home for lunch. But the voice could only have belonged to Molly Brennan.

Liles coughed.

“Hello?” she said again, with a scratch in her voice, as if she’d been talking too much or too seldom.

“Sorry,” Liles croaked.

“What?” said Molly.

“I said sorry.”

“Oh. Because you’re late calling?”

“I got something caught in my throat.”

“Understood,” said Molly.

“So, I mean—are you okay?”

“Fine, thanks,” she said.

“You are?” said Liles. When Molly didn’t answer the question a second time, he moved on. “Well, good.”

“Were you spying on me yesterday?”

“Of course not.”

“I saw you while I was outside.”

“When you fell out of your window, you mean,” said Liles.

“You saw me fall? So you were spying.”

“I heard the noise, that’s all.”

“Shouldn’t you have been at school?”

“I was home sick.”

“Feeling better now, though?” she said.

“Sure,” said Liles. He knew he should ask her about her father. Instead he kicked lightly at a parking curb.

“Okay. So hey,” she said lightly. “Didn’t your dad used to work at Nueturn?”

“My dad? Yeah. Floor manager and engineer.”

“Two jobs?”

“Not really. Nueturn hired scientists and high-degree people at every level, and they offered incentives for people who reduced energy expenditure.”

“Expenditure?” Molly repeated.

“Yeah. What?” said Liles. “That’s the word.”

“You know a lot about the plant?”

Liles shrugged. Then, remembering she couldn’t see him: “I know a little.”

Molly’s next words were drowned in static. Liles started pacing the parking lot, searching for a pocket of reception. If he got cut off, would she want him to call again? Was she hiding somewhere in the house, hoping her stepmom wouldn’t catch her contacting the outside world? It was exciting to think so.

“Say that again? Sorry,” he said.

“Did your dad ever take you there?” said Molly.

“One time. Why?”

“Did you see the compliance assurance office?”

“The what?” said Liles.

“Compliance assurance. Did you ever see that office?”

“I don’t know, there were a lot of offices. And I was like nine years old.”

“Do you maybe remember how the compliance assurance office was laid out?”

“Is this why you wanted to talk to me?” asked Liles. “To talk about Nueturn?”

“That and to see why you were spying on me.”

“I wasn’t spying.”

Either the chilly wind hissed into Liles’ phone, or Molly sighed. This was not the call for help he’d imagined.

“I never saw any office called compliance assurance,” he said.

“Do you at least know why your dad was over at my house last night?” said Molly.

“I think he was worried about you.”

“Well, there’s nothing to worry about,” said Molly.

“You’re not in danger?” Liles hated himself for posing it as a question.

“So you don’t know anything about the compliance assurance office,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard him.

“No.”

“Okay,” her voice went bright and formal. “Well, thanks for calling.”

“Hold on,” said Liles. This was another chance to be the guy that set her free, and he was missing it. Why wouldn’t she tell him she was in danger? Maybe if he got her out of the house even for a minute, she’d feel safe enough to tell the truth about her father and ask for rescue. “I can take you to Nueturn,” he said. “We can check out the old

compliance office.”

“I can’t,” said Molly.

“I didn’t say when we’d go.”

“It doesn’t matter when.”

“We can get there and back in an hour,” said Liles.

“Will you just ask your dad about compliance assurance? It’d help me a lot.”

“Help you with what?”

The phone hissed with more static. Liles turned and started the other way.

“Molly?” he said.

“Will you ask your dad or not?” she said.

“Let’s make a deal,” said Liles. “I’ll ask Dad about the compliance assurance office and you tell me why your dad pushed you out your window.”

Molly hung up. There was no smash of a phone into its receiver. Just a digital hiccup, and then four beeps announcing game over—the end of Liles’ second or third or thirtieth feeble attempt at saving Molly Brennan.

It puzzled him that she would choose the day after her fall to inquire about the layout of her late mother’s workplace. When Chester died, would Liles suddenly cherish every bit of minutia about the old man? A cruel answer came to him and he shook it off as he slouched into AP world history.

The ride home on the pink, white, and purple bike was especially dreary, compared to the thrill he’d felt that morning, pedaling toward a secret telephonic rendezvous. Now nothing waited for him at home but his parents, an unfinished college essay, and his video games deprived of their controllers. He was surprised to find his

father's old Civic parked in the driveway so early in the afternoon. It surprised even more when he entered his bedroom and found his father sitting on the foot of his bed, his top-heavy, bulldog eyes fixed on the TV, and one of Liles' game controllers gripped both hands like a water ski handle. He wasn't entrenched in battle with rebellious centaurs or pegasi, though. He was on the menu screen, trying and failing to start a game.

"What're you doing in here?" said Liles. He'd meant it as a real question, but it came out as a way of saying *Get out, I am a sovereign nation, however puny, and this is my embassy.*

"Hey, son," said Chester. He twitched his head toward Liles, but kept his eyes on the screen. "Which button goes?"

As he set his backpack beside his desk, Liles poked the controller until the screen switched to an image of Zeus in welding goggles, a toga and kevlar, aiming a crossbow whose bolt was lightning.

Chester sat up straight. He held the controller toward Liles. "What's happening?"

"It's loading," said Liles.

"Loading my gun?"

"No, like starting the game," said Liles.

The screen faded to gold, and then the columns of Olympus appeared, and the battle began. "Hey, here we go," said Chester. "Wow."

Drawn by a lifetime gamer's deeply rooted instinct, Liles sat beside his father on the bed and watched the carnage. Chester pressed the jump button, maybe meaning to fire his revolver, and was struck by a bolt from on high.

"Whoa," he said. "Is it over?"

“You’ll respawn,” said Liles.

“Sounds gross,” said Chester. “Which button fights?”

“Do you mean melee? Shoot? Aim?”

“I mean kill the man-horses.”

Liles pointed out the key buttons. Chester’s thumb seemed drawn to the jump button, though, and he hopped along the edge of the battlefield.

“Look at me go,” he said. “Will I get tired?”

“No,” said Liles.

“Sounds nice,” said Chester. He still wore his grocer’s apron, but the geriatric shoes were off.

“Why are you home early and playing my Xbox, Dad?”

“They let me off because I’ve got to work a double tomorrow,” said Chester. “And your mother got on to me for saying that video games made you crazy, and for grounding you like a ten year old, so I thought I’d give these things a try while I’ve got a minute.” He flinched as the celestial sniper shot him down again. “Which button rebirths?”

“You’ll respawn automatically,” said Liles.

“Ah. Anyway if I play this and I don’t start flaking on all my responsibilities, maybe I was wrong about games. Fair?”

“Okay,” said Liles. He knew some video games were best played with friends, and the second controller was there beside the TV. For now he kept his hands in his jacket pockets and watched. The two Fishrocket men sat side by side for a death or two, their faces awash in blue and white flashes from the screen.

“How was school?”

“Dandy,” said Liles.

“Good,” said Chester. “Can I take that guy’s rifle?”

Liles showed him how.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hm,” said Chester.

“You know Nueturn?”

“The place I helped design and worked at for three decades before they shut down and left me twisting in the wind?”

“Right,” said Liles. “So—um—what did the compliance assurance office do?”

Chester took his eyes off the screen, but kept pressing buttons. It seemed to Liles his gameplay didn’t get any worse.

“Well, son, they assured compliance.”

“But what’s that mean?”

Chester turned back to the screen. “I was a factory floor manager. That office was human resources territory.”

“But you at least visited compliance assurance, right?”

“Is this for a school project?”

Liles flexed the underdeveloped part of his brain needed for lying.

“Yes,” he said.

“We were always pretty darn busy on the production floor. I never had much time to get down to CA.”

Liles nodded. A steam-powered chariot mowed Chester down. He respawned.

“So you wouldn’t know how the compliance assurance office was laid out?”

“How it was what?”

“Like, the desks. In the compliance assurance office.”

“Did you take up interior decorating without telling your parents?” asked Chester.

“That’s a bit of a girly choice.”

“Throw a grenade,” said Liles.

“What?” said Chester.

“Too late,” said Liles, as the screen went red.

“What happened?”

“That minotaur gored you,” said Liles. “You have to watch your flank.”

Chester sighed.

“Respawn time. This isn’t too bad, Liles. I’ll bet without video games I’d never have experienced a goring.”

“Ha,” said Liles.

“Any more questions for me?”

“Well, actually—what were you and Mrs. Brennan arguing about across the street last night?”

This time the old man’s eyes stayed on the screen, but his eyebrows—thick, gray, unplucked in all their decades—slid down his brow.

“We weren’t arguing.”

“It looked like you were,” said Liles.

“Were you spying?”

“Everybody really likes that word. You guys were out in the open and I looked

out my window. I was in my bed and I heard you guys.”

“You heard what?” Chester asked, and Liles thought the old man spoke more quickly than usual, though it could’ve been because he was running from a pegasus charge.

“I heard arguing.”

“We weren’t arguing,” Chester said again. “I went over to check on Molly.”

“At like midnight?” said Liles.

“Adults don’t have curfews, son.”

They watched the screen. Liles knew how to take down pegasi, but he said nothing.

“You’re full of questions today,” said Chester. “Don’t you want to ask if Molly is alright?”

“Is she?”

“She was playing with her little brother, and he gave her a pretty hard kick, and she fell back through the window. Bad luck, is all.”

“Her brother is six years old,” said Liles.

“I know that.” By some miracle Chester found his way onto the back of a pegasus. “Whoa,” he said, as he took to the sky. “That’s what Molly said happened.”

“Shoot the sniper while you’re up there,” said Liles. “And you mean that’s what Mrs. Brennan said that Molly said.”

“Correct,” said Chester, as Liles stood up from the bed, pushing off hard enough that Chester had to steady himself.

“What’s the problem, son? Their business is not our business. What button

pauses?”

Liles moved towards the door.

“Hold on, son. How do you pause? Listen, when I came in here earlier I noticed by chance that your essay is not done.”

“I’ll do it tonight, Dad.”

“Well I had a minute so I came pretty close to writing it for you. Have a look.”

At his computer, Liles saw a full two pages of writing, with only the meat of each sentence missing. He read the first paragraph:

One experience that definitely changed my life was BLANK. It may seem like BLANK, but as I will demonstrate, the experience changed how I look at BLANK, how I BLANK, and most of all, how I intend to BLANK as a student at your fine institution.

“What is this?” said Liles.

“You just fill in the blanks,” said Chester. “Thought I’d make it easy for you.”

“I can write my own sentences.”

“Could’ve fooled me.” Chester pressed the jump button, which dismounted him from the flying horse, and he fell to his death. “Rats,” he said. “I just had a minute and thought I’d help.”

“I think you need a new hobby or something, Dad, if you’re in here writing my essays. Maybe get a second job to keep you busy.”

Chester’s face stayed nearly the same. A faint grin remained, but it went dark, like a bananas left out too long.

“You can just delete it if you want, Liles,” he said. “Just so you get it done.”

Liles looked at his father’s spotted hands, wrapped clumsily around the controller. Like Chester, Liles had no hair on the knuckles of his index fingers.

A movement outside the window caught his eye, and kept him from finding more troubling similarities between himself and the old man. Molly was standing in her front driveway as a red station wagon pulled in. Liles didn’t recognize the car, or the heavysset man that emerged from the driver seat. Molly stepped forward and unfolded her arms to shake hands with the man, who led her around to the back of the station wagon. He opened the hatchback to reveal a coffee table, sitting legs up. As Liles stood watching, and Chester sat gaming, the man pulled the table onto the driveway and set it legs down for Molly to examine. The table looked a bit like the shattered pile of wood Liles had seen two days before. Molly paid the man, refused his offer to carry the thing inside, and lumbered awkwardly, the tabletop pressed against her front, back into the house through the garage.

Liles watched all this in disbelief. This was Molly’s plan. She’d just replace whatever her father broke and just carry on. She wasn’t going to ask for help. Liles would have to do break the cycle himself.

He solved problems every day in video games. Usually the way forward was to master a new trick or skill. In *Zelda*, it might be archery or horseback riding. Here, it was skipping school, waiting until the street was clear of parents, and going to the Brennan house. One way or another he would get Molly to tell him the truth. He would expose Simon Brennan’s violence, prove his gullible father wrong, and save Molly.

The plan calmed him down. It drained all frustration from him, and he felt a

sudden tenderness toward his father, bouncing nervously on the bed, sticking out his tongue in concentration, jabbing dull-thumbed at the twelve-button controller. Again, Chester dismounted the pegasus in midair.

“Bah,” he said, as he waited to respawn. “Hey quit pouting and come show me how to dodge stuff on the flying horse. I keep getting lightnined.”

If Liles had known that night was the last of its kind for him, he might have done more than sit beside his father, pick up the second controller, and join the game. He might have said something more than just explaining that the evasive maneuver Chester needed was called a barrel roll.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hidden between Mrs. Norton's dying lilac bushes, straddling his purple and pink bicycle, Liles waited for his parents and Simon Brennan to all leave for work. It took a while, and to kill time he toiled on his second-hand Game Boy to save the kingdom of Hyrule and its princess, Zelda. The quest was long and meandering. It involved demolition, fishing, puzzle solving, self-transformation, self-duplication, and fencing with malevolent, reanimated skeletons, but at least the hero knows his princess. He meets her, she meets him, and then the adventure begins.

When his parents and Mr. Brennan were all gone, Liles pulled his bike from its hiding place and rolled up to Molly's house. Mrs. Brennan's car still sat in the driveway, but if Liles' mother had really seen her with a black eye, she was a victim of the abuse too. Liles might even get the confession he needed from her, though of course he wanted it to come from Molly. As long as he removed Molly from danger, the means didn't matter. He let his bike fall into the grass, tiptoed for no good reason up the steps, and for the first time in his life, knocked on Molly Brennan's door.

Immediately he lost all sense of what to do with his arms and hands. Should he stand at attention like Master Chief, minus the space armor and assault rifle? Bounce on his heels like Link in a fight? Crouch on the rail like Batman? Glancing at his shoes, he saw that both sets of laces were tied, but one of them was only a single knot. So when Mrs. Ruth Brennan answered the door, he was down on one knee, double-knotting his laces just in case he and Molly had to make a run for it.

"Liles? Goodness," she said.

Looking at her, Liles remembered the sad day maybe a decade ago that he learned dogs don't smile, no matter how much it looks like they do. Liles had grown since the funeral, but it seemed more that Mrs. Brennan had shrunk. Somewhere beyond her, inside the house, Molly's little brother cried.

"Good morning, Mrs. Brennan," said Liles. It was only three days since his mother had reported seeing Mrs. Brennan with a black eye, but all Liles could see was a patch of too much makeup high on both cheeks. Her elbows winged out on either side of her and she rubbed her on sides, as if ironing wrinkles from her flannel shirt, which was mostly blue, and far too thick to ever wrinkle.

"I've not gotten a good look at you since you were a little guy," she said.

"No ma'am."

"Well, you're still a little guy, I guess."

"I've always stuck pretty close to the seventieth percentile in height," said Liles, wondering why he remembered that.

"Ha ha," said Mrs. Brennan.

"Anyway," said Liles.

"What can I do for you, cutie?"

"Are—is—um—Molly happen to be home?" He knew the sentence was bad, but he found he was out of breath and couldn't rephrase. Again Mrs. Brennan reminded him of a dog not really smiling and held up a hand.

"Sure she is. She'll be thrilled to have a visitor. You wait right there, okay?" She shut Liles outside, so he pressed his ear against the door and listened. He heard her footsteps fade away but then return quickly, and he barely managed to pull back before

she threw the door open again.

“Sweetie, aren’t you supposed to be in school?” she said.

“No ma’am,” said Liles. Like an idiot he hadn’t anticipated this question.

“Oh,” she said. “Lucky you.” She disappeared again. With his ear against the door, Liles heard the boy crying and two high voices. Then, without the warning of audible footsteps, the door swung open. The slab of pine nearly caught Liles in the jaw. He dodged back, stood at attention, and saw Molly, right there in front of him.

Just over a year earlier, he’d broken down and looked up Mario’s princess from his very first game. The little royal pyramid of red, white, and brown pixels disappointed him, but at least the Mario Bros. never found their girl with bruises along her jawline, just above her right knee, or striping her collar bone. Suddenly, Molly’s trouble was not some promise of adventure. Liles recognized the bruises now as signs of failure for every single person around the girl. That including himself, his father, Molly’s father, and her stepmother. Liles didn’t just want to put a stop to the violence in the Brennan house now. He wanted somehow to stop it from ever having happened at all.

“What are you doing here?” said Molly. Her piano black hair was longer than it had been in the fifth grade, and pulled roughly back. The muscles in her legs once balled up by soccer had since stretched out long and thin. Her wide eyes—green speckled with copper—sent a clear message of unwelcome, and they forced Liles—no matter how hard he tried to look the hero—to grin.

“Hi, Molly,” he said.

“Why are you smiling?” she said.

“It’s polite,” he answered. He really was trying to suppress the grin, but her tank

top was untucked, and that struck him just then as a brave, joyful, genius style choice. He tried not to notice her blue, cotton shorts, and failed.

“Smiling’s only polite in certain circumstances,” said Molly. She kept the door pulled against her shoulder. “Like birthdays, or for pictures, or while brushing your teeth.”

Liles chuckled.

“Brushing your teeth,” he said.

“Why are you here, Liles?”

“Well, you hung up on me yesterday,” he said.

“And you took that as a sign to go ahead and come to my house?”

Liles’ involuntary grin faded at last.

“It’s not really coming to your house, if I live next door. It’s just stopping by,” he waved a hand behind him, “if I live next door.”

“So you stopped by to say hello?”

“You can relax, you know,” said Liles. “I saw him drive off. He’s gone.”

“What?” said Molly.

“I mean you don’t have to be afraid.”

“So you came by to say hello and to tell me I don’t have to be afraid.”

“That and I talked to my dad about the compliance assurance office.”

Molly looked behind her into the house.

“I’m just right here,” she called out, and then she stepped over the threshold. She pulled the door almost shut, but kept her hand on the knob.

“Thanks for doing that,” she said. “And?”

“He didn’t know anything,” said Liles.

“Oh wonderful. Really glad you came over.”

“Hey hold on,” said Liles. “I thought the deal was if I asked my dad about compliance assurance, you’d tell me the truth about you and that window.”

“You proposed that deal and I hung up. Has anyone ever hung up on you before? Do you understand the gesture?”

“I guess I don’t call a whole lot of people,” said Liles.

“Well, hanging up does not signal agreeing to any deals.”

Clearly she wasn’t going to talk to him about her father unless they were clear of the house. Maybe Mrs. Brennan was not as kind as she seemed. Maybe she was hiding behind the door and would report everything Molly said.

To check that theory, Liles pointed at the door, mouthed the words *is someone listening?* and then shrugged to signal the question mark.

“What are you doing?” said Molly.

Liles repeated the steps of the message.

“I don’t know what that is,” she scowled. “Thanks for trying with your dad, though. Bye.”

“We can go to Nueturn,” said Liles. “I’ll take you there.”

Molly stood silent for a moment. Liles looked away from her eyes for fear he’d grin again.

“I can’t,” she said.

“We can go there right now, real quick, and we can find the compliance assurance office and check it out. We can figure out how the desks and lamps were arranged or

whatever.”

“No,” said Molly.

“No?”

“I can’t leave.”

He could hardly see Molly through the shrinking gap between door and doorframe.

“Why is your brother crying?” said Liles, trying to stall.

“He’s singing.”

“Oh,” said Liles. “I thought he couldn’t talk.”

“Doesn’t,” said Molly.

“What?”

“We’re not sure what he could do. He doesn’t talk.”

“Oh,” said Liles again.

The gap in the door had stopped shrinking.

“Is your brother the reason you don’t want to leave?” said Liles.

“You don’t know anything about my brother.”

“That’s true. But I do know your dad won’t be home for like eight hours. We can get to Nueturn and back in maybe two.”

“What does this have to do with my Dad?”

“You tell me, Molly.”

“He wasn’t even around back then,” she said.

“Huh?” said Liles. “Back when?”

“Talk to you later, Liles,” said Molly, but before she could shut the door, Mrs.

Brennan called from the other room. Liles heard her heels clapping across the floor, and then the door opened wide. Liles got a fresh breath of Mrs. Brennan's hair product, and could hear the little boy's tragic singing much more clearly.

"Of course you can go out for a bit, Molly," said Mrs. Brennan.

"Oh yeah?" said Liles.

"It's a great day to get out, kids."

"No, Ruth, it's not," said Molly.

"I can stay home for a few hours, it's okay," said Mrs. Brennan. "I'll watch Shelly and you two go on."

"Perfect," said Liles.

"I have homework to send in by five," said Molly.

"Do you?" said Mrs. Brennan. "That's no reason not to go out for a bit with a friend."

Molly took hold of the door and slammed it shut, leaving Liles for a third time standing on the porch, wondering what to do with his hands. After a moment, an ice cream truck rolled down the street. It wasn't blaring kiddy music, but Liles wondered if he should buy ice cream for Molly. The van drove on, as if rejecting the idea. He tapped his toes on the steps and considered the possibility that Molly had developed that phobia—the fear of going outside. Thinking it would help pass the time, he looked it up on his phone. Agoraphobia. He started researching to see if singing like a hyena was common to any specific mental handicap, but then the Brennan women reappeared, Molly's jaw set, and Mrs. Brennan's greyhound non-smile wider than ever.

"We've got it all figured out, Mr. Fishracket," she said. "Can you two be back by

three, so Molly has time for her homework?”

“Absolutely,” said Liles. He figured Molly really wanted to beat her father home, to stay between him and her little brother.

“There you go, Molly,” said Mrs. Brennan. “Go grab some shoes.”

While Liles and Mrs. Brennan waited, the latter patted at her flannel shirt, and the former marveled that his investigation and rescue mission had turned into an outing mandated by Molly’s stepmother. Definitely not the stuff of legends or myths.

“You don’t have to be back by three,” said Mrs. Brennan.

“Oh, okay,” said Liles.

“She can be late with a bit of homework for once,” she said. “Take your time.”

She pushed at her bleached bangs, and Liles saw that—like the Brennan house during the night—Mrs. Brennan’s hand either trembled, or looked very much like it did.

“Are you alright, Mrs. Brennan?” said Liles.

“Hm?” she said.

“I’ll get her home before her dad. I promise.”

“You’re a very serious kid, Liles,” said Mrs. Brennan.

Molly returned then, and stepped past Liles out into the yard. She carried with her a small red backpack.

“His camera is on the table,” she called to her stepmom.

“Oh, does Shelly take pictures?” asked Liles.

“No,” said Molly.

“Not quite,” said Mrs. Brennan.

“Let’s get going, Liles,” said Molly. She turned to him, and the weak, cloud-

filtered sunlight brought new colors to her eyes and the bruises.

“Okay,” said Liles. “Where’s your bike?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Oh.” Liles looked at his pink and purple disaster of a bike.

“Is that yours?” said Mrs. Brennan.

“That’s his,” said Molly.

Mrs. Brennan nodded once, just processing the information.

“Well, are you going far?” she asked. Liles noticed she didn’t ask where they were going.

“Too far to walk,” he said.

“Do you not have a car?” said Molly.

“I borrow my dad’s sometimes, but he’s at work.”

“Oh well, then,” said Molly. She took a step back toward the house.

“I could drive you,” said Mrs. Brennan.

“What about Shelly?” said Molly.

“No, I guess that wouldn’t work,” said Mrs. Brennan.

“Some other time,” said Molly.

“You can just ride handlebars,” said Mrs. Brennan.

“Do what?” said Molly.

“Do what?” said Liles.

“Are you serious,” said Mrs. Brennan. “Come on. You guys don’t know how to ride handlebars?”

“No,” said Liles.

“Of course not,” said Molly. “What is that?”

“Such sad times,” said Mrs. Brennan. “At least you own a bike, Liles. I’ll show you.” She stepped over the threshold to join them in the yard, but Molly held up a hand.

“Don’t leave him alone in there, Ruth,” she said.

“You’re right, you’re right,” Mrs. Brennan moved back into the house. “Still here,” she called. “Okay then, Liles, go ahead and get on the bike. There you go. Now, Molly, you can hop up and sit on his handlebars.”

“How?” said Molly.

“Just hop up there, like onto a counter. You see the axle on the front wheel? The little bolt at the middle of the wheel. There. You can kind of rest your feet there.”

Molly looked at the bike, her arms knotted across her chest.

“We’ll just walk really fast,” she said.

“It’s not hard,” said Mrs. Brennan.

“I’m not sitting on anybody’s purple handlebars, Ruth,” said Molly. She started walking north.

“We’re headed this way, actually, sorry,” said Liles, not sure why he’d apologized. He dismounted and led Molly south, rolling his bike unburdened between them toward the closed Nueturn factory.

“You’re sure, Ruth?” said Molly.

“Stop looking back here,” Mrs. Brennan said from the door. “He’ll be fine, and we’ll be fine. Don’t you dare rush, Liles.” Keeping one foot inside the door, she smiled after them until they were out of sight.

#

The quickest way to Nueturn took Liles and Molly south down Forest Avenue, toward the river. Molly's blue shorts came nowhere near her knees. They bounced microscopically as she walked. Without meaning to, Liles rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, as if feeling that thin cotton. To keep himself from staring, he counted to twenty between glances.

The gears of his bike ticked like a clock turning too fast. One of the six miles was already behind them. Liles knew he should ask Molly about her father, the window, and what he could do to help her.

"Um, so your brother sings?" he said.

"Yeah," said Molly. "How much farther?"

"We're not even halfway," said Liles. "If you're in a hurry, we could try the bike thing. The thing your step-mom suggested."

Molly picked up the pace. With a grunt, Liles adjusted to keep up.

"So what song was your brother singing this morning?"

"It's hard to tell. Definitely something Disney," said Molly.

"Nice," said Liles. He liked Disney movies okay, though the heroes were all pretty useless to their heroines. Pocahontas, Mulan, Merida, Belle, and even Cinderella basically fend for themselves. Aladdin does alright, but Liles reasoned that the villain is really defeated by the rules of the genie.

"Phenomenal cosmic power," he said.

"What did you say?" said Molly.

“Nothing. Just thinking about the genie and the lamp. Remember that part?”

“Oh yeah,” said Molly. “Shelly watched it basically nonstop at one point.

Phenomenal cosmic power...”

“...itty bitty living space,” said Liles.

Molly made a sound like a laugh through her nose. So Liles wasn’t coaxing the truth out of her about her monstrous father, but at least for now she was out of that house and safe. It occurred to him that the heroic thing to do was make sure Mrs. Brennan and Shelly were also safe, but one out of three would have to do, for now.

“You’re skipping school aren’t you,” said Molly.

“Yes.”

“Why? I remember you being a good student.”

“You do?” said Liles, thinking not about his reputation as a student, but about Molly remembering him at all.

“Did you skip just to take me to Nueturn?”

“What?” said Liles.

Molly waited, confident that he’d heard her just fine.

“No,” said Liles. “Not just for that.”

Without looking at her, he felt Molly watching him. They turned off Forest and onto Frazier Avenue. This was a busier road, lined with boutique stores, and as traffic roared by, Liles hoped that someone would see them and recognize that Liles Fishrocket was walking with Molly Brennan. At the same time, and just as desperately, he hoped no adult would recognize him and then stop by the bank or the grocery store, where they might see one of his parents, and mention that their son was meandering down Frazier

during a school day.

“Are we close?” said Molly.

“Still not halfway.”

Molly drew out her phone.

“I should check in with Ruth.”

“We’ve been gone less than an hour,” said Liles.

“Yeah, well,” said Molly, thumbing her phone, “for my brother an hour is a long time.”

“I was going to ask you about him,” said Liles.

“What,” said Molly. There was no question in the word, but a demand to get it over with. Liles had thought of asking what kind of disability or mental handicap Shelly suffered from. He knew very little about that kind of thing, and was hoping that maybe the boy could somehow reveal Simon Brennan’s violent nature, even if Molly and Mrs. Brennan tried to hide it. Molly’s tone changed his mind, though, and he asked nothing as she put her phone to her ear and stopped walking.

“Ruth?” she said after a moment. “Is he okay? Did you give him the camera?” As she listened, Molly turned her back to Liles and took a slow, wavering step towards home. Liles did not squander this chance to admire her without risk of being caught. Her cotton shorts stopped just above the knees, where they were slightly frayed, as if Molly had cut them into shorts. Liles wondered if he could remember Molly’s mother ever wearing blue, full-length sweatpants.

“Make sure to smile when he takes your picture,” Molly said into the phone. “It won’t keep him happy otherwise. I’m just reminding you.”

Liles watched as she took another step back the way they'd come. Had he already squandered all the time he was going to get with her outside that house?

"Yes, we're having lots of fun, Ruth," said Molly. "A great day out. Why would I tell him that? But will you call me if he acts up? Fine. I will. Yes. Right now." She turned to face Liles. "She's making me tell you to stop me from stressing out."

"Oh," said Liles. "Does she have any tips?"

Molly squinted at him. Her mouth moved, as if tasting something or suppressing a smile.

"Bye, Ruth," she said.

"Here's what I think we should do," said Liles.

As she drew a deep breath and slipped her phone back into her bag, Molly closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were suddenly on Liles, who thought that was a mean trick to pull when he was trying to think, walk, push his bike, talk, and not stare.

"What?" she said, gentler than before.

"You're in a hurry to get back to your brother, but you really want to see the place where your mom worked."

"Right," said Molly.

"So my question is: are you sure you don't want to try the handlebars trick?"

"The trick where I sit on the front of your bike? That handlebar trick?"

"Yeah, that one," said Liles. "It'd be a lot faster."

"So I'd be like one of those mermaids on the front of a pirate ship?"

"Yeah, kind of," said Liles. "It's called a figurehead."

"What is?" said Molly.

“The mermaid statue things on ships.”

“And how in the world did you know that?” said Molly.

The truth was that the term came up in *Age of Blackbeard*, an old computer game devoted to sailing the seas and saving a hostage, who is rich and pretty, and is at one point used as a living figurehead for the villain’s flagship.

“I read it somewhere,” said Liles. “In a book.”

Molly folded her arms and kept walking. Her legs were longer than Liles’, who kept up at a jog.

“It would definitely be faster,” he said.

“Not worth it,” said Molly.

“And it would be kind of impressive if we managed to do it without flipping over or anything,” said Liles.

“We’d definitely flip over,” said Molly.

“What if instead of that handlebar trick, we called it something better? Like figureheading,” said Liles, wondering if this qualified as flirting. “I’m sure you’d be a great figureheader.”

Molly stopped their progress down Central Avenue. Though her arms were still crossed, she again squinted at Liles.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll try figureheading, but you’re the mermaid.”

“Me?” said Liles.

“I think I like that better,” said Molly.

“Well,” said Liles. His grip on the handlebar tightened. “Um. I mean do you remember how to ride a bike?”

“I bet it’s just like riding a bike,” said Molly.

“Right,” said Liles. He leaned the handlebars toward her and stepped to the front of the bicycle. “You never forget.”

So it was that a little before ten o’clock the morning of his first day playing full-on hooky, while escorting Molly to the closed-down former workplace of her deceased mother, Liles Fishracket sat on the handlebar of his own bicycle—his toes perched on the front wheel’s axle—and rode along Frazier while Molly pedaled for almost twenty feet before they tipped into the guardrail, sending Liles tumbling to the pavement.

When he came to a stop, Liles lay on his back a moment, checking with pats and swipes that his body was intact. He touched a scrape on his forehead and winced. Somewhere above him, he heard low, hard laughter.

“Maybe I should take over the driving,” he said, climbing back over the guardrail.

“I’m sorry,” said Molly. She wiped her eyes, gasping for breath. Liles hadn’t seen her smile like this since they were eleven and on the school bus. She’d been half a dozen rows away, then, laughing at a joke Liles didn’t hear. “One more try,” she said.

“Then let’s at least have a quick lesson in steering a bicycle,” said Liles.

“I know how to steer, just not with a person sitting on the front.”

“Well it’s just that you don’t really want to turn the handlebars at all. It’s more of a lean,” said Liles.

“That’s what I tried to do, but you counter-leaned.”

“I was leaning for balance. That’s what I’m supposed to do,” said Liles.

“Oh, according to the figureheading rule book?” said Molly.

“Alright. One more try,” said Liles. “If you steer us headlong into an oncoming

pickup it will not be my fault.”

“It will be if you counter-lean,” said Molly. She swung her leg back over the bike while Liles reassumed the figurehead position. She found her balance, he resisted the urge to lean, and their second takeoff was successful, more or less.

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VITA

Brian Beise was born in Mississippi but spent most of his childhood in Paris. For high school he attended EABJM, a French, bilingual school in the 15th arrondissement. While there, he was exposed to novels and poetry from around the world, which intensified his interest in writing. Ernest Hemingway, Chinua Achebe, Seamus Heaney, Charles Dickens, Susan Hill, Haruki Mirakami, and J.D. Salinger were particularly influential. Upon reading that writing is a discipline requiring daily practice, he began writing by hand every day, whether or not he had anything good to write about. After receiving his International Baccalaureate diploma, he returned to the United States. In 2009 he received his BA in English and American language and literature at UTC. After three years working as a copywriter and completing a failed novel, Brian returned to UTC to study for a Master of Art in English. During his more recent studies, the work of Michael Chabon, Neil Gaiman, John Green, and Donna Tartt influenced Brian's view of contemporary fiction. In his finished novel, **BRAWN**, and his subsequent work, Brian aims to write fiction that can entertain a casual reader and interest the more literary eye. He still writes every day, even when nothing interesting comes of it.