

A delirium Story

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Begin Reading

Let me tell you something about dying: it's not as bad as they say.

It's the coming-back-to-life part that hurts.

I was a kid again in Rhode Island, running through the gallery, heading toward the ocean.

The gallery was what we called the long, covered walkway that ran from the harbor all the way to the old square, where you could still find bombs, undetonated, embedded in the brick. There was a rumor that went around among us—if you stepped on one, you'd explode. This kid Zero once dared me to do it, and I did just so he'd leave me alone. Nothing happened. Still, I wouldn't have done it again.

You never know. A second time it could go *boom*.

The gallery was all in brick and housed shops that a hundred years ago must have catered to tourists, vacationers, families. The storefront windows were all gone, maybe shot out, but probably just broken after the blitz, when anyone who survived went looting for supplies. There was, in order: Lick 'n' Swirl Ice Cream; Benjamin's Pizza; the Arcade; the Gift Gallery; T-Shirts-n-More; Franny's Ice Cream. The ice cream machines had been taken apart for scrap, but the pizza oven in Benjamin's was still there, big as a car, and sometimes we used to stick our heads inside and inhale and pretend we smelled baking bread.

There were also two art galleries, and funny enough, most of the art was still hanging on the walls. You can't use paintings as shovels or canvas as a blanket; no point in stealing art, no one to sell it to after the blitz and no money to buy it with. There were photographs of tourists from Before, wearing bright T-shirts and strappy sandals and eating ice cream cones piled high with different-colored scoops, and paintings of the beach at dawn, and at dusk, and at night, and in the rain, and in the snow. There was one painting, I remember, that showed a broad, clean sweep of sky and the ocean drawn out to the horizon, and the sand littered with seashells and crabs and mermaid's purses and bits of seaweed. A boy and girl were standing four feet apart, not facing each other, not acknowledging each other in any way, just standing, looking out at the water.

I always liked that painting. I liked to think they had a secret.

So when I died and turned kid again I went back there, back to the gallery—before Portland, and the move up north, and her. All the stores had been repaired, and there were hundreds of people standing behind the glass, palms pressed to the windowpanes, watching me as I ran. They were all shouting to me, but I couldn't hear them. The glass was too thick. All I could see was the ghost-fog of their breath against the glass and their palms, flat and pale, like dead things.

The longer I ran, the farther the ocean seemed, and the smaller I got, until I was so small I was no bigger than a piece of dust. Until I was no bigger than an idea. I knew I'd be okay if I could only reach the ocean, but the gallery just kept on growing, huge and full of shadows, and all those people kept calling to me silently from behind the glass.

Then a wave came and pushed me backward, and slammed me against something made of stone, and I became big again. My body exploded outward like I'd gone and stepped on that bomb and I was breaking apart into ten thousand pieces.

Everything was on fire. Even my eyes hurt when I tried to open them.

"I don't believe it," were the first words I heard. "Someone up there must be looking after him."

Then someone else: "No one looks after this garbage."

I was alive again. I wanted to die.

One time, when I was twelve, I burned down a house.

Nobody was living there. That's why I chose it. It was just some half-run-down white clapboard farmhouse, sitting in the middle of a bunch of lumpy outhouses and barns, like deer turds gathered at the bottom of a big hill. I have no idea what happened to the family that used to live there, but I liked to imagine that they'd gone off to the Wilds, made a clean break for the border once the new regulations kicked in, once people started getting locked up for disagreeing.

It was close to the border, only fifty feet from the fence. That's why I chose it too.

I had started with small things—matchbooks, papers; then piles of leaves, heaped carefully into a garbage can; then a little locked wooden shed on Rosemont Avenue. I watched from Presumpscot Park, sitting on a bench, while the firemen came to put out the shed fire, sirens screaming, geared up. I watched

while the neighbors gathered, until there were so many they blocked my view and I tried to stand. But I couldn't stand. My feet and legs were numb. Like bricks. So I just sat and sat, until the crowd thinned and I saw the shed wasn't a shed anymore but just a pile of charred wood and metal and molten plastic, where a bunch of toys had fused together.

All because of the smallest spark. All because of the *click* of a lighter in my hand.

I couldn't stop.

Then: a house. It was summer, six o'clock, dinner hour. I figured if anyone smelled the smoke they might think it was a barbecue, and I'd have plenty of time to get out of there. I used rags stuffed with kerosene and a Bic lighter I had stolen from the desk of the principal's office at my school: yellow with smiley faces on it.

Right away I knew it was a mistake. The house went up in less than a minute. The flames just . . . swallowed it. The smoke blocked out the sun and turned the air blurry from the heat. The smell was awful. Maybe there'd been dead animals in the house, mice and raccoons. I hadn't thought to check.

But the worst was the noise. It was louder, way louder, than I had expected. I could hear wood popping, splitting apart, could hear individual splinters burst and crackle into nothing. Like the house was screaming. But weirdly, when the roof went down, there wasn't any sound at all. Or maybe I couldn't hear by then, because my lungs were full of smoke and my head was pounding and I was running as fast as I could. I called the fire department from an old pay phone, disguising my voice. I didn't stay to watch them come.

They saved the barn, at least. I found out later. I even went to a few parties there, years afterward, on nights I couldn't stand it anymore: all the pretending, the secrets, the sitting around and waiting for instructions.

I even saw her there, once.

But I never went back without remembering the fire—the way it ate up the sky, the sound of a house, a *something*, shriveling into nothing.

That's what it was like waking up in the Crypts. No-longer-dead. But without her.

Like burning alive.

I have nothing to say about my months there. Imagine it, then imagine worse, then give up and know you can't imagine it.

You think you want to know, but you don't.

No one expected me to live, so it was like a game to the guards to see how much I could take. One guy, Roman, was the worst. He was ugly—fat lips, eyes glassed over like a fish on ice in the grocery store—and mean as hell. He liked to put his cigarettes out on my tongue. He cut the insides of my eyelids with razors. Every time I blinked, I felt like my eyes were exploding. I used to lie awake at night and imagine wrapping my hands around his throat, killing him slowly.

See? I told you. You don't want to know.

But the worst was where they put me. The old cell where I'd once stood with Lena, staring at the words etched into the stone. A single word, actually. Just *love*, over and over.

They'd patched up the hole in the wall, reinforced it and barred it with steel. But I could still taste the outside, still smell the rain and hear the distant roar of the river beneath me. I could watch the snow bending whole trees into submission, could lick the icicles that formed on the other side of the bars.

That was torture—being able to see, and smell, and hear, and being trapped in a cage. Like standing on the wrong side of the fence, only a few feet from freedom, and knowing you'll never cross it.

Yeah. Like that.

I got better—somehow, miraculously, without wanting it or willing it or trying. My skin grew together, sealed in the bullet, still lodged somewhere between two ribs. My fever went down, and I stopped seeing things whenever I closed my eyes: people with holes in their faces instead of mouths, buildings catching fire, skies filled with blood and smoke. My heart kept going, and some small, distant part of me was glad.

Slowly, slowly, I grew back into my body. One day, I managed to stand up. A week later, to walk the cell, staggering between the walls like a drunk.

I got a beating for that one—for healing too fast. After that I moved only at night, in the dark, when the guards were too lazy to do random checks, when they slept or drank or played cards instead of making the rounds.

I wasn't thinking of escape. I wasn't thinking of her. That came later. I wasn't thinking anything at all. It was just will, forcing my blood through my veins and my heart to keep opening and shutting and my legs to try and move.

When I remembered, I remembered being a little kid. I thought about the homestead on the Rhode Island coast, long before I moved homesteads with a few others and came to Maine: the gallery and the smell of low tide, and all the brick covered in layers of bird shit, crusty as salt spray. I remembered the boats

this guy Flick made out of timber and scrap, and the time he took me fishing and I hooked my first trout: the blush pink of its belly and how good it tasted, like nothing I'd ever eaten before. I remembered Brent, who was my age and like a brother, and how his finger looked after he got cut on an old bit of razor wire, puffy and dark as a storm cloud, and how he screamed when they cut it off to stop the infection from spreading. Dirk and Mel and Toadie: all of them dead, I heard later, killed on some secret mission to Zombieland. And Carr, in Maine, who taught me all about the resistance, who helped me memorize facts about the new me when it was time for me to cross over.

And I remembered my first night in Portland, how I couldn't get comfortable on the bed, and how I moved onto the floor, finally, and fell asleep with my cheek against the rug. How weird everything was: the supermarkets stocked with food I'd never seen before, and trash bins heaped with stuff that was still usable, and rules, rules for everything: eating, sitting, talking, even pissing and wiping yourself.

In my mind, I was reliving my whole life again—slowly, taking my time. Delaying.

Because I knew, sooner or later, I'd get to her.

And then . . . Well, I'd already died once. I couldn't live through it again.

The guards lost interest in me after a while.

In the quiet, and the dark, I got stronger.

Eventually she came. She appeared suddenly, exactly like she'd done that day—she stepped into the sunshine, she jumped, she laughed and threw her head back, so her long ponytail nearly grazed the waistband of her jeans.

After that, I couldn't think about anything else. The mole on the inside of her right elbow, like a dark blot of ink. The way she ripped her nails to shreds when she was nervous. Her eyes, deep as a promise. Her stomach, pale and soft and gorgeous, and the tiny dark cavity of her belly button.

I nearly went crazy. I knew she must think I was dead. What had happened to her after crossing the fence? Had she made it? She had nothing, no tools, no food, no idea where to go. I imagined her weak, and lost. I imagined her dead. She might as well be.

I told myself that if she was alive she would move on, she would forget me, she would be happy again. I tried to tell myself that was what I wanted for her.

I knew I would never see her again.

But hope got in, no matter how hard and fast I tried to stomp it out. Like these tiny fire ants we used to get in Portland. No matter how fast you killed them, there were always more, a steady stream of them, resistant, ever-multiplying.

Maybe, the hope said. *Maybe*.

Funny how time heals. Like that bullet in my ribs. It's there, I know it's there, but I can barely feel it at all anymore.

Only when it rains. And sometimes, too, when I remember. The impossible happened in January, on a night like all other winter nights, frigid, black, and long.

The first explosion woke me from a dream. Two other explosions followed, buried somewhere beneath layers of stone, like the rumblings of a faraway train. The alarms started screaming but just as quickly went silent.

The lights shut off all at once.

People were shouting. Footsteps echoed in the halls. The prisoners began banging on walls and doors, and the darkness was full of shouting.

I knew right away it must be freedom fighters. I could *feel* it, the way I could always feel it in my fingertips when I was supposed to do a job, like a drop, and something was wrong—an undercover cop hanging around, or a problem with a contact. Then I'd keep my head down, keep it moving, regroup.

Later I found out that in the lower wards, two hundred cell doors swung open simultaneously. Electrical problem. Two hundred prisoners made a break for it, and a dozen had made it out before the police and regulators showed up and started shooting.

Our doors were closed with deadbolts, and stayed shut.

I beat on the door so hard my knuckles split. I screamed until my voice dried up in my throat. We all did. All of us in Ward Six, all of us forgotten, left to rot. The minutes that had passed since the lights went off felt like hours.

"Let me out!" I screamed, over and over. "Let me out. I'm one of you."

And then, a miracle: a small cone of light, a flashlight sweeping down the hall, and the pattern of fast footsteps. I'll admit it. I called to be let out first. I'm not too proud to say it. I'd spent five months in that hellhole, and escape was on the other side of the door. Days, years passed before my door swung open.

But it did. Swing open.

I recognized the guy with the keys. I knew him as Kyle, though I doubt that was his real name. I'd seen him at one or two meetings of the resistance. I'd

never liked him. He wore really tight button-down shirts and pants that made him look like he had a constant wedgie.

He wasn't wearing a button-down then. He was wearing all black, and a ski mask pushed back on his head, so I could see his face. And in that moment, I could have kissed him.

"Let's go, let's go."

It was chaos. It was hell. Emergency lights flashing, illuminating in strobe prisoners clawing at one another to get through the doors, and guards swinging with clubs or firing, randomly, into the crowd to hold them back. Bodies in the halls, and blood smearing the linoleum, speckled on the walls.

I knew from all my times at the Crypts, there was a service entrance in the basement, next to the laundry room. By the time I made it to the first floor, the cops were flowing in, bug-eyed in their riot gear. The screaming was so loud. You couldn't even hear what the cops were yelling. Five feet away from me, I watched some woman wearing a hospital gown and paper slippers shank a cop right in the neck with a pen. I thought, *Good for her*.

Like I said: I'm not too proud.

There was a pop, and a fizz, and something went ricocheting down the hall. Then a hard burn in my eyes and throat and I knew they'd chucked in the tear gas, and if I didn't get out then, I'd never get out. I made for the laundry chute, trying to breathe through the filthy cotton of my sleeve. Pushing people when I had to. Not caring.

You have to understand. I wasn't just thinking of me. I was thinking of her, too.

It was a long shot, but I had no choice. I crawled into the laundry chute, as narrow as a coffin, and dropped. Four long seconds of darkness and free fall. I could hear my breath echoing in the metal cage.

Then I was down. I landed in a big pile of sheets and pillowcases that smelled like sweat and blood and things I didn't want to think about. But I was safe, and nothing was broken. The laundry room was black, empty, the old machines still. The whole room had that moist feel that all laundry rooms do, like a big tongue.

I could still hear screaming and gunshots from upstairs, rolling down the laundry chute, amplified and transformed. It sounded like the world was ending.

But it wasn't.

Out of the laundry room, around the corner, no problem at all. The service door was supposed to be alarmed, but I knew the staff always disabled it so they

could go out for smoke breaks without going upstairs.

So: outside, and to the black rush of the Presumpscot River. To freedom.
For me, the world was beginning.

How did I love her?

Let me count the ways.

The freckles on her nose like the shadow of a shadow; the way she chewed on her lower lip when she was thinking and the way her ponytail swung when she walked and how when she ran she looked like she was born going fast and how she fit perfectly against my chest; her smell and the touch of her lips and her skin, which was always warm, and how she smiled. Like she had a secret.

How she always made up words during Scrabble. Hyddym (secret music). Grofp (cafeteria food). Quaw (the sound a baby duck makes). How she burped her way through the alphabet once, and I laughed so hard I spat out soda through my nose.

And how she looked at me like I could save her from everything bad in the world.

This was my secret: she was the one who saved me.

I had trouble finding the old homestead. It took me almost a full day. I'd crossed over the river, into a part of the Wilds I didn't know, and there were no landmarks to guide me. I knew I had to circle southeast, and I did, keeping the city's perimeter in my sights. It was cold outside, but there was lots of sun, and ice ran off the branches. I had no jacket, but I didn't even care.

I was free.

There should have been freedom fighters around, escaped prisoners from the Crypts. But the woods were silent and empty. Sometimes I saw a shape moving through the trees and turned around, only to see a deer bounding away, or a raccoon moving, hunched, through the undergrowth. I found out later that the Incidents in Portland were carried out by a tiny, well-trained group—only six people in total. Of them, four were caught, tried, and executed for terrorism.

I found the old homestead at last, long after it got dark, when I was using the moon to navigate and piling up branches as markers so I could be sure I wasn't just turning in circles. I smelled smoke and followed it. I came out into the long alley, where Grandpa Jones and Caitlyn and Carr used to set up shop in their patched-up tents and makeshift houses, where the old trailers stood. It seemed like a lifetime ago I'd lain in bed with Lena and felt her breath tickling my chin

and held her while she slept, felt her heart beating through her skin to mine.

It was a lifetime ago. Everything was different.

The homestead had been destroyed.

There'd been a fire. That much was obvious. The trees in the surrounding area were bare stumpy fingers, pointing blackly to the sky, as if accusing it of something. It looked like there'd been bombs, too, from the covering of metal and plastic and broken glass vomited across the grass. Only a few trailers were still intact. Their walls were black with smoke; whole walls had collapsed, so charred interiors were visible—lumpy forms that might have been beds, tables.

My old house, where I'd lain with Lena and listened to her breathe and willed the darkness to stay dark forever so we could be there, together, always—that was gone completely. Poof. Just some sheet metal and the concrete rubble of the foundation.

Maybe I should have known. Maybe I should have taken it as a sign.

But I didn't. "Don't move."

There was a gun against my back before I knew it. I was strong again, but my reflexes were weak. I hadn't even heard the guy coming.

"I'm a friend," I said.

"Prove it."

I pivoted slowly, hands up. A guy was standing there, crazy skinny and crazy tall, like a human grasshopper, with the squinty look of someone who needs glasses but can't get them in the Wilds. His lips were chapped, and he kept licking them. His eyes flicked to the fake procedural scar on my neck.

"Look," I said, and drew up my sleeve, where they'd tattooed my intake number at the Crypts.

He relaxed then, and lowered the gun. "Sorry," he said. "I thought the others would be back by now. I was worried. . . ." Then his eyes lit up, as if he had just registered what he said. "It worked," he said. "It worked. The bombs . . . ?"

"Went off," I said.

"How many got out?"

I shook my head.

He licked his lips again. "I'm Rogers," he said. "Come on. Sit. I got a fire going."

He told me about what had happened while I'd been inside: a big sweep on the homesteads, extending from Portland all the way down to Boston and into New Hampshire. There'd been planes, bombs, the works, a big show of military might for the people in Zombieland who'd started to believe that the invalids

were real, and out there, and growing.

“What happened to the homesteaders?” I asked. I was thinking of Lena. Of course. I was always thinking of Lena. “Did they get out?”

“Not everyone.” Rogers was twitchy. Always moving, standing up and sitting down, tapping his foot. “A lot of them did, though. At least, that’s what I heard. They went south, started doing work for the R down there.”

We talked for hours, Rogers and me. Eventually, others came: prisoners who’d made it across the border into the Wilds, and two of the freedom fighters who’d launched the operation. As the darkness drew tighter they materialized through the trees, drawn to the campfire, appearing suddenly from the shadows, white-faced, as if stepping into this world from another. And they were, in a way.

Kyle, constant-wedgie-boy, never made it back. And then I felt bad, really bad.

I never even thanked him.

We had to move. There would be retribution for what we’d done. There would be air strikes, or attacks from the ground. Rogers told me the Wilds weren’t safe anymore, not like they used to be.

We agreed to catch a few hours of sleep and then take off. I suggested south. That’s where everyone had gone—that’s where Lena, if she had survived, would be. I had no idea where. But I would find her.

We were a small, sad group: a bunch of skinny, dirty convicts, a handful of trained fighters, a woman who’d been on the mental ward and wandered off soon after she joined us. We lost two people, actually. One guy, Greg, had been on Ward Six since he was fifteen years old and had been caught by the police distributing dangerous materials: posters for a free underground concert. He must have been forty by then, skinny as a rail and insect-eyed, with hair growing all the way down his back.

He wanted to know when the guards would come by to bring us food and water. He wanted to know when we were allowed to bathe, and when we could sleep, and when the lights would come on. In the morning, when I woke up, he was already gone. He must have gone back to the Crypts. He’d gotten used to it there.

Rogers shook us all awake before dawn. We’d made camp in one of the remaining trailers. It was decently sheltered from the wind, even though it was missing one of its walls. For a moment, waking up with a layer of frost crusting

the blanket and my clothes, with the smell of the campfire stinging the back of my throat and the birds just starting to sing—I thought I was dreaming.

I'd thought I would never see the sky again. Anything, anything is possible, if you can just see the sky.

The attack came sooner than we were expecting.

It was just after noon when we heard them. I knew right away they were untrained—they were making way too much noise.

“You”—Rogers pointed at me—“up there.” He jerked his head toward a small embankment; at the top were the ruins of a house. “Everyone, split. Spread out. Just let 'em pass.” But he shoved a gun in my hand, one of the few we had.

It had been a long time since I'd held a gun. I hoped I'd remember how to shoot.

The leaves crunched under my shoes as I jogged up the hill. It was a clear day, cold, and my breath burned in my lungs. The old house had the rotten smell of an unwashed sock. I pushed open the door and crouched in the dark, leaving the door cracked open an inch so I could keep watch.

“What the hell are you doing?”

The voice made me spin around and nearly topple over. The man was filthy. His hair was long, wild, and reached below his shoulders.

“It's all right,” I started to say, trying to calm him down. But he cut me off.

“Get out.” He grabbed my shirt. His fingernails were long and sharp, and he stunk. “Get out. Do you hear me? This is my place. Get out.”

He was getting louder and louder. And the zombies were close—would be on top of us any second.

“You don't understand,” I tried again. “You're in danger. We all are.”

But now he was wailing. All his words ran together into a single note. “Getoutgetoutgetout.”

I shoved him down and tried to get a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. There were voices from outside, the *cracklecrackle* of feet through the dry leaves. While my attention was distracted, he bit down on my hand, hard.

“Getoutgetoutgetout!” He started up his screaming as soon as I drew my hand back. “Getoutgetoutget—”

He was cut silent only by the first volley of bullets.

I'd rolled off him just in time. I threw myself flat on the ground and covered my head. Soft wood and plaster rained down on me as they emptied twenty rounds into the walls. Then there were other shots, this time farther off. Our

group had broken cover.

The door squeaked open. A band of sunlight grew around me. I stayed still, on my stomach, hardly breathing, listening.

“This one’s dead.” The floorboards creaked; something skittered in the corner.

“How about the other one?”

“He’s not moving.”

Holding my breath, willing my muscles not to move, not to twitch even. If my heart was still beating, I couldn’t feel it. Time was slowing down, stretching into long, syrupy seconds.

I’d killed only once in my life, when I was ten years old, just before I moved to Portland. Old Man Hicks, we called him. Sixty years old, the oldest person I knew in the Wilds by far, crippled by arthritis, bedridden, cataracts, full-body pain, day in and day out. He begged us to do it. *When the horse ain’t no good, you’re doing the horse a favor. Put me down, he used to say. For the love of God, put me down.*

They made me do it. So I would know that I could. So I would know I was ready.

“Yup.” The man stopped above me. Toed me with one of his boots, right between the ribs. Then squatted. I felt his fingers on my collar, searching for my neck, for my pulse. “Looks pretty dead to me, all r—”

I rolled over, hooked an arm around his neck, and pulled him down on top of me as the second guy brought his gun up and let two bullets loose. He had good aim. The guy I was using like a shield got hit twice in the chest. For a split second, the shooter hesitated, realizing what he’d done, realizing he’d just emptied a round into his partner’s chest, and in that second I rolled the body off me, aimed, and pulled the trigger. It didn’t take more than a single shot.

Like riding a bike, I thought, and had a sudden image of Lena on her bike, skidding down onto the beach, legs out, laughing, while her tires shuddered on the sand. I stood up and searched the men for guns, IDs, money.

People do terrible things, sometimes, for the best reasons.

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

We were lying on the blanket in the backyard of 37 Brooks, like we always did that summer. Lena was on her side, cheek resting on her hand, hair loose. Beautiful.

“The worst thing I’ve ever done . . .” I pretended to think about it. Then I

grabbed her by the waist and rolled her on top of me as she shrieked and begged me to stop tickling. “It’s what I’m thinking of doing right now.”

She laughed and pushed herself off me. “I’m serious,” she said. She kept one hand on my chest. She was wearing a tank top, and I could see one of her bra straps—pale seashell-colored pink. I reached out and ran a finger along her collarbones, my favorite place: like the silhouette of tiny wings.

“You have to answer,” she said. And I almost did. I almost told her then. I wanted her to tell me it was okay, that she still loved me, that she would never leave. But then she leaned down and kissed me and her hair tickled my chest, and when she drew back her eyes were bright and honey-colored. “I want to know all your deep, dark secrets.”

“All of them? You sure?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You were in my dream last night.”

Her eyes were smiling. “Good dream?”

“Come here,” I said. “I’ll show you.” I rolled her down onto the blanket and moved on top of her.

“You’re cheating,” she said, but she laughed. Her hair was fanned out across the blanket. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I don’t have to,” I said, and kissed her. “I’m an angel.”

I’m a liar.

I was lying even then. She deserved an angel, and I wanted to be hers.

When I was in the Crypts, I’d often sat awake and made a list of things she should know, things I would tell her if I ever found her again—like about killing Old Man Hicks when I was ten, how I was shaking so hard Flick had to hold my wrists steady. All the information I passed on when I was in Portland, coded messages and signals—information used I-don’t-know-how for I-don’t-know-what. Lies I told and had to tell. Times I said I wasn’t scared and I was.

And now, these last sins: two regulators, dead.

And one more for the road.

Because when the fight was over, and I came down from the house to take stock of the damage, I saw someone familiar: Roman, the guard from the Crypts, lying in the leaves with a handle sticking out of his chest, his shirt clotted with blood. But alive. His breath was a liquid gargle in his throat.

“Help me,” he said, choking on the words. His eyes were rolling up to the sky, wild, like a horse’s. And I remembered Old Man Hicks saying, *When the*

horse ain't no good, you're doing the horse a favor.

So I did. Help him. He was dying anyway, slowly. I put a bullet through his head, so it would go quick.

I'm sorry, Lena.

We lost three of our group in the fight that day, but the rest of us moved on. We went slowly, zigzagging. Any time we heard rumors of a populated homestead, we scouted for it. Rogers liked the company, the information, the opportunity to communicate with other freedom fighters, restock our weapons, trade for better provisions. I only cared about one thing. Each time we got close to a camp, I got my hopes up all over again. Maybe this one . . . maybe this time . . . maybe she'd be there. But the farther we got from Portland, the more I worried. I had no way of finding Lena. No way of knowing whether she was alive, even.

By the time we made it to Connecticut, spring was coming. The woods were shaking off the freeze. The ice on the rivers opened up. There were plants poking up everywhere. We had good luck. The weather held, we got lucky with a few rabbits and geese. There was food enough.

Finally, I got a break. We were camping for a few days in the old husk of a shopping center, all blown-out windows and low cement buildings with faded signs for HARDWARE and DELI SANDWICHES and PRINCESS NAILS, a place that kind of reminded me of the gallery, and we came across a trader who was going in the opposite direction, heading north to Canada. He camped with us for the night, and in the evening he unrolled a thick mohair blanket and spread out all his wares, whatever he had for sale: coffee, tobacco and rolling papers, tweezers, antibiotics, sewing needles and pins, a few pairs of glasses. (Even though none of the glasses in the trader's collection were the right fit, Rogers traded a knife for a pair anyway. They were better than nothing.)

Then I saw it: buried in a tangle of miscellaneous jewelry, crap no one would use except for scrap metal, was a small turquoise ring on a silver chain. I recognized it immediately. I'd seen her wear it a hundred times. I'd removed it so I could kiss her neck, her collarbones. I'd helped her fasten the little clasp, and she'd laughed because my fingers were so clumsy.

I reached for it slowly, like it was alive—like it might leap away from my fingers.

“Where did you get this?” I asked him, trying to keep my voice steady. The turquoise felt warm in my hand, as if it still carried a little bit of her heat in the stone.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” He was good at what he did: a fast talker, a guy who knew how to survive. “Sterling and turquoise. Probably sell for a decent amount on the other side. Forty, fifty bucks if you need some quick cash. What are you giving for it?”

“I’m not buying,” I said, though I wanted to. “I just want to know where you got it.”

“I didn’t steal it,” he said.

“Where?” I said again.

“A girl gave it to me,” he said, and I stopped breathing.

“What did she look like?” Big eyes, like maple syrup. Soft brown hair. Perfect.

“Black hair,” he said. No. Wrong. “Probably early twenties. Had a funny name—Bird. No, Raven. She was from up this way, actually. Came south last year with a whole crew.” He lowered his voice and winked. “Traded the necklace and a good knife, just for a Test. You know what I mean.”

But I’d stopped listening. I didn’t care about the girl, Raven, or whatever her name was—I knew she might have taken it off Lena. I knew this might mean that Lena was dead. But it could mean that she had made it, joined up with a group of homesteaders, made it south. Maybe Lena had traded with the girl, Raven, for something she needed.

It was my only hope.

“Where was she?” I stood up. It was dark already, but I couldn’t wait. It was my first—my only—clue about where Lena might be.

“Big warehouse just outside of White Plains,” he said. “There was a whole big group of ’em. Two or three dozen.” He frowned. “You sure you don’t want to buy it?”

I was still holding on to the necklace. “I’m sure,” I said. I put it down carefully; I didn’t want to leave it behind, but I had nothing but the gun Rogers had given me and a knife I’d taken off one of the regulators, plus a few IDs. Nothing I could trade.

Rogers figured we’d made it ten miles west of Bristol, Connecticut; that meant, roughly figuring, New York City was another one hundred miles and White Plains thirty less than that. I could do thirty miles a day if the terrain was good and I didn’t make camp for more than a few hours each night.

I had to try. I had no idea whether Raven was on the move and whether Lena, if she was with them, would soon be moving too. I’d been asking, praying, for a way to find her, for a sign that she was still alive—and a sign had come.

That's the thing about faith. It works.

Rogers gave me a pack with a flashlight, a tarp for bedding down, and as much food as he could spare, even though he said it was craziness starting out right away, in the dark, all alone. And he was right. It was craziness. *Amor deliria nervosa*. The deadliest of all deadly things.

Sometimes I think maybe they were right all along, the people on the other side in Zombieland. Maybe it would be better if we didn't love. If we didn't lose, either. If we didn't get our hearts stomped on, shattered; if we didn't have to patch and repatch until we're like Frankenstein monsters, all sewn together and bound up by who knows what.

If we could just float along, like snow.

That's what Zombieland is: frozen, calm, quiet. It's the world after a blizzard, the peacefulness that comes with it, the muffled silence and the sense that nothing in the world is moving. It's beautiful, in its own way.

Maybe we'd be better off.

But how could anyone who's ever seen a summer—big explosions of green and skies lit up electric with splashy sunsets, a riot of flowers and wind that smells like honey—pick the snow?

[Excerpt from *Panic*](#)

Read on for an excerpt of LAUREN OLIVER'S thrilling novel *Panic*, which *Kirkus Reviews* says "will have readers up until the wee hours."



heather

THE WATER WAS SO COLD IT TOOK HEATHER'S BREATH away as she fought past the kids crowding the beach and standing in the shallows, waving towels and homemade signs, cheering and calling up to the remaining jumpers.

She took a deep breath and went under. The sound of voices, of shouting and laughter, was immediately muted.

Only one voice stayed with her.

I didn't mean for it to happen.

Those eyes; the long lashes, the mole under his right eyebrow.

There's just something about her.

Something about her. Which meant: Nothing about you.

She'd been planning to tell him she loved him tonight.

The cold was thunderous, a buzzing rush through her body. Her denim shorts felt as though they'd been weighted with stones. Fortunately, years of braving the creek and racing the quarry with Bishop had made Heather Nill a strong swimmer.

The water was threaded with bodies, twisting and kicking, splashing, treading water—the jumpers, and the people who had joined their celebratory swim, sloshing into the quarry still clothed, carrying beer cans and joints. She could hear a distant rhythm, a faint drumming, and she let it move her through the water—without thought, without fear.

That's what Panic was all about: no fear.

She broke the surface for air and saw that she'd already crossed the short stretch of water and reached the opposite shore: an ugly pile of misshapen rocks, slick with black and green moss, piled together like an ancient collection of Legos. Pitted with fissures and crevices, they shouldered up toward the sky, ballooning out over the water.

Thirty-one people had already jumped—all of them Heather's friends and former classmates. Only a small knot of people remained at the top of the ridge—the jagged, rocky lip of shoreline jutting forty feet into the air on the north side of the quarry, like a massive tooth biting its way out of the ground.

It was too dark to see them. The flashlights and the bonfire only illuminated

the shoreline and a few feet of the inky dark water, and the faces of the people who had jumped, still bobbing in the water, triumphant, too happy to feel the cold, taunting the other competitors. The top of the ridge was a shaggy mass of black, where the trees were encroaching on the rock, or the rock was getting slowly pulled into the woods, one or the other.

But Heather knew who they were. All the competitors had to announce themselves once they reached the top of the ridge, and then Diggin Rodgers, this year's sportscaster, parroted back the names into the megaphone, which he had borrowed from his older brother, a cop.

Three people had yet to jump: Merl Tracey, Derek Klieg, and Natalie Velez. Nat.

Heather's best friend.

Heather wedged her fingers in a fissure in the rocks and pulled. Earlier, and in years past, she had watched all the other gamers scabbling up the ridge like giant, waterlogged insects. Every year, people raced to be the first to jump, even though it didn't earn any extra points. It was a pride thing.

She banged her knee, hard, against a sharp elbow of rock. When she looked down, she could see a bit of dark blood streaking her kneecap. Weirdly, she didn't feel any pain. And though everyone was still cheering and shouting, it sounded distant.

Matt's words drowned out all the voices.

Look, it's just not working.

There's something about her.

We can still be friends.

The air was cool. The wind had picked up, singing through the old trees, sending deep groans up from the woods—but she wasn't cold anymore. Her heart was beating hard in her throat. She found another handhold in the rock, braced her legs on the slick moss, lifted and levered, as she had watched the gamers do, every summer since eighth grade.

Dimly, she was aware of Diggin's voice, distorted by the megaphone.

"Late in the game . . . a new competitor . . ."

But half his words got whipped away by the wind.

Up, up, up, ignoring the ache in her fingers and legs, trying to stick to the left side of the ridge, where the rocks, driven hard at angles into one another, formed a wide and jutting lip of stone, easy to navigate.

Suddenly a dark shape, a person, rocketed past her. She almost slipped. At the last second, she worked her feet more firmly onto the narrow ledge, dug hard

with her fingers to steady herself. A huge cheer went up, and Heather's first thought was: *Natalie*.

But then Diggin boomed out, "And he's *in*, ladies and gentlemen! Merl Tracey, our thirty-second gamer, is *in*!"

Almost at the top now. She risked a glance behind her and saw a steep slope of jagged rock, the dark water breaking at the base of the ridge. It suddenly seemed a million miles away.

For a second the fog cleared from her head, the anger and the hurt were blown away, and she wanted to crawl back down the rock, back to the safety of the beach, where Bishop was waiting. They could go to Dot's for late-night waffles, extra butter, extra whipped cream. They could drive around with all the windows open, listening to the rising hum of the crickets, or sit together on the hood of his car and talk about nothing.

But it was too late. Matt's voice came whispering back, and she kept climbing.

No one knows who invented Panic, or when it first began.

There are different theories. Some blame the shuttering of the paper factory, which overnight placed 40 percent of the adult population of Carp, New York, on unemployment. Mike Dickinson, who infamously got arrested for dealing on the very same night he was named prom king, and now changes brake pads at the Jiffy Lube on Route 22, likes to take credit; that's why he still goes to Opening Jump, seven years after graduating.

None of these stories is correct, however. Panic began as so many things do in Carp, a poor town of twelve thousand people in the middle of nowhere: because it was summer, and there was nothing else to do.

The rules are simple. The day after graduation is Opening Jump, and the game goes all through summer. After the final challenge, the winner takes the pot.

Everyone at Carp High pays into the pot, no exceptions. Fees are a dollar a day, for every day that school is in session, from September through June. People who refuse to pony up the cash receive reminders that go from gentle to persuasive: vandalized locker, shattered windows, shattered face.

It's only fair. Anyone who wants to play has a chance to win. That's another rule: all seniors, but *only* seniors, are eligible, and must announce their intention to compete by participating in the Jump, the first of the challenges. Sometimes as many as forty kids enter.

There is only ever one winner.

Two judges plan the game, name the challenges, deliver instructions, award and deduct points. They are selected by the judges of the previous year, in strict secrecy. No one, in the whole history of Panic, has ever confessed to being one.

There have been suspicions, of course—rumors and speculation. Carp is a small town, and judges get paid. How did Myra Campbell, who always stole lunch from the school cafeteria because there was no food at home, suddenly afford her used Honda? She said an uncle had died. But no one had ever heard of Myra's uncle—no one, really, had ever *thought* about Myra, until she came rolling in with the windows down, smoking a cigarette, with the sun so bright on the windshield, it almost completely obscured the smile on her face.

Two judges, picked in secret, sworn to secrecy, working together. It must be this way. Otherwise they'd be subject to bribes, and possibly to threats. That's why there are two—to make sure that things stay balanced, to reduce the possibility that one will cheat, and give out information, leak hints.

If the players know what to expect, then they can prepare. And that isn't fair at all.

It's partly the unexpectedness, the never-knowing, that starts to get to them, and weeds them out, one by one.

The pot usually amounts to just over \$50,000, after fees are deducted and the judges—whoever they are—take their cut. Four years ago, Tommy O'Hare took his winnings, bought two items out of hock, one of them a lemon-yellow Ford, drove straight to Vegas, and bet it all on black.

The next year, Lauren Davis bought herself new teeth and a new pair of tits and moved to New York City. She returned to Carp two Christmases later, stayed just long enough to show off a new purse and an even newer nose, and then blew back to the city. Rumors floated back: she was dating the ex-producer of some reality TV weight-loss show; she was becoming a Victoria's Secret model, though no one has ever seen her in a catalog. (And many of the boys have looked.)

Conrad Spurlock went into the manufacture of methamphetamines—his father's line of business—and poured the money into a new shed on Mallory Road, after their last place burned straight to the ground. But Sean McManus used the money to go to college; he's thinking of becoming a doctor.

In seven years of playing, there have been three deaths—four including Tommy O'Hare, who shot himself with the second thing he'd bought at the pawn shop, after his number came up red.

You see? Even the winner of Panic is afraid of *something*.

So: back to the day after graduation, the opening day of Panic, the day of the Jump.

Rewind back to the beach, but pause a few hours before Heather stood on the ridge, suddenly petrified, afraid to jump.

Turn the camera slightly. We're not quite there. Almost, though.

dodge

NO ONE ON THE BEACH WAS CHEERING FOR DODGE Mason—no one *would* cheer for him either, no matter how far he got.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was the win.

And Dodge had a secret—he knew something about Panic, knew more about it, probably, than any of the other people on the beach.

Actually, he had *two* secrets.

Dodge liked secrets. They fueled him, gave him a sense of power. When he was little, he'd even fantasized that he had his own secret world, a private place of shadows, where he could curl up and hide. Even now—on Dayna's bad days, when the pain came roaring back and she started to cry, when his mom hosed the place down with Febreze and invited over her newest Piece of Shit date, and late at night Dodge could hear the bed frame hitting the wall, like a punch in the stomach every time—he thought about sinking into that dark space, cool and private.

Everyone at school thought Dodge was a pussy. He knew that. He *looked* like a pussy. He'd always been tall and skinny—angles and corners, his mom said, just like his father. As far as he knew, the angles—and the dark skin—were the *only* things he had in common with his dad, a Dominican roofer his mom had been with for one hot second back in Miami. Dodge could never even remember his name. Roberto. Or Rodrigo. Some shit like that.

Back when they'd first gotten stuck in Carp (that's how he always thought about it—getting *stuck*—he, Dayna, and his mom were just like empty plastic bags skipping across the country on fitful bits of wind, occasionally getting snagged around a telephone pole or under the tires of some semi, pinned in place for a bit), he'd been beat up three times: once by Greg O'Hare, then by Zev Keller, and then by Greg O'Hare *again*, just to make sure that Dodge knew the rules. And Dodge hadn't swung back, not once.

He'd had worse before.

And that was Dodge's second secret, and the source of his power.

He wasn't afraid. He just didn't care.

And that was very, very different.

The sky was streaked with red and purple and orange. It reminded Dodge of an enormous bruise, or a picture taken of the inside of a body. It was still an hour or so before sunset and before the pot, and then the Jump, would be announced.

Dodge cracked a beer. His first and only. He didn't want to be buzzed, and didn't need to be either. But it had been a hot day, and he'd come straight from Home Depot, and he was thirsty.

The crowd had only just started to assemble. Periodically, Dodge heard the muffled slamming of a car door, a shout of greeting from the woods, the distant blare of music. Whippoorwill Road was a quarter mile away; kids were just starting to emerge from the path, fighting their way through the thick underbrush, swatting at hanging moss and creeper vines, carting coolers and blankets and bottles and iPod speakers, staking out patches of sand.

School was done—for good, forever. He took a deep breath. Of all the places he had lived—Chicago, DC, Dallas, Richmond, Ohio, Rhode Island, Oklahoma, New Orleans—New York smelled the best. Like growth and change, things turning over and becoming other things.

Ray Hanrahan and his friends had arrived first. That was unsurprising. Even though competitors weren't officially announced until the moment of the Jump, Ray had been bragging for months that he was going to take home the pot, just like his brother had two years earlier.

Luke had won, just barely, in the last round of Panic. Luke had walked away with fifty grand. The other driver hadn't walked away at all. If the doctors were right, she'd never walk again.

Dodge flipped a coin in his palm, made it disappear, then reappear easily between his fingers. In fourth grade, his mom's boyfriend—he couldn't remember which one—had bought him a book about magic tricks. They'd been living in Oklahoma that year, a shithole in a flat bowl in the middle of the country, where the sun singed the ground to dirt and the grass to gray, and he'd spent a whole summer teaching himself how to pull coins from someone's ear and slip a card into his pocket so quickly, it was unnoticeable.

It had started as a way to pass the time but had become a kind of obsession. There was something elegant about it: how people saw without seeing, how the mind filled in what it expected, how the eyes betrayed you.

Panic, he knew, was one big magic trick. The judges were the magicians; the rest of them were just a dumb, gaping audience.

Mike Dickinson came next, along with two friends, all of them visibly drunk. The Dick's hair had started to thin, and patches of his scalp were visible when he

bent down to deposit his cooler on the beach. His friends were carrying a half-rotted lifeguard chair between them: the throne, where Diggin, the announcer, would sit during the event.

Dodge heard a high whine. He smacked unthinkingly, catching the mosquito just as it started to feed, smearing a bit of black on his bare calf. He hated mosquitoes. Spiders, too, although he liked other insects, found them fascinating. Like humans, in a way—stupid and sometimes vicious, blinded by need.

The sky was deepening; the light was fading and so were the colors, swirling away behind the line of trees beyond the ridge, as though someone had pulled the plug.

Heather Nill was next on the beach, followed by Nat Velez, and lastly, Bishop Marks, trotting happily after them like an overgrown sheepdog. Even from a distance, Dodge could tell both girls were on edge. Heather had done something with her hair. He wasn't sure what, but it wasn't wrestled into its usual ponytail, and it even looked like she might have straightened it. And he wasn't sure, but he thought she might be wearing makeup.

He debated getting up and going over to say hi. Heather was cool. He liked how tall she was, how tough, too, in her own way. He liked her broad shoulders and the way she walked, straight-backed, even though he was sure she would have liked to be a few inches shorter—could tell from the way she wore only flats and sneakers with worn-down soles.

But if he got up, he'd have to talk to Natalie—and even looking at Nat from across the beach made his stomach seize up, like he'd been kicked. Nat wasn't exactly *mean* to him—not like some of the other kids at school—but she wasn't exactly nice, either, and that bothered him more than anything else. She usually smiled vaguely when she caught him talking to Heather, and as her eyes skated past him, through him, he knew that she would never, ever, actually look at him. Once, at the homecoming bonfire last year, she'd even called him Dave.

He'd gone just because he was hoping to see her. And then, in the crowd, he had spotted her; had moved toward her, buzzed from the noise and the heat and the shot of whiskey he'd taken in the parking lot, intending to talk to her, *really* talk to her, for the first time. Just as he was reaching out to touch her elbow, she had taken a step backward, onto his foot.

“Oops! Sorry, Dave,” she'd said, giggling. Her breath smelled like vanilla and vodka. And his stomach had opened up, and his guts went straight onto his shoes.

There were only 107 people in their graduating class, out of the 150 who'd started at Carp High freshman year. And she didn't even know his name.

So he stayed where he was, working his toes into the ground, waiting for the dark, waiting for the whistle to blow and for the games to begin.

He was going to win Panic.

He was going to do it for Dayna.

He was going to do it for revenge.

[Excerpt from *Vanishing Girls*](#)

Read on for an excerpt of LAUREN'S upcoming novel *Vanishing Girls*, a gripping story about two sisters inexorably altered by a terrible accident.

Vanishing Girls

BEFORE

MARCH 27

Nick

“Want to play?”

These are the three words I’ve heard most often in my life. *Want to play?* As four-year-old Dara bursts through the screen door, arms extended, flying into the green of our front yard without waiting for me to answer. *Want to play?* As six-year-old Dara slips into my bed in the middle of the night, her eyes wide and touched with moonlight, her damp hair smelling like strawberry shampoo. *Want to play?* Eight-year-old Dara chiming the bell on her bike; ten-year-old Dara fanning cards across the damp pool deck; twelve-year-old Dara spinning an empty soda bottle by the neck.

Sixteen-year-old Dara doesn’t wait for me to answer, either. “Scoot over,” she says, bumping her best friend Ariana’s thigh with her knee. “My sister wants to play.”

“There’s no room,” Ariana says, squealing when Dara leans into her. “Sorry, Nick.” They’re crammed with a half-dozen other people into an unused stall in Ariana’s parents’ barn, which smells like sawdust and, faintly, manure. There’s a bottle of vodka, half-empty, on the hard-packed ground, as well as a few six-packs of beer and a small pile of miscellaneous items of clothing: a scarf, two mismatched mittens, a puffy jacket, and Dara’s tight pink sweatshirt with *Queen B*tch* emblazoned across the back in rhinestones. It all looks like some bizarre ritual sacrifice laid out to the gods of strip poker.

“Don’t worry,” I say quickly. “I don’t need to play. I just came to say hi, anyway.”

Dara makes a face. “You just got here.”

Ariana smacks her cards faceup on the ground. “Three of a kind, kings.” She cracks a beer open, and foam bubbles up around her knuckles. “Matt, take off your shirt.”

Matt is a skinny kid with a slightly-too-big-nose look and the filmy

expression of someone who is already on his way to being very drunk. Since he's already in his T-shirt—black, with a mysterious graphic of a one-eyed beaver on the front—I can only assume the puffy jacket belongs to him. “I'm cold,” he whines.

“It's either your shirt or your pants. You choose.”

Matt sighs and begins wriggling out of his T-shirt, showing off a thin back, constellated with acne.

“Where's Parker?” I ask, trying to sound casual, then hating myself for having to try. But ever since Dara started . . . *whatever* she's doing with him, it has become impossible to talk about my former best friend without feeling like a Christmas tree ornament has landed in the back of my throat.

Dara freezes in the act of redistributing the cards. But only for a second. She tosses a final card in Ariana's direction and sweeps up a hand. “No idea.”

“I texted him,” I say. “He told me he was coming.”

“Yeah, well, maybe he *left*.” Dara's dark eyes flick to mine, and the message is clear. *Let it go*. I guess they must be fighting again. Or maybe they're not fighting, and that's the problem. Maybe he refuses to play along.

“Dara's got a *new* boyfriend,” Ariana says in a singsong, and Dara elbows her. “Well, you do, don't you? A *secret* boyfriend.”

“Shut up,” Dara says sharply. I can't tell whether she's really mad or only pretending to be.

Ari fake-pouts. “Do I know him? Just tell me if I *know* him.”

“No way,” Dara says. “No hints.” She tosses down her cards and stands up, dusting off the back of her jeans. She's wearing fur-trimmed wedge boots and a metallic shirt I've never seen before, which looks like it has been poured over her body and then left to harden. Her hair—recently dyed black, and blown out perfectly straight—looks like oil poured over her shoulders. As usual, I feel like the Scarecrow next to Dorothy. I'm wearing a bulky jacket Mom bought me four years ago for a ski trip to Vermont, and my hair, the unremarkable brown of mouse poop, is pulled back in its trademark ponytail.

“I'm getting a drink,” Dara says, even though she's been having beer. “Anyone want?”

“Bring back some mixers,” Ariana says.

Dara gives no indication that she's heard. She grabs me by the wrist and pulls me out of the horse stall and into the barn, where Ariana—or her mom?—has set up a few folding tables covered with bowls of chips and pretzels, guacamole, packaged cookies. There's a cigarette butt stubbed out in a container

of guacamole, and cans of beer floating around in an enormous punch bowl full of half-melted ice, like ships trying to navigate the Arctic.

It seems as if most of Dara's grade has come out tonight, and about half of mine—even if seniors don't usually deign to crash a junior party, *second semester* seniors never miss any opportunity to celebrate. Christmas lights are strung between the horse stalls, only three of which contain actual horses: Misty, Luciana, and Mr. Ed. I wonder if any of the horses are bothered by the thudding bass from the music, or by the fact that every five seconds a drunk junior is shoving his hand across the gate, trying to get the horse to nibble Cheetos from his hand.

The other stalls, the ones that aren't piled with old saddles and muck rakes and rusted farm equipment that has somehow landed and then expired here—even though the only thing Ariana's mom farms is money from her three ex-husbands—are filled with kids playing drinking games or grinding on each other, or, in the case of Jake Harris and Aubrey O'Brien, full-on making out. The tack room, I've been informed, has been unofficially claimed by the stoners.

The big sliding barn doors are open to the night, and frigid air blows in from outside. Down the hill, someone is trying to get a bonfire started in the riding rink, but there's a light rain tonight, and the wood won't catch.

At least Aaron isn't here. I'm not sure I could have handled seeing him tonight—not after what happened last weekend. It would have been better if he'd been mad—if he'd freaked out and yelled, or started rumors around school that I have chlamydia or something. Then I could hate him. Then it would make *sense*.

But since the breakup he's been unfailingly, epically polite, like he's the greeter at a Gap. Like he's *really* hoping I'll buy something but doesn't want to seem pushy.

"I still think we're good together," he'd said out of the blue, even as he was giving me back my sweatshirt (cleaned, of course, and folded) and a variety of miscellaneous crap I'd left in his car: pens and a phone charger and a weird snow globe I'd seen for sale at CVS. School had served pasta marinara for lunch, and there was a tiny bit of Day-Glo sauce at the corner of his mouth. "Maybe you'll change your mind."

"Maybe," I'd said. And I really hoped, more than anything in the world, that I would.

Dara grabs a bottle of Southern Comfort and splashes three inches into a plastic cup, topping it off with Coca-Cola. I bite the inside of my lip, as if I can chew back the words I really want to say: This must be at *least* her third drink;

she's already in the doghouse with Mom and Dad; she's supposed to be staying out of trouble. She landed us both in *therapy*, for God's sake.

Instead I say, "So. A new boyfriend, huh?" I try and keep my voice light.

One corner of Dara's mouth crooks into a smile. "You know Ariana. She exaggerates." She mixes another drink and presses it into my hand, jamming our plastic cups together. "Cheers," she says, and takes a big swig, emptying half her drink.

The drink smells suspiciously like cough syrup. I set it down next to a platter of cold pigs in blankets, which look like shriveled thumbs wrapped up in gauze. "So there's no mystery man?"

Dara lifts a shoulder. "What can I say?" She's wearing gold eye shadow tonight, and a dusting of it coats her cheeks; she looks like someone who has accidentally trespassed through fairyland. "I'm irresistible."

"What about Parker?" I say. "More trouble in paradise?"

Instantly I regret the question. Dara's smile vanishes. "Why?" she says, her eyes dull now, hard. "Want to say 'I told you so' again?"

"Forget it." I turn away, feeling suddenly exhausted. "Good night, Dara."

"Wait." She grabs my wrist. Just like that, the moment of tension is gone, and she smiles again. "Stay, okay? *Stay*, Ninpin," she repeats, when I hesitate.

When Dara gets like this, turns sweet and pleading, like her old self, like the sister who used to climb onto my chest and beg me, wide-eyed, to wake up, wake up, she's almost impossible to resist. Almost. "I have to get up at seven," I say, even as she's leading me outside, into the fizz and pop of the rain. "I promised Mom I'd help straighten up before Aunt Jackie gets here."

For the first month or so after Dad announced he was leaving, Mom acted like absolutely nothing was different. But recently she's been *forgetting*: to turn on the dishwasher, to set her alarm, to iron her work blouses, to vacuum. It's like every time he removes another item from the house—his favorite chair, the chess set he inherited from his father, the golf clubs he never uses—it takes a portion of her brain with it.

"Why?" Dara rolls her eyes. "She'll just bring cleansing crystals with her to do the work. Please," she adds. She has to raise her voice to be heard over the music; someone has just turned up the volume. "You *never* come out."

"That's not true," I say. "It's just that you're *always* out." The words sound harsher than I'd intended. But Dara only laughs.

"Let's not fight tonight, okay?" she says, and leans in to give me a kiss on the cheek. Her lips are candy-sticky. "Let's be happy."

A group of guys—juniors, I'm guessing—huddled together in the half-dark of the barn start hooting and clapping. "All right!" one of them shouts, raising a beer. "Lesbian action!"

"Shut up, dick!" Dara says. But she's laughing. "She's my *sister*."

"That's definitely my cue," I say.

But Dara isn't listening. Her face is flushed, her eyes bright with alcohol. "She's my sister," she announces again, to no one and also to everyone, since Dara is the kind of person other people watch, want, follow. "And my best friend."

More hooting; a scattering of applause. Another guy yells, "Get it on!"

Dara throws an arm around my shoulder, leans up to whisper in my ear, her breath sweet-smelling, sharp with booze. "Best friends for life," she says, and I'm no longer sure whether she's hugging me or hanging on me. "Right, Nick? Nothing—*nothing*—can change that."

[AFTER](#)

http://www.theShorelineBlotter.com/march28_accidentsandreports

At 11:55 p.m., Norwalk police responded to a crash on Route 101, just south of the Shady Palms Motel. The driver, Nicole Warren, 17, was taken to Eastern Memorial with minor injuries. The passenger, Dara Warren, 16, who was not wearing her seat belt, was rushed by ambulance to the ICU and is, at the time of this posting, still in critical condition. We're all praying for you, Dara.

Sooo sad. Hope she pulls through!
posted by: mamabear27 at 6:04 a.m.

i live right down the road heard the crash from a half mile away!!!
posted by: qTpie27 at 8:04 a.m.

These kids think they're indestructible. Who doesn't wear a seat belt?? She has no one to blame but herself.
posted by: markhhammond at 8:05 a.m.

Have some compassion, dude! We all do stupid things.
posted by: trickmatrix at 8:07 a.m.

Some people stupider than others.
posted by: markhhammond at 8:08 a.m.

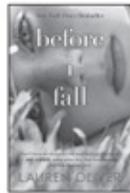
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About the Author



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LAUREN OLIVER is the author of the YA novel *Before I Fall* and the Delirium trilogy: *Delirium*, *Pandemonium*, and *Requiem*, which have been translated into more than thirty languages and are *New York Times* and international bestselling novels. She is also the author of two novels for middle-grade readers, *The Spindlers* and *Liesl & Po*, which was a 2012 E. B. White Read Aloud Award nominee. Lauren's novel *Panic* has been optioned for film by Universal Studios. A graduate of the University of Chicago and NYU's MFA program, Lauren Oliver is also the cofounder of the boutique literary development company Paper Lantern Lit. You can visit her online at www.laurenoliverbooks.com.

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