READY TO FALL

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To Stanley and Jacqueline Fleischman,
who read every draft,
and
to the kids in Writers' Guild,
my zany menagerie of kindred spirits

READY TO FALL

PROMISES

When Mommy finally comes home it's almost bedtime.

I'm sitting on the top stair wearing my green railroad pajamas. Grandma is sitting next to me, our knees close together.

Daddy opens the door and they come in.

She walks into the house first, with slow shuffling steps. Daddy holds her around the waist very, very gently, almost not touching her.

He is carrying a white plastic bag with her things in it.

The dark winter sky gasps behind them.

Daddy closes the door.

He puts down the white plastic bag.

He takes Mommy's coat from her shoulders and drapes it over the arm of the couch.

Mommy is wearing her Vassar sweatshirt that zips up the front. She is wearing yoga pants and slippers. She is also wearing a plastic hospital identification bracelet.

Daddy takes Mommy by the elbow and leads her to the rocking chair, which is waiting for her like a grandma with purple velvet arms. This is our favorite chair in the entire house because it is where we used to rock and cuddle and drink milk when we were new. I almost remember it. My head in the crook of her arm the way it is in my favorite baby picture. I am one day old. Just a furry black head. Max.

Daddy helps Mommy into the chair.

She leans back and closes her eyes and doesn't rock or move at all, which is very strange because Mommy is usually moving all the time.

Daddy lets her sit there a minute. He hangs up their coats. Then he closes the closet door, goes to the white plastic bag, opens it, and places things on the coffee table one at a time. There are pamphlets and bandages and boxes and medicine bottles and tubes of ointment. Then he comes back and kisses Mommy on the head and they both stay like that for a while, his cheek resting on the top of her head, not saying anything, just being there together.

Grandma holds my hand and hushes me so I won't interrupt them.

Don't go down yet, she says. Let them settle in first.

But I haven't seen Mommy for two days and one night

and I'm not about to stay up here. I want to tell her a joke about a boy and a dragon.

I yank my hand out of Grandma's and crash down the stairs in my pajamas feet like a green hurricane, with Grandma close behind me step by step, holding on to the banister saying, Here we come. Welcome home, honey. Oh, look at you.

I am tumbling and twirling down, stomping and slobbering like the Tasmanian Devil, growly and monster-crazy, whooping and leaping off the last three stairs all at once, so I land with a thump and slide in my pajamas feet toward Mommy, who is not rocking in the rocking chair. She opens her eyes and smiles at me. Her eyes are still as blue as they were before she left, and her smile is still filled with the same pretty white teeth. I think she is going to tell me a joke. But instead she holds out her arms.

Baby boy, she says.

It is the same voice she had before she left.

But she looks smaller than Mommy.

I stand in front of her and don't know what to do.

I want to jump in her lap and scrunch up under her chin and kiss her cheeks and put my fingers in her hair and rock like I used to when I was a very little Max-Max. But Daddy told me it might hurt to have me press, so I need to be very careful with Mommy and not hug too tight.

How about an air hug, Daddy suggests.

Yes, says Grandma. An air hug would be just right.

Mommy holds out her arms and closes her eyes and kisses the air.

I hold out my arms and close my eyes and kiss the air too.

Not good enough, I whisper.

Not good enough at all, Mommy says, laughing. Come over here. Let me take a look at you. It's okay. Come on up.

I tiptoe to the rocking chair. She smiles and nods, which is the same as permission, so I climb up on Mommy's lap and hug her really gently around the neck with both my arms.

Good job, honey, says Grandma.

Mommy kisses my nose and my chin and she tickles my back with her fingers up and down like dancing spiders and then she blows a slurpy raspberry in my neck and I growl like a monster.

I forget what Daddy said and lean in a little too far.

Mommy pulls back.

Okay, she says. Her voice is tight. Time to climb down now.

Daddy lifts me off.

There you go, champ, he says. Give Mommy some space now.

Grandma takes one of my hands.

He's been such a good boy, Grandma tells them.

Mommy's eyes go all soft and watery.

I'm so glad you were here, she says.

Oh sweetheart, says Grandma, I'm just glad I could be here for you. I wish I could do more. You know that, don't you?

I know, says Mommy. But tell me, was he really okay? Did he get upset at night?

Grandma swings my hand back and forth and then kisses my fist.

He was just fine, she says. Her voice is light and cheerful because she is pretending I was not upset so Mommy won't feel bad about leaving us.

Mommy looks doubtful, so Grandma finally admits that I cried at bedtime. But we told stories, didn't we, Max? And the stories helped calm him.

Grandma told me a story about a magic toy store, I say. You want to know what toy I picked at the magic toy store?

What did you pick? Mommy asks.

A magic jack-in-the-box that when you wind him up and wind him up, he finally pops, zoing, *out of the box, he zoings up and then he keeps on zoinging higher and higher and higher until he reaches up to the moon.*

Holy moly, says Mommy. Grandma sure is a great storyteller, isn't she?

I nod. I want to keep on telling, but Mommy looks small.

She is putting her head back in the chair and closing her eyes again.

Listen, Max, says Daddy. Why don't you go upstairs for a while and let Mommy and Daddy talk with Grandma.

I want to be with Mommy, I say.

I know, Daddy says. But we need some alone time with Grandma. You've had her all to yourself for two whole days. And now it's our turn, okay?

I don't say anything.

You know what I really want, Maxy? Mommy asks me.

Her eyes are still closed.

I really want you to draw me a special feel-better picture of something that will make me laugh. Would you do that for me? Would you go up to your room and get your sketch pad and imagine me something funny with lots of colors?

Mommy opens her eyes. Even though they are the same blue they've always been, they are full of something new. Something that hurts.

My lip is quivering like a big baby.

Hey, she says. Hey, come here.

I come over.

Mommy kisses me on the forehead.

Go on, son, says Daddy. Be a strong boy.

He looks me in the eyes.

Being strong means you're not allowed to show them you're scared.

Okay, I say.

Promise? says Daddy.

I promise.

Okay, says Daddy, I promise too.

We do pinkie swears.

Daddy rubs his eyes. I don't think he will be able to keep his promise.

Go on upstairs, says Grandma. I'll be up in a few minutes to tuck you in.

Can you tell me the magic train story again? I ask.

Anything you want, says Grandma.

So I march back up the stairs to my room like a soldier wearing boots.

I am a strong boy. I am the strongest boy in the house.

I take out my colored pencils and my sketch pad. I find orange and purple.

I draw a purple dragon with a little orange boy riding on its back.

I want to know which color is Mommy's favorite, because I will use that color for the fire coming out of the dragon's mouth. If Mommy says her favorite color is green, then the fire will be green, but if Mommy says her favorite color is blue, the fire will be blue.

I go to the top of the stairs.

Daddy and Grandma are talking.

They are talking in soft voices so I won't hear them, but I do.

I crouch behind the banister and listen.

I hear lots of words I don't know like prognosis *and* recuperate.

Give it to me straight, says Grandma.

Daddy tells it straight. His voice is flat like the kind of line you make with a ruler that stretches all the way across the page without any lumps.

Okay, says Daddy. After the first five years she has an eighty-one percent chance of survival. Then after that, the odds go up to something like ninety. That's pretty good odds. Plus the surgeon said the tumor was contained. It had not spread to the lymph nodes and they think they got the whole thing. So we have reason to be optimistic.

Mommy is crying.

It is not a quiet, hiccupping, sniffling cry like I make when I don't want anyone to hear me. This is a cry that comes from Mommy's heart, which used to be covered with breasts that fed me milk, but is now only covered by stitches and gauze and bandages, which are all thinner than breasts, which is why I can hear the cry coming so loud from beneath her Vassar sweatshirt, breaking out of her chest

like a huge bird and rising into the house, its great wings casting shadows on each of us.

Oh, honey, says Grandma.

Grandma and Daddy go over to her. They put their hands around her shoulders and lean in their heads. They hold her while she cries.

I want to run down there so they can hold me too, but I pinkie-swear promised I'd be strong, so instead of running into their arms, I scramble as fast as I can from the banister back into my room, slipping and sliding down the hallway on my pajamas feet with my mouth pinched tight so nothing comes out. I jump into my bed and scrunch myself up in the corner and put my blanket over my head like a tent and cry into my hands under the blankets, holding on to my sobs so no one can hear, keeping all the howls inside my mouth with my fingers, all alone in my room until Grandma comes up the stairs and finds me.

Max. Max. Oh sweetheart.

Grandma takes the blanket off my head and takes my hands away from my mouth and gathers me into her arms so I can press my face against her shoulder, and she rubs my back and holds me and whispers into my hair that it's okay, it's okay, and she rocks me and rocks me and rocks me until my head droops against her shoulder and she holds me and kisses me and lowers me down onto the pillow that feels like a cloud.

I wonder if in heaven the angels sleep on pillows made of clouds. I hope so. I hope they have someone nice to tuck them in. I wonder if God has warm lips like Grandma. I hope he sits on the edges of their beds when they are too scared to go to sleep. And then when they have finally stopped crying, I hope he closes the door slow and quiet so the light in the hallway makes a triangle across the pillow and they can curl up in the light and pray that everything is going to be all right.

FUNERAL ON RYE WITH MUSTARD

THE BELL RINGS AND I OPEN THE DOOR. WOULD YOU look at that? It's Great-Tanta Sarah. She's flown in from Florida, rented a car, and picked Grandma up from Green Meadows Assisted Living Facility. They are both dressed to the nines. Great-Tanta Sarah is going all Old-World on us. She's wearing a black woolen dress even though it's the middle of August, she has a black lace doily on her head, and she's carrying a leaning tower of deli platters from Barry's down the street because let's face it, nothing in this godforsaken world tastes better with grief than a little corned beef on rye. Except maybe some chopped liver and a pickle on the side. Great-Tanta Sarah stretches up to kiss my unshaven cheek and bustles past me into the house. She wants to make herself busy. Grandma reaches for my

hands just like she used to when I was little. She swings them back and forth with gnarled fingers.

"Look at you," she whispers with tears in her eyes.

She hugs me as hard as she can, but it feels like being hugged by a sparrow.

"It's the wrong order of things," she rasps into my shoulder. "Last year I buried Marty. And now I'm going to bury my Anna."

The top of her head smells like salt.

"They don't prepare you for this. No one prepares you."

"I know," I say.

But who am I kidding? I don't know a goddamned thing.

When the cancer came back, it was in her brain.

After ten years of remission, no one could have guessed it would come to this.

In the last few weeks, her left eye bulged out so far she would joke, *The better to see you with, my dear.* Which was almost funny. What was funnier was the fact that she referred to the tumor behind her eye as *he*, and occasionally gave us blow-by-blow reports of what he was doing. *He's watching football. He's scratching his armpits. He's sitting on the couch with a bottle of beer and a half-finished cigarette.* He was a lousy tenant. But what can you do? *Inoperable* means you better say goodbye. And we did.

In the limousine on our way to the synagogue, I lean my forehead against the glass and watch the sunlight stream through the trees.

Dad grabs my hand. "Be strong for me, okay, Max?"

"Yeah," I say. "Okay."

"What's going to happen to him when I'm gone?" Mom asked toward the end. She was so far gone already, at first we weren't sure if she was talking about me or the tumor. *Who's going to take him in, with his smelly feet and his hairy armpits and all his rottweilers? Who's going to give him a place to stay?* I told her not to worry. We would make sure someone took care of him, and she quieted and sighed, her left eye bulging like a horrible secret.

In the synagogue lobby, Rabbi Birnbaum, who looks like a fish, makes an announcement in his practiced, baleful voice. "As you requested, Mr. Friedman, before the service begins, we'll open the casket in the sanctuary for a short viewing so close family can say goodbye. I'll take you and Max in first to have a private moment with Anna, and when you're ready, the others can join you. Then we'll close the casket, you all will be seated, the rest of the mourners will enter, and the service will begin. Okay?"

"Okay," Dad mutters, brushing the wrinkles from his slacks. "Thank you, Rabbi. Let's go, Max."

But I can't move.

"Come on," says Dad.

"Just a minute," I say.

Last night I stayed awake until three in the morning googling embalmment photos. Black-and-white ones from the turn of the century when they used to pose the dead with their loved ones before burial. One corpse was sitting propped up in a chair with her eyes open, a pale arm around the shoulders of a freaked-out little boy in a black suit. Another was lying in his bed in a cowboy hat, holding a rifle in one hand and a rabbit skin in the other, his head cocked, his mouth half open, smiling like a puppet. But Jews don't believe in embalming corpses. We leave the body pretty much as it was when it died. That means no embalming fluid. No makeup. No wig. Nothing to fool us into thinking they are going to wake up.

One thing on this earth I know for absolute certain is that I do not want to see my mother in that coffin.

I do not want to know what twenty-four hours in a funeral home has done to her face.

The rabbi opens the door to the sanctuary.

There is the casket that Mom picked out. Plain wood. Nothing special. How could she fit into something so small and still? She never sat in one place, and she was always throwing back her head and laughing so hard that you couldn't help but laugh along with her, even when it felt like

your life was cracking down the middle. You might think that a person who is dying would stop laughing, but this was not the case with Mom. She laughed right through to the end. Well, not the very end. In the very end, when she was mostly trying to breathe, no one was laughing. Not even her. That last day we sat around her bed and held her hands and stayed quiet so she could concentrate on leaving us. But the day before that, she tried to laugh as much as possible. Dad said she was doing it for us. To help us through. But I think she was doing it a little bit for herself too.

"Tell me a joke, Max," she had said.

And I did. Even though I felt like I was dying too.

The rabbi opens the lid.

She's in there.

From where I'm standing I can see the tip of her nose.

The world spins.

"It's time to say goodbye," says Dad.

He leads me to the casket and we look inside.

"Oh God," says Dad, holding his heart. "Oh my God. Look at her."

I look. My knees buckle. Dad puts his arm around me.

How can this be?

Lying in her bed at home, she was Mom. She was Mom

when she took her last breath. She was Mom when the men came with the stretcher to take her away. But now she's something else entirely. A wax sculpture. A mannequin. All the raucous, snorting, swearing, moving, bigger-than-life attitude snuffed out like a candle.

I put my hands on the edge of her coffin and I look and look.

Her face is white and fallen, but the tumor is still there, bulging behind her eyelid. If Jews believed in embalmment, they would have sucked him out with a straw, vacuumed him from her cranium along with her brain, or maybe they would have sliced him out with a scalpel and thrown him away. But they left him just as he was the moment she died, and here he is now, reaching out to me, the last piece of my mother left on this earth. Her favorite tumor. Starving. Licking his lips as I lean forward.

Who is going to take him in?

Now the rabbi leads the rest of our family into the sanctuary to pay their last respects before the service begins. They cry when they see us standing alone by her casket, two lost men with our hands in our pockets.

They gather around us and tell us how sorry they are, how she was so beautiful, so funny—and we say *Yes she was* and *Thank you* because that's what grown men say when they're strong like Dad wants me to be. They don't say *I wish it was my face in that coffin*. They don't goad my

mother's favorite tumor the way I am doing, silently in my mind. *Please. Take me next. My brain is delicious. You can eat it with mustard.* Because this would be a heinous thing to think before your own mother's funeral when you're supposed to be thinking about her. *Psst. Hey there. I promised I would take care of you. You want somewhere to live for a while? My brain is ripe. It will fill your belly. Come eat. And when you're done, bury me next to her so I don't have to be alone.*

The rabbi announces it's time to close the lid and we will open the doors for the service to begin unless anyone wants to say one last goodbye. Dad raises his hand like a schoolboy. He approaches the casket. His back is straight. He stands there looking at her. Then he leans over and kisses her on the lips one last time, a man and his bride.

The family is silent, waiting.

This isn't a fairy tale. She doesn't wake up.

Instead, the prince falls across her body, puts his head on her chest and weeps.

His yarmulke falls to the floor.

The bride is still dead when Great-Tanta Sarah finally comes and pulls my dad away from the casket. She's still dead when the rabbi, who continues to look like a fish, closes the lid, a grim finality. She's still dead when Dad slumps into the pew next to me. The doors to the sanctuary open

and all the other mourners start filing in. Congregants. Neighbors. Friends. The hospice nurse. People from Dad's caregiver support group. People from Mom's yoga class. They all look at me with sorry faces. They think I'm strong, just like Dad wants me to be. They have no idea that when they weren't looking, my mother's favorite tumor entered my brain like a thief.

I do not cry during the entire service. I do not cry during the Mourner's Kaddish, the prayer that falls around us like rain. I do not cry during the eulogies or the sermon. And later, at the cemetery, where the sun slants between the stones like the golden wings of an angel, I do not cry when they lower the casket into the grave. One by one, we shovel dirt over her blind, expressionless face. I don't tell anyone that with every thump of dirt, I am imagining my own face in that coffin. I am imagining my own empty eyes, my own skin pale as wax.

Shhh, says the tumor as he coils his tendrils into my cerebral cortex. *Don't tell a soul.*

WELCOME TO THE HOTEL GLIOBLASTOMA

THE WEEK OF SHIVA GOES BY LIKE A SHADOW. I pretend to be strong so no one has any idea how far I've come unhinged. When they ask me how I'm holding up, I say, "I'm doing okay," because that's what they expect me to say. *I'm doing okay* is a much better response than *My mother's favorite tumor is letting his rottweilers use my cerebral cortex as a fire hydrant*, because this would prove what I have begun to suspect lately, which is that I've completely lost my grip on reality. Besides, no one likes a lunatic when they are trying to mourn. Especially at the end of August, when the roses are too hot to hold up their heads.

August turns to September. Labor Day comes and goes. It's time for Dad to go back to the frame shop and for me to start my sophomore year of high school. Dad says it's time

for us to begin functioning like regular human beings again. Notice the erroneous simile. *Like* regular human beings. I'm pretty certain that "*regular*" is not a word you could use for me anymore.

The first week of school, I sleepwalk through my classes. Instead of doing homework, I spend my evenings imagining what the tumor looks like winding himself into my cerebral cortex with his long red tendrils. I draw pictures of him leering at me. In many parts of the world, brains are a delicacy. Cow brains, anyway. Human brains, not so much. But the tumor is a culinary risk-taker. He sautés mine with shallots and white wine and feasts upon it with a napkin tucked under his chin.

One week passes into the next. I settle in to school. Dad has a few jobs. He photographs a bar mitzvah. A wedding. A family reunion. At the shop he develops a few prints and sells a few frames. It's not fine art, but it pays the bills. The green leaves on the maple tree outside my bedroom window blush at the tips. Every morning, Dad urges me awake, kisses me on the forehead, a heartbreaking and tender gesture, even though I pretend I hate to be kissed. Later, he hands me a bagel and pushes me out the door. *I'll be home when you get home, okay?* And I say *Okay*, because that's what you say when the guy who loves you is doing his best. I grab my sketchbook and my skateboard, and I set off down

the road to the high school, a tall black figure dissolving into the distance.

At school I slump in my chair with my sketchbook, my black hood pulled over my face, lanky legs crossed at the ankles, and red Converse All Star sneakers tapping against each other. I sketch corpses. Some with their eyes open. Some with their eyes closed. I imagine Dad closing my eyes after I die. That's why I can't answer when Mr. Mancini, who doesn't tolerate slackers, stands by my shoulder and barks, "Which branch of government is responsible for making laws? Legislative or executive?" The whole class gets quiet. They're wondering if Mr. Mancini will push me to speak today, or yell at me for not paying attention, or just give up, as most of my teachers are doing these days, just give up and move on to the next kid, leaving me at my desk to fester silently.

Shhh, says the tumor, twirling his impossible fingers through the cracks in my brain. *Don't tell a soul.*

The end of September brings the cinnamon of leaves beginning to crisp. Mom always loved it when the heat broke and the cool sun started shining through the branches. There's a picture that Dad took when I was a baby. She is holding me up to see the leaves. I am reaching with my

hands, wide-eyed and smiling as though the leaves were jewels, and she is laughing, her long hair falling behind her. Now I'm sitting in the guidance office with my father, but no one is laughing. Dad takes out the letter the school sent about my grades and unfolds it on Ms. Cunningham's desk so we all can see my brilliance.

Honors English—C
Trigonometry—F
Honors French—D
American History—C
Honors Biology—D

"I know it looks alarming," says Ms. Cunningham, "but it makes sense that his grades are suffering after what he's been through. Mr. Friedman, the teachers know it's been a hard time for you and Max."

"He's failing Trigonometry," says Dad. "His highest mark is a C."

"I think we should be asking Max about it," says Ms. Cunningham. "He's the only one who can tell us what's really going on in his head. Max? What do you think of all this? Can you help us understand what's been happening?"

"Nope," I say without looking at either of them.

"Don't be rude, Max," says Dad.

"I'm not being rude," I mutter to the floor. "She asked if I can help you understand what's going on. I said nope."

Nope. Nopity. Nope.

Ms. Cunningham leans forward and tries to make eye contact with me. "Max," she says, "your dad and I are trying to figure out what we should do next, but it's hard if you won't talk with us."

"I'm not much of a talker," I say.

The tumor applauds. He appreciates sarcasm.

"Well, I think it makes sense that you aren't available for academics right now," says Ms. Cunningham. "You're grieving. That's why you're struggling to get your work done. This is a really tough time for you, isn't it?"

"Yes," I say.

"See?" She smiles sadly at my father.

"But a kid doesn't go from getting straight As freshman year to getting Cs, Ds, and Fs sophomore year if there isn't something very, very wrong going on."

"Something very wrong *is* going on," says Ms. Cunningham gently. "His mother died over the summer."

"We can't just let him fall apart," says Dad.

"No one's going to let him fall apart," says Ms. Cunningham. "That's why we sent the letter. It's clear that we need to take some action to help Max get back on track."

"Yes," says Dad emphatically, "now you're talking. Action. Thank you."

"Mr. Friedman, is Max having any therapy to help him work through his loss?"

"Well, no, not exactly," says Dad. "But we're in a family bereavement support group. It gives us a chance to talk about our experience with other folks who understand. That's sort of like therapy."

"Does Max share what's on his mind during these sessions?"

Dad looks at me. "He's always been quiet when it comes to emotional stuff. I'm like that too. But his mother—she could talk to anyone about anything. People loved that about her. And she could listen too. Listening is a gift, you know."

"I know," says Ms. Cunningham. "And I can imagine that must make the loss even more difficult. Was Max close to his mom?"

"Yes," says Dad. "They were very close."

I take my sketchbook out of my backpack and start drawing a tumor with vampire fangs and a cape. I draw quickly, shading in lines.

Dad and Ms. Cunningham watch me.

"So here's what we'll do," says Ms. Cunningham. "I'm going to suggest that Max meet with me twice a week for a while so I can help support him through this. I think talking about how he's feeling would help him. What do you think, Max? Would you like to do some counseling with me?"

No, I would definitely not like that at all.

I shrug.

"So it's a plan," says Ms. Cunningham.

"And what about his teachers?" asks Dad.

"What do you mean?" asks Ms. Cunningham.

"I mean, what about telling his teachers that it's okay to start pushing him a little bit? His mother wouldn't have wanted him to fail."

"Well," says Ms. Cunningham, "until we start our sessions together, I won't know how much we should push him. Max is fragile right now, Mr. Friedman."

"Please," says Dad. His eyes are wide and desperate. "Please, Ms. Cunningham," he says again, this time much more quietly. "I don't want his teachers to give up on him."

"No one's giving up on Max," says Ms. Cunningham. "Believe me. Things are going to start getting better around here. Just you wait."

THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS: AND OTHER UNFORTUNATE PLATITUDES

BUT THEY DON'T GET BETTER.

All I can think about is the tumor.

He is the only part of Mom I have left.

At school I sketch ghosts rising from graves.

At home, Dad and I try to make our way together, two men in an empty house, trying to exist in a new, astonished silence. After the ladies from the synagogue stop coming over with noodle kugels and chicken soup, we lapse into bachelorhood. At first, Dad cooks dinner like he's been doing since Mom got sick the second time, but soon we're just heating up frozen pizzas and eating Chef Boyardee ravioli from the can. After dinner, Dad lies down on the couch, exhausted. I go upstairs to draw corpses: wormy-eyed

wraiths, shadow lords, dark specters both with and without wings.

I eat my pathetic lunch in Ms. Cunningham's office twice a week so she can help me "get in touch with the grief," a plan that pisses me off, not because I'm missing out on some spectacular social experience in the cafeteria (I've always been pretty much a loner, sitting with my sketchbook drawing while my classmates either ignore me or look on, bemused), but because let's face it, there's no way I'll ever tell Ms. Cunningham what's actually going on inside my defective but delectable brain. She thinks talking about my emotions will eventually help me be more *available* for academics. But most of the time I don't talk at all. I look out the window and watch the blazing orange leaves wave in the wind.

In class, I put my head down on my desk or stare off into space or draw on my wrists in black ink.

Sometimes my teachers surreptitiously push an extra classroom copy of the textbook and a few pieces of white lined paper onto my desk so I will not look so obvious in my apathy.

"Max," says Ms. Cunningham, "I'm wondering if it might be time to start trying to work at school again. We know you're sad. Believe me. It makes a lot of sense that you're sad. Anyone would be. But I've met with your teachers, and I've talked to your dad about it, and we all think it's time

for you to try getting back to your normal routine here at school."

I don't say anything. I'm thinking about the tumor.

Mom's cancer started out in her breasts and ended up in her brain.

"Just too beautiful and too brilliant for this earth," she told us toward the end, all teeth and eyes when she smiled. "God's taking back all my best parts."

I know she meant to make us laugh, but it's hard to laugh when you're trying so hard not to cry that you have to bite your lips. Dad kissed the top of her head and said, "Anna, you are just too much perfection in one human being," and then he took a photograph of her, which was, if you ask me, the perfect response.

Ms. Cunningham leans over and looks right in my eyes to make sure I'm paying attention to her.

"So, Max. We all think it's important that you start bringing your materials to class, even if you're feeling sad. And that you start paying attention to what your teachers and your classmates are saying. Even if it's overwhelming at first. And when you and I talk together, it's important that you listen to me, and when the teacher assigns homework, it's important that you do it, Max, because the school year goes by so fast, and once you're behind, it's

hard to catch up. I don't want to pressure you, but next year you're going to start looking at colleges, and we really don't want failing grades on your report card, especially someone like you, with so much talent and so much promise. We want to send you into your junior year with a good, strong, clean academic record. Okay?"

"Yeah," I say. "Okay."

But it's not okay. It's really not.

Because the tumor is watching NFL with the sound turned all the way up and I have always hated football. Every time his team scores, he jumps up and down on the couch and the rottweilers go wild.

Not surprisingly, I don't bring my stuff the next day or the next day, or the next day either.

US History. Mr. Mancini has been lecturing about the Magna Carta and *Rights of Man* and, true to form, I don't have my spiral notebook or my textbook *United We Stand*, the one with the waving flag and the bald eagle on the front, or the rough draft of my assigned reflection on John Locke's philosophy of natural rights, and instead of turning to talk with my partner about life, liberty, and property, I'm drawing scenes from the zombie apocalypse in my sketchbook and trying not to think about tumors.

And because more than two months have gone by since

the funeral, and because Ms. Cunningham has made a *plan* (scrunch invisible finger quotes around the word *plan*) with my dad and my teachers about consequences for continued bad behavior, Mr. Mancini does not shrug his shoulders and leave me alone like he's been doing. Instead, he gets in my face like he wants to fight.

"Excuse me," says Mr. Mancini. "Where are your materials?"

"In my locker," I say.

Students watch. Only an idiot would mess with Mr. Mancini.

"And why, Mr. Friedman, did you think it was a good idea to attend my class without the materials you need in order to participate?"

I shrug.

"A few minutes ago, I asked you to talk with your table partner about the meaning of John Locke's philosophy of natural rights. Why are you not doing that?"

I shrug.

"We read about John Locke and reflected upon his philosophy for homework. Do you have your homework with you?"

"No," I say.

"Is that in your locker too?"

"No," I say. "I didn't do my homework."

Kids around me shift in their seats.

"And why didn't you do your homework?"

I shrug.

"I expect you to do the homework I assign, Mr. Friedman. Do you understand?"

I shrug.

"I asked you a question. Do. You. Understand. Answer me with words, please."

"Yes, sir," I say. "I understand."

"Good," says Mr. Mancini. "From now on, I expect you to behave as a full member of this community. That means you read what we read, you write what we write, and you discuss what we discuss. Do you think you are capable of that?"

"No," I tell him.

"Excuse me?" asks Mr. Mancini.

I clear my throat and stand up beside my seat so he will hear me loud and clear.

"I said no, sir. I do not think I am capable of that."

"Then get out," says Mr. Mancini.

There is a beat.

"You want me to go?" I ask.

"Yes," says Mr. Mancini. "Get out of my classroom. Now."

All eyes are on me.

"Where do you want me to go, sir?"

"I don't know," says Mr. Mancini. "But if you're going to

be in my class, I expect you to participate. Otherwise, I want you out of here. Go. Now."

"Okay," I say.

"Don't come back until you're ready to be part of the class."

"Okay," I say through my teeth. "I'm leaving."

I grab my things. I pull my hood low over my eyes and walk out the door.

BROWN-RICE SUSHI

ACCORDING TO OUR FRIEND LYDIE GROSSMAN, GLUTEN is an addictive drug sold cheaply by mass-market food stores to keep the consumer bloated and thus less likely to rebel against the tyrannical culinary monopolies plaguing our society. Along the same lines, white rice has only a tenth of the varied nutrients contained in God's own ultra-wholesome, whole-grain hippie-dippy wild rice, which, by the way, is better for digestion and neuroplasticity. Grains are our friends. You know that, don't you? Besides wild rice, there are other delicious, albeit gassy substitutes, including grains with names that sound like they belong to Iranian rock stars: Freekeh, Kasha, and Quinoa.

Organic vegetables are better than regular vegetables because no one needs the carcinogens they put in those

pesticides. Only eat free-range chickens and grass-fed beef. Only eat mercury-free fish and free-trade chocolate. Make your own juice. Whenever possible, add flaxseed or lemongrass. It is better to spend two hundred dollars at Whole Foods than fifty dollars at a regular supermarket, that horrible hegemony of classist dogma.

"Ugh," says Lydie, "I can't believe you're still buying groceries at Stop and Shop."

She says the words *Stop and Shop* as though it were a well-known den of iniquity, and then she wrinkles her nose and makes a worried face.

We met Lydie and her pint-size blond daughters at the Caregiver Family Support Group that was held in the basement of the local JCC every Tuesday and Thursday, but now we know her from the Bereavement Family Support Group, which is down the hall on Wednesdays and Fridays. They don't put the caregiver-support people on the same day as the bereavement-support people because they don't want the caregivers to lose hope or the bereavement people to feel jealous.

Sometimes, after group, Lydie takes us all out for lemongrass-and-ginseng smoothies. Dad and I pretend to like them, but mostly we are just thankful for the company.

Tonight we're home making vegetarian sushi with brown rice because Lydie wants to show us how to make an organic, nontoxic meal with a very small carbon footprint, a plan

that makes me think of tiptoeing dinosaurs. She has everything set up on the kitchen counter in bowls. There's a stack of dried seaweed. Then there's a bowl of brown rice, and a plate with radishes, spinach, ginger, and carrots, all cut into slivers. Finally, there are scrambled eggs from her backyard, free-range, feminist yoga hens, Gertrude, Camille, and Gloria.

We join her at the counter, making five of us. First there's Luna and Soleil, Lydie's New Age, freaky, feral, four-year-old, late-in-life twin daughters. There's me and my dad. And then there's Lydie, smelling of patchouli and peppermint with her long gray hair down her back in a braid.

Lydie gives us each a square mat made of thin strips of bamboo. She shows us how to put the square of seaweed on the mat, how to scoop on the brown rice so it only covers half the seaweed, how to pat down the rice with a wooden spoon so it makes a thin layer across the bottom, how to place the vegetables in a pyramid on top of the rice, and when that's finished, how to lay down the pièce de résistance, the eggs, courtesy of the fussy triumvirate of feminist yoga hens, fried to perfection. We roll up the seaweed and rice and veggies and eggs with the bamboo mats, squeeze them so they stick, and then chop them into pieces with a wetted knife. Luna and Soleil are masters at sushi making. They work quietly with their little fingers and their little knives.

“All done,” says Lydie. “These look good. Don’t you love the color of the carrot and the spinach against the eggs? It’s just beautiful.”

“Bee-you-tee-full,” sings Luna.

“Beautiful,” my dad agrees.

“Not as beautiful as steak tips,” I say.

Soleil jumps up and down and pants like a hungry dog.

Dad elbows me. “Try it,” he says.

We bring an assortment of plates to the table along with a bottle of soy sauce, five tiny dipping bowls, and five pairs of chopsticks. Luna and Soleil climb into their chairs. I sit down. Dad pushes in Lydie’s chair for her. Then he sits down as well.

We all look at one another.

No one knows what to say.

Dad clears his throat. “Eat up,” he says.

Lydie pours some soy sauce into her dipping bowl, picks up a piece of sushi with her chopsticks, dips it into the soy sauce, and takes a bite.

“Mmm,” she says, chewing, eyes closed. “This is fabulous. You must try this, girls. Max. Joe. Come on. It’s good.”

“Namaste,” says Luna, closing her eyes and pressing her palms together like a small blond monk.

Soleil meows.

They dig in.

Luna uses her chopsticks perfectly.

Soleil puts her head down and laps at the sushi like a cat.

Dad picks up a piece with his fingertips, plunges it into the soy sauce, wiggles it around until it's drenched, and then chews and smiles so Lydie will think he likes it. "Wow," says Dad, still chewing. "That's really something."

"You like it?" asks Lydie.

"I do," says Dad. "Very flavorful."

"Now you try it," Lydie says to me.

"I'm not hungry," I tell her.

"What did they serve you for lunch today?" she asks me.

"Pizza."

"It's all the gluten they're giving kids at the public schools," Lydie tells Dad. "Keeps them bloated and docile. Max, you really need this. It'll clean you right out."

I look down at my brown-rice sushi and imagine myself sitting on the toilet excreting it.

"Just try it," says Dad.

I take a piece of sushi from my plate with my chopsticks, dip it in the soy sauce, shove it in my mouth, and chew. It's not so bad, actually. It's crisp. Fresh. Kind of nutty. I love the eggs from the free-range, feminist yoga hens. I love the crunch of the carrots and the texture of the rice. I am about to swallow and tell Lydie all this when something catches my eye. The pattern on my plate, the plate my mother used to love best. There is a strange blue geometric pattern all

along the rim. And then inside, a scene. A bridge over a river. A pagoda on a mountain. A path. A tiny woman holding a walking stick. I cough and spit my sushi into the napkin.

Soleil giggles and spits her sushi into her napkin too.

I run to the sink and dump the sushi into the garbage disposal. I flick the switch. The kitchen is filled with a sound like grinding bones.

"Oh, come on," says Dad.

"That's okay," says Lydie. "He doesn't have to like it."

I rinse the plate and look at the little woman. I remember when my mom found this plate in an antique shop. She loved Blue Willow china. All the tiny details. The willow tree, the path, the waterfall, the pagoda. She always wanted to travel, but she never got the chance. I imagine her walking down a path in China with a stick in her hand. A little blue mother.

"It's not just this," says my dad quietly to Lydie. "He doesn't like anything these days. He's been having a terrible time at school."

"I know what you mean," says Lydie. "Soleil is having a really rough time in preschool too. She used to sleep on her own during nap time, but her teacher tells me she suddenly needs to hold on to Luna in order to fall asleep. She climbs onto Luna's mat, grabs her around the waist, and refuses to let go."

When I was little and Dad worked late at the frame shop, Mom would lie down with me to help me fall asleep. She smelled like lemons and honey. I gaze into the plate. All the blue patterns. There's the tiny blue woman on the path. Walking past the mountains. Way down there. So tiny I almost can't see her. I turn on the hot water, drip a few drops of lemon soap, and fill the sink with bubbles. I squint my eyes and trace the willow path with one soapy finger.

"I'm so worried about him," says Dad. "The school's been trying to help, but it just seems like he's getting lost."

I keep my back turned and busy myself with following the path. There are thousands of tiny details. *Hello, all you tiny blue details.*

"Have you thought about transferring him to a smaller school?" asks Lydie.

"The school year's already started," says Dad. "What school's going to accept a sophomore at the end of October?"

"You should check out the Baldwin School," says Lydie. "I work in the office. Some families moved away this fall and they're looking to fill those spots. The teachers are amazing, Joe. Max would love it."

"I've heard good things about it," says Dad.

"It's a pretty special place," says Lydie. "It's very progressive. They value creativity and self-expression. It's primarily a boarding school, but there are day students as

well. It's great for artistic kids like Max who are just a little offbeat."

"Max isn't offbeat," says Dad.

I stalk back to the table with my clean plate clutched to my chest like a baby and my hood over my eyes. I place my plate on the table, drop my forehead down onto the cool, smooth surface, and rock my head back and forth because sometimes even a rotting frontal lobe needs some loving. I take deep breaths in and out, rocking the tumor to sleep on this plate that my mother once loved.

"Okay," admits my dad. "Maybe he is a little offbeat."

I rub my cheek against the plate, close my eyes, and sigh. At night I used to curl up with my face resting against Mom's soft hands.

"I'll bet it costs an arm and a leg," says my dad.

"They have financial aid," says Lydie.

"Still," says my dad. "We don't have extra money lying around."

"Maybe someone in your family can help you," says Lydie.

"Maybe," says my dad. "Everyone's been through so much. I just don't know how I'd ask for something like that."

"Yeah," says Lydie. "I get it."

I rest my head against the blue plate and breathe.

Soleil gets out of her chair and moves wordlessly to my side. She takes off my hood, puts her hands in my hair, and

starts petting me. She leans her warm little head against my head. Soleil smells like lemons and honey. It is the warm smell of my mother's healthy skin. I put my arms around her and she leans into me. It feels good for just a moment. Just one blessed moment. I close my eyes and hold my breath because if I breathe right now I am going to lose it completely. I am frozen in this moment with honey-lemon skin that smells like my mother and hands on my head and my horrible secret twitching inside my brain like a frenzied bat looking for a window.