

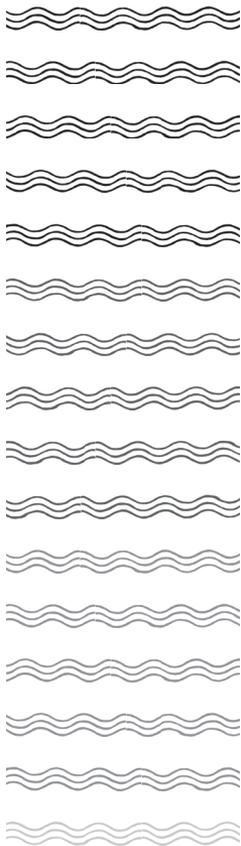
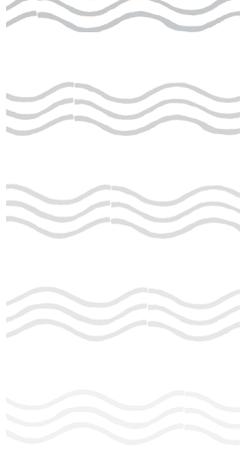
ONE HEART. INFINITE POSSIBILITIES.



EVERY-
THING
I
THOUGHT
I
KNEW

SHANNON TAKAOKA

**EVERYTHING I
THOUGHT I KNEW**



**EVERYTHING
I THOUGHT
I KNEW**

**Shannon
Takaoka**



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are either products of the author's
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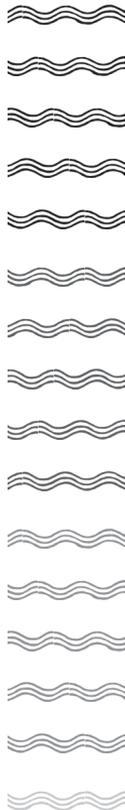
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**For Emi, Evan, and Scott,
who always believed in me**



≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡ BROKEN ≡≡≡≡≡≡≡≡

Here's one of the many things I thought I knew that turns out to be wrong: you need to fall in love to end up with a broken heart.

That's not how it was for me. At least not at first.

Sometimes things—glass, eggs, hearts—just break, and there's no way to put them back to their exact, original form. You can't stir the cream out of your coffee. A broken plate, even if you glue it, will always have cracks. This is just basic physics, or, more specifically, the second law of thermodynamics. Not to nerd out on you too much.

But I'm already getting ahead of myself, which I tend to do, because my brain never seems to want to slow down and just *be still*. There's too much going on in there, especially now. So let's rewind a bit and begin with the moment the

universe decided to start messing with all my assumptions and well-laid plans, big-time.

October 14 at 3:45 p.m.

It's the fall of my senior year.

I'm running.

"Damn, it's hot," I say to Emma as we round the curve at the far side of our high school's track. The lane lines vibrate ahead of me in the heat. Halloween is a few weeks away, and it must be more than eighty degrees, at least.

Emma, her auburn ponytail smooth and perfect, looks like she's barely broken a sweat. "Is it?" she asks. "Feels pretty good to me." A warm spell, typical for the San Francisco Bay Area in the fall, has brought us beach weather in the middle of a month packed with college application submissions, after-school practices, and, as always, piles of homework. The result: we won't, in fact, be hanging at the beach. Cross-country is basically the only time I get to breathe outdoor air.

We're doing intervals today, and Emma's pace seems faster than usual. As soon as we are side by side, she pulls ahead. I have to push myself to catch her. I push, she pulls. She pulls, I push. This is starting to annoy me, even though it's what Emma and I always do when we practice together—we compete.

She pulls ahead again. I try to focus on increasing my pace.

Focus, Chloe, focus.

But all I can think about is water.

I didn't drink enough before practice.

I didn't drink *any* water, actually. I got held up leaving seventh period because I needed to talk to Ms. Breece about my paper proposal for AP Physics and had barely enough time to pull on my running shoes. My proposal is going to be late, which Ms. Breece made sure to note is "unlike you, Chloe," which is true, I guess, but it got me thinking about what really, honestly *is* "like me," because sometimes, or maybe even *all the time*, I'm stumped on that one. Which got me stressing again about my college application essays and whether they are mind-numbingly boring, and, by extension, if *I* am mind-numbingly boring. Which resulted in me forgetting to fill up my water bottle. This is starting to seem like kind of a big mistake, now that my mouth has gone dry and I'm dizzy and feeling like I might be about to throw up all over my shoes.

I turn to Emma. Her mouth is moving, but I only hear her last few words.

"... don't you think?" she asks. "Chloe?" Cross-country is when we catch up on anything we didn't get to talk about at lunch. The pop quiz we weren't expecting in Calc. Weekend plans. Emma's ongoing analysis of her five-minute conversation with Liam Morales about *Catch-22*—*Was it an excuse to talk to her? Or did he just need some quick info from someone who actually read the book?*—a topic that, for my own reasons, I really don't want to analyze anyway. But I must

have zoned out for a few seconds, or minutes, because I have no idea what she just said.

“Think about what?” I barely have enough breath to get out the words, so I slow to a light jog as Emma pulls ahead of me for the third—or is it fourth?—time. Instead of pushing, I just stop. My heart is thumping hard.

Thump thumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthump. It’s all I can hear. *Thumpthumpthumpthumpthump.*

Emma turns around. “Chloe?”

The lane lines ahead of me look wrong. They’re not just vibrating, they’re rippling. Like those wave graphs in my physics textbook. The whole field around us is rippling. *Are we having an earthquake?* I look toward Emma, also rippling, who has now stopped running too and is staring at me, eyes wide.

“Chloe, are you okay?”

My chest feels like it’s being crushed. My ears are on fire. Sweat is running down my face and my back, soaking my shirt.

Not okay, I think.

Definitely not okay. But I can’t say the words.

And then the world that’s spinning, spinning, spinning like a top gets tipped over, me with it. The last thing I see is the brilliant blue of the October sky overhead.

When I open my eyes, my mom is there, and I can tell immediately that she’s been crying. Her face is puffy and red. Next

to her, my dad is pale, like someone drained the blood out of him.

“Mom?”

“Hi, sweetie.” She grabs my hand.

Machines whir all around me. A tube is fitted under my nose. Oxygen, I’m assuming. Electrodes are attached to my chest under a thin fabric gown and there’s an IV in my right arm. I’m in a hospital, obviously. But not dead. So that’s encouraging, at least.

“Mom, what happened?” I whisper. My chest hurts. I still feel like I don’t have enough air in my lungs, and it’s hard for me to talk. She and my dad look at each other in that way they do sometimes when I ask a question they don’t really want to answer. Like when I was five and asked them if they were going to die someday too after we held a backyard funeral for my recently departed hamster, Nugget.

I can tell my mom is holding back tears as she struggles to keep a neutral face. She clutches my hand with both of hers.

“It’s your heart, Chloe. There’s something wrong with your heart.”

My heart?

How can there be something wrong with my heart? Heart problems are for big-bellied old men. For people who eat greasy cheeseburgers and fries all the time and never exercise. For people who smoke. Not for just-turned-seventeen-year-old girls. Not for vegetarians who run five miles almost every day after school. Not for people like me.

I turn from my mom to my dad. Dad's the science teacher of the family; maybe he's the one who should cover this. But he's still as silent as the grave, which is highly unusual for him. And alarming to me.

"Dr. Ahmadi says it's a defect," my mom explains. "One that we didn't know about until now. He will be here shortly to go over everything with us."

"Who's Dr. Ahmadi?" I ask.

Nothing that's happening right now is making any sense. *Why didn't they call Dr. Curtis?* I wonder. She knows me. I know her. She's been my doctor since I was a baby.

"Dr. Ahmadi is a cardiac surgeon," my mom says. "He's a specialist."

The word *surgeon* gets my attention.

Surgery seems serious. *Heart* surgery, extremely serious. But it can't be anything that bad. I was *fine* when I left the house this morning. Wasn't I? Plus, I don't have time for any surgery. Not now. Not in the next-to-last semester of my senior year. Not with midterms coming up in a few weeks and college applications due. I try to take a deep breath to calm myself down, but I just end up inhaling a horrible plastic-y smell from the oxygen tube and it freaks me out even more. Why are they giving me oxygen?

"Do I need surgery?" I ask, my chest already tightening up in anticipation of the answer.

My mom and dad look at each other again, and I really want to shake them this time, because I know they know

I hate it when they treat me like a baby who can't handle uncomfortable information. If there's something important going on, I want to know what it is. I like to have answers.

But before I can ask another question, there's a knock at the door.

"Hello?"

A man wearing green surgical scrubs appears in the doorway and my mom and dad stand up.

"Please come in," my mom says. "She's awake."

A smile spreads across his face as he walks toward me.

"Nice to meet you, Chloe. I'm Dr. Ahmadi."

According to Dr. Ahmadi, here's what (not who) is responsible for breaking my heart:

Arrhythmogenic Right Ventricular Dysplasia. ARVD for short.

It's a rare form of cardiomyopathy—a cellular defect—and it's been slowly killing the muscle tissue of my right ventricle, probably for years. Maybe since I was born. The resulting scars are now making it hard for my heart to do what it's supposed to do. Like beat hard enough to oxygenate my blood. Which is not exactly something a pint of Ben & Jerry's and an ugly cry is going to fix.

ARVD is why I collapsed on my high school's track. Why I have been feeling so tired and out of breath recently.

Why I'm going to need a new heart.

And it's why, if I don't get one soon, I'm going to die.

I'm going to die before I turn eighteen. I'm going to die before I graduate high school. Before I get to go to college, visit Tokyo, climb the Eiffel Tower, fall in love, own a dog, and become the first scientist to confirm the existence of life on another planet. *Oh my god*, I think. *What else?* I don't even know all the things that I want to do, to see, to taste, hear, and touch, because I assumed I had plenty of time to figure it out. A lifetime of it.

Dr. Ahmadi tells us that, based on my condition and my age, the chances are good that I'll be given a priority position on the transplant waiting list.

And then we will be in the very awkward, awful situation of hoping that someone who is not me might die instead.

So I can live.

≡≡≡ STRANGE DAYS ≡≡≡

Somewhere—close by? far away?—I hear an alarm. Is it a hospital monitor, alerting nurses to come running? Or is it the phone on my nightstand, in my bedroom, at home? I'm stuck again in that weird in-between place that bridges asleep and awake, where I'm not sure if I can trust my senses.

Is what's happening right now *really* happening, or is it a dream?

Where am I?

What am I supposed to be doing today?

I never got stuck like this *before*. Before everything that happened with my heart, I always woke up with a plan, hardly remembering my dreams. My brain would already be busy preparing for the day ahead: the French quiz scheduled for

first period, the English paper that I needed to revise during study hall, the cross-country meet after school.

But now, I sometimes struggle to ground myself. *Am I in my room, or someplace else?* Sometimes I forget *when* it is, forget that it's morning and not night, that it's almost summer and not fall, that more than eight months have passed and I'm not still running side by side with Emma in the second week of October during our senior year. Sometimes . . . sometimes I open my eyes and wonder, for many more seconds than is comfortable, if I'm living or if I'm dead.

Spoiler alert: I'm still alive. My heart? Not so much.

Now I have a new one, and a lot of things are different. Not just different—*strange*.

The most obvious is the scar. It runs from the top of my collarbone to my abdomen and makes me feel like the Bride of Frankenstein, who, as you may know, was also brought back to life using borrowed parts. This is why, technically speaking, I guess I shouldn't even call it a "new" heart.

If I want to be 100 percent accurate, it's recycled.

Repurposed.

Reanimated.

One that previously belonged to someone else.

Until a fog-shrouded night this past December—one week before Christmas—when it was extracted from my donor's still-warm body and transplanted into mine.

We both had run into some serious bad luck.

My luck, as we know, turned south that day I collapsed

during cross-country practice. And two months later, a trauma of some sort rendered my donor's head pretty much kaput.

Healthy heart. Dead brain. An ideal match for a patient on the list.

A patient like me.

True story: The national transplant waiting list is the only list I've ever made it to the top of for failing rather than succeeding. My heart was getting a big fat F in keeping me alive, and that's one consideration that moves you to the front of the line. Minors also generally get priority over older people, who have less of their lives ahead of them, I suppose. How much you have in common with your donor determines the rest. Blood types need to be compatible. Proximity is also important, since hearts, in particular, have a limited shelf life. My donor had O positive blood, just like me. We also lived within thirty miles of each other, which is how, on the night I got the call, I was able to be in surgery, buzz saw poised over my sternum, within minutes of my partner-in-bad-luck's official pronouncement of death.

And now we're not partners in anything anymore. It's just me left standing, trying to wrap my head around everything that's different, and strange, and not like how I'd thought.

So what else? In addition to the scar, there are a *lot* of pills. Pills to take in the morning. Pills to take at night. Pills that I can't forget or else I'll break this heart too, and then I'll be back on that horrible list, waiting again for someone who

is not me to die. Or not waiting, if it's me who does the dying. This is why my mom makes me carry around one of those plastic dispensers with a tiny compartment for each day of the week, just like my grandma.

I also used to run all the time, but now I don't. I used to be a vegetarian, but now I'm not. I used to have every minute of my life scheduled, but now I have hours, sometimes whole days, where I do nothing but watch back-to-back episodes of *Parks and Recreation* and *The Walking Dead* and leaf through the stack of comics I bought at the used bookstore downtown.

I used to never have nightmares.

But the most different thing of all, especially for everyone who knew me *before*, is that I'm now a high school dropout. Well, sort of. I missed more than half of my senior year, so I'm making it up in summer school, which is full of actual dropouts, like Jane Kessler, who tells me she flunked trig; and Brian Felder, who didn't graduate because he had to go to one of those rehab camps for *World of Warcraft* addicts. So instead of doing a research-lab summer internship like I'd planned, I've been spending my weekdays in the nearly empty school library, staring blankly at an open Google doc and pretending to make headway on the essay I need to turn in about *The Grapes of Wrath*. Normally, this is something I could probably wrap up with one hand tied behind my back, but the "Symbolism of the Turtle in Chapter Three" is eluding me. Does anyone really *care* why John Steinbeck wrote

about a turtle crossing the road? I know I sure don't. Not at the moment, anyway, which is not . . . like me.

I hear my mom in the hallway and prepare the smile I will put on when she pops her head into my room to make sure I'm up. She's weirdly cheerful and helicopter-like and overenthusiastic these days, which is yet another thing that's different. I don't have the heart (no pun intended) to tell her I'm not all that excited to get out of bed. That I don't want to take another handful of pills, or write my AP English essay about symbolic turtles, or start dealing with the college acceptances stacked on my desk, which, due to my "special circumstances," can be deferred a semester while I complete the credits I need to graduate. That I feel like a stranger in my own skin.

In fact, though I haven't mentioned this to her or my dad or anybody else, I'm not all that excited about anything these days—except for one thing: at three o'clock, I surf.

≡ HEADS AND HEARTS ≡

A slimy piece of seaweed tangles around my ankle and I shake it off, simultaneously shaking some feeling back into my numb toes. Even with the wetsuit on, the coldness of the water is always a shock at first—the ocean spray like tiny needles pelting my face. Paddling my board over the swells, I keep my eyes on Kai's head bobbing up and down about ten yards ahead of me and try to forget the fact that most of my weight is resting on a breastbone that not so long ago was sawed in half. It almost feels like the scar is tingling beneath my suit.

My parents would freak if they knew I was out here, putting my recently restored life into the hands of this guy I barely know. I SPECIALIZE IN BEGINNERS read the ad I found pinned to a bulletin board in a nearby surf shop a few

weeks ago—a shop I had finally ventured into after spending more than a few afternoons surveying all the action from the beach.

Initially, I'd been hanging out there to escape Senior Week. To avoid everyone trying to convince me to come to the senior picnic and the senior-faculty dodgeball game and the night where all the seniors spray-paint their names on the Wall—a cement barrier that holds up the hill behind campus. I was invited to everything, of course, even though I wasn't officially graduating. But feigning excitement about my classmates' upcoming parties and travel plans and college start dates when I was days away from reporting to summer school? Hard pass. So instead, I got in my car, which lately is one of the few things that makes my brain stop buzzing, and I drove until I reached the coast. Watching the waves, alone, with my feet buried in the cool sand, was so much better than attending Senior Pajama Day. And once I started studying the surfers paddling out and gliding like water gods over the waves, I couldn't stop. Had I really never noticed how mesmerizing they are before? I guess not, because if you had told “before Chloe” that she'd be attempting to surf, she would have said you were dreaming. She'd have warned you that the waves here are too powerful. The water is too cold. That there are sharks lurking nearby that might mistake you for a seal.

The truth is that, until I first connected with Kai, I'd never more than waded into the water north of the Golden Gate. But now . . . *now* I'd much rather be freezing my butt off and

paddling like a madwoman than be safe on solid ground. Even if my arms feel like rubber and my last attempt to stand up on the board left me struggling through the shallows, tossed around like an empty bottle sucked up from the shore. Strangely, my usual cautionary reflex seems to have malfunctioned. I'm not worried that I might drown, or break a limb, or get eaten by a great white. I only want to skim across the top of the water effortlessly, like Kai. And I'm going to keep eating sand until I find the wave that will take me out of my head and make me more at home with this new heart. If only for a minute.

Kai doesn't know about my heart transplant, of course. The full wetsuit covers my scar. The only thing he knows about me at all is that I want to learn to surf. And I don't know a whole lot about him, aside from the fact that he seems like he was born riding a wave. He doesn't talk much.

After I catch up to him, we float on our boards and wait.

And wait. It's a sunless day. The sky above is milky white, covered by a thick layer of fog, and the water is a hard steel gray. The wind whips at my face, its scent sharp with salt and brine.

"Heads up," he says, as a promising wave rolls toward us.

I position myself on my board—not too far forward, not too far back—and start paddling into the wave like he's taught me, my arms burning from the effort. It feels like I'm going nowhere. Then I remember how he's always warning me about beginners wasting energy by paddling too shallow,

and with all my strength, I reach into the water as deeply as I can.

Right, left. Right, left. Right, left. My board rises with the wave. I can't see where Kai is at the moment, but I hear him yell, "Pop up!" as it starts to break. The heart in my chest is pounding. We've practiced pop-ups a bunch of times on the sand, but I haven't yet managed to stay standing on the water. Will today be the day?

Kai's advice echoes in my head. *Don't grab the rails.* I place my hands under my chest and push up. *Back foot first.* I slide my back foot out from under me and then launch my front foot forward. *Make sure your knees are bent.* I twist sideways as I come up to standing, knees still bent, aaaaannnd . . . pitch forward, headfirst, into the ocean.

Damn it!

I surface as the wave rushes past, its momentum roaring in my ears, pulling me and my board with it. *Damn it, damn it, damn it.* Our hour is almost up today. Which means there won't be time for me to try to catch another wave. About ten seconds later, I see Kai passing by on the next one, riding it all the way in and hopping off with ease. *Great.* Now I also get to struggle out of the water like a flopping sea lion while he watches.

He's standing in the sand with his board planted next to him, his black hair dripping, as I trudge out of the surf.

"You looked at your feet," he says.

I nod, still breathing hard.

“You need to look ahead, in the direction you want to go,” he explains. “It’ll help you keep your balance. Also—”

“I was leaning too far forward.”

“Uh . . . yeah. You were leaning.”

He only has a lot to say when it’s about technique.

We make eye contact and my face warms up, which is equal parts embarrassing and annoying. Sometimes I wish I had found an instructor who was less “surfer.” I mean, I know this is kind of a cliché and all, but guys who surf are very, very . . . *fit*. Kai included. He also has nice lips. It’s a little distracting.

“Okay,” I say, sighing. “Look ahead, don’t lean forward. Anything else I’m messing up?”

Kai leans down on one knee and detaches me from the ankle leash.

“Don’t get so frustrated,” he says as he pulls at the Velcro on the cuff, which I really didn’t need help with because it comes off super easy. “You’re doing great for someone who’s never surfed before. A lot of people quit as soon as they have a bad wipeout.”

So far, bad wipeouts are my middle name.

“Well, I’m not going to quit, but I do have sand in places where I never thought I’d have sand,” I say. “How does that even happen if I’m wearing a wetsuit?”

Kai ignores my question and looks up at me. “Where’d you get this leash?”

“Same place I bought the board,” I tell him.

“It’s cheap. If it snaps and you lose your board, you’ll have to swim all the way in,” he says. “I’ll bring a better one for you next week.”

He’s still on one knee and I almost blurt out, “Are you about to propose?”—but I stop myself. Making flirty jokes with a boy I’ve only known for a few weeks is *definitely* not something I did *before*. Besides, we don’t really have a joke-cracking relationship. Most of the time, Kai is all business. So what I actually say is, “Okay, thanks. I’ll bring some extra cash.”

He stands. “No need. You can borrow one of mine. See you next week.”

I nod. “Next week.” I pick up my board and start walking toward the path that leads to the parking lot, but I pause to call over my shoulder. “I’m catching one next time. Even if I have to stay out there till I can’t feel my toes.”

“Hmm. If you can’t feel your toes, how are you going to keep your balance?” Kai raises his eyebrows as if he has just imparted some deep wisdom.

Well, okay. That was *kind of* a joke, so maybe he’s not *all* business.

≡≡≡ THE TUNNEL ≡≡≡

When we were younger, Emma used to tell me that if you died in your dreams, you'd never wake up. "Think about it," she said. "If someone is trying to kill you or you're falling through the sky, you always wake up before." Before the hunter unleashes his arrow. Before your body slams into the ground.

Even though I was skeptical of anything superstitious, Emma's certainty spooked me. "Dream your death, and you're screwed."

But now I know this can't be true. Because for the last few weeks, I've died over and over again in my dreams. Every single night.

It always starts with me speeding toward the black mouth of a tunnel on a motorcycle. I wear a heavy leather jacket,

steel-toed boots, and a helmet. Air rushes through the seams on my face shield and bright yellow lights streak by, blurring into a single fluorescent line. I lean into a curve and, as I'm pulling out of it, I see a Christmas tree, tied with twine, lying across the lane. I swerve, slide, hear the echoing screech of tires behind me. Time slows for a few brief seconds as I am sent flying. There is broken glass. There is the acrid smell of burning rubber. Oil-stained pavement rushes up to meet me, filling my field of vision. The last thing I hear is a loud, sickening crack as blood washes over my eyes.

And then there is nothing.

A nothing so complete and empty that I know without a doubt that I am dead.

Until the phone on my nightstand sounds its alarm, ushering in another day.

I jolt up in bed, heart hammering, and silence my alarm. *It's okay*, I think. *You're okay. You're in your room. In your bed. Not dead.* It's the "nothing" part of the dream that's the worst. Worse than the crack as my head hits the pavement. Worse than all the blood. Is that what death is really like? Like *nothing*? It's terrifying to think that in one instant you're seeing and smelling and feeling and hearing and thinking and then in the next you're just this . . . void. Even though I'm sweating, the thought makes me shiver. And my head hurts like hell. Almost like it really did just slam into the pavement.

There's a knock on my door, and a nanosecond later, my

mom pops her head into my room. I always used to protest when she wouldn't wait for my "permission" to enter, but now I cut her more slack. All the heart drama has put her through the wringer.

"Are you awake in here?" she asks.

"Yep, I'm up," I say.

Mom gives me a closer look and the little worry line between her eyebrows deepens.

"Everything okay?"

My pulse is still racing from the dream, so I take a deep, calming breath. "I'm fine," I lie, not wanting to get her all worked up over a nightmare.

She sets a glass of water down on my nightstand and sits at the edge of my bed. "You look a little pale."

"Mom, I'm *fine*."

"Okay," she says, standing back up, giving me "my space."
"Don't forget your pills."

"Yes, Mom."

Making sure I take my medication has become her number-one mission in life. She pauses in the doorway again on her way out.

"Dad wants to stop for lunch in the city after your appointment. Any thoughts on where you'd like to go?"

Oh, boy. I knew they were going to make a big deal out of this.

"I still don't understand why you both need to come," I say, throwing off my covers and swinging my legs out of bed.

“Don’t be silly, Chloe. Your six-month appointment is a big deal! We should celebrate, don’t you think?”

I should want to, right? Today is my six-month postoperative checkup. Six months since my original model heart was removed and replaced by another. Now that I have reached this milestone, and provided that the heart biopsy that I must submit to this morning looks good, I will no longer have to see my cardiac surgeon every few weeks. It also means that I’m supposed to be able to get back to most “normal activities,” whatever that means.

The thing is, taking a gazillion pills a day doesn’t exactly feel normal. Neither does going to school in the summer or my constant compulsion to just get in my car and drive *fast, fast, fast*, or the weird memory issues I’ve been having—*for how long now? weeks? months?*—or my now-nightly death dream. And the least normal thing of all? The constant, ever-present, can’t-get-away-from-it-not-even-for-a-second awareness of someone *else’s* original model heart beating inside *my* chest. *Thump*. Does it sound different? *Thump, thump*. Does it speed up faster? Does it skip in a way that’s unlike the one that used to be mine?

I wish I could tell my mom and dad that it feels strange to celebrate. That *everything* feels strange.

After showering, I pull on a pair of jeans and find a sweater to wear over my T-shirt. It’s always so cold in the hospital. Before heading out to the kitchen, I take a quick look at myself in the mirror on my closet door, just to make sure it’s

still me looking back. Same brown eyes. Same constellation of freckles on my cheeks. Same not-quite-manageable hair. Still me.

At least, it appears to be. Aside from the *thump*.

Thump, thump.

≡≡≡ QUESTIONS ≡≡≡

From the moment that I could talk, I wanted to know *why* about everything.

Why do people need to eat?

Why do my fingers wrinkle in the bath?

Why don't we get burnt up by the sun?

Mostly because I was curious. It was fun to ask questions and learn the answers. But a part of me also really *needed* to know. Explanations were comforting, especially when delivered by my science-teacher dad:

“Your fingers wrinkle in the bath to help you grip things in the water. The water tells your brain that things might get slippery, so your brain sends a message back to your fingers that makes the skin on them shrivel up a bit, so that it's easier

to hold things that are wet. They'll go back to normal in a little while, after you dry off. No worries."

My five-year-old self had been studying the puckered skin on my fingers and was relieved to hear that it wouldn't stay that way.

"Or maybe you are actually an old woman named Gertrude disguised as my daughter," he couldn't help adding, looking into my eyes and squinting as he wrapped me in my pink butterfly towel. "What have you done with my Chloe?"

"Stop it, Daddy." I giggled. "It's me, it's me!"

"Gertrude" became our little joke for the next couple of days—*Gertrude, could you please pass the salt? How was school today, Gertrude?*—until I moved on to another *why*, and another, and another.

By age ten, the questions I asked didn't always have simple explanations.

Why are we here?

What happens to you when you die?

How big is the universe, anyway?

I remember folding myself into the three-way mirror at Macy's while my mom was busy with zippers and hangers, watching my reflection repeat and repeat and repeat into what seemed like an infinite number of Chloes in an infinite number of dressing rooms. I wondered: Would we all leave the dressing room and go home to the same house, the same parents, the same life? Or would some Chloes take a left

when they stepped out of the frame while the rest of us took a right? And then what? How many combinations of lefts, rights, ups, and downs could there possibly be? Was there a Chloe headed to a fancy restaurant for dinner? One about to get hit by a bus while crossing the street?

“Do you think other versions of us exist?” I’d asked my mom. “Like in other realities or something?”

“I think you watch way too much *Doctor Who*,” my mom had answered. “I can’t see the mirror, Chloe. This is the last dress, I promise.”

Reluctantly, I moved out of her way, still daydreaming about what all the other Chloes were doing. It had to be something more exciting than watching their moms try on fifteen black dresses that all looked the same.

I don’t know exactly when I stopped asking so many questions. But by high school, I was convinced that right answers are what *really* matter. You can’t get bogged down questioning everything or risk being wrong when every test, homework assignment, and pop quiz has the power to add or shave a fraction of a percentage from that all-important GPA. So I made sure that I studied hard enough to earn As on all my tests. I selected AP courses and after-school activities based on which ones would look best on my college application submissions. I went to the library. I volunteered. I signed up. This rigorous attention to detail had a singular purpose, of course: a résumé competitive enough to earn me a spot at a

great school. By the fall of my senior year, high school graduation seemed like it would be a formality—I just needed to show up, follow through on my final assignments, and claim my place near the top of the class.

And yet, there was a small part of me that still wondered . . . *Why?* Why had my childhood curiosity given way to caution? Why did I worry so much about saying the wrong thing or making a mistake? And, despite my successes, why did I sometimes feel like my life was not entirely my own?

But I pushed those questions aside. Because everything was on track. Everything was going according to plan. Until the thing happened that was definitely *not* on my to-do list: a failing heart.

And now here I am. Instead of having lunch with my fellow summer interns or shopping for dorm room supplies with my mom, I'm sitting on an exam table at the UCSF cardiothoracic surgery center, freezing in a crinkling paper gown. It figures that in the one circumstance that my actual life depends on acing a test, no amount of studying will make a difference. Instead, all I can do is wait for Dr. Ahmadi to appear so he can tell me if my latest circulatory grade makes the cut.

I've banished my mom and dad to the front lobby, mainly because I can't stand it when my dad gets anxious and starts to pace. But also, I'd like a little time to absorb the news if the report isn't good. I have no reason to believe that it won't be,

but if recent experience has taught me anything, it's that the absolute shittiest worst-case scenario can happen when you least expect it. I hear footsteps in the hall outside and sit up straighter, adjusting the plastic tie on the gown.

When Dr. Ahmadi walks in the room, he looks as happy as my parents did when I got a near-perfect score on my SATs. "Looking good, Chloe!" he says, as he holds up my most recent heart biopsy and EKG results. He hands me a piece of graph paper that maps the electrical activity of my transplanted heart. To most people, it probably looks like a bunch of squiggly lines, but I've viewed enough EKGs by now to understand what I'm seeing. I trace my finger over the pattern of low peaks interspersed with steep upside-down Vs. It's showing a "normal sinus rhythm," which means this heart is doing exactly what it's supposed to do: pumping blood into my lungs and out to the rest of my body without making a fuss. Zero drama is pretty much the best you can ask for when it comes to a heart.

"All functioning appears to be normal and there are no signs of rejection, although you'll need to continue on the immunosuppressants indefinitely, of course," says Dr. Ahmadi. "But for now, things really look good. How do you feel about that?"

I feel relieved, of course, but maybe not as relieved as my parents will be—especially my dad, who, if he were in the room right now, would probably crush Dr. Ahmadi with one of his bear hugs.

But *weird* is the word that comes to mind first. I feel weird. Physically, things are getting back on track. My body feels stronger every day. I notice it for sure when I'm out paddling in the waves with Kai, although I'm not going to tell Dr. Ahmadi or my parents about that. I don't have any chest pain. This is all objectively very good news, yet I can't shake the feeling that something is not right.

I study Dr. Ahmadi's kind face, still young-looking despite the fact that his hair is flecked with gray. His calm manner has often reassured me, especially on the night when I was whisked into the operating room for my transplant, an entire team of doctors and nurses jogging along beside me. Maybe he will have a simple explanation if I tell him what's going on with me now. Because sometimes my head seems even more messed up than my old, defective heart.

There's something wrong with my memory, for one thing. In the last few weeks—or maybe longer—I've been feeling like I've lost places, events, even people, from my life before. I keep seeing these fragments that my mind can't seem to fully download and piece together. Didn't I once fall out of a tree? Why can't I remember when? Or where? There are faces that I recall, but not names. Scenes that appear in my brain without any other context that I'm unable to anchor to a fixed place or time: a windswept hillside blanketed with wild lavender. A blue house. A thin woman wearing a knit cap. I can tell you that the woman's eyes are beautiful—a tropical water color that's somewhere between green and blue; that her cap

is charcoal gray; that she wears tiny, delicate gold hoops in her ears, but I don't remember *who* she is.

These gaps in my memory, or whatever they are, are scaring me. And I haven't mentioned them to my mom or dad yet because I don't want to scare them. But I'm wondering: Could my brain somehow have been damaged during those weeks I spent connected to an oxygen tank, never feeling like I had enough? Have I forgotten key moments from my old life?

Then there's the latest thing: the nightmares. And the headaches that come after.

And it's not just my memory. It's my mood that feels off. Shouldn't I feel happy? Shouldn't I feel *#blessed*? This recycled heart, after all, has saved me. There will be more birthdays. College. Travel. A *life*. If I tell Dr. Ahmadi that I often have an overwhelming desire to reach in and rip it out, pulsing and dripping—a bloody hole in my chest seeming preferable to a piece of someone else pumping away in there—will he think I'm ungrateful? A terrible person? Or will he smile his easy smile and tell me it's all normal and nothing to worry about?

In the end, I decide not to say anything about any of it. I don't want any more tests. No more blood draws. No more machines scanning parts of my body. Today, I'm officially free of all that. My parents are free of all that. For a little longer than usual, at least. Dr. Ahmadi types a few notes on his tablet and stands up. "Okay, then! I'll run out to give your folks a quick update while you change. And keep the copy of the

EKG—you might want to frame it.” He smiles. “We’ll see you in four months. Until then, call us if you’re experiencing any pain, shortness of breath, nausea . . . well, you know the drill. Or call us if you just need to talk.”

I know he means this, and if I thought it would help to unload on anyone, he’d be the person I’d choose. But cardiac surgeons are busy, and the last thing I want to do is get everybody all worked up over nothing. My brain is probably just a little scattered from all the meds I have to take. And I have a normal EKG in my hand that tells me I *should* be celebrating. So I’m just going to make my parents happy and post this on our fridge under that ridiculous MY CHILD IS AN HONOR STUDENT AT OAK VALLEY HIGH magnet that my dad purchased at the school’s fund-raising auction because he thought it was hilarious.

In my most cheerful, everything-is-fine voice, I echo Dr. Ahmadi with a “See you in four months!” as he slips out the door.

≡≡≡ THE RIDE ≡≡≡

If you surf, having a solid understanding of physics is useful. Waves, after all, are one of the best examples of physics in action: energy (wind) moving through matter (water). And if you can get a sense of the origin, intensity, and direction of the energy part, and how the tides and the type of break interact with it, you'll have an idea of how the water is going to behave. Before I figured this out, I thought catching waves had more to do with luck than anything else. But now I know why Kai is always going on about "checking the surf report." Turns out you can apply some science to surfing.

"Let's go!" I barely stop after finding Kai on the beach when I arrive, eager to get out before the tide changes.

"Hold up," he says, picking up his backpack to retrieve the ankle leash he promised to bring for me last week. "Let's

swap this for the one you have. So you don't take anyone's head off out there."

Ankle leashes do more than just ensure that you won't lose your board in the surf. They also protect the other surfers around you, especially the more experienced ones from the amateurs. A runaway board can result in a whole lot of stitches for anyone in its path.

Kai hands over the leash and I lay my board down, squatting while I remove the one that's already attached. "Thanks," I say.

"They're a little tricky. Want me to get it?"

I shake my head. "I can do it." He stands back in a posture that looks as though he expects me to ask for help at any minute. I line up the two ends of the leash string, tie an overhand knot, and push one end through the plug on my board. Then I attach the cord and fasten the cuff at my ankle.

"Ready!" I say, standing up.

"Huh," he says. "Usually takes me a couple of tries to get that right."

I shrug. "I once earned a Girl Scout badge for tying knots."

He nods and squints at me. "Of course you did."

I squint back. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. You just . . . seem like the kind of person who might excel at Girl Scouting."

I raise my eyebrows.

“I mean, you level up fast.” Kai rakes his hand through his hair and shakes his head. “Never mind.”

“Waves should be good today, right?” I ask, changing the subject. “I saw that the swell interval is supposed to be long.” A longer interval between waves means that each one accumulates more energy and peels longer, which makes for a better ride.

“Take a look,” he says, nodding toward the horizon, where a handful of surfers are already lined up, waiting. I watch one pop up and sail across the face of a wave. “The report helps, but nothing’s better than your own eyes.”

“Looks good,” I confirm.

He nods. “Let’s go, then.”

As we paddle out, I’m having a harder time getting through the white water than I did last week. Although the waves look long and clean farther out, they are breaking hard on the beach. Kai is ahead of me, and I watch what he does, mirroring his movements. He’s paddling strong and sure, propelling himself directly into the oncoming waves. The trick is to generate enough momentum to push through the impact zone without getting rolled off your board. I dig deep into the water, trying to pick up as much speed as I possibly can. The spray stings my face, and now I can’t see Kai at all—he’s lost behind the roiling wall of foam that’s surging toward me. I push up hard on my rails and throw all of my weight forward. White water rushes past as I *push, paddle, push, paddle*, and

then I'm through the worst of it, denying the ocean its first opportunity to screw with my surfing plans today. Now I just need to keep it that way.

Kai twists his head around up ahead to make sure I'm still behind him and gives a quick thumbs-up with his right hand. We join the lineup.

"You okay?" he asks as I paddle up next to him, my eyes taking in the size of the swells. They look pretty damn huge up close and I feel like we are floating in a giant bowl of water. All I can see is ocean ahead and ocean behind and the blue-gray sky up above.

"Yeah," I say, more confident than I feel.

Kai looks a tiny bit anxious as well, which I know is not because he's worried for himself. I've already seen him surf waves bigger than these. Is he worried that he's got me into a situation that I might not be able to handle?

His eyes connect with mine. "If you can't get up, just hang on to your board and paddle back in with the wave."

Yep, I think. He's already expecting me to wipe out. Again.

I watch the surfers ahead of us as they race for incoming waves, pop up, and then take off toward the shore. Not one has fallen. *I'm not going to be the only one who does*, I tell myself.

Another wave sweeps toward us, rising and rising and rising till it begins to cast a shadow over our heads. This is the one.

The one I'm going to catch.

"It's yours!" Kai yells and, as soon as I hear that, I launch.

Left, right, left, right, left, right. I paddle harder than I've ever paddled before and get myself into position, the nose of my board pointing toward the beach. I wait until it begins to lift under me. Now I just need to hang on for the right moment. Which is . . . *now.*

Now!

I place my hands underneath my chest and pop up, so shocked to be standing that I almost topple off again, like last week. The board wobbles slightly, but this time I regain my balance and then, *holy shit*, I'm surfing, actually really surfing, on my own, for the first time ever.

The wave that I've caught is a big one. Bigger even than it seemed when I watched it gather itself up, before I perched myself near the summit of its rising, racing, liquid surface. It whisks me toward the shore, and I feel as though I'm no longer in the water, but flying above it, like a pelican or a gull. Everything looks, and feels, different from this perspective as the scale and scope of the world multiplies, expanding in all directions. The ocean. The beach. The sky. For a split second, I can even see behind the sand dunes, glimpsing the roofline of pastel-painted storefronts that line the road beyond them. I inhale, filling my lungs with salt air, which has got to be some kind of enhanced, extra-intense version of oxygen, because I've never felt more awake and alive. My board rises higher.

And higher.

And higher.

Too high.

There's a surfing term for what happens when the lip of a wave crashes beneath you. It's called "going over the falls."

I imagine it in slow motion, but really it's only milliseconds before I'm tossed from water to air. My board slips out from under me, my foot yanked with it by my new (and hopefully improved) ankle leash. Unlike last week's tumble, I come down hard and fast with this wave. The ocean alternately muffles sound and then roars around me as I surface, briefly, only to be pushed back under. I struggle up again, gasping for breath. As I do, my head hits something hard. Or something hard hits my head. I can't tell which.

And suddenly, the death dream is all I can think about. The one where my head smashes into the pavement and my skull cracks. The world, huge and wide and open just seconds ago, is closing in, confusing my senses. It's dead quiet. The water feels thick and heavy, so thick that I am caught, suspended like a specimen in a jar, unable to move my limbs. I can't tell up from down, right from left. As the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth, along with what seems like gallons of salt water, I frantically try to conjure up Kai's words of advice for when you are pinned under a wave: *stay calm*.

Stay calm.

I force myself to open my eyes so I can try to get my bearings. But what I see doesn't make any sense. Instead of murky water, I see a silver-gray pit bull with a scar above its eye. I see a different beach, a different break, and clear water lit up by the sun. I see a woman lying in a hospital bed, tubes

everywhere. *Is she the woman I remember? The one wearing the knit cap?* I see a cypress tree, a porch swing, an EKG. I see the tunnel from my dream, the motorcycle crash, blood washing over my eyes. Then everything goes blank.

“Chloe.”

A dark silhouette moves into my view, encircled by a white halo of light. I wonder if I’m in the hospital again. Or maybe I never left in the first place. Maybe I never made it to the top of the list and there never was a heart. Maybe I’m dead and all the surfing lessons are just a figment of my disjointed, oxygen-deprived imagination.

“Chloe,” the silhouette says, louder this time, moving in. The blurred edges start to come into focus and a familiar face emerges. Hazel eyes. Black hair dangling, wet, over warm brown skin. Lips dusted with sand. This is no Angel of Death. It’s Kai. And this time, he looks more than a little anxious.

I stare at him.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “God, I feel like an asshole.”

“What? Why?” I push up to my elbows and Kai sits back on his heels next to me. I look out toward the pounding surf, watch the edge of the water bubble up over the coarse sand and then retreat. It’s cold and windy and I’m shivering, but I am on the beach and very much alive. *How did I even get here?* I wonder.

“Your board,” he says, frowning. “You got cracked really hard by your board. Maybe we should call—”

“No!” I say, louder than I mean to. We are not calling *anybody*. No professionals. No hospital. The last thing I want is for my parents to get wind of what I’ve been up to these last few Wednesday afternoons, when they think I’ve been at the library catching up on summer school assignments. So far they know nothing about my new and dangerous hobby. And, for now, I want to keep it that way.

My tongue throbs and I realize I must have bitten it, but otherwise I feel all right. Heart is beating. Head is . . . the same. But something seems strange in an out-of-sequence kind of way, like this movie I watched with my dad one afternoon in the hospital, about a guy with a weird amnesia condition who has to write everything that happens to him on Post-it notes. *Was there a dog on the beach with us?* If there was, it’s gone now. *Who was that woman in the hospital? Is she the same one that I’m sure I know but can’t remember?*

“I’m okay.” I shut the weirdness out of my mind and focus my eyes on Kai, who looks relieved that I’m at least speaking and moving and hopefully not about to ruin his surf lesson business. “Why do you feel like an asshole?”

He frowns again. “I probably shouldn’t have taken you out there with the waves so big.”

“But I wanted . . .” I say. It’s not his fault that I nearly got knocked out by my board. I forgot one vital piece of his advice: *cover your head when you come up*.

“She okay?”

I look over and see two other surfers hovering nearby, packing up their gear. The tall one is talking to Kai.

“I’m *okay*,” I answer instead, pushing all the way up to sitting to emphasize my absolute okay-ness.

“I think she’s good,” Kai calls back. “Thanks for the help.”

The help? Now I’m wondering just how many people out here witnessed my latest epic wipeout.

“We’ve all been there!” the surfer says to me. “Sucks to get pinned under. That was a sweet ride before you bit it, though.”

“Uh, thanks,” I say, still confused about how I made it back to the beach. I don’t remember anything between being underwater and seeing people and pit bulls and places I don’t recognize, and staring up into Kai’s very pretty eyes, which are again studying me with caution.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asks. “You were kind of out of it when I caught up to you. Those dudes said you were talking about a dog or something, and you said you were going to take a nap. You could have a concussion.”

“I’m good. *Really*. I think I just got a little freaked out when I was held under, but I feel okay now.” *Just shake it off*, I tell myself. *Shake it off*. I manage a smile despite the fact that my tongue is swelling up. “So when are we catching the next one?”

And unexpectedly, the serious look on his face is transformed by a truly genuine smile. “It was pretty awesome, huh?”

This is the first time I've seen Kai smile, aside from the time a small fish had brushed against my foot and I screamed and tumbled off my board in surprise. As I was trying, without much grace, to climb back on in the choppy water, I thought I saw the corners of his mouth turn up. Briefly. But not like this. When he smiles full-on, he has dimples.

"Yeah," I say. "It's like . . ."

"Flying."

"Yeah."

"I was six when I caught my first wave," he says. "Felt like a superhero."

"Which one?" I ask.

"Which what?"

"Which superhero?"

"Batman."

"Batman?" I laugh, imagining a pint-size Kai surfing in a full-body bat suit, black cape flying. "No Silver Surfer?"

He shakes his head. "C'mon. When you're six, superhero means either Batman or Spider-Man. Maybe the Hulk."

Batman. I've learned more about Kai in the last three minutes than I probably have in the last three weeks.

I make a move to stand. Too quickly, I realize, because I feel dizzy and sit back down in the sand. *It's fine. Shake it off. Take a deep breath.* I look at Kai. "Let's go back out."

And now I even get a laugh. With the dimples again. It's like he's a different person.

“Slow down there, boss,” he says. “Maybe we should call it a day and give your head a rest.”

Give my head a rest.

I wish. I want to tell him that my head feels infinitely better out there than it usually does at home, even after getting bonked by my board. Surfing allows me *not* to think. Only feel. The icy water. The wind on my cheeks. The movement of the waves beneath my body. In fact, the ocean is pretty much the only place I want to be right now. I refuse to let one weird moment ruin it.

Kai stands and offers his hand to help me up. I take it. And now, it’s all I can think about. *What would that hand feel like in my hair? On my face?*

“Thanks,” I say, rising to face him. He’s eyeing me with an intensity that makes me panic slightly, afraid that he can somehow read my mind.

“Ouch. You should probably put some ice on that when you get home.”

Touching my temple, I feel a bruise starting to bulge under the skin.

Ahh. Mystery of the intense look: solved.

“Yep. Ice,” I say, nodding.

I look out toward the horizon, where the ocean meets the sky. The afternoon sun is breaking through spaces in the clouds. It’s beautiful and looks like the kind of thing a person might post on Instagram, with an inspirational quote. But

in my case, it just reminds me that I've lost track of the time and I'm *#late*.

"I have to go," I tell Kai.

Being late used to make my parents, at worst, slightly aggravated. Now, if I don't show up when I say I will, I know they're worrying about the heart. Is it still beating? Am I lying on the ground somewhere, grasping my chest? I realize I had better come up with a plausible explanation for the welt on my temple (Falling library book? A run-in with a swinging locker door?) and I still need to stop at my neighbor Mrs. Linney's house to feed her cat, water her roses, and safely stash my surfboard in her backyard shed. Her summer in Europe is convenient for a girl with secrets.

My phone is in my backpack in the truck of my car—a used Honda that my parents originally intended as a graduation gift until it became more of a *we're-glad-you're-still-alive* gift. I make a mental note to text my mom that I'm running behind. But as I pick up my board, something occurs to me: I hadn't noticed another car near the path on our section of the beach when I parked earlier.

I turn back toward Kai.

"Need a lift?"

"Nah," he says. "Thanks, though."

"Where do you live, anyway?" I ask, wanting to know just one thing more about this boy who minutes before was leaning over me, close enough to kiss.

"Nearby," he says. "See you next Wednesday."

≡ WEIRD THINGS ≡

I swivel my chair in front of the computer monitor in the school library and poise my fingers over the keyboard. I'm supposed to be working on a research paper for my AP Physics class—the one I didn't get to complete last December when I was busy getting my heart cut out—but instead I'm doing the thing my dad is always warning my mom and me that we should never do: Googling health advice. “The internet is a house of horrors for hypochondriacs,” he loves to say. I wouldn't consider myself a hypochondriac, but where else am I supposed to track down answers without having to actually talk to someone? Like, for instance, my mom, who, due to her for-real hypochondriac tendencies, would probably rush me to the hospital the minute I tell her that I bashed my head—while surfing!—and then hallucinated a bunch

of stuff that doesn't even make any sense. So, yeah, that's not going to happen.

But I can't stop thinking about yesterday. *Was I hallucinating?* Those images I saw when I was stuck under that wave are now burned in my brain, but why can't I remember what they mean? And why do I keep waking up to the same horrible nightmare, with my head feeling like it's been smashed by a brick? Something is definitely not right. Only this time, it's with my brain instead of my heart.

I type into the search bar: *Heart transplant. Neurologic complications.*

Okay.

It turns out that auditory and visual hallucinations are not uncommon for heart transplant patients. That's somewhat of a relief, I guess. At least I know it's not just me.

I keep reading. *Most commonly, transplant patients have reported hallucinations after surgery, while in intensive care on a ventilator.* Interesting. *Some people describe these hallucinations as "out-of-body" or "near-death" experiences, but these transient symptoms are likely due to the side effects of pain medications, e.g., opiates or benzodiazepines.* Hmm. It's been more than six months since my surgery. More than six months since I've been connected to a ventilator. And currently, I'm not on any pain meds. But I was. Could they have caused long-term effects? My eyes back up to the word *transient*. Temporary. Short-lived. Fleeting. Maybe the immunosuppressants that I'm taking now are triggering my recent symptoms. I'll have

to double-check the side effects listed on my current crop of medications.

I try another search: *Heart transplant. Memory loss.*

As I scan through a list of medical journal articles and health reporting, something I've never heard of before catches my eye: *Organ Transplants and Cellular Memory.*

I click on the link and end up on what looks like a patient blog or forum of some kind. I start scanning the first entry. In it, Janet, a sixty-four-year-old office manager and soon-to-be new grandmother talks about how she feels like a “different person” following her heart transplant.

After I started getting back to regular activities following my transplant, on a whim I signed up for an art class at the community center near my house. I've never taken an art class in my adult life, and never considered myself a particularly good artist even when I was a child. But as soon as I saw the flyer for “Introduction to Still Life Painting” in the mail, I just knew it was something I really had to do. Once I started the class, my husband was floored by the paintings I was bringing home! He even joked that I'd been hiding my secret talent from him for years and wondered when we could get rich selling my work. When I eventually made contact with my donor's family, I found out that the woman whose heart I have had been a very successful artist. Some of her works are even sold through a gallery in New York! Now, I don't

know if it's this cellular memory thing or God's will, but somehow I think that I must have inherited her artistic abilities, that my eyes and hands are channeling her spirit.

Wait, *what?*

“Hey, brainiac. Can you look at my trig assignment again?”

I'm knocked out of my trance by the voice of Jane Kessler, who pulls up a chair next to my workstation.

Jane, who I had never exchanged a single word with until I got stuck in summer school, is my new friend here, mainly because I help her with math. She scoots closer to me.

“*Well?* How about it?” She waves her assignment in front of me. “I'll buy you lunch?”

I think she's trying to whisper, but Jane is not very good at speaking in a library voice.

I don't even know why she's attempting to be quiet anyway. Nobody here cares—not the weird antisocial kid to my left, who I've never seen without Beats headphones attached to his skull, or the girl who talks to herself when she types, and especially not Mr. Adams, who's hunched over his laptop at the librarian's station, most likely trying to watch the Giants game on mute.

Summer school is definitely not like real school. Serious school. The kind of school I used to attend. Until I learned that this was the best option for completing my graduation

requirements, I had no idea that my high school even had a summer program. Most of the people here, I've never met before. Like Beats headphones boy, who, according to Jane, got suspended for throwing a chair in his history class and then missed a month of school because his parents sent him to one of those military-style boot camps. And Sydney and April, the two girls who had babies last semester.

But Jane, I know. Or at least know of. In school or out, she's the kind of person who is impossible not to notice. One, because she's loud. Jane is not shy about voicing her opinion, even when nobody has technically asked for it. And two, she always looks kind of fabulous. Like today, in her sleeveless black T-shirt, Doc Marten boots, retro-red lipstick, and very short shorts that I'd never be allowed to leave the house in.

Jane tells me that an F in trigonometry has foiled her graduation plans this year—a fact that she attributes to her trig teacher, Ms. Hines, “being a total bitch.” I'm dubious about this. Unless Ms. Hines has had a lobotomy since I had her my junior year for the honors course, “total bitch” is not how I'd describe her. She used to give us multiple chances to make test corrections and kept candy on her desk for anyone willing to volunteer to work out a problem on the whiteboard. Mainly, I just think that Jane hates math. Or maybe school in general.

I turn my chair in her direction. “You're buying me lunch?”

She nods. “Your lunch wishes will be my command.”

Another difference between summer school and real school is that previously, Jane would probably have had zero interest in hanging out with me. In real school, we did not swim in the same circles. Jane was not on the honors track. We didn't have any classes together. Nor did we ever encounter each other at any of the extracurricular activities that normally kept me and most of my friends busy until well after dinner most nights: sports, student government, music lessons, Math Club, Community Service Club, fill-in-the-blank-with-whatever-might-look-good-on-a-college-admissions-application Club. I don't think Jane does clubs. In fact, she probably didn't even know who I was before I became famous (at school anyway) for getting a new heart.

Jane, on the other hand, was kind of famous before I was. Or maybe *infamous* is more accurate. For telling Mr. Hoffman to "fuck off" in front of her entire history class when she got into an argument with him about the pros and cons of socialism. (I heard this from Mia Ryan, the most reliable conduit for school gossip.) For spray-painting a magnificent, albeit unauthorized, mural honoring Frida Kahlo on the school's football scoreboard. (It was homecoming weekend, so *everybody* saw that one.) For organizing a huge beach party that resulted in about forty kids missing school during the final day of STAR testing. (I was not invited but did hear about it for days after.) There are plenty more Jane-related rumors, but these I can't verify: That she is the reason why Dave Rubin broke up with Mindy Pierson, *and* why Lisa Tan broke up

with Becca Strauss. That she's the one who stole and then sold the answer key to the tenth-grade geometry final. That she's the person to go to if you want to buy weed. Whether any of this is true or not, Jane doesn't seem to care what people think about her one way or the other. Nor does she seem to care about always having the right answer or getting straight As. In other words, she's everything I'm not. Or that I didn't used to be.

At the moment, however, she is at least attempting to pass trig.

"Let me see the math," I say.

She slides her chair next to mine and hands me her assignment. Intricately drawn Japanese anime characters run up and down the borders of the worksheet. They all have speech bubbles above their heads with the same words inside: "Trig blows!"

I look over her half-hearted attempts at working out the assignment and see immediately where she's screwing up.

"Okay, you can't get that answer because cosine has no meaning on its own. You always need to find the cosine of an angle."

She looks unsure. "Umm . . . okay."

"So if the cosine of x is equal to one, you need to find a value for x so that once you take the cosine of the value, you get one."

"You get one." Jane buries a hand in her platinum pixie haircut and nods in the way that people do when they

don't want to admit they have no idea what you are talking about.

"Look at the graph of the cosine function . . . you *have* seen a graph like this before, right?" I glance at Jane. She's reading the results of my Google search.

"Jane. Are you even listening?" I ask, though it's clear that she's not. She seems to have issues with focus.

"What are you doing, some kind of report?" she asks.

"No, just research."

"About your heart?"

I still haven't told anybody about what happened at the beach on Wednesday or about any of the other stuff that's been freaking me out recently: The gaps in my memory. The nightmares. The feeling of not being able to reengage with my old life. But Jane is not my worrywart mom. And she's not Emma, who would probably just think that I'd lost it. Maybe it would be a bit of a relief to tell *somebody*. At least some of it.

"I'm looking for some background on transplant recipients. About side effects from surgery, that kind of thing," I tell her.

"Like what kind of side effects?" she asks.

"I'm not really sure what I'm looking for . . . I'm just curious about what other patients have experienced."

"Move over." Jane nudges me sideways and leans in closer to study my screen. After a few minutes, her eyes bug out.

"Holy shit, is this for real?" She nods toward the monitor. "This cellular memory thing? People can inherit their donor's

abilities and memories and stuff?” She stares at me. “Oh my god, is that happening to you?”

“Jane, no,” I say, already feeling like it may have been a mistake to invite her in to all this. Especially when I’m reading random, highly unscientific heart transplant theories on the internet. “It’s not physiologically possible. Memory is a function of the brain. The heart is an organ that pumps blood. You can’t acquire neurological processes through a heart. Just because some woman took a community center painting class does not mean she inherited anyone else’s memories.”

“But it says here that even cells in your heart include your entire genetic code. So wouldn’t that mean that *maybe* a transplanted organ could transfer some of your donor’s, like, *memory* cells to you and, then, voilà, you can paint?”

I shake my head. Where to even start? “First of all, there’s no such thing as a ‘memory cell.’”

Jane squints at me.

“So, since your transplant, have you picked up any new food preferences or hobbies? Anything that you didn’t do before?”

Well, of course, I think. There are tons of things that are different since my transplant. They’re different because I nearly *died* and had major, *life-altering* surgery. I did start eating meat again, but that was just for the protein, not because I have any new “food preferences.” And, yes, I’ve taken up surfing. But for all I know, my donor could have been a vegetarian who didn’t even know how to swim.

A tiny voice inside my head asks: *What about the other stuff that prompted this whole Google search in the first place? The memories that I can't place? The nightmares?*

But all I tell Jane is, "Nope. Nothing comes to mind. Honestly, Jane, I think this cellular memory theory is . . . not serious science." *It can't be.*

She crosses her arms.

"What about this lady who can paint now? How do you explain that?"

I gesture toward the computer screen. "Just because Janet here took an art class and thinks she painted a really good sunflower doesn't mean she inherited a lifetime of fine-arts experience. What's happening with her is probably more like the placebo effect."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes in drug trials, they give a control group a placebo, like sugar pills, so they can compare the results against the ones from the group that's taking the real thing. But the people in the control group don't *know* they're not getting the actual drug and, even though they're not, there are cases where some experience improvements in their symptoms anyway. It's the *belief* that they are taking something that could help them that seems to have an effect."

"So I don't get it," says Jane. "What does the placebo effect have to do with this heart transplant story?"

I'm in full-on class presentation mode now.

"Once this lady heard that her donor was a professional

artist, it made her *believe* that her own painting skills were *way better* than they probably are. Maybe she even painted with more confidence as a result, which meant her paintings really *were* better. Placebo effect. Get it?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jane says. “But there are some other really wild stories here. Not just the painting one. You should totally read them!”

Maybe I will later, when I can focus and think. “How about we get back to your math?” I say.

“Ugh, do we have to?” Jane pretends that she’s banging her head on the desk in front of her.

“Do you want to graduate, or what?”

She raises her head.

“Well, my mom says I can’t use her car until I do, so yes.”

I click out of the cellular memory forum. My dad is probably right: searching for health advice on the internet is a terrible idea.

It’s late, and I’m staring up at the wood beams on my bedroom ceiling, unable to sleep. Unable to shake the thoughts that have been circling around and around in my mind. It all started before the beach, didn’t it? Before the tunnel dream. Even before the memory gaps, or whatever they are. Because what I didn’t tell Jane today is that the first weird thing to happen was right after the transplant, in the hospital. When I saw the crying man.

At first I thought he was one of the doctors or nurses

who kept flitting in and out of my room to change an IV bag, make a note on my chart, or adjust one of the many machines humming and beeping all around me. But he wasn't wearing scrubs, a white jacket, or anything that identified him as official hospital personnel. Plus, his demeanor stood out from that of the usual staff (detached and professional for most of the doctors—or trying-too-hard cheerful for most of the nurses). He was slumped in a chair next to my bed, his face resting in his hands.

He stayed there for a while, but since I was still on the ventilator, I couldn't speak. I couldn't ask him who he was. He didn't speak either—just wept quietly, and then slipped like a shadow out the door.

Once I was free of the ventilator and a bit less drugged up, I asked my parents who he was.

“Nobody but family is allowed in the ICU,” my dad said. “Are you sure it wasn't one of the nurses?”

I told him I was sure.

“A dream, maybe?” suggested my mom. “Dr. Ahmadi said the anesthesia might make you feel kind of funky for a while.”

“No,” I insisted. “He was real. I know he was real.”

I tried to sit up but was nearly knocked senseless by a heavyweight boxing punch of pain.

My dad jumped up from his chair, a look of panic on his face. My easygoing, goofball dad, terrified that I would come apart at the seams right before his eyes.

And admittedly, I did feel a bit stitched together in that moment, as the line of black sutures tightened across my chest. Maybe I *was* coming apart.

I lowered myself back against the pillows, hoping that would be enough to calm him down. “He was real,” I repeated, no longer so sure myself.

My mom went out to check the visitor’s log at the front desk.

Security was called.

And not long after, a tight-lipped hospital administrator, accompanied by a man in an official-looking uniform, showed up in my room. The administrator, her hair pulled back into a tidy bun, introduced me to Mr. Platt, the hospital’s head of security, who proceeded to ask a bunch of questions.

“What did he look like?”

“He was tall, kind of muscular.” My throat was raw from being intubated, so I had to whisper.

“Eyes?”

I realized as he was questioning me that I never got a good look at his face.

“I don’t remember.”

“Hair color?”

“Not sure. It was buzzed . . . close to his scalp.”

I could tell this was starting to sound suspiciously vague to him.

“What was he wearing?”