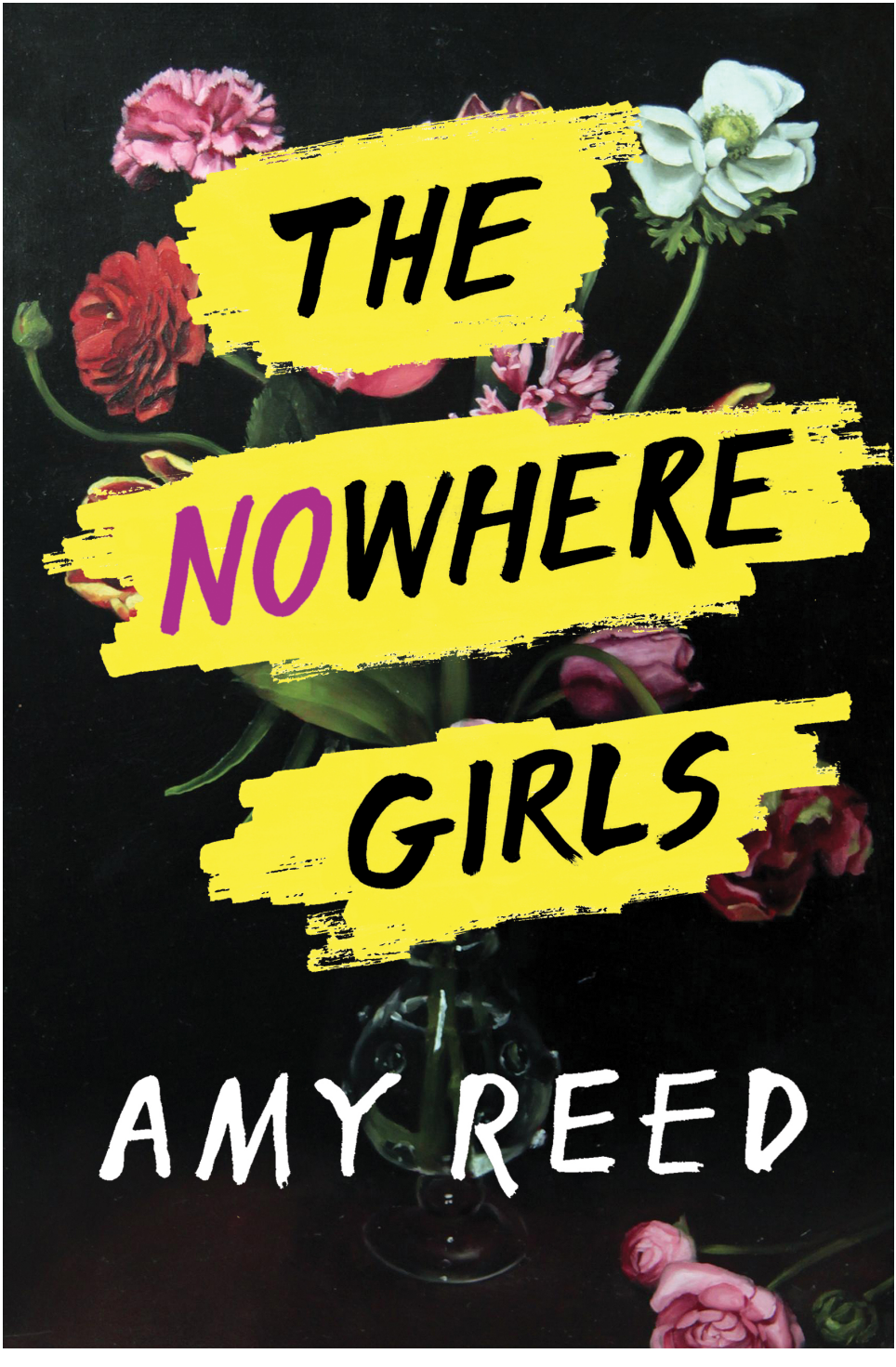
THE
NOWHERE
GIRLS
AMY REED

SIMON PULSE
An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020
First Simon Pulse hardcover edition October 2017

Art direction and full jacket design by Jessica Handelman
Front jacket design by Alex Robbins

Interior designed by Greg Stadnyk
The text of this book was set in Garamond.
Manufactured in the United States of America
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Reed, Amy Lynn, author.
Title: The Nowhere Girls / by Amy Reed.
Description: First Simon Pulse hardcover edition. | New York : Simon Pulse, 2017. |
Summary: "Three misfit girls come together to avenge the rape of a girl none of them knew and in the process start a movement that transforms the lives of everyone around them"—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016044338 (print) | LCCN 2017020892 (eBook) |
ISBN 9781481481731 (hc) | ISBN 9781481481755 (eBook) |
Subjects: | CYAC: Rape—Fiction. | Conduct of life—Fiction. | Sex—Fiction. | High schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | Family life—Oregon—Fiction. | Oregon—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.R2462 (eBook) | LCC PZ7.R2462 Now 2017 (print) | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016044338

For us.

You save yourself or you remain unsaved.

—Alice Sebold, *Lucky*

US.

Prescott, Oregon.

Population: 17,549. Elevation: 578 feet above sea level.

Twenty miles east of Eugene and the University of Oregon. One hundred thirty miles southeast of Portland. Halfway between a farm town and a suburb. Home of the Spartans (Go Spartans!).

Home of so many girls. Home of so many almost-women, waiting for their skin to fit.

The U-Haul truck opens its sliding door for the first time since Adeline, Kentucky, unleashing the stale air from the small southern town that used to be Grace Salter's home, back when her mother was still a dutiful Baptist church leader (though not technically a "pastor," because as a woman in a church belonging to the Southern Baptist Convention, she could not technically claim the official title, nor its significantly higher pay grade, even with her PhD in Ministry and more than a decade of service). Everything in Grace's life changed when Mom fell off that horse and bumped her head and suffered

the concussion and subsequent spiritual experience that, according to Mom's version of events, freed her mind and helped her hear the true voice of the Lord and, according to Grace's version of events, got them booted out of Adeline and ruined their lives.

Couches, beds, and dressers are in their approximate positions in the new house. Grace's mother starts unpacking the kitchen. Dad searches on his phone for pizza delivery. Grace climbs steep, creaking stairs to the room she has never seen before today, the room Mom and Dad only saw in photos their real estate agent sent them, the room she knows is meant to be hers because of the yellow wall paint and purple flower decals.

She sits on the stained twin mattress she's had since she was three and wants nothing more than to curl up and fall asleep, but she doesn't know where her sheets are. After five days of nonstop driving, fast food, and sharing motel rooms with her parents, she wants to shut the door and not come out for a long time, and she certainly doesn't want to sit on boxes of dishes while eating pizza off a paper towel.

She lies on her bed and looks at the bare ceiling. She studies a water-damaged corner. It is early September, still technically summer, but this is Oregon, known for its year-round wetness, something Grace learned during her disappointing Web searches. She wonders if she should try to find a bucket to put on the floor in anticipation of a leak. "Be prepared." Isn't that the Boy Scout motto? She wouldn't know; she had been a Girl Scout. Her troop learned how to do things like knit and make marzipan.

Grace turns her head to look out the window, but her eyes catch texture beneath the peeling white lip of the frame. Carved words,

like a prisoner's inside a cell, through layers of peeling yellow, then blue, then white, the fresh words sliced through decades of paint:

Kill me now.
I'm already dead.

Grace's breath catches in her throat as she stares at the words, as she reads the pain of a stranger who must have lived and breathed and slept in this room. Was their bed in this very same place? Did their body already carve out this position in space where Grace's body lies now?

How intimate these tiny words are. How alone a person must feel to cry out to someone they can't even see.

Across town, Erin DeLillo is watching Season Five, Episode Eleven, of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The title of this episode is "Hero Worship." It's about a traumatized, orphaned boy who becomes emotionally attached to Lieutenant Commander Data, an android. The boy admires Data's superior intelligence and speed, but perhaps even more, he wishes he shared Data's lack of ability to experience human emotions. If the boy were an android, he wouldn't be so sad and lonely. If he were an android, he wouldn't feel responsible for the careless mistake that tore his ship apart and killed his parents.

Data is an android who wants to be human. He is watching them from the outside. Like Data, Erin is often confounded by the behavior of humans.

But unlike Data, Erin is more than capable of feeling. She feels too

much. She is a raw nerve and the world is always trying to touch her.

Mom says, "It's a beautiful day! You should be outside!" She speaks in exclamation points. But Erin's skin is almost as pale as Data's and she burns easily. She doesn't like being hot or sweaty, or any other discomfort that reminds her she lives in her imperfectly human body, which is why she takes a minimum of two baths a day (but definitely not showers—they feel too stabby on her skin). Her mother knows this about Erin, and yet she keeps saying things she thinks normal moms of normal kids are supposed to say, as if Erin is capable of being a normal kid, as if that is something she would even aspire to be. Mostly, what Erin aspires to be is more like Data.

If they lived by the ocean, Erin might not have the same reluctance to go outside. She might even be willing to subject her skin to the stickiness of sunscreen if it meant she could spend the day turning over rocks and cataloging her findings, mostly invertebrates like mollusks, cnidarians, and polychaete worms, which, in Erin's opinion, are all highly underappreciated creatures. At their old house near Alki Beach in West Seattle, she could walk out her front door and spend entire days searching for various life-forms. But that was when they still lived in Seattle, before the events that led to Erin's decision that trying to be "normal" was way more trouble than it was worth, a decision her mother still refuses to accept.

The problem with humans is they're too enamored with themselves, and with mammals in general. As if big brains and live birth are necessarily signs of superiority. As if the hairy, air-breathing world is the only one that matters. There is a whole universe underwater to be explored. There are engineers building ships that can travel miles

beneath the surface. One day, Erin aims to design and drive one of those ships, armed with PhDs in both marine biology and engineering. She will find creatures that have never been found, will catalog them and give them names, will help tell the story of how each being came to be, where it fits within life's perfectly orchestrated web.

Erin is, unapologetically, a science geek. She knows this is an Asperger's stereotype, as are many other things about her—the difficulties expressing emotion, the social awkwardness, the sometimes inappropriate behavior. But what can she do? These are parts of who she is. It's everyone else who decided to make them a stereotype.

One thing Erin knows for sure is that no matter what you do, people will find a way to put you in a box. It's how we're programmed. Our default is laziness. We categorize things to make them easier to understand.

That's what makes science so satisfying. It is complicated and massive, but it is also so tidy, so organized. What Erin loves most about science is the order, the logic, the way every bit of information fits into a system, even if we can't see it yet. She has faith in that system the way some people have faith in God. Evolution and taxonomy are comforting. They are stable and right.

But there's the pesky problem of chance, which never ceases to trouble Erin, and which she has made it her life's goal to figure out. The whole reason there are humans, the whole reason there's anything more than the very first single-celled organism, is because of mutation, because of something unpredictable, surprising, and unplanned—the exact kind of thing Erin hates. It's what makes

chemists and physicists and mathematicians look down on biologists as inferior scientists. Too much relies on powers outside our control, outside the laws of reason and logic and predictability. It's what makes biology a science of stories, not equations.

The thing about evolution that Erin needs to get to the bottom of is how sometimes it's this unexpected and unplanned thing that is the most necessary. Freak accidents are what make evolution possible, what made one fish start breathing air, what made his progenies' flippers turn into feet. So often, the key to survival is mutation, change, and most of the time that change is nothing more than an accident.

Sometimes it's the freaks of nature who end up being the strongest.

In the small but steadily growing Mexican part of town, there is one extended family consisting of five adults, two teenagers, seven children under the age of fourteen, and one wilted matriarch with quickly advancing dementia and questionable citizenship status. This does not include the additional cousins, second cousins, and cousins-once-removed scattered across Prescott and several surrounding towns. Rosina Suarez is the only child to a single mother, a widow whose husband died only five months after they were married, six months before baby Rosina was born. Instead of a father, Rosina has an extended family of aunts and uncles and cousins who move in and out of her house as if it were their own. Her mother's two sisters-in-law, who live in the identical townhouse apartments to the left and right of Rosina's, have been blessed with living husbands and large families. Their children do not complain or talk back or wear dark clothing, do not paint their faces with

unflattering makeup or shave the sides of their heads or listen to loud music from the 1990s that consists mostly of girls' screaming.

Rosina's family is from the mountains of Oaxaca, with deep indigenous Zapotec roots, with short, sturdy bodies and smooth dark brown skin, round faces and flat noses. Rosina's father was a mestizo from Mexico City, more European than Indio, and Rosina is tall and thin like him, towering over her family, an alien among them in so many ways.

As the eldest and only daughter, Rosina's mother has inherited the duty to house and look after her grandmother, who has a tendency to wander off when no one's looking. And because Rosina is her family's eldest daughter, it is also her duty to look after the entire brood of cousins, in addition to her regular shifts at her uncle José's restaurant, La Cocina, the best Mexican restaurant in Prescott (some would say the entire extended Eugene metropolitan area), and the center of the family's economy. Rosina spends the two and a half hours between the end of school and the start of her shift at the restaurant at her other uncle's house watching her seven young cousins while Abuelita somehow takes a nap on a chair in the corner despite the screaming horde of children, and Rosina's eldest cousin, Erwin, who is a senior at Prescott High and, in Rosina's opinion, the biggest waste of breath in the state of Oregon, sits around playing video games and popping his zits, with periodic trips to the bathroom, which Rosina suspects are masturbation breaks. Rosina's second-oldest cousin is a boring girl with no interests who is almost thirteen and perfectly qualified to take her place as primary babysitter. But Rosina is, and always will be, the oldest girl, and it is, and always will be, her responsibility to be her mother's assistant and take care of the family.

How is Rosina ever going to form a band if she's busy every afternoon changing diapers and keeping the toddlers from sticking sharp knives in electrical sockets? She should be rocking, she should be screaming into a mic onstage, not singing lullabies to her unappreciative little shit cousins while they smear boogers on her favorite pair of black jeans, which she has to hang outside to dry because the dryer's broken again, where they're going to get faded and absorb the smell of so many neighbors' tortillas frying.

The front door opens. One of the babies squeals with delight at the appearance of his mother, returned from working the lunch shift at the restaurant. "I'm out of here, Tía," Rosina says, leaping up from the couch and out the door before her aunt can even close it behind her. Rosina steps over the scattered pieces of hand-me-down junk that pass as toys, jumps on her secondhand bike, and gets the hell out of there without noticing the spit-up on her leg and something brown on her shirt that is either smashed banana or baby poop.

A mile east is a neighborhood without an official name, but which most Prescott residents openly refer to as Trailer Town. It is home to double- and single-wide trailers and small houses tilting off their foundations, yards that have been overgrown for so long, the weeds are as tall as young trees. In one of these trailers, a popular boy is kissing the salty neck of a girl whose neck is used to being kissed. She is not his girlfriend. She is used to not being anybody's girlfriend.

The little electric fan inside the trailer is on full blast, but the heat of both their bodies inside the metal box is making the girl sleepy and

a little nauseous. She wonders if she had anything she was supposed to do today. She wonders if the boy would notice if she took a little nap. She resigns herself to the answer as she closes her eyes and waits for him to finish. None of these boys ever takes very long.

There was a time when, like so many girls, she was obsessed with princesses, a time when she believed in the power of beauty and grace and sweetness. She believed in princes. She believed in being saved.

She's not sure she believes in anything now.

In a very different neighborhood, a very different girl closes her eyes and lets go, feels the boy's head between her legs, painting pleasure on her body with his tongue, just like she taught him. She smiles, almost laughs with the joy of it, how it takes her by surprise, how it bubbles up and makes her weightless.

She has never questioned her entitlement to this. She has never questioned the power of her body. She has never questioned her right to pleasure.

There are a handful of hills in Prescott, and Prescott High School student body president, straight-A+ student, pre-pre-med at (fingers crossed!) Stanford University, lives on top of the tallest one. At the moment she is driving last year's Ford midlist floor model (her father owns the dealership—"Prescott Ford: Most Fords sold in the 541 area code!") into her family's three-car garage, after finishing her volunteer shift at the old people's home (though of course she would never call it that out loud). "Retirement community" is less

offensive, which is important; she doesn't like offending anyone. She would never in a million years tell anyone how old people actually kind of gross her out, how she has to fight off the inclination to vomit through most of her shift, how afterward she sometimes cries with desperate relief as she steps into the hot shower and washes the smell of them off her, a combination of mothballs and soft food. She picked this particular volunteer opportunity because she knew it would be the most challenging, because she knows this is the key to success—embracing challenge.

In her head, she counts up her volunteer hours. She files this number away with her other favorite numbers: her GPA (4.2), her number of AP classes (ten so far, and counting), and the countdown of school days until graduation (one hundred eighty. Ugh.). She vowed long ago to not end up like her mother, a Prescott native who almost made it out, but who skipped college to marry her high school sweetheart. Sure, her mom ended up rich, but she had a chance at something more. She could have been someone besides the wife of a car salesman and the head of her neighborhood book club. She gave up the opportunity to *be* someone just as her fingers were about to brush against it, just a second before she could have grabbed it and run and never looked back.

Two miles west, a girl searches the Internet for easy ways to lose twenty pounds.

A quarter of a mile east, someone checks for the third time that the bathroom door is locked. They look at themselves in the mirror and

try not to cringe, carefully apply the lipstick they stole from their mother's purse, stuff toilet paper in the bra they shoplifted from Walmart, cross their eyes so the blur will turn them into somebody else. "I am a girl," they whisper. "My name is not Adam."

On the other side of the highway, a girl has sex with her boyfriend for the second time ever. This time it doesn't hurt. This time she moves her hips. This time she starts to understand what all the fuss is about.

In the next town over, two best friends kiss. One says, "You have to promise to never tell." The other thinks, *I want to tell everyone.*

One girl watches TV. Another plays video games. Others work part-time jobs or catch up on their summer reading lists. Some wander aimlessly around the mall in Eugene, hoping to get noticed.

One girl looks at the sky, imagines riding the clouds to somewhere new. One digs in the earth, imagines an underground tunnel like a freeway.

In another state, an invisible girl named Lucy Moynihan tries to forget a story that will define her for the rest of her life, a story no one claimed to believe.

GRACE.

The problem is, even when she ruins your life, it's kind of hard to hate your mom when she's perfect. And not "perfect" with flippy air fingers and an ironic teen accent. Perfect as in practically a saint, like almost literally. Except, technically, you have to be Catholic to become a saint, which Grace's family is not. But what are they, exactly? Certainly not Baptists anymore. Are they *Congregationalists* now? Is that even a thing?

Grace's father said Prescott, Oregon, would be more in line with their family's values than Adeline, Kentucky. He has a special gift for putting a positive spin on things that suck. He's in marketing, after all. For instance, seeing a benefit in having to move away from the only home Grace has ever known because their (former) church pretty much drove them out of town. This, Dad interpreted as an opportunity to show fortitude and resilience. It was also a great motivation to improve their skills of clipping coupons, minimizing toilet paper usage, and finding new variations of rice and beans while Mom looked for a new job and Grace tried to get

through a day of school without crying in public. While her parents practiced their fortitude and resilience, Grace practiced pretending to not be too upset that every friend she had, most of them since preschool years, threw her to the curb because her mom fell off a horse and bumped her head and refound God to be a way more liberal guy than everyone in their church wanted Him to be.

Mom's first mistake in the church was being a woman, which happened way before she bumped her head. Many of the old white folks (in a congregation that was mostly old white folks) crossed their arms in front of their chests and frowned during her guest sermons, waiting for the real pastor to take over and do the real preaching. Even before the head bump, she was a little too chipper for their tastes, a little too into the love business. So they were primed and ready for all hell to break loose when she went and married those two gay guys who owned the dog salon. In her last sermon before she got the boot, in addition to reminding the congregation of the annoying fact that Jesus loved and accepted everyone without judgment, she alluded to his being a brown-skinned socialist. There was even a rumor around town that someone overheard her exclaim, "Fuck Leviticus!" while she was pruning roses in her yard.

So, just like that, after years of service, Grace's mom was out of her job as director of women's activities and guest speaker at Great Redeemer First Baptist megachurch, instantly reviled and hated by nearly seven thousand parishioners from Adeline and the neighboring three counties. Dad had just started his online marketing business and wasn't making any money yet. But worse than being suddenly poor was being suddenly friendless in a small town where everybody

was friends. No one would sit by Grace at lunch. Graffiti started showing up on her locker, the strangest of which was "Slut" and "Whore," since she was, and is, still very much a virgin. That's just what you call girls when you want to shame them. So Grace spent what remained of the school year eating lunch alone in the gym bathroom, talking to no one throughout the day except the occasional teacher, and her parents had no idea. Mom was too busy trying to find a new job and Dad was too busy trying to find clients; Grace knew her pain wasn't something they needed to talk about.

Grace isn't quite sure how to define what she's feeling right now, but she at least knows it's not sadness about leaving. Adeline made itself very clear that it no longer had anything to offer Grace and her family in terms of friendship or feeling welcome. And even before that, when Grace was comfortably lodged in her low but stable place in the social hierarchy, with a set cast of friends and acquaintances, with well-defined rules of behavior and speech—even then, with all that order—Grace suspected something was off. She knew her role well and she performed it brilliantly, but that's what it was: a performance. Some part of her always felt like she was lying.

Maybe she always secretly hated Christian music and the cheesy, horribly produced Christian-themed movies they always watched in Friday night youth group. Maybe she secretly hated her social life revolving around youth group. Maybe she hated sitting at the same lunch table every day, with the same bland girls she never really chose and never particularly liked, who could be both timid and insufferably hostile to anyone outside their circle, whose gossip cloaked itself in Christian righteousness. Maybe she secretly wanted

a boyfriend to make out with. Maybe she was curious about all sorts of things she was not supposed to be curious about.

Grace had always yearned for something else. Different town, different school, different people. And now that she finally has the opportunity to possibly get it, she realizes she's terrified. She realizes she has no idea what she actually wants.

What's worse? Lying about who you are, or not knowing who you are at all?

Right now, faced with the uncertainty of starting a new school year at a new school in a new town, Grace would give anything for the simplicity of her old life. It may not have been satisfying in any meaningful way, it may have not been true, but at least it was safe. It was predictable. It was home. And those things sound pretty good right now.

But instead, here she is—in this weird place that doesn't know if it's a small town or a suburb, stuck in this purgatory between an unsatisfactory past and an unknown future. School starts tomorrow, Sunday is Mom's first sermon at the new church, and nothing feels close to being okay. Nothing about this place feels like home.

Grace suspects she should be praying or something. She should be asking for guidance. She should be making room for God. But right now she has bigger things to worry about than God, like surviving junior year of high school.

Grace realizes what she's feeling is homesickness. But how can someone be homesick for a place that doesn't even exist anymore?

And how can someone start a new life when she doesn't even know who she is?

ROSINA.

Fuck cousin Erwin and his useless boy existence, fuck all the uncles of the world, fuck Mami and Tía Blanca and Tía Mariela for thinking Rosina's their slave, fuck old-school tradition for agreeing with them, fuck this bike and its crooked wheel, fuck this town for its potholes and crumbly sidewalks, fuck Oregon, fuck rain and rednecks and football players and people who eat at La Cocina and don't tip and throw their greasy napkins on the floor for Rosina to clean up.

But Abuelita's okay. Rosina both loves *and* likes her grandmother, which is no small thing for Rosina. Even though Abuelita thinks Rosina is her dead daughter, Alicia, who never made it out of their village in Mexico. Even though Abuelita wandered off Tuesday night when no one was looking and made it all the way to the slightly nicer and much whiter neighborhood nearly a mile away, and that pretty cheerleader named Melissa who Rosina's been crushing on since sixth grade had to bring her back. After crying for an hour, after riding her bike through the neighborhood searching

for Abuelita, Rosina heard a knock and opened the front door, her face blotchy, her hair a mess, her nose wet with tears and snot, to a vision of beauty and kindness: Melissa the cheerleader holding Abuelita's hand, a warm smile on her face, her eyes radiant with sunlight. "Look who I found," the cheerleader said, and Abuelita kissed Melissa on the cheek, said, "Eres un ángel," walked inside the house, and Rosina was so embarrassed, she shut the door in Melissa's beautiful face after only barely managing to say thank you.

Rosina cringes at the memory. Never has a girl made her feel so un-Rosina-like. Never has she felt so bumbling. She thinks of the stupid expression "weak in the knees," how she always thought of it as some gooey romantic nonsense, but now she realizes she has experienced scientific proof that it's a real physical condition, and she hates herself for being such a cliché, for having such a crush, for being such a *girl* about it.

She pedals hard, hoping the burn in her legs will wipe away this unsettling feeling of wanting something, wanting someone, she knows she cannot have. Even on her bike, riding as fast as she can, Rosina still feels caged, trapped. She can't ride to Eugene. She certainly can't ride to Portland. All she can do is wander around the streets of this tired old town, looking for something new. Sometimes after a rain there are sidewalks full of half-drowned worms. Sometimes lost mail. The usual empty bottles and candy wrappers, receipts, a couple of crumpled-up shopping lists. Roadkill. The only new things in this town are trash.

Rosina races through the streets of Prescott, an eternal loner, the only brown girl in town who doesn't hang out with the other brown

girls, as if she's trying to stand out on purpose, her spiky black hair snaking through the air, earbuds in her ears, listening to those wild women that made music in towns and cities so close to here but practically a whole generation ago, those brave girls with boots and electric guitars, singing with voices made out of moss and rocks and rainstorms. Relics, artifacts. Everything worth anything happened a long time ago when new really meant new.

Why does she always end up on this street? There's nothing here but cookie-cutter houses that were new in the fifties, a few scraggly trees, small front lawns with browning grass. This street isn't on the way to anywhere Rosina wants to go. It's not on the way to anywhere.

But there it is. The house. Lucy Moynihan's house. Faded white paint peeling like on every other house. From the outside, it's nothing special. It housed a girl Rosina barely knew. It's been empty all summer. It shouldn't matter. It doesn't. So why does she keep coming back here? As if it's calling her. As if, even though Lucy's long gone, she's not done with this town quite yet.

But the house isn't empty now. Not anymore.

If Rosina hadn't already been staring, she probably never would have noticed the plain, chubby white girl reading on the front porch. There isn't much about the girl that makes her stand out from the side of the house. She is off-white against off-white. She has the kind of soft, undefined face you don't remember. But she's new, and that's something. That's more than something.

"Hey!" Rosina calls, screeching to a halt on her bike.

The girl jumps. Rosina thinks she hears a mouselike squeak.

"Who are you?" Rosina says as she kicks open her kickstand. "You just moved here?" she says as she walks up the cracked footpath. "This is your house now?"

"Um, hi?" the girl says, setting her book down, a mediocre fantasy novel. She brushes limp, dirty blond bangs out of her eyes, but they fall right back to where they were.

"I'm Rosina," Rosina says, thrusting her hand out for a shake.

"Grace."

Grace's hand is limp and slightly moist in Rosina's tight grip. "What year are you? You look like a sophomore."

"Junior."

"Me too."

"I'm going to Prescott High."

"Yeah, that's kind of the only option here." Rosina does nothing to hide the fact that she's sizing the new girl up. "Your accent is hilarious. You're like a cartoon character or something."

Grace opens her mouth, but nothing comes out.

"Sorry, that sounded rude, didn't it?" Rosina says.

"Um, kind of?"

"I actually sort of meant it as a compliment. You're different. I like different. Where are you from?"

"A small town in Kentucky called Adeline."

"Huh. Well, there are a lot of rednecks here, so you'll feel right at home. You know whose house you're moving into, right?" Rosina doesn't wait for an answer. "Do you know what 'pariah' means? This was the town pariah's house. Have you read that book *The Scarlet Letter*? She was kind of like that, except not."

"I never read it. It was banned from my school's library."

"Wow. Even we're not that backward here."

Rosina's quiet for a while. She kicks a clump of weeds growing through a crack in the sidewalk. "I guess she's a sophomore this year. Wherever she is."

"Who?" Grace says. "What'd she do?"

Rosina shrugs. "*She* didn't do anything. But it doesn't really matter what actually happened. It just matters that she talked about it." Rosina's eyes shift around but nothing holds her gaze. She wants something to lean on. She is the kind of person who likes to lean.

"What do people say happened?" Grace asks.

Rosina shrugs. She is trying to act cool, trying to act like there aren't feelings running deep beneath the surface. But it is hard to act cool when you're not leaning on something, when you were already pissed off before this unexpected conversation even started, when the late afternoon sun is in your eyes and you're standing in the shadow of the house of that poor girl who deserved better and you should have done something for her when you had the chance.

"The thing is," Rosina says, "people don't want to hear something that'll make their lives more difficult, even if it's the truth. People hate having to change the way they see things. So instead of admitting the world is ugly, they shit on the messenger for telling them about it."

Rosina spits on the sidewalk, sickened by the slow heat rising from the pit of her stomach and threatening to burn her down. What is it about this quiet girl on the porch that is making her mouth move and flames come out? Is it simply because she's asking questions? Because she actually seems to care?

"Who gives a crap about some girl getting raped?" Rosina says with bitter sarcasm. "She wasn't important. None of us is important. The girl is gone. We should all just forget her." Rosina looks at Grace like she just noticed she's there. "You really don't say much, do you?"

"You've kind of been doing all the talking."

Rosina smiles. "Well, New Girl, do you have anything interesting to say?"

"Oh," Grace says. "Um . . ."

"Time's up," Rosina says. "I'm out of here. See you at school, I guess."

"It was nice to meet you?" Grace says. Rosina tips an imaginary hat, then turns and lifts her leg over her bike.

"Wait!" Grace says. She seems as surprised as Rosina at the sudden volume of her voice. "What was her name?"

Rosina sighs. "Does it matter?"

"Um, yes?" Grace says softly. Then a little louder: "Yes, I think it does matter."

Rosina doesn't want to believe her. That would mean caring about something she can't do anything about. She doesn't want to say the girl's name out loud, because that would make her real, and what's the fucking point of that?

"Lucy," Rosina says as she hops onto her bike. "Lucy Moynihan." Then she rides away, as fast as her long legs can pedal.

ERIN.

"I practiced my routine for tomorrow morning," Erin tells her mother. "It will take me approximately one hour and fifteen minutes from the moment I wake up until I get to school. Margin of error is plus or minus three minutes. This schedule also assumes that I select and lay out my outfit the night before."

"That's nice, honey," Mom says. "But maybe it's not necessary to lay your clothes out since you wear the same thing every day." Mom is always trying to convince Erin to do things differently. There is always a better way than Erin's way.

"But it will add a cumulative one to two minutes to take each item out of its drawer."

Erin's wardrobe consists of three checkered flannels, four plain white T-shirts, two gray T-shirts, three pairs of baggy jeans, two pairs of baggy cords, one pair of black Converse All Stars, and one pair of blue Converse All Stars, everything with the tags cut off.

"Why don't you wear those new shirts I got you?" Mom says.

"They're too scratchy."

"I'll wash them a few more times. They'll soften up."

"I like my old shirts."

"Your old shirts have holes in them. They're stained."

"So?"

"You may not care about things like that, but other people notice," Mom says. "People will make judgments about you."

"That's their problem."

Erin knows that Mom thinks she's helping, that Mom thinks this is the key to happiness—belonging, finding a way to fit in. But Erin already tried that. She spent her whole childhood studying people, trying to figure out how to be a "normal girl." She became a mimic, an actor playing multiple parts—she had long hair, she wore clothes her mom said were cute, she even wore makeup for a short period in eighth grade. She sat on her hands to keep herself from rubbing them together when she got nervous. She bit her cheek until it bled to keep herself from rocking in public. Erin was a chameleon, changing herself to fit whatever group she happened to find herself in, constantly racing through the database in her head for appropriate things to wear, to not wear; to say, to not say; to feel, to not feel. But no matter how hard she tried, Erin was never quite appropriate. Her words were always either a little too early or a little too late, her voice always a little too loud or a little too quiet. The harder she tried to fit in, the worse she felt.

People know what boys with Asperger's look like, or at least they think they do. Boys rage and thrash and scream. They fight and throw themselves around. They punish the world for making them hurt.

But girl Aspies are different. Invisible. Undiagnosed. Because

unlike boys, girls turn inward. They hide. They adapt, even if it hurts. Because they are not screaming, people assume they do not suffer. The girl who cries herself to sleep every night doesn't cause trouble.

Until she speaks. Until her pain gets so big it boils over. Until she has no choice but to emerge from her almost two weeks of silence to tell the truth about what she did with the boy named Casper Pennington—her final and most drastic attempt to do what she thought the other girls were doing. The event that led them here.

Erin shaved her head soon after. She vowed to never again care what anyone thought of her. She vowed to stop caring, period.

Mom sighs. "I just want to help make life easier for you."

"My old shirts make life easier for me," Erin says flatly. If she didn't wear the same thing every day, she'd have to decide what to wear every single morning. How do people do that? How do they even leave the house?

"Fine," Mom says. "You win." As if it's a war. As if it's Erin against Mom and the Normal Police.

Mom serves Erin a lunch of avocado-and-grapefruit salad with a side of raw almond butter and celery. It looks more like art than food—weird vegan chipmunk art. She put Erin on a raw food diet last year because she read somewhere it's supposed to help with mood stabilization and digestion issues for people on the spectrum. As much as Erin hates to admit it, it does actually seem to be working. But now, no matter how much she eats, she's almost always hungry again in an hour.

Mom is standing at her usual station at the kitchen island behind her laptop. This is where she lives her online life in the world of

Asperger's parents—sending e-mails to the support group she leads, moderating her Facebook group, tweeting helpful tips and articles, posting raw, vegan, gluten-free recipes on her Pinterest page. She does all these things, is considered to be an expert on Asperger's by a growing number of virtual friends, but she still doesn't understand Erin at all.

Erin's dog, Spot, is sitting in his usual station next to her under the table. He is named after Data's pet cat, Spot, featured in several episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Erin could not get a cat because she's allergic. This Spot is her second Spot. Spot number one was a guinea pig. Spot does not have spots. He is a golden retriever. Data's Spot didn't have spots either, so Erin isn't worried about these inconsistencies.

"Are you looking forward to your job in the school office?" Mom says. She has been trying to teach Erin small talk. They practice at mealtimes.

"It's not a 'job,' Mom. They're not paying me. It's essentially slave labor. In some ways, you and Dad are paying *them*, since public schools are funded by tax dollars, and I assume you both pay taxes. Dad does at least. You don't work."

"I work, honey," Mom says. "I just don't get paid money for the work I do."

"You could get advertisers for your blog," Erin says. "You could get paid for speaking at conferences and stuff."

"Thank you for your input," Mom says. "But I'm happy where I am."

"No, you're not," Erin says. Mom gives her the look that means

she said exactly the wrong thing, but Erin keeps talking. "If you made money, you could become financially independent."

"Why would I want to do that?"

She doesn't say it. As mean as she can be to her mom, as many inappropriate things that come out of her mouth, there is one thing she never says: *So you wouldn't have to stay married to Dad.*

Erin shrugs. "A monkey would be overqualified for my job in the office. They just needed to put me somewhere during PE." Erin got a doctor's note saying she has problems with group sports and touching people. The note does not specify her dislike of sweating, which is also a problem.

"The training went well this morning?"

"I have access to the whole school database. I can look up everyone's grades if I want to."

"But you wouldn't do that, would you?"

"It's against the rules." Everyone knows how Erin feels about rules. That's why they gave her the job, which includes access to sensitive information.

"What's your plan for the rest of the day?" Mom says.

"I will read for one hour. Then I will pick up Spot's poo in the backyard and dispose of it. Then I will wash my hands for a full minute. Then I will eat an apple and carrot sticks because this meal will only keep me satiated for approximately ninety minutes. After that, I will watch my episode because I have completed all my duties for the day."

Erin's old occupational therapist in Seattle taught her about delayed gratification, about how it's the key to success. Erin has

become very good at it. She does all the things she doesn't want to do before she does the things she wants to do. That way she is always motivated to keep doing things and she always gets everything done. She always has at least one list going of what needs to be done, in a precise order based on a combination of importance, time sensitivity, and enjoyability (or lack of). Making these lists is sometimes as much work as the tasks themselves. But what people don't understand is it's necessary; it's a matter of survival. Without Erin's elaborate lists and schedules, tasks would have no hope of ever getting done. Erin would forget. Things would get jumbled around in her head until they crumbled into misplaced pieces, burying Erin in anxiety. Without her lists, without her obsessive organization, there are no rules, no order. The world makes no sense. It flies apart and threatens to fly Erin away with it.

"Sounds like a plan," Mom says.

"I always have a plan."

"Yes, honey," Mom says. "I know."

Maybe Erin can't pick up on subtle tones all the time, but she's pretty sure Mom's voice means exasperated. Erin feels a wrenching in the place in her chest where pain always starts, the place from which anxiety radiates into the rest of her body. Right now, the pain place is saying Mom should be proud of Erin for the success of her lists, not annoyed and ashamed that she needs them.

Spot paws at Erin's leg because he can tell she's feeling agitated. Mom got him cheap because he failed out of helper dog school, but he's still very talented.

"There's a new family in my Tuesday night support group,"

Mom says, even though she knows Erin hates talking while she eats.

"That's nice," Erin says. What she wants to do is say nothing, but that is unfortunately not how conversations work.

"They have a ten-year-old daughter who was just diagnosed. She's very high functioning, like you. Very intelligent."

High-functioning, low-functioning. As if it's that simple. As if those two designations mean anything real.

Erin doesn't say anything. Her excuse is that she's chewing celery.

"I thought it might be nice if you two could have a playdate sometime."

"Mom, I'm sixteen years old. I do not have playdates."

"I know she'd really like to meet you."

"I don't care."

"Erin, look at me," she says. Erin does, but she aims her sight just below Mom's eyes, a special trick she developed to make people think she's looking them in the eye when really she's not. "Remember how we talked about empathy? Try to imagine how this girl feels, and how reassuring it would be to meet someone older with Asperger's who's doing well."

Erin rubs her hands together to help calm her anxiety, to help her think straight. She thinks about empathy, how people mistakenly believe Aspies don't have it, that it's something people like Erin need to be taught. But Erin has empathy, lots of it, so much it hurts sometimes, so much that other people's pain turns into her own pain and makes her completely incapable of doing anything useful for anyone. That's why it's easier to avoid it than to engage. It's easier to try to ignore it than try to comfort whoever's hurting, because

usually that backfires and makes things worse. What Erin wants to do with pain is fix it, make it go away, and sometimes that's not what other people want. And that makes absolutely no sense to Erin at all.

What makes sense is logic. When in doubt, Erin asks herself, "What would Data do?" She does her best to think like an android. She uses her excellent logic skills to deduce if meeting would be a beneficial situation for the ten-year-old.

"But, Mom," Erin finally says, having reached her conclusion, "I'm *not* doing well." Despite her lists, despite her adapting, every day is a struggle that leaves Erin exhausted in a way Mom will never understand.

Erin knows what Mom's face means. It is what people call a face "dropping," though it hasn't actually gone anywhere. It means very sad and disappointed. In the case of Erin's mom, it also means you just said something that's obvious but that she's working very hard to pretend isn't true.

"Why do you say that? You get great grades, your IQ is off the charts, you're thriving in a mainstream high school."

Erin thinks about that. "I have one friend. Everyone else calls me a freak. Even she calls me a freak sometimes. And my one attempt at having a boyfriend made us have to move to another state."

"Erin, we've talked about this. That's not why we moved. Your dad got offered a job here."

But Erin doesn't have to be a genius (even though she is) to know the real reason they moved. Whether or not her parents admit it, she knows no one willingly moves from a tenured position at the

University of Washington to the University of Oregon for a job that pays less money.

"Mom," Erin says, "you need a better hobby."

She recognizes the look on Mom's face. It's like the face dropping from before, but worse.

"Empathy, Erin," Mom says softly. Her eyes are wet.

Erin feels something grab and twist the pain place in her chest. That means she is supposed to say she's sorry.

"I need some space," Erin says instead. "I'll be in my room." Her mother exhausts her more than almost anyone else. It's not necessarily being around people that drains Erin's batteries, it's being around people who want her to act like someone she's not.

"Come on, Spot," Erin says. The dog follows Erin out of the kitchen, loyal even when Erin says things that make Mom sad. Erin never knows if Mom moves from her place at the island counter while she's gone, because every time she comes back, Mom's still there.