

## Chapter One

When I was little, my dad used to tell me, “Will, you can pick your friends, and you can pick your nose, but you can’t pick your friend’s nose.” This seemed like a reasonably astute observation to me when I was eight, but it turns out to be incorrect on a few levels. To begin with, you cannot possibly pick your friends, or else I never would have ended up with Tiny Cooper.

Tiny Cooper is not the world’s gayest person, and he is not the world’s largest person, but I believe he may be the world’s largest person who is really, really gay, and also the world’s gayest person who is really, really large. Tiny has been my best friend since fifth grade, except for all last semester, when he was busy discovering the sheer scope of his own gayness, and I was busy having an actual honest-to-God Group of Friends for the first time in my life, who ended up Never Talking to Me Again due to two slight transgressions:

1. After some school-board member got all upset about gays in the locker room, I defended Tiny Cooper’s right to be both gigantic (and, therefore, the best member of our shitty football team’s offensive line) and gay in a letter to the school newspaper that I, stupidly, signed.
2. This guy in the Group of Friends named Clint was talking about the letter at lunch, and in the process of talking about it, he called me a bitchsqealer, and I didn’t know what a bitchsqealer was, so I was like, “What do you mean?” And then he called me a bitchsqealer again, at which point I told Clint to fuck off and then took my tray and left.

Which I guess means that technically *I* left the Group of Friends, although it felt the other way around. Honestly, none of them ever seemed to like me, but they were *around*, which isn’t nothing. And now they aren’t around, leaving me utterly bereft of social peers.

Unless you count Tiny, that is. Which I suppose I must.

Andbutso a few weeks after we get back from Christmas break our junior year, I’m sitting in my Assigned Seat in precalc when Tiny waltzes in wearing his jersey tucked into his chinos, even though football season is long over. Every day, Tiny miraculously manages to wedge himself into the chair-desk beside mine in precalc, and every day, I am amazed he can do it.

So Tiny squeezes into his chair, I am duly amazed, and then he turns to me and he whispers really loudly because secretly he wants other people to hear, “I’m in *love*.” I roll my eyes, because he falls in love every hour on the hour with some poor new boy. They all look the same: skinny and sweaty and tan, the last an abomination, because all February tans in Chicago are fake, and boys who fake tan—I don’t care whether

they're gay—are ridiculous.

“You're so cynical,” Tiny says, waving his hand at me.

“I'm not cynical, Tiny,” I answer. “I'm practical.”

“You're a robot,” he says. Tiny thinks that I am incapable of what humans call emotion because I have not cried since my seventh birthday, when I saw the movie *All Dogs Go to Heaven*. I suppose I should have known from the title that it wouldn't end merrily, but in my defense, I was seven. Anyway, I haven't cried since then. I don't really understand the *point* of crying. Also, I feel that crying is almost—like, aside from deaths of relatives or whatever—totally avoidable if you follow two very simple rules: 1. Don't care too much. 2. Shut up. Everything unfortunate that has ever happened to me has stemmed from failure to follow one of the rules.

“I know love is real because I *feel* it,” Tiny says.

Apparently, class has started without our knowing, because Mr. Applebaum, who is ostensibly teaching us precalculus but is mostly teaching me that pain and suffering must be endured stoically, says, “You feel what, Tiny?”

“Love!” says Tiny. “I feel love.” And everyone turns around and either laughs or groans at Tiny, and because I'm sitting next to him and he's my best and only friend, they're laughing and groaning at me, too, which is precisely why I would not choose Tiny Cooper as my friend. He draws too much attention. Also, he has a pathological inability to follow either of my two rules. And so he waltzes around, caring too much and ceaselessly talking, and then he's baffled when the world craps on him. And, of course, due to sheer proximity, this means the world craps on me, too.

After class, I'm staring into my locker, wondering how I managed to leave *The Scarlet Letter* at home, when Tiny comes up with his Gay-Straight Alliance friends Gary (who is gay) and Jane (who may or may not be—I've never asked), and Tiny says to me, “Apparently, everyone thinks I professed my love for you in precalc. Me in love with Will Grayson. Isn't that the silliest crap you ever heard?”

“Great,” I say.

“People are just such idiots,” Tiny says. “As if there's something wrong with being in love.”

Gary groans then. If you could pick your friends, I'd consider Gary. Tiny got close with Gary and Jane and Gary's boyfriend, Nick, when he joined the GSA during my tenure as a member of the Group of Friends. I barely know Gary, since I've only been hanging around Tiny again for about two weeks, but he seems like the normalest person Tiny has ever befriended.

“There's a difference,” Gary points out, “between being in love and announcing it in precalc.” Tiny starts to talk and Gary cuts him off. “I mean, don't get me wrong. You have every right to love Zach.”

“Billy,” says Tiny.

“Wait, what happened to Zach?” I ask, because I could have sworn Tiny was in love with a Zach during precalc. But forty-seven minutes have passed since his proclamation, so maybe he's changed gears. Tiny has had about 3,900 boyfriends—half of them Internet-only.

Gary, who seems as flummoxed by the emergence of Billy as I am, leans against the lockers and bangs his head softly against the steel. “Tiny, you being a makeout whore is *so* not good for the cause.”

I look way up at Tiny and say, “Can we quell the rumors of our love? It hurts my chances with the ladies.”

“Calling them ‘the ladies’ doesn’t help either,” Jane tells me.

Tiny laughs. “But seriously,” I tell him, “I always catch shit about it.” Tiny looks at me seriously for once and nods a little.

“Although for the record,” Gary says, “you could do worse than Will Grayson.”

“And he has,” I note.

Tiny spins in a balletic pirouette out into the middle of the hallway and, laughing, shouts, “Dear World, I am not hot for Will Grayson. But world, there’s something else you should know about Will Grayson.” And then he begins to sing, a Broadway baritone as big as his waist, “I can’t live without him!”

People laugh and whoop and clap as Tiny continues the serenade while I walk off to English. It’s a long walk, and it only gets longer when someone stops you and asks how it feels to be sodomized by Tiny Cooper, and how you find Tiny Cooper’s “gay little pencil prick” behind his fat belly. I respond the way I always do: by looking down and walking straight and fast. I know they’re kidding. I know part of knowing someone is being mean to them or whatever. Tiny always has some brilliant thing to say back, like, “For someone who theoretically doesn’t want me, you sure spend a lot of time thinking and talking about my penis.” Maybe that works for Tiny, but it never works for me. Shutting up works. Following the rules works. So I shut up, and I don’t care, and I keep walking, and soon it’s over.

The last time I said anything of note was the time I wrote the fricking letter to the editor about fricking Tiny Cooper and his fricking right to be a fricking star on our horrible football team. I don’t regret writing the letter in the least, but I regret signing it. Signing it was a clear violation of the rule about shutting up, and look where it got me: alone on a Tuesday afternoon, staring at my black Chuck Taylors.

That night, not long after I order pizza for me and my parents, who are—as always—late at the hospital, Tiny Cooper calls me and, real quiet and fast, he blurts out, “Neutral Milk Hotel is supposedly playing a reunion show at the Hideout and it’s totally not advertised and no one even knows about it and holy shit, Grayson, holy shit!”

“Holy shit!” I shout. One thing you can say for Tiny: whenever something awesome happens, Tiny is always the first to hear.

Now, I am not generally given over to excitement, but Neutral Milk Hotel sort of changed my life. They released this absolutely fantastic album called *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* in 1998 and haven’t been heard from since, purportedly because their lead singer lives in a cave in New Zealand. But anyway, he’s a genius. “When?”

“Dunno. I just heard. I’m gonna call Jane, too. She likes them almost as much as you do. Okay, so now. Now. Let’s go to the Hideout now.”

“I’m literally on my way,” I answer, opening the door to the garage.

I call my mom from the car. I tell her Neutral Milk Hotel is playing at the Hideout and she says, “Who? What? You’re hiding out?” And then I hum a few bars of one of their songs and Mom says, “Oh, I know that song. It’s on the mix you made me,” and I say, “Right,” and she says, “Well you have to be back by eleven,” and I say, “Mom this is a historical event. History doesn’t have a curfew,” and she says, “Back by eleven,” and I say, “Fine. Jesus,” and then she has to go cut cancer out of someone.

Tiny Cooper lives in a mansion with the world’s richest parents. I don’t think either of his parents have jobs, but they are so disgustingly rich that Tiny Cooper doesn’t even live *in* the mansion; he lives in the mansion’s *coach house*, all by himself. He has three bedrooms in that motherfucker and a fridge that always has beer in it and his parents never bother him, and so we can sit there all day and play video game football and drink Miller Lite, except in point of fact Tiny hates video games and I hate drinking beer, so mostly all we ever do is play darts (he has a dartboard) and listen to music and talk and study. I’ve just started to say the *T* in Tiny when he comes running out of his room, one black leather loafer on and the other in his hand, shouting, “Go, Grayson, go go.”

And everything goes perfectly on the way there. Traffic’s not too bad on Sheridan, and I’m cornering the car like it’s the Indy 500, and we’re listening to my favorite NMH song, “Holland, 1945,” and then onto Lake Shore Drive, the waves of Lake Michigan crashing against the boulders by the Drive, the windows cracked to get the car to defrost, the dirty, bracing, cold air rushing in, and I love the way Chicago smells—Chicago is brackish lake water and soot and sweat and grease and I love it, and I love this song, and Tiny’s saying *I love this song*, and he’s got the visor down so he can muss up his hair a little more expertly. That gets me to thinking that Neutral Milk Hotel is going to *see me* just as surely as I’m going to see them, so I give myself a once-over in the rearview. My face seems too square and my eyes too big, like I’m perpetually surprised, but there’s nothing wrong with me that I can fix.

The Hideout is a dive bar made of wooden planks that’s nestled between a factory and some Department of Transportation building. There’s nothing swank about it, but there’s a line out the door even though it’s only seven. So I huddle in line for a while with Tiny until Gary and Possibly Gay Jane show up.

Jane’s wearing a hand-scrawled Neutral Milk Hotel v-neck T-shirt under her open coat. Jane showed up in Tiny’s life around the time I dropped out of it, so we don’t really know each other. Still, I’d say she’s currently about my fourth-best friend, and apparently she has good taste in music.

Waiting outside the Hideout in the face-scrunching cold, she says hi without looking at me, and I say hi

back, and then she says, “This band is so completely brilliant,” and I say, “I know.”

This marks possibly the longest conversation I’ve ever had with Jane. I kick at the gravelly dirt a little and watch a miniature dust cloud encircle my foot and then I tell Jane how much I like “Holland, 1945,” and she says, “I like their less accessible stuff. The polyphonic, noisy stuff.” I just nod, in hopes that it appears I know what *polyphonic* means.

One thing about Tiny Cooper is that you can’t whisper in his ear, even if you’re reasonably tall like myself, because the motherfucker is six six, and so you have to tap his giant shoulder and then sort of motion with your head that you’d like to whisper into his ear, and then he leans down and you say, “Hey, is Jane the gay part of the Gay-Straight Alliance or the straight part?”

And Tiny leans down to my ear and whispers back, “Dunno. I think she had a boyfriend freshman year.” I point out that Tiny Cooper had about 11,542 girlfriends freshman year, and then Tiny punches me in the arm in a way that he thinks is playful but actually causes permanent nerve damage.

Gary is rubbing Jane’s arms up and down to keep her warm when *finally* the line starts to move. Then about five seconds later, we see this kid looking heartbroken, and he’s precisely the kind of small-blond-tan guy Tiny Cooper would like, and so Tiny says, “What’s wrong?” And then the kid answers, “It’s over twenty-one only.”

“You,” I tell Tiny, stammering. “You *bitchsqealer*.” I still don’t know what it means, but it seems appropriate.

Tiny Cooper purses his lips and furrows his brow. He turns to Jane. “You got a fake ID?” Jane nods. Gary pipes up, “Me too,” and I’m tensing my fists, my jaw locked, and I just want to scream, but instead I say, “Whatever, I’m going home,” because *I* don’t have a fake ID.

But then Tiny says real fast and real quiet, “Gary, hit me as hard as you can in the face when I’m showing my ID, and then, Grayson, you just walk behind me like you belong in the joint,” and then no one says anything for a while, until Gary says, too loud, “Um, I don’t really know how to *hit*.” We’re getting close to the bouncer, who has a large tattoo on his bald head, so Tiny just mumbles, “Yes you do. Just hit me hard.”

I lag back a little, watching. Jane gives her ID to the bouncer. He shines a flashlight on it, glances up at her, and hands it back. Then it’s Tiny’s turn. I take a series of very quick, short breaths, because I read once that people with a lot of oxygen in their blood look calmer, and then I watch as Gary gets on his tiptoes and rears his arm back and wallops Tiny in the right eye. Tiny’s head jerks back, and Gary screams, “Oh my God, *ow ow*, shit my hand,” and the bouncer jumps up to grab Gary, and then Tiny Cooper turns his body to block the bouncer’s view of me, and as Tiny turns, I walk into the bar like Tiny Cooper is my revolving door.

Once inside, I look back and see the bouncer holding Gary by the shoulders, and Gary grimacing while staring at his hand. Then Tiny puts a hand on the bouncer and says, “Dude, we were just fucking around. Good one though, Dwight.” It takes me a minute to figure out that Gary is Dwight. Or Dwight is Gary.

The bouncer says, “He fucking hit you in the eye,” and then Tiny says, “He owed me one,” and then Tiny

explains to the bouncer that both he and Gary/Dwight are members of the DePaul University football team, and that earlier in the weight room Tiny had spotted poorly or something. The bouncer says he played O-Line in high school, and then suddenly they're having a nice little chat while the bouncer glances at Gary's extrarordinarily fake ID, and then we are all four of us inside the Hideout, alone with Neutral Milk Hotel and a hundred strangers.

The people-sea surrounding the bar parts and Tiny gets a couple of beers and offers me one. I decline. "Why Dwight?" I ask. And Tiny says, "On his ID, he's Dwight David Eisenhower IV." And I say, "Where the frak did everyone get a fake ID anyway?" and then Tiny says, "There are places." I resolve to get one.

I say, "Actually, I will have a beer," mostly because I want something in my hand. Tiny hands me the one he's already started in on, and then I make my way up close to the stage without Tiny and without Gary and without Possibly Gay Jane. It's just me and the stage, which is only raised up about two feet in this joint, so if the lead singer of Neutral Milk Hotel is particularly short—like if he is three feet ten inches tall—I will soon be looking him straight in the eye. Other people move up to the stage, and soon the place is packed. I've been here before for all-ages shows, but it's never been like this—the beer that I haven't sipped and don't intend to sweating in my hand, the well-pierced, tattooed strangers all around me. Every last soul in the Hideout right now is cooler than anyone in the Group of Friends. These people don't think there's anything wrong with me—they don't even *notice* me. They assume I am one of them, which feels like the very summit of my high school career. Here I am, standing on an over-twenty-one night at the best bar in America's second city, getting ready to be among a couple hundred people who see the reunion show of the greatest no-name band of the last decade.

These four guys come out onstage, and while they don't bear a *striking* resemblance to the members of Neutral Milk Hotel, I tell myself that, whatever, I've only seen pictures on the web. But then they start playing. I'm not quite sure how to describe this band's music, except to say that it sounds like a hundred thousand weasels being dropped into a boiling ocean. And then the guy starts singing:

*She used to love me, yeah*

*But now she hates*

*She used to screw me, bro*

*But now she dates*

*Other guys*

*Other guys*

Barring a prefrontal lobotomy, there's absolutely no way that the lead singer of Neutral Milk Hotel would ever *think*, let alone *write*, let alone *sing*, such lyrics. And then I realize: I have waited outside in the cold gray-lit car-exhausted frigidity and caused the possible broken bones in Gary's hand to hear a band that is,

manifestly, *not* Neutral Milk Hotel. And although he is nowhere amid the crowd of hushed and stunned NMH fans surrounding me, I immediately shout, “Damn you, Tiny Cooper!”

At the end of the song, my suspicions are confirmed when the lead singer says, to a reception of absolute silence, “Thank you! Thanks very much. NMH couldn’t make it, but we’re Ashland Avenue, and we’re here to rock!” *No*, I think. *You’re Ashland Avenue and you’re here to suck*. Someone taps me on the shoulder then and I turn around and find myself staring at this unspeakably hot twenty-something girl with a labret piercing, flaming red hair, and boots up her calves. She says, askingly, “We thought Neutral Milk Hotel was playing?” and I look down and say, “Me—” I stammer for a second, and then say “too. I’m here for them, too.”

The girl leans into my ear to shout above the atonal arrhythmic affront to decency that is Ashland Avenue. “Ashland Avenue is no Neutral Milk Hotel.”

Something about the fullness of the room, or the strangeness of the stranger, has made me talkative, and I shout back, “Ashland Avenue is what they play to terrorists to make them talk.” The girl smiles, and it’s only now that I realize that she’s conscious of the age difference. She asks me where I’m in school, and I say “Evanston,” and she says, “*High* school?” And I say, “Yeah but don’t tell the bartender,” and she says, “I feel like a real pervert right now,” and I say, “Why?” and she just laughs. I know the girl isn’t really into me, but I still feel marginally pimping.

And then this huge hand settles on my shoulder, and I look down and see the middle school graduation ring he’s worn on his pinkie ever since eighth grade and know immediately that it’s Tiny. And to think, some idiots claim that the gays have fashion sense.

I turn around and Tiny Cooper is crying huge tears. One of Tiny Cooper’s tears could drown a kitten. And I mouth WHAT’S WRONG because Ashland Avenue is sucking too loudly for him to hear me, and Tiny Cooper just hands me his phone and walks away. It’s showing me Tiny’s Facebook feed, zoomed in on a status update.

*Zach* is like the more i think about it the more i think y ruin a gr8 frendship? i still think tiny’s awesum tho.

I push my way through a couple people to Tiny, and I pull down his shoulder and scream into his ear, “THAT’S PRETTY FUCKING BAD,” and Tiny shouts back, “I GOT DUMPED BY STATUS UPDATE,” and I answer, “YEAH, I NOTICED. I MEAN, HE COULD HAVE AT LEAST TEXTED. OR E-MAILED. OR SENT A PASSENGER PIGEON.”

“WHAT AM I GOING TO *DO*?” Tiny shouts in my ear, and I want to say, “Hopefully, go find a guy who knows there is no u in *awesome*,” but I just shrug my shoulders and pat him firmly on the back, and guide him away from Ashland Avenue and toward the bar.

Which, as it turns out, is something of a mistake. Just before we get to the bar, I see Possibly Gay Jane hovering by a tall table. She tells me Gary has left in disgust. “It was a publicity ploy by Ashland Avenue, apparently,” she says.

I say, “But no NMH fan would *ever* listen to this drivel.”

Then Jane looks up at me all pouty and big-eyed and says, “My brother is the guitarist.”

I feel like a total asshole and say, “Oh, sorry, dude.”

And she says, “Christ, I’m kidding. If he were, I’d disown him.” At some point during our four-second conversation I have managed to completely lose Tiny, which is no easy task, so I tell Jane about Tiny’s great Facebook wall of dumpage, and she is still laughing when Tiny appears at our table with a round tray holding six shot glasses full of a greenish liquid. “I don’t really drink,” I remind Tiny, and he nods. He pushes a shot toward Jane, and Jane just shakes her head.

Tiny takes a shot, grimaces, and exhales. “Tastes like Satan’s fire cock,” Tiny says, and then pushes another shot in my direction. “Sounds delightful,” I say, “but I’ll pass.”

“How can he just,” Tiny yells, and then he takes a shot, “dump me,” and another shot, “on his STATUS after I say I LOVE him,” and another. “What is the goddamned world coming to?” Another. “I really do, Grayson. I know you think I’m full of shit, but I knew I loved him the moment we kissed. Goddamn it. What am I going to *do*?” And then he stifles a sob with the last shot.

Jane tugs on my shirtsleeve and leans in to me. I can feel her breath warm against my neck, and she says, “We’re going to have a big frickin’ problem when he starts feeling those shots,” and I decide that Jane is right, and anyway, Ashland Avenue is terrible, so we need to leave the Hideout posthaste.

I turn to tell Tiny it’s time to go, but he has disappeared. I glance back at Jane, who’s looking toward the bar with a look of profound concern on her face. Shortly thereafter, Tiny Cooper returns. Only two shots this time, thank God.

“Drink with me,” he says, and I shake my head, but then Jane pokes me in the back, and I realize that I have to take a bullet for Tiny. I dig into my pocket and hand Jane my car keys. The only sure way to prevent him from drinking the rest of the plutonium-green booze is to down one myself. So I grab the shot glass and Tiny says, “Aw, fuck him, anyway, Grayson. Fuck everybody,” and I say, “I’ll drink to that,” and I do, and then it hits my tongue and it’s like a burning Molotov cocktail—glass and all. I involuntarily spit the entire shot out onto Tiny Cooper’s shirt.

“A monochrome Jackson Pollock,” Jane says, and then tells Tiny, “We gotta bolt. This band is like a root canal *sans* painkiller.”

Jane and I walk out together, figuring (correctly, as it turns out) that Tiny, wearing my shot of nuclear fallout, will follow us. Since I’ve failed at drinking both the alcoholic beverages Tiny bought me, Jane tosses the keys back to me in a high arc. I grab them and get behind the wheel after Jane climbs into the back. Tiny tumbles into the passenger seat. I start the car, and my date with massive aural disappointment comes to an end. But I hardly think about it on the way home because Tiny keeps going on about Zach. That’s the thing about Tiny: his problems are so huge that yours can hide behind them.

“How can you just be so *wrong* about something?” Tiny is asking over the noisy screechiness of Jane’s

favorite (and my least favorite) NMH song. I'm cruising up Lake Shore and can hear Jane singing along in the back, a little off-key but closer than I'd be if I sang in front of people, which I don't, due to the Shutting Up Rule. And Tiny is saying, "If you can't trust your gut then what can you trust?" And I say, "You can trust that caring, as a rule, ends poorly," which is true. Caring doesn't sometimes lead to misery. It always does.

"My *heart* is broken," Tiny says, as if the thing has never happened before to him, as if it has never happened before to anyone. And maybe that's the problem: maybe each new breakup feels so radically new to Tiny that, in some way, it *hasn't* happened before. "And Yaw naht helping," he adds, which is when I notice he's slurring his words. Ten minutes from his house if we don't catch traffic, and then straight to bed.

But I can't drive as fast as Tiny can deteriorate. By the time I exit Lake Shore—six minutes to go—he's slurring his words *and* bawling, going on and on about Facebook and the death of polite society and whatever. Jane's got her hands, with fingernails painted black, kneading Tiny's elephantine shoulders, but he can't seem to stop crying, and I'm missing all the lights as Sheridan slowly unwinds before us, and the snot and tears mix until Tiny's T-shirt is just a wet mess. "How far?" Jane asks, and I say, "He lives off Central," and she says, "Jesus. Stay calm, Tiny. You just need to go to sleep, baby. Tomorrow makes everything a little better."

Finally, I turn into the alley and steer around the potholes until we get behind Tiny's coach house. I jump out of the car and push my seat forward so Jane can get out behind me. Then we walk around to the passenger seat. Jane opens the door, reaches across Tiny, manages through a miracle of dexterity to unfasten his seat belt, and then says, "All right, Tiny. Time for bed," and Tiny says, "I'm a fool," and then unleashes a sob that probably registers on the Richter scale in Kansas. But he gets up and weaves toward his back door. I follow, just to make sure he gets to bed all right, which turns out to be a good idea, because he doesn't get to bed all right.

Instead, about three steps into the living room, he stops dead in his tracks. He turns around and stares at me, his eyes squinting as if he's never seen me before and can't figure out why I'm in his house. Then he takes off his shirt. He's still looking at me quizzically when, sounding stone sober, he says, "Grayson, something needs to happen," and I say, "Huh?" And Tiny says, "Because otherwise what if we just end up like everybody at the Hideout?" And I'm about to say *huh* again, because those people were far cooler than our classmates and also far cooler than us, but then I know what he means. He means, What if we become grown-ups waiting for a band that's never coming back? I notice Tiny looking blankly at me, swaying back and forth like a skyscraper in the wind. And then he falls facefirst.

"Oh boy," Jane says behind me, and only then do I realize she's here. Tiny, his face buried in carpet, has taken to crying again. I look at Jane for a long time and a slow smile creeps over her face. Her whole face changes when she smiles—this eyebrow-lifting, perfect-teeth-showing, eye-crinkling smile I've either never seen or never noticed. She becomes pretty so suddenly that it's almost like a magic trick—but it's not like I want her or anything. Not to sound like a jerk, but Jane isn't really my type. Her hair's kinda disastrously curly and she mostly hangs out with guys. My type's a little girlier. And honestly, I don't even like my type of girl that much, let alone other types. Not that I'm asexual—I just find Romance Drama unbearable.

“Let’s get him in bed,” she says finally. “Can’t have his parents find this in the morning.”

I kneel down and tell Tiny to get up, but he just keeps crying and crying, so finally Jane and I get on his left side and roll him over onto his back. I step over him, and then reach down, getting a good grip under his armpit. Jane mimics me on his other side.

“One,” says Jane, and I say, “Two,” and she says, “Three,” and grunts. But nothing happens. Jane is small—I can see her upper arm narrow as she flexes her muscles. And I can’t lift my half of Tiny either, so we resolve to leave him there. By the time Jane places a blanket on top of Tiny and a pillow beneath his head, he’s snoring.

We’re about to leave when all of Tiny’s snotting finally catches up with him, and he begins to make these hideous noises that sound like snoring, except more sinister, and also more wet. I lean down to his face and see that he’s inhaling and exhaling these disgusting bubbly strands of snot from the last throes of his cryathon. There’s so much of the stuff that I worry he’ll choke.

“Tiny,” I say. “You gotta get the snot outta your nose, man,” but he doesn’t stir. So I get down right by his eardrum and shout, “Tiny!” Nothing. Then Jane smacks him across the face, really rather hard. Nada. Just the awful, drowning-in-snot snoring.

And that is when I realize that Tiny Cooper cannot pick his nose, countering the second part of my dad’s theorem. And shortly thereafter, with Jane looking on, I disprove the theorem entirely when I reach down and clear Tiny’s airways of snot. In short: I cannot pick my friend; he cannot pick his nose; and I can—nay, I *must*—pick it for him.

## Chapter Two

i am constantly torn between killing myself and killing everyone around me.  
those seem to be the two choices. everything else is just killing time.  
right now i'm walking through the kitchen to get to the back door.

mom: have some breakfast.

i do not eat breakfast. i never eat breakfast. i haven't eaten breakfast since i was able to walk out the back door without eating breakfast first.

mom: where are you going?

school, mom. you should try it some time.

mom: don't let your hair fall in your face like that – i can't see your eyes.

but you see, mom, that's *the whole fucking point*.

i feel bad for her – i do. a damn shame, really, that i had to have a mother. it can't be easy having me for a son. nothing can prepare someone for that kind of disappointment.

me: bye

i do not say 'good-bye.' i believe that's one of the bullshittiest words ever invented. it's not like you're given the choice to say 'bad-bye' or 'awful-bye' or 'couldn't-care-less-about-you-bye.' every time you leave, it's supposed to be a good one. well, i don't believe in that. i believe *against* that.

mom: have a good d—

the door kinda closes in the middle of her sentence, but it's not like i can't guess where it's going. she used to say 'see you!' until one morning i was so sick of it i told her, 'no, you don't.'

she tries, and that's what makes it so pathetic. i just want to say, 'i feel sorry for you, really i do.' but that might start a conversation, and a conversation might start a fight, and then i'd feel so guilty i might have to move away to portland or something.

i need coffee.

every morning i pray that the school bus will crash and we'll all die in a fiery wreck. then my mom will be able to sue the school bus company for never making school buses with seat belts, and she'll be able to get more money for my tragic death than i would've ever made in my tragic life. unless the lawyers from the school bus company can prove to the jury that i was guaranteed to be a fuckup. then they'd get away with buying my mom a used ford fiesta and calling it even.

maura isn't exactly waiting for me before school, but i know, and she knows i'll look for her where she is. we usually fall back on that so we can smirk at each other or something before we're marched off. it's like those people who become friends in prison even though they would never really talk to each other if they weren't in prison. that's what maura and i are like, i think.

me: give me some coffee.

maura: get your own fucking coffee.

then she hands me her XXL dunkin donuts crappaccino and i treat it like it's a big gulp. if i could afford my own coffee i swear i'd get it, but the way i see it is: her bladder isn't thinking i'm an asshole even if the rest of her organs do. it's been like this with me and maura for as long as I can remember, which is about a year. i guess i've known her a little longer than that, but maybe not. at some point last year, her gloom met my doom and she thought it was a good match. i'm not so sure, but at least i get coffee out of it.

derek and simon are coming over now, which is good because it's going to save me some time at lunch.

me: give me your math homework.

simon: sure. here.

what a friend.

the first bell rings. like all the bells in our fine institution of lower learning, it's not a bell at all, it's a long beep, like you're about to leave a voicemail saying you're having the suckiest day ever. and nobody's ever going to listen to it.

i have no idea why anyone would want to become a teacher. i mean, you have to spend the day with a group of kids who either hate your guts or are kissing up to you to get a good grade. that has to get to you after a while, being surrounded by people who will never like you for any real reason. i'd feel bad for them if they weren't such sadists and losers. with the sadists, it's all about the power and the control. they teach so they can

have an official reason to dominate other people. and the losers make up pretty much all the other teachers, from the ones who are too incompetent to do anything else to the ones who want to be their students' best friends because they never had friends when they were in high school. and there are the ones who honestly think we're going to remember a thing they say to us after final exams are over. right.

every now and then you get a teacher like mrs. grover, who's a sadistic loser. i mean, it can't be easy being a french teacher, because nobody really needs to know how to speak french anymore. and while she kisses the honors kids' *derrieres*, with standard kids she resents the fact that we're taking up her time. so she responds by giving us quizzes every day and giving us gay projects like 'design your own ride for euro disney' and then acting all surprised when i'm like 'yeah, my ride for euro disney is minnie using a baguette as a dildo to have some fun with mickey.' since i don't have any idea how to say 'dildo' in french (*dildot?*), i just say 'dildo' and she pretends to have no idea what i'm talking about and says that minnie and mickey eating baguettes isn't a ride. no doubt she gives me a check-minus for the day. i know i'm supposed to care, but really it's hard to imagine something i could care less about than my grade in french.

the only worthwhile thing i do all period – all morning, really – is write *isaac, isaac, isaac* in my notebook and then draw spider-man spelling it out in a web. which is completely lame, but whatever. it's not like i'm doing it to be cool.

i sit with derek and simon at lunch. the way it is with us, it's like we're sitting in a waiting room. every now and then we'll say something, but mostly we stick to our own chair-sized spaces. occasionally we'll read magazines. if someone comes over, we'll look up. but that doesn't happen often.

we ignore most of the people who walk by, even the ones we're supposed to lust after. it's not like derek and simon are into girls. basically, they like computers.

derek: do you think the X18 software will be released before summer?

simon: i read on trustmaster's blog that it might. that would be cool.

me: here's your homework back.

when i look at the guys and girls at the other tables, i wonder what they could possibly have to say to each other. they're all so boring and they're all trying to make up for it by talking louder. i'd rather just sit here and eat.

i have this ritual, that when it hits two o'clock i allow myself to get excited about leaving. it's like if i reach that point i can take the rest of the day off.

it happens in math, and maura is sitting next to me. she figured out in october what i was doing, so now every day at two she passes me a slip of paper with something on it. like 'congratulations' or 'can we go now?' or 'if

this period doesn't end soon i am going to slit my own skull.' i know i should write her back, but mostly i nod. i think she wants us to go out on a date or something, and i don't know what to do about that.

everyone in our school has afterschool activities.

mine is going home.

sometimes i stop and board for a while in the park, but not in february, not in this witch-twat-frigid chicago suburb (known to locals as naperville). if i go out there now, i'll freeze my balls off. not that i'm putting them to any use whatsoever, but i still like to have them, just in case.

plus i've got better things to do than have the college dropouts tell me when i can ramp (usually about . . . never) and have the skatepunks from our school look down at me because i'm not cool enough to smoke and drink with them and i'm not cool enough to be straightedge. i'm no-edge as far as they're concerned. i stopped trying to be in their in-crowd-that-doesn't-admit-it's-an-in-crowd when i left ninth grade. it's not like boarding is my life or anything.

i like having the house to myself when i get home. i don't have to feel guilty about ignoring my mom if she's not around.

i head to the computer first and see if isaac's online. he's not, so i fix myself a cheese sandwich (i'm too lazy to grill it) and jerk off. it takes about ten minutes, but it's not like i'm timing it.

isaac's still not on when i get back. he's the only person on my 'buddy list,' which is the stupidest fucking name for a list. what are we, three years old?

me: hey, isaac, wanna be my buddy!?

isaac: sure, buddy! let's go *fishin* '!

isaac knows how stupid i find these things, and he finds them just as stupid as i do. like lol. now, if there's anything stupider than buddy lists, it's lol. if anyone ever uses lol with me, i rip my computer right out of the wall and smash it over the nearest head. i mean, it's not like anyone is laughing out loud about the things they lol. i think it should be spelled loll, like what a lobotomized person's tongue does. loll. loll. i can't think any more. loll. loll!

or ttyl. bitch, you're not actually *talking*. that would require actual *vocal contact*. or <3. you think that looks like a heart? if you do, that's only because you've never seen scrotum.

(rofl! what? are you really rolling on the floor laughing? well, please stay down there a sec while I KICK YOUR ASS.)

i had to tell maura that my mom made me get rid of my instant messenger in order for her to stop popping up whenever i was trying to do something.

gothblood4567: 'sup?

finalwill: i'm working.

gothblood4567: on what?

finalwill: my suicide note. i can't figure out how to end it.

gothblood4567: lol

so i killed my screenname and resurrected myself under another. isaac's the only person who knows it, and it's going to stay that way.

i check my email and it's mostly spam. what i want to know is this: is there really someone in the whole world who gets an email from [hlyywkrrs@hothotmail.com](mailto:hlyywkrrs@hothotmail.com), reads it, and says to himself, 'you know, what i really need to do is enlarge my penis 33%, and the way to do it would be to send \$69.99 to that nice lady ilena at VIRILITY MAXIMUS CORP via this handy internet link!' if people are actually falling for that, it's not their dicks they should be worried about.

i have a friend request from some stranger on facebook and i delete it without looking at the profile because that doesn't seem natural. 'cause friendship should not be as easy as that. it's like people believe all you need to do is like the same bands in order to be soulmates. or books. *omg . . . U like the outsiders 2 . . . it's like we're the same person!* no we're not. it's like we have the same english teacher. there's a difference.

it's almost four and isaac's usually on by now. i do that stupid reward thing with my homework – it's like *if i look up what date the mayans invented toothpicks, i can check to see if isaac's online yet. then if i read three more paragraphs about the importance of pottery in indigenous cultures, i can check my yahoo account. and finally if i finish answering all three of these questions and isaac isn't on yet, then i can jerk off again.*

i'm only halfway through answering the first question, some bullshit about why mayan pyramids are *so much cooler* than egyptian ones, when i cheat and look at my buddy list and see that isaac's name is there. i'm about to think *why hasn't he IM'ed me?* when the box appears on the screen. like he's read my mind.

boundbydad: u there?

grayscale: yes!

boundbydad: J

grayscale: J x 100

boundbydad: i've been thinking about you all day

grayscale: ???

boundbydad: only good things

grayscale: that's too bad J

boundbydad: depends on what you think of as good

JJ

it's been like this from the beginning. just being comfortable. i was a little freaked out at first by his screenname, but he quickly told me it was because his name was isaac, and ultimately my dad chose to kill the goat instead of me was too long to be a good screenname. he asked me about my old screenname, finalwill, and i told him my name was will, and that's how we started to get to know each other. we were in one of those lame chatrooms where it falls completely silent every ten seconds until someone goes 'anyone in here?' and other people are like 'yeah' 'yup' 'here!' without saying anything. we were supposed to be in a forum for this singer i used to like, but there wasn't much to say about him except which songs were better than the other songs. it was really boring, but it's how isaac and i met, so i guess we'll have to hire the singer to play at our wedding or something. (that is so not funny.)

soon we were swapping pictures and mp3s and telling each other about how everything pretty much sucked, but of course the ironic part was that while we were talking about it the world didn't suck as much. except, of course, for the part at the end when we had to return to the real world.

it is so unfair that he lives in ohio, because that should be close enough, but since neither of us drives and neither of us would ever in a million years say, 'hey, mom, do you want to drive me across indiana to see a boy?,' we're kind of stuck.

grayscale: i'm reading about the mayans.

boundbydad: angelou?

grayscale: ???

boundbydad: nevermind. we skipped the mayans. we only read 'american' history now.

grayscale: but aren't they in the americas?

boundbydad: not according to my school. \*\*groans\*\*

grayscale: so who did you almost kill today?

grayscale: and by 'kill,' i mean 'wish would disappear,'

just in case this conversation is being monitored by administrators

boundbydad: potential body count of eleven. twelve if you count the cat.

grayscale: . . . or homeland security

grayscale: goddamn cat!

boundbydad: goddamn cat!

i haven't told anyone about isaac because it's none of their business. i love that he knows who everyone is but nobody knows who he is. if i had actual friends that i felt i could talk to, this might cause some conflict. but since right now there'd only need to be one car to take people to my funeral, i think it's okay.

eventually isaac has to go, because he isn't really supposed to be using the computer at the music store where he works. lucky for me that it doesn't seem to be a busy music store, and his boss is like a drug dealer or something and is always leaving isaac in charge while he goes out to 'meet some people.'

i step away from the computer and finish my homework quickly. then i go in the den and turn on law & order, since the only thing i can really count on in life is that whenever i turn on the tv there will be a law & order episode. this time it's the one with the guy who strangles blonde after blonde after blonde, and even though i'm pretty sure i've seen it like ten times already, i'm watching it like i don't know that the pretty reporter he's talking to is about to have the curtain cord around her neck. i don't watch that part, because it's really stupid, but once the police catch the guy and the trial's going on, they're all

lawyer: dude, the cord knocked this microscopic piece of skin off your hand while you were strangling her, and we ran it under the microscope and found out that you're totally fucked.

you gotta know he wishes he'd worn gloves, although the gloves probably would've left fibers, and he would've been totally fucked anyway. when that's all over, there's another episode i don't think i've seen before, until this celebrity runs over a baby in his hummer and i'm like, oh, it's the one where the celebrity runs over the baby in his hummer. i watch it anyway, because it's not like i have anything better to do. then mom comes home and finds me there and it's like we're a rerun, too.

mom: how was your day?

me: mom, i'm watching tv.

mom: will you be ready for dinner in fifteen minutes?

me: *mom*, i'm watching tv!

mom: well, set the table during the commercials.

me: FINE.

i totally don't get this – is there anything more boring and pathetic than setting the table when there are only two of you? i mean, with place mats and salad forks and everything. who is she kidding? i would give anything not to have to spend the next twenty minutes sitting across from her, because she doesn't believe in letting silence go. no, she has to fill it up with talk. i want to tell her that's what the voices in your head are for, to get you through all the silent parts. but she doesn't want to be with her thoughts unless she's saying them out loud.

mom: if i get lucky tonight, maybe we'll have a few more dollars for the car fund.

me: you really don't need to do that.

mom: don't be silly. it gives me a reason to go to girls' poker night.

i really wish she would stop it. she feels worse about me not having a car than i do. i mean, i'm not one of those jerks who thinks that as soon as you turn seventeen it's your god-given american right to have a brand-new chevrolet in the driveway. i know what our situation is, and i know she doesn't like that i have to work weekends at cvs in order to afford the things we need to pick up at cvs. having her constantly sad about it doesn't make me feel better. and of course there's another reason for her to go play poker besides the money. she needs more friends.

she asks me if i took my pills before i ran off this morning and i tell her, yeah, wouldn't i be drowning myself in the bathtub if i hadn't? she doesn't like that, so i'm all like 'joke, joke' and i make a mental note that moms aren't the best audience for medication humor. i decide not to get her that *world's greatest mom of a depressive fuckup* sweatshirt for mother's day like i'd been planning. (okay, there's not really a sweatshirt like that, but if there was, it would have kittens

. on it, putting their paws in sockets.)

truth is, thinking about depression depresses the shit out of me, so i go back into the den and watch some more law & order. isaac's never back at his computer until eight, so i wait until then. maura calls me but i don't have the energy to say anything to her except what's happening on law & order, and she hates it when i do that. so i let the voicemail pick up.

me: this is will. why the fuck are you calling me? leave a message and maybe i'll call you back.

[BEEP]

maura: hey, loser. i'm so bored i'm calling you. i figured if you weren't doing anything i could bear your children. oh, well. i guess i'll just go call joseph and ask him to do me in the manger and begat another holy child.

by the time i care, it's almost eight. and even then, i don't care enough to call her back. we have this thing about calling each other back, in that we don't do it very much. instead i head to the computer and it's like i turn into a little girl who's just seen her first rainbow. i get all giddy and nervous and hopeful and despairing and i tell myself not to look obsessively at my buddy list, but it might as well be projected onto the insides of my eyelids. at 8:05 his name pops up, and i start to count. i only get to twelve before his IM pops up.

boundbydad: greetings!

grayscale: and salutations!

boundbydad: so glad u're here.

grayscale: so glad to be here

boundbydad: work today = lamest! day! ever! this girl

tried to shoplift and wasn't even subtle about it. i used to have some sympathy for shoplifters

boundbydad: but now i just want to see them behind

bars. i told her to put it back and she acted all 'put what back?' until i reached into her pocket and took the disc out. and what does she say to that? 'oh.'

grayscale: not even 'sorry'?

boundbydad: not even.

grayscale: girls suck.

boundbydad: and boys are angels? J

we go on like this for about an hour. i wish we could talk on the phone, but his parents won't let him have a cell and i know my mom sometimes checks my phone log when i'm in the shower. this is nice, though. it's the only part of my day when the time actually seems worth it.

we spend our usual ten minutes saying good-bye.

boundbydad: i really should go.

grayscale: me too.

boundbydad: but i don't want to.

grayscale: me neither.

boundbydad: tomorrow?

grayscale: tomorrow!

boundbydad: i wish you.

grayscale: i wish you, too.

this is dangerous because as a rule i don't let myself wish for things. too many times when i was a kid, i would put my hands together or squinch my eyes shut and i would devote myself fully to hoping for something. i even thought that there were some places in my room that were better for wishing than others – under the bed was okay, but on the bed wasn't; the bottom of the closet would do, as long as my shoebox of baseball cards was in my lap. never, ever at my desk, but always with the sock drawer open. nobody had told me these rules – i'd figured them out for myself. i could spend hours setting up a particular wish – and every single time, i'd be met with a resounding wall of complete indifference. whether it was for a pet hamster or for my mom to stop crying – the sock drawer would be open and i would be sitting behind my toy chest with three action figures in one hand and a matchbox car in the other. i never hoped for everything to get better – only for one thing to get better. and it never did. so eventually i gave up. i give up every single day.

but not with isaac. it scares me sometimes. wishing it to work.

later that night i get an email from him.

*i feel like my life is so scattered right now. like it's all these small pieces of paper and someone's turned on the fan. but talking to you makes me feel like the fan's been turned off for a little bit. like things could actually make sense. you completely unscatter me, and i appreciate that so much.*

GOD I AM SO IN LOVE.