

THE BORROWER

REBECCA MAKKAI

VIKING

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter 1 - Story Hour](#)

[Chapter 2 - Trouble, Right Here in River City](#)

[Chapter 3 - The Nothing Hand](#)

[Chapter 4 - The Ark](#)

[Chapter 5 - Benefit](#)

[Chapter 6 - It's Only an Origami Moon](#)

[Chapter 7 - Drummer Boy](#)

[Chapter 8 - Exhibit D: The Cots \(or, If You Give a Librarian a Closet\)](#)

[Chapter 9 - The Predecessor](#)

[Chapter 10 - Stupid](#)

[Chapter 11 - Pumpkin Head](#)

[Chapter 12 - The Week Before](#)

[Chapter 13 - Out of the Hobbit-Hole](#)

[Chapter 14 - Down the Rabbit Hole](#)

[Chapter 15 - Anthem](#)

[Chapter 16 - Head on a Pike](#)

[Chapter 17 - Debussy's Horns](#)

[Chapter 18 - Chocolate Factory, Leningrad](#)

[Chapter 19 - Courage, Heart, Brain](#)

[Chapter 20 - Fugitive](#)

[Chapter 21 - Choose Your Own Fiasco](#)

[Chapter 22 - I Could Not Have a Tongue](#)

[Chapter 23 - One Light, Two Light, Red Light, Blue Light](#)

[Chapter 24 - The Labaznikov Special](#)

[Chapter 25 - Runaway Nation](#)

[Chapter 26 - A Glass for Glass](#)

[Chapter 27 - The BFG](#)

[Chapter 28 - The Emerald State](#)

[Chapter 29 - Scam](#)

[Chapter 30 - Where's Ian?](#)

[Chapter 31 - North](#)

[Chapter 32 - Humbug](#)

[Chapter 33 - O Canada](#)

[Chapter 34 - The Battle of Havre](#)

[Chapter 35 - Outstanding Fine](#)

[Chapter 36 - In Which Lucy Clicks Her Heels Together Three Times](#)

[Chapter 37 - Away from Earth Awhile](#)

[Chapter 38 - . . . And It Was Still Hot](#)

[Chapter 39 - Tim Ex Machina](#)

[If a Book Lacked an Epilogue, Ian Would Frequently Offer His Own](#)

VIKING

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For Lydia and Heidi

May all doors—and all books—be open to you both

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Ian Was Never Happy Unless There Was a Prologue

I might be the villain of this story. Even now, it's hard to tell.

Back at the library, amid the books and books on ancient Egypt, the picture the children loved most showed the god of death weighing a dead man's heart against a feather. There is this consolation, then, at least: one day, I will know my guilt.

I've left behind everyone I used to know. I've found another library, one with oak walls, iron railings. A college library, where the borrowers already know what they're looking for. I scan their books and they barely acknowledge me through their caffeinated haze. It's nothing like my old stained-carpet, brick-walled library, but the books are the same—same spines, same codes on yellowed labels. I know what's in them all. They whisper their judgment down.

The runaways, the kidnappers, look down from their shelves and claim me for their own. They tell me to light out for the Territory, reckon I'm headed for Hell just like them. They say I'm the most terrific liar they ever saw in their lives. And that one, old lecher-lepidopterist, gabbling grabber, stirring his vodka-pineapple from the high narrow shelf of N-A-B, let me twist his words. (You can always count on a librarian for a derivative prose style): Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what I envied, what I thought I could fix. Look at this prison of books.

Before this all began, I told Rocky that one day I'd arrange my books by main character, down through the alphabet. I realize now where I'd be: Hull, snug between Huck and Humbert. But really I should file it under Drake, for Ian, for the boy I stole, because regardless of who the villain is, I'm not the hero of this story. I'm not even the subject of this prayer.

Story Hour

Every Friday at 4:30, they gathered cross-legged on the brown shag rug, picked at its crust of mud and glitter and Elmer's glue, and leaned against the picture book shelves.

I had five regulars, and a couple of them would have come seven days a week if they could. Ian Drake came with chicken pox, and with a broken leg. He came even when he knew it had been canceled that week, and sat there reading aloud to himself. And then each week there were two or three extras whose parents happened to need a babysitter. They'd squirm through chapters 8 and 9 of a book they couldn't follow, pulling strings from their socks and then flossing their teeth with them.

That fall, five years ago, we were halfway through *Matilda*. Ian came galloping up to me before reading time, our fourth week into the book.

"I told my mom we're reading *Little House in the Big Woods* again. I don't think she'd be a fan of *Matilda* too much. She didn't even like *Fantastic Mr. Fox*." He forked his fingers through his hair. "Are we *capisce*?"

I nodded. "We don't want your mom to worry." We hadn't gotten to the magic part yet, but Ian had read it before, secretly, crouched on the floor by the Roald Dahl shelf. He knew what was coming.

He skipped off down the biography aisle, then wandered back up through science, his head tilted sideways to read the spines.

Lorraine came up beside me—Lorraine Best, the head librarian, who thank God hadn't heard our collusions—and watched the first few children gather on the rug. She came downstairs some Fridays just to smile and nod at the mothers as they dropped them off, as if she had some hand in Chapter Book Hour. As if her reading three minutes of *Green Eggs and Ham* wouldn't make half the children cry and the others raise their hands to ask if she was a good witch or a bad witch.

Ian disappeared again, then walked up through American History, touching each book in the top right-hand row. "He practically lives here, doesn't he?" Lorraine whispered. "That little homosexual boy."

"He's ten years old!" I said. "I doubt he's *anything*-sexual."

"Well I'm sorry, Lucy, I have nothing against him, but that child is a gay." She said it with the same tone of pleasure at her own imagined magnanimity that my father used every time he referred to "Ophelia, my black secretary."

Over in fiction now, Ian stood on tiptoes to pull a large green book from a high shelf. A mystery: the blue sticker-man with his magnifying glass peered from the spine. Ian sat on the floor and started in on the first page as if it indeed contained all the mysteries of the world, as if everything in the universe could be solved by page 132. His glasses caught the fluorescent light, two yellow disks over the pages. He didn't move until the other children began gathering and Lorraine bent down beside him and said, "Everyone's waiting for you." We weren't—Tony didn't even have his coat off yet—but Ian scooted on his rear all the way across the floor to join us, without ever looking up from the book.

We had five listeners that day, all regulars.

“All right,” I said, hoping Loraine would make her exit now, “where did we leave off?”

“Miss Trunchbull yelled because they didn’t know their math,” said Melissa.

“And she yelled at Miss Honey.”

“And they were learning their threes.”

Ian sighed loudly and held up his hand.

“Yes?”

“That was all two weeks ago. BUT, when last we left our heroine, she was learning of Miss Trunchbull’s history as a hammer thrower, and also we were learning of the many torture devices she kept in her office.”

“Thank you, Ian.” He grinned at me. Loraine rolled her eyes—whether at me or Ian, I wasn’t sure—and tottered back to the stairs. I almost always had to cut Ian off, but he didn’t mind. Short of burning down the library there was nothing I could do that would push him away. I was keeping *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* behind the desk to sneak to him whenever he came without his babysitter. Almost every afternoon for the past week he had run downstairs and stuck his head over my desk, panting.

Back then, before that long winter, Ian reminded me most of a helium balloon. Not just his voice, but the way he’d look straight up when he talked and bounce around on his toes as if he were struggling not to take off.

(Did he have a predecessor? asks Humbert.

No. No, he didn’t. I’d never met anyone like him in my life.)

Whenever he couldn’t find a book he liked, he’d come lean on the desk. “What should I read?”

“*How to Stop Whining*,” I’d say, or “*An Introduction to the Computer Catalogue*,” but he knew I was kidding. He knew it was my favorite question in the world. Then I’d pick something for him—*D’Aulaires’ Greek Myths* one time, *The Wheel on the School* another. He usually liked what I picked, and the *D’Aulaires’* launched him on a mythology spree that lasted a good two months.

Because Loraine warned me early on about Ian’s mother, I made sure he read books with innocuous titles and pleasant covers. Nothing scary-looking, no *Egypt Game*. When he was eight, he came with his babysitter and borrowed *Theater Shoes*. He returned it the next day and told me he was only allowed to read “boy books.”

Fortunately, his mother didn’t seem to have a great knowledge of children’s literature. So *My Side of the Mountain* crept under the radar, and *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*.

Both books about running away, I realized later, though I swear at the time it never crossed my mind.

We finished two chapters and then I stalled until 5:30, when half the mothers would bounce down the stairs in their tennis skirts and the other half would emerge with their toddlers from the picture book pit. “Who is the hero of this book?” I asked. This was easy. It was always the main character. In children’s books, there is rarely an antihero, an unreliable narrator.

Aaron sounded like he’d been practicing his answer for days: “Matilda is really the hero, but Miss Honey is kind of a hero, too, because she’s very nice.”

“Who’s the villain?”

“Mrs. Crunchable!” shouted Tessa. “Even though she’s the principal! And principals are usually nice!”

“Yes,” I said, “I think you’re right.” Even when the bad guy isn’t a man in a black mask, they have a fairly good sense of villainy. A few bright ones understand how broad the category can be.

“Because a villain could be anyone, like a bunny in your garden,” Tessa said.

“Could it even be someone’s parents?” I asked. I wanted them to think about Matilda’s wretched,

TV-addicted mother and father, the book's other antagonists.

"Yeah," said Tony, "like if your mom has a gun."

These were wise, modern children, and they knew: a mother could be a witch, a child could be a criminal. A librarian could be a thief.

Let's call the scene of the crime Hannibal, Missouri. (Of course there's a real Hannibal out there minding its own business, living on Twain tourism and river water. I only ask to borrow its name.) *This* Hannibal had no river, but it had a highway straight through town, and if you drove past and saw only the McDonald's, the Citgo, the grime and corn and car fumes, you'd never know the hedged lawns, the schools with untattered flags, the big houses to the west and the smaller ones east with the gravel drives and shiny mailboxes.

And there was the library, right off the main road, its unfortunate '70s brick architecture masked by Fall Fest banners and three waist-high iron squirrels. Noble squirrels, their heads in the air, they stood sentry to the book drop and public entrance. Before pushing open the heavy front doors, every child felt compelled to touch each one, or to brush the snow off the tails, or even to climb up and perch on the tallest squirrel's head. Every child somehow believed these acts forbidden. Thundering down the stairs to the basement, the children's cheeks were red. They passed my desk in bright, puffed-up parkas. Some smiled, some practically shouted their greetings, some avoided my eyes completely.

At twenty-six I was the head children's librarian only because I was willing to work more hours than the other two (much older) women, Sarah-Ann and Irene, who seemed to see the library as some kind of volunteer work, like a soup kitchen.

"We're so lucky they give us their time," said Loraine. Which was true, as they were often busy remodeling entire rooms.

I was four years out of college, had started biting my nails again, and was down to two adult friends. I lived alone in an apartment two towns over. A simple maiden lady librarian.

Observe, for the record, my genetic makeup, indicating a slight predisposition for criminal behavior, hereditary proclivity for running away, and the chromosomal guarantor for lifelong self-flagellation.

Things Inherited from my Father:

- Taste for mud-thick coffee.
- Two bony knots on my forehead, one above each eye, just below the hairline. (No trauma at birth, no drop to the floor, just confused nurses rubbing my brow, my father baring his own in explanation. If we two are not the villains of the story, why these family horns?)
- A revolutionary temperament, dating far past my great-grandfather the Bolshevik.
- Half a family name, Hulkinov shortened to Hull by a New York judge, the joke lost on my father's immigrant ears as he stood in his refugee shoes, a hull of his Russian self.
- Pale Russian hair, the color of absolutely nothing.
- The family crest my father brought all the way from Moscow on a thick gold ring, with its carving of a man—book in right hand, severed head on pike in left. (This most famous Hulkinov was a seventeenth-century scholar-warrior, a man who heard the

distant trumpets, left his careful books, fought for justice or freedom or honor. And
~~here I am, the end of the line: twenty-first-century librarian-felon.)~~

- Deep Russian guilt.

Things Inherited from my Mother:

- Mile-thick American Jewish guilt.

These are the setting and main characters. We are nestled into our beanbags: let us begin.
("Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern.)

Trouble, Right Here in River City

A woman came down the stairs alone one afternoon early in October, in slacks and heels and a brown silk blouse. Obviously a parent, not a bedraggled teacher or nanny or tutor. Beautiful, with red hair in a ponytail that didn't taper sadly like mine, but ended straight and thick like an actual horse's tail. She put a book on the counter. Her silver earrings swung in sync. I'd never seen her before.

"Are you busy?"

I capped my pen and smiled. "Sure. No."

"I'm Ian's mommy."

"I'm sorry?" She was making such insistent eye contact that I couldn't quite process her words.

"My son is Ian Drake?"

"Oh, *Ian*. Yes, of course. How can I help you?" I was a little astonished to realize that I'd never encountered this woman before. And to realize that I'd never thought about it, even with all the discussion of what books his mother would or would not approve. When Ian was younger, he always came with a babysitter. Now he often came alone on his bike, wearing an empty backpack that he could fill with books.

"Well, he brought home this novel, *Tuck Everlasting*?" She shoved it closer to me, as if I might want to look it over. "And I'm sure this is just a wonderful book for slightly older children, and we so appreciate your suggestions. He's just a little sensitive." She laughed lightly and leaned forward. "What Ian really needs right now are books with the breath of God in them."

"The breath of God."

"I know you do such a job of nourishing their minds, but of course we also need reading that will nourish our souls. Each one of us." She smiled, eyebrows raised. "And Ian's still so young, he needs your help. I'm sure you can do that for me, Sarah-Ann."

I must have stared with my mouth open, until I saw that I'd left Sarah-Ann's nameplate on the front of the desk. I was strangely flattered that Ian hadn't told her my name, that our daily conversations were something he wanted to keep private. I wasn't about to correct her. If she thought Sarah-Ann Drummond was the one in charge of selecting books with the breath of God, so much the better.

I smiled, making sure she was done. "Actually, since we're a public library, we don't censor what any of our patrons access. It's our job to make everything available. Although *parents* can certainly choose for their children." I could have gone on at length, but I found myself holding back. I didn't want her to spook and tell Ian he couldn't come to the library anymore, and (as much as I wasn't normally a fan of unaccompanied children in the library) I didn't think his reading experience would be enhanced by this particular mother hanging over his shoulder, making sure all the words Judy Blume wrote were sufficiently God-suffused. So I certainly wasn't going to mention that he could also check out any of the books upstairs in the adult section and access pretty much any Web site in the world from our computers.

"He really does love the library," she said. She was missing a rich southern accent, I realized, one

those charming Kentucky belle ones. It would have complemented her perfectly. She pulled a folded piece of notepaper out of her purse, thick cream with the name *Janet Marcus Drake* in shiny pale blue script at the top. “This is a list of the content matter I’d like him to avoid.” She had abruptly flipped from the southern belle and was now putting on the extremely businesslike air of those perfectionist women who’d only worked in the professional world for two or three years before stopping to have children and were now terrified of not being taken seriously. She handed the list over and waited, as if she expected me to read it aloud. It read:

- Witchcraft/Wizardry
- Magic
- Satanism/Occult Religions, etc.
- Adult Content Matter
- Weaponry
- The Theory of Evolution
- Halloween
- Roald Dahl, Lois Lowry, Harry Potter, and similar authors

“You understand what is meant by adult content matter?”

I managed, somehow, to open my mouth and assure her that I did.

“And I neglected to list it, but I also understand that you have candy available for the children.” She didn’t need to put it so formally. She was staring right at the bowl of Jolly Ranchers on the edge of my desk. “I just don’t want him running around here with a sugar high!” And she laughed again, right back to Scarlett O’Hara on the porch.

Because I couldn’t think of anything nonprofane to say at that moment, I said nothing. It wasn’t so much good manners or restraint as a sort of paralysis of the tongue. I wanted to ask her if she’d ever heard of the First Amendment, if she was aware that Harry Potter was not an author, if she thought we had books about Satanism lying around the children’s section, if she was under the impression that I was Ian’s babysitter, reading tutor, or camp counselor. Instead I took my pen and added another line to her list: “No candy.”

“I’m so glad for your cooperation, Sarah-Ann,” she said.

I wanted to get rid of her, and I wanted to placate her, but I couldn’t sit there and make a verbal contract to defy the Constitution. So I said, “What I can do is avoid recommending books with this content.”

“But surely you understand that he might find it on his own.”

I nodded, which she was free to interpret however she wished, and said (reassuringly, conclusively) “I have it all written down here.” I patted the list and stood to extend my hand.

A girl came up behind her with a stack of books. Mrs. Drake looked back at her, winked at me as she shook my hand, and walked away.

The girl heaved the stack onto the counter. Seven books, all on Marco Polo.

I spent the next few minutes leaning back in my chair, practicing my yoga breathing and trying to figure out if I’d just compromised my morals. I was still clutching Janet Drake’s folded list. The next thing I registered was Loraine swaying down the stairs, then lurching forward to lean on my desk with

both hands. Her short brown hair was a mess, clumps of it sticking to her forehead in a lacquer of gel and sweat.

“Lucy,” she said, much too loudly. “Were you able to calm that woman down?”

“Yes.” I slid my feet back into my shoes. “She tried to give me this list.” I started to unfold it, but Loraine waved her hand. She’d seen it already.

“Just don’t let him check out any more wizard books. Leave a note for Sarah-Ann and Irene, too.”

I was almost used to Loraine by that point, to her philosophy that if the community was ever going to buy us new chairs, we needed to keep the community happy, civil liberties be damned. She was usually in favor of quickly and permanently removing from the library any book that any patron bothered complaining about. Instead of calling her an alcoholic old bat, instead of picking up the phone to alert the ACLU, I took the path of least resistance. I said, “How am I supposed to do that, exactly?”

Loraine swayed slightly and gripped the edge of the counter. Her fingernails were painted dark red as was the skin around each nail. “Oh, just tell him it’s a reference book or something. Tell him it can’t be checked out.”

“Sure.” I wasn’t at all concerned about Loraine enforcing this, or even remembering it a month later. And if she tried to fire me because I’d checked out a book to a patron of the public library, I’d have so much free legal representation within ten minutes that her gin-soaked head would spin.

“Are you feeling ill, Lucy? I only ask because your shirt is so wrinkled.”

“I’m just fine.”

“Well, yes, I’m sure you are.” She took her hand off the counter and walked carefully off to the children’s bathroom.

At 6:00 I turned off the computer, re-shelved the books from the cart, and went upstairs. Rocky wheeled himself out from behind the desk as I came up. He wore glasses with black frames and lenses so thick they distorted his eyes, which were already somewhat swallowed by his heavy cheeks. Several patrons had confided in me (as I nodded, somewhat horrified) that they were “surprised he could speak so articulately.”

“Coffee?”

“Of course,” I said.

We locked up and went across the street to the sandwich place. Rocky waited outside, because there was a step to get in, and I brought his coffee out. I sat down on the sidewalk bench and he wheeled up beside me. I sipped my coffee through the hole in the lid and burned my tongue. “So Ian Drake’s mother yelled at me today,” I said, which wasn’t true but was exactly how I felt afterward. “And then Loraine yelled at me about Ian’s mother.” I was like an eight-year-old, calling it “yelling” just because I hadn’t liked it. “She’s telling me to censor his reading. Loraine is.”

He opened his coffee and blew on it. Why was I always the one to burn my tongue? Why did everyone else think to take these precautions?

“But you know to ignore her. Are you actually letting this bother you?” Rocky’s persistent viewpoint was that I took everything too personally. And he was so used to Loraine, after twelve years in the library, that he couldn’t be shocked by anything she did. He also seemed, lately, to take a perverse pleasure in pointing out my own naïveté by acting as if he himself had expected, and was even bored by, all unusual human behavior: a four-year-old projectile vomiting on our new Britannic

set, Loraine storing an old Sprite bottle filled with vodka in the staff refrigerator, the president of the United States claiming Jesus wanted us to be at war. “Do you have your theme for the summer?” he said. He wasn’t going to let me fixate.

“No.” I would spend a good part of my winter and spring making flyers and cutting out construction paper race cars or comets to hang on the north wall for Summer Reading Club. There were kits you could order, of course, but I believed they were soulless, and Loraine believed they were expensive. “Loraine wants something about a magic journey again.” Two years earlier, the theme had been “There Is No Frigate Like a Book,” which was disastrous because none of the children knew what a frigate was, and several parents thought it was something dirty.

“‘Devour a Book’? You could have a shark eating a book. A dinosaur.”

“Not bad.”

“It’s better than the frigate.”

I turned sideways on the bench and put my feet up. “How about ‘Witchcraft and the Satanic Occult’?”

“‘Being and Nothingness’! You could give them little Sartre badges!”

“‘Civilization and Its Discontents!’ ”

We kept at this for a while, and at least it made me feel better. Which seemed to be our entire relationship. Probably my fault. We went to old movies together at the Film Forum—not dates, just movies no one else wanted to see—and we rolled our eyes at each other all day long, till he decided I was overreacting and told me so.

He tugged at the end of my sweater sleeve. “You told me to give you hell if you ever wore a cardigan again.”

“It’s cold.”

“I’m just following orders.”

I hated that I’d started to look like a librarian. This wasn’t right. In college, I’d smoked things. My first car had angry bumper stickers. I came from a long line of revolutionaries.

I stood up and stretched, and then felt irrationally guilty for doing that in front of Rocky, who couldn’t. I got so tired of *sitting* all day, and I was sure it would give me gangrene or hemorrhoids. I made excuses at work to walk through the aisles. The return cart rarely had three books on it, because I was out of my seat to re-shelve them every five minutes.

And for what portion of human history had people even had desk jobs? Maybe the last four hundred years, out of four million? It wasn’t natural.

My father’s favorite joke: What is one Russian? A nihilist. What are two Russians? A game of chess. What are three Russians? A revolution.

But what do you call a would-be revolutionary stuck at a desk? Antsy, maybe. Trouble. A dormant volcano.

The Nothing Hand

On Halloween, I passed out candy from behind my desk to the costumed children whose parents preferred they trick-or-treat in businesses rather than the ostensibly razor-blade-ridden homes of East Hannibal. I had put a poster on the front door that week declaring that children dressed as a character from a book got two times the candy plus a bookmark, but so far we'd had only two Harry Potters, one Dorothy, and a boy who claimed Michael Jordan counted because there were a lot of books about him.

Ian came down the stairs with his mother's manicured hand on his shoulder. I quickly grabbed my nameplate and stuffed it in the top drawer. I wondered if I'd ever see Ian alone again. He wasn't dressed up, just wearing his regular blue coat. I remembered from his mother's list that they didn't do Halloween, but he peered a long time through his glasses at the two children leaving in their space suits before he showed his mother where the C. S. Lewis shelf was. A few minutes later, Mrs. Drake went to the chapter book feature shelf, where I'd put out a bunch of forgotten Newbery winners and runners-up. She was frowning and skimming *The Golden Goblet* when Ian shuffled up to the desk. He pushed his left hand out from where it had been hiding in the sleeve of his coat. His index finger was wrapped in wrinkled tinfoil, with a pointed top and some Sharpie lines indicating a face.

"Miss Hull!" he whispered. "I'm not dressed up, but my finger is the Tin Woodman!"

I laughed and mouthed "Oh my goodness" and gave him two Kit Kats and a bookmark.

He shoved the candy in his pocket and pulled his hand back up his sleeve just as his mother came to the desk with an armload of books. A few Hardy Boys and some biographies, but nothing I thought Ian would like. I stamped them a little vigorously, and smiled back as she wished me a wonderful evening.

In those moments of small-town pettiness, in those moments where I realized I'd forever be on the responsible adult side of the Halloween candy exchange, in those moments where I looked down and saw myself wearing sensible shoes, I might have cursed my ending up in Hannibal. I could have been living in a loft in Brooklyn, or backpacking across Spain with my father's money, or finishing a PhD. But I didn't regret it, at least not totally, because the randomness—the anonymous and insipid randomness—was the appeal. My father would have hooked me up with a hundred good jobs, or at least "good" in the monetary sense. He would have paid for the most self-indulgent, nonfunded MFA in filmmaking at the most expensive university in the country.

But four years earlier, finishing up my English degree, I had stubbornly refused to tell him if I even had a job lined up at all. That April, I'd walked across campus to the Career Development Office, on the top floor of the student center, and sat in a soft plastic chair until a woman I'd never seen before—a woman with lacquered white hair—welcomed me into her office and asked me a series of increasingly perplexed questions about what I wanted to do with my life. She had a hard time believing that a student graduating magna cum laude could care so very little where she went next. She ended up having her secretary print out a fifty-page list of the addresses and job titles of all the

alumni in the database whose careers were considered to be somehow “in the field of English.” These people, presumably, would look out for one of their own and help me find a job. I was a little—disappointed, after deliberately turning my back on my father and his connections, to be handed fifty pages of additional connections. But at least they were *my* connections, not his. The people on the list were teachers, technical writers, tutors, translators, and journalists. Loraine Best, class of '65, was one of the only ones with a library job, but this wasn't why I wrote to her. I simply started e-mailing every alum in alphabetical order, until it was time for midterms. I got from Aaronson to Chernack, and then I spent three weeks studying and drinking beer and breaking up with my boyfriend and waiting. Going alphabetically and without discrimination made it seem less like milking the connections and more like leaving it up to chance. We Russians have always been good at roulette.

I had no library science degree and no experience, but Loraine happened to need a children's librarian fast, after the old one was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. She hadn't even had time yet to advertise the job, and so when my letter arrived she took it as an answer to her prayers and hired me over the phone. I was offered the job while sitting on the top bunk of my dorm room, wearing underwear and a Violent Femmes T-shirt and wooly socks. Kate Phelps had died from the cancer by the time I rolled into town that June.

And of course Loraine threw it back in my face every few weeks: “I hired you sight unseen because I knew I was getting a Holyoke graduate, and I thought that guaranteed a certain work ethic.”

When I told my parents I'd be working the children's desk at a small library in a small town in Missouri, my father said, “This is because of some boyfriend? There are a million good boys in Chicago, and many of them are Russian. At some point you are wanting to be an *adult* librarian, no? I say this because you need a challenge. There are university libraries where I can pull on the strings.”

My mother said, “At least you'll be in driving distance.” When she didn't add anything else, I realized this was the kindest thing she could think to say.

Later that same fall, Ian entered the children's fiction contest. Five minutes before the deadline, he came downstairs alone to hand me his story, in a cover made of purple construction paper and decorated with a bright yellow hand cut from a Cheerios box. It was called “The Nothing Hand.” He pushed his sweaty hair back and bounced up and down as if he expected me to read it right then.

“This looks great,” I said, and thumbed through the typed pages for his benefit. I looked up at him leaning over my desk, at his hair that was now stuck straight back with sweat, and at the strange mark I'd never noticed before above his left eyebrow. There were four little pink indented dots, all in a straight row, evenly spaced a few millimeters apart. Could that have been from a fork? I'd heard that teachers had to keep files on any suspicious bruises or wounds, and I wondered if I should start doing the same. I was thinking also of Emily Alden, with that huge bruise on her neck last winter that she claimed was from her brother hitting her with a snowball.

“It's about this hand,” Ian was saying, “that's totally invisible, and it's detached from any human body. It's kind of like a Greek myth, but there's a mortal at the end, and it's on its own separate page. So at the end of the story, you have to guess what the mortal is, and then you can turn the page and see if you were right.”

“So there's a *moral*?”

“No, a mortal, because of how it's inspired by Greek myths. Get it? It's a joke. Also, I forgot page numbers.”

“I’ll bend the rules for you,” I said. I already knew it would win first prize for the fifth grade, because the only other entry was about some kind of ninja battle. I read the beginning as soon as he left. He’d printed it out in dark blue:

THE NOTHING HAND

by Ian Alistair Drake Grade 5

There once was a hand that was made of nothing. It was invisible to all of your senses but it could do whatever it would like. Here was its life:

Day 1: Steal doughnuts and hide.

Day 2: Eat the doughnuts it stole, through a special mouth that it had.

Day 3: Get revenge on bullies through using trickery.

Day 4: Hide under rocks in the forest, waiting for trouble.

I flipped to the end to see the moral.

Mortal: Don’t tell even the rabbits where you’re hiding, because rabbits can’t keep a secret.

I wondered why an invisible hand would need to hide. The first year I ran the contest, a very fat little boy had handed in a story about children who could shrink themselves to two inches tall and ride around in toy cars. I remembered thinking that children’s imaginary worlds were so closely connected with desire, how that poor boy had so obviously wanted to shrink. So what did *this* mean, coming from a child who was loud and omnipresent and somewhat demanding—this wish for double invisibility? Although, come to think of it, it wasn’t a coincidence he spent all his free time in a quiet room below ground, his face buried in biographies of Houdini. To the town of Hannibal, he was half-invisible already.

I’d become friends with a woman named Sophie Bennett who was my age and taught fourth grade Hannibal Day, and I decided to ask her about Ian the next time she came in. She poked through nonfiction for an hour almost every weekend, checking out whole armloads of books about Aztecs or mushrooms. That Sunday afternoon she sank loudly into one of the child-sized computer chairs near my desk.

“I am so fucking sick,” she said. She put her big canvas bag on the floor beside her and looked around the room to see who was there. She hated running into her students. A little girl who had come in by herself was coloring at a table, an older boy was playing computer games, and a couple of middle schoolers were working quietly with tutors. “I think I’ve had twelve healthy days since I started teaching. And now all my kids have lice. Seriously, don’t touch anyone. Don’t even touch the coats.”

I laughed and walked in front of the desk so we could talk more quietly. “I have a question for you,” I said, sitting next to her in one of the computer chairs. She took a big plastic hair clip out of her bag, put it in her mouth to hold it, and started gathering a ponytail.

“Hmm.”

“Okay, Ian Drake. He’s in fifth grade. Did you teach him last year?”

“No,” she said, “I think Julie Leonard had him. But his family is legendary. Big nightmare.”

“I actually had this whole confrontation with the mother. She comes down here, and she goes, ‘My

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