

WHAT THE?

What about a teakettle? What if the spout opened and closed when the steam came out, so it would become a mouth, and it could whistle pretty melodies, or do Shakespeare, or just crack up with me? I could invent a teakettle that reads in Dad's voice, so I could fall asleep, or maybe a set of kettles that sings the chorus of "Yellow Submarine," which is a song by the Beatles, who I love, because entomology is one of my *raisons d'être*, which is a French expression that I know. Another good thing is that I could train my anus to talk when I farted. If I wanted to be extremely hilarious, I'd train it to say, "Wasn't me!" every time I made an incredibly bad fart. And if I ever made an incredibly bad fart in the Hall of Mirrors, which is in Versailles, which is outside of Paris, which is in France, obviously, my anus would say, "Ce n'étais pas moi!"

What about little microphones? What if everyone swallowed them, and they played the sounds of our hearts through little speakers, which could be in the pouches of our overalls? When you skateboarded down the street at night you could hear everyone's heartbeat, and they could hear yours, sort of like sonar. One weird thing is, I wonder if everyone's hearts would start to beat at the same time, like how women who live together have their menstrual periods at the same time, which I know about, but don't really want to know about. That would be so weird, except that the place in the hospital where babies are born would sound like a crystal chandelier in a houseboat, because the babies wouldn't have had time to match up their heartbeats yet. And at the finish line at the end of the New York City Marathon it would sound like war.

And also, there are so many times when you need to make a quick escape, but humans don't have their own wings, or not yet, anyway, so what about a birdseed shirt?

Anyway.

My first jujitsu class was three and a half months ago. Self-defense was something that I was extremely curious about, for obvious reasons, and Mom thought it would be good for me to have a physical activity besides tambourining, so my first jujitsu class was three and a half months ago. There were fourteen kids in the class, and we all had on neat white robes. We practiced bowing, and then we were all sitting down Native American style, and then Sensei Mark asked me to go over to him. "Kick my privates," he told me. That made me feel self-conscious. "Excusez-moi?" I told him. He spread his legs and told me, "I want you to kick my privates as hard as you can." He put his hands at his sides, and took a breath in, and closed his eyes, and that's how I knew that actually he meant business. "Jose," I told him, and inside I was thinking, What the? He told me, "Go on, guy. Destroy my privates." "Destroy your

privates?" With his eyes still closed he cracked up a lot and said, "You couldn't destroy my privates if you tried. That's what's going on here. This is a demonstration of the well-trained body's ability to absorb a direct blow. Now destroy my privates." I told him, "I'm a pacifist," and since most people my age don't know what that means, I turned around and told the others, "I don't think it's right to destroy people's privates. Ever." Sensei Mark said, "Can I ask you something?" I turned back around and told him, "Can I ask you something?" is asking me something." He said, "Do you have dreams of becoming a jujitsu master?" "No," I told him, even though I don't have dreams of running the family jewelry business anymore. He said, "Do you want to know how a jujitsu student becomes a jujitsu master?" "I want to know everything," I told him, but that isn't true anymore either. He told me, "A jujitsu student becomes a jujitsu master by destroying his master's privates." I told him, "That's fascinating." My last jujitsu class was three and a half months ago.

I desperately wish I had my tambourine with me now, because even after everything I'm still wearing heavy boots, and sometimes it helps to play a good beat. My most impressive song that I can play on my tambourine is "The Flight of the Bumblebee," by Nicolai Rimsky-Kor-sakov, which is also the ring tone I downloaded for the cell phone I got after Dad died. It's pretty amazing that I can play "The Flight of the Bumblebee," because you have to hit incredibly fast in parts, and that's extremely hard for me, because I don't really have wrists yet. Ron offered to buy me a five-piece drum set. Money can't buy me love, obviously, but I asked if it would have Zildjian cymbals. He said, "Whatever you want," and then he took my yo-yo off my desk and started to walk the dog with it. I know he just wanted to be friendly, but it made me incredibly angry. "Yo-yo moi!" I told him, grabbing it back. What I really wanted to tell him was "You're not my dad, and you never will be."

Isn't it so weird how the number of dead people is increasing even though the earth stays the same size, so that one day there isn't going to be room to bury anyone anymore? For my ninth birthday last year, Grandma gave me a subscription to National Geographic, which she calls "the National Geographic." She also gave me a white blazer, because I only wear white clothes, and it's too big to wear so it will last me a long time. She also gave me Grandpa's camera, which I loved for two reasons. I asked why he didn't take it with him when he left her. She said, "Maybe he wanted you to have it." I said, "But I was negative-thirty years old." She said, "Still." Anyway, the fascinating thing was that I read in National Geographic that there are more people alive now than have died in all of human history. In other words, if everyone wanted to play Hamlet at once, they couldn't, because there aren't enough skulls!

So what about skyscrapers for dead people that were

built down? They could be underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up. You could bury people one hundred floors down, and a whole dead world could be underneath the living one. Sometimes I think it would be weird if there were a skyscraper that moved up and down while its elevator stayed in place. So if you wanted to go to the ninety-fifth floor, you'd just press the 95 button and the ninety-fifth floor would come to you. Also, that could be extremely useful, because if you're on the ninety-fifth floor, and a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe, even if you left your birdseed shirt at home that day.

So what about skyscrapers for dead people that were built down? They could be underneath the skyscrapers for living people that are built up. You could bury people one hundred floors down, and a whole dead world could be underneath the living one. Sometimes I think it would be weird if there were a skyscraper that moved up and down while its elevator stayed in place. So if you wanted to go to the ninety-fifth floor, you'd just press the 95 button and the ninety-fifth floor would come to you. Also, that could be extremely useful, because if you're on the ninety-fifth floor, and a plane hits below you, the building could take you to the ground, and everyone could be safe, even if you left your birdseed shirt at home that day.

I've only been in a limousine twice ever. The first time was terrible, even though the limousine was wonderful. I'm not allowed to watch TV at home, and I'm not allowed to watch TV in limousines either, but it was still neat that there was a TV there. I asked if we could go by school, so Toothpaste and The Minch could see me in a limousine. Mom said that school wasn't on the way, and we couldn't be late to the cemetery. "Why not?" I asked, which I actually thought was a good question, because if you think about it, why not? Even though I'm not anymore, I used to be an atheist, which means I didn't believe in things that couldn't be observed. I believed that once you're dead, you're dead forever, and you don't feel anything, and you don't even dream. It's not that I believe in things that can't be observed now, because I don't. It's that I believe that things are extremely complicated. And anyway, it's not like we were actually burying him, anyway. Even though I was trying hard for it not to, it was annoying me how Grandma kept touching me, so I climbed into the front seat and poked the driver's shoulder until he gave me some attention. "What. Is. Your. Designation." I asked in Stephen Hawking voice. "Say what?" "He wants to know your name," Grandma said from the back seat. He handed me his card.

GERALD THOMPSON
Sunshine Limousine
serving the five boroughs
(212) 570-7249

handed him my card and told him, “Greetings. Gerald. I. Am. Oskar.” He asked me why I was talking like that. I told him, “Oskar’s CPU is a neural-net processor. A learning computer. The more contact he has with humans, the more he learns.” Gerald said, “O” and then he said “K.” I couldn’t tell if he liked me or not, so I told him, “Your sunglasses are one hundred dollars.” He said, “One seventy-five.” “Do you know a lot of curse words?” “I know a couple.” “I’m not allowed to use curse words.” “Bummer.” “What’s ‘bummer?’” “It’s a bad thing.” “Do you know ‘shit?’” “That’s a curse, isn’t it?” “Not if you say ‘shiitake.’” “Guess not.” “Succotash my Balzac, dipshiitake.” Gerald shook his head and cracked up a little, but not in the bad way, which is at me. “I can’t even say ‘hair pie,’” I told him, “unless I’m talking about an actual pie made out of rabbits. Cool driving gloves.” “Thanks.” And then I thought of something, so I said it. “Actually, if limousines were extremely long, they wouldn’t need drivers. You could just get in the back seat, walk through the limousine, and then get out of the front seat, which would be where you wanted to go. So in this situation, the front seat would be at the cemetery.” “And I would be watching the game right now.” I patted his shoulder and told him, “When you look up ‘hilarious’ in the dictionary, there’s a picture of you.”

In the back seat, Mom was holding something in her purse. I could tell that she was squeezing it, because I could see her arm muscles. Grandma was knitting white mittens, so I knew they were for me, even though it wasn’t cold out. I wanted to ask Mom what she was squeezing and why she had to keep it hidden. I remember thinking that even if I were suffering hypothermia, I would never, ever put on those mittens.

“Now that I’m thinking about it,” I told Gerald, “they could make an incredibly long limousine that had its back seat at your mom’s VJ and its front seat at your mausoleum, and it would be as long as your life.” Gerald said, “Yeah, but if everyone lived like that, no one would ever meet anyone, right?” I said, “So?”

Mom squeezed, and Grandma knitted, and I told Gerald, “I kicked a French chicken in the stomach once,” because I wanted to make him crack up, because if I could make him crack up, my boots could be a little lighter. He didn’t say anything, probably because he didn’t hear me, so I said, “I said I kicked a French chicken in the stomach once.” “Huh?” “It said, ‘Oeuf.’” “What is that?” “It’s a joke. Do you want to

hear another, or have you already had un oeuf?” He looked at Grandma in the mirror and said, “What’s he saying?” She said, “His grandfather loved animals more than he loved people.” I said, “Get it? Oeuf?”

I crawled back, because it’s dangerous to drive and talk at the same time, especially on the highway, which is what we were on. Grandma started touching me again, which was annoying, even though I didn’t want it to be. Mom said, “Honey,” and I said, “Oui,” and she said, “Did you give a copy of our apartment key to the mailman?” I thought it was so weird that she would mention that then, because it didn’t have to do with anything, but I think she was looking for something to talk about that wasn’t the obvious thing. I said, “The mailperson is a mailwoman.” She nodded, but not exactly at me, and she asked if I’d given the mailwoman a key. I nodded yes, because I never used to lie to her before everything happened. I didn’t have a reason to. “Why did you do that?” she asked. So I told her, “Stan—” And she said, “Who?” And I said, “Stan the doorman. Sometimes he runs around the corner for coffee, and I want to be sure all of my packages get to me, so I thought, if Alicia—” “Who?” “The mail-woman. If she had a key, she could leave things inside our door.” “But you can’t give a key to a stranger.” “Fortunately Alicia isn’t a stranger.” “We have lots of valuable things in our apartment.” “I know. We have really great things.” “Sometimes people who seem good end up being not as good as you might have hoped, you know? What if she had stolen your things?” “She wouldn’t.” “But what if?” “But she wouldn’t.” “Well, did she give you a key to her apartment?” She was obviously mad at me, but I didn’t know why. I hadn’t done anything wrong. Or if I had, I didn’t know what it was. And I definitely didn’t mean to do it.

I moved over to Grandma’s side of the limousine and told Mom, “Why would I need a key to her apartment?” She could tell that I was zipping up the sleeping bag of myself, and I could tell that she didn’t really love me. I knew the truth, which was that if she could have chosen, it would have been my funeral we were driving to. I looked up at the limousine’s sunroof, and I imagined the world before there were ceilings, which made me wonder: Does a cave have no ceiling, or is a cave all ceiling? “Maybe you could check with me next time, OK?” “Don’t be mad at me,” I said, and I reached over Grandma and opened and closed the door’s lock a couple of times. “I’m not mad at you,” she said. “Not even a little?” “No.” “Do you still love me?” It didn’t seem like the perfect time to mention that I had already made copies of the key for the deliverer from Pizza Hut, and the UPS person, and also the nice guys from Greenpeace, so they could leave me articles on manatees and other animals that are going extinct when Stan is getting coffee. “I’ve never loved you more.”

“Mom?” “Yes?” “I have a question.” “OK.” “What are you squeezing in your purse?” She pulled out her hand and opened it, and it was empty. “Just squeezing,” she said. Even though it was an incredibly sad day, she looked so, so beautiful. I kept trying to figure out a way to tell her that, but all of the ways I thought of were weird and wrong. She was wearing the bracelet that I made for her, and that made me feel like one hundred dollars. I love making jewelry for her, because it makes her happy, and making her happy is another one of my *raison d’être*.

It isn’t anymore, but for a really long time it was my dream to take over the family jewelry business. Dad constantly used to tell me I was too smart for retail. That never made sense to me, because he was smarter than me, so if I was too smart for retail, then he really must have been too smart for retail. I told him that. “First of all,” he told me, “I’m not smarter than you, I’m more knowledgeable than you, and that’s only because I’m older than you. Parents are always more knowledgeable than their children, and children are always smarter than their parents.” “Unless the child is a mental retard,” I told him. He didn’t have anything to say about that. “You said ‘first of all,’ so what’s second of all?” “Second of all, if I’m so smart, then why am I in retail?” “That’s true,” I said. And then I thought of something: “But wait a minute, it won’t be the family jewelry business if no one in the family is running it.” He told me, “Sure it will. It’ll just be someone else’s family.” I asked, “Well, what about our family? Will we open a new business?” He said, “We’ll open something.” I thought about that my second time in a limousine, when the renter and I were on our way to dig up Dad’s empty coffin.

A great game that Dad and I would sometimes play on Sundays was Reconnaissance Expedition. Sometimes the Reconnaissance Expeditions were extremely simple, like when he told me to bring back something from every decade in the twentieth century—I was clever and brought back a rock—and sometimes they were incredibly complicated and would go on for a couple of weeks. For the last one we ever did, which never finished, he gave me a map of Central Park. I said, “And?” And he said, “And what?” I said, “What are the clues?” He said, “Who said there had to be clues?” “There are always clues.” “That doesn’t, in itself, suggest anything.” “Not a single clue?” He said, “Unless no clues is a clue.” “Is no clues a clue?” He shrugged his shoulders, like he had no idea what I was talking about. I loved that.

spent all day walking around the park, looking for something that might tell me something, but the problem was that I didn’t know what I was looking for. I went up to people and asked if they knew anything that I should know, because sometimes Dad would design Reconnaissance Expeditions so I would have to talk to people. But everyone I went up to was

just like, What the? I looked for clues around the reservoir. I read every poster on every lamppost and tree. I inspected the descriptions of the animals at the zoo. I even made kite-fliers reel in their kites so I could examine them, although I knew it was improbable. But that's how tricky Dad could be. There was nothing, which would have been unfortunate, unless nothing was a clue. Was nothing a clue?

That night we ordered General Tso's Gluten for dinner and I noticed that Dad was using a fork, even though he was perfect with chopsticks. "Wait a minute!" I said, and stood up. I pointed at his fork. "Is that fork a clue?" He shrugged his shoulders, which to me meant it was a major clue. I thought: Fork, fork. I ran to my laboratory and got my metal detector out of its box in the closet. Because I'm not allowed to be in the park alone at night, Grandma went with me. I started at the Eighty-sixth Street entrance and walked in extremely precise lines, like I was one of the Mexican guys who mow the lawn, so I wouldn't miss anything. I knew the insects were loud because it was summer, but I didn't hear them because my earphones covered my ears. It was just me and the metal underground.

Every time the beeps would get close together, I'd tell Grandma to shine the flashlight on the spot. Then I'd put on my white gloves, take the hand shovel from my kit, and dig extremely gently. When I saw something, I used a paintbrush to get rid of the dirt, just like a real archeologist. Even though I only searched a small area of the park that night, I dug up a quarter, and a handful of paper clips, and what I thought was the chain from a lamp that you pull to make the light go on, and a refrigerator magnet for sushi, which I know about, but wish I didn't. I put all of the evidence in a bag and marked on a map where I found it.

When I got home, I examined the evidence in my laboratory under my microscope, one piece at a time: a bent spoon, some screws, a pair of rusty scissors, a toy car, a pen, a key ring, broken glasses for someone with incredibly bad eyes...

I brought them to Dad, who was reading the New York Times at the kitchen table, marking the mistakes with his red pen. "Here's what I've found," I said, pushing my pussy off the table with the tray of evidence. Dad looked at it and nodded. I asked, "So?" He shrugged his shoulders like he had no idea what I was talking about, and he went back to the paper. "Can't you even tell me if I'm on the right track?" Buckminster purred, and Dad shrugged his shoulders again. "But if you don't tell me anything, how can I ever be right?" He circled something in an article and said, "Another way of looking at it would be, how could you ever be wrong?"

He got up to get a drink of water, and I examined what he'd circled on the page, because that's how tricky he could be. It was in an article about the girl who had disappeared, and

how everyone thought the congressman who was humping her had killed her. A few months later they found her body in Rock Creek Park, which is in Washington, D.C., but by then everything was different, and no one cared anymore, except for her parents.

statement, read to the hundreds of gathered press from a makeshift media center off the back of the family home, Levy's father adamantly restated his confidence that his daughter would be found.

*"We will **not stop looking** until we are given a definitive reason to stop looking, namely, Chandra's return."*

During the brief question and answer period that followed, a reporter from El Pais asked Mr. Levy if by "return" he meant "safe return." Overcome with emotion, Mr. Levy was unable to speak, and his lawyer took the microphone. "We continue to hope and pray for Chandra's safety, and will do everything within..."

It wasn't a mistake! It was a message to me!

I went back to the park every night for the next three nights. I dug up a hair clip, and a roll of pennies, and a thumbtack, and a coat hanger, and a 9V battery, and a Swiss Army knife, and a tiny picture frame, and a tag for a dog named Turbo, and a square of aluminum foil, and a ring, and a razor, and an extremely old pocket watch that was stopped at 5:37, although I didn't know if it was A.M. or P.M. But I still couldn't figure out what it all meant. The more I found, the less I understood.

I spread the map out on the dining room table, and I held down the corners with cans of V8. The dots from where I'd found things looked like the stars in the universe. I connected them, like an astrologer, and if you squinted your eyes like a Chinese person, it kind of looked like the word "fragile." Fragile. What was fragile? Was Central Park fragile? Was nature fragile? Were the things I found fragile? A thumbtack isn't fragile. Is a bent spoon fragile? I erased, and connected the dots in a different way, to make "door." Fragile? Door? Then I thought of porte, which is French for door, obviously. I erased and connected the dots to make "porte." I had the revelation that I could connect the dots to make "cyborg," and "platypus," and "boobs," and even "Oskar," if you were extremely Chinese. I could connect them to make almost anything I wanted, which meant I wasn't getting closer to anything. And now I'll never know what I was supposed to find. And that's another reason I can't sleep.

Anyway.

I'm not allowed to watch TV, although I am allowed to rent documentaries that are approved for me, and I can read anything I want. My favorite book is A Brief History of Time, even though I haven't actually finished it, because the math is incredibly hard and Mom isn't good at helping me. One of

my favorite parts is the beginning of the first chapter, where Stephen Hawking tells about a famous scientist who was giving a lecture about how the earth orbits the sun, and the sun orbits the solar system, and whatever. Then a woman in the back of the room raised her hand and said, "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." So the scientist asked her what the tortoise was standing on. And she said, "But it's turtles all the way down!"

I love that story, because it shows how ignorant people can be. And also because I love tortoises.

A few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters. I don't know why, but it was one of the only things that made my boots lighter. One weird thing is that instead of using normal stamps, I used stamps from my collection, including valuable ones, which sometimes made me wonder if what I was really doing was trying to get rid of things. The first letter I wrote was to Stephen Hawking. I used a stamp of Alexander Graham Bell.

"Dear Stephen Hawking, Can I please be your protégé? Thanks, Oskar Schell"

I thought he wasn't going to respond, because he was such an amazing person and I was so normal. But then one day I came home from school and Stan handed me an envelope and said, "You've got mail!" in the AOL voice I taught him. I ran up the 105 stairs to our apartment, and ran to my laboratory, and went into my closet, and turned on my flashlight, and opened it. The letter inside was typed, obviously, because Stephen Hawking can't use his hands, because he has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, which I know about, unfortunately.

"Thank you for your letter. Because of the large volume of mail I receive, I am unable to write personal responses. Nevertheless, know that I read and save every letter, with the hope of one day being able to give each the proper response it deserves. Until that day, Most sincerely, Stephen Hawking"

I called Mom's cell. "Oskar?" "You picked up before it rang." "Is everything OK?" "I'm gonna need a laminator." "A laminator?" "There's something incredibly wonderful that I want to preserve."

Dad always used to tuck me in, and he'd tell the greatest stories, and we'd read the New York Times together, and sometimes he'd whistle "I Am the Walrus," because that was his favorite song, even though he couldn't explain what it meant, which frustrated me. One thing that was so great was how he could find a mistake in every single article we looked at. Sometimes they were grammar mistakes, sometimes they were mistakes with geography or facts, and sometimes the article just didn't tell the whole story. I loved having a dad who was smarter than the New York Times, and I loved how my cheek could feel the hairs on his chest through his T-shirt, and how he always

smelled like shaving, even at the end of the day. Being with him made my brain quiet. I didn't have to invent a thing.

When Dad was tucking me in that night, the night before the worst day, I asked if the world was a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise. "Excuse me?" "It's just that why does the earth stay in place instead of falling through the universe?" "Is this Oskar I'm tucking in? Has an alien stolen his brain for experimentation?" I said, "We don't believe in aliens." He said, "The earth does fall through the universe. You know that, buddy. It's constantly falling toward the sun. That's what it means to orbit." So I said, "Obviously, but why is there gravity?" He said, "What do you mean why is there gravity?" "What's the reason?" "Who said there had to be a reason?" "No one did, exactly." "My question was rhetorical." "What's that mean?" "It means I wasn't asking it for an answer, but to make a point." "What point?" "That there doesn't have to be a reason." "But if there isn't a reason, then why does the universe exist at all?" "Because of sympathetic conditions." "So then why am I your son?" "Because Mom and I made love, and one of my sperm fertilized one of her eggs." "Excuse me while I regurgitate." "Don't act your age." "Well, what I don't get is why do we exist? I don't mean how, but why." I watched the fireflies of his thoughts orbit his head. He said, "We exist because we exist." "What the?" "We could imagine all sorts of universes unlike this one, but this is the one that happened."

I understood what he meant, and I didn't disagree with him, but I didn't agree with him either. Just because you're an atheist, that doesn't mean you wouldn't love for things to have reasons for why they are.

I turned on my shortwave radio, and with Dad's help I was able to pick up someone speaking Greek, which was nice. We couldn't understand what he was saying, but we lay there, looking at the glow-in-the-dark constellations on my ceiling, and listened for a while. "Your grandfather spoke Greek," he said. "You mean he speaks Greek," I said. "That's right. He just doesn't speak it here." "Maybe that's him we're listening to." The front page was spread over us like a blanket. There was a picture of a tennis player on his back, who I guess was the winner, but I couldn't really tell if he was happy or sad.

"Dad?" "Yeah?" "Could you tell me a story?" "Sure." "A good one?" "As opposed to all the boring ones I tell." "Right." I tucked my body incredibly close into his, so my nose pushed into his armpit. "And you won't interrupt me?" "I'll try not to." "Because it makes it hard to tell a story." "And it's annoying." "And it's annoying."

The moment before he started was my favorite moment.

"Once upon a time, New York City had a sixth borough." "What's a borough?" "That's what I call an inter-

ruption." "I know, but the story won't make any sense to me if I don't know what a borough is." "It's like a neighborhood. Or a collection of neighborhoods." "So if there was once a sixth borough, then what are the five boroughs?" "Manhattan, obviously, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx." "Have I ever been to any of the other boroughs?" "Here we go." "I just want to know." "We went to the Bronx Zoo once, a few years ago. Remember that?" "No." "And we've been to Brooklyn to see the roses at the Botanic Garden." "Have I been to Queens?" "I don't think so." "Have I been to Staten Island?" "No." "Was there really a sixth borough?" "I've been trying to tell you." "No more interruptions. I promise."

When the story finished, we turned the radio back on and found someone speaking French. That was especially nice, because it reminded me of the vacation we just came back from, which I wish never ended. After a while, Dad asked me if I was awake. I told him no, because I knew that he didn't like to leave until I had fallen asleep, and I didn't want him to be tired for work in the morning. He kissed my forehead and said good night, and then he was at the door. "Dad?" "Yeah, buddy?" "Nothing."

The next time I heard his voice was when I came home from school the next day. We were let out early, because of what happened. I wasn't even a little bit panicky, because both Mom and Dad worked in midtown, and Grandma didn't work, obviously, so everyone I loved was safe.

I know that it was 10:18 when I got home, because I look at my watch a lot. The apartment was so empty and so quiet. As I walked to the kitchen, I invented a lever that could be on the front door, which would trigger a huge spoked wheel in the living room to turn against metal teeth that would hang down from the ceiling, so that it would play beautiful music, like maybe "Fixing a Hole" or "I Want to Tell You," and the apartment would be one huge music box.

After I petted Buckminster for a few seconds, to show him I loved him, I checked the phone messages. I didn't have a cell phone yet, and when we were leaving school, Toothpaste told me he'd call to let me know whether I was going to watch him attempt skateboarding tricks in the park, or if we were going to go look at Playboy magazines in the drugstore with the aisles where no one can see what you're looking at, which I didn't feel like doing, but still.

Message one. Tuesday, 8:52 A.M. *Is anybody there? Hello? It's Dad. If you're there, pick up. I just tried the office, but no one was picking up. Listen, something's happened. I'm OK. They're telling us to stay where we are and wait for the firemen. I'm sure it's fine. I'll give you another call when I have a better idea of what's going on. Just wanted to let you know that I'm OK, and not to worry. I'll call again soon.*

There were four more messages from him: one at 9:12, one at 9:31, one at 9:46, and one at 10:04. I listened to them, and listened to them again, and then before I had time to figure out what to do, or even what to think or feel, the phone started ringing.

It was 10:22:27.

I looked at the caller ID and saw that it was him.

WHY I'M NOT WHERE YOU ARE 5/21/63

To my unborn child: I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk and talk, I couldn't keep my mouth shut, the silence overtook me like a cancer, it was one of my first meals in America, I tried to tell the waiter, "The way you just handed me that knife, that reminds me of—" but I couldn't finish the sentence, her name wouldn't come, I tried again, it wouldn't come, she was locked inside me, how strange, I thought, how frustrating, how pathetic, how sad, I took a pen from my pocket and wrote "Anna" on my napkin, it happened again two days later, and then again the following day, she was the only thing I wanted to talk about, it kept happening, when I didn't have a pen, I'd write "Anna" in the air—backward and right to left—so that the person I was speaking with could see, and when I was on the phone I'd dial the numbers—2, 6, 6, 2—so that the person could hear what I couldn't, myself, say. "And" was the next word I lost, probably because it was so close to her name, what a simple word to say, what a profound word to lose, I had to say "ampersand," which sounded ridiculous, but there it is, "I'd like a coffee ampersand something sweet," nobody would choose to be like that. "Want" was a word I lost early on, which is not to say that I stopped wanting things—I wanted things more—I just stopped being able to express the want, so instead I said "desire," "I desire two rolls," I would tell the baker, but that wasn't quite right, the meaning of my thoughts started to float away from me, like leaves that fall from a tree into a river, I was the tree, the world was the river. I lost "come" one afternoon with the dogs in the park, I lost "fine" as the barber turned me toward the mirror, I lost "shame"—the verb and the noun in the same moment; it was a shame. I lost "carry," I lost the things I carried—"daybook," "pencil," "pocket change," "wallet"—I even lost "loss." After a time, I had only a handful of words left, if someone did something nice for me, I would tell him, "The thing that comes before 'you're welcome,'" if I was hungry, I'd point at my stomach and say, "I am the opposite of full," I'd lost "yes," but I still had "no," so if someone asked me, "Are you Thomas?"

I would answer, “Not no,” but then I lost “no,” I went to a tattoo parlor and had YES written onto the palm of my left hand, and NO onto my right palm, what can I say, it hasn’t made life wonderful, it’s made life possible, when I rub my hands against each other in the middle of winter I am warming myself with the friction of YES and NO, when I clap my hands I am showing my appreciation through the uniting and parting of YES and NO, I signify “book” by peeling open my clapped hands, every book, for me, is the balance of YES and NO, even this one, my last one, especially this one. Does it break my heart, of course, every moment of every day, into more pieces than my heart was made of, I never thought of myself as quiet, much less silent, I never thought about things at all, everything changed, the distance that wedged itself between me and my happiness wasn’t the world, it wasn’t the bombs and burning buildings, it was me, my thinking, the cancer of never letting go, is ignorance bliss, I don’t know, but it’s so painful to think, and tell me, what did thinking ever do for me, to what great place did thinking ever bring me? I think and think and think, I’ve thought myself out of happiness one million times, but never once into it. “P” was the last word I was able to speak aloud, which is a terrible thing, but there it is, I would walk around the neighborhood saying, “I I I I.” “You want a cup of coffee, Thomas?” “I.” “And maybe something sweet?” “I.” “How about this weather?” “I.” “You look upset. Is anything wrong?” I wanted to say, “Of course,” I wanted to ask, “Is anything right?” I wanted to pull the thread, unravel the scarf of my silence and start again from the beginning, but instead I said, “I.” I know I’m not alone in this disease, you hear the old people in the street and some of them are moaning, “Ay yay yay,” but some of them are clinging to their last word, “I,” they’re saying, because they’re desperate, it’s not a complaint it’s a prayer, and then I lost “I” and my silence was complete. I started carrying blank books like this one around, which I would fill with all the things I couldn’t say, that’s how it started, if I wanted two rolls of bread from the baker, I would write “I want two rolls” on the next blank page and show it to him, and if I needed help from someone, I’d write “Help,” and if something made me want to laugh, I’d write “Ha ha ha!” and instead of singing in the shower I would write out the lyrics of my favorite songs, the ink would turn the water blue or red or green, and the music would run down my legs, at the end of each day I would take the book to bed with me and read through the pages of my life:

I want two rolls
And I wouldn’t say no to something sweet
I’m sorry, this is the smallest I’ve got
Start spreading the news...
The regular, please
Thank you, but I’m about to burst
I’m not sure, but it’s late
Help Ha ha ha!

It wasn’t unusual for me to run out of blank pages before the end of the day, so should I have to say something to someone on the street or in the bakery or at the bus stop, the best I could do was flip back through the daybook and find the most fitting page to recycle, if someone asked me, “How are you feeling?” it might be that my best response was to point at, “The regular, please,” or perhaps, “And I wouldn’t say no to something sweet,” when my only friend, Mr. Richter, suggested, “What if you tried to make a sculpture again? What’s the worst thing that could happen?” I shuffled halfway into the filled book: “I’m not sure, but it’s late.” I went through hundreds of books, thousands of them, they were all over the apartment, I used them as doorstops and paperweights, I stacked them if I needed to reach something, I slid them under the legs of wobbly tables, I used them as trivets and coasters, to line the birdcages and to swat insects from whom I begged forgiveness, I never thought of my books as being special, only necessary, I might rip out a page—“I’m sorry, this is the smallest I’ve got”—to wipe up some mess, or empty a whole day to pack up the emergency light bulbs, I remember spending an afternoon with Mr. Richter in the Central Park Zoo, I went weighted down with food for the animals, only someone who’d never been an animal would put up a sign saying not to feed them, Mr. Richter told a joke, I tossed hamburger to the lions, he rattled the cages with his laughter, the animals went to the corners, we laughed and laughed, together and separately, out loud and silently, we were determined to ignore whatever needed to be ignored, to build a new world from nothing if nothing in our world could be salvaged, it was one of the best days of my life, a day during which I lived my life and didn’t think about my life at all. Later that year, when snow started to hide the front steps, when morning became evening as I sat on the sofa, buried under everything I’d lost, I made a fire and used my laughter for kindling: “Ha ha ha!” “Ha ha ha!” “Ha ha ha!” “Ha ha ha!” I was already out of words when I met your mother, that may have been what made our marriage possible, she never had to know me. We met at the Columbian Bakery on Broadway, we’d both come to New York lonely, broken and confused, I was sitting in the corner stirring cream into coffee, around

and around like a little solar system, the place was half empty but she slid right up next to me, “You’ve lost everything,” she said, as if we were sharing a secret, “I can see.” If I’d been someone else in a different world I’d’ve done something different, but I was myself, and the world was the world, so I was silent, “It’s OK,” she whispered, her mouth too close to my ear, “Me too. You can probably see it from across a room. It’s not like being Italian. We stick out like sore thumbs. Look at how they look. Maybe they don’t know that we’ve lost everything, but they know something’s off.” She was the tree and also the river flowing away from the tree, “There are worse things,” she said, “worse than being like us. Look, at least we’re alive,” I could see that she wanted those last words back, but the current was too strong, “And the weather is one hundred dollars, also, don’t let me forget to mention,” I stirred my coffee. “But I hear it’s supposed to get crummy tonight. Or that’s what the man on the radio said, anyway,” I shrugged, I didn’t know what “crummy” meant, “I was gonna go buy some tuna fish at the A&P. I clipped some coupons from the Post this morning. They’re five cans for the price of three. What a deal! I don’t even like tuna fish. It gives me stomachaches, to be frank. But you can’t beat that price,” she was trying to make me laugh, but I shrugged my shoulders and stirred my coffee, “I don’t know anymore,” she said. “The weather is one hundred dollars, and the man on the radio says it’s gonna get crummy tonight, so maybe I should go to the park instead, even if I burn easily. And anyway, it’s not like I’m gonna eat the tuna fish tonight, right? Or ever, if I’m being frank. It gives me stomachaches, to be perfectly frank. So there’s no rush in that department. But the weather, now that won’t stick around. Or at least it never has. And I should tell you also that my doctor says getting out is good for me. My eyes are crummy, and he says I don’t get out nearly enough, and that if I got out a little more, if I were a little less afraid...” She was extending a hand that I didn’t know how to take, so I broke its fingers with my silence, she said, “You don’t want to talk to me, do you?” I took my daybook out of my knapsack and found the next blank page, the second to last. “I don’t speak,” I wrote. “I’m sorry.” She looked at the piece of paper, then at me, then back at the piece of paper, she covered her eyes with her hands and cried, tears seeped between her fingers and collected in the little webs, she cried and cried and cried, there weren’t any napkins nearby, so I ripped the page from the book—“I don’t speak. I’m sorry.”—and used it to dry her cheeks, my explanation and apology ran down her face like mascara, she took my pen from me and wrote on the next blank page of my daybook, the final one:

Please marry me
I flipped back and pointed at, “Ha ha ha!” She flipped

forward and pointed at, "Please marry me." I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm sorry, this is the smallest I've got." She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me." I flipped back and pointed at, "I'm not sure, but it's late." She flipped forward and pointed at, "Please marry me," and this time put her finger on "Please," as if to hold down the page and end the conversation, or as if she were trying to push through the word and into what she really wanted to say. I thought about life, about my life, the embarrassments, the little coincidences, the shadows of alarm clocks on bedside tables. I thought about my small victories and everything I'd seen destroyed, I'd swum through mink coats on my parents' bed while they hosted downstairs, I'd lost the only person I could have spent my only life with, I'd left behind a thousand tons of marble, I could have released sculptures, I could have released myself from the marble of myself. I'd experienced joy, but not nearly enough, could there be enough? The end of suffering does not justify the suffering, and so there is no end to suffering, what a mess I am, I thought, what a fool, how foolish and narrow, how worthless, how pinched and pathetic, how helpless. None of my pets know their own names, what kind of person am I? I lifted her finger like a record needle and flipped back, one page at a time:

Help