

about what a great football player Erik is, but Mr. Costello was ready for them. He has a football-playing son of his own, and he hopped into his Jeep Cherokee to go get him.

They all wound up in the great room, near the fireplace. I sat on a stool near the kitchen. Mr. Costello's son is named Mike. Mike and his father talked about the football program at Lake Windsor High with a great deal of pride. Mr. Costello pointed out, "We've only had the program for ten years, and we've already surpassed the program at Tangerine High. No big-school football players are coming out of Tangerine High anymore. The Lake Windsor Seagulls are now the dominant team in three counties. They're rewriting all the county record books."

Dad said, "What position do you play, Mike?"

Mike Costello spoke very well, like one of those football guys who make United Way commercials. "Coach Warner and Dad and I made a decision last year. Coach had enough line-men, but he had no backup at quarterback. He's been working with me, and now I'm number-two quarterback on the depth chart."

Mike's father turned to Mom and explained, "That means he's the backup to Antoine Thomas."

But no one in my family needs to be told what "number two on the depth chart" means. If Mom had chosen to, she could have explained to Mr. Costello what it *really* means. As backup quarterback, his son Mike would be handling the snaps and holding the ball for the placekicker—in this case, Erik Fisher, a placekicker who can hit with deadly accuracy from fifty yards. If Mom had chosen to, she could have explained to him that Mike Costello's backside would be featured in the local paper often as he held the ball for this new placekicking sensation. But she didn't.

Mike was very friendly. He told Erik that he "had heard about him already from the coach" and that he "was looking forward to working with him."

Erik smiled and said, "So Coach Warner told you that you'll be my holder?"

Mike answered, "Coach wants me in there as the holder so we can have the option—either we can kick the ball, or we can fake the kick and have me roll out and run or pass."

Erik was still smiling, but he said, "Coach Warner knows what I can do. He can send anybody out there to pretend to kick a field goal. When I go out there, it'll be for real."

Mike shrugged and said, "That'll be the coach's call. Won't it?"

Erik locked eyes with him for a second, then backed off.

"Yes, of course it will."

I thought to myself, *Way to go, Mike*. But I had to admit Erik was right. I've heard Coach Warner talk to Dad enough to know he's counting on Erik to be an impact player, a star. I guess part of that stardom will come at Mike's expense. I can see Mike Costello's future. I can see the *Tangerine Times* photos of the sensational senior placekicker Erik Fisher and his anonymous holder. (Dad has the clippings from Houston of the sensational junior placekicker Erik Fisher and his anonymous holder, a kid whose name totally escapes me now.) There will be no football glory in Mike Costello's future. But does Mike, or his father, really care? They certainly don't care the way Dad and Erik do.

Dad told them that he graduated from Ohio State. But he added that he always regretted not being big enough to play football there. Mike's dad told us that he graduated from FSU, and from FSU's School of Law. He didn't add that he regretted anything.



Both Costellos seemed to be impressed by Erik. They both asked about his high school exploits back in Houston. They both admired the gold varsity ring on his hand. Dad boasted that Erik was the only sophomore in his high school ever to receive one.

Erik was as phony as he needed to be. He asked some questions about Lake Windsor High's student government, and about its National Honor Society. He asked about early-acceptance programs at different universities in Florida.

Mike told us that he had already been accepted into FSU's School of Engineering, so I don't think he's too worried about his future in football, or in anything else. Actually, he seems a pretty decent guy, for a football player. But who knows? He's bound to change, in one way or another, once he gets caught up inside the Erik Fisher Football Dream.

## Monday, August 21

It took me a long time to fall asleep last night. I was thinking about this: Erik's arrival is going to change the football season at Lake Windsor High School. Dad's arrival is going to change how things are done in the Civil Engineering Department in Tangerine County. Mom's arrival will change the Homeowners' Association in Lake Windsor Downs. So what about me? Will I make the difference between winning and losing for the middle school's soccer team?

I have this sense that great things are expected of us here. Dad calls this a "booming area," but it's no Houston. It's not even a Huntsville. It's like we're major leaguers who've been sent down to a minor-league city for a while. We're expected to do great things here and then move back up to the big leagues.

I got down to breakfast just as Dad was leaving. He was halfway out the door, and he did not look happy. He was lec-

turing Mom: "You ought to file a complaint against that fireman. You ought to call the county and complain about the slow response time. Then you ought to complain about them sending some jerk kid out here who doesn't know what he's doing or what he's talking about."

I don't know why, but I immediately rose to Wayne's defense. "He sure seemed to know what he was talking about, Dad. He sure knew all about the muck fire."

Dad snapped back, "No professional shows up twenty minutes late wearing cutoffs. If he worked for me, he'd be fired."

Then he was out the door, leaving me with my unanswered questions: *Fired for what, Dad? For telling us the truth? For telling us something that you didn't know? That you should have known?*

After breakfast I joined Mom in one of the guest bedrooms. We'd taken on the job of unpacking the boxes. We had already worked our way through the great room, the living room, and the dining room.

"Shade and storage space," Mom said, "are the two things that you do not get in Florida. People pack up their northern homes with their attics and basements and tiny upstairs rooms that nobody ever uses, and they move into these Florida homes that are as wide open as cathedrals. All the house space down here is devoted to air and light, nothing to storage."

Mom had, of course, anticipated this problem. Before the movers came we had set aside everything that we would not use "on a regular basis" in Florida. All of these items are now straddled in a climate-controlled storage space just west of here, out on Route 22. We probably have as much stuff out there as we do here in the house, including most of Mom's antiques, which "just aren't Florida."

It occurred to me, as we unpacked the things that *are* Florida, that Mom might actually hate moving here. But of



course she will never tell me about it. Just like she would never have told Grandmom and Grandpop about hating any of those moves of her childhood. Mom would never waste her time complaining. Just like she would never waste her time worrying about the past.

Later in the afternoon we drove up Route 89, past new developments with new walls and guardhouses, past a long row of high-tension wires, to the adjoining campuses of Lake Windsor High School and Lake Windsor Middle School. All the way there we seemed to be riding side-by-side with black storm clouds.

"I hope we get in before this rain starts," Mom muttered as we turned at Seagull Way into the enormous blacktopped parking lot of the campus. We drove past the long, windowless two-story high school and around the football stadium to the middle school. The middle school office is located in a one-story building that looks like the younger brother of the high school building.

We made it inside just as the first bolts of lightning cracked around us. While Mom gave my name to the secretary, I looked through a glass door at a field full of small wooden shacks. They take up most of the space between this main building and the steel bleachers of the high school football stadium. "I wonder who gets put into those shacks," I said, turning toward Mom. She was now standing with a tall, thin woman with jet black hair.

The woman eyed me coldly and said, "All seventh and eighth graders are in portable classrooms. The main building is for sixth graders only."

Mom did not look pleased. The woman continued, "I'm Mrs. Gates. I'm the principal here at Lake Windsor Middle School."

Mom extended her hand. "I'm Caroline Fisher. This is my son Paul."

"Hello, Paul," she said. "What can I tell you folks about Lake Windsor Middle?"

"We were hoping to see exactly where Paul will be going next week. He has problems with his eyesight—he's legally blind—so we were hoping to make a dry run today."

Mrs. Gates looked hard at my glasses. She seemed to be trying to think of a way out of this, but she finally said, "I see. I see. All right, let's take a quick tour."

Mrs. Gates and Mom took off at a fast walk. I followed slowly, angry at Mom for calling attention to my eyesight. She wanted a tour of the place because she's nosy and wants to see everything for herself. It wasn't because I can't see, because I can. I can see just fine.

"We call this the Building," Mrs. Gates explained. "It contains the main office, the cafeteria, the library, and the sixth-grade classrooms."

"Don't you have an auditorium?" Mom asked.

"The cafeteria doubles as the auditorium."

"What about a gym?"

"When we need to, we use the high school's gymnasium."

"But where do you have your PE classes?"

"Oh, we always have physical education outdoors, on one of our fields."

"And when it rains?"

"Then we have it indoors, in the classrooms."

"Surely they don't do jumping jacks in those wooden portables."

"No. On a rainy day the PE teachers will most likely concentrate on other parts of their curriculum, such as health care or good nutrition."



We were outside now, facing the portables. There must be forty of them, all connected by a system of wooden walkways—the kind of boardwalks you see at the beach—only these stretch over some sick-looking grass and a lot of brown dirt.

Mrs. Gates was speaking rapidly. “Each portable is, of course, air-conditioned. As you can see, all of the buildings on our campus are grounded with lightning rods for our afternoon storms.”

Mom eyed the field with alarm. “How would you ever know if there were some emergency out here?”

Mrs. Gates turned to her and asked, “Like what?”

I froze. Even I could hear the annoyance in that voice.

Mom locked eyes with her. “Does it really matter like what? Do I really have to provide you with an example of what constitutes an emergency?”

Mrs. Gates retreated. “No, of course not. Each portable is connected to the main office by a telephone and a public-address system, and each has its own pull alarm in case of fire.”

We all stared at the crisscross of wooden walkways until Mrs. Gates asked, “What brings your family to Tangerine?”

“My husband’s job. He’s the new Deputy Director of Civil Engineering for the county.”

“I see.”

Large drops of rain started to fall around us, so we headed back inside. Mom prompted me, “Paul? Do you have any questions?”

“Yes. Do you have a soccer team?”

“We do. We have an excellent soccer program—a boys’ team and a girls’ team. We play against all the schools in this area. Are you a soccer fan?”

“I’m a soccer *player*.” I corrected her. “I play goalie.”

We were now back at the main office; Mrs. Gates led us through into her private office. “Mrs. Fisher, I’d like to get you to fill out an IEP for Paul—an Individualized Education Plan. Being vision impaired, Paul is entitled to take part in our IEP program. Basically we identify Paul’s situation, set specific goals for him to achieve, and note any special needs he might have.”

Mom started to read the form. I stepped outside to show that I wanted no part of that conversation. I spotted a glass trophy case and went to check it out. The biggest trophy was for last year’s boys’ soccer team. It said, **FIRST PLACE, TANGERINE COUNTY SPORTS COMMISSION.**

Mom came out of the office briskly. We ran through the cold rain to the car. Once we were inside and belted up, she said, “So, what do you think of Lake Windsor Middle School?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, staring out the window.

We drove back past the field of portables, but Mom suddenly hit the brakes.

“Look at that!” she cried.

The field was now completely flooded, like a rice paddy. The brown water had risen to within inches of the wooden walkways. We both shook our heads in disbelief.

Then I decided to answer her question about the school. “I guess if they have a decent soccer team, I’ll let them slide about not having indoor classrooms and not having a gym.”

“Yeah?” Mom sputtered. “Not having a gym, or an auditorium. Two more facts apparently overlooked by your father. And what am I supposed to do? Send you to school every day in rain gear? With an umbrella?”

Mom would never say it, but I bet we were thinking the same thing. *What else has Dad “overlooked” about Tangerine?* We drove on in silence, except for the pounding of the rain, from



the flooded campus of Lake Windsor Middle School to the flooded streets of Lake Windsor Downs.

### Wednesday, August 23

All four of us were back at the high school-middle school campus today. The head coach, Coach Warner, was holding a three-day tryout camp for the football team before the start of the school year.

Erik, of course, didn't need to try out, but he was there anyway. Dad had brought Erik to meet Coach Warner earlier in the summer. Dad had knelt down and held the ball for Erik to drill fifty-yard field goals, one after another, while, according to Dad, the coach's jaw had dropped lower and lower.

Now Dad and I were standing next to the coach—not that either one of them was aware of me. I was watching a huge bird of prey circling overhead, like a hawk. But it wasn't a hawk. I knew that. It was an osprey. (I know the difference because of a science project I did last year. Could a vision-impaired person tell the difference?)

The players were doing calisthenics under a troubled-looking sky. As black clouds gathered in the west, Coach Warner explained to Dad, "I've never had a good placekicker before, but I sure could have used one last season. We lost four games by a grand total of seven points."

"Those days are over," Dad assured him.

"Antoine Thomas was the whole show last year. He was the go-to guy on every play. He ran for over a hundred yards eight times."

"That's pretty impressive."

"I even had him running back kicks. But I'm not going to do that this year. He's just gotten too valuable. If Erik can give

us five or six points a game, then I can save Antoine for quarterbacking."

"Oh, Erik can give you that. He averaged nine points a game last year, and he was only a junior. He scored fourteen points in one game. That was the game when he kicked the forty-seven-yard field goal."

I remembered that game back in Houston. Erik was on the front page of the sports section the next day. I think it was the proudest day of Dad's life.

Dad told Coach Warner the thing about Ohio State—how he regretted that he hadn't been big enough to play football there. Coach Warner nodded sympathetically, like he agreed this was some kind of tragedy in Dad's life. I don't understand that.

Then again, I don't understand why Dad loves football. I've played football, real football, in the junior league. It's boring. You just stand around most of the time waiting for somebody to tell you what to do. And in the end, some guy like Erik who hasn't even worked up a sweat can come in and grab all the glory. It doesn't work that way in soccer.

Erik used to play soccer. He was really good, too. This was back in Huntsville, back when he was nine and ten years old. He took all the penalty kicks for his team. That's how he learned to kick so hard, drilling those penalty kicks into the back of the goal net. When we moved to Houston, when Erik was eleven, he realized that football was the star attraction. He took to kicking a football, soccer style, into a small net that he set up in our backyard. Day after day, in rain and cold and heat, Erik worked on perfecting a two-step kick.

Up until then, Dad wasn't much into sports. Once Erik started getting good, though, Dad became transformed. He started talking about his high school football career and, of



course, his regrets about college. He became obsessed with football, especially with placekicking. He learned how to hold the ball for Erik, spinning the laces away. For a while, he tried to get me to hike the ball to them. But I never really cooperated, and they soon dropped me from the routine.

We watched the Lake Windsor players break into groups for timed sprints. Mom came up and stood with us for a minute. I knew that she was really there to tell me to get in the car because a thunderstorm was coming. She said, "A storm's coming," to Coach Warner, but he just smiled and agreed with her, "Sure is!"

Mom pointed out some people to me. There was Mike Costello, and there were his father and his brother standing on the other sideline. There was Arthur Bauer, the guy Erik had over to the house yesterday. There was Antoine Thomas, the quarterback.

Mom quickly grew impatient to get me to the car. On the way to the parking lot, she said, "Those boys shouldn't be out there in a thunderstorm."

"They have to play in all kinds of weather, Mom. Sometimes you get caught in a blizzard. Sometimes you get caught in the rain. It's part of football. It's part of soccer, too."

"Why can't they practice in the morning, when it doesn't rain? This is ridiculous. When you know that it's definitely going to rain at exactly the same time every day, you can't really call it getting caught in the rain, can you?"

I had to agree. "I guess you're right. It's like the afternoon tree-watering time around here. But there aren't any trees anymore."

We climbed inside the car just as the first big drops of rain rapped against the roof.

"Look at your father! What is he doing out there?"

"I don't know."

"He's just going to stand there and get soaked?"

"Looks like it."

"This isn't Texas. They have their own weather in Florida, and we all need to change our attitudes about it. People shouldn't stand outside in this kind of rain. Just listen to that!"

The rain was beating down so loud now that it was hard to hear Mom's voice.

I sat thinking for a minute and then hollered, "I'll bet the people who used to live here, the people who grew the tangerines, were really happy with this weather. That's why they were here, right? To grow tangerines?"

"Do you mean, it's nice weather here if you're a duck?"

"Yeah. Or a tangerine. But now it's all upside-down, you know? It's all messed up. The rain clouds show up every day, just like they're supposed to, but there aren't any tangerine trees. Just people. And the people have no use for the rain clouds. So the clouds go around looking for all the tangerine trees. They can't find them, they get mad, and they start thundering and lightning and dumping the rain on us."

I had the feeling Mom knew what I was talking about, but all she would say is, "Clouds don't get mad, Paul."

We sat in the bearing rain noise for a few minutes, then it abruptly stopped, like some annoying little kid had stopped banging on a pan. The sun came out, and the streaming heat rose up all around us. "Great," Mom muttered. "Now it's sauna time."

"You need to lighten up, Mom."

"Oh, is that right? You're the one getting attacked by disappointed rain clouds. Why don't you lighten up?" Mom looked in the rearview mirror and added, "Look! Soccer players!"



I turned around and, sure enough, behind the field of portables was a small group heading toward the middle-school soccer field.

"That's Mike Costello's brother in front. His name's Joey. Go ahead, Paul, catch up to them. Teach them a few things."

"Yeah, maybe I will."

I hopped out and followed the group. There were four guys ahead of me kicking a ball around. I walked up and stood right in the goal.

Joey Costello said something like, "Hey, how's it going?" and kicked one at me. Then the other three kids fanned out in a semicircle in front of the goal. I caught Joey's kick and rolled the ball out to the next guy so he could take a shot. I caught his kick, rolled it to the next guy, and so on. They weren't very good. Not one of them seemed to know how to kick. They didn't drive the ball with their insteps, they just stubbed it with their toes. I had no trouble stopping everything they kicked at me.

I never did hear the names of the other guys. But when they got tired of playing, we walked back together toward the football field parking lot. Joey said, "Are you coming out for the Lake Windsor team?"

"Oh yeah. I'll be there."

"You gonna play goalie?"

"Yeah. How about you?"

"Fullback, I guess. I played some goalie last year, but I never got into a game."

"When are tryouts?"

"I don't know." Joey turned to the other guys. "When are tryouts? Anybody heard?"

Everybody shook their heads or said, "No." Joey said, "Listen to the morning announcements. They'll tell you when."

"All right," I said. "I'll catch you guys later." The four of them continued toward the other side of the field, still scrubbing the ball along the ground ahead of them. I saw that Mom and Dad were waiting at the car, so I hustled over there.

I said, "Where's Erik?"

"He's getting a ride home with Arthur Bauer," Dad answered.

"How did your soccer playing go?" Mom asked.

"No sweat," I said. As we rode back, I thought about how easy it was, and how easy it was going to be. If Joey was the best they could do for a goaltender, then I already had the job. I wondered if he had changed his mind about playing goal again after watching me today. I wouldn't doubt it. I wondered if he saw that a major leaguer was here to play a season or two in the minors.

## Monday, August 28

Today was the first day of school. I left the house at seven-thirty to walk to the front of the development and catch the bus. The smoke was thick and strong smelling. I walked past dark green Dumpsters filled with plasterboard and scrap metal, past blue portable toilets parked along the construction lots. It occurred to me that I've never lived in a development that was finished. I have always lived with overflowing construction Dumpsters and portable toilets sitting on boards.

I turned right at the end of Kensington Gardens Drive and walked parallel to the high gray wall. Something started to bother me almost immediately. The gray of the wall drifted along in the left side of my vision—distracting me, troubling me. What was it? Something about the wall? Something about a bus stop? Something that I needed to remember? My steps



slowed down, and I came to a dead stop, frozen there like a windup toy that had run out of torque.

Then a scene came back to me. Just like the other morning in Houston. Entirely on its own, a scene came back to me:

*I remembered another bus stop.* And a shiny yellow school bus. I was standing at the back of a line of kids, waiting to board the bus for one of my first days at kindergarten.

Mom had driven me to school on the actual first day. This was the first day when I would be accompanied by no one except Erik, my fifth-grade brother. But Erik did not accompany me for long. He was standing at the front of the school-bus line with his fifth-grade friends when one of them turned, made a gesture, and called to me, "Hey, Eclipse Boy, how many fingers am I holding up?"

I didn't realize at first that the boy was talking to me, and I had no idea what he meant. Erik and his friends laughed about the joke, then the bus doors opened and we all filed in. I can't put all of the details in order now, but it became clear to me later that, for some reason, the big kids on the school bus were calling me Eclipse Boy.

The fact is we did have an eclipse that summer, around three weeks before school started. Based on that, Erik was telling his friends this story: The reason for the Coke-bottle glasses on my eyes was that I had stared at the sun, unprotected, during that eclipse.

The story puzzled me then, and it puzzles me now. I do not remember doing any such thing. And yet when I search through our family photos, I can see that I never wore glasses of any kind before that summer. But right after the eclipse, I was wearing these thick lenses that I now call my regular glasses.

Puzzled or not, I went right along with the story. I even told it myself. It gave me a special kindergarten identity. It made me

somebody. I was the boy who had not listened and who was now paying the price. *Look at me if you dare!* Teachers and other adults seemed to value me as an example. I was the living proof that you shouldn't look at an eclipse or you'll go blind; that you shouldn't play in an abandoned refrigerator or you'll suffocate; that you shouldn't go swimming right after you eat or you'll get stomach cramps and drown.

So there I sat on that yellow school bus—Erik Fisher's younger brother, Eclipse Boy, visually impaired and totally incapable of following in his brother's footsteps.

The scene faded. I stood still for another minute, trying to remember more, but nothing would come. Then I made myself turn away from the wall, and I made my legs move again, one step in front of the other, to the end of the street.

As I turned the corner, I was surprised to see other kids standing next to the guardhouse. In my two weeks here, I had never seen any other kid in Lake Windsor Downs, even though I had ridden my bike up and down all of the streets at all times of the day. Now here they were, spread out in a lazy line, about ten kids of various sizes.

I quietly took my place at the end of the line, next to a guy who was slouching so badly that I thought he might actually fall over. He wasn't alone, either. Everyone seemed to be depressed, to be sorry to be there. I wondered if that was just an act, or if they really didn't feel any excitement about the first day of school.

"What's up, goalie?"

I turned, startled to find that someone was standing right behind me. I hadn't seen him coming. It was Joey Costello. I held out my hand and said, "It's Paul. Paul Fisher. You're Joey, right?"



"Right," he answered, shaking my hand.

"I met your brother over at my house. I met your father, too."

"Yeah, they said something about that. They said your brother can kick fifty-yard field goals."

"Right. Yeah, he can."

"Mike says Coach Warner has him holding the ball for him.

His name's Erik, right?"

"Yeah. I had a feeling Mike might be holding the ball for Erik when he told us he was the backup quarterback."

Joey thought for a moment, then said, "Mike's getting a bad break, you know. Mike's a good player, but he's a lineman, not a quarterback. And now he's playing behind Antoine Thomas, the best quarterback in the state. He'll never get to play unless something bad happens to Antoine. And then everybody'll be mad because Mike ain't no Antoine."

"Yeah. He can't win."

The bus turned into the entranceway and stopped in front of us. When we climbed on, Joey sat with one of the soccer players from the other day. I found an empty seat near the back and pulled out my class schedule. The school had sent us a computerized schedule that showed my six periods, teachers' names, and classroom numbers.

With the schedule had come a map of the high school—middle school campus, which I appreciated, and a handwritten note to Mom from Mrs. Gates, which I did not. It said, "Vision-impaired students should report to the office for assistance." That made me mad. What did she plan to do? Assign me a dog and a cane?

The bus turned into the campus and drove around to a circular driveway that said BUSES ONLY. I looked again at my schedule, feeling jittery. It said, "Homeroom 8:15–8:25, Portable 9." I moved along with a big crowd of kids, circling the main build-

ing and funneling into the wooden walkways that led to the portables.

I found the one that said P-9 with no problem whatsoever. There was a green sign on the door that said, MS. ALVAREZ. I climbed the three wooden stairs and opened the door. Ms. Alvarez gave me a cheery "Good morning" and told me to find an empty desk.

The class seems to be made up of the same type of droopy kids that had stood with me in the bus line. In contrast, Ms. Alvarez has a lot of enthusiasm. She told us she was "truly excited to be here on the first day of a new year." She went on to tell us that we're her first homeroom ever, and that she's looking forward to starting each day with us. We sat there and stared at her without much reaction, but she smiled bravely through it, and we passed the first ten minutes of the school year together. She asked us to all take out our schedules and check them. Mine said, "Science 8:30–9:25, Portable 12."

Ms. Alvarez read some announcements from a computer printout, but there was nothing about the soccer team. The speaker in the room crackled to life with the sound of a gong being struck. This was our signal to funnel out again onto the wooden walkways. We had four minutes to get to our next class, but it took me less than one.

I climbed up a set of stairs marked P-12, where the green sign said, MRS. HOFFMAN. Mrs. Hoffman was standing right inside the door, scowling and holding a seating chart. She's clearly at the other end of the teacher food chain from Ms. Alvarez. As she would soon tell us, she has been teaching science for twenty years. She asked my name and then directed me to the last seat in the first row. The kids in this room seem a little more lively.

Just five minutes into Mrs. Hoffman's class there was a knock on the door. A girl came in holding a block of wood with



the word pass painted on it. She whispered to Mrs. Hoffman, who checked her chart, looked toward me, and said, "Paul Fisher, go with this young lady, please."

What could I do? I got up. I followed the girl out the door and onto the walkway. I said, "Where are we going?"

"Mr. Murrow's office."

"Who's Mr. Murrow?"

"He's the head of guidance."

We went to a small office inside the main office. A man with a brown suit and thick glasses like mine was sitting at a desk. He had a pile of those IEP forms spread out in front of him. He said, "And what is your name?"

"Paul Fisher, sir."

He found my IEP form. "All right, Paul, this is Kerri Gardner, one of our school volunteers. Kerri will act as your eyes, so to speak, until you've learned your way around our campus."

"I can see fine."

He seemed genuinely surprised. "You can?"

"Yes, sir. I've been to two classes already."

Mr. Murrow looked back at my IEP form and then at me. He said, "Well, perhaps since you're new to our school, Kerri could just take you around for the first day. What harm could that do?"

I didn't know what else to say. I didn't know how to describe the harm that that would do to me. Nothing more came out of my mouth, so he said, "Why don't you two go on back to Mrs. Hoffman's class."

I followed Kerri Gardner back to P-12—actually, to the wooden steps outside of it. That was where I finally found my voice. I stopped still and said as calmly as I could, "Look. I'm sorry. I don't mean to mess up your job, but there's no reason for anybody to show me around. OK?"

She looked at me, puzzled, so I explained, "There's nothing wrong with me. This is a mistake. I can see just fine."

Kerri answered matter-of-factly, "So then what's with the glasses?"

I reached up and fingered the thick plastic frames. I finally answered, "I had an accident. I had some kind of damage to my eyes when I was five years old."

Kerri clearly did not mind being released from her duties. She thought for a moment, lowered her voice, and said, "Look. I'll hold on to the pass until the end of the day and then turn it in. Nobody'll know."

"OK, thanks."

Kerri started off but turned back to ask, "What was the accident? What damaged your eyes?"

"I don't know. I mean, I'm not sure," I replied.

She took off again, leaving me thinking. *Why didn't I answer that question? I used to have an answer ready to that question.*

*But if that's the truth, if that really happened, why can't I remember it?*

### Wednesday, August 30

I'm in my room now, at the computer, listening to the sound of Erik kicking a football into a net in the backyard. It's a short, violent sound, like some big guys holding up some little guy and punching him over and over in the stomach. *Poomph. Poomph. Poomph.*

The Erik Fisher Football Dream seems to be materializing. Arthur Bauer is holding the ball for him today, crouching low and spinning the laces away, just like Dad, just like Mike Costello. Arthur is a senior, like Erik. Unlike Erik, he seems to



have no special talent for football. And yet here he is, a third-string benchwarmer kind of guy, holding the ball for the great Erik Fisher.

Arthur has a sister named Paige, who is a sophomore and a cheerleader. Paige is down there, too. She is clearly going to be Erik's girlfriend. Arthur's girlfriend is named Tina Turreton. She's sitting next to Paige. Tina is a junior and, of course, a cheerleader.

The four of them are hanging out in the smoke of a late-afternoon muck fire ignited by an early-afternoon lightning strike. *Poomph. Poomph. Poomph.*

Mom has already done her research on Erik's friends. She pumps him for information over dinner every night, and he tells her whatever she wants to know: Arthur and Paige Bauer are the yellow Stuart with the brick front. Their father is a building contractor and a major in the Army National Guard. They moved in three years ago. Tina Turreton is the white York, like ours, but with avocado trim. She's only lived here a year.

They're a strange foursome, sitting back there in the smoke. Basically they pay no attention to each other. The girls are on the cement patio, sitting at the redwood picnic table, doing homework. The boys are on the grass, kicking the ball into the net. *Poomph. Poomph. Poomph.*

I guess Paige and Tina want to date football players, so these two will do. Erik and Arthur want to date cheerleaders, so these two will do.

I watched them all pull up to the house in Arthur Bauer's truck, then I hurried upstairs. Arthur has a white Toyota Land Cruiser that he's jacked up and put big tires on for "mud running." That's what they do around here. They take their jacked-up trucks out into the swamps and "mud run." When they can't

do that, they run up and down the dirt road behind our wall, the perimeter road. Arthur's truck has a big spotlight mounted on top, at the center of the windshield, so he can go mud running at night.

Now he can take Erik mud running. And he can take Erik to practice. And he can take Erik wherever else Erik says to take him.

You see, Erik doesn't drive. Can you believe that? One of the greatest things about high school is that you can drive. All by yourself. You're *free*. But Erik doesn't drive. He has never even expressed an interest in driving. Tell me that isn't strange.

From my bedroom window I can see them all clearly, especially Arthur Bauer. And I can predict his future. Arthur is about to get his big break, his chance to be somebody at Lake Windsor High. Let's face it, Arthur Bauer is no Mike Costello. He is not the backup quarterback to Antoine Thomas. He has not already been accepted into FSU's School of Engineering. He has never really accomplished anything, until now. This is his shot at the big time. He will somehow, with Erik's help, beat out Mike Costello for the job of holder on placekicks. It will be Arthur's backside featured in the newspapers, holding the ball for Erik Fisher's fifty-yard field-goal attempts.

According to Joey Costello, Arthur has never even gotten into a game. Now he'll be out there when the crowd is roaring, and the cameras are flashing, and the game is on the line. What will Arthur do for an opportunity like that, for that kind of fame and glory? What will Arthur do for Erik, his sponsor, his benefactor, his ticket to the big time? Let's face it. He will do anything. He will do anything that Erik asks. He has found himself a place in the Erik Fisher Football Dream, and he will do anything to stay there.



I've always been afraid of Erik. Now I get to be afraid of Erik and Arthur.

### Thursday, August 31

In addition to my regular glasses, I have special goggles, prescription goggles, for playing sports. They're made out of some kind of astronaut plastic that could crash-land on Venus and not break. Nothing can break them. If the dinosaurs had worn these goggles, and the Earth had been bombarded by mile-wide asteroid boulders, the dinosaurs would still have died, but their goggles would be intact. Nothing can break these goggles.

The reason I bring this up is that Ms. Alvarez read the announcement this morning that tryouts for the soccer teams, boys' and girls', will start tomorrow. I have my goaltending gear—the prescription goggles, knee pads, and elbow pads—in a drawer in my room. I just checked the drawer to make sure everything was ready. I didn't want to find out tomorrow that my gear was all packed away in our climate-controlled storage place on Route 22.

Mom and I took some stuff to the storage place today. Mom is not adjusting well to the smoke from the muck fire. She took down her mother's drapes from the dining room and packed them up with her grandmother's quilts from the bedrooms. "I won't have them ruined by this smoke," she told me as I lugged the boxes out to the car. "We'll put them back out when your grandparents visit in December."

My grandparents are Mom's parents. Dad's parents died when he was young—his father when he was ten, and his mother when he was a freshman in college. Dad never talks about them. It's like they never existed.

Mom doesn't talk much about hers, either. I know that my grandfather retired from the army as a master sergeant. He still works as a security guard in an office building. My grandmother always ran a day-care business out of her home, wherever that happened to be, right up until last year. Mom says that's where she inherited her own organizational skills.

Mom is now donating those skills to the Homeowners' Association of Lake Windsor Downs. Mr. Costello asked her to be on the Architectural Committee. It's a powerful position. If you have any plan to improve your house, even if it's just planting a new tree, you have to have it approved beforehand by the Architectural Committee.

Because of this, Mom has taken to spotting irregularities whenever we drive into or out of the development. She's taken to saying stuff like, "Look at the trim color on that Lancaster. That's not a regulation trim color. It looks like pea soup."

Today she said, "Look at the mailbox on that Tudor. That's not a Tudor-style mailbox."

I said, "Lighten up, Mom."

"Don't tell me to lighten up. These people all read and signed the regulations before they bought houses here. Those regulations are serious, Paul. This development has a certain look to it. If you like that look, then you buy a house here. If you don't like that look, then you buy a house someplace else."

"What harm could it do to have a non-Tudor mailbox?"

Mom thought about that one. "Not much, I suppose. I won't send them a letter about the mailbox, because the one they have doesn't look bad. But if twenty more houses decided to put up twenty different styles of mailboxes, it'd start to look like a shantytown around here."

Mom suddenly got very serious. "Paul, I'm talking as somebody who never, ever, lived in a nice house growing up. Or even



lived anywhere near a nice house. This is not a joke to me. Your house is your family's biggest investment. And you have to protect that investment."

At the storage place, Mom showed her ID to an elderly guard, who waved us on. I unlocked our bin, pulled up the sliding metal door, and stacked the boxes inside. On the way home I turned the conversation to the soccer tryouts.

Mom actually had a good suggestion. She said, "You should call that Joey Costello boy. You two could run some laps tonight. Maybe we can get a soccer-team car pool going with them, too."

I called Joey as soon as we got back, and asked him if he wanted to start running. He said he runs every night at six-thirty, and I could meet him at the guardhouse if I wanted. I said OK and hung up.

That was odd. If he ran every night, why had I never seen him?

Anyway, Joey turned out to be pretty funny. Up until now he'd been a little stiff. We started to run with the sand at our backs and just a trace of smoke in the air. On our second lap he pointed to a house, a white Stuart on a corner lot. He said, "You see that house? Mr. Donnelly and his son live there. They've been hit by lightning three times."

"No way."

"Absolutely. Three times. Are they losers or what?" I had to laugh when I noticed the sign on their front lawn.

"Hey, look! It's for sale!"

"Yeah. Like they've got a prayer."

"I don't know. When you're looking at a house, does anybody tell you bad stuff like that?"

Joey said, "No way. They'd never mention it."

"What if you found out?"

"They'd tell you that it was a good thing. They'd tell you that, statistically, it's the safest house in the whole development. Maybe in the whole world. There's almost no chance that this house will ever get hit by lightning again."

I looked back over my shoulder at the receding Stuart. "I'll get hit again. And again. And I'll tell you why."

"Why?"

"The lightning. It knows that spot."

"What are you talking about?"

I pointed at an empty lot full of sugar sand. "Think about this place. After they plowed under all the tangerine groves, what did they do?"

"Who? What did who do?"

"The developers. The construction guys. What did they do?"

"I don't know."

"They leveled everything out with bulldozers. Right? They brought in tons and tons of that white sand and dumped it here. Then they landscaped over everything."

"Yeah. So what?"

"So let's say that that corner house used to be the highest ground around here for miles. Maybe it was at the top of a rise with big trees on it. So that's where the lightning always used to strike."

"Then it must've had big *dead* trees on it."

"Whatever. This was the highest spot, and it worked like a lightning rod. Now, you could bring back those developers, and the construction guys, and the engineers, and ask them to point out where the highest spot around here used to be. Not one of them would know. But the lightning knows. It hits right where it's always hit. It's just that some fool has stuck a house there." I pointed back toward the front of the development, toward the four English royal-family models. "Who knows?"



Maybe someday, after all this crumbles away, the trees will be back, and these storms will make sense again."

We completed our second lap. Joey was looking at me a little strangely. He said, "See you tomorrow."

"Right. Tryouts are at four. You need a ride home?"

"Nah, I'll catch a ride with Mike."

"OK."

I started off, but Joey was struggling with something. He finally said, "Hey, uh, Fisher . . . I don't think lightning is that complicated. I don't think it knows anything about anything."

I thought about that. "Yeah. Maybe I'm exaggerating."

But maybe I'm not.

## Friday, September 1

My last class of the day is language arts, with Mrs. Bridges. If you think we're slugs in the morning with Ms. Alvarez, you should see us by sixth period. Some kids actually fall asleep, but I don't think they're completely to blame. By the time we get to sixth period, the portables' air conditioners have been struggling along for seven hours, with the doors constantly opening and closing. We're sweating buckets by then. We're willing. Even Mrs. Bridges's perm is wilting by then.

But today, when the speaker cracked on and the gong bell sounded, I was filled with new energy. I hefted up my gym bag and set off for the soccer tryouts.

Just to the south of the portables is a baseball diamond with a scoreboard that says, LAKE WINDSOR MIDDLE SCHOOL—HOME OF THE SEAGULLS. The soccer field is to the left of that, next to a stretch of undeveloped land.

As I left the wooden walkways Joey fell into step with me, and we jogged together to the fields.

"You're a pretty good goalie, right?" he asked me.

"Right," I said.

"Then I'm going out for fullback."

"Hey, we need at least two goalies. What if I get killed?"

"You're not gonna get killed. I'll play fullback. I like full-

back. You get to knock people down."

"Suit yourself."

Joey pointed to a circle of kids near the sideline. "Check out Tommy over there, the kid with the ball. He's from the Philippines. Awesome display, man. Awesome."

I looked over and recognized a kid from my homeroom, Tommy Acoso. He had a group of guys standing around watching him, like he was a juggler. We stopped to watch him, too. He kept hitting the ball straight up in the air with his head, feet, and knees, never letting it touch the ground, just keeping it going and going and going. Sometimes he would make it stop dead, right on his forehead. It *was* an awesome display. Not all of these guys were the toe stubbers who I had played with last week.

"That's Gino over there," Joey whispered. "Gino Deluca. He'll be the captain this year. No doubt. He was a co-captain last year. Scored twenty-two goals."

I saw a big guy—big for a soccer player—with long, curly black hair. He was driving penalty kicks into the net from twelve yards out. I asked Joey, "Where's he from?"

"I don't know. New Jersey, I think."

Gino kept hammering penalty shots into the upper left corner of the goal while a tall kid in a gray sweatshirt retrieved the ball and rolled it back. Gino is obviously a major leaguer. He's the kind of guy you have to have on a soccer team in order to win. The guy who wants to take the penalty kicks. The guy who's hungry to score the goals.