

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 wilting. Even Mrs. Bridges's pen is wilting by then.

But today, when the speaker crackled 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, TAKE 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 fullback. 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 Philip-pines. Awesome display, man. Awesome."

I looked over and recognized a kid from my homeroom, Tommy Accoso. 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 diving 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.

The head coach is Mr. Walski, an eighth-grade teacher. He blew a whistle, and we all moved toward him. He looks more like a baseball-basketball guy to me, but he coached the soccer team last season, and he knows most of the seventh and eighth graders. He's tall and nearly bald. When he spoke, it was in a raspy voice. "I want to congratulate you guys on making the team."

There was a scattering of laughter.

"For those of you who may not know it, our policy in the Lake Windsor Middle School soccer program is this: Everybody makes the team, everybody practices, and everybody gets a uniform. However,"—and he paused here for emphasis—"that does not mean that everybody is, as we say, 'on the bus.' Everybody cannot, and I must emphasize *cannot*, go to every away game. We have a small team bus, and we have restrictions due to insurance. We can only take fifteen kids to the away games. That's our policy. You're a part of this team from day one, but your part may be to play in practice games only and to dress for the home games only. Does everybody understand?"

There were nods around the group. The coach continued, "OK, let's get started. Gino, you're the captain. Take them twice around the field. Then we're going to break into sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade groups and start calisthenics. Let's move out."

I ran with Joey and about thirty other guys, twice around the field. "That means half of us are dog meat," Joey muttered. "What are you complaining about? You're on the team."

"Fifteen kids are on the real team, and fifteen kids are dog meat. I was dog meat last year, and it was a drag. I don't want to do that again."

"Hey, it makes sense to me. Why drive all these extra guys to a game when there's no chance they're going to play?"
"Yeah? That's easy for you to say."

After calisthenics, we broke into groups to kick the ball around. I had no reason to do that, so I found my gym bag and got out my goggles, knee pads, and elbow pads. Gino and some other eighth graders were back at the goal kicking shots at the kid in the gray sweatshirt. I walked up next to the goal and stood there until they couldn't help but notice me.

The kid in gray checked out my goggles and said, "Yow! It came from Mars!"

The eighth graders laughed, but when I didn't go away Gino said to me, "You here to play, or you here to model sportswear?"

"To play."

Gino motioned and the kid in the gray sweatshirt stood off to the side. I moved into the goal, dead in the center, and placed my heels on the chalk line. A kid with red hair was next in line to kick. He took a shot that rolled wide of the goal. I never even moved.

I was waiting for Gino, and he knew it. He called for the ball and then placed it with care on the penalty line. He stepped back three paces and looked right at me. I got down into my goalie crouch, a coiled spring ready to release. Gino shouted like a samurai, took two quick steps, and started his powerful kick. I sprang up and to my right, exactly where I had watched him kick every other penalty shot. I heard the sound of his foot whalloping the ball, and then I felt it smack against my right wrist. The ball flew away from the goal as fast as it had flown in. It sailed toward the far sideline. I hit the ground and popped up immediately, ready for more.

Gino looked at the ball bouncing away in the distance and then looked back at me. He seemed genuinely surprised. "Whoa!" he said quietly, and gave me a thumbs-up sign with both hands.

The kid in the gray sweatshirt hung around by the goal for another minute. Then he casually walked out and joined the others in the line, waiting for a turn to kick one at me.

The coach didn't see any of this, but I knew I had just landed the job. I was now the Lake Windsor Middle School goalkeeper. First-string goalkeeper. On-the-bus goalkeeper.

Tuesday, September 5

Mom and I had just returned home from the supermarket. We were unloading her station wagon, carrying bags of groceries from the garage into the kitchen, when Erik and Arthur pulled up in the Land Cruiser. There was mud splattered all over the sides, all over the tinted windows, and even up on that center spotlight. Erik got out of the passenger side and walked up to Mom, slowly and solemnly. Arthur got out and followed him. Erik stopped just inside the garage and said, "Mike Costello is dead, Mom. He got killed at practice today."

Mom and I stopped still, the supermarket bags weighing down our arms. Neither of us moved, or knew what to do next. We stared at him, speechless, until he continued in the same voice. "He was just standing there in the end zone. He had one hand on the goalpost, leaning on it, and *kaboom!* There was a crack, and a flash, and he went flying through the air. He landed right on his back, right there on the goal line."

By now Mom was staring hard at him, trying to understand the point of this speech. "Erik? The boy . . . the boy who was here?—Mike? Is dead?"

"Dead before he hit the ground. Arthur and I went over and looked at him, right?"
Arthur spoke up. "Right."

"The whole left side of his hair was burned off. Singed right off, you know?"

Mom still did not seem to comprehend. She struggled for words. "What . . . what . . . Erik, tell me exactly what you did."

"Me? Nothing. There was nothing I could do. Coach Warner, all the other coaches, they surrounded him. They started banging on his chest."

Arthur added, "Bangin' on him."

"Doing CPR. Everybody was going nuts. Dad started running up to his car phone, dialing 911."

Mom said, "Your father? Your father called 911?"

"Yeah. Ambulances came. Cop cars came. They had this power-pack thing, you know?"

Arthur said, "Jump-startin' him."

"They were trying to jump-start his heart. They were sticking needles in him. Everything! But nothing worked, because he was already dead. He was dead before he hit the ground."

"What about Jack? Jack Costello? Was he there watching all of this?"

"No, I didn't see him. I think his brother was there." Erik looked over at Arthur. "Was that his brother?"

Arthur said, "Yeah," and seemed to fight back a smile.

Erik continued, "His little brother freaked out. He went crazy. He kept trying to take off Mike's shoes. I thought the coach was gonna have to smack him. He wouldn't get out of the way. Just kept trying to get his shoes off. Did you see that?" Erik looked at Arthur again, who covered up his face with his hand. Mom picked up the phone. She tried to reach Dad—first at his mobile number, then through his office beeper—but she couldn't.

I asked her, "Should I call Joey?"

"No. No, we can't call the Costellos now. We can't intrude on them now." Mom banged out another number on the phone. "I'm going to try the school."

There was no answer at the school, either. Mom stood there staring at the bags of groceries. She looked like she was going to pass out. The ring of the telephone made her jump. It was Dad, calling from the hospital. He told her basically the same story that Erik had, right down to Joey Costello and the problem with Mike's shoes. Joey and his parents were at the hospital, and Mike had been officially pronounced dead. Dad said that everyone there was in a state of shock.

I know I was. I carried my bags of groceries on into the kitchen and set them down. Then I heard a strange sound. It was the sound of voices in the backyard. Happy voices.

I looked through the patio doors and saw Erik and Arthur. They were laughing. I stepped closer to the doors, and I could hear Erik saying, "Did you see his hair? Did you see the side of his head? He got Mohawked, man!"

Arthur said, "Mohawked."

I watched them in disbelief. How could they be happy? Who were these two people? Then I realized it: They were the two people who will benefit from Mike Costello's death. And they were celebrating it. Erik grabbed at Arthur's shoes and screamed in a high-pitched voice, "The shoes! Gimme the shoes!"

I turned to look for Mom. She was still in the garage, on the phone with Dad. She saw none of this. She heard none of this. I turned back to watch the cruel comedy routine on the other side of the glass. There they were, Erik and a nasty friend. Just like I remembered them in Houston. Nothing had changed except the name of the friend.

I felt sick and confused. I asked myself, *How could this happen? How could this happen to Mike Costello? He was a nice guy.*

He was number two on the depth chart. He was already accepted into the School of Engineering at FSU.

And I answered myself, Here's how: because Mike Costello didn't fit into the Erik Fisher Football Dream . . . Mike would never, could never, have been sitting out there with Erik and laughing at such a thing.

Now Mike is dead.

But the Dream lives on.

Wednesday, September 6

Mom seemed to think they would be canceling classes at the high school today and sending everyone home early because of the tragedy with Mike Costello. Mom was way off on that one. They didn't cancel classes. They didn't even cancel football practice.

I watched the football practice from a distance. I stood in a goal on the soccer field, looking through the back side of the football stadium bleachers. Different pockets of players were doing different drills. It all looked very violent today. Over here they were shouting and hitting a tackling dummy. Over there they were hurting their bodies at a blocking sled, trying to drive it backward. In the middle of all this knocking down and getting knocked down and getting back up again, I could see Erik standing at the fifty-yard line, untouched by it all. Calmly, deliberately, he drilled his field goals between the upright posts in the end zone. But Mike Costello was not there to spin the laces away from the kicker and set the ball down. Mike Costello was on a slab at the undertaker's. No, there was another backside in the distance today—Arthur Bauer's.

Naturally, Joey Costello was not at soccer practice, or at school. I expected to hear something about Mike over the

loudspeaker, but the only announcement they read was about reduced tickets to a carnival that's coming to Tangerine. No "Pray for Mike Costello" or "Pray for Joey Costello." Ms. Alvarez, though, wrote his address on the chalkboard and urged everybody who knows Joey to send a card to the family.

A couple of guys at soccer practice were talking about the accident. They said that the principal of the high school, Mr. Bridges (husband of my language arts teacher), read an announcement. Mr. Bridges said the Student Council planned to do something special to honor Mike's memory. He didn't say what that something was. It obviously wasn't canceling football practice.

Mom and Dad are at each other's throats arguing about all of this—the football practice, the lightning, the kind of place we live in now. Mom is determined to call the parents of each and every football player, get them together, and have them refuse to send their sons to any more afternoon practices.

Dad, apparently, is arguing the other side. Coach Warner now refers to Dad as one of his "football fathers." Dad likes that, and I think he is afraid of doing anything that might mess up his status. Mom's reply was something like, "Dead boys don't kick footballs."

Soccer practice was a colossal drag. We spent most of the time playing a pointless (and goal-less) scrimmage game—the sixth and seventh graders versus the eighth graders. I have games like that. The ball never gets near the goal. Two teams full of clueless toe stubbers keep kicking it back and forth at each other, never going twenty yards past either side of midfield. The kid in the gray sweatshirt played goal for the eighth graders. He had a shutout going, too.

It's obvious to me that there are only a handful of real players on this team. Our side had Tommy and me. Their side had

Gino and a couple of big guys playing fullback. Everybody else who got the ball just kicked it away in a panic. We have absolutely nobody at midfield. That's why the pointless, toe-stubbing battle continued to rage. There is no in-between on this team. We have two great strikers in Tommy and Gino, one great goaltender in me, and a freezer full of dog meat. Maybe when Tommy and Gino get together on the front line they can feed off each other. I sure hope so.

While I was standing there in the goal waiting for something to happen, my mind started to wander. I started thinking about Joey and what he must be going through. I wondered what I would be like in Joey's place. What if my brother had landed on the goal line with the left side of his hair singed off? What if Erik was the body at the undertaker's now? How would I feel about that?

I would feel relieved. I would feel safer. But I would feel sorry, too. Erik is a part of that eclipse story. I know he is. Erik is a part of whatever it is that I need to remember. I don't want Erik to die and take his part of the story with him.

Thursday, September 7

Mom began her telephone campaign at 9:00 a.m. She had a list of all the numbers in Lake Windsor Downs. She called everyone she knew of who had a son on the football team.

After a few hours of this, she was interrupted by a call from Dad. The principal of Lake Windsor High School, Mr. Bridges, had called him. Mr. Bridges told Dad that he was getting complaints from parents about the afternoon football practices. Dad and Mr. Bridges arranged to have a meeting at our house tonight with Coach Warner and anyone else who wanted to come. Mom acted surprised, hung up, then returned to her list

and called back everyone who had expressed interest. She asked them all to meet at our house at 7:45.

After dinner I helped Mom arrange couches and extra chairs in the great room. Erik went out with Arthur. For a while I could hear them racing up and down the perimeter road in the mud, then they were gone.

By 7:55 twelve parents had arrived. They sat in the great room with Dad and made small talk about the Japanese fish in our lake, stuff like, *Are the koi disappearing from the lake? Are they dying? Is someone fishing in the lake at night? Could there be an alligator eating the koi?*

Mom answered the door at 8:05 to Mr. Bridges, a short round man in a blue suit, and Coach Warner, who was wearing a Lake Windsor High pullover. Mom showed them to a pair of chairs next to the fireplace, facing the crowd. She thanked them for coming, then took a seat next to Dad on the couch. Coach Warner sat down, but Mr. Bridges remained standing to speak.

"You probably know me. I'm Bud Bridges. I've been principal of Lake Windsor High since the doors opened here ten years ago. And I have to share with you that this tragic accident is the worst thing that's happened to me as a principal. Mike Costello was a fine young man, a young man I'm proud to say I knew. His loss is a personal loss for me."

"Let's make sure he's the last one we lose!" Everyone in the room looked at Mom, who had startled them with this interruption.

Mr. Bridges recovered quickly. "Amen to that. I met with the Student Council officers today. They have decided to dedicate this year's Senior Awards Night to Mike Costello and to plant a tree in his memory in our entranceway."

Mom leaned forward. "Mr. Bridges, can we count on you to stop these afternoon practices during thunderstorms?"

Mr. Bridges looked over at Coach Warner. "I've discussed this with the coach, and I'll let him address that."

Mr. Bridges sat down, but Coach Warner did not get up. He spoke quietly from his chair, directly to Mom. "Ma'am, I also took Mike Costello's death personally. I knew Mike well. I knew him as a football player and as a leader. I know that Mike was dedicated to this team and would not want to see it destroyed because of this tragic accident." The coach cleared his throat. "And that's really what you're talking about, ma'am, the destruction of this team. There really is no other time to practice, so we would be a team that did not practice. There are some boys who play for me, boys like Anroine Thomas, who are counting on football, and on this football season in particular, to get them into college. College is not going to happen for them without football. That's just a hard fact. I know some of you have the means to send your kids to college anyway. I'm just saying that not everybody is in that situation."

Mom remained hunched forward. "We're not saying. Don't practice. We're saying. Don't practice when lightning might strike and kill a player."

"Ma'am, there has never been another boy injured by lightning in our program. And we've been practicing in the same place at the same time for ten years now. It was an accident, a tragic accident . . . Somebody gets killed in their car out on the highway, it's tragic and we mourn the loss of that person, but we don't stop all traffic from ever using that highway again. We don't close it down. We recognize it as an accident."

Mom sat upright. She pulled a small black notebook out of her pocket. "Coach Warner, you may be interested in this information. This is from the *Tangerine Times*, August first: 'Tangerine County is the lightning-strike capital of the United States. More people are killed by lightning in Tangerine County per

year than in any other country in America.' That's not 'any other country in Florida,' Coach. That's 'any other country in America.' And there have indeed been other football players killed—one at Tangerine High and one at St. Anthony's High. A cross-country runner was killed here two years ago by lightning. A sophomore from Lake Windsor High was killed stepping off of her school bus last year. Being struck by lightning is one of the top causes of accidental death in this area."

Coach Warner looked down, like he was thinking. When he looked back up at Mom, he seemed to have made up his mind. "Ma'am, if you choose to remove your son from the football program based on that information, I will understand. He can turn in his playbook and uniform to me or to one of my assistant coaches."

I looked at Dad, sitting back on the couch next to Mom. His whole body was stiff, rigid, like he was dead. What would he do? Would he publicly take Coach Warner's side against Mom? Or would he defend her and anger Erik's coach?

I would not find out the answers to these questions, because it was Mom who spoke up. She was not ready to give up, either. Mom was not ready to pull the plug on the Erik Fisher Football Dream that drove our lives. "Why can't you hold your practices in the morning, for the safety of all? I understand that these boys, and you coaches, and we parents, are all dedicated. We can dedicate ourselves to getting the boys to the football field at six-thirty. That way they can practice for an hour, take showers, and be ready for class at eight."

Coach Warner replied slowly, "Ma'am, I can't ask these players and their parents to give up their sleep, to disrupt their lives, to come out to practice football at six-thirty." He paused to collect his thoughts. "We have kids who can only get to school by bus. Those kids could no longer make practice. Again,

this is about doing the right thing for everybody involved. Not all of my players have parents at home, with cars, who don't need to be at work themselves by six-thirty in the morning."

Mom was angry now. She pointed her black notebook at him. "You seem to want to make this a rich-versus-poor or a have-versus-have-not issue, right? But a bolt of lightning is not aware of a kid's parents' income when it hits him. That's what we're talking about here, if you'd care to listen. We're talking about kids placed in harm's way every day because of when *you* schedule your practice."

Coach Warner looked down again. He wasn't going to budge. Mr. Bridges was looking more and more nervous.

Arthur Bauer's father said, to no one in particular, "It's the same thing with soldiers. They gotta train in all kinds of weather so they'll be ready for anything."

A long and tense silence followed. It was broken when a large man, larger than Coach Warner, stood up. He had a reddish gray crew cut and a big head and neck, like a football player's. When he spoke, though, it was with a surprisingly high voice. "I'm Bill Donnelly. My son, Terry, and I live at 6200 Kew Gardens Drive. Some of you may know my house, or know about it. It's the one that's been struck by lightning three times. Each time it was at about four o'clock in the afternoon. My son plays football at Lake Windsor High, and I'm very proud of that. But I have to agree with Mrs. Fisher. We live in an area where this lightning-strike stuff is a reality." He stopped and addressed the coach directly. "I'm willing to drive my son to practice at four o'clock in the morning if I have to. And I'll take part in any kind of car pool we set up, to make sure that every kid can get there." He turned then and looked right at Mom. "I can't sell my house because of this lightning thing. I can't get an insurance agent to write me a homeowners' policy. But I don't

really care about any of that. I care about my son and what might happen to him. I can't even imagine what Jack Costello and his wife are going through tonight."

Mr. Donnelly sat down, and the rest of the room finally came to life. Other parents leaned over to Mom to tell her that they'd take part in a car pool, too.

Mr. Bridges stood up to speak. He had to wait until the talking died down. "Well, all right, I think that's a good suggestion. What we can do now is present this suggestion to all the parents. We can contact the parent or guardian of each player and ask them to respond to the question, Should we move football practice to the early morning? Coach, does that work for you?"

Coach Warner was quick to agree. "Of course. We can try that. Me and my staff are certainly willing. We'll ask all the parents, and if the majority want to do that, then that's what we'll do." He paused to look at Mom. "Personally, I'd prefer another solution."

Mom replied immediately, "Which is?"

"Which is that we continue to practice in the afternoon, but we call a halt to it whenever there is lightning in the area."

"That's every day, Coach. Every day at four o'clock."

"No. It is not every day. At this time of the season we might have rain every day. We might have rain during some of our games, too. But that does not mean that there is lightning striking in the area every day."

The coach stopped, and no one else spoke. Mr. Bridges took the opportunity to sum up the meeting. "Then we're all agreed on this course of action. We need to present this suggestion to the parents of all the players. If the majority want to move practice to the morning, we'll work together to solve the transportation problems that some boys might have."

People around the room started mumbling, and the meeting broke up. Mom thanked Mr. Bridges and Coach Warner for coming. They exited quickly. Other parents lingered for a short time at the door, thanking Mom. Mom made a point of thanking Mr. Donnelly, right in front of Dad, "for speaking up in support of our children." Dad pretended to be saying good night to someone else, but Mom sure he heard. By 8:30, the house was empty of guests. Mom, Dad, and I worked silently to restore the furniture and straighten up the great room.

Mom headed upstairs first. She said good night to me, but she pointedly ignored Dad. When I went upstairs, he was standing alone by the fireplace, staring at the spot where Coach Warner had been sitting.

Friday, September 8

I'm not going to dwell on this. I'm just going to say it and get on with my life.

I was standing in the goal at soccer practice taking shots from some of the starting players, mostly eighth graders. They've all picked up on what the kid in the gray sweatshirt said about my goggles. They all call me Mars. That's OK with me. I've been called worse. What's important is that I'm a player, and they all recognize that. I'm their starting goalie, right?

So I was standing in the goal, wearing the red pullover goalie shirt, handling some pretty easy shots. Gino was over on the sideline talking to Coach Walski. I saw them kind of looking at me, and then Gino came running over and yelled, "Hey, Mars! Is your name Paul Fisher?"

"Yeah."

"Coach wants to see you."

"All right." I figured this was it. This was going to make it

all official. The coach was going to tell me how impressed he has been by my play in goal, and so on. I hustled over to the sideline. "Coach Walski? You wanted to see me?"

"Are you Paul Fisher?"

"Yes, sir."

He looked at his clipboard and flipped through some pages until he found a memo. "Uh, Paul, you have an IEP. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

Coach Walski looked pained. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Paul, but you're not eligible for the program."

"Sir?"

"You can't play. You can't play soccer for Lake Windsor Middle School."

"What are you talking about—can't play? I can play! I'm one of the best players here!"

"No. No, I mean you're not eligible to play. I have a memo from Mr. Murrow saying that you're in a special program for the visually handicapped. Is that right?"

"So what? I can see fine!"

"That's not the point."

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"We have to carry insurance on every boy and girl in the program or we can't play. Period. If we lose our insurance, we lose our program. I'm sorry, but there's no way we can justify putting a visually handicapped student in the goal, of all places, where he could get his head kicked in." He looked at me like I was crazy to think otherwise. Then he added, "Come on now."

I screamed, "No, you come on now! You see if you can kick my head in! You see if you or anybody else here can get one ball past me—one ball!"

Coach Walski pulled back. He changed his tone. "Paul, I'm sorry. I know you're upset. I know you're disappointed. But try to understand this. It'd be the same situation if you had a heart murmur, or a hernia, or whatever. I have to play it straight with the insurance company. If any kid has any physical problem, I have to report it. And I know that this condition of yours will not be acceptable to the insurance company. Again, I'm sorry."

He got even sorer a few seconds later. I still can't believe what I did. I knelt down on that sideline, took off my sports goggles, and started to cry. I didn't say another word. I just put my head down and cried and sobbed.

Coach Walski was as much at a loss as I was. Neither of us knew what to do next. He just stood there and watched me. I heard him call an assistant over and tell him to organize a scrimmage. Coach Walski stood a little off to the side and waited. I finally stopped. I wiped my face with my goalie shirt, put my goggles back on, and walked from the field to the parking lot. I stood in the bus shelter until five, when Mom pulled up in the station wagon. Dad was right behind her in the Range Rover. Mom rolled down the passenger-side window. "What are you doing here? Are you all right?"

"I got kicked off the team."

"What? What happened?"

"Coach Walski said I'm in a program for the handicapped so I'm off the team."

"That's . . . that's outrageous! He can't do that."

"Well, he just did it. He said they can't get insurance for me because I'm in a handicapped program. You know all about that. Right, Mom?"

"Me? What do you mean?"

"You told them I'm handicapped! You told them I'm visually impaired!"

"Darling, you are. I just told them the truth."

"That's not the truth. I can see! Don't you know that? Why did you fill out that stupid form when you know I can see? You saw me play in Houston. You saw me make thirty saves in one game! Did I look visually impaired then?"

"Paul, darling, I did not know that the IEP form had anything to do with playing on the soccer team. I would never have filled it out if I did. I know how important this is to you. Listen, now. Your father will straighten this out with Coach Walski." She turned off her engine, got out, and went back to speak to Dad.

I didn't listen, but I guess she explained the situation, because Dad got out and walked to the soccer field. I remained standing in the bus shelter, watching the black outline of an osprey slowly crossing the sky to its nest. It was clutching something that flashed brightly, reflecting the sun. I said to myself, *There goes another one of your koi, Mr. Costello.*

Mom was watching me, but she didn't say anything. Did she really believe that Dad was going to straighten this out?

We both watched Dad talk to Coach Walski, and we both watched him walk back to the station wagon. He stood at the passenger window, between Mom and me, and said, "All right. Here's the deal. They have a problem with the insurance. They can't put Paul in the goal because of his vision. *However!* Coach Walski does want you to manage the team. He hasn't appointed a manager yet for this season, and he wants you to take the job. He said to tell you that you'd be 'on the bus.' You'd be in charge of the team and the equipment for every game, home and away."

I looked at Mom's face. At least she understood. At least she had a clue.

I didn't argue. There was nothing left to say. I looked back at Dad and told him calmly, "I'm not a water boy, Dad. I'm not

a team manager. I'm a player." Then I climbed into the back of the station wagon, and we all started for home.

After a few miles, Mom whispered, "Darling, do you want me to speak to Mr. Murrow?"

I said, "What for?"

"To tell him that your vision has improved."

"Why? Do you believe that?"

We drove in silence for a while. Then she answered, "Yes, I do. I do believe it. And I do remember those games in Houston. You were the best goaltender in that league. I was terrified to let you play, but you turned out to be the best goaltender in that league." I looked up at the rearview mirror and saw tears in her eyes. "Paul, all I can do is apologize, and promise that I'll never mention your eyesight to anyone ever again."

I was too hurt and angry to tell her that I appreciated those words. That those words helped. But they did.

Friday, September 8, later

The obituary in the *Tangerine Times* said that Mike Costello would have a public viewing tonight and a private burial ceremony tomorrow. I was actually looking forward to going. For one thing, I had never been to what Mom was calling a Catholic wake. But also I was feeling very, very low about myself and about the soccer team, and I realized that Joey was the only person I knew who was feeling worse. He was someone who even I could feel sorry for.

I squeezed into my blue suit, and Mom, Dad, and I drove in the Volvo to O'Sullivan's Funeral Home on Route 89. As we drove, I pointed out the steady series of osprey nests, each at least ten feet in diameter, built along the tops of the high-tension wires. Dad said, "They ought to get rid of those things."

"Why, Dad?"

"Why? They could short out the power for the whole town. That's a crazy place to build a nest."

I thought to myself, *Maybe so, but at least the osprey don't have to smell the muck fire. And their streets don't get flooded every time it rains.* I wondered if their nests ever got hit by lightning.

We pulled into the parking lot of the funeral home. There were lots of 4 x 4s and sports cars. All of the football players and a lot of the seniors who knew Mike Costello had come. Erik was in the parking lot, too, with a big group of kids around him that included Paige, Arthur, and Tina.

As we walked inside I began to get a scared feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had never seen a dead body. I had never been in a funeral home. There was a powerful scent of flowers—too powerful—as we paused in the lobby. Two separate viewings were happening. The viewing for "Michael J. Costello" was taking place in the room to the right.

As soon as the wooden doors opened, I could see him—Mike Costello. He was laid out in a casket. He had bright lights over him; his right side was facing the public. The casket was steel gray, with a white satin interior. I was really amazed. Here I was, looking at an actual dead person, a person who I had seen alive just days before. Mike Costello looked terrific. He looked like he was lit from within, like a wax statue in a football hall of fame.

I didn't know how to behave. I had never been through anything like this before, so I copied Mom and Dad. They walked up to the casket and knelt on the padded kneelers. They said a short prayer and got up. I waited for them to finish, then I knelt down alone at the casket. Closer up, Mike Costello didn't look so terrific. There was no hair on the left side of his head. There was no hair on his left hand, either.

I got back up and looked for Mom and Dad. They were

waiting behind another couple for a chance to speak to Mr. and Mrs. Costello. I walked up and stood with them. I was surprised to hear how light their conversation was. They weren't even talking about Mike. They were talking about the lake at our development and about what might be happening to the koi. I looked around for Joey, but I didn't see him. I saw football players and cheerleaders and Student Council types spread out all over the room. Mr. Bridges was there. So were Coach Warner and the other football coaches.

When it was our turn to talk to the Costellos, Mom expressed how sorry we all were about the terrible accident. I just muttered, "I'm sorry," and shook hands with them. Mrs. Costello said, "Joey will be glad to see you here. I know he wants to talk to you. He wants to ask you something."

The room was just about filled, mostly with high schoolers and adults. But then I did see a group of middle school kids coming in, and Joey was with them. A girl from my math class named Cara, Cara Clifton, gave him a big hug right in front of everybody. In fact, she kind of hung on him. Then she and the rest of the middle school kids went over and found seats. Everybody in the room seemed to be sitting down.

Joey was alone for a minute, so I went over and said, "How's it goin'?"

"Hey, Fisher. It's goin'. It's goin'. What's happening at soccer practice?"

"I don't know. I got kicked off the team."

"Yeah. Right."

"No, no kidding. I really did. I got kicked off."

"No way!"

"Yeah way."

"Uh, look. The priest just came in. I gotta go sit down. But I want to hear about this. I gotta ask you something, too."

I went over and sat with Mom and Dad. A young priest came in and started saying the rosary with everybody. We didn't know what that was all about, but we sat there with our heads bowed and said some of the prayers. Then the priest spoke about Mike. He talked about what a good guy he was. What else could you say about Mike? I don't know anybody, except Erik and Arthur, who wouldn't say that about him. A lot of people in the room were crying. A whole lot of people.

After the priest left some of the kids left, too, and some of the adults got up and started to talk again. We stayed in our seats for a while. Mr. Donnelly went back to the casket and knelt there, with his eyes tightly closed, for a long time. Mom pointed out people from Lake Windsor Downs—a gray-and-white Tudor, a York with a circular driveway. Paige was talking to a man I recognized from the football practice meeting. He was her father, Arthur Bauer, Sr. Mom pointed out Tina Turton's mother, too; she looked like she could be Tina's older sister—very young-looking. I recognized a few of the other parents who had come to the meeting in our great room, but I don't know their names.

After a few minutes we walked out into the lobby. That's where I saw Joey again. He had one arm around Cara Clifton, who was crying uncontrollably; he was shaking hands with Coach Warner with his other arm. A couple of guys from the soccer team were there, too, a couple of the toe stubbers. They obviously hadn't heard that I was off the team. One of them said, "What's up, Mars?" which I didn't mind at all. That nickname is all I'm ever going to get from the Lake Windsor soccer program.

Kerri Gardner came up and put her hand on Cara's shoulder. She looked over at me and said, "Hi." She explained to Cara that their ride was waiting and they had to go. Then she

turned back to me and said, "I hear you're a great soccer player." I just stood there, unable to think of anything to reply. Cara let go of Joey, asked Kerri for a tissue, and the two of them left.

Joey joined his mother and father near the door, where a line had formed to say good-bye. It must have been a tough thing to stand there and say something to every one of those people, but that's exactly what they did. When Mom and Dad got up there, the Costellos started asking them about the meeting in our great room—how it had gone and who had said what.

Joey picked up our conversation where it had left off. "So how did you get kicked off the soccer team? I thought you were on the bus."

"I *was* on the bus. At least I think I was."

"Walski kicked you off?"

"Yeah. I don't know. Sort of. Murrow sent him this memo saying that I'm in a handicapped program, a program for the visually impaired. He freaked. He said he'd lose his insurance policy or something."

Joey was shaking his head. "Oh, man. Man, that's cold."

Maybe my dad can file a lawsuit for you or something."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah. He's a lawyer. He can file a lawsuit. It's gotta be against your civil rights. Your parents are paying taxes so you can go to this school, right? Why shouldn't you be allowed to play on the school team?"

"You're right."

"It's not your fault if you're a geek."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Hey, you know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"Look, do you want to go to the carnival with us tomorrow?"

I was shocked to hear Joey say that. I answered, "Uh, isn't tomorrow the funeral?"

"Well, the funeral is first thing tomorrow morning. My mom thinks it's a good idea that I go out and do something with my friends tomorrow afternoon. 'Life goes on,' she said. We've been doing nothing but all this funeral stuff, you know, since it happened. So she says I need to get out and do something to take my mind off it." He looked over toward his parents. "They're more worried about *me* now than they are about Mike. You know what I'm saying?"

I looked at Joey's parents, then at mine. He asked me again, "So are you up for it? For the carnival?"

"Yeah, sure. I guess. I don't know anything about it. I heard the announcements about it at school."

"It's pretty cool, for Tangerine. It's low-rent, but it's cool, in a low-rent kind of a way. I'll call you tomorrow afternoon."

"Yeah. All right."

Mom and Dad and the Costellos finished their conversation. I wish I knew what they talked about. It must have been serious, because Mom and Dad didn't exchange another word all the way home.

That was all right with me. I needed time to think. I looked out the window at the starry night, at the high-tension wires and the osprey nests, and I thought over and over again about what I could have said back to Kerri Gardner.

Saturday, September 9

Life goes on, all right.

When I came downstairs for breakfast, Mom and Dad were arguing. Mom was sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter. Dad

and Erik were standing in the doorway, ready to exit. Erik was letting Dad do all the talking.

"Look, there's nothing wrong with me taking Erik to practice this morning."

Mom clearly did not agree. "You don't schedule a football practice on the morning of your team captain's funeral."

"It's a private funeral. We were not invited to attend that funeral."

"That's not the point. You should show respect for the family by canceling practice on the morning of the funeral."

Dad had heard enough. "Well, Coach Warner did not think that was appropriate, so he didn't do it. The season begins in one week, and we need to get out there."

"You need to get out there?"

"That's right. Every team in this country is practicing this morning, and so are we. And while we're at it, Coach Warner did not *schedule this practice on the morning of the funeral*. These weekend practices have been scheduled all along. It's not fair for you to say that the coach doesn't care about his players, or that he doesn't care about Mike Costello, just because he continues to do his job."

Mom didn't reply, so Dad and Erik completed their exit.

Mom's final word on the subject was to me. "Coach Warner cares so much about his players that he pushes them out into the lightning every day."

Joey called at 2:30. Mom answered the phone. She offered to drive us, so Joey showed up at our door at 2:45. Mom asked him how the services went. He said, "Fine," and that was that. We didn't talk about it again. Life went on. We got into Mom's car and drove to the carnival.

I was curious to finally see the town of Tangerine. In the

time we've lived here, we've driven in every direction but this one. We've gone west to the supermarket, south to the mall, north to the schools, but never east to the town. As we headed up Route 89, Joey said, "My dad told me that this all used to be tangerine groves, as far as the eye could see. It was the tangerine capital of the world."

Mom turned off the highway at Route 22 and drove east through the citrus groves. The air was filled with a remarkable scent.

Joey said, "What is that smell? That's gross."

I said, "You're crazy. I love that smell. That's the citrus something is in bloom now. Huh, Mom?"

Mom said, "I don't know, honey."

We drove for another mile. We passed a cluster of lime green houses made out of cement block. I said, "Check out that color, Mom. You'd better notify the Architectural Committee."

Mom was not amused. "This isn't a development, Paul."

"Then how come the houses are all the same color?"

Mom thought about that and replied, "Maybe you're right. Maybe this is some kind of early development. Maybe the owners of the packing plant built those houses for their workers."

"The migrant workers?"

"No. I don't think so. The migrant workers would come and pick fruit for a few weeks and then move on. But there must have been permanent workers, citrus packers, who lived here year-round. Like Joey was saying, this used to be the tangerine capital of the world . . . Now the tangerine industry is dead. Look. Over there. That's the old packing plant."

It was strange to see an old packing plant, to see an old anything. But it was also comforting to hear that something around here has a history. That something actually belongs here.

It makes sense. I can see how it worked: The citrus packers walked from those lime green cement-block houses into that packing plant—that huge and magnificent structure. It must have been built, red brick by red brick, to be the most magnificent building the workers had ever seen, like a European cathedral.

So why did it stop working? When did it all go wrong? Whose fault was it? Maybe the people from the lime green houses just got tired of walking into this building every morning. Maybe they stopped seeing how magnificent it was. And now it's gone. It's all over. Somewhere else is now the tangerine capital of the world.

We didn't see much else of the town, because suddenly, right in front of us, were the rides and tents of the carnival. "Low-rent" was a compliment for this thing. It was set up in a big field of dirt, next to a sign that read TANGERINE FLEA MARKET EVERY SUNDAY. Mom dropped us off in the parking lot, which was another field of dirt across the road. She said, "Are you boys sure you want to get out here?"

"Yeah!" Joey laughed. Maybe he thought Mom was kidding. Mom sighed. "OK. When do you want to be picked up?"

"I don't know, Joey, what do you say? Seven o'clock?"

Joey thought about it. "Yeah. That's cool."

Mom called, "All right. I'll see you two right here, on this spot, at seven o'clock. Be careful."

"We will, Mom. Bye."

As we waited to cross the busy road, Joey handed me a discount ticket and said, "They're from Coach Walski."

Just outside the entranceway I saw a group of guys with a soccer ball. They were good. Three of them were doing the juggling bit with a ball, like Tommy Acoso does, but they were

passing it back and forth, too. I stopped to watch for a minute, and a kid called over to me, "Hey! Give me one of those tickets!"

"I only got one," I said.

"Yeah? So I only need one. Hand it over."

Joey grabbed my elbow and hustled me away. "C'mon, man. Don't mess around with those guys. They're from Tangerine Middle."

"So?"

"Don't talk to them, and don't look at them." We handed over our tickets and passed through a turnstile. "They have gangs in Tangerine Middle School. They have kids with guns, man. Real gangstas. Some of them have AK-47s."

"No way."

"Hey, don't believe me. Just don't mess with them, 'cause I ain't bailing you out."

We walked quickly past the Octopus and another ride that looked like a swinging-ax pendulum. Joey called out, "There they are! There's Cara and Kerri and the guys!"

I was thrilled. I had been secretly hoping this would happen. Cara came up and put her arm around Joey right away. Unfortunately nobody, Kerri included, paid much attention to me. The three guys, who I sort of knew from classes and lunch, were all talking about going to a freak show in the back of the carnival. Cara and Kerri were saying things like "Oh, gross" and "No way."

Everybody was disappointed when we actually got inside the freak show, called Wonders of the World. Everybody except me. I was really fascinated as I prowled through the dark, partitioned rooms of the exhibits. They were mostly photos, but there were some wax statues, too. The exhibits had names like the Woman with a Third Eye, the Buffalo Man, and the Frozen Fräulein.

I lost the rest of the group when I stopped to read about the Boy Who Never Grew. According to the sign, this boy stopped growing at the age of five, but he went on to live to the age of eighty-nine. And although he was studied by the top doctors in Europe, he remains a mystery to this day. No one ever discovered what happened to him to cause this strange affliction. I peered into the eyes in the photo for a long, long time.

When I came out of Wonders of the World, blinking in the sun, my classmates were all gone. The guys who I had seen at the entrance with the soccer ball were there, waiting to go in. They were too busy karate-kicking at each other to notice me.

I turned left and headed toward the big double Ferris wheel. I watched it being loaded, seat by seat. The wheel rotated up, and I saw Cara and Joey close together on a seat. It rotated again, and I saw Kerri. She was sitting with one of the guys from the group. A guy named Adam. A guy who doesn't wear glasses and who knows how to talk. I spun around and walked the other way, eventually stopping at a snow-cone place. After about half an hour by myself, I caught up with the group again. No one had noticed that I was gone. Kerri wound up going on the Caterpillar with Adam, too. I didn't go on any rides.

Seven o'clock finally came. I went and stood at the entrance. I could see that Mom was already parked in the lot. Joey kept me waiting for ten minutes, then ran up and said, "You ready?"

"Yeah. I've been ready."

We crossed the road and climbed into the air-conditioned car. Mom cried out, "Look at that!"

We looked, and we saw the gang of soccer kids from Tangerine Middle all climbing into the back of a light green, classic Ford pickup truck.