

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.

"Yeah. Cool truck," Joey and I said, almost at the same time. "No! No!" Mom continued. "Look at the truck and tell me what's wrong with this picture."

We looked again, and I noticed the words TOMAS CRUZ GROVES, TANGERINE, FLORIDA written on the door. "Do you mean that they spelled Thomas wrong?"

"Honestly, Paul!" she snapped. "Can't you be serious when I ask you a question?"

"But I am being serious."

Mom pointed at the pile of kids, who were now riding toward the exit. "Seatbelts! They're not wearing any seatbelts. Not one of them. And how could they? They're all bouncing around in the back of that truck like a bunch of golden retrievers."

"Well, that's up to them, right?"

"No, that is not up to them! That is against the law. One good bump and they'll all break their necks! Why do we bother passing safety laws? People will still throw six kids into the back of a truck and then drive them out onto the highway."

Mom drove in silence all the way home—angry about the driver of the pickup truck. It doesn't take much these days to make her angry. I was feeling pretty miserable myself—about Kerri Gardner, about soccer, about my whole life here. I remembered the face of the Boy Who Never Grew, the face of that eighty-nine-year-old little boy. I remembered the fear in his eyes. I know that fear. It's my fear. They may as well strick me in there next to him.

A picture came to me, nasty yet satisfying. I could stop trying to be what everyone else is and accept being a freak. They could open a new exhibit, starring me. A modern exhibit called the Children Who Wouldn't Listen. Stomach Cramps Boy, who went swimming right after lunch. Refrigerator Door Boy, sealed

forever to stay fresh. And Eclipse Boy, studied by the greatest doctors in Europe but still a mystery to this day.

## Monday, September 11

I was up for a long time last night, listening to the rain. It was still raining when Mom dropped me off at the guardhouse. I stood next to Joey, but neither one of us had much to say.

Lake Windsor Middle School is a very uncomfortable place to be when it's raining. Hundreds of kids crowd into the walkways between classes. The kids with umbrellas smack them into each other. The kids without umbrellas panic because they're trapped in the cold, pounding rain, unable to move behind the kids with umbrellas.

I was one of the kids with umbrellas, even though the coolest guys don't carry them. Of course, the coolest guys don't have to take off their glasses and dry them before they can see again, either.

It was still pouring during third period when a kid came into my math class in P-19. He was soaking wet and holding one of those wooden office passes. The teacher, Mr. Ward, called me up to the front and said, "You're wanted in Mr. Murrow's office right away."

I let the kid with the pass share my umbrella as we crossed over the ocean of mud and ducked into the building. When we got to Mr. Murrow's office, I noticed Mrs. Gates and Coach Wal-ski standing with him next to his desk. Lined up on a long couch against the opposite wall were Joey, Adam, and the other two guys from our group at the carnival. I went over and sat with them. Mr. Murrow started speaking. He was angry. "I want you boys to tell me exactly what happened at the carnival on Saturday."

He paused and then added, "You were all at the carnival on Saturday, were you not?"

Nobody answered until Joey spoke up and said, "Yes, sir. We were there."

Joey didn't say anything else, so Coach Walski intervened. "We know that you were there, boys, because I gave you all tickets. That's how we've all come to be in Mr. Murrow's office today. Now, maybe you don't know what this is all about, so I'll tell you. Mrs. Gates got a phone call on Saturday from the Sheriff's Department."

Mr. Murrow picked up the story from here. His tone was more reasonable now, more like Coach Walski's. "The Tangerine County Sheriff's Department received a complaint from the owners of the carnival that one of their exhibits was vandalized by boys from a soccer team. They called Mrs. Gates and asked her to help find out exactly what happened to the exhibit." He checked the name on a piece of paper. "The Wonders of the World exhibit."

Joey was quick to respond. "Hey, we didn't do anything wrong. We were in the exhibit, yeah. But we didn't do anything to it."

Everybody on the couch agreed, except me. I knew immediately what had happened, and who had done it. I really didn't want to rat out those soccer guys, but I was the only one who had seen them going in. It had to be me. I raised my hand up limply and said, "I think I know who did it."

All three adults turned to me. Mr. Murrow said, "OK. Who did it?"

"When I came out of the exhibit, I saw a bunch of guys from Tangerine Middle going in. I think they were soccer players."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, sir, they were carrying a soccer ball."

The three adults looked at each other, and then they smiled. The rest of us started to relax. Joey said, "Yeah, I saw those guys, too, on the way in and on the way out. They were bad news, no question about it."

Coach Walski said to Joey, "Did you recognize any of them from our game last year?"

Joey was certain. "Oh yeah. They were definitely from that team. I think they were all starters. I never saw them going into the freak show, so I didn't know who you were talking about at first. But yeah, definitely, they're the guys you're looking for."

Mrs. Gates seemed relieved and happy. She said, "Thank you very much, boys. I guess we've solved this mystery. I wish they were all so easy to solve."

Mr. Murrow added, "I'm glad it was just a case of mistaken identity. I didn't think you guys would do anything like this. All right, why don't you go ahead and get back to class. And thank you, too, Coach."

Coach Walski told him, "I know the coach at Tangerine Middle. Her name's Betty Bright. Call Betty and tell her what happened. She'll round those kids up."

Mr. Murrow picked up the phone as we all piled out into the hall.

Nobody said anything. When we got to the outside door, I asked Joey if he wanted to walk under my umbrella. Adam and the other two kids were too cool to have umbrellas, so they took off and ran through the rain toward their portables.

I stopped still when we got outside the building, right at the entrance to the boardwalk. This whole thing was really bothering me, so I said to Joey, "Hey, we ratted those guys out."

Joey seemed puzzled. "Yeah. So what? They're never gonna know who we are."

"Oh no? Who knows what Murov's gonna say to this Betty Bright. He might tell her our names."

"No way. It's not like we're testifying in court or filling out affidavits. Our names aren't on anything."

"Listen to yourself. You sound like a lawyer."

"Oh, give me a break, Fisher! Do you want to take the rap for something that you didn't do?"

"No."

Joey paused for a moment and asked, "So how come you took off at the carnival?"

"I don't know." I paused, too. I finally said, "That Adam kid, is he going out with Kerri Gardner? Is that the deal?"

"Adam? Adam's a geek."

"So what does that mean? Is he going out with her or isn't he?"

"Not that I know of. Why? Do you want to go out with her?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Well, hey, she obviously likes geeks. Why shouldn't you?" I stood there, trying to think of a comeback, when suddenly, I heard a *whooshing* sound, like the sound you get when you open a vacuum-sealed can of peanuts. Then the brown water that had puddled up all over the field began to move. It began to run toward the back portables, like someone had pulled the plug out of a giant bathtub. Next came a *crack-crack-cracking* sound. The boards began to come apart, and the loose mud under the walkways began to slide toward that giant bathtub drain.

One after another the doors of the portables opened and the teachers looked out, staring into the dense rain, trying to spot the cause of all this commotion. Mr. Ward opened the door of Portable 19. He stepped out onto the porch and looked around back. Across the field, the kids from Ms. Alvarez's

portable came walking out with their belongings, in single file, like they were supposed to do in a fire drill. Other teachers saw that and started their kids out, too. But suddenly there was a larger sound. A louder *whoosh* turned every head and opened every eye in that rainy field. Then the walkways started to heave up and down, making terrible splintering noises.

Immediately kids started screaming and vaulting over the handrails, landing in the ankle-deep mud. Another *whoosh* and more violent cracking sounds followed. Then every seventh and eighth grader started to pour out of those portables, some still calm, some panicking.

There was instant and total chaos in the back row, the one nearest to the football field, because the portables themselves were starting to break apart and move. The kids came diving out, jamming in the doorways, pushing into the backs of other kids, knocking each other flat on the disintegrating boardwalk. They knocked each other into the moving mudslide that was now swirling in a circle around them.

"What is it?" I yelled to Joey. "An earthquake?"

"No! Sinkhole, man! It's a sinkhole! It's opening up under the field. Look at 19!"

I looked and saw the entire portable being swallowed up by the mud, its roof now where its porch steps should be. I yelled, "That's my math class!"

Joey shouted back over the din, "They must all be trapped in there!"

I didn't even think about it. I yelled back, "Come on!"

We ditched my umbrella and jumped out of the way as the first panicked wave reached the building. We pushed around the bottleneck of screaming kids forming at the door. Stepping carefully, we sloshed and fought our way through the mud to Portable 19.

We joined some eighth graders in a kind of bucket brigade extending from the field down into the sinkhole. They were grabbing the hands of the kids who were trapped in the portable and pulling them up, step-by-step, to the edge of the hole. Some of those guys must have been ten feet below ground level at this point, and the sinkhole was still deepening and spreading. The mud continued to swirl around us in a rapid clockwise motion. Empty of kids, Portable 16 fell right over, roof first, into the far end of the hole. Portables 20 and 21 were balanced on the rim of the crater, about to go.

Joey and I dug our heels into the mud about halfway down toward the bottom of the hole. We pulled and grabbed at kids as they made their way up the slippery incline to the top. Some of them were so frightened that they didn't want to let go of us, but we pushed them along anyway, up to the next guys. I lost my balance twice and fell into the mud, but I managed to right myself quickly. My glasses were so caked with mud that I could no longer see anything clearly. I must have pulled twenty kids up before I heard Mr. Ward's voice yell, "That's it! That's everybody! Let's get out of here!"

Those of us in the middle of the line helped the guys from the bottom to climb out. Then they pulled us up. I heard Mr. Ward yell again, "There go 17 and 18!" and I heard the sounds of Portables 17 and 18 splintering apart. The *whooshing* was getting louder, and I felt afraid for the first time, afraid that we might all get sucked down and drown in the mud. We moved out in a tight group, holding on to each other through the field of moving slop and splintered boards.

Finally we pushed our way inside the main building, out of the rain. I tried to clean my glasses on my sopping, filthy shirt. No way. Someone snatched the glasses away from me, right out of my hands. It was a big guy, with a towel, and he proceeded

to wipe them clean. He said, "Mars, my man! Good work out there."

I knew that voice. I said, "Thanks, Gino."

He placed them carefully on my head and said, "It sucks what they did to you, Mars. I told Coach Walski that, too. You're the best seventh-grade, four-eyed Martian goalie in the entire county."

"Thanks, Gino. I appreciate that."

He started to move on with his towel, but he turned to add, "They should have bent the rules for you, Mars. They bend the rules for *other* guys, lots of them, so they should have bent them for you." I watched Gino head off into the sea of muddy and miserable kids.

Sirens started to wail outside. Then the loudspeakers crackled to life. "This is Mrs. Gates. We are experiencing an extreme emergency. Please listen carefully and do exactly as I say. First, any injured student should come immediately to the office. No student who is *not* injured should attempt to come to the office at this time. All other students should move calmly and quietly to their afternoon bus stops or pickup points. School buses have already been dispatched to drive you home. If you cannot go home at this time, you should proceed out the front entrance and walk to the high school gymnasium."

Mrs. Gates repeated this speech twice more as I worked my way out the front door and turned left to my bus stop. I hooked up with Joey again there. He said he'd heard that there were kids with broken arms and legs all over the office.

A convoy of ambulances, police cars, and fire engines turned into the entranceway, their sirens wailing and their lights flashing. The rain continued to hammer down, pounding on the long line of kids trudging north, around the football stadium, toward the high school gymnasium.

Our bus pulled into the circular drive and we climbed on board patiently and politely, slopping mud all over the aisle floor and the seats. The bus driver said she had instructions to take all of us right to our doors.

I was shivering and my teeth were chattering by the time I got home. I let myself in through the side door to the garage and went into the laundry room. I peeled off my shirt, socks, shoes, and pants and dumped them all into the washing machine. Then, wearing only my undershorts, and streaked head to foot with mud like one of those lost guys from the Amazon rainforest, I went in to break the news to Mom.

### Monday, September 11, later

At four o'clock Grandmom and Grandpop called from Ohio to tell us we were on the national news—on CNN—so Mom turned it on. They already had live footage shot by a news helicopter. It showed the whole campus, then it zeroed in on the field of portables and the focal point of the sinkhole.

I was surprised, and even a little disappointed, at how small the crater was—only about fifty yards across. I was also surprised to hear that only a dozen kids were treated at the Tangerine County Medical Center, and all for minor injuries. Nobody was dead. Nobody was even kept overnight for observation.

The local news at six o'clock opened with the same helicopter shot. But they also had interviews with Mrs. Gates, Mr. Ward, the sheriff, and a group of eighth graders who had been in the Portable 19 rescue brigade.

They were followed by a geologist from the University of Florida, Dr. Judith Something. She explained that the above-normal amounts of storm runoff (rain) had caused an under-

ground cavern to form and then collapse. When it collapsed, everything on the surface above it collapsed, too—in this case, the area of the field that contained Portables 16 through 21.

The reason this sinkhole had done such massive damage to the school was that all the portables were connected by wooden walkways. Yeah. Tell me about it—all that cracking and splintering! None of the news coverage could recapture that.

Dad came home angry and agitated. Reporters had been calling Dad's office, the Department of Civil Engineering, asking how a school could be built over a huge sinkhole. Old Charley Burns was out of the office at a stock-car race, so Dad had to take the heat. Dad tried to find the geological surveys for the Lake Windsor campus, but he couldn't. He had to tell the reporters that he didn't know where they were. One reporter had had the nerve to ask him, "How can you not know what's going on in your own office?" He was especially angry about that.

The eleven o'clock news featured the same exact reports. That's when I got a call from Joey. He said, "I heard that a whole home ec class got buried alive in Portable 18. They're just not telling us."

"No way. Who told you that?"

"Cara."

"She's hysterical."

"Yeah. You're right. She is. I gotta go." And he hung up.

I gotta go, too. I'm wiped out. But I feel good about today. I faced down danger today, maybe even death. When disaster struck, we all had to do something. In a way, we all had to become someone. I'm not saying I was a hero. All I did was slide around in the mud and try to pull people up. But I didn't panic and run, either.

I'm still afraid of Erik. I'm afraid of Arthur now, too. But today I wasn't a coward, and that counts for something.

## Tuesday, September 12

The *Tangerine Times* printed a special pullout section on the Lake Windsor Middle School sinkhole. The photos were spectacular. They had one huge shot of the splintered walkways sticking up in all directions, like Godzilla had just trampled through there.

The newspaper ran a letter from Mrs. Gates to the parents of all seventh and eighth graders. We're all supposed to attend a special disaster meeting on Friday night at seven-thirty in the high school gymnasium. The letter said that "state and county officials are planning to attend," and that "they are currently working out an emergency relocation plan that will be presented at this meeting."

I'll bet they are. Think about it: There are 25 portables that are completely trashed, completely out of commission. Let's say there are 25 kids assigned to each of those portables. And each kid has 7 class periods a day. That's 625 kids and 175 class periods to relocate. Awesome.

I was shocked to read that the sixth graders are supposed to return to school on Thursday. Thursday! The main building of the middle school and all the buildings of the high school have been certified as "structurally safe" by a team of engineers hastily assembled by Old Charley Burns. It turns out that Old Charley was in Daytona, but now he's back. And he is "taking personal charge of the case." (I'm sure that's fine with Dad, who wants nothing to do with the case, or with Old Charley.)

The field of portables, of course, has been certified as a disaster area. The engineers condemned everything "within a

hundred-yard radius of the focal point of the sinkhole," which was right under Portable 19. The condemned area includes all of the portables, of course. But to the south it also includes a corner of the soccer field and all of the baseball diamond. To the north it includes nearly all of the high school football bleachers that back up onto the middle school.

There's extra land to the south, so the soccer field can be moved. But what about those steel-frame, thirty-row-high, hundred-yard-long high school bleachers? They're not moving anywhere. They're condemned. Period. The football stadium has just lost half of its seating capacity. And Erik Fisher, the soon-to-be-famous placekicker, has just lost half of his audience.

## Thursday, September 14

Dad is the new Director of Civil Engineering for Tangerine County.

It happened quickly. Channel 2 ran an *Eyewitness News* special report about Old Charley Burns last night at 6:00 p.m. Dad had Old Charley's job by noon today.

The *Eyewitness News* team really kicked butt. It turns out that in the ten-year, multi-million-dollar building boom on the west side of Tangerine County, Old Charley's department never denied *one* request for a permit. They never sent out one inspector, either. They let the developers hire their own inspectors and even fill out their own inspection reports. They let the developers conduct their own geological surveys, too—including the missing one for the Lake Windsor campus. And they maintained "the most relaxed building code in all of Florida for construction methods and materials."

So what has Old Charley been doing instead of inspecting new development plans? According to the *Eyewitness News*

team, he's been "living the high life—either at a Florida Gators game or at a stock-car race." The University of Florida Alumni Association lists Old Charley as a "Bull Gator" contributor. He even has his own skybox. He has a skybox at Daytona, too. And he is an honored guest at Talladega, at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, and at various other race sites around the southeast.

According to the *Eyewitness* team narrator, "Charley Burns lived the high life. Yet his salary remained that of a civil servant. So where did it all come from—the skyboxes, the expensive trips, the big contributions? It came from the developers—on the side, off the books, under the table. They wanted Charley Burns out of the way, so they sent him to Charlotte, or to Darlington, or to Talladega. While he was gone, the Estates at East Hampton, and the Villas at Versailles, and Lake Windsor Downs, and the middle school–high school complex all went up—unsurveyed, unsupervised, and unsafe."

By the time the report was finished, Old Charley was road-kill. There wasn't enough left of Old Charley to hose off the driveway. At first Dad said he was worried that he'd be "farred with the same brush." But a county commissioner called him right after the broadcast and talked to him for over an hour. Then, like I said, he got the job today.

I heard Dad promise the commissioner that "every new construction site will be thoroughly inspected and regulated from now on." So I guess it's the end of the multi-million-dollar building boom west of Tangerine. The end of an era. The Old Charley Burns era.

Dad never mentioned Old Charley in his conversation with the commissioner. He never mentioned him when he told Mom, Erik, and me about the job offer, either.

It's the end of an era, all right. And it's like Old Charley

Burns—the former Director, the racing fan, the real character—no longer exists.

But that's Dad. You're either at the center of his world, or you're nowhere. There is no in-between.

It's the Dad era now.

## Friday, September 15

Mom and Dad and I drove up to the high school tonight to hear about the emergency relocation plan. I expected to hear that we were going to be out of school for a month or two, or maybe even six.

I guess we all thought that, because Mom had been calling every private school within driving distance. She was trying to sell me on a local Catholic school called St. Anthony's. The boys there have to wear blue pants, white shirts, and blue ties.

Mom was selling, but I wasn't buying. "Mom, we're not Catholic," I pointed out.

"That doesn't matter. I talked to the principal, Sister Mary Margaret. You don't have to be Catholic to go there. It just happens to be a Catholic school."

"What are you saying? It's just a coincidence that only Catholics go there?"

"Maybe you don't know everything about it, Paul. Would you please listen? Ten percent of their students are not Catholic. And the sister told me that she's been flooded by calls from Lake Windsor Middle, so you'd be with kids you know."

"There are about three kids that I can stand at Lake Windsor Middle."

"Well, I'll bet you Joey Costello's parents have called there."

"Sure. I'll bet Joey Costello's parents know what a rosary is, too."



Dad snapped at both of us. "I think this discussion is a bit premature, don't you? The school officials say they have a plan worked out. So let's all hear what it is. Until then let's have some peace and quiet."

Dad is stressed to the max about this sinkhole business. His department is getting dozens of phone calls from magazines, and wire services, and TV producers. He's talked to people from as far away as Australia and Japan. In so many words, he gives them all the same message: "Old Charley Burns did it. Now Old Charley's gone."

That's why the county commissioners want Dad onstage with them at the meeting tonight. They want everybody watching to get the message: "Old Charley Burns did it. Now Old Charley's gone."

When we got to the high school there were about a thousand parents and kids entering the gymnasium. We saw the Costellos getting out of their Jeep.

While our parents talked, Joey muttered to me, "Check it out. Some of these geeks still have mud on them."

I said, "Did you see the news?"

"Yeah. Can you believe it? If we hadn't gone home on that bus, we'd have been on TV with Mr. Ward and the rest of the 'rescue brigade,' right? They'd be making a movie about us."

"Yeah. Right."

"We'd have been heroes." Joey looked away. He clenched his jaw and added, "Mike would have been proud of what we did, I'll tell you that."

"Yeah. I'm sure he would have."

"OK, here we go. I'll catch you tomorrow."  
"OK."

We split off from the Costellos and moved into the gymnasium. There were no seats at all. The pullout bleachers had not

been pulled out, so everybody had to stand. We worked our way in as far as we could, stopping about twenty yards from a small stage.

Dad spotted the county commissioner who backed him for Charley Burns's job. The commissioner was a big guy with a big gut and a big bald head. Dad waved to him and then pushed his way steadily forward up onto the stage until he was standing next to him. Mom and I stayed down on the floor.

After a few minutes Mrs. Gates walked to the microphone and tapped it. "I want to begin by apologizing for the standing-room-only conditions, but it was the only way to get all of us in here tonight. I want to thank Mr. Bridges, the principal of Lake Windsor High School, and all of his staff. They, along with our own remarkable middle school staff, have been working nearly round the clock since Tuesday morning."

The people in the crowd applauded in appreciation.

"I don't need to tell anyone what happened here on Monday. But I do want to assure you that none of our students were seriously injured. And that's because every student behaved in a very mature way. The fact is, many students showed a great deal of courage out there. They helped to keep a natural disaster from becoming a human disaster, and they, too, deserve our applause."

There was louder applause this time. I strained to see Joey, but I couldn't.

"I want to introduce the people up here on the stage." Mrs. Gates then went on to introduce about twenty people: the Commissioner of This, the Coordinator of That, the Superintendent of Something. When she got to the Director of Civil Engineering and read out Dad's name, the crowd buzzed ominously.

Finally she got to the part that everyone had come to hear. "All these people, in conjunction with the State Department of

Education in Tallahassee, have helped to devise this emergency relocation plan." Mrs. Gates stopped and held up some papers. She looked over the crowd. "I cannot stress too strongly that this is all temporary. This is a plan to hold us over until we've fixed our problem—fixed it quickly, fixed it completely. The Department of Civil Engineering"—she stopped and looked down at her notes—"under the new direction of Mr. Fisher, has a small army of contractors at work out there. They will make sure that the sinkhole is completely stabilized and that there is *zero* chance of this ever happening again." Mrs. Gates paused, but no one applauded.

"Now. The estimated timetable for repairs to our school, and that means restoring everything to just the way it was, is three months. Our target date for returning to normal life at Lake Windsor Middle is January eighth, the start of the new term. For the remainder of this term, we will all go by this emergency relocation plan, which goes into effect on Monday."

*Wait a minute! Whoa!* I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *Monday?* I had figured on a month's down time at the very least. Now, basically, we had the weekend off, and then we were due back in school.

Mrs. Gates turned to page two of the plan and began to read the details. They added up to this: All the eighth graders would have to squeeze into the high school; all the seventh graders would have to squeeze into the middle school.

Parents around me whispered to each other and acted like they understood.

Mrs. Gates should have quit while she was ahead, but she continued. "Unfortunately this means that the middle school will have to run on a split shift for the rest of this term, with class periods reduced to forty minutes. Sixth graders will begin

at seven-thirty A.M. and end at one P.M. Seventh graders will begin at one-thirty P.M. and end at seven P.M."

An unfriendly-sounding rumble began in the crowd.

Mrs. Gates spoke again quickly. "We understand what a strain this will put on everyone, but I ask you to remember that this is only until the end of the term. We also understand that this plan simply will not work for some families. That is why seventh-grade parents will have another option."

Mrs. Gates turned and pointed to a black woman in a blue suit. "Dr. Grace Johnson, the principal of Tangerine Middle School, has agreed to take in any of our seventh graders for the remainder of this term. Lake Windsor students who choose to go there will be absorbed into the existing class schedule at Tangerine Middle School, which is the same as our normal class schedule. Those of you who choose this option, however, will have to provide your own transportation."

The crowd noise started to increase.

Mrs. Gates said, "Seventh graders, please do not leave without a split-shift schedule." She then closed the meeting by saying, "That's all for now. Remember: We're all in this together, and we'll come out of this an even stronger Lake Windsor Middle School family. Good night."

As the people around me started toward the exits, I stood rock still, looking up, like I was looking toward the heavens. It was a miracle. I could not believe what had just happened.

Dad found us in the crowd and said, "Come on. We can talk about all this in the car."

"No. No!" I shouted above the noise. "We have to talk about it here. The miracle happened here!"

Mom looked at me curiously, but she sided with Dad. "Come on, Paul. The car is quieter, and we need quiet. This is a big decision to make."

I was elated, and I wasn't budging. "What's to decide?" I faced down Mom and Dad in the middle of that gymnasium. "Mom, you ruined my life at Lake Windsor Middle when you turned in that IEP! This is your chance to un-ruin it! Dad, I don't mind if you never pay any attention to me for the rest of my life, just give me this chance! I won't complain about Erik, ever. Just give me this chance. Both of you. I want to go to Tangerine Middle School, and I want to go with no IEP."

I looked at Mom, and I knew I had her. She couldn't resist me, not after what had happened with Coach Walski. I looked at Dad, and he seemed puzzled. Not angry, just puzzled. He said, "What's this about me never paying attention to you? Maybe during football season I'm more wrapped up with what Erik's doing. That's true. But the rest of the time I pay equal attention to you boys."

"Football season and soccer season happen at the same time, Dad. It's OK with me if you can't pay attention to both. Just let me go to Tangerine Middle. Do you understand? I wouldn't be the water boy there. I'd be the goalie."

Dad started nodding—slowly at first, but then he picked up speed. Mom looked at me with her nervous smile, but she nodded right along with him.

The heavens had opened up for me.

## PART 2