

Jonah

My blond, big-nosed English teacher snorts as he lifts a patty with his spatula and deposits it like a dead or recumbent mouse on my plate. It's a hot day, very sunny. He points; I step over to the condiments table, and the line closes up behind me. Lydia stands at the table—we're fourteen, this is before I fell in love with her. She's using the ketchup so I wait, quiet as always.

"Hi, Luke," she says, handing me the red plastic bottle. "It's the last day."

"Yeah." But I know why she said it. A vague fear looms and I hesitate with the ketchup. I come back to the present and squeeze too hard; the hamburger drowns.

"Are you gonna tell her?" asks Lydia.

"Today?" I scan the table. "But there's no mustard."

"It's the last day," she repeats.

"Should I even?" I suddenly notice the patty is not on a bun and I realize I never picked one up. I've never been good at eating lunch. Well, this just looks stupid. I keep my eyes on Lydia as I lean over and let the plate fall into the trash.

I've wanted to tell Patty ever since the day I first saw her and, when I got home and closed the door to my room, whispered her name with awe. It's not the first time my friends have suggested I tell her how I feel, but now Lydia is unusually firm. "You don't always get a chance," she insists, "to say it. And it's the last day. You won't get to see her till grade ten."

"Let's go find everyone. Lemme just grab a Coke first."

Lydia glances at the table, puts down her plate with the quite intact hamburger, and fixes her eyes on mine. "No, I think you should tell her."

I sigh. I'm going to have to. I'm going to be sent to tell her. Even worse, I know where Patty is right now, so I have no excuse not to do it this instant.

I entertain the pause as long as possible. Just before Lydia opens her mouth, red-haired Helen sidles up out of nowhere—Helen, who calls me Chad and admires that I listen to classical music. She licks her lips and asks what's up.

"Luke's gonna go tell Patty he likes her," Lydia juts in immediately. Helen's face lights up. "Chad!" she exclaims.

I start to sputter "Well—" but now another friend has overheard and now they're talking excitedly and now my brain swims and I become confused and now it's fact: in a second I'm going to go tell Patty I like her. I shut my eyes hard.

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I have no idea how my body is transferred from that plane to the one inside the

school. I shiver and remark the yellowness of the walls; I can still smell the barbecue.

The fear is no longer vague. I steer myself to the main hallway, and it opens up before me, a row of dead grey lockers like huge fish on hooks on either side. The corridor is thinly populated, and I easily pick out the mouse-haired girl about halfway down, kneeling at her dead grey locker, elbow-deep in its guts.

My stomach rumbles. I've never been good at eating lunch. As I lurch forward I wonder where all my friends went. My footsteps are so loud. If they're not audible, surely my irregular heartbeat is. But Patty doesn't look up. I end up standing over her, awkwardly holding my weight as though I wasn't entirely subject to gravity. Her name, which I hadn't noticed lurking in the back of my throat, suddenly escapes.

She looks up quickly, locker door flapping open. The shoulder of her white shirt bears a mustard stain. "Oh, hi," she answers. Is she shy? Is she put off?

"I gotta say something," I start, trying to steady my feet. The ground shifts, I swear. Feeling to reorient myself, I lay my hand on a locker. Ugh—it's soft.

"Oh," says Patty.

"I like you. I've liked you forever. I thought we could—um. I like you a lot. Sorry." Smooth. I feel too much like myself, halting and shy, to be a hero bearing this message of doom. She doesn't speak, her expression is frozen; I wonder if she missed the point. "As in I *like* like you," I conclude.

"Oh," says Patty.

The grey fish close in around me to devour me. No—I see it. The fish are dead, as I thought. But this is more sinister. This is the belly of the whale, with its half-suspended gravity, its twisting floors. A deep groan and it churns—I'm losing my balance, I have nauseated it. I feel for a place to grip. Clumsy, bravely, I cast my lot one last time:

"Do you maybe think you might possibly hypothetically like me back?"

"Oh," says Patty. "No."

My hand slips. My vision shudders, my brain spins, and I shut my eyes tight until it hurts. All is dark; I see my friends standing on the shore watching, unreachable, and fear is everything. There is the sound of a great rushing, and my knees give. I am swept away.

When the storm is done, after much silence and breathing I open my eyes again. It's light, and I am calm and warm. I'm sitting on the bus home. It's a long ride for us Georgetowners, almost an hour. I have a lot of time to think—and after that, it sinks in, I have all summer. I don't have to see her again until grade ten.