



# BAD MAGIC

pseudonymous bosch

Illustrations by Gilbert Ford



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\* OOPS.



## This book begins with a bad word.

Can you guess which one?

WAIT! Don't say it out loud. Don't even think it to yourself. I get into enough trouble as it is.

In fact, if the only reason you opened this book is to find the bad words in it, you will be sorely disappointed. I learned the hard way to keep my writing clean.\*

Alas, when the hero of this book, Clay, first pronounced this word that I just mentioned, or rather that I most definitively did NOT mention, this swear word, this curse word, this very, very bad word, this word that I am not repeating or in any way revealing, he didn't know there was anything wrong with it; he was only three years old.

Where would such a young boy learn such a grown-up word? I have no idea. I certainly didn't teach it to him.

Maybe his father yelled it when his father stubbed his toe. Maybe his babysitter grumbled it into her phone when she thought Clay was sleeping.

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\* LET'S JUST SAY EDITORS AREN'T THE GENTLE BOOKISH CREATURES PEOPLE THINK THEY ARE, AND LEAVE IT AT THAT.

Maybe an older boy taught him the word because the older boy thought it would be funny to hear a three-year-old say it.

It really doesn't matter where Clay learned the word any more than it matters what the word was; it only matters that he said the word when he did.

At the time of this fateful event, Clay was in a crowded elevator, leaving his first dentist appointment. As his brother would tell it later, Clay was happily sucking on the acid-green lollipop he had been given as a reward for his good behavior,\* when all of a sudden he took the lollipop out of his mouth and hollered this terrible, terrible word at the top of his little lungs.

"#ξ\*%o!!!"

Needless to say, everybody in the elevator was

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\* Q: WHAT DO YOU CALL A DENTIST WHO HANDS OUT LOLLIPOPS?

A: A VERY SHREWD BUSINESSMAN.

\*\* WHY DO WE USE RANDOM TYPOGRAPHICAL SYMBOLS TO REPRESENT EXPLETIVES? HOW THE \*&%\*^#\$ SHOULD I KNOW? I DO KNOW, HOWEVER, THAT THESE SYMBOLS ARE CALLED *GRAWLIXES*. (FOR MORE ON GRAWLIXES, SEE THE APPENDIX AT THE BACK OF THIS BOOK.)

shocked to hear such foul language come out of such a small child. A big kid giggled. An old lady frowned. Even her Pekingese lapdog seemed to whimper in distress.

Mortified, Clay's brother, who was twelve years older than Clay and who was in charge of Clay for the afternoon, leaned in to Clay's ear and whispered, "You can't say that—that's a bad word."

Clay looked at his brother in confusion. "Why? What did it do?"

Everybody laughed. The mood in the elevator, er, elevated.

But that isn't the end of the story.

On the bus ride home, Clay's brother couldn't get Clay's question out of his head. What did bad words *do*? What made them bad?

Finally, he had an answer: "Bad words are bad because they make people feel bad. That's what they do."

Clay nodded. This made sense to him. "And good words make people feel good?"

"Right."

"And magic words make people feel magic?"

Clay's brother hesitated. He was an amateur magician and said magic words all the time—mostly

while practicing tricks on Clay—but he'd never thought about them in this particular way. “Um, I guess. How 'bout that?”

“Accadabba!” said Clay, giggling. “Shakazam!”

Sometimes, between siblings or close friends, words take on meanings that can't easily be explained to other people. They become like inside jokes—inside words, as it were. After the elevator episode, *bad word* became Clay and his brother's inside word for *magic word*. Also for *code word* and for *password* and for any other word that had some unique power or significance. For any word that *did* something.

“Can you think of a bad word for me?” Clay's brother would ask before making a coin disappear behind his hand or before pulling a scarf out of Clay's ear.

“What's the bad word?” Clay would demand, blocking his brother's access to the refrigerator or bathroom.

As Clay grew older and became more and more adept at magic tricks himself (possibly more adept than his brother, although please don't tell anyone I said so), *bad word* maintained its special meaning.

“Hey, bad man, what’s the bad word?” they would ask each other in greeting.

When they left coded messages for each other, they would leave hints about the bad word needed to decode the message.

When they did magic shows for their parents or friends, they called themselves the Bad Brothers.

*Bad* was their bond.

Then, around the time Clay turned eleven, his brother pulled off the biggest, baddest magic trick of all: He disappeared, with little warning and no explanation.

That was almost two years ago. And still Clay would sometimes wonder what he had done to drive his brother away. What had he said? What bad word had he uttered without knowing it?

And what bad magic would make his brother come back?



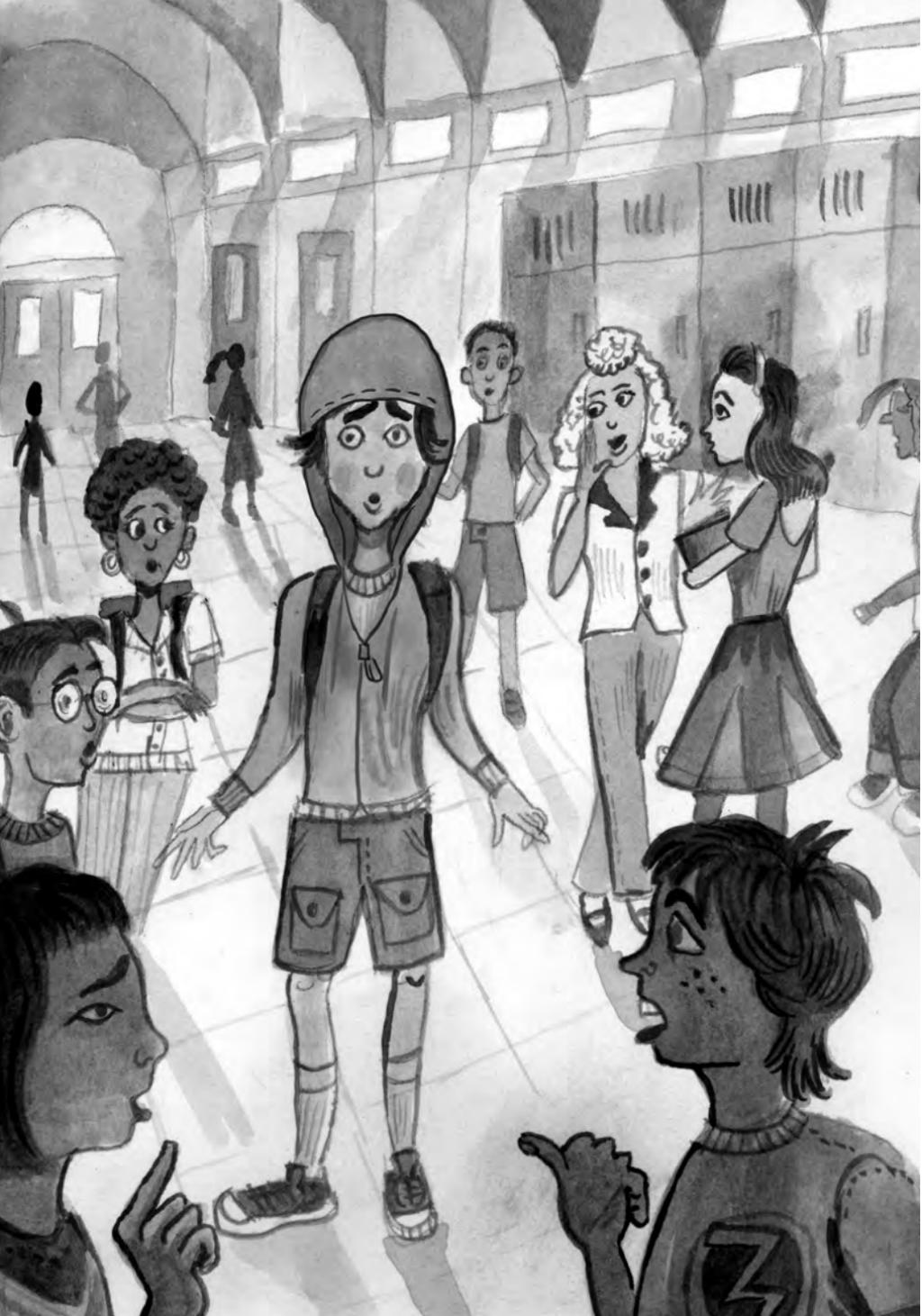
# CHAPTER ONE

## MAGIC SUCKS

**C**lay was not the type of person who would want a book written about him. I may as well admit that now.

Go ahead, judge me. Call me names. Curse me and the horse I wrote in on. But there it is.

He wasn't shy exactly, but these days, at the age of twelve, almost thirteen, he liked to keep a low profile. He slouched in his chair. He hid his face in a comic book or skateboard magazine. He wore a hoodie, even on warm days. It wasn't that he had a big nose or funny ears or horrible acne; I may be biased, but I think he was almost handsome, in a



dried-snot-on-his-sleeve sort of way. It was just that he preferred not to attract attention. Just being looked at for longer than a moment or two made him start jiggling his knee. I can only guess what Clay would have thought about being scrutinized for almost four hundred pages.

Still, it happens to everyone occasionally. Being looked at, I mean.\*

On the morning to which I now turn, the morning Clay's life began to tumble helplessly out of control, on *that* morning, kids kept looking at Clay, not just once or twice, but repeatedly, and he had no idea why.

It started as soon as he got to school. The staring and the whispering. The first few kids he caught turned away so fast that he almost thought he'd imagined it. But the next few were bolder; they openly ogled and snickered. One girl he knew just looked at him and shook her head. Two boys he couldn't remember seeing before gave him a thumbs-up. And that was even more alarming.

After he stowed his skateboard in his locker, Clay

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\* AS FOR A BOOK BEING WRITTEN ABOUT YOU, THAT ONLY HAPPENS IF YOU'RE UNLUCKY ENOUGH TO MEET SOMEONE LIKE ME. BEWARE.

ducked into the bathroom and examined himself in the mirror. There were no boogers hanging from his nose. His fly wasn't open. His hair was a mess, as usual, but it was hidden under his hoodie. He could see nothing wrong. Nothing that wasn't always wrong, anyway.

Had somebody been spreading rumors about him? Had he been mistaken for someone else? It made no sense.

Clay's first class, language arts, was on the ground floor with an entrance directly off the school-yard next to the basketball court. When he walked up, a half dozen kids were already standing around, talking in hushed voices.

While the others took a few steps back, Clay's best friend, Gideon, stepped right up to Clay.

"Okay, yeah, sure, it's kind of...awesome? And I'm kind of...impressed?" said Gideon. "And I know I'm always saying you should just do this, like what are you waiting for, but here? Now? At school? Seriously?" Gideon had this odd way of speaking so that it always sounded as if he were in the middle of a conversation; it was a little hard to follow, even for Clay.

"I mean, do you have a death wish?" Gideon persisted. "Or are you just totally certifiable?"

"What are you talking about?" Clay asked. "Why is everybody—?" He faltered. "What the—?"

Behind Gideon, on the outside wall of their classroom, there was a freshly painted graffiti mural, or "bomb" as they are sometimes called.

As soon as he saw the mural, Clay's leg started to jiggle. He felt dizzy. He thought he might puke.

## MAGIC SUCKS!

it said, in big black bubble letters.

Underneath was a small tag, the signature of the artist:

**CLAY**

"Don't worry—I took a picture," said Gideon, holding up his phone. "Yeah, they'll kick you out of school, and yeah, you'll have no future, and yeah, your parents will kill you, but at least your words will live forever, right?"

The name, the lettering style, the entire mural was unmistakably, unquestionably, undeniably Clay's.

The trouble was, the mural *wasn't* his. He hadn't painted it. And he had no idea how it had gotten there.

It was as if the mural had appeared by magic.  
Very *sucky* magic.

# CHAPTER TWO

## A SCHOOL PLAY

While the mural might not have been Clay's, the now-immortal words *MAGIC SUCKS!* were very much his own. It was just that he'd written them elsewhere.

On paper. Not stucco.

Like many great works of literature—and for all I know, like many great works of graffiti art as well—Clay's words (all two of them!) were inspired by the greatest of all wordsmiths, William Shakespeare.

I'm not trying to impress you. Okay, maybe I am trying to impress you. But it's true nonetheless.

Allow me to explain:



Every spring, the sixth graders at Clay's school put on a Shakespeare play. Depending on the kind of student you were, it was either the highlight of your educational career or a major source of dread.

For Clay, as you might guess, it was mainly the latter.

Most years, the sixth graders chose to perform *Macbeth*, because it has witches and bloody hands; or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, because it has fairies and a man with the head of a donkey, or, as the students always delighted in calling it, the head of an "ass."\*

This year, a new language arts teacher, Mr. Bailey, had come to school. To his students' chagrin, he had insisted on choosing the play himself: *The Tempest*. He'd even cast himself as the lead!

It hardly seemed fair.

By now I'm sure you've read every one of Shakespeare's plays many times over. (If you haven't, I insist you put down this book and start immediately.) But just in case you're experiencing an inexplicable lapse in memory, I will remind you that *The*

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\* HEY, DON'T LOOK AT ME.... SHAKESPEARE SAID IT FIRST!

**THE TEMPEST**  
**BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**  
**STARRING**  
**MR. E. BAILEY**  
**AND HIS SIXTH-GRADE STUDENTS**

*Tempest* is about a sorcerer named Prospero who is stranded on a tropical island with his daughter.

There is a storm. There is a shipwreck. There is a monster. There is romance. There is magic. There is mayhem.

The usual story stuff.

Clay liked the play well enough. At least he liked the opening, with all the crashing thunder and lightning and with the big cardboard ship that got destroyed in the first few minutes of the show. (Somehow, the fact that he'd painted the ship himself made the destruction all the more satisfying.)

What he disliked was his part: Antonio, Prospero's conniving younger brother.

In Clay's opinion, the best roles were Ariel, the tree spirit who casts spells on everyone (not that Clay wanted to wear Ariel's green sparkle tights!\*), and Caliban, the monster who is enslaved by Prospero.

Gideon played Caliban. On opening night, Clay watched in envy as his friend, his face caked with awesomely gruesome Halloween makeup, growled and scowled his way across the stage, cursing everyone in his path.\*\*

As Antonio, Clay didn't get to do much at all. In the play's last act, Prospero forgives Antonio for having stolen his dukedom, but Antonio never gets to apologize, or defend himself, or even curse like Caliban.

Instead, Clay had to stand on the side of the stage next to the smoke machine, listening to the

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\* AND NOT THAT IT WOULDN'T BE A FINE THING IF HE DID!

\*\* CALIBAN CURSES CONSTANTLY IN *THE TEMPEST*. AT ONE POINT, THE MONSTER, WHO WAS TAUGHT TO SPEAK BY PROSPERO, TURNS TO HIS MASTER AND SAYS, *YOU TAUGHT ME LANGUAGE, AND MY PROFIT ON IT IS, I KNOW HOW TO CURSE. THE RED PLAGUE RID YOU FOR LEARNING ME YOUR LANGUAGE!* BASICALLY CURSING HIS LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER FOR BEING HIS LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER. WHICH WAS QUITE AMUSING FOR THE AUDIENCE AT CLAY'S SCHOOL, CONSIDERING MR. BAILEY, A REAL-LIFE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER, WAS PLAYING PROSPERO.

old sorcerer's pompous speeches while trying to forget there was an audience watching his every move.

As the play went on and his eyes started to sting from the smoke, Clay felt increasingly fidgety. And increasingly strange.

Whenever he looked at Mr. Bailey, Clay didn't see his language arts teacher; he didn't even see the character Mr. Bailey was playing, Antonio's older brother, Prospero. He saw his own real-life older brother. The brother who had left almost two years earlier. The brother Clay was doing his best to forget.

He could almost hear that funny humming sound his brother made—*hmmgh*—and his brother's voice saying, “How 'bout that?” His brother was haunting him—through Shakespeare!

Toward the end of *The Tempest*, after Prospero has magically manipulated everyone into doing his bidding, as if they were all puppets in his personal puppet show, the magician renounces magic forever:

*This rough magic I here abjure,  
I'll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,*

*And, deeper than did ever plummet sound,  
I'll drown my book.\**

“Liar,” blurted Clay. “You’ll never give up magic. You don’t care about anything else—”

“Shh!” Gideon whispered from the wings.

Clay blushed red. He hadn’t realized he was speaking aloud. He wasn’t even sure whom he’d been speaking to: Mr. Bailey or Prospero or his brother. He looked around. Everybody was focused on Mr. Bailey. As far as Clay could tell, nobody else had heard him.

He sighed—silently—with relief.

“And stop jiggling!” Gideon added.

Clay blushed redder. And willed his knee to stop bobbing up and down.

“You’re jiggling again.”

A week later, Clay and Gideon were sitting next

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\* THROUGHOUT *THE TEMPEST*, PROSPERO TOYS WITH THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM. HE MAKES THEM FALL IN LOVE, FIGHT WITH EACH OTHER, AND BELIEVE EACH OTHER DEAD, VERY MUCH AS IF HE’S THE WRITER OF THE PLAY. FOR THAT REASON, MANY BELIEVE PROSPERO’S GIVING UP MAGIC WAS SHAKESPEARE’S WAY OF SAYING *I QUIT!* INDEED, *THE TEMPEST* WAS THE LAST PLAY SHAKESPEARE EVER WROTE—AT LEAST, THE LAST ONE HE WROTE BY HIMSELF. I GUESS AFTER SHAKESPEARE GAVE UP MAGIC, HE STARTED NEEDING HELP WITH HIS HOMEWORK, JUST LIKE THE REST OF US.



to each other in Mr. Bailey's class, working on essays about the play. It was almost the end of the year and everyone was writing at top speed, as if every syllable brought them closer to summer vacation.

Everyone except Clay.

Gideon poked him in the leg. "Dude, your knee!"

"Sorry," Clay muttered.

Clay, as you may have noticed by now, was a jiggler.

For as long as he could remember, he'd had a mysterious restless energy that kept him in constant motion. It wasn't just his knees. He twiddled his thumbs...tapped his toes...

"Clay, a pencil is for writing," called Mr. Bailey from across the room. "Not wiggling!"

...and wiggled his pencils.

"Um...thinking!"

The exception was when he was skateboarding. With wheels moving below, Clay's body relaxed and his mind was able to focus. Unfortunately, skateboards weren't allowed in the classroom.

Holding his knee down with one hand, and his pencil down with the other, Clay made himself look at the piece of paper on his desk. The paper was blank, and the essay was due in ten minutes.

"Nine more minutes, everybody," Mr. Bailey said to the room.

Make that nine minutes.

Clay glanced at the chalkboard:

Discuss the role of magic in THE TEMPEST. Why does Prospero break his staff and drown his magic book at the end? If you had magic powers, would you do the same?

What was it about this question? Why was it so difficult for him to answer?

And why did it make his leg jiggle uncontrollably?

As the rest of the class filed out, Clay walked over to Mr. Bailey's desk, which was piled so high with books that Clay had to look over them to see his teacher.

Mr. Bailey was a short, plump man with a pink face and a mutton-chop beard. Today, as was not unusual, he was wearing a knit vest and leather sandals with purple socks. If he looked like a magical character, it wasn't Shakespeare's fierce wizard Prospero; it was Tolkien's harmless hobbit Bilbo.

Mutely, Clay held up his empty sheet of paper.

“What’s this?” bellowed Mr. Bailey, standing up but not taking the paper. “Writer’s block?”

Despite his small stature, Mr. Bailey had a loud, booming voice, developed, he had bragged to his students more than once, during his many years on the stage.

“Uh-huh,” said Clay, bouncing on his toes (which is a double-leg jiggle, if you think about it).

Mr. Bailey nodded. “Actually, I’ve always thought *block* wasn’t the right word. It’s more of a knot, wouldn’t you say?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Or maybe a net,” suggested Mr. Bailey, philosophically. “A net one gets all knotted up inside.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But the point is, young man, you are unable to write.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Why?” asked Mr. Bailey, leaning toward Clay across the piles of books.

“Uh-huh,” said Clay, taking a step back. “Wait, what?”

“Why can’t you write?” asked Mr. Bailey, leaning farther. A few books toppled over, but he took no notice. “Is it the subject?”

Clay squirmed. "I don't know. I mean, I don't even believe in magic."

"Do you have to believe in something to write about it?"

"No, I guess not," said Clay.

"Well then...?"

Clay hesitated. How to explain? "My older brother, when I was little, he used to do all these tricks—you know, card tricks, coin tricks, hat tricks. I figured them all out eventually. Magicians just say a bunch of stuff to make you think they're doing something they're not. They're liars. Cheese-wizards."

Mr. Bailey laughed, as if this were a great joke. "Cheese-wizards? I think you're confusing magic-show magic with magic in Shakespeare's time. In those days, magic was taken very seriously."

"What's the difference? The whole idea of magic is fake. It's all cheese-wizardry."

"Well, write that, if you must," said Mr. Bailey.

"I can't," said Clay. "My... brain won't let me."

Mr. Bailey regarded Clay over his desk. "I've heard teachers complain that you are developing an attitude problem, Clay. Is this what they're talking about?"

Clay shrugged, forcing himself not to look

away. He didn't think he had an attitude problem; he thought he had an honesty problem. The problem was, he didn't know how not to be honest.

Clay had exceptionally big eyes as well as wild, fury, half-curly hair. When he stared without blinking—a talent he had developed at a young age to irritate his older brother—the effect was quite startling. He looked like a forest animal.

Discomfited, Mr. Bailey was the first to look down.

“I think I have something that might help—”

From under his desk, Mr. Bailey slid out a large cardboard box. Spilling out of the top was the velvet robe he had worn in *The Tempest*, and sticking out of the robe was the gnarled piece of wood that had served as his magic staff. For a second, Clay thought his teacher might give him the staff—either that or hit him over the head with it. But Mr. Bailey put the staff aside and started pulling out more props from the play.

“Ah, here we are—”

Smiling, Mr. Bailey handed Clay a smallish book covered with cracked rust-red leather. Inset in the center of the cover was a tiny triangular mirror.

It took a moment for Clay to recognize what

he was looking at. Prospero's magic book. The book Prospero drowns at the end of *The Tempest*. Clay had never seen it up close before.

"Thanks, but, um, are you sure you won't need this?" asked Clay. "What if you do the play again?"

Mr. Bailey waved his hand dismissively. "Once I've played a role, it's done. The character becomes part of me."

Clay opened the book—or tried to. The pages of the book had dried together, and Clay had to pry them apart in order to look inside. Though old and worn, the pages were blank save for a few stains and some yellowing near the edges.

Mr. Bailey told Clay he didn't have to write about *The Tempest*. As long as he wrote something—anything—in the journal, he would get class credit.

"Like what?" asked Clay, peering into the tiny mirror. His eye peered back at him. He had the odd sensation that he was spying on himself.

"It doesn't matter—I don't even have to read it," said Mr. Bailey.

"But how can you not read it if you look at it?"

Clay thought his logic was irrefutable, but Mr. Bailey just chuckled. "Believe me, I have a lot of practice ignoring things that students write."

He sat down and put his sandaled feet up on his desk, satisfied that the problem was solved.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I played King Lear? Now that was a performance! ..."

As Mr. Bailey told him about the trials and tribulations of playing Shakespeare's mad king, Clay kept trying to excuse himself.

To no avail.

# CHAPTER THREE

## THE WRITING ON THE WALL

**T**hat afternoon, when he got home from school, Clay leaned his skateboard against the wall of his bedroom and sat down at his desk—which was actually a drafting table.

For somebody with writer's block, a casual observer might have noted, Clay sure wrote a lot. His desk, his skateboard, the wall his skateboard was leaning against, almost every surface in the room was covered with Clay's writing.

I say writing, but mostly it was his name written again and again. Or variations, like

**CLAYMASTER**

or **C~~L~~AYMASTER**

or **C~~A~~YD~~O~~**.

Sometimes his name appeared as a simple tag. Other times it was written in twisting three-dimensional letters. In the most elaborate versions, the letter Y was depicted as a fist squeezing clay.

More than anything, Clay's walls resembled a graffiti artist's sketchbook. A talented graffiti artist's sketchbook, I would add. (I'm told hands are notoriously difficult to draw.) But as I said, I may be biased.

As to whether Clay had ever brought one of his graffiti pieces to life somewhere else—on a school wall, for example—the answer is no. At least, not yet.

He pored over pictures of vintage graffiti art. He hunted for murals beneath freeway overpasses. And lately, at Gideon's instigation, he and Gideon had started following around some older kids who had an active graffiti crew (not that the older kids ever tolerated them for very long). But whether it was due to moral qualms or fear of being caught or just his cautious not-quite-thirteen-year-old nature, Clay had yet to write on a single wall outside of his room.

Of course, that doesn't mean he didn't plan to.



Clay pulled the journal out of his backpack and took a pen out of his drawer, ready to write whatever non-sense came to mind.

As soon as he uncapped the pen, it exploded, spraying ink in every direction. A big black splat landed on the red cover of the journal.

“Aaargh!”

The pen was a “magic” pen—a gag gift—given to him by his brother four years earlier.

“Figures,” Clay grumbled.

All the gifts his brother gave him exploded—whether they were supposed to or not.

Shaking his head in annoyance, Clay threw the pen to the floor, then wiped off the journal with a tissue. A smeared, star-shaped stain remained.

“Oh, great.”

He grabbed a fat black marker off a shelf and opened the journal.

## MAGIC SUCKS!

he wrote in swollen bubble letters.

As he dotted the exclamation mark, Clay imagined that he saw a blue flame erupt—and for a flickering second he saw the page fill with words. He blinked, and the page went blank again.

I must be getting tired, he thought, rubbing his eyes.

He tagged the page quickly—

## **CLAY**

—then closed the journal. There was nothing more to say.

When Clay arrived at school the next morning, he still hadn't decided whether he was going to show Mr. Bailey the journal. It might be wiser, Clay thought, to write something longer, without the word *sucks* in it.

The last thing he expected was that the whole school would see his journal entry blown up on a wall.

# **MAGIC SUCKS!**

## **CLAY**

The words on the wall were nearly identical to those he'd written the night before—the only difference being that they were bigger—much, much bigger. It looked as though somebody had scanned Clay's journal, then run Mr. Bailey's wall through a giant printer.

Clay couldn't understand it. Had somebody snuck into his room in the middle of the night, taken his journal out of his backpack, copied it onto Mr. Bailey's wall, then returned the journal—all without waking Clay up? He couldn't think of anybody who hated him enough to go to all that trouble.

He felt weirdly exposed, as if it were a long confessional journal entry, not just two words, that had been copied onto the wall.

When Mr. Bailey found him, the bell was ringing and Clay was still staring at the wall, repeatedly tapping his journal as though it might eventually reveal the explanation for the mystery mural. He snapped the journal shut, but he was too late.

"Give that to me," said Mr. Bailey, who suddenly looked a lot less like a hobbit and a lot more like an angry middle school teacher.

Biting his lip, Clay handed him the journal. Mr. Bailey opened it to the offending page.

MAGIC  
SUCKS!

CLAY



“I’m very surprised, Clay,” said Mr. Bailey, glancing from the journal to the wall and back again. The effort to keep his fury in check was making his cheeks red and puffy. “Writing this in a journal is one thing, but on a wall...?”

“I didn’t do it—”

“Is there something you’re upset about? Something going on at home, maybe?”

“I said I didn’t do it—”

“It will be better for you in the long run if you admit it now,” said Mr. Bailey, his cheeks getting bigger and redder by the second. He was beginning to resemble a blowfish.

“But I didn’t—”

Mr. Bailey held up his hand. “Save it for the Head of School—”

“Can I at least have the journal back?” said Clay. The journal was the one clue he had about the writing on the wall. The one thing that might help him clear his name.

“Administration office, now!” Mr. Bailey exploded, spit flying everywhere.

Clay walked away, his whole body quivering with anger and confusion. He was about to be suspended,

possibly expelled, for something he hadn't done and couldn't explain.

Before leaving the schoolyard, he took a last look at the graffiti. From a distance, the bubble letters appeared to wriggle, snakelike, in the sunlight. His words came in and out of focus, over and over, taunting him with their message.

**MAGIC SUCKS! ...**

**MAGIC SUCKS! ...**

**MAGIC SUCKS! ...**

An effect, it seemed, of the tears welling in his eyes.

# CHAPTER **FOUR**

## A FAMILY MEETING

**O**ther families had Friday night dinner; Clay's family had Friday night meetings.

The meetings started promptly at six o'clock and proceeded according to a strict set of rules, with each family member choosing one topic, and one topic only, for the evening.

When Clay was younger, the topics he chose most often were Spider-Man, the Hulk, and whatever magic trick his brother had most recently taught him.

Lately, he had started keeping his personal enthusiasms to himself. For the family meetings he chose more practical topics, like how he needed a trip

slip signed, or how he needed new sneakers, or how he hadn't been to the dentist in over three years.

The fact that he had to bring these things up at a meeting tells you most of what you need to know about his family. Outside of the meetings, I'm afraid to say, they didn't get much family business done, or even spend much time together not getting done the business that they were not getting done.

It hadn't always been that way. Before Clay was born, things were very different. Or so Clay was made to understand by Max-Ernest. Max-Ernest, as you might surmise, was Clay's older brother, and somebody I am intimately familiar with.\*

You see, their parents were convinced that they had been too controlling of Max-Ernest when Max-Ernest was little (true). They felt they had overworried, overscheduled, and generally overparented him (also true), and that as a result Max-Ernest was an overanxious person (I won't judge).

When their second son, Paul-Clay (as Clay was then called), was born, they decided to reverse course and take a more hands-off approach.

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\* IF YOU KNOW THE NAME MAX-ERNEST, YOU KNOW TO KEEP QUIET ABOUT IT. IF THE NAME IS NEW TO YOU, YOU SHOULD KEEP QUIET ABOUT IT ANYWAY. I'M SORRY I CAN'T TELL YOU WHY. JUST TRUST ME ON THIS.

Their new child, they declared, would parent himself.

The freedom they gave Clay was great when it came to such things as choosing when to go to bed or how many desserts to have. It was not so great when it came to things like, say, trip slips, footwear, or dental care. While he was still living at home, Max-Ernest gave his younger brother as much attention as an ~~overly cerebral~~ extremely smart and ~~self-absorbed~~ very busy person like Max-Ernest was capable of giving. But there was only so much he could do, not being Clay's legal guardian. The Friday night meetings were Max-Ernest's idea. A way of ensuring that their family ship kept sailing.

When Max-Ernest first left for college, he attended a school not very far away, and he always came home on Friday nights. Even after he transferred to a school much farther afield, he kept contributing to the family meetings via weekly postcards. The cards always contained a riddle for Clay to solve ("What travels the world but never leaves its corner? Hint: There's one on this postcard.") or an odd fact for Clay to uncover ("What is the smallest city in the smallest country in the world? Hint: They are one and the same."). Clay didn't always love his brother's riddles and word games

(they were usually too silly for Clay, or too difficult, or both); nonetheless, getting a postcard from his brother was the highlight of Clay's week.

Or had been, until the day, almost two years ago now, when that awful card came:

Dear family,

You will not hear from me for a while.

Do not worry.

Love, M-E

Clay looked in vain for hidden clues and secret messages—for a “bad word” that would reveal the note’s true meaning—but he didn’t find any. As far as he could tell, the message was no more or less than it seemed: a good-bye. The picture on the card was of a rabbit sticking its head out of a top hat, and Clay assumed this meant that Max-Ernest intended to go on the road as a magician, but he had no way of knowing for certain.

Not a single card from Max-Ernest had arrived since, not even on Clay’s twelfth birthday.

Most parents, Clay knew, would have made more of an effort to find a missing son. But when

he approached his parents about it, they pointed out that Max-Ernest was over eighteen and free to make his own choices.

“Wouldn’t you want us to respect your choices?” said his mother. “We expect you to respect ours.”

“There’s a saying, Clay,” said his father. “When you love someone, let them go.”

Clay thought his parents were taking that saying too literally, but nothing he said would sway them. For a while, Clay tried to take up the search himself. Alas, Max-Ernest had a deep distrust of technology, and there was no way to contact him electronically that Clay knew of. He did have a physical address for his brother—in Barcelona—and he sent several letters, but they were returned unopened. Next, Clay tried contacting Max-Ernest’s friends. They’d all changed their e-mail addresses and phone numbers several times, but finally Clay was able to get a message to Max-Ernest’s old friend Cass. She replied through her mother that Clay shouldn’t worry, Max-Ernest was fine.

That settled it for Clay. If his brother had cared enough, he would have contacted Clay by now. Obviously, their relationship was no longer very important, if it had ever been.

It was around that time that Clay dropped the

*Paul* in *Paul-Clay* and started calling himself simply Clay.\* He also stopped being interested in magic and started getting interested in other things, like skateboarding and, more significant for our story, graffiti.

Tonight, as always, Clay had printed a copy of the meeting agenda. It sat on the dinner table in front of him, next to a notebook computer and the frozen pizza he had heated up for himself. At his feet was his skateboard, which he idly kicked back and forth.

#### FRIDAY NIGHT MEETING

1. Clay's act of vandalism—causes (Mom)
2. Clay's act of vandalism—consequences (Dad)
3. Clay's alleged act of vandalism—who really did it? (Clay)

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\* HE NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT, BUT I'M GUESSING THE DOUBLE NAME REMINDED HIM TOO MUCH OF MAX-ERNEST'S. INCIDENTALLY, THEIR DOUBLE NAMES CAME FROM THEIR PARENTS' INABILITY TO AGREE ON ANYTHING, A STORY I TELL IN A SERIES OF BOOKS I CAN'T TELL YOU ABOUT.

As soon as his father sat down, Clay hit the table with his spoon. It was his turn to chair the family meeting, which in this case was rather like officiating at his own funeral.

"This meeting is now called to order," he said by rote. He looked at the notebook computer propped up on the table next to him. "Mom?"

"Thank you, Clay," said his mother on the computer screen. "First, I want you to know we understand what you've done. The impulse to write on walls is as old as mankind."

Clay's father nodded. "It's a way of saying, *See, world, I am here!* For a boy entering adolescence, this kind of self-expression is very powerful."

"And beautiful. Just think of those wonderful cave paintings at Lascaux!" Clay's mother smiled at her husband. "You remember?"

"How could I forget?" He beamed at the computer, then turned to Clay. "As for *graffiti*, the word is Italian. First used to describe inscriptions found in the ruins of Pompeii. Another great place to visit!" he added, turning back to his wife. "What is it about volcanoes...?"

Clay's mother blushed on-screen. "Not now, honey!"



Although technically they lived together, Clay's parents could never be in each other's presence for very long without fighting. Thus, they took turns attending the family meeting in person, with one or the other always attending in pixelated form. While this arrangement kept things civil, it had its downside. For reasons Clay could never discern, physical separation always seemed to inspire romantic feelings in his parents.

"Um, guys, can I say something?" asked Clay.

"Of course; you know you can say anything to us," said his father.

"That's why we're here," said his mother (although strictly speaking, they weren't in the same place).

"I tried to tell you guys when I called from school. The graffiti, I—I didn't write it," Clay stammered. "Well, I wrote it—just not on that wall."

Clay did his best to explain, but his parents, perhaps understandably, were very skeptical.

"Clay, you know we aren't here to judge, right?" said his father. "That's not what this is about."

"All we ask is for your honesty," said his mother.

"But I am being honest! I wouldn't do that—it's whacked."

Clay's knee jiggled wildly under the table, sending his skateboard this way and that.

"It's very disappointing that you don't feel you can confide in us," said his father.

"Are you afraid we will withhold love from you if you tell us the truth?" asked his mother.

Clay felt his face reddening. His parents were psychologists, and he hated it when they analyzed his emotions.

"Maybe you'd like to talk about this with another therapist, someone who isn't one of your parents," suggested his father.

"What's the point of talking at all if you're not going to believe me!"

Clay's parents looked at him askance. He had spoken rather loudly.

"Never mind. Just forget it," said Clay through gritted teeth. "It doesn't matter whether I did it anyway."

He took a bite of pizza and chewed furiously.

"What matters, then?" demanded his father.

"That the school thinks I did. And now you have to figure out a punishment."

"Let's not use the word *punishment*," said Clay's father. "Let's use the word *consequence*."

“Whatever—if I don’t have one, they’re not letting me into seventh grade.”

Already, he had been compelled to paint over the graffiti, and he had been suspended for the remaining week of school. However, the school had made it clear that some further action must be taken if Clay was ever going to return.

“All right, Clay, have it your way,” said Clay’s mother, as if she were indulging him in a meaningless diversion. “What is to be your consequence?”

Clay was very curious—in a morbid sort of way—to hear the answer to this question. His parents had very little experience disciplining him, if any. As Clay would have been the first to admit, this was not because his behavior was especially good (although, I hasten to add, his behavior wasn’t especially bad); it was because his parents considered themselves too enlightened for the old-fashioned reward-and-punishment system.

“Well, Clay?” prompted his father.

Clay blinked in disbelief. “You want me to come up with my own punishment?”

“Naturally,” said his mother.

“It won’t mean anything if we decide for you,” said his father.

Clay felt perversely disappointed. Of course, he didn't *want* to be punished, but he'd hoped that for once his parents would act more like normal parents.

"Well..." he said, stalling. "Don't parents usually ground their kids when they do something like write on a wall?"

Clay's mother looked out at him from the computer screen as if he had suggested a trip to Mars. "Should we ground you, Clay? Is that what you want?"

Clay shrugged. "If I wanted you to, wouldn't that kinda defeat the purpose?"

Before anybody could say anything more, the doorbell rang, or more accurately, buzzed. Glad of an excuse to leave the room, Clay leaped up to answer.

# CHAPTER **FIVE**

## A SUMMER CAMP FOR STRUGGLING YOUTH

**W**hen Clay opened the door, he saw a large envelope resting on the doorstep. His heart started beating fast; it had to be from his brother. Who else would send mail timed to arrive in the middle of a Friday night meeting?

Clay's mind raced with possibilities as he picked up the envelope. Would Max-Ernest at last tell them where he was? Might he even announce that he was coming home?

But then he saw the return address: Mr. Bailey. No doubt the envelope contained a letter repeating the threat about his not getting to enter seventh grade.

No longer very excited, Clay walked back to the dining room and emptied the envelope onto the table.

There was no letter, only a stack of summer camp brochures.

A Post-it was attached:

Maybe one of these is right for Clay?  
Regards, E. Bailey.

Camp.

Clay had never gone to camp. He'd never even gone on a camping trip. Camp was something that other families did. Like Little League. Or piano lessons. Or family dinner.

Why was Mr. Bailey suggesting camp?

As soon as he started looking closely at the brochures, Clay saw the answer: All the camps were designed for kids with problems of one sort or another. The first offered to "treat mood disorders through music." Which sounded fine except Clay didn't have a mood disorder—or at least not a *diagnosed* mood disorder, agreed his parents—and he didn't play any musical instruments. The next was a high-security facility for violent and "seriously

at-risk” youth, with “on-call psychiatric assistance.” (“I already have on-call psychiatric assistance,” Clay pointed out to his parents. “You guys.”) Another offered “rehabilitation through construction”—in other words, Clay thought, slave labor.

The most intriguing brochure featured a photo of a lake backed by a waterfall and, in the far distance, a smoking volcano. A llama grazed in the foreground.

At his mother’s request, Clay read the text aloud.

Clay looked up from the brochure. “Animal husbandry? No way am I being some animal’s husband.”\*

“There’s no need to joke about it,” said Clay’s father. “This camp could be exactly what we’re looking for.”

“Don’t tell me you want me to go to this place!” exclaimed Clay. “It’s for delinquents.”

Clay’s mother nodded. “Didn’t you say you wanted a consequence?”

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\* IN MOST CASES, YOU WILL BE RELIEVED TO HEAR, ANIMAL HUSBANDRY HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH HUSBANDS OR WIVES OR ANY KIND OF MARRIAGE AT ALL. RATHER, IT IS THE BRANCH OF AGRICULTURE THAT DEALS WITH LIVESTOCK, SPECIFICALLY THE CARE AND BREEDING OF ANIMALS SUCH AS CATTLE, HOGS, SHEEP, AND HORSES.

# **EARTH RANCH**

## A SUMMER CAMP FOR STRUGGLING YOUTH

*Hike a volcano, feed a llama, cook over an open fire....*

Has your child made poor choices? Behaved aggressively or inappropriately? Stolen or defaced other people's property? Refused to listen to reason?

Whether your child has been in trouble with the police or just the school principal, early intervention is the key to future success.

Earth Ranch, a summer camp on rugged and remote Price Island, helps children outgrow problem behaviors and reach their full potential away from the temptations of modern technology. Imagine: a summer with no computers, no television, no video games, not even a cell phone.

Through wilderness survival training, animal husbandry, and simple comradeship, our campers learn to value their environment, their community, and, most important, themselves.

Earth Ranch is a completely self-sustaining ranch and farm; we grow our own food, produce our own energy, and recycle our own waste. We are a model for living responsibly in the twenty-first century.

This is life the way nature intended.

Sign up your child today!

"But I've already got summer plans," Clay protested.

"What plans?" asked his father.

"To go to the skate park. I'm turning thirteen, remember? I'll finally be old enough to go without an adult."

Near the skate park, there was a famously treacherous hill—called Kill Hill by skaters—that Clay and Gideon had vowed to conquer that summer. He didn't feel it was necessary to mention Kill Hill to his parents, however.

"That's not a summer plan," said his mother.  
"That's a one-hour activity."

"Besides, you're not turning thirteen for weeks," said his father.

Clay seethed as he ate a second slice of the now cold and stringy pizza.

Why would they want to send him to a camp for bad kids, or "struggling youth," as the camp called them? It was one thing for his teacher to think he was a degenerate, but didn't his parents think better of him? Or did they only pretend to be so permissive and accepting? He almost wished he really had been the one to write on Mr. Bailey's wall; it would serve his parents right.

Later, Clay hunted online for some incriminating piece of information about Earth Ranch or Price Island that would convince his parents to let him stay home.

Here is what he learned:

Price Island is a small private island in the Pacific Ocean, approximately eighty miles northwest of Hawaii. The island belongs to the estate of the deceased Wall Street financier Randolph Price and is home to Mount Forge, one of the few privately owned active volcanoes in the world. An eccentric collector of art, books, and other curiosities, Price spent a vast fortune building a palace, which was destroyed in minutes when the volcano erupted. Currently, the island is believed to be uninhabited.

About Earth Ranch itself, Clay could find no information at all. He looked at travel websites, summer camp websites, information-for-parents-of-troubled-kids websites, but nary a mention did he see.

He called his father back into the dining room and called up his mother on his computer. Both his parents had been up late working; neither liked being disturbed.

“Guess what—Earth Ranch is totally off the grid!” he said. “What kind of camp doesn’t have a website?”

“An old-fashioned camp,” said his father.

“Yeah, too old-fashioned,” said Clay. “It probably doesn’t have flushing toilets.”

“Your father and I have discussed it,” said Clay’s mother. “We’ve decided a consequence isn’t such a bad idea after all.”

“It’s not the graffiti,” said his father. “It’s your failure to take responsibility.”

“There has clearly been a breakdown in our communication,” said his mother. “Maybe some time apart will help.”

“Great,” said Clay, incensed. “You never punish me—sorry, *consequence* me—once in my whole life, and suddenly you’re sending me to Alcatraz...on a volcano...with llamas!”

That night, Clay dreamed about the journal. But this time when he looked into the tiny mirror on the front, he didn’t see himself; he saw a volcano exploding in flames. Rivers of lava gushed in all directions, until the lava’s red glow eclipsed everything else and merged with the journal’s red cover.

EARTH  
RANCH

# CHAPTER SIX

## A LOOSE SCREW

I won't tell you how Clay spent his next week—not because he did anything you wouldn't approve of, but because he hardly did anything at all. Except fret about where he would be spending his summer and about whether he'd have a school to return to in the fall.

When the Earth Ranch enrollment packet arrived, it did nothing to assuage Clay's anxiety. Indeed, the brief letter that accompanied the packet raised more questions than it answered. While noting that Clay had applied late and would be enrolling a week after the other campers, the letter said that the camp would make an exception for him because of the "special

circumstances” of his case. Furthermore, his entire fee would be covered by the estate of Randolph Price, the camp’s founder.

What special circumstances, Clay wondered. Weren’t there kids who were more deserving than he was? Disabled kids, maybe, or poor kids? Kids who were better students? Better athletes? Better artists? Or, if they wanted problem kids, weren’t there worse criminals, tougher cases to crack?

What was most peculiar, however, was the packing list—which was quite long, considering everything was supposed to fit in a single backpack. The list included routine items like a water bottle, sunscreen, flashlight, hat, bandanna, socks, and underwear, but also some rather unexpected and even alarming things, such as a gas mask, a life jacket, and a bag of carrot tops. The last item, carrot tops, was underlined, and accompanied by a handwritten notation saying it was very important that the carrot tops be kept handy during Clay’s trip to camp.

“You think I’m going to be feeding rabbits, or is it for dusting furniture?” Clay asked his parents at their next family meeting.

“Maybe the carrot tops are for recycling?” sug-

gested his father, whose turn it was to participate via computer screen.

"I think you mean composting," said his mother, now in the room with Clay.

"I think this camp is crazy," said Clay.

Travel instructions were equally specific. In three days' time, a parent was to take him as far as the seaport, where he was to meet a privately chartered seaplane at dock sixteen at precisely 9:12 a.m. Clay was to be wearing his life jacket and an old pair of sneakers.

"It's like they're expecting the plane to crash into the sea!" Clay complained.

Predictably, Clay's parents couldn't agree on who would take him to the plane. Unpredictably, and at the last minute, both elected to escort him (in person); and they arrived at the gate to dock sixteen as a surprisingly normal-looking family of three.

As his parents walked down the ramp to the dock, Clay lingered, inspecting the various tags scratched into the gate. Then he jumped onto his skateboard for one last ride. The ramp wasn't exactly Kill Hill, but it would have to do for this summer. (In the Earth Ranch enrollment packet, skateboards were listed very clearly among forbidden items.) He

sailed down to the dock and sped across the wooden boards, vibrating like a jackhammer. When he got close to the end of the dock, he popped the tail of his board, attaining a last fleeting moment of air, then skidded to a stop, his face flushed.

He glanced at his parents to see if they were watching—would they be angry or impressed?—but their attention was fixed on the object in front of them. Clay brushed away his disappointment; it wasn't the first time their attention was elsewhere.

Tethered to the end of the dock was an old seaplane with two rusty propellers and two ski-like legs. A man with tattooed arms and a long ponytail was attacking one of the plane's propellers with a wrench. Next to him, a fat bulldog layed in the sun, pink tongue glistening. The man grunted in frustration, then gave up and threw his wrench into the sea.

Clay eyed the plane dubiously. It looked like it would have enough trouble staying afloat on the water, let alone flying in the sky.

"Is this the plane for Price Island?" asked Clay's father.

"Do you see any other planes?" asked the man.

"No boats, either," said Clay's mother. "We thought this dock was closed."

The man grinned. A gold tooth glinted. “That’s why I dock here. Much cheaper.”

“As in free, you mean,” said Clay, smirking. “Is that even...allowed?”

“Clay!” reprimanded his father. “I’m sure he wouldn’t dock here without permission.”

Clay’s mother nodded. “You’re going to a camp where they teach kids to respect the rule of law. I hardly think they’d hire a lawbreaker to fly you there!”

The man’s smile faded a little bit. “Right you are, ma’am. Even so, maybe we’d better not mention this to the folks at camp, eh?”

The pilot slapped Clay on the shoulder. “You must be the lucky camper. I’m Skipper.” He gave his dog a pat on the head. “This here’s my copilot, Gilligan.”

The bulldog took a lumbering step toward Clay and drooled all over his hand.

“Hey,” said Clay, wiping his hand on his pants.

“What about the propeller?” asked Clay’s father. “Is there a problem?”

“Oh, just a couple loose screws...” said Skipper. “Just kiddin’! This plane’s sturdier than a tank. Besides, a little rattling builds character, right?”

Clay seized the initiative, pulling his parents aside. “Can I talk to you guys a second?

"Are you really going to make me get on that thing?" he whispered.

"You won't get into seventh grade otherwise, remember?" said his father.

"It won't matter what grade I'm in, if I'm dead!"

"Don't be so dramatic, Clay," said his mother.

Skipper whistled from beside the plane. "All aboard! Last call for Price Island!"

"Fine. Nice knowing you," Clay said to his parents.

Fuming, Clay thrust his skateboard into the hands of his surprised father and headed for the plane. His parents were as crazy as the pilot, he decided. It would be a relief to get away from them.

About to step in, Clay looked at the side of the plane. The letters had chipped away, along with the rest of the paint, but he could just make out a name: *The Tempest*.

"*The Tempest*? Like the play?" he asked, surprised.

"No, like the plane," said Skipper, as if Clay had suggested something idiotic. "It means 'storm.'"

"I know, but it's also the name of this Shakespeare play I was in."

"Oh, is it now?" said Skipper mockingly. "I didn't

know I had such a literary traveler on my hands.” He turned to his dog. “We’ll have to mind our p’s and q’s, won’t we, Gilligan?”

Clay smiled weakly, wishing he hadn’t said anything.

Five minutes later, Clay was wishing even more fervently that he had stayed home.

After making several sputtering circles in the water like an oversized bird learning to fly, the plane was finally airborne, but Clay was not convinced it would maintain altitude. The cabin wasn’t pressurized or even very well sealed. It was cold and noisy, and Clay, who had inherited a slight fear of heights from his brother, could see bits of blue water through the cracks. He kept picturing the plane plummeting back to earth—and deep into the sea.

His life jacket around his neck, he was squeezed into the back of the plane between his backpack and a large cardboard box addressed to *Jonah P—, c/o Earth Ranch, Price Island*. At least we’re headed to the right place, Clay thought.

Gilligan, the bulldog copilot, occupied the only seat other than Skipper’s, which would have been

fine except that the dog kept turning his head around and slobbering all over Clay's neck. When Clay pulled away from him, he growled.

Clay tapped Skipper on the shoulder. The pilot pulled his right headphone away from his right ear. "What's that, Shakespeare?"

"Hey, you think your dog could maybe turn back around?" Clay asked, wiping dog saliva off his neck.

"His name is Gilligan."

"Sorry. Do you think you could get Gilligan to turn around?"

"You don't like dogs, huh, Shakespeare?"

"I like dogs; I just don't like slobber. My name is Clay, by the way."\*

Skipper pulled his headphones down around his neck and turned to face Clay, leaving the plane's

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\* AUTHOR'S NOTE: DOGS

AS YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED, AUTHORS AND FILMMAKERS TEND TO CREATE HEROES WHO LOVE ANIMALS—IN PARTICULAR, DOGS. THE COMMON PERCEPTION IS THAT A CANINE COMPANION MAKES YOUR CHARACTER MORE SYMPATHETIC. FOR THIS REASON, I WAS RELUCTANT TO SHARE SOME OF THE ABOVE LINES OF DIALOGUE WITH YOU. THE TRUTH IS THAT CLAY HADN'T HAD MUCH EXPERIENCE WITH DOGS. ONCE, SHORTLY AFTER HIS BROTHER LEFT HOME, CLAY ASKED FOR A DOG. BUT HIS PARENTS GOT INTO SUCH A BIG FIGHT ABOUT WHAT KIND OF DOG TO GET, WHO WOULD GET IT, AND WHO WOULD CARE FOR IT THAT HE NEVER ASKED FOR A DOG—OR FOR ANYTHING ELSE—EVER AGAIN.

AS FOR ME, I HAVE A CAT.

controls free. The plane dipped slightly, and Clay wondered nervously if it had an autopilot function.

"You think people don't slobber...Shakespeare?" Skipper asked. His bloodshot eyes stared at Clay.

"Sure they do, but—forget it." This was one time, Clay decided, when it was best not to argue.

Thankfully, Skipper turned to face the windshield and put his hands back on the controls. Clay noticed that Skipper's biceps was decorated with a tattoo of a bulldog.

"Cool tattoo," Clay said, trying to be conciliatory. "Looks just like him."

"You mean Gilligan? All dogs look alike to you, don't they?" said the pilot, insulted. "This isn't Gilligan. This is my last dog, Tattoo."

"You mean this is your last tattoo of a dog?"

"No, this is a tattoo of my last dog, Tattoo." The pilot turned around, causing the plane to dip again.

"That was his name? Tattoo?" asked Clay, wishing he'd never brought it up.

"Yeah, you know, like the guy on *Fantasy Island*," said the pilot.

"What's *Fantasy Island*?"

“Fantasy Island. The TV show. Who doesn’t know Fantasy Island?”

“Me.”

“And I suppose you don’t know Gilligan’s Island, either, huh, Shakespeare?”\*

“Nope.”

Skipper groaned in disgust. “You know all these fancy-pants plays and you don’t even know a simple TV show? How you going to survive out on Price Island when you don’t even know *Gilligan’s Island*?!”

“Actually, the play *The Tempest*—it takes place on an island, too.”

“Oh, does it now? I guess you don’t need TV, then, after all, huh? Shakespeare thought of everything.”

That pretty much ended the conversation. The dog continued to drool all over Clay. Clay tried pulling away from him; it didn’t work.

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\* FANTASY ISLAND AND GILLIGAN’S ISLAND WERE BOTH POPULAR TELEVISION SERIES IN THE 1970S. ON GILLIGAN’S ISLAND THERE WERE SEVEN CASTAWAYS ON A DESERTED ISLAND. MIRACULOUSLY, THEY WERE ALWAYS CLEAN-SHAVEN AND PERFECTLY COIFFED. NONETHELESS, THEY WANTED NOTHING MORE THAN TO GET OFF THE ISLAND AND WERE ALWAYS HOPING FOR RESCUE. ON FANTASY ISLAND THE SITUATION WAS THE OPPOSITE. GUESTS VISITED FANTASY ISLAND FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD, PAYING ASTRONOMICAL FEES TO HAVE THEIR GREATEST WISHES COME TRUE.

"Try scratching his ears," said the pilot after a few minutes. "He likes that."

Sure enough, Gilligan started wagging his tail as soon as Clay started scratching behind his ears. Alas, he didn't stop slobbering.

Clay woke about two and a half hours later, covered in dog drool.

"There it is. Price Island," said the pilot, pointing out the window. "Your new home away from home."

Clay craned his neck to look. Clouds clustered around the plane, obscuring his view. Ahead, where Skipper had pointed, the clouds were so thick, all Clay could see was a wall of white. Or grayish white.

"I can't see anything."

"No kidding. It's the bloody vog."\*

"The what?"

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\* VOG IS A PORTMANTEAU (PRONOUNCED LIKE PORT MAN TOE): A WORD THAT IS MADE BY SQUEEZING TWO WORDS TOGETHER. IN THIS CASE VOLCANIC AND SMOG. FUNNILY ENOUGH, THE WORD SMOG IS ALSO A PORTMANTEAU. IT COMBINES THE WORDS SMOKE AND FOG. WHICH MAKES VOG A DOUBLE PORTMANTEAU. A PORTMANTEAU-TEAU, PERHAPS. VOG, BY THE WAY, IS A REAL WORD; I DIDN'T MAKE IT UP. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, ASK SOMEBODY WHO LIVES ON THE BIG ISLAND OF HAWAII. I PROMISE, THIS PERSON WILL HAVE A LOT TO SAY ABOUT VOG.

“The vog. You really don’t know anything about where you’re going, do you, Shakespeare?”

“Why, what’s to know?”

“Who says there’s anything to know,” the pilot snapped. “Besides, nothing I tell you is going to do you any good now, is it?”

“Well, what’s vog?” asked Clay, who was getting increasingly nervous.

“You’re so smart, figure it out. Think v- word then -og word...vuh-og.”

“*Vampire dog?*”

“No, vog is volcanic smog.” The pilot shook his head. “*Vampire dog?* You really have something against dogs, don’t you?”

“No...what are you doing?”

Clay was thrown to the side as the plane entered a steeply banked turn.

“Circling the island so they know we’re here.”

“But how can they see us?” asked Clay, gripping the seat in front of him.

“They can’t. But sometimes they can hear.”

Just as the plane tilted so much that its wings were near vertical and Clay thought they were going to drop out of the sky, the vog suddenly cleared.

Instead of all white, Clay now saw all black. It took a moment for him to realize he was looking at land and not ocean or outer space. He was torn between terror of the plane falling from the sky and fascination with the forbidding sight below. It looked as though the entire island had been charred in a massive fire. Where was he going, Mordor?\*

“Why’s it all black like that?” he asked when Skipper had at last righted the plane, and Clay’s heart rate had returned to normal.

“Lava. That’s all lava rock.”

“Sheesh. That must have been a gnarly eruption.”

In the vast blackness, he could just make out the twists and turns of what must once have been raging rivers of lava headed into the sea.

“What are those white squiggly things?” Clay asked.

“You’ll see....”

As they skirted closer to the shore, the white

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\* MORDOR, OF COURSE, IS THE HOME OF THE DARK LORD SAURON IN J. R. R. TOLKIEN’S *LORD OF THE RINGS*. CLAY MAY NOT HAVE BEEN FAMILIAR WITH *FANTASY ISLAND*, BUT HE HAD READ HIS FAIR SHARE OF FANTASY LITERATURE—BEFORE DECRYING ALL THINGS MAGICAL.

squiggles became letters; they were written on the black rock beach like chalk letters on a blackboard. Clay admired them for a second. Then—

“Wait!” he cried. “It says SOS! Somebody’s in trouble!”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Shakespeare, but those letters have been there for years. So whoever it was . . .” The pilot trailed off.

“What? What happened to them?”

“What makes you think I know?” said the pilot evasively. “Now hold on . . .”

The plane hit the water with a tremendous splash, like a giant child doing a belly flop.

They taxied for a moment, then Skipper turned off the propellers, and the plane coasted to a stop. When the windows cleared of spray, Clay glanced toward shore. The black rock beach looked decidedly inhospitable.

“Where’s the dock?”

“There isn’t any,” said Skipper, who was already climbing out of his seat.

“You have a raft or something?” asked Clay, starting to sweat (whether from nervousness or the tropical heat, he couldn’t have said).

"A raft? What do you think this is, *The Love Boat*? No, don't tell me, you never heard of *The Love Boat*, either," said the pilot, opening the door.\* "You gotta swim, Shakespeare. Or walk. It ain't deep."

Clay felt a rush of warm, thick tropical air as he looked out at the turquoise water.

"What about my backpack?" He gestured to the large backpack beside him—purchased especially for camp and already bursting at the seams.

The pilot shrugged. "It'll dry."

Before Clay could protest, Skipper threw Clay's heavy backpack into the water.

"Hey! It's gonna sink!"

"So get going. I don't like hanging out here any longer than I have to."

"Why? You make it sound like there's something wrong with this place."

"Just go already, will ya?"

There was no way for Clay to change into his bathing suit; it was in the backpack. Bracing himself,

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\* *THE LOVE BOAT*, AS YOU PROBABLY GUessed, IS ANOTHER TELEVISION SERIES FROM THE 1970S. IT CHRONICLES THE ADVENTURES OF A CRUISE SHIP CREW, AND AN EVER-CHANGING CAST OF PASSENGERS SEARCHING FOR LOVE.

he closed his eyes and jumped out of the plane, fully dressed.

The water was surprisingly warm and, as Skipper had promised, not very deep. Clay's feet hit bottom just as his head was about to go under. When he straightened up, he found that the water was chest-high and as clear as a swimming pool. He could see his sneakers digging into the sand. His backpack was floating nearby, slowly drifting out to sea, shoulder straps and waist belt trailing behind. Clay lunged for it.

As soon as Clay had secured his backpack on his back, Skipper held a large cardboard box out the airplane door. Clay recognized the box that had been taking up half the space on the plane.

"You're supposed to deliver this," the pilot shouted.

"How—?!"

"Hold up your hands!" Skipper tossed the box in Clay's direction. Clay almost fell backward when the box landed in his hands, but somehow he managed to keep it out of the water.

He looked toward the shore; it was a good forty feet away. Getting there without dropping the box was not going to be easy.

It was then that a more serious problem occurred



to him: "Hey, Skipper!" he shouted. "There's nobody there."

"You were expecting flowers and coconut drinks?" With that, Skipper closed the door of the plane. Cursing to himself and holding the box above his head, Clay started wading as quickly as he could—which was not very quickly—toward dry land.

"Hey, Shakespeare!" Clay turned to see Skipper waving out of an open window.

"Yeah?"

"I should probably warn you...."

"About what?" Clay shouted.

Skipper shouted something in return, but Clay couldn't quite make it out; the propellers were whirling again.

"Did you say, *Beware—you—scary?*"

Skipper shouted again, louder.

*"Beware—the—you—bury?"* Clay repeated.

"Right!"

"So I'm supposed to bury something? Or not bury it?"

But by then the plane was taking off, leaving crashing waves in its wake.