

ALL

The story of
a boy called
Finch and
a girl named
Violet.

THE

a novel



BRIGHT



PLACES

Jennifer
Niven

CHAPTER SAMPLER

ALL THE BRIGHT PLACES

Jennifer Niven

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FINCH

I am awake again. Day 6.

Is today a good day to die?

This is something I ask myself in the morning when I wake up. In third period when I'm trying to keep my eyes open while Mr. Schroeder drones on and on. At the supper table as I'm passing the green beans. At night when I'm lying awake because my brain won't shut off due to all there is to think about.

Is today the day?

And if not today—when?

I am asking myself this now as I stand on a narrow ledge six stories above the ground. I'm so high up, I'm practically part of the sky. I look down at the pavement below, and the world tilts. I close my eyes, enjoying the way everything spins. Maybe this time I'll do it—let the air carry me away. It will be like floating in a pool, drifting off until there's nothing.

I don't remember climbing up here. In fact, I don't remember much of anything before Sunday, at least not anything so far this winter. This happens every time—the blanking out, the waking up. I'm like that old man with the beard, Rip Van Winkle. Now you see me, now you don't. You'd think I'd have gotten used to it, but this last time was the worst yet because I wasn't asleep for a couple days or a week or two—I was asleep for *the holidays*, meaning Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. I can't tell you what was different this time around, only that when I woke up, I felt deader than usual. Awake, yeah, but completely empty, like someone had been feasting on my blood. This is day six of being awake again, and my first week back at school since November 14.

I open my eyes, and the ground is still there, hard and permanent. I am in the bell tower of the high school, standing on a ledge about four inches wide. The tower is pretty small, with only a few feet of concrete floor space on all sides of the bell itself, and then this low stone railing, which I've climbed over to get here. Every now and then I knock one of my legs against it to remind myself it's there.

My arms are outstretched as if I'm conducting a sermon and this entire not-very-big, dull, dull town is my congregation. "Ladies and gentlemen," I shout, "I would like to welcome you to my death!" You might expect me to say "life," having just woken up and all, but it's only when I'm awake that I think about dying.

I am shouting in an old-school-preacher way, all jerking head and words that twitch at the ends, and I almost lose my

balance. I hold on behind me, happy no one seems to have noticed, because, let's face it, it's hard to look fearless when you're clutching the railing like a chicken.

"I, Theodore Finch, being of unsound mind, do hereby bequeath all my earthly possessions to Charlie Donahue, Brenda Shank-Kravitz, and my sisters. Everyone else can go f--- themselves." In my house, my mom taught us early to spell that word (if we *must* use it) or, better yet, not spell it, and, sadly, this has stuck.

Even though the bell has rung, some of my classmates are still milling around on the ground. It's the first week of the second semester of senior year, and already they're acting as if they're almost done and out of here. One of them looks up in my direction, as if he heard me, but the others don't, either because they haven't spotted me or because they know I'm there and *Oh well, it's just Theodore Freak.*

Then his head turns away from me and he points at the sky. At first I think he's pointing at me, but it's at that moment I see her, the girl. She stands a few feet away on the other side of the tower, also out on the ledge, dark-blond hair waving in the breeze, the hem of her skirt blowing up like a parachute. Even though it's January in Indiana, she is shoeless in tights, a pair of boots in her hand, and staring either at her feet or at the ground—it's hard to tell. She seems frozen in place.

In my regular, nonpreacher voice I say, as calmly as possible, "Take it from me, the worst thing you can do is look down."

Very slowly, she turns her head toward me, and I know this girl, or at least I've seen her in the hallways. I can't resist:

“Come here often? Because this is kind of my spot and I don’t remember seeing you here before.”

She doesn’t laugh or blink, just gazes out at me from behind these clunky glasses that almost cover her face. She tries to take a step back and her foot bumps the railing. She teeters a little, and before she can panic, I say, “I don’t know what brings you up here, but to me the town looks prettier and the people look nicer and even the worst of them look almost kind. Except for Gabe Romero and Amanda Monk and that whole crowd you hang out with.”

Her name is Violet Something. She is cheerleader popular—one of those girls you would never think of running into on a ledge six stories above the ground. Behind the ugly glasses she’s pretty, almost like a china doll. Large eyes, sweet face shaped like a heart, a mouth that wants to curve into a perfect little smile. She’s a girl who dates guys like Ryan Cross, baseball star, and sits with Amanda Monk and the other queen bees at lunch.

“But let’s face it, we didn’t come up here for the view. You’re Violet, right?”

She blinks once, and I take this as a yes.

“Theodore Finch. I think we had pre-cal together last year.”

She blinks again.

“I hate math, but that’s not why I’m up here. No offense if that’s why you are. You’re probably better at math than I am, because pretty much everyone’s better at math than I am, but it’s okay, I’m fine with it. See, I excel at other, more important things—guitar, sex, and consistently disappointing my dad, to

name a few. By the way, it's apparently true that you'll never use it in the real world. Math, I mean."

I keep talking, but I can tell I'm running out of steam. I need to take a piss, for one thing, and so my words aren't the only thing twitching. (*Note to self: Before attempting to take own life, remember to take a leak.*) And, two, it's starting to rain, which, in this temperature, will probably turn to sleet before it hits the ground.

"It's starting to rain," I say, as if she doesn't know this. "I guess there's an argument to be made that the rain will wash away the blood, leaving us a neater mess to clean up than otherwise. But it's the mess part that's got me thinking. I'm not a vain person, but I am human, and I don't know about you, but I don't want to look like I've been run through the wood chipper at my funeral."

She's shivering or shaking, I can't tell which, and so I slowly inch my way toward her, hoping I don't fall off before I get there, because the last thing I want to do is make a jackass out of myself in front of this girl. "I've made it clear I want cremation, but my mom doesn't believe in it." And my dad will do whatever she says so he won't upset her any more than he already has, and besides, *You're far too young to think about this, you know your Grandma Finch lived to be ninety-eight, we don't need to talk about that now, Theodore, don't upset your mother.*

"So it'll be an open coffin for me, which means if I jump, it ain't gonna be pretty. Besides, I kind of like my face intact like this, two eyes, one nose, one mouth, a full set of teeth, which, if I'm being honest, is one of my better features." I smile so she

can see what I mean. Everything where it should be, on the outside at least.

When she doesn't say anything, I go on inching and talking. "Most of all, I feel bad for the undertaker. What a shitty job that must be anyway, but then to have to deal with an asshole like me?"

From down below, someone yells, "Violet? Is that Violet up there?"

"Oh God," she says, so low I barely hear it. "OhGod-ohGodohGod." The wind blows her skirt and hair, and it looks like she's going to fly away.

There is general buzzing from the ground, and I shout, "Don't try to save me! You'll only kill yourself!" Then I say, very low, just to her, "Here's what I think we should do." I'm about a foot away from her now. "I want you to throw your shoes toward the bell and then hold on to the rail, just grab right onto it, and once you've got it, lean against it and then lift your right foot up and over. Got that?"

She nods and almost loses her balance.

"Don't nod. And whatever you do, don't go the wrong way and step forward instead of back. I'll count you off. On three."

She throws her boots in the direction of the bell, and they fall with a *thud, thud* onto the concrete.

"One. Two. Three."

She grips the stone and kind of props herself against it and then lifts her leg up and over so that she's sitting on the railing. She stares down at the ground and I can see that she's frozen again, and so I say, "Good. Great. Just stop looking down."

She slowly looks at me and then reaches for the floor of the bell tower with her right foot, and once she's found it, I say, "Now get that left leg back over however you can. Don't let go of the wall." By now she's shaking so hard I can hear her teeth chatter, but I watch as her left foot joins her right, and she is safe.

So now it's just me out here. I gaze down at the ground one last time, past my size-thirteen feet that won't stop growing—today I'm wearing sneakers with fluorescent laces—past the open windows of the fourth floor, the third, the second, past Amanda Monk, who is cackling from the front steps and swishing her blond hair like a pony, books over her head, trying to flirt and protect herself from the rain at the same time.

I gaze past all of this at the ground itself, which is now slick and damp, and imagine myself lying there.

I could just step off. It would be over in seconds. No more "Theodore Freak." No more hurt. No more anything.

I try to get past the unexpected interruption of saving a life and return to the business at hand. For a minute, I can feel it: the sense of peace as my mind goes quiet, like I'm already dead. I am weightless and free. Nothing and no one to fear, not even myself.

Then a voice from behind me says, "I want you to hold on to the rail, and once you've got it, lean against it and lift your right foot up and over."

Like that, I can feel the moment passing, maybe already passed, and now it seems like a stupid idea, except for picturing the look on Amanda's face as I go sailing by her. I laugh at the

thought. I laugh so hard I almost fall off, and this scares me—like, really scares me—and I catch myself and Violet catches me as Amanda looks up. “Weirdo!” someone shouts. Amanda’s little group snickers. She cups her big mouth and aims it skyward. “You okay, V?”

Violet leans over the rail, still holding on to my legs. “I’m okay.”

The door at the top of the tower stairs cracks open and my best friend, Charlie Donahue, appears. Charlie is black. Not CW black, but black-black. He also gets laid more than anyone else I know.

He says, “They’re serving pizza today,” as if I wasn’t standing on a ledge six stories above the ground, my arms outstretched, a girl wrapped around my knees.

“Why don’t you go ahead and get it over with, freak?” Gabe Romero, better known as Roamer, better known as Dumbass, yells from below. More laughter.

Because I’ve got a date with your mother later, I think but don’t say because, let’s face it, it’s lame, and also he will come up here and beat my face in and then throw me off, and this defeats the point of just doing it myself.

Instead I shout, “Thanks for saving me, Violet. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t come along. I guess I’d be dead right now.”

The last face I see below belongs to my school counselor, Mr. Embry. As he glares up at me, I think, *Great. Just great.*

I let Violet help me over the wall and onto the concrete. From down below, there’s a smattering of applause, not for me,

but for Violet, the hero. Up close like this, I can see that her skin is smooth and clear except for two freckles on her right cheek, and her eyes are a gray-green that makes me think of fall. It's the eyes that get me. They are large and arresting, as if she sees everything. As warm as they are, they are busy, no-bullshit eyes, the kind that can look right into you, which I can tell even through the glasses. She's pretty and tall, but not too tall, with long, restless legs and curvy hips, which I like on a girl. Too many high school girls are built like boys.

"I was just sitting there," she says. "On the railing. I didn't come up here to—"

"Let me ask you something. Do you think there's such a thing as a perfect day?"

"What?"

"A perfect day. Start to finish. When nothing terrible or sad or ordinary happens. Do you think it's possible?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever had one?"

"No."

"I've never had one either, but I'm looking for it."

She whispers, "Thank you, Theodore Finch." She reaches up and kisses me on the cheek, and I can smell her shampoo, which reminds me of flowers. She says into my ear, "If you ever tell anyone about this, I'll kill you." Carrying her boots, she hurries away and out of the rain, back through the door that leads to the flight of dark and rickety stairs that takes you down to one of the many too-bright and too-crowded school hallways.

Charlie watches her go and, as the door swings closed behind her, he turns back to me. “Man, why do you do that?”

“Because we all have to die someday. I just want to be prepared.” This isn’t the reason, of course, but it will be enough for him. The truth is, there are a lot of reasons, most of which change daily, like the thirteen fourth graders killed earlier this week when some SOB opened fire in their school gym, or the girl two years behind me who just died of cancer, or the man I saw outside the Mall Cinema kicking his dog, or my father.

Charlie may think it, but at least he doesn’t say “Weirdo,” which is why he’s my best friend. Other than the fact that I appreciate this about him, we don’t have much in common.

Technically, I’m on probation this year. This is due to a small matter involving a desk and a chalkboard. (For the record, replacing a chalkboard is more expensive than you might think.) It’s also due to a guitar-smashing incident during assembly, an illegal use of fireworks, and maybe a fight or two. As a result, I’ve agreed involuntarily to the following: weekly counseling; maintaining a high B average; and participation in at least one extracurricular. I chose macramé because I’m the only guy with twenty semihot girls, which I thought was pretty good odds for me. I also have to behave myself, play well with others, refrain from throwing desks, as well as refrain from any “violent physical altercations.” And I must always, always, whatever I do, hold my tongue, because not doing so, apparently, is how

trouble starts. If I f--- anything up from here on out, it's expulsion for me.

Inside the counseling office, I check in with the secretary and take a seat in one of the hard wooden chairs until Mr. Embry is ready for me. If I know Embryo—as I call him to myself—like I know Embryo, he'll want to know just what the hell I was doing in the bell tower. If I'm lucky, we won't have time to cover much more than that.

In a few minutes he waves me in, a short, thick man built like a bull. As he shuts the door, he drops the smile. He sits down, hunches over his desk, and fixes his eyes on me like I'm a suspect he needs to crack. "What in the hell were you doing in the bell tower?"

The thing I like about Embryo is that not only is he predictable, he gets to the point. I've known him since sophomore year.

"I wanted to see the view."

"Were you planning to jump off?"

"Not on pizza day. Never on pizza day, which is one of the better days of the week." I should mention that I am a brilliant deflector. So brilliant that I could get a full scholarship to college and major in it, except why bother? I've already mastered the art.

I wait for him to ask about Violet, but instead he says, "I need to know if you were or are planning to harm yourself. I am goddamn serious. If Principal Wertz hears about this, you're gone before you can say 'suspended,' or worse. Not to mention if I don't pay attention and you decide to go back up there and jump off, I'm looking at a lawsuit, and on the salary they pay

me, believe me when I say I do not have the money to be sued. This holds true whether you jump off the bell tower or the Purina Tower, whether it's school property or not."

I stroke my chin like I'm deep in thought. "The Purina Tower. Now there's an idea."

He doesn't budge except to squint at me. Like most people in the Midwest, Embryo doesn't believe in humor, especially when it pertains to sensitive subjects. "Not funny, Mr. Finch. This is not a joking matter."

"No, sir. Sorry."

"The thing suicides don't focus on is their wake. Not just your parents and siblings, but your friends, your girlfriends, your classmates, your teachers." I like the way he seems to think I have many, many people depending on me, including not just one but multiple girlfriends.

"I was just messing around. I agree it was probably not the best way to spend first period."

He picks up a file and thumps it down in front of him and starts flipping through it. I wait as he reads, and then he looks at me again. I wonder if he's counting the days till summer.

He stands, just like a cop on TV, and walks around his desk until he's looming over me. He leans against it, arms folded, and I look past him, searching for the hidden two-way mirror.

"Do I need to call your mother?"

"No. And again no." And again: *no no no*. "Look, it was a stupid thing to do. I just wanted to see what it felt like to stand there and look down. I would never jump from the bell tower."

“If it happens again, if you so much as *think* about it again, I call her. And you’re going to do a drug test.”

“I appreciate your concern, sir.” I try to sound my most sincere, because the last thing I want is a bigger, brighter spotlight directed at me, following me throughout the halls of school, throughout the other parts of my life, such as they are. And the thing is, I actually like Embryo. “As for the whole drug thing, there’s no need to waste precious time. Really. Unless cigarettes count. Drugs and me? Not a good mix. Believe me, I’ve tried.” I fold my hands like a good boy. “As for the whole bell tower thing, even though it wasn’t at all what you think, I can still promise that it won’t happen again.”

“That’s right—it won’t. I want you here twice a week instead of once. You come in Monday and Friday and talk to me, just so I can see how you’re doing.”

“I’m happy to, sir—I mean, I, like, really enjoy these conversations of ours—but I’m good.”

“It’s nonnegotiable. Now let’s discuss the end of last semester. You missed four, almost five, weeks of school. Your mother says you were sick with the flu.”

He’s actually talking about my sister Kate, but he doesn’t know that. She was the one who called the school while I was out, because Mom has enough to worry about.

“If that’s what she says, who are we to argue?”

The fact is, I was sick, but not in an easily explained flu kind of way. It’s my experience that people are a lot more sympathetic if they can *see* you hurting, and for the millionth time in my life I wish for measles or smallpox or some other recognizable

disease just to make it simple for me and also for them. Anything would be better than the truth: *I shut down again. I went blank. One minute I was spinning, and the next minute my mind was dragging itself around in a circle, like an old, arthritic dog trying to lie down. And then I just turned off and went to sleep, but not sleep in the way you do every night. Think a long, dark sleep where you don't dream at all.*

Embryo once again narrows his eyes to a squint and stares at me hard, trying to induce a sweat. “And can we expect you to show up and stay out of trouble this semester?”

“Absolutely.”

“And keep up with your classwork?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll arrange the drug test with the nurse.” He jabs the air with his finger, pointing at me. “Probation means ‘period of testing somebody’s suitability; period when student must improve.’ Look it up if you don’t believe me, and for Christ’s sake, stay alive.”

The thing I don’t say is: I want to stay alive. The reason I don’t say it is because, given that fat folder in front of him, he’d never believe it. And here’s something else he’d never believe—I’m fighting to be here in this shitty, messed-up world. Standing on the ledge of the bell tower isn’t about dying. It’s about having control. It’s about never going to sleep again.

Embryo stalks around his desk and gathers a stack of “Teens in Trouble” pamphlets. Then he tells me I’m not alone and I can always talk to him, his door is open, he’s here, and he’ll see me on Monday. I want to say no offense, but that’s not much

of a comfort. Instead, I thank him because of the dark circles under his eyes and the smoker's lines etched around his mouth. He'll probably light up a cigarette as soon as I go. I take a heaping pile of pamphlets and leave him to it. He never once mentioned Violet, and I'm relieved.

VIOLET

154 days till graduation

Friday morning. Office of Mrs. Marion Kresney, school counselor, who has small, kind eyes and a smile too big for her face. According to the certificate on the wall above her head, she's been at Bartlett High for fifteen years. This is our twelfth meeting.

My heart is still racing and my hands are still shaking from being up on that ledge. I have gone cold all over, and what I want is to lie down. I wait for Mrs. Kresney to say: *I know what you were doing first period, Violet Markey. Your parents are on their way. Doctors are standing by, ready to escort you to the nearest mental health facility.*

But we start as we always do.

"How are you, Violet?"

"I'm fine, and you?" I sit on my hands.

“I’m fine. Let’s talk about you. I want to know how you’re feeling.”

“I’m good.” Just because she hasn’t brought it up does not mean she doesn’t know. She almost never asks anything directly.

“How are you sleeping?”

The nightmares started a month after the accident. She asks about them every time I see her, because I made the mistake of mentioning them to my mom, who mentioned them to her. This is one of the main reasons why I’m here and why I’ve stopped telling my mom anything.

“I’m sleeping fine.”

The thing about Mrs. Kresney is that she always, always smiles, no matter what. I like this about her.

“Any bad dreams?”

“No.”

I used to write them down, but I don’t anymore. I can remember every detail. Like this one I had four weeks ago where I was literally melting away. In the dream, my dad said, “You’ve come to the end, Violet. You’ve reached your limit. We all have them, and yours is now.” *But I don’t want it to be.* I watched as my feet turned into puddles and disappeared. Next were my hands. It didn’t hurt, and I remember thinking: *I shouldn’t mind this because there isn’t any pain. It’s just a slipping away.* But I did mind as, limb by limb, the rest of me went invisible before I woke up.

Mrs. Kresney shifts in her chair, her smile fixed on her face. I wonder if she smiles in her sleep.

“Let’s talk about college.”

This time last year, I would have loved to talk about college. Eleanor and I used to do this sometimes after Mom and Dad had gone to bed. We'd sit outside if it was warm enough, inside if it was too cold. We imagined the places we would go and the people we would meet, far away from Bartlett, Indiana, population 14,983, where we felt like aliens from some distant planet.

"You've applied to UCLA, Stanford, Berkeley, the University of Florida, the University of Buenos Aires, Northern Caribbean University, and the National University of Singapore. This is a very diverse list, but what happened to NYU?"

Since the summer before seventh grade, NYU's creative writing program has been my dream. This is thanks to visiting New York with my mother, who is a college professor and writer. She did her graduate work at NYU, and for three weeks the four of us stayed in the city and socialized with her former teachers and classmates—novelists, playwrights, screenwriters, poets. My plan was to apply for early admission in October. But then the accident happened and I changed my mind.

"I missed the application deadline." The deadline for regular admission was one week ago today. I filled everything out, even wrote my essay, but didn't send it in.

"Let's talk about the writing. Let's talk about the website."

She means EleanorandViolet.com. Eleanor and I started it after we moved to Indiana. We wanted to create an online magazine that offered two (very) different perspectives on fashion, beauty, boys, books, life. Last year, Eleanor's friend Gemma Sterling (star of the hit Web series *Rant*) mentioned us in an interview, and our following tripled. But I haven't touched the

site since Eleanor died, because what would be the point? It was a site about sisters. Besides, in that instant we went plowing through the guardrail, my words died too.

“I don’t want to talk about the website.”

“I believe your mother is an author. She must be very helpful in giving advice.”

“Jessamyn West said, ‘Writing is so difficult that writers, having had their hell on earth, will escape all punishment hereafter.’”

She lights up at this. “Do you feel you’re being punished?” She is talking about the accident. Or maybe she is referring to being here in this office, this school, this town.

“No.” *Do I feel I should be punished?* Yes. Why else would I have given myself bangs?

“Do you believe you’re responsible for what happened?”

I tug on the bangs now. They are lopsided. “No.”

She sits back. Her smile slips a fraction of an inch. We both know I’m lying. I wonder what she would say if I told her that an hour ago I was being talked off the ledge of the bell tower. By now, I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know.

“Have you driven yet?”

“No.”

“Have you allowed yourself to ride in the car with your parents?”

“No.”

“But they want you to.” This isn’t a question. She says this like she’s talked to one or both of them, which she probably has.

“I’m not ready.” These are the three magic words. I’ve discovered they can get you out of almost anything.

She leans forward. “Have you thought about returning to cheerleading?”

“No.”

“Student council?”

“No.”

“You still play flute in the orchestra?”

“I’m last chair.” That’s something that hasn’t changed since the accident. I was always last chair because I’m not very good at flute.

She sits back again. For a moment I think she’s given up. Then she says, “I’m concerned about your progress, Violet. Frankly, you should be further along than you are right now. You can’t avoid cars forever, especially now that we’re in winter. You can’t keep standing still. You need to remember that you’re a survivor, and that means . . .”

I will never know what that means because as soon as I hear the word “survivor,” I get up and walk out.

On my way to fourth period. School hallway.

At least fifteen people—some I know, some I don’t, some who haven’t talked to me in months—stop me on my way to class to tell me how courageous I was to save Theodore Finch from killing himself. One of the girls from the school paper wants to do an interview.

Of all the people I could have “saved,” Theodore Finch is

the worst possible choice because he's a Bartlett legend. I don't know him that well, but I know *of* him. Everyone knows *of* him. Some people hate him because they think he's weird and he gets into fights and gets kicked out of school and does what he wants. Some people worship him because he's weird and he gets into fights and gets kicked out of school and does what he wants. He plays guitar in five or six different bands, and last year he cut a record. But he's kind of . . . extreme. Like he came to school one day painted head-to-toe red, and it wasn't even Spirit Week. He told some people he was protesting racism and others he was protesting the consumption of meat. Junior year he wore a cape every day for an entire month, cracked a chalkboard in half with a desk, and stole all the dissecting frogs from the science wing and gave them a funeral before burying them in the baseball field. The great Anna Faris once said that the secret of surviving high school is to "lay low." Finch does the opposite of this.

I'm five minutes late to Russian literature, where Mrs. Mahone and her wig assign us a ten-page paper on *The Brothers Karamazov*. Groans follow from everyone but me, because no matter what Mrs. Kresney seems to think, I have Extenuating Circumstances.

I don't even listen as Mrs. Mahone goes over what she wants. Instead I pick at a thread on my skirt. I have a headache. Probably from the glasses. Eleanor's eyes were worse than mine. I take the glasses off and set them on the desk. They were stylish on her. They're ugly on me. Especially with the bangs. But maybe, if I wear the glasses long enough, I can be like her. I can

see what she saw. I can be both of us at once so no one will have to miss her, most of all me.

The thing is, there are good days and bad days. I feel almost guilty saying they aren't all bad. Something catches me off guard—a TV show, a funny one-liner from my dad, a comment in class—and I laugh like nothing ever happened. I feel normal again, whatever that is. Some mornings I wake up and I sing while I'm getting ready. Or maybe I turn up the music and dance. On most days, I walk to school. Other days I take my bike, and every now and then my mind tricks me into thinking I'm just a regular girl out for a ride.

Emily Ward pokes me in the back and hands me a note. Because Mrs. Mahone collects our phones at the start of every class, it's the old-fashioned kind, written on notebook paper.

Is it true you saved Finch from killing himself? x Ryan. There is only one Ryan in this room—some would argue there's only one Ryan in the whole school, maybe even the world—and that's Ryan Cross.

I look up and catch his eye, two rows over. He is too good-looking. Broad shoulders, warm gold-brown hair, green eyes, and enough freckles to make him seem approachable. Until December, he was my boyfriend, but now we're taking a break.

I let the note sit on my desk for five minutes before answering it. Finally, I write: *I just happened to be there. x V.* Less than a minute later, it's passed back to me, but this time I don't open it. I think of how many girls would love to receive a note like this from Ryan Cross. The Violet Markey of last spring would have been one of them.

When the bell rings, I hang back. Ryan lingers for a minute, waiting to see what I do, but when I just sit there, he collects his phone and goes on.

Mrs. Mahone says, “Yes, Violet?”

Ten pages used to be no big deal. A teacher would ask for ten and I would write twenty. If they wanted twenty, I’d give them thirty. Writing was what I did best, better than being a daughter or girlfriend or sister. Writing was me. But now writing is one of the things I can’t do.

I barely have to say anything, not even “I’m not ready.” It’s in the unwritten rulebook of life, under *How to React When a Student Loses a Loved One and Is, Nine Months Later, Still Having a Very Hard Time*.

Mrs. Mahone sighs and hands me my phone. “Give me a page or a paragraph, Violet. Just do your best.” My *Extenuating Circumstances* save the day.

Outside the classroom, Ryan is waiting. I can see him trying to figure out the puzzle so he can put me back together again and turn me into the fun girlfriend he used to know. He says, “You look really pretty today.” He is nice enough not to stare at my hair.

“Thanks.”

Over Ryan’s shoulder, I see Theodore Finch strutting by. He nods at me like he knows something I don’t, and he keeps on going.

FINCH

Day 6 (still) of being awake

By lunch, it's all over school that Violet Markey saved Theodore Finch from jumping off the bell tower. On my way to U.S. Geography, I walk behind a group of girls in the hallway who are going on and on about it, no idea that I'm the one and only Theodore Finch.

They talk over each other in these high voices that always end in question marks, so that it sounds like *I heard he had a gun? I heard she had to wrestle it out of his hands? My cousin Stacey, who goes to New Castle, says she and a friend were in Chicago and he was playing this club and he totally hooked up with both of them? Well, my brother was there when he set off the firecrackers, and he said before the police took him away, he was all "Unless you want to reimburse me, I'll wait for the finale"?*

Apparently, I'm tragic and dangerous. *Oh yeah*, I think.

That's right. I am here and now and not just awake, but Awake, and everyone can just deal with it because I am the second freakin' coming. I lean in and say to them, "I heard he did it over a girl," and then I swagger all the way to class.

Inside the classroom, I take my seat, feeling infamous and invincible and twitchy and strangely exhilarated, as if I just escaped, well, death. I look around, but no one is paying any attention to me or Mr. Black, our teacher, who is literally the largest man I have ever seen. He has a red, red face that always makes him look like he's on the verge of heatstroke or a heart attack, and he wheezes when he talks.

The whole time I've been in Indiana, which is all my life—the purgatory years, I call them—we've apparently lived just eleven miles away from the highest point in the state. No one ever told me, not my parents or my sisters or my teachers, until now, right this minute, in the "Wander Indiana" section of U.S. Geography—the one that was implemented by the school board this year in an effort to "enlighten students as to the rich history available in their own home state and inspire Hoosier pride."

No joke.

Mr. Black settles into his chair and clears his throat. "What better and more . . . appropriate way to start off . . . the semester than by beginning . . . with the highest point?" Because of the wheezing, it's hard to tell if Mr. Black is all that impressed by the information he's relaying. "Hoosier Hill is . . . 1,257 feet above sea level . . . and it's in the backyard . . . of a family home. . . . In 2005, an Eagle . . . Scout from Kentucky . . . got

permission to . . . build a trail and picnic area . . . and put up a sign. . . .”

I raise my hand, which Mr. Black ignores.

As he talks, I leave my hand in the air and think, *What if I went there and stood on that point? Would things look different from 1,257 feet? It doesn't seem very high, but they're proud of it, and who am I to say 1,257 feet isn't something to be impressed by?*

Finally, he nods at me, his lips so tight, it looks like he's swallowed them. “Yes, Mr. Finch?” He sighs the sigh of a one-hundred-year-old man and gives me an apprehensive, distrustful look.

“I suggest a field trip. We need to see the wondrous sights of Indiana while we still can, because at least three of us in this room are going to graduate and leave our great state at the end of this year, and what will we have to show for it except a subpar public school education from one of the worst school systems in the nation? Besides, a place like this is going to be hard to take in unless we see it. Kind of like the Grand Canyon or Yosemite. You need to be there to really appreciate its splendor.”

I'm only being about twenty percent sarcastic, but Mr. Black says, “Thank you, Mr. Finch,” in a way that means the direct opposite of thank you. I start drawing hills on my notebook in tribute to our state's highest point, but they look more like formless lumps or airborne snakes—I can't decide.

“Theodore is correct that some . . . of you will leave . . . here at the end of . . . this school year to go . . . somewhere else.

You'll be departing our . . . great state, and before . . . you do, you should . . . see it. You should . . . wander. . . .”

A noise from across the room interrupts him. Someone has come in late and dropped a book and then, in picking up the book, has upset all her other books so that everything has gone tumbling. This is followed by laughter because we're in high school, which means we're predictable and almost anything is funny, especially if it's someone else's public humiliation. The girl who dropped everything is Violet Markey, the same Violet Markey from the bell tower. She turns beet red and I can tell she wants to die. Not in a jumping-from-a-great-height kind of way, but more along the lines of *Please, earth, swallow me whole*.

I know this feeling better than I know my mom or my sisters or Charlie Donahue. This feeling and I have been together all my life. Like the time I gave myself a concussion during kickball in front of Suze Haines; or the time I laughed so hard that something flew out of my nose and landed on Gabe Romero; or the entire eighth grade.

And so, because I'm used to it and because this Violet girl is about three dropped pencils away from crying, I knock one of my own books onto the floor. All eyes shift to me. I bend to pick it up and purposely send the others flying—boomeranging into walls, windows, heads—and just for good measure, I tilt my chair over so I go crashing. This is followed by snickers and applause and a “freak” or two, and Mr. Black wheezing, “If you're done . . . Theodore . . . I'd like to continue.”

I right myself, right the chair, take a bow, collect my books, bow again, settle in, and smile at Violet, who is looking at me

with what can only be described as surprise and relief and something else—worry, maybe. I'd like to think there's a little lust mixed in too, but that could be wishful thinking. The smile I give her is the best smile I have, the one that makes my mother forgive me for staying out too late or for just generally being weird. (Other times, I see my mom looking at me—when she looks at me at all—like she's thinking: *Where in the hell did you come from? You must get it from your father's side.*)

Violet smiles back. Immediately, I feel better, because she feels better and because of the way she smiles at me, as if I'm not something to be avoided. This makes twice in one day that I've saved her. *Tenderhearted Theodore*, my mother always says. *Too tenderhearted for his own good.* It's meant as a criticism and I take it as one.

Mr. Black fixes his eyes on Violet and then me. "As I was saying . . . your project for this . . . class is to report on . . . at least two, preferably three . . . wonders of Indiana." I want to ask, *Wonders or wanders?* But I'm busy watching Violet as she concentrates on the chalkboard, the corner of her mouth still turned up.

Mr. Black goes on about how he wants us to feel free to choose the places that strike our fancy, no matter how obscure or far away. Our mission is to go there and see each one, take pictures, shoot video, delve deep into their history, and tell him just what it is about these places that makes us proud to be a Hoosier. If it's possible to link them in some way, all the better. We have the rest of the semester to complete the project, and we need to take it seriously.

“You will work . . . in teams of . . . two. This will count . . . for thirty-five percent . . . of your final grade. . . .”

I raise my hand again. “Can we choose our partners?”

“Yes.”

“I choose Violet Markey.”

“You may work that out . . . with her after class.”

I shift in my seat so I can see her, elbow on the back of my chair. “Violet Markey, I’d like to be your partner on this project.”

Her face turns pink as everyone looks at her. Violet says to Mr. Black, “I thought if there was something else I could do—maybe research and write a short report.” Her voice is low, but she sounds a little pissed. “I’m not ready to . . .”

He interrupts her. “Miss Markey, I’m going . . . to do you the biggest . . . favor of your life. . . . I’m going to say . . . no.”

“No?”

“No. It is a new year. . . . It is time to get . . . back on the camel.”

A few people laugh at this. Violet looks at me and I can see that, yes, she is pissed, and it’s then I remember the accident. Violet and her sister, sometime last spring. Violet lived, the sister died. This is why she doesn’t want attention.

The rest of class time is spent telling us about places Mr. Black thinks we might enjoy and that, no matter what, we must see before we graduate—the usual humdrum tourist spots like Conner Prairie, the Levi Coffin House, the Lincoln Museum, and James Whitcomb Riley’s boyhood home—even though I know that most of us will stay right here in this town until we die.

I try to catch Violet's eye again, but she doesn't look up. Instead, she shrinks low in her seat and stares straight ahead.

Outside of class, Gabe Romero blocks my way. As usual, he's not alone. Amanda Monk waits just behind, hip jutted out, Joe Wyatt and Ryan Cross on either side of her. Good, easygoing, decent, nice-guy Ryan, athlete, A student, vice president of the class. The worst thing about him is that since kindergarten he's known exactly who he is.

Roamer says, "I better not catch you looking at me again."

"I wasn't looking at you. Believe me, there are at least a hundred other things in that room I'd look at before you, including Mr. Black's large, naked ass."

"Faggot."

Because Roamer and I have been sworn enemies since middle school, he shoves the books out of my hands, and even though this is right out of Fifth-Grade Bullying 101, I feel a familiar black grenade of anger—like an old friend—go off in my stomach, the thick, toxic smoke from it rising up and spreading through my chest. It's the same feeling I had last year in that instant before I picked up a desk and hurled it—not at Roamer, like he wants everyone to believe, but at the chalkboard in Mr. Geary's room.

"Pick 'em up, bitch." Roamer walks past me, knocking me in the chest—hard—with his shoulder. I want to slam his head into a locker and then reach down his throat and pull his heart out through his mouth, because the thing about being Awake

is that everything in you is alive and aching and making up for lost time.

But instead I count all the way to sixty, a stupid smile plastered on my stupid face. *I will not get detention. I will not get expelled. I will be good. I will be quiet. I will be still.*

Mr. Black watches from the doorway, and I try to give him a casual nod to show him everything's cool, everything's under control, everything's fine, nothing to see, palms aren't itching, skin isn't burning, blood isn't pumping, please move along. I've made a promise to myself that this year will be different. If I keep ahead of everything, and that includes me, I should be able to stay awake and here, and not just semi-here but here as in present as in now.

The rain has stopped, and in the parking lot Charlie Donahue and I lean against his car under the washed-out January sun as he talks about the thing he most loves talking about other than himself—sex. Our friend Brenda stands listening, books clutched against her broad, broad chest, hair shining pink and red.

Charlie spent winter break working at the Mall Cinema, where he apparently let all the hot girls sneak in without paying. This got him more action than even he knew what to do with, mostly in the handicapped row in the back, the one missing armrests.

He nods at me. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

“Where were you?”

“Around. I didn’t feel like coming to school, so I hit the interstate and didn’t look back.” There’s no way of explaining the Asleep to my friends, and even if there was, there’s no need. One of the things I like best about Charlie and Bren is that I don’t have to explain myself. I come, I go, and *Oh well, it’s just Finch.*

Charlie nods again. “What we need to do is get you laid.” It’s an indirect reference to the bell tower incident. If I get laid, I won’t try to kill myself. According to Charlie, getting laid fixes everything. If only world leaders would get laid well and regularly, the world’s problems might disappear.

Brenda frowns at him. “You’re a pig, Charlie.”

“You love me.”

“You wish I’d love you. Why don’t you be more like Finch? He’s a gentleman.” There aren’t many people who would say this about me, but the great thing about this life of ours is that you can be someone different to everybody.

I say, “You can leave me out of it.”

Bren shakes her head. “No, I’m serious. Gentlemen are rare. They’re like virgins or leprechauns. If I ever get married, I’m going to marry one.”

I can’t resist saying, “A virgin or a leprechaun?” She slugs me in the arm.

“There’s a difference between a gentleman and a guy with no play.” Charlie nods at me. “No offense, man.”

“None taken.” It’s true, after all, at least compared to him, and actually what he means is that I have bad luck with women.

Something about going for the bitchy ones or the crazy ones or the ones who pretend not to know me when other people are around.

Anyway, I'm barely listening, because over Bren's shoulder I see her again—Violet. I can already feel myself falling hard, something I've been known to do. (Suze Haines, Laila Collman, Annalise Lemke, the three Brianas—Briana Harley, Briana Bailey, Briana Boudreau . . .) All because she smiled at me. But it was a damn good smile. A genuine one, which is hard to come by these days. Especially when you're me, Theodore Freak, Resident Aberration.

Bren turns around to see what I'm looking at. She shakes her head at me, her mouth all smirked up in a way that makes me protect my arm. "God, you guys are all the same."

At home, my mother is talking on the phone and defrosting one of the casseroles my sister Kate prepares at the start of each week. Mom waves and then keeps right on. Kate runs down the stairs, swipes her car keys from the counter, and says, "Later, loser." I have two sisters—Kate, just one year older than I am, and Decca, who's eight. Clearly, she was a mistake, which she figured out at the age of six. But we all know if anyone is the mistake here, it's me.

I go upstairs, wet shoes squeaking against the floor, and shut the door to my room. I pull out something old on vinyl without checking what it is and slap it onto the turntable I found in the basement. The record bumps and scratches, sounding like

something from the 1920s. I'm in a Split Enz kind of phase right now, hence the sneakers. I'm trying out Theodore Finch, '80s kid, and seeing how he fits.

I fish through my desk for a cigarette, stick it in my mouth, and remember as I'm reaching for my lighter that Theodore Finch, '80s kid, doesn't smoke. God, I hate him, the clean-cut, eager little prick. I leave the cigarette in my mouth unlit, trying to chew the nicotine out, and pick up the guitar, play along, then give it up and sit down at the computer, swinging my chair around so it's backward, the only way I can compose.

I type: **January 5. Method: Bell tower of school. On a scale of one to ten on the how-close-did-I-come scale: five. Facts: Jumping increases on full moons and holidays. One of the more famous jumpers was Roy Raymond, founder of Victoria's Secret. Related fact: In 1912, a man named Franz Reichelt jumped off the Eiffel Tower wearing a parachute suit he designed himself. He jumped to test his invention—he expected to fly—but instead he fell straight down, hitting the ground like a meteor and leaving a 5.9-inch-deep crater from the impact. Did he mean to kill himself? Doubtful. I think he was just cocky, and also stupid.**

A quick internet search turns up the information that only five to ten percent of all suicides are committed by jumping (so says Johns Hopkins). Apparently, jumping as a means of killing oneself is usually chosen for convenience, which is why places like San Francisco, with its Golden Gate Bridge (the world's top suicide destination), are so popular. Here, all we have is the Purina Tower and a 1,257-foot hill.

I write: **Reason for not jumping: Too messy. Too public. Too crowded.**

I switch off Google and hop onto Facebook. I find Amanda Monk's page because she's friends with everyone, even the people she's not friends with, and I pull up her friend list, typing in "Violet."

Just like that, there she is. I click on her photo and there she is, even bigger, wearing the same smile she gave me earlier. You have to be her friend to read her profile and view the rest of her pictures. I sit staring at the screen, suddenly desperate to know more. Who is this Violet Markey? I try a Google search, because maybe there's a secret back entrance to her Facebook page, one that requires a special knock or a three-digit code, something easily figured out.

What I pull up instead is a site called EleanorandViolet.com, which lists Violet Markey as cocreator/editor/writer. It's got all the usual boys-and-beauty-type blog posts, the most recent from April 3 of last year. The other thing I pull up is a news article.

Eleanor Markey, 18, a senior at Bartlett High School and member of the student congress, lost control of her car on A Street Bridge at approximately 12:45 a.m. April 5. Icy conditions and speed may have caused the crash. Eleanor was killed on impact. Her 16-year-old sister, Violet, a passenger in the vehicle, sustained only minor injuries.

I sit reading and rereading this, a black feeling settling in the pit of my stomach. And then I do something I swore I'd never do. I sign up for Facebook just so I can send her a friend

request. Having an account will make me look sociable and normal, and maybe work to offset the whole meeting-on-the-verge-of-suicide situation, so that she'll feel it's safe to know me. I take a picture of myself with my phone, decide I look too serious, take another one—too goofy—and settle on the third, which is somewhere in between.

I sleep the computer so I don't check every five minutes, and then I play the guitar, read a few pages of *Macbeth* for homework, and eat dinner with Decca and my mom, a tradition that started last year, after the divorce. Even though I'm not much into eating, dinner is one of the most enjoyable parts of my day because I get to turn my brain off.

Mom says, "Decca, tell me what you learned today." She makes sure to ask us about school so that she feels she's done her duty. This is her favorite way to start.

Dec says, "I learned that Jacob Barry is a jackass." She has been swearing more often lately, trying to get a reaction out of Mom, to see if she's really listening.

"Decca," Mom says mildly, but she is only half paying attention.

Decca goes on to tell us about how this boy named Jacob glued his hands to his desk just to get out of a science quiz, but when they tried to separate skin from wood, his palms came off with the glue. Decca's eyes gleam like the eyes of a small, rabid animal. She clearly thinks he deserved it, and then she says so.

Mom is suddenly listening. "Decca." She shakes her head. This is the extent of her parenting. Ever since my dad left, she's

tried really hard to be the cool parent. Still, I feel bad for her because she loves him, even though, at his core, he's selfish and rotten, and even though he left her for a woman named Rosemarie with an accent over one of the letters—no one can ever remember which—and because of something she said to me the day he left: "I never expected to be single at forty." It was the way she said it more than the words themselves. She made it sound so *final*.

Ever since then, I've done what I could to be pleasant and quiet, making myself as small and unseen as possible—which includes pretending to go to school when I'm asleep, as in *the Asleep*—so that I don't add to the burden. I am not always successful.

"How was your day, Theodore?"

"Grand." I push my food around my plate, trying to create a pattern. The thing about eating is that there are so many other more interesting things to do. I feel the same way about sleeping. Complete wastes of time.

Interesting fact: A Chinese man died from lack of sleep when he stayed awake for eleven days straight as he attempted to watch every game in the European Championship (that's soccer, for those, like me, who have no clue). On the eleventh night, he watched Italy beat Ireland 2–0, took a shower, and fell asleep around five a.m. And died. No offense to the dead, but soccer is a really stupid thing to stay awake for.

Mom has stopped eating to study my face. When she does pay attention, which isn't often, she tries hard to be understanding about my "sadness," just like she tries hard to be

patient when Kate stays out all night and Decca spends time in the principal's office. My mother blames our bad behavior on the divorce and my dad. She says we just need time to work through it.

Less sarcastically, I add, "It was okay. Uneventful. Boring. Typical." We move on to easier topics, like the house my mother is trying to sell for her clients and the weather.

When dinner is over, Mom lays a hand on my arm, fingertips barely touching the skin, and says, "Isn't it nice to have your brother back, Decca?" She says it as if I'm in danger of disappearing again, right in front of their eyes. The slightly blaming note in her voice makes me cringe, and I get the urge to go back to my room again and stay there. Even though she tries to forgive my sadness, she wants to count on me as man of the house, and even though she thinks I was in school for most of that four-almost-five-week period, I did miss a lot of family dinners. She takes her fingers back and then we're free, which is exactly how we act, the three of us running off in three different directions.

Around ten o'clock, after everyone else has gone to bed and Kate still isn't home, I turn on the computer again and check my Facebook account.

Violet Markey accepted your friend request, it says.

And now we are friends.

I want to shout and jog around the house, maybe climb up onto the roof and spread my arms wide but not jump off, not even think about it. But instead I hunch closer to the screen and browse through her photos—Violet smiling with two people

who must be her parents, Violet smiling with friends, Violet smiling at a pep rally, Violet smiling cheek to cheek with another girl, Violet smiling all alone.

I remember the picture of Violet and the girl from the newspaper. This is her sister, Eleanor. She wears the same clunky glasses Violet had on today.

Suddenly a message appears in my inbox.

Violet: **You ambushed me. In front of everyone.**

Me: **Would you have worked with me if I hadn't?**

Violet: **I would have gotten out of it so I didn't have to do it to begin with. Why do you want me to do this project with you anyway?**

Me: **Because our mountain is waiting.**

Violet: **What's that supposed to mean?**

Me: **It means maybe you never dreamed of seeing Indiana, but, in addition to the fact that we're required to do this for school, and I've volunteered—okay, ambushed—you into being my partner, here's what I think: I think I've got a map in my car that wants to be used, and I think there are places we can go that need to be seen. Maybe no one else will ever visit them and appreciate them or take the time to think they're important, but maybe even the smallest places mean something. And if not, maybe they can mean something to us. At the very least, by the time we leave, we know we will have seen it, this great state of ours. So come on. Let's go. Let's count for something. Let's get off that ledge.**

When she doesn't respond, I write: **I'm here if you want to talk.**
Silence.

I imagine Violet at home right now, on the other side of the computer, her perfect mouth with its perfect corners turned up,

smiling at the screen, in spite of everything, no matter what. *Violet smiling.* With one eye on my computer, I pick up the guitar, start making up words, the tune not far behind.

I'm still here, and I'm grateful, because otherwise I would be missing this. Sometimes it's good to be awake.

"So not today," I sing. "Because she smiled at me."

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This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters (with the exception of the creators of the World's Largest Ball of Paint and the Blue Flash and Blue Too roller coasters) are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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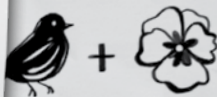
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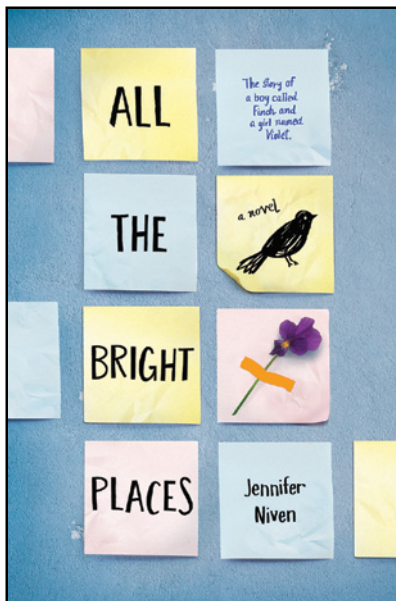


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I was just sitting
there, on the railing.
I didn't come up
here to—you know.
Jump.

Let me ask you
something.
Do you think
there's such a thing
as a perfect day?



What?

A perfect day.
Start to finish.
When nothing
terrible or sad or
ordinary happens.
Do you think
it's possible?



I don't know.

Have you ever
had one?

No.

I've never had
one either, but
I'm looking
for it.

Thank you,
Theodore Finch.
For saving me.
If you ever tell
anyone about this,
I'll kill you.