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Opening extract from **I'll Give You the Sun**

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This is **HOW** it all Begins.

With Zephyr and Fry – reigning neighborhood sociopaths – torpedoing after me and the whole forest floor shaking under my feet as I blast through air, trees, this white-hot panic.

“You’re going over, you pussy!” Fry shouts.

Then Zephyr’s on me, has one, both of my arms behind my back, and Fry’s grabbed my sketchpad. I lunge for it but I’m armless, helpless. I try to wriggle out of Zephyr’s grasp. Can’t. Try to blink them into moths. No. They’re still themselves: fifteen-foot-tall, tenth-grade asshats who toss living, breathing thirteen-year-old people like me over cliffs for kicks.

Zephyr’s got me in a headlock from behind and his chest’s heaving into my back, my back into his chest. We’re swimming in sweat. Fry starts leafing through the pad. “Whatcha been drawing, Bubble?” I imagine him getting run over by a truck. He holds up a page of sketches. “Zeph, look at all these naked dudes.”

The blood in my body stops moving.

“They’re not dudes. They’re *David*,” I get out, praying I won’t sound like a gerbil, praying he won’t turn to later drawings in the pad, drawings done today, when I was spying, drawings of *them*, rising out of the water, with their surfboards under arm, no wetsuits, no nothing, totally glistening, and, uh:

holding hands. I might have taken some artistic license. So they're going to think... They're going to kill me even before they kill me is what they're going to do. The world starts somersaulting. I fling words at Fry: "You know? Michelangelo? Ever heard of him?" I'm not going to act like me. *Act tough and you are tough*, as Dad has said and said and said – like I'm some kind of broken umbrella.

"Yeah, I've heard of him," Fry says out of the big bulgy mouth that clumps with the rest of his big bulgy features under the world's most massive forehead, making it very easy to mistake him for a hippopotamus. He rips the page out of the sketchpad. "Heard he was *gay*."

He *was* – my mom wrote a whole book about it – not that Fry knows. He calls everyone gay when he's not calling them homo and pussy. And me: homo and pussy *and* Bubble.

Zephyr laughs a dark demon laugh. It vibrates through me.

Fry holds up the next sketch. More *David*. The bottom half of him. A study in detail. I go cold.

They're both laughing now. It's echoing through the forest. It's coming out of birds.

Again, I try to break free of the lock Zephyr has me in so I can snatch the pad out of Fry's hands, but it only tightens Zephyr's hold. Zephyr, who's freaking Thor. One of his arms is choked around my neck, the other braced across my torso like a seat belt. He's bare-chested, straight off the beach, and the heat of him is seeping through my T-shirt. His coconut suntan lotion's filling my nose, my whole head – the strong smell of the ocean too, like he's carrying it on his back...

Zephyr dragging the tide along like a blanket behind him... That would be good, that would be *it* (*Portrait: The Boy Who Walked Off with the Sea*) – but not now, Noah, so not the time to mind-paint this cretin. I snap back, taste the salt on my lips, remind myself I'm about to die—

Zephyr's long seaweedy hair is wet and dripping down my neck and shoulders. I notice we're breathing in synch, heavy, bulky breaths. I try to unsynch with him. I try to unsynch with the law of gravity and float up. Can't do either. Can't do anything. The wind's whipping pieces of my drawings – mostly family portraits now – out of Fry's hands as he tears up one, then another. He rips one of Jude and me down the middle, cuts me right out of it.

I watch myself blow away.

I watch him getting closer and closer to the drawings that are going to get me murdered.

My pulse is thundering in my ears.

Then Zephyr says, "Don't rip 'em up, Fry. His sister says he's good." Because he likes Jude? They mostly all do now because she can surf harder than any of them, likes to jump off cliffs, and isn't afraid of anything, not even great white sharks or Dad. And because of her hair – I use up all my yellows drawing it. It's hundreds of miles long and everyone in Northern California has to worry about getting tangled up in it, especially little kids and poodles and now asshat surfers.

There's also the boobs, which arrived by overnight delivery, I swear.

Unbelievably, Fry listens to Zephyr and drops the pad.

Jude peers up at me from it, sunny, knowing. *Thank you*, I tell her in my mind. She's always rescuing me, which usually is embarrassing, but not now. That was righteous.

(Portrait, Self-portrait: Twins: Noah Looking in a Mirror, Jude out of It)

"You know what we're going to do to you, don't you?" Zephyr rasps in my ear. He's back to the regularly scheduled homicidal programming. There's too much of him on his breath. There's too much of him on me.

"Please, you guys," I beg.

"Please, you guys," Fry mimics in a squeaky girly voice.

My stomach rolls. Devil's Drop, the second-highest jump on the hill, which they plan to throw me over, has the name for a reason. Beneath it is a jagged gang of rocks and a wicked whirlpool that pulls your dead bones down to the underworld.

I try to break Zephyr's hold again. And again.

"Get his legs, Fry!"

All six-thousand hippopotamus pounds of Fry dive for my ankles. Sorry, this is not happening. It just isn't. I hate the water, prone as I am to drowning and drifting to Asia. I need my skull in one piece. Crushing it would be like taking a wrecking ball to some secret museum before anyone ever got to see what's inside it.

So I grow. And grow, and grow, until I head-butt the sky. Then I count to three and go freaking *berserk*, thanking Dad in my mind for all the wrestling he's forced me to do on the deck, to-the-death matches where he could only use one arm and I could use everything and he'd still pin me down because he's thirty feet tall and made of truck parts.

But I'm his son, his *gargantuan* son. I'm a whirling, ass-kick-ing Goliath, a typhoon wrapped in skin, and then I'm writhing and thrashing and trying to break free and they're wrestling me back down, laughing and saying things like "what a crazy mother." And I think I hear respect even in Zephyr's voice as he says, "I can't pin him, he's like a frickin' eel," and that makes me fight harder – I love eels, they're *electric* – imagining myself a live wire now, fully loaded with my own private voltage, as I whip this way and that, feeling their bodies twisting around mine, warm and slick, both of them pinning me again and again, and me breaking their holds, all our limbs entwined and now Zephyr's head's pressed into my chest and Fry's behind me with what feels like a hundred hands, and it's just motion and confusion and I am lost in it, lost, lost, lost, when I begin to suspect ... when I realize – I have a hard-on, a supernaturally hard hard-on, and it's jammed into Zephyr's stomach. High-octane dread courses through me. In my mind, I call up the bloodiest most hella gross machete massacre – my most effective boner-buster – but it's too late. Zephyr goes momentarily still, then jumps off me. "What the—?"

Fry rolls up onto his knees. "What happened?" he wheezes out in Zephyr's direction.

I've reeled away, landed in a sitting position, my knees to my chest. I can't stand up yet for fear of a tent, so I put all my effort in trying not to cry. A sickly ferret feeling is burrowing itself into every corner of my body as I pant my last breaths. And even if they don't kill me here and now, by tonight everyone on the hill will know what just happened. I might as well swallow

a lit stick of dynamite and hurl myself off Devil's Drop. This is worse, so much worse, than them seeing some stupid drawings.

(Self-portrait: *Funeral in the Forest*)

But Zephyr's not saying anything, he's just standing there, looking like his Viking self, except all weird and mute. Why?

Did I disable him with my mind?

No. He gestures in the direction of the ocean, says to Fry, "Hell with this. Let's grab the slabs and head out."

Relief swallows me whole. Is it possible he didn't feel it? No, it isn't – it was steel and he jumped away totally freaked out. He's still freaked out. So why isn't he pussyhomoBubbling me? Is it because he likes Jude?

Fry twirls a finger by his ear as he says to Zephyr, "Someone's Frisbee is seriously on the roof, bro." Then to me: "When you least expect it, Bubble." He mimes my free-fall off Devil's Drop with his mitt of a hand.

It's over. They're headed back toward the beach.

Before they change their Neanderthal minds, I hustle over to my pad, slip it under my arm, and then, without looking back, I speed-walk into the trees like someone whose heart isn't shaking, whose eyes aren't filling up, someone who doesn't feel so newly minted as a human.

When I'm in the clear, I blast out of my skin like a cheetah – they go from zero to seventy-five mph in three seconds flat and I can too practically. I'm the fourth-fastest in the seventh grade. I can unzip the air and disappear inside it, and that's what I do until I'm far away from Zephyr and Fry and what happened. At least I'm not a mayfly. Male mayflies have two

dicks to worry about. I already spend half my life in the shower because of my one, thinking about things I can't stop thinking about no matter how hard I try because I really, really, really like thinking about them. Man, I do.

At the creek, I jump rocks until I find a good cave where I can watch the sun swimming inside the rushing water for the next hundred years. There should be a horn or gong or something to wake God. Because I'd like to have a word with him. Three words actually: WHAT THE FUCK?!

After a while, having gotten no response as usual, I take out the charcoals from my back pocket. They somehow survived the ordeal intact. I sit down and open my sketchbook. I black out a whole blank page, then another, and another. I press so hard, I break stick after stick, using each one down to the very nub, so it's like the blackness is coming out of my finger, out of me, and onto the page. I fill up the whole rest of the pad. It takes hours.

(A Series: Boy Inside a Box of Darkness)

o o o

The next night at dinner, Mom announces that Grandma Sweetwine joined her for a ride in the car that afternoon with a message for Jude and me.

Only, Grandma's dead.

"Finally!" Jude exclaims, falling back in her chair. "She promised me!"

What Grandma promised Jude, right before she died in her sleep three months ago, is that if Jude ever really needed her, she'd be there in a flash. Jude was her favorite.

Mom smiles at Jude and puts her hands on the table. I

put mine on the table too, then realize I'm being a Mom-mirror and hide my hands in my lap. Mom's contagious.

And a blow-in – some people just aren't from here and she's one of them. I've been accumulating evidence for years. More on this later.

But now: Her face is all lit up and flickery as she sets the stage, telling us how first the car filled with Grandma's perfume. "You know how the scent used to walk into the room before she did?" Mom breathes in dramatically as if the kitchen's filling with Grandma's thick flowery smell. I breathe in dramatically. Jude breathes in dramatically. Everyone in California, the United States, on Earth, breathes in dramatically.

Except Dad. He clears his throat.

He's not buying it. Because he's an artichoke. This, according to his own mother, Grandma Sweetwine, who never understood how she birthed and raised such a thistle-head. Me neither.

A thistle-head who studies *parasites* for a living. No comment.

I glance at him with his lifeguard-like tan and muscles, with his glow-in-the-dark teeth, with all his glow-in-the-dark normal, and feel the curdling – because what would happen if he knew?

So far Zephyr hasn't blabbed a word. You probably don't know this, because I'm like the only one in the world who does, but a dork is the official name for a whale dick. And a blue whale's dork? Eight feet long. I repeat: EIGHT FEET LOOOOOOOOONG! This is how I've felt since it happened yesterday:

(Self-portrait: *The Concrete Dork*)

Yeah.

But sometimes I think Dad suspects. Sometimes I think the toaster suspects.

Jude jostles my leg under the table with her foot to get my attention back from the salt shaker I realize I've been staring down. She nods toward Mom, whose eyes are now closed and whose hands are crossed over her heart. Then toward Dad, who's looking at Mom like her eyebrows have crawled down to her chin. We bulge our eyes at each other. I bite my cheek not to laugh. Jude does too – she and me, we share a laugh switch. Our feet press together under the table.

(*Family Portrait: Mom Communes with the Dead at Dinner*)

"Well?" Jude prods. "The message?"

Mom opens her eyes, winks at us, then closes them and continues in a séance-y woo-woo voice. "So, I breathed in the flowery air and there was a kind of shimmering..." She swirls her arms like scarves, milking the moment. This is why she gets the professor of the year award so much – everyone always wants to be in her movie with her. We lean in for her next words, for The Message from Upstairs, but then Dad interrupts, throwing a whole load of boring on the moment.

He's never gotten the professor of the year award. Not once. No comment.

"It's important to let the kids know you mean all this metaphorically, honey," he says, sitting straight up so that his head busts through the ceiling. In most of my drawings, he's so big, I can't fit all of him on the page, so I leave off the head.

Mom lifts her eyes, the amusement wiped off her face. "Except I don't mean it metaphorically, Benjamin." Dad used to

make Mom's eyes shine; now he makes her grind her teeth. I don't know why. "What I meant quite literally," she says/grinds, "is that the inimitable Grandma Sweetwine, dead and gone, was in the car, sitting next to me, plain as day." She smiles at Jude. "In fact, she was all dressed up in one of her Floating Dresses, looking *spectacular*." The Floating Dress was Grandma's dress line.

"Oh! Which one? The blue?" The way Jude asks this makes my chest pang for her.

"No, the one with the little orange flowers."

"Of course," Jude replies. "Perfect ghost-wear. We discussed what her afterlife attire would be." It occurs to me that Mom's making all this up because Jude can't stop missing Grandma. She hardly left her bedside at the end. When Mom found them that final morning, one asleep, one dead, they were holding hands. I thought this was supremely creepy but kept it to myself. "So..." Jude raises an eyebrow. "The message?"

"You know what I'd love?" Dad says, huffing and puffing himself back into the conversation so that we're never going to find out what the freaking message is. "What I'd love is if we could finally declare The Reign of Ridiculous over." This, again. The Reign he's referring to began when Grandma moved in. Dad, "a man of science," told us to take every bit of superstitious hogwash that came out of his mother's mouth with a grain of salt. Grandma told us not to listen to her artichoke of a son and to take those grains of salt and throw them right over our left shoulders to blind the devil.

Then she took out her "bible" – not The Bible but an enormous leatherbound book stuffed with batshit ideas (aka:

hogwash) – and started to preach the gospel. Mostly to Jude.

Dad lifts a slice of pizza off his plate. Cheese dives over the edges. He looks at me. “How about this, huh, Noah? Who’s a little relieved we’re not having one of Grandma’s luck-infused stews?”

I remain silent. Sorry, Charlie. I *love* pizza, meaning: Even when I’m in the middle of eating pizza, I wish I were eating pizza, but I wouldn’t jump on Dad’s train even if Michelangelo were on it. He and I don’t get on, though he tends to forget. I never forget. When I hear his big banging voice coming after me to watch football or some movie where everything gets blown up or to listen to jazz that makes me feel like my body’s on backward, I open my bedroom window, jump out, and head for the trees.

Occasionally when no one’s home, I go into his office and break his pencils. Once, after a particularly toilet-licking Noah the Broken Umbrella Talk (our version of the father-son chat), when he laughed and said if Jude weren’t my twin he’d be sure I’d come about from parthenogenesis (looked it up: conception without a father), I snuck into the garage while everyone was sleeping and keyed his car.

Because I can see people’s souls sometimes when I draw them, I know the following: Mom has a massive sunflower for a soul so big there’s hardly any room in her for organs. Jude and me have one soul between us that we have to share: a tree with its leaves on fire. And Dad has a plate of maggots for his.

Jude says to him, “Do you think Grandma didn’t just hear you insult her cooking?”

“That would be a resounding no,” Dad replies, then hoovers

into the slice. The grease makes his whole mouth gleam.

Jude stands. Her hair hangs all around her head like light-circles. She looks up at the ceiling and declares, "I always loved your cooking, Grandma."

Mom reaches over and squeezes her hand, then says to the ceiling, "Me too, Cassandra."

Jude smiles from the inside out.

Dad finger-shoots himself in the head.

Mom frowns – it makes her look a hundred years old. "Embrace the mystery, Professor," she says. She's always telling Dad this, but she used to say it different. She used to say it like she was opening a door for him to walk through, not closing one in his face.

"I married the mystery, Professor," he answers like always, but it used to sound like a compliment.

We all eat pizza. It's not fun. Mom's and Dad's thoughts are turning the air black. I'm listening to myself chew, when Jude's foot finds mine under the table again. I press back.

"The message from Grandma?" she interjects into the tension, smiling hopefully.

Dad looks at her and his eyes go soft. She's his favorite too. Mom doesn't have a favorite, though, which means the spot is up for grabs.

"As I was saying." This time Mom's using her normal voice, husky, like a cave's talking to you. "I was driving by CSA, the fine arts high school, this afternoon and that's when Grandma swooped in to say what an absolutely perfect fit it would be for you two." She shakes her head, brightening and becoming her



usual age again. "And it really is. I can't believe it never occurred to me. I keep thinking of that quote by Picasso: 'Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once one grows up.'" She has the bananas look on her face that happens in museums, like she's going to steal the art. "But this. This is a chance of a lifetime, guys. I don't want your spirits to get all tamped down like..." She doesn't finish, combs a hand through her hair – black and way curly like mine – turns to Dad. "I really want this for them, Benjamin. I know it'll be expensive, but what an oppor—"

"That's it?" Jude interrupts. "That's all Grandma said? That was the message *from the afterlife*? It was about some *school*?" She looks like she might start crying.

Not me. Art school? I never imagined such a thing, never imagined I wouldn't have to go to Roosevelt, to Asshat High with everyone else. I'm pretty sure the blood just started glowing inside my body.

(Self-portrait: *A Window Flies Open in My Chest*)

