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Opening Extract from...

Paper Towns

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1.

The longest day of my life began tardily. I woke up late, took too long in the shower, and ended up having to enjoy my breakfast in the passenger seat of my mom's minivan at 7:17 that Wednesday morning.

I usually got a ride to school with my best friend, Ben Starling, but Ben had gone to school on time, making him useless to me. "On time" for us was thirty minutes before school actually started, because the half hour before the first bell was the highlight of our social calendars: standing outside the side door that led into the band room and just talking. Most of my friends were in band, and most of my free time during school was spent within twenty feet of the band room. But I was not in the band, because I suffer from the kind of tone deafness that is generally associated with actual deafness. I was going to be twenty minutes late, which technically meant that I'd still be ten minutes early for school itself.

As she drove, Mom was asking me about classes and finals and prom.

"I don't believe in prom," I reminded her as she rounded a corner. I expertly angled my raisin bran to accommodate the g-forces. I'd done this before.

"Well, there's no harm in just going with a friend. I'm sure you could ask Cassie Hiney." And I *could* have asked Cassie Hiney,

who was actually perfectly nice and pleasant and cute, despite having a fantastically unfortunate last name.

"It's not just that I don't like prom. I also don't like people who like prom," I explained, although this was, in point of fact, untrue. Ben was absolutely gaga over the idea of going.

Mom turned into school, and I held the mostly empty bowl with both hands as we drove over a speed bump. I glanced over at the senior parking lot. Margo Roth Spiegelman's silver Honda was parked in its usual spot. Mom pulled the minivan into a cul-de-sac outside the band room and kissed me on the cheek. I could see Ben and my other friends standing in a semicircle.

I walked up to them, and the half circle effortlessly expanded to include me. They were talking about my ex-girlfriend Suzie Chung, who played cello and was apparently creating quite a stir by dating a baseball player named Taddy Mac. Whether this was his given name, I did not know. But at any rate, Suzie had decided to go to prom with Taddy Mac. Another casualty.

"Bro," said Ben, standing across from me. He nodded his head and turned around. I followed him out of the circle and through the door. A small, olive-skinned creature who had hit puberty but never hit it very hard, Ben had been my best friend since fifth grade, when we both finally owned up to the fact that neither of us was likely to attract anyone else as a best friend. Plus, he tried hard, and I liked that—most of the time.

"How ya doin'?" I asked. We were safely inside, everyone else's conversations making ours inaudible.

"Radar is going to prom," he said morosely. Radar was our other best friend. We called him Radar because he looked like a little bespectacled guy called Radar on this old TV show *M*A*S*H*, except 1. The TV Radar wasn't black, and 2. At some

point after the nicknaming, our Radar grew about six inches and started wearing contacts, so I suppose that 3. He actually didn't look like the guy on *M*A*S*H* at all, but 4. With three and a half weeks left of high school, we weren't very well going to renickname him.

"That girl Angela?" I asked. Radar never told us anything about his love life, but this did not dissuade us from frequent speculation.

Ben nodded, and then said, "You know my big plan to ask a freshbunny to prom because they're the only girls who don't know the Bloody Ben story?" I nodded.

"Well," Ben said, "this morning some darling little ninth-grade honeybunny came up to me and asked me if I was Bloody Ben, and I began to explain that it was a kidney infection, and she giggled and ran away. So that's out."

In tenth grade, Ben was hospitalized for a kidney infection, but Becca Arrington, Margo's best friend, started a rumor that the real reason he had blood in his urine was due to chronic masturbation. Despite its medical implausibility, this story had haunted Ben ever since. "That sucks," I said.

Ben started outlining plans for finding a date, but I was only half listening, because through the thickening mass of humanity crowding the hallway, I could see Margo Roth Spiegelman. She was next to her locker, standing beside her boyfriend, Jase. She wore a white skirt to her knees and a blue print top. I could see her collarbone. She was laughing at something hysterical—her shoulders bent forward, her big eyes crinkling at their corners, her mouth open wide. But it didn't seem to be anything Jase had said, because she was looking away from him, across the hallway to a bank of lockers. I followed her eyes and saw Becca Arrington

draped all over some baseball player like she was an ornament and he a Christmas tree. I smiled at Margo, even though I knew she couldn't see me.

"Bro, you should just hit that. Forget about Jase. God, that is one candy-coated honeybunny." As we walked, I kept taking glances at her through the crowd, quick snapshots: a photographic series entitled *Perfection Stands Still While Mortals Walk Past.* As I got closer, I thought maybe she wasn't laughing after all. Maybe she'd received a surprise or a gift or something. She couldn't seem to close her mouth.

"Yeah," I said to Ben, still not listening, still trying to see as much of her as I could without being too obvious. It wasn't even that she was so pretty. She was just so awesome, and in the literal sense. And then we were too far past her, too many people walking between her and me, and I never even got close enough to hear her speak or understand whatever the hilarious surprise had been. Ben shook his head, because he had seen me see her a thousand times, and he was used to it.

"Honestly, she's hot, but she's not *that* hot. You know who's seriously hot?"

"Who?" I asked.

"Lacey," he said, who was Margo's other best friend. "Also your mom. Bro, I saw your mom kiss you on the cheek this morning, and forgive me, but I swear to God I was like, *man, I wish I was Q. And also, I wish my cheeks had penises.*" I elbowed him in the ribs, but I was still thinking about Margo, because she was the only legend who lived next door to me. Margo Roth Spiegelman, whose six-syllable name was often spoken in its entirety with a kind of quiet reverence. Margo Roth Spiegelman, whose stories of epic adventures would blow through school like a summer storm: an

old guy living in a broken-down house in Hot Coffee, Mississippi, taught Margo how to play the guitar. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who spent three days traveling with the circus—they thought she had potential on the trapeze. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who drank a cup of herbal tea with the Mallionaires backstage after a concert in St. Louis while they drank whiskey. Margo Roth Spiegelman, who got into that concert by telling the bouncer she was the bassist's girlfriend, and didn't they recognize her, and come on guys seriously, my name is Margo Roth Spiegelman and if you go back there and ask the bassist to take one look at me, he will tell you that I either am his girlfriend or he wishes I was, and then the bouncer did so, and then the bassist said "yeah that's my girlfriend let her in the show," and then later the bassist wanted to hook up with her and she *rejected the bassist from the Mallionaires.*

The stories, when they were shared, inevitably ended with, *I mean, can you believe it?* We often could not, but they always proved true.

And then we were at our lockers. Radar was leaning against Ben's locker, typing into a handheld device.

"So you're going to prom," I said to him. He looked up, and then looked back down.

"I'm de-vandalizing the Omnictionary article about a former prime minister of France. Last night someone deleted the entire entry and then replaced it with the sentence 'Jacques Chirac is a gay,' which as it happens is incorrect both factually and grammatically." Radar is a big-time editor of this online user-created reference source called Omnictionary. His whole life is devoted to the maintenance and well-being of Omnictionary. This was but one of several reasons why his having a prom date was somewhat surprising.

"So you're going to prom," I repeated.

"Sorry," he said without looking up. It was a well-known fact that I was opposed to prom. Absolutely nothing about any of it appealed to me—not slow dancing, not fast dancing, not the dresses, and definitely not the rented tuxedo. Renting a tuxedo seemed to me an excellent way to contract some hideous disease from its previous tenant, and I did not aspire to become the world's only virgin with pubic lice.

"Bro," Ben said to Radar, "the freshhoneys know about the Bloody Ben story." Radar put the handheld away finally and nodded sympathetically. "So anyway," Ben continued, "my two remaining strategies are either to purchase a prom date on the Internet or fly to Missouri and kidnap some nice corn-fed little honeybunny." I'd tried telling Ben that "honeybunny" sounded more sexist and lame than retro-cool, but he refused to abandon the practice. He called his own mother a honeybunny. There was no fixing him.

"I'll ask Angela if she knows anybody," Radar said. "Although getting you a date to prom will be harder than turning lead into gold."

"Getting you a date to prom is so hard that the hypothetical idea itself is actually used to cut diamonds," I added.

Radar tapped a locker twice with his fist to express his approval, and then came back with another. "Ben, getting you a date to prom is so hard that the American government believes the problem cannot be solved with diplomacy, but will instead require force."

I was trying to think of another one when we all three simultaneously saw the human-shaped container of anabolic steroids known as Chuck Parson walking toward us with some intent.

Chuck Parson did not participate in organized sports, because to do so would distract from the larger goal of his life: to one day be convicted of homicide. "Hey, faggots," he called.

"Chuck," I answered, as friendly as I could muster. Chuck hadn't given us any serious trouble in a couple years—someone in cool kid land laid down the edict that we were to be left alone. So it was a little unusual for him even to talk to us.

Maybe because I spoke and maybe not, he slammed his hands against the lockers on either side of me and then leaned in close enough for me to contemplate his toothpaste brand. "What do you know about Margo and Jase?"

"Uh," I said. I thought of everything I knew about them: Jase was Margo Roth Spiegelman's first and only serious boyfriend. They began dating at the tail end of last year. They were both going to University of Florida next year. Jase got a baseball scholarship there. He was never over at her house, except to pick her up. She never acted as if she liked him all that much, but then she never acted as if she liked anyone all that much. "Nothing," I said finally.

"Don't shit me around," he growled.

"I barely even *know* her," I said, which had become true.

He considered my answer for a minute, and I tried hard to stare at his close-set eyes. He nodded very slightly, pushed off the lockers, and walked away to attend his first-period class: The Care and Feeding of Pectoral Muscles. The second bell rang. One minute to class. Radar and I had calc; Ben had finite mathematics. The classrooms were adjacent; we walked toward them together, the three of us in a row, trusting that the tide of classmates would part enough to let us by, and it did.

I said, "Getting you a date to prom is so hard that a thousand

monkeys typing at a thousand typewriters for a thousand years would never once type *'I will go to prom with Ben.'*"

Ben could not resist tearing himself apart. "My prom prospects are so poor that Q's grandma turned me down. She said she was waiting for Radar to ask her."

Radar nodded his head slowly. "It's true, Q. Your grandma loves the brothers."

It was so pathetically easy to forget about Chuck, to talk about prom even though I didn't give a shit about prom. Such was life that morning: nothing really mattered that much, not the good things and not the bad ones. We were in the business of mutual amusement, and we were reasonably prosperous.

I spent the next three hours in classrooms, trying not to look at the clocks above various blackboards, and then looking at the clocks, and then being amazed that only a few minutes had passed since I last looked at the clock. I'd had nearly four years of experience looking at these clocks, but their sluggishness never ceased to surprise. If I am ever told that I have one day to live, I will head straight for the hallowed halls of Winter Park High School, where a day has been known to last a thousand years.

But as much as it felt like third-period physics would never end, it did, and then I was in the cafeteria with Ben. Radar had fifth-period lunch with most of our other friends, so Ben and I generally sat together alone, a couple seats between us and a group of drama kids we knew. Today, we were both eating mini pepperoni pizzas.

"Pizza's good," I said. He nodded distractedly. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nuffing," he said through a mouthful of pizza. He swallowed.

"I know you think it's dumb, but I want to go to prom."

"1. I do think it's dumb; 2. If you want to go, just go; 3. If I'm not mistaken, you haven't even asked anyone."

"I asked Cassie Hiney during math. I wrote her a note." I raised my eyebrows questioningly. Ben reached into his shorts and slid a heavily folded piece of paper to me. I flattened it out:

Ben,
I'd love to go to prom with you, but I'm already going with Frank. Sorry!
—C

I refolded it and slid it back across the table. I could remember playing paper football on these tables. "That sucks," I said.

"Yeah, whatever." The walls of sound felt like they were closing in on us, and we were silent for a while, and then Ben looked at me very seriously and said, "I'm going to get so much play in college. I'm going to be in the *Guinness Book of World Records* under the category 'Most Honeybunnies Ever Pleased.'"

I laughed. I was thinking about how Radar's parents actually *were* in the *Guinness Book* when I noticed a pretty African-American girl with spiky little dreads standing above us. It took me a moment to realize that the girl was Angela, Radar's I-guess-girlfriend.

"Hi," she said to me.

"Hey," I said. I'd had classes with Angela and knew her a little, but we didn't say hello in the hallway or anything. I motioned for her to sit. She scooted a chair to the head of the table.

"I figure that you guys probably know Marcus better than anyone," she said, using Radar's real name. She leaned toward us, her elbows on the table.

"It's a shitty job, but someone's got to do it," Ben answered, smiling.

"Do you think he's, like, embarrassed of me?"

Ben laughed. "What? No," he said.

"Technically," I added, "*you* should be embarrassed of *him*."

She rolled her eyes, smiling. A girl accustomed to compliments. "But he's never, like, invited me to hang out with you, though."

"Ohhhh," I said, getting it finally. "That's because he's embarrassed of *us*."

She laughed. "You seem pretty normal."

"You've never seen Ben snort Sprite up his nose and then spit it out of his mouth," I said.

"I look like a demented carbonated fountain," he deadpanned.

"But really, you wouldn't worry? I mean, we've been dating for five weeks, and he's never even taken me to his house." Ben and I exchanged a knowing glance, and I scrunched up my face to suppress laughter. "What?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Honestly, Angela. If he was forcing you to hang out with us and taking you to his house all the time—"

"Then it would definitely mean he *didn't* like you," Ben finished.

"Are his parents weird?"

I struggled with how to answer that question honestly. "Uh, no. They're cool. They're just kinda overprotective, I guess."

"Yeah, overprotective," Ben agreed a little too quickly.

She smiled and then got up, saying she had to go say hi to someone before lunch was over. Ben waited until she was gone to say anything. "That girl is awesome," Ben said.

"I know," I answered. "I wonder if we can replace Radar with her."

"She's probably not that good with computers, though. We need someone who's good at computers. Plus I bet she sucks at Resurrection," which was our favorite video game. "By the way," Ben added, "nice call saying that Radar's folks are overprotective."

"Well, it's not my place to tell her," I said.

"I wonder how long till she gets to see the Team Radar Residence and Museum." Ben smiled.

The period was almost over, so Ben and I got up and put our trays onto the conveyer belt. The very same one that Chuck Parson had thrown me onto freshman year, sending me into the terrifying netherworld of Winter Park's dishwashing corps. We walked over to Radar's locker and were standing there when he raced up just after the first bell.

"I decided during government that I would actually, literally suck donkey balls if it meant I could skip that class for the rest of the semester," he said.

"You can learn a lot about government from donkey balls," I said. "Hey, speaking of reasons you wish you had fourth-period lunch, we just dined with Angela."

Ben smirked at Radar and said, "Yeah, she wants to know why she's never been over to your house."

Radar exhaled a long breath as he spun the combination to open his locker. He breathed for so long I thought he might pass out. "Crap," he said finally.

"Are you embarrassed about something?" I asked, smiling.

"Shut up," he answered, poking his elbow into my gut.

"You live in a lovely home," I said.

"Seriously, bro," added Ben. "She's a really nice girl. I don't see

why you can't introduce her to your parents and show her Casa Radar."

Radar threw his books into his locker and shut it. The din of conversation around us quieted just a bit as he turned his eyes toward the heavens and shouted, "IT IS NOT MY FAULT THAT MY PARENTS OWN THE WORLD'S LARGEST COLLECTION OF BLACK SANTAS."

I'd heard Radar say "the world's largest collection of black Santas" perhaps a thousand times in my life, and it never became any less funny to me. But he wasn't kidding. I remembered the first time I visited. I was maybe thirteen. It was spring, many months past Christmas, and yet black Santas lined the windowsills. Paper cutouts of black Santas hung from the stairway banister. Black Santa candles adorned the dining room table. A black Santa oil painting hung above the mantel, which was itself lined with black Santa figurines. They had a black Santa Pez dispenser purchased from Namibia. The light-up plastic black Santa that stood in their postage-stamp front yard from Thanksgiving to New Year's spent the rest of the year proudly keeping watch in the corner of the guest bathroom, a bathroom with homemade black Santa wallpaper created with paint and a Santa-shaped sponge. In every room, save Radar's, their home was awash in black Santadom—plaster and plastic and marble and clay and wood and resin and cloth. In total, Radar's parents owned more than twelve hundred black Santas of various sorts. As a plaque beside their front door proclaimed, Radar's house was an officially registered Santa Landmark according to the Society for Christmas.

"You just gotta tell her, man," I said. "You just gotta say, 'Angela, I really like you, but there's something you need to

know: when we go to my house and hook up, we'll be watched by the twenty-four hundred eyes of twelve hundred black Santas."

Radar ran a hand through his buzz cut and shook his head. "Yeah, I don't think I'll put it exactly like that, but I'll deal with it."

I headed off to government, Ben to an elective about video game design. I watched clocks through two more classes, and then finally the relief radiated out of my chest when I was finished—the end of each day like a dry run for our graduation less than a month away.

I went home. I ate two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as an early dinner. I watched poker on TV. My parents came home at six, hugged each other, and hugged me. We ate a macaroni casserole as a proper dinner. They asked me about school. They asked me about prom. They marveled at what a wonderful job they'd done raising me. They told me about their days dealing with people who had been raised less brilliantly. They went to watch TV. I went to my room to check my email. I wrote a little bit about *The Great Gatsby* for English. I read some of *The Federalist Papers* as early prep for my government final. I IM'ed with Ben, and then Radar came online. In our conversation, he used the phrase "the world's largest collection of black Santas" four times, and I laughed each time. I told him I was happy for him, having a girlfriend. He said it would be a great summer. I agreed. It was May fifth, but it didn't have to be. My days had a pleasant identicalness about them. I had always liked that: I liked routine. I liked being bored. I didn't want to, but I did. And so May fifth could have been any day—until just

before midnight, when Margo Roth Spiegelman slid open my screenless bedroom window for the first time since telling me to close it nine years before.