

One

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

—Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

I'm not going to lie to you.

My opening line may not be as brilliant as the opening line of *David Copperfield*, but not many lines are. I adore Dickens. I realize that this is a peculiar and deeply uncool confession from a seventeen-year-old girl, but I can't help that. My book is sort of like *David Copperfield*—it's about parents and children and the abuse of power—but don't freak out and stop reading just because of that. It's not nearly as long as *David Copperfield*, it doesn't have hundreds of characters with weird names, and it's full of sex and foul language. Well, not full, exactly. But there is a bit of both.

Maybe in two hundred years the first line of *The Lit Report* by Julia Riley will be on a test in some futuristic high school where everyone wears identical silver jumpsuits and

all lectures are simulcast from a central teaching facility somewhere in rural Saskatchewan. Maybe some things never change and there will always be pop quizzes like the one Mrs. Hopper sprang on us in Lit class last week. There was a lot of groaning when she announced the quiz and even more when she handed out the assignment: *Identify three of the first lines listed below and write a brief paragraph (150–200 words) on the significance of each one.* This was good news for me—I had actually read all five of the books the quotations were taken from—but not so good for many of my classmates, who consider reading a form of punishment.

I finished the quiz quickly and had a lot of time to sit and think about what makes a great first line. I thought about it so much that I wrote an extra mini-essay comparing and contrasting “This is George.” and “Call me Ishmael.” My thesis was that the first sentence of a novel, whether it’s written for four-year-olds or forty-year-olds, sets the tone for the whole book and reveals much of what is to come. It can be two words or twenty or two hundred—it doesn’t matter. If the first line doesn’t hook the reader, the book is doomed. End of story. Mrs. Hopper gave me bonus points for my essay, accompanied by her trademark happy face with cat’s-eye glasses. I wondered if it was possible for a lousy book to have a fabulous first line and whether all great books have great beginnings. And then I started to think about how I would start my own story. And then I decided to try.

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So here is my opening sentence again, in case it didn't make an indelible impression on you the first time.

I'm not going to lie to you.

It pissed me off that Ruth ditched me and went alone to Sharon West's party one Saturday night in early November. But when she didn't get on the bus at her stop the following Monday, I started to worry. Especially after I saw the Grim Reaper. I was on the upper level of a red double-decker bus, trying to avoid talking to my classmates. I'm not a morning person so I usually read on the bus, which confirms my reputation as a grind, if not a complete freak. No one on the bus is likely to engage me in conversation about *Jane Eyre* or *The Satanic Verses*, so it works out okay. But that day I had forgotten my book, probably because I was upset with Ruth, and as I gazed out the window, the Grim One zipped across the crosswalk on one of those skinny silver scooters, scythe over one shoulder, cowl casting a deep shadow over his face. Ruth would have enjoyed the vision of Death on a scooter. She certainly wouldn't have assumed, as I did, that it was a bad omen. She would have snorted and said, "Bad omen, my ass. What's next? Jesus on a Segway? Mary in a Smart Car? The Holy Ghost on rollerblades?" My reasoning was that since Halloween had come and gone, the Grim Reaper was a sign and not just a kid in a leftover Wal-Mart costume.

I closed my eyes and listened to the music seeping out of my seatmate's headphones. I inhaled the perfume the girl in front of me had bathed in, wondering idly which cash-crazed celebrity had lent her name to this particularly nasty combination of musk and—was that licorice? I don't wear perfume. It makes me sneeze, and besides, it's frowned upon at my house, along with smoking, junk food, alcohol, drugs, swearing, sex, all forms of popular music and most of the other things normal teenagers take for granted. I have a cell phone, but only because my mother likes to keep tabs on me. Also because she got a great two-for-one deal through her job at the law firm. I'm only supposed to shut it off during school and church or if I'm asleep (which I often am at church or school). When it rang on the bus, I assumed it was just my mom making sure I'd packed the nutritious lunch she left in the fridge for me. She leaves for work before I go to school, but she always puts a note with my lunch, a note that she signs *In God's love*, as if her own love is insufficient to the task.

I reached into my pack and shut the phone off without looking at it. I wasn't up for a lecture on the merits of skinless chicken breasts. My mother frets about my weight. I was an adorably chubby baby, a cute but chunky little kid, and I'm a pretty hefty teenager, which is neither cute nor adorable. I could easily model for a Botero painting—I'm all ass and thighs. Most of the girls I go to school with are

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more Giacometti-esque, if that's a word. Not that they'd know what I meant. My mother, who has never weighed a feather over 130 pounds, even when she was pregnant, is a devoted perimeter-aisle shopper and fanatical participant in Christian-themed step-aerobics classes (don't ask). Baked potatoes are a huge indulgence at our house, as is full-fat sour cream, real bacon or any of the other things that make a baked potato even remotely edible. I tease her about worshipping the Canada Food Guide, and if she's in a good mood she swats me with a Beatitudes tea towel. If she's in a bad mood, I get a lecture on sacrilege. She is proud that she has never eaten a Big Mac. I'm pretty sure she believes that heaven is full of anorexic angels, sort of a divine Calvin Klein ad with wings. Maybe she thinks there is a special hell for fat people, and her only child is going to end up there, and we will be separated throughout eternity by my belly flab. She is mystified by my weight and probably prays nightly that my metabolism will self-correct. She doesn't know that for the last four years, ever since I've had an income from babysitting, I've eaten at least one Big Mac a day. More if I have time and money. I also inhale fries, guzzle milkshakes, devour pizza and suck back as much pop as my bladder can stand. I make Queen Latifah look like a wood nymph.

The bus pulled up in front of my school, and I got up and staggered down the narrow spiral staircase and out the back door.

“When’s the baby due?” Mark Grange yelled as I made my way up the stairs to homeroom. Mark’s a wiry little guy in grade ten, taking every possible liberty with the school uniform: pants slung low so you can see what brand of underwear he wears (Joe Boxer with happy faces), unlaced black oxfords, white shirtsleeves rolled up to his knobby elbows, plaid tie hanging like a scarf around his scrawny neck, blazer stuffed in his pack.

I rubbed my belly and smiled beatifically. Maybe it really was time to start dieting. “Any day now,” I said serenely. “Any day.” I squeezed myself into my desk as Mr. Dooley’s voice came over the PA system, exhorting us to prayer and reminding us that it’s hotdog day. Goody—cheap calories. While I listened, I looked over at Ruth’s desk. No sign of Ruth, but her lucky hair elastic was sitting where she left it, wrapped around a tin of Altoids (like Ruth, they are curiously strong). A picture of Ruth playing tonsil hockey with Queen Elizabeth is taped to the desk. Ruth’s dad has Photoshop on his computer so he can put color pictures—sunrises, rainbows, big-eyed African children—in the programs he makes for his church. He claims people put more in the collection plate if they have something inspirational to look at during his sermon. Ruth has been Photoshopping for years, so she has a great collection of pictures of herself with everybody from Raffi and Big Bird to the Pope and the Dalai Lama. The only thing that the pictures have in common is that

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all the celebrities, with the exception of Big Bird, look like dwarves, and Ruth looks like an Amazon. I have no idea whether this is intentional or simply a technological glitch.

Ruth has always been big: big-boned, big-headed, big-mouthed, big-hearted, big-haired, big-assed. When I first met her, which was in Sunday school when we were four, she was already taller, broader, louder and wilder than most of the boys in our little class. She would climb on top of our Bible-crafts table and belt out “Jesus loves me” or “What a friend we have in Jesus” at the top of her lungs until one of the lemon-sucking deacons would come running down the stairs from the sanctuary and hiss at Miss Reynolds to keep Ethel Merman quiet. I had no idea who Ethel Merman was, but I was in awe of Ruth, who jumped down from the table, smiled sweetly at Miss Reynolds and said she was just singing for Jesus. When she was older, whenever anyone tried to shut her up, she’d say, “I’m making a joyful noise unto the Lord—is that so wrong?” For some reason—maybe because of my look of abject adoration, or maybe because I gave her my crackers and cheese—Ruth latched onto me that first Sunday and we’ve been inseparable ever since.

I have a few other friends at school. Brandy Light, who is skinny and pale to the point of invisibility, sits behind me in homeroom. She doesn’t have an eating disorder—she’s just one of those people who can eat crap all day without gaining an ounce. She loves candy, especially Reese’s Peanut

Butter Cups, hates all forms of exercise and loathes the sun. Brandy has an older brother named Bud, who's in and out of jail, and twin little sisters named Margarita and Cristall. It's a good thing their mother found Jesus before she had a chance to name a kid Highball or Shooter. My mother says Bud is messed up because every time he says his full name, people laugh at him. I don't agree. I think Bud is messed up because his mother drank a case of his namesake every day she was pregnant with him. No amount of prayer is going to fix that.

Stewart and Marshall sit on either side of Brandy. Stewart is Korean and Marshall is Pakistani. For reasons unknown and unfathomable, they model themselves after Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis and make terrible jokes about women, Jews and black people. They insist they're being ironic. Of all of us, only Brandy believes in God, and even she won't let a wwJD bracelet touch her bony wrist. What Would Jesus Do at Westland Christian High School? Turning water into wine would be frowned upon, as would hanging out with hookers. And forget about loaves and fishes in the cafeteria. Unless he could turn them into tuna melts. I figure Jesus would be happiest hanging out with me and my friends. I just can't see him playing on the basketball team or joining the Young Entrepreneur's Club. He might sign up for the choir, I guess, but is there anything in the Bible about his ability to carry a tune? At Westland, in order to graduate, you have

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to join a club and commit to it for a full school year. Since none of us wanted to join the Bluegrass Club, the Mountain Biking Club, the Future Homemaker's Club or the Forensics Club (although that one sounded kind of cool), Ruth and I formed our own club. The Classics Club is fully sanctioned by the school and devotes itself to the reading and discussion of classic books that have been made into movies or TV shows. We meet once a month at Stewart's house, since he has the biggest TV. Because I've usually read the books, I hand out copies of a brief book report, Brandy fakes some discussion notes, Stewart and Marshall bring the movie, and Ruth provides the food. As we anticipated, no one else has ever tried to join, although if Jesus asked, I guess we'd have to let him in. He might have some interesting things to say about *Madame Bovary* or *The English Patient*.

Basically, Christian school is something that makes our parents feel good. Anyone with half a brain (which is about half the student population) can figure out that we're covering the same curriculum as other high schools—we just have Christian teachers, mandatory Bible study and daily prayer as well. We still have to write math exams, but no one bats an eye if you get down on your knees by your desk and ask for divine assistance. You're actually likely to get a better grade if you do, assuming you don't get caught reading the answers taped to the underside of your desk. In that case, you will be sent directly to Hell (aka Principal Dooley's office).

And don't believe anyone who tells you that kids at Christian schools don't do drugs, drink or have a lot of sex; we're teenagers, for God's sake.

The morning I saw the Soul Snatcher—after Mr. Dooley's announcements and after the obligatory prayer-fest and roll call (Ruth's absence was noted with a bit of eye-rolling on Mrs. Gregory's part)—I applied myself quite diligently to chemistry, physics and geography. It's always easier to concentrate when Ruth isn't around. She's my best friend, but if we had mottos mine would be *Don't Rock the Boat* and hers would be *I Wonder What Capsizing Would Feel Like?* I actually like school, a shameful fact that I reveal to as few people as possible. My grades can't help but reflect my fondness for academic stuff, but I keep my report cards to myself. My mom signs off on them, murmuring "Thank You, Jesus," like he's my extra-special tutor. Report card day at Ruth's house is seldom a happy occasion. Ruth is brilliant, but in a wacky way. She can't do calculus to save her life, but she does a great business in signature forgery. There's a big market for that around report card time. I keep telling her that not graduating from high school will ruin our grand plan, and, to her credit, she's not actually failing anything at the moment. And of course she's never absent without a note signed by one of her parents.

At lunchtime I thought she might turn up at the Dairy Queen, but she wasn't there so I trudged back to school

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alone with a belly full of the Brownie Batter Blizzard I need to keep me awake during Bible study. At the end of the day, when I finally dug my cell phone out of the bottom of my pack, I found fifteen text messages from Ruth, all saying the same thing: *Call me NOW!* Since the first message had been sent when I was on the bus that morning, I figured I could wait until I got home to call her. Talking to Ruth can be exhausting, and I like to be comfortable while she yammers at me. Plus, I was still a bit pissed off. Somewhere between the Dairy Queen and closing prayers, I'd gotten over worrying that the Reaper was an omen. Ruth's text messages confirmed that she must be okay. Bored, but okay.

When I got home, I picked up the snack my mother had thoughtfully left in the fridge and took it to my room. Baby carrots and broccoli florets—yum. I keep a small cooler in what Ruth calls my hopeless chest, which is her idea of a witty *double entendre*. My hope chest also contains an assortment of salty, fat-laden snack foods and a stack of tea towels embroidered with ironically appropriate Bible verses like “He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” I grabbed a jar of ranch dressing, a Coke and a bag of Doritos, swiped a few carrots through the dressing, nibbled a few chips and burrowed under my duvet to call Ruth. When she answered, I yelled, “Bueller!” in my best Dean Rooney voice. In my opinion, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is a classic, even though it wasn't a book first.

Ruth and I quote from it all the time. Maybe she hadn't spent the day driving around in a sports car or leading a parade, but she sure as hell hadn't been suffering through math and Bible study like me.

When she didn't laugh I yelled "Bueller!" again.

"Shut up," she snapped. "It's not like that. I've been here all day, in bed, waiting for my best friend to return my calls."

"Are you sick?" I asked, suddenly feeling guilty for not answering her messages sooner. "Do you have cramps or something?"

"No," she said, "maybe I'll never have cramps again." Even for Ruth, that was a pretty sweeping statement.

"Never have cramps again?" I said. "Cool. Where do I sign up? Did you go to a new doctor?" Ruth and I have been going to the same doctor since we were born. No way would Dr. Mishkin give her anything that affected her reproductive abilities, not without her parents' approval, which they would never give. Not ever. We're supposed to abstain from sex until we marry and then breed like rabbits. Birth control just doesn't enter into it. We're not even supposed to masturbate.

"Shut up," Ruth moaned. "There's no doctor. It's just that..." Her voice trailed off. She actually sounded sick, and I was getting more worried by the second. Maybe I'd dismissed the Reaper too quickly.

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“Just that what?” I said, sitting up in bed and creating an avalanche of chips and carrots.

“I did it,” she muttered.

“Did what?”

“It,” she said. “You know—sex. I had sex with Rick Greenway. On Saturday night. At Sharon’s party. In the upstairs bathroom.”

“You had sex with Rick Greenway on Saturday night at Sharon’s party in the upstairs bathroom?” I sounded like I was playing *Clue*.

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?” Ruth was starting to sound less like a character from *Steel Magnolias* and more like my old friend. “What are you, a fucking parrot? We got loaded and we had sex and then I came home. And that’s about all I remember. So I can’t even tell you if it was any good. My first time and I didn’t even get a good look at his dick, so don’t ask.”

“I wasn’t going to,” I said, although I couldn’t help thinking about it—Rick’s dick. Rick’s prick. And I didn’t even like the guy. I knew that Ruth had vowed not to be a virgin when she entered grade twelve, so she was right on track, if not a little early. “You weren’t raped, were you?” I asked.

“Don’t be an asshole, Julia. Of course I wasn’t raped. I went to the party to get laid and I did. It’s just...” Her voice trailed off again.

“What?”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be, that’s all. It hurt and it was over really fast.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve read about that—you know—in novels.”

Ruth snorted. “Yeah, I bet *Pride and Prejudice* is full of stuff about dumb chicks who get drunk and give it up at parties to grade twelve guys with small pricks.”

“How small are we talking about?” I asked, looking speculatively at a baby carrot on the floor. She’d obviously seen something. “Zucchini? Parsnip? Dill pickle?” There was a moment of silence. I wondered if Ruth had hung up on me. She does that a lot.

Suddenly there was a loud cackle of laughter from my phone. “Gherkin,” Ruth announced. “Definitely a gherkin. With a side order of pearl onions.”

“Wow!” I said. “Excellent image. Makes him sound like the deli special.”

“Yeah, well, he wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t what?”

“Special. He wasn’t special at all.” Ruth sounded like she was going to cry again, so I said the first thing that came into my head, something my mom had first said to me when I was thirteen and had a massive unrequited crush on Brandon Portland.

“There’s someone special out there for you, sweetie,” I said in my suckiest voice.

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“Yeah, right,” she muttered.

“You deserve at least a Polski Ogorki,” I said. “Or maybe you’d prefer a plain old kosher dill—”

“Shut up,” Ruth yelled. “You’ll be lucky if you get a pickled green bean.”