

1

fallen

The whole thing feels like a prank at first, like something they planned—a joke with a punch line. Maybe, before I know it, one of the girls will tell me it's meant to be funny and then get me out of here.

But then again, maybe not.

I have a bad, bad, bad feeling about this.

I try not to panic. The first thing everyone says to do in emergencies—earthquakes or house fires or if, say, you fall down an abandoned well out in the wasteland behind town—is to stay calm.

“Stay calm, Kammie,” I tell myself. My voice echoes up the dusty shaft to where the girls are, safe on high ground. I kind of think of them as The Girls, with capital letters like that. I think that’s how they think of themselves.

“HELP!” I scream. “MANDY KANDY SANDY!”

I am thoroughly wedged, arms pinned against my sides. No one answers me, but I know they are up there.

I can hear my own breathing.

I’m panicking.

No! I’m not panicking. I won’t.

My feet are dangling over nothing. I can feel all that emptiness underneath them, cold and bottomless.

I try to breathe slow, in and out. In and out. In and out. My heart beats. Nothing is broken, at least I don’t think so. So I guess I’m OK.

I *am* OK.

I will be OK.

OK.

I’m not actually OK and it hurts to breathe. It

hurts to *be*. I scream “HELP!” again. But it hurts even more to scream, so I stop.

“Guys?” I call. “This isn’t funny.” Why aren’t they answering? I know they are there. I hear gravel crunching under their feet and the sound of voices, low and too quiet to understand, whispers that float by in the sky above the well’s now-open mouth.

“KANDY!” I scream. “HELP!” Kandy is in charge. Kandy is the one to ask. She is The Queen of them all.

I stare up at the perfectly round hole of sky and hot Texas air, and wait. And then—finally—there they are, three shadowy faces peering down at me from the top of the well, filling up all that blue. Mandy, Kandy, and Sandy, the most popular girls in the sixth grade at Nowheresville Middle School. Their mouths are open, like it might help them to see me better.

“Wow,” Sandy says. “You fell in.” I guess Sandy is in charge of stating obvious things.

“I fell in.” I’m crying now. “I fell in!” I repeat. “This isn’t funny. Get me out!”

The sun is angled so there is just one ribbon of light on the wall in front of me. There is not much else to look at except the blue hole up there, and craning my neck is starting to hurt. The wall is yellowish-brown dusty brick. Or maybe it's ancient clay. The dust makes me think of old people's skin, crumbling and dry.

"Help me please, help me please . . ." I whimper, pulling my face back as far from the wall as I can. I don't want to be breathing in old-person skin dust! I cough. Why aren't they getting me out of here?

"HELP ME NOW," I yell. "PLEASE?"

"WAIT," a voice answers. "Just . . . hang ON."

"And, like, stop shouting," another one says. I don't know them well enough to be able to tell without looking whose voice is whose. I look up.

A foot is dangling over the edge, like the owner of the foot is just sitting there casually. The foot is wearing blue nail polish. My mom would kill me before she'd let me wear that color on my nails, that's for sure. She's old-fashioned, she says. She doesn't think nail polish is "appropriate" for kids,

even though she used to wear it all the time, back when she used to get pedicures. Probably the same color, even. I stick my tongue out at the foot, not that it can see me, and it vanishes back out of sight. The owner of the foot is probably thinking, *What if it gets dirty? Gross.*

I am covered with dirt. So I guess that *I* am gross. I sneeze three times, *bang bang bang*, and little clouds of dust float between me and the sun, hovering like filthy fairies.

This, as my grandma would say if she wasn't dead, is a fine kettle of fish. Luckily for me, there are no fish in the well—or water, thank goodness. I *hate* fish, with their puckered mouths that look like they are going to suck the flesh clean off your bones, tiny bit by tiny bit, like little sea vampires.

I may be 11 years old, but I'm very small for my age. If I wasn't so small, I wouldn't have been able to slip so easily into the bricks and mortar and whatever else holds well walls together when the old, dirt-covered board I was standing on gave way and let me drop into the hole like a whack-a-mole.

Except I can't pop back up. If I was a normal size, this wouldn't be happening. If this was a wishing well and I had a coin, I'd wish to be bigger. I'd wish to be huge. I'd wish to be the tallest girl in the sixth grade, the tallest girl in the world. I hate being small. It's just not fair.

The only time being small pays off is when you are trying to get a discount on movie tickets. And even then, it's not worth it because getting away with that is the same as lying. Lying turns your soul into something small and dry and hard, like an old raisin you find in your book bag squashed under a book you on-purpose-forgot to return to your old school library because you loved it too much to leave it behind.

I hereby declare that I, Kammie Summers, age 11, am not a liar, which is a *miracle*, if you consider where I come from. My parents are the biggest liars of all: If there was a prize for lying, they would win it by a mile. Their souls are worse than raisins, they are tiny lumps of coal, squashed so hard that maybe they're turning into diamonds, sharp and glittery.

My soul? Well, it's still *basically* a grape, sweet and juicy and delicious and, frankly, kind of awesome.

Which doesn't even *matter*, because my juicy and amazing soul is *stuck in a well*.

“KANDY!” I yell. “GET ME OUT! NOOOOOOOWWWW!”

Kandy Proctor's face appears above me. “Kammmmmmmmie,” she drawls, sing-songy and slow, like *What's the rush?*

Kandy is also 11, but is not small for her age. Her head starts slowly moving lower and lower into the hole. Someone must be holding on to her legs to stop her from falling. Kandy Proctor is not the kind of girl who falls into wells. From this angle, her chin looks like it's made of Silly Putty, pulling stringily away from her neck. “Holy cow,” she says. “You're far.” She stretches her arm down the well, but can't even reach the tip of my nose, which is my highest point right now. Her fingernails are blue. And those blue nails, they aren't anywhere near close enough to touch me. Panic bubbles up in my throat. I swallow it like hot soup and it hurts and

burns. She waves her arm around. “So, grab on, I guess!” she says. There is something about the way that Kandy moves that makes me think of a giraffe, long and bony.

She’s too far away.

“I can’t reach up!” I shout. I’m mad now. “My *arms* are stuck! How can I grab on? How am I going to get out?”

“Are you dying?” she asks, ignoring the question. “Like, are you . . . broken?”

“No!” I yell. “And no! I don’t know! It hurts. It hurt. Why did you let me fall in the well?” Specifically what Kandy had said was, “Stand on that square right there.” She’d pointed at a square of dirt that was slightly higher than the dirt around it, the thing that was covering the well. “And sing a song, loud, but not a Christmas song because I really hate those. Sing something good. And you have to get *all* the words right, or you have to start over.”

I did it, just what she said. Or, at least, I tried to.

I had gotten as far as *the dawn’s early light* when the wood under me snapped in two like someone

had given it a kung fu punch, and down I went. I'd thought I was winning. I mean, I knew all the words and no one is going to say that the national anthem isn't cool. There's no way.

"Um," Kandy says now. "I kind of don't know why you didn't test the board before you stood on it?" Her hair, which is in a braid, swings like a rope. If this was a real working well, it would have a bucket tied to it. The bucket would land on my head. And she'd probably laugh.

"I hate you!" I whisper. Then louder I go, "I don't know. But you have to get me out!"

"Kammie," she says. "Stay calm, girl. OMG, the blood is totally rushing to my head. I feel sick. Are you going to grab me or not?"

I think she's a little bit in love with how caring she's trying to sound, but her OMGs and her concerned voice make me feel like I'm watching her audition for the school play. From the bottom of a well, that is. "I. Can't. Reach!" I yell. "OMG, Kandy," I mimic her. "Just get me out."

"I don't know how! Um," she says, "I'm seeing

stars. Like in a cartoon! Sorry. I'll be back in a sec." Her hand and her braid and her face all disappear in an upwards flush of swirling Kandy drama. I hear a giggle and a thump.

I try to stop breathing so fast. I try to stop being so mad at Kandy. And Mandy. And Sandy. (Which is kind of impossible, but I *try*.) I also try to think about what to do. But all I can think is *HELP! I'M GOING TO DIE!* And also, *OMG OMG OMG*.

I guess Kandy is rubbing off on me after all. Back in my old life, I'd never say "OMG." I wasn't one of those girls. I was different. I used bigger words. But now I'm here, and I'm just a small-worder. I'm someone who says "LOL." Or, "I want a BFF." I don't even know who I am anymore, to tell you the truth. And it doesn't matter. Because *I'm in a well*.

I try to pretend like I'm playing the part of a kid in a public service announcement about dangerous wells, except if I was, then the camera would stop rolling and someone would get me out. And/or I'd know how to get MYSELF out. Because someone

would tell me how! That's the great thing about acting: Someone always tells you how to be and what to do. I *love* acting. Drama is my favorite—or, at least, it was. There is no Drama Club here in Nowheresville, Texas. There are sports, sports, and more sports. And stupid cheerleading classes, so maybe—if you try real hard—you can be a cheerleader for all those sports in high school.

No thank you.

I'd rather do the sports, even though I hate sports.

But maybe if I was sportier, I could climb out of here. Maybe if I was more muscly, I wouldn't have fallen down here in the first place. Maybe if I was someone else, I wouldn't have been gullible enough to stand on a well in the first place.

“HURRY!” I yell. “Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

I can hear the rise and fall of the girls' voices, the scuffling of shoes in the gravel-crunchy dirt, the giggling. The pauses while they try to think of something. They could easily walk away. They could go and not come back. My stomach does a twist. I

swallow hard, dust in my throat, trying not to be sick. Let's face it, there is nowhere for throw-up to go in here except to puddle on my chest, which would basically be the worst.

Like this could get worse.

The blue sky, which is no longer blocked by Kandy Proctor's head, or anyone else's for that matter, is as round as a coin up there. The sun, which has edged into view, is burning a shadow in my vision. "There is a light at the end of the tunnel," I yell. "But I can't reach it!" I'm trying to be funny. Gallows humor, Mom would call it. We have a lot of that around our house lately.

"Don't go to the light!" shouts Sandra Fishburn, suddenly appearing, blinking, above me. Sandy's dad is a preacher. She's kind of both too dumb and too serious for that joke to work. "Don't go to the light! If you go, you *won't* come back. People don't."

"I'm stuck," I say. "I can't *go* anywhere. And the light is the sun! Not, like, *the light of heaven!* I was kidding. But, come on, Sandy. Come on. What are you guys doing up there? Help me."

“Kammie,” Amanda Fassbender says, her face now in the gap next to Sandy’s. “This is getting boring. Just, just, just . . . get out of there!”

“I CAN’T GET OUT,” I shout. “I CAN’T MOVE!” Kandy appears alongside the others and all three girls stare down at me. It’s hard to tell what their faces are doing. “GET HELP!” I add, helpfully. “PLEASE!” I don’t want to be crying, but I can’t stop it. There’s snot and tears all over my face, mixing with the dust. I must look disgusting. It’s like my face is pouring tears out all over the place without my say-so. “I don’t know what you’re doing!” I hiccup. “Help me. I don’t like it in here!”

“No one likes wells,” Mandy says. “Except maybe snakes or lizards, and stuff like that.”

“WHAT?” I yell. “WHAT?”

“Calm down. I was joking!” Mandy says. “Sort of. I mean, there probably aren’t any snakes in there. . . .”

Kandy snort-laughs. “There aren’t!” she says. “Don’t let Mandy freak you out.”

“I AM ALREADY FREAKED OUT,” I yell.

I hope there aren’t snakes down here. A well

actually does seem like a place where a snake would like to live. Do snakes like to be cold? I can't remember. Maybe I never knew. I don't know much about snakes. They are either warm-blooded or cold-blooded, which means they either like to be cold or hate it. I shiver and pull my arms and legs tighter into my body, and I slip down again. Farther.

Deeper.

No!

The little patch of light that was on the wall is gone now. There is nothing in front of me but shadows and darkness.

"STOP!" I yell at myself and somehow I do. I cross my feet at the ankles then uncross them. My feet wish they had something to stand on. My feet are desperate to stop my fall. I could fall forever. I could fall out the other side of the world.

"Don't go deeper!" yells Kandy, like it's a choice that I can make.

"Kandy," says Sandy, in a whisper so loud it echoes down into my ears and rubs up against them, Styrofoam-sinister. "What if we can't get her out?"

“I can hear you,” I say. My arms prickle with goose bumps. Whispering makes me think of wool that you are rubbing on your tongue. I want to spit but I can’t, because it would just land on me.

“Um, OK,” Kandy says. “We’ve got to go.” She says it like she’s leaving a conversation, as if it’s yesterday afternoon and we’re talking on the phone and I’m just going to sit here with the telephone pressed against my ear, waiting for her to come back. We have a landline now. Mom gave up her cell phone. It’s like we didn’t just move, we traveled back through time to 1975. In the kitchen, there’s a patterned, squishy floor with gold flecks. There’s a spot where you can sit where the sun comes in the window and makes a rectangle of sparkling light on the floor. That’s where I was sitting yesterday, tracing patterns on the gold bits, when Kandy called to say that I could join her club if I passed the *initiation*.

This is the initiation.

I guess I’m not going to pass.

The heads disappear again. My own head hurts.

My own head wants to disappear into the warm sunshininess of the Texan blue sky, to melt in the heat like a candle in a flame. But instead, my head's an ice cube, shivering and clattering away on top of my neck, my teeth rattling from the cold. My ears are ringing like they did after the Rory Devon concert that Maria Potts' parents took ten of us to for her birthday last May. Rory was so amazing. We were in the front row and we could see the sweat on his face. We could even feel it freckling our own faces like a creepy but awesome drizzle when he danced. It was basically the last time in my life that I was truly happy, even if for three days afterwards, my ears wouldn't stop ringing. I didn't shower for a week.

I swallow down some more crying and nearly choke to death on my own spit, which would actually be a sort of ironic way to die in a well, if *ironic* means what I think it means, which is "so pathetic that it's almost funny, but is actually tragic."

A bunch of pebbles and loose dirt come raining down onto my face and shoulders. Mandy's face

appears. “Oh! You’re still there,” she deadpans, like maybe while they were gone, I just climbed out and went home.

“Yes, I am,” I say. Where else would I be? I sneeze three more times. I can’t not sneeze in groups of three. It’s a thing of mine. But there is not enough room in here to both breathe and sneeze. My eyes hurt, my nose hurts, my throat hurts, and my lungs hurt, like I’m really for sure going to have an asthma attack and die.

“We’ve been talking and we’ve decided that . . . well, just get out of there,” says Mandy, like that’s it. It’s up to me.

“HOW?” I yell. “I don’t know HOW! I can’t. I CAN’T.”

“Wiggle,” Mandy says impatiently, leaning in so far that I can smell the perfume that she says she stole from Walgreens. I bet she just took it from her mom’s bathroom. It smells like something too sweet combined with cough medicine. Then her gum falls out of her mouth and lands in my hair. IN MY HAIR. I can’t reach it, for obvious reasons. “My

gum! Oopsy!” She laughs. “So, um, wiggle back up now.”

“Wiggle *up*?” says Sandy, and then she giggles. “Did you just spit your gum on her?”

The gum smells like spearmint and drool. I can see it out of the corner of my eye, sitting there above my left eye on a crooked overhang of bangs. Mandy yelps with laughter. Then I hear, “What?” Then I hear, “In her *hair*.” Then I hear Kandy’s manic bel-low of laughter. She roars like nothing has ever been funny before and this is the funniest thing that humanity will ever achieve. I’m glad none of them have phones because if they did, they’d be filming this and turning it into something that goes viral on the Internet and the whole world would be laughing at me at the same time. Gum in her hair! Hold me! OMG! So funny! LOL

I try to ignore them. I’m the one in the snake-filled well with a gob of spitty spearmint gunk in my hair. I *wiggle*. I hold my breath and squish my arms in even tighter and I move my hips back and forth, just a bit, because just a bit is all I can do. As

it turns out, wiggling is a bad idea because my body doesn't wiggle up, it slides down.

And down.

And down.

How deep is this well?

I think I'm screaming, but I might not be screaming. I might be holding my breath. I might be dead. I might be sleeping somewhere in New Jersey, in my old water bed, and any second now, I'll wake up and everything will have been a dream. A terrible dream. Texas. Mandy, Kandy, and Sandy. The well.

All of it.

When I come to a stop, I'm shaking all over. I hope I don't shake myself loose and fall farther still. When I first crashed down here, I was close enough to the sky to feel like I could maybe, just about almost possibly somehow climb out. Now I'm not even close. The sky-hole is so far away it looks as tiny as a saucer, and I am way bigger than a teacup.

"Help," I whimper, even though I know there is no way they can hear me without shouting. Not now.

The skin on my elbows and knees has rubbed off on the well walls. I am raw. I feel as pinkish red as a lump of ground raw meat. All of my skin hurts and burns like a bad sunburn that's been scraped dry by a sandpapery towel.

“Please help,” I say.

“ARE YOU AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL?” one of The Girls yells.

“No!” I answer. “I mean, I don't know! No. I guess not.”

I wish I could see down. I wish I could see the bottom to know how much farther I might go, how much more air is under my feet before they might finally touch down on something solid, something real, something to hold me up.

2

Erased

I can't see myself at all, partly because it is dark in the well and partly because I can look up and I can look straight ahead, but the rest of my body is all stuffed down below my shoulders like a sausage in a skin. I feel as if I've been erased from the neck down, like my body is not really here with me. I'm just a head, alone. My body is separate from me, but it can still send me messages. Messages like *OUCH*. All the parts that hurt, all the parts that are dangling, all the parts that are wedged, those parts are

all messaging me at the same time so that my brain just feels white, fuzzy, painful noise.

I take a deep breath and hold it, and it feels like a whole army of tiny samurai soldiers are stabbing into my non-existent sides. I can feel it, but at the same time, it feels like it isn't happening to me. When I shift my weight, my leg throbs like a giant heart, sending the pain up through my veins. My body is the Internet and my brain is my e-mail and it's receiving the news. *Ouch, ouch, ouch*. Love, mylegs@therestofmybody.com, e-mailing me from the black nothing below.

Black, like a black hole, like we learned about in science, just waiting to pull everything in and unravel it into a backward explosion. I don't get how that works, how things can *implode*, but I didn't put up my hand to ask. At school, I'm invisible. It's part of the plan. I didn't want anyone to really notice me until I was part of the Mandy, Kandy, Sandy alliance. Until I was safe, in a group of friends. Until I was one of The Girls.

Ha. *Ha*.

I'm such an *idiot*.

I should have picked someone else. Anyone else. That kid with the purple glasses! That girl with the birthmark that leaks down her face onto her neck! The BFFs who wear their long blond hair in matching headbands every day! I could have made that work. I could have been whoever they wanted me to be, I guess.

But now, where am I? Down a well. Totally alone. In the dark.

Some pretty bad things that have happened to me in the dark include: 1. Accidentally stepping on our old dog, Hayfield, and breaking his back leg. 2. Slipping down the stairs when I took a wrong turn to the bathroom at a sleepover at Molly Fortin's house in second grade. 3. Being stuck in a well.

"Where are you?" I yell. "YOU GUYS. Don't leave me!"

"Don't get hysterical!" says Sandy. I have to stretch my hearing to the max to even catch what she's saying. Her now-tiny face blocks the distant light for a second. Then it disappears. I blink and

blink. My eyes are starting to adjust. My heart slows back down a tiny bit. I can see the well wall. I can see the outline of bricks.

“Help!” I yell again. “HELP HELP HELP HELP HELP!”

“Stop yelling!” yells Kandy, appearing, her teeth shining like tiny flashlights. We ARE helping. DUH!” She’s starting to sound a whole lot less caring and a whole bunch more annoyed, like this is something I’ve done to her, like I’ve really inconvenienced her. My insides curl up and pinch.

“I can see your teeth!” I yell.

“No kidding,” she says, and disappears again.

Then Sandy appears, scowls, and vanishes. I wish Sandy was the one who had fallen down the well. I wish *she* was the one who was small enough to fit. Or maybe I just wish another well would open up next to this one and she would go shooting down it like a waterslide and land in the big ball of lava in the center of the earth, or maybe past that, maybe in China.

If I could actually fall that far, it might be pretty

cool, if only the tunnel was just a bit wider and smooth as marble and all my skin didn't get rubbed off on the way. No one welcomes a kid without skin when they suddenly pop up in the middle of a busy intersection in Shanghai or someplace else that is Chinese. They'd probably scream. They'd probably run. Maybe they'd think I was a ghost or a monster, risen from the sewers. If a Chinese person with no skin suddenly fell up here and appeared from the sewer at the corner of Main and First, the people in this podunk town wouldn't exactly be giving them a warm hug and a Dr. Pepper. They'd call the sheriff. They'd have that person in the slammer before you could say, "Are you OK?" You'd have people calling CNN, posting that an alien had landed, taking selfies with the poor thing. Someone would declare that the zombie apocalypse had started. And then, before you knew it, the whole town would probably drive to Dallas in a mass evacuation, in their big dusty pickup trucks, kids hanging out of the back with hunting rifles, ready to shoot the undead.

I can't hear the girls anymore so I remind them I am here by yelling some more. My voice is getting tired and heavy, and trying to use it is like trying to lob a bowling ball uphill. I can't hear their voices but I'm sure I can still hear giggling. "It's not funny!" I say, but they must think it is because they don't stop. "I'm bleeding!" I shout, my voice as scratchy as an old smoker's. "I'm scared," I add in a quieter voice. I'm glad they can't hear me because admitting it would just make them laugh harder. Mom once told me that I take everything too seriously, and maybe this is one of those things. Maybe it is funny? I force a laugh, but the thing is, it isn't funny. Not even a bit.

"Oh, sorry!" says Mandy, suddenly face-first back in the hole, her braid hanging down like Rapunzel's, just like Kandy's did before, but nowhere even close enough to reach. Mandy has the longest hair. She has never had her hair cut. Not even once. When she sits down, she can tuck the end of it under her butt. "We were just talking about,

like, something else? You know? But now we're going to save you!"

"Kandy," I say. "I mean, *Mandy*. Come on! HURRY! I'm going to die!"

"It's AMANDA," she says, snottily, before disappearing again. "We told you, you have to be in the club to call us by our *good* names."

I don't think I've ever hated anyone as much as I hate her right now, and that's the truth.

"Grrr," I say, low down in my throat, but the vibration makes my ribs hurt, so I stop.

It smells bad down here, like farts and rotting fruit. I remember hearing once that even if you've never smelled something dead, when you do smell something dead, you know right away and will say to yourself, "Oh, *that* is the smell of something dead!" Like it's programmed into our cells to recognize death. Well, *I* smell something dead. There is something dead underneath me, somewhere between me and China. Maybe the dead thing is the last person who fell down the well, the last person

who tried to join their stupid club and stood on the board to sing the national anthem. Maybe the whole well is full of dead kids! My heart starts to pound really hard.

“Seriously, hurry!” I yell. “You guys have to get me out! There’s something dead in here!”

“What is it?” Kandy yells, like it matters.

“I don’t know,” I shout. “I can’t see anything.”

“Is it a zombie?” Sandy says, unhelpfully.

“That is NOT FUNNY,” I yell.

“Calm down,” calls Amanda in a sing-songy voice. Then, “BOOO!” Her laugh echoes around me. I want to plug my ears so bad, but I can’t. I can’t do anything but listen. “BOOO!” she can hardly even say it, she’s laughing too hard.

I’ve decided now for sure that Amanda is my least favorite. She has red hair and white skin, and freckles crawl all over her face like amoebas. Her teeth look like Chiclets wedged crookedly into her gums, or they would if she brushed them often enough to keep them white. Sandra (Sandy!) is blonde and has braces already because her uncle is

an orthodontist. Kandy is a brunette. (No one calls Kandy anything except Kandy. I don't even know what else to call her!) Her teeth are totally perfect naturally. Everything about how she looks is totally perfect naturally. That's why she makes all the big decisions. She's the leader. I didn't even know them yet when I figured that out. You can just tell. It's something about the way she walks and the way she dresses and the way the other girls are trying to walk like her and dress like her, but they aren't quite as good at it. They just look like imitation-Kandy, not the real thing. They look like they want so bad to be the real thing that they would do anything, like sell their soul to the Devil maybe, if he made those kinds of deals.

Like drop the new kid down the well, even.
And laugh about it.

I said they were the popular girls, but I left out the part where they are also the meanest girls in the whole sixth grade. But, obviously, popular and mean are tied together so tight they're like those knots that just tighten and tighten no matter how

hard you try to untangle them. Mean is where they get their power. The thing with mean girls is that everyone knows that if you aren't one of them, they're going to destroy you, tiny bit by tiny bit. And I'm not going to lie, I've been destroyed enough for this year, for this whole life even.

When you move somewhere new, you get to *be* someone new. I was ready. What was left of me was ready to be Kammie Summers, Mean Girl #4.

I didn't have anything to lose.

"Kandy!" I yell. "Get a rope! Pull me out!"

She leans into the well again. The opening is a whole lot bigger at the top than at the part where I am wedged. The well gets narrower as it descends. For a second, she looks so friendly up there that I remember why I like her. She's so pretty! She's so normal! She's so happy! She's never had so many bad things happen to her at once that she's done the worst thing you can do. She's never been broken and sloppily put back together with paste and scars.

"There's no rope," Kandy yells, and at first

I think she's said, "There's no hope," which also sounds true. "Stop screaming!" she adds. "I can't think. I'm, like, trying really hard to think of something, you know." Then, "Ew, it *stinks* in here. We'll have to just . . . go get someone, I guess. Stay there."

"Where else would I go?" I yell back weakly, but she's already disappeared from view. And then, just like that, I hear the whisper-crunch sound of their feet stepping away from me, leaving me alone. It's as if all the sound has been sucked away with them, into a vacuum. "Implode," I whisper. This is what it sounds like in outer space, I'll bet, your ears filled up with its emptiness, nothing but the whole universe all around you. We just learned in science class that space is a vacuum, but if that's true, then why aren't we all sucked clean away? Or, at the very least, why can't I be sucked up out of this well? Why doesn't gravity push us up instead of pulling us down?

Kandy is probably shaking out her hair while she runs in her slightly gallop-y way, trying to get the well-smell off her. In my head, this happens in

slow motion, the sun throwing a shower of golden sparkles into her hair, which is maybe now freed from its braid, bouncing perfectly like in a shampoo commercial.

I wonder how long it will take *me* to get clean after this. I'll probably never be clean again. Ten years from now, I'll scratch my ear and dust will fall out. If I live that long, I guess. We don't even have a bathtub in our new place, only a really terrible, rust-dripping shower that smells like cat pee and broken hearts. I used to love to take baths with a million bubbles, so many that they were like a blanket that I could hide under. My favorite bubbles smelled like chewing gum and had a pink girl on the bottle. She had boobs the size of watermelons and her face was permanently frozen in a half-creepy smile, but the bubbles smelled like happiness and birthday parties and dancing and vanilla cake and everything good.

I guess the bank reclaimed those bubbles, too. I hope those bankers love them. I hope they go home and take off their expensive-looking blue shirts and

striped ties and then climb into a bath full of sweet pink bubbles. I hope they say to themselves, “Gosh, I’m so great! I stole these from an 11-year-old girl who never did anything wrong. I’m a good guy! Love these bubbles!”

Jerks.

I hope they get a rash.

In the dark, I am starting to see things like underwater coral and moving shapes that I know aren’t really there; they are just shadows on my eyeballs or things floating past my retinas. I blink hard. Staring at the hole where the light shines in has left a stamp on my eyes, so even if I close them, I see a round, lighter patch that’s still out of reach, even though it’s *there* on my eyelid. It’s inside me, but I’ll never reach it, like how stuff in 3-D movies can look real enough to touch. That sounds like a metaphor for something important, but I don’t really get what it is. Metaphors and similes make my head hurt, picking apart those sentences in Language Arts, making all those words fall away from their sentences and separating them into gerunds

and modifiers and whatever. It's like sentence massacres, those poor words bleeding sadly all over the page. I don't know why school has to take everything good and turn it boring and painful and bad. If I ran a school, I'd make it fun. I'd make it better. I don't know how, but I would.

Speaking of bleeding, my leg is wet and kind of sticky, and I just know that's blood, coagulating down there. Gross. Even the word *coagulating* is gross. It's a word that coagulates in your throat when you whisper it in the dark. "Coagulating," I whisper, then I cough hard, clearing it away.

Anyway, I wish I hadn't worn these shorts, my favorites, cutoffs that are the exact perfect length and don't gape out at the waist, like most jeans do on me. I bet they are ruined. I bet holes tore right through them while I was falling. I'll have to throw them out. I'll never get another pair. We just don't have money for that anymore, and shorts this good don't show up at the Goodwill.

Once they found out that we shop at the Goodwill, The Girls would've kicked me out anyway.

I should never have tried to join Kandy's stupid, awful club. It's ruined everything. I might even die! I thought I was going to be someone different here in Texas. I thought I was going to be someone tough and happy and sparkly and untouchable, like they are. I thought I could do that, just start over in a different way.

I was wrong.

Mom would say, "Oh, honey, those girls aren't your people." And I know it. I knew it all along. But Mom isn't exactly around much now to give advice, and I didn't ask anyway. I didn't have to ask. I knew—I just didn't care. Or maybe I wanted new people.

My people would never have laughed at me. Not even Tracy Kelliher. Not even after she stopped talking to me. She was never that kind of mean. Not Mandy-mean. Not let-me-fall-down-a-well mean. Not even close to that. Their meanness is multiplied by three because it's like if one person feels a certain way, then automatically the other two do, too. They are practically the same girl, but times

three. Three times better. Three times prettier. Three times meaner. Kandy, Amanda, and Sandra. Kandy, Mandy, and Sandy. At first, I wished my name could be shortened to something that ends with an _andy, but now I'm glad it's not.

It took me five whole days to work up the nerve to go up to Kandy at recess and say, "Can I hang out with you guys?" I practiced first, trying to make it sound like I didn't care, like I was tougher and cooler than her. When I finally said it, I stared at a tree behind her, watching a bird hop from one branch to another. Scrunched my juice box up in my hand, casually tossed it in the garbage can behind her. Kept my eyes off her face. The bird was small and brown. The juice box went into the can like a three-pointer in basketball. I swept my hair out of my eyes. I was busy and this was just a question and it wasn't the most important thing I'd ever asked anyone, like I didn't stay awake all night the night before, practicing the ask.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as she looked at me, up and down really slowly, and said,

“Sooooorry, but we’re all full. Like, you know, we have a blonde. A brunette. And a redhead.” As if it was obvious that all clubs had one girl with each hair color.

“You don’t have a black girl,” I drawled back, improvising, talking slowly and deliberately.

Kandy said, “You aren’t black!” Her eyes widened. Then she looked suspicious.

“That’s true,” I said. “But my grandmother on my mom’s side was.” I made that up, but Kandy didn’t know anything about me yet. I squinted up at the sun.

“You’re just another brunette,” said Kandy. “And we don’t *really* have room for you.” But I could tell she was hesitating.

“Please?” I said.

If I could go back in time and erase anything, it would be that *please*. I showed weakness. I could tell by the way her back straightened up and she stared me down. She sucked all the power back from me through her eyes. Then she giggled.

I should have walked away and started hanging

out with someone else. There were plenty of kids who wanted to be with me! I was the new girl! The mysterious new girl! Or I could have done what I got good at in my old school, which is to pretend to be really into my book and to not look up until the bell rang to go back inside. To be a secret inside myself. To stay away from everyone and anyone who could hurt me.

I could have kept myself safe that way.

But I *wanted*. I totally wanted to be with them. To *be* them. It's so lame, now that I think about it. It's so dumb. *I'm* so dumb to have ever wanted anything to do with them.

But I couldn't help it.

It had to do with the way they moved through the school like sharks, and the other students moved to the side. The way the kids stared at the three of them, like they were movie stars or just famous for being famous. And they have this clubhouse—an actual *clubhouse*, like in a movie or a book—that is to die for. Amanda's dad had built it just for them, in their yard, right out front so everyone could

see it. Her house was on the small hill behind the school, so no one could miss it, perched up there like it was special, the most special house in town.

Inside the clubhouse, there was real furniture and curtains and a white shag rug and even an Internet connection so they could watch movies in there on the Xbox. Out front, there were three chairs painted in different colors, one for each of them, and a pot of geraniums the color of fireworks. It had everything. I wanted to live in that clubhouse. I wanted to put my posters of Rory on the walls. I wanted to lie on the bed in there and read Harry Potter books over and over again and never ever have to leave.

“Maybe you can be the one with short hair,” Sandra said. “Like, um, we’ve already got a normal blonde, brunette, and redhead. I mean, I *guess* you can. If you have to join.” She looked at Kandy. “What?” Sandy said. “She could pull it off! She’s, you know.” Sandy smirked. “Boyish.” She shrugged. “I’m just saying.”

“I can do that,” I said.

I don't know why I said that. My hair was the only thing in my life that was any good. It came down to my shoulders and I could make it do loose curls without even really trying. I could make it look like I'd spent the day at the beach. I could straighten it and make it shine like a crow's feathers. I could do any kind of braid you can even make up. I was good at braiding. Maybe even better than they were.

"Really?" Sandy said. "OK. Good! Great. It will be, like, your test. *Part* of it. We'll have other tests. But the first one is cutting your hair. Mandy will do it. She's awesome at hair cutting and stuff like that."

I should have known that their stupid club was going to land me exactly where I am, about to die in a well with a terrible haircut that Amanda did with her mom's kitchen scissors, the blades all sticky from who-knows-what, little patches of rust changing the usual *snip-snip* scissor noise to something more like Styrofoam rubbing against itself. Amanda, who had *never* had a haircut herself, not

ever, like that made her a better person than everyone else. Why did I think *she* could do it? When she started cutting, I wasn't scared. Not really. It felt OK, the weight of my hair falling in clumps onto her kitchen floor. The other girls were oohing and aahing. "You are sooooo talented," Kandy said. "You could be a hairdresser when you grow up! You totally should do that."

"Maybe even for movie stars," said Sandy.

"Maybe even for Talia," said Mandy.

The girls sighed. They loved Talia. She was their favorite singer, but I didn't like her. She was too big. Not big, like fat or tall, but *big*, like *in your face*. I like people who stay gently where they are, a little bit behind what they are doing. They just *sing*. You think of the song first, because it's so good, before you think of the person doing the singing. And then you find yourself looking at them because they are so good at the thing they are doing, not because they are flapping their tongue in your face and screaming and all half-naked and stuff. Too much.

When I grow up, I'm going to be one of the *gently*

present people. (Grandma used to say that it was better to be gently present than to announce yourself, and I know exactly what she meant by that. Talia could have used a few lessons from Grandma, that's for sure.) I'm going to be someone who makes you look, slowly, over to where I am. I mean, if I ever turn out to be good at anything.

I felt pretty, the way they were staring at me when they cut my hair. But now that I think of it, it was like I was showing off, sitting there letting them hack off all my hair. *I* was Talia. *I* was being bigger than I am, all LOOK AT ME. IN YOUR FACE. But I liked it. That's the confusing part. I liked that they were looking. I guess I have a bit of Talia in me, after all. I guess that's another bit of me that I don't like so much.

Grandma wouldn't like it either.

After it was done, I got up from that stool and I felt lighter, better, prettier. But then I *looked*. I saw myself in the bathroom mirror, and I almost threw up my peanut butter and jelly sandwich all

over the sink, which had toothpaste spit clumped by the drain. I swallowed just in time. In the mirror, I looked pale and sick and weirdly exposed. Hairless, like some kind of newborn animal that should be cute but isn't. My freckles stood out on my white skin like flecks of blood on paper. My bangs were so high up on my forehead that I looked like someone who had just got some super-surprising news. There were clumps and bits of hair sticking out and even one patch above my ear that looked bald.

“Wow,” I lied. “It’s so awesome and, like, sick.” I’d never said that word out loud before to mean “good,” and it felt dumb and wrong in my mouth. But then again, my hair looked dumb and wrong on my head. I looked dumb and wrong in the mirror. And everything about my life was totally dumb. And totally wrong. And totally sick, not in a good way.