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Opening extract from

Fans of the Impossible Life

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JEREMY

The first day of my sophomore year of high school I somehow lost the ability to tie a tie. It was one of the same ties that I had worn every day since eighth grade, when the male population of St. Francis Prep got switched over from clip-ons, but on this morning it felt like an unfamiliar object in my hands.

"Jeremy?" my dad called up from downstairs. The clock on my nightstand said 7:49. I was going to be late.

Dad came up the stairs and stuck his head in the open door of my room.

"You want a coffee thermos to go?" he asked. "Dave's got a fresh pot downstairs."

"No, thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"You okay?"

"I can't get this," I said.

He looked at the disheveled knot hanging below my collar.

"Want some help?"

I nodded. He came over to me, undid the knot that I had made, and retied it. I watched his face while he concentrated. His lips moved a little, as if he were trying to remember something.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem," he said. He finished and stepped back,

examining his work. “Very dapper.”

“It’s the same uniform I’ve always worn.”

“It’s a dapper uniform.”

He lingered for a moment, and I turned away from him with the excuse of putting something in my backpack. I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want him to say anything about this morning.

I was saved by the cat slinking in the door and weaving her huge, fluffy white body between our legs.

“Dolly Parton the Cat is here to send you off,” Dad said. He always insisted on calling her “Dolly Parton the Cat,” as if someone might mistake her for the real Dolly Parton.

“Thank you, Dolly Parton the Cat,” he said. “Won’t you sing Jeremy a song for his first day of tenth grade?”

Dad went down the hall singing, “And eyeeeeeyeeeeee . . . will always love meeeew . . .”

I sat down on my bed with my backpack at my feet. Dolly Parton the Cat jumped up next to me and pushed her head under my hand, demanding that I scratch her ears.

“Time to go back,” I said.

Fifteen minutes later Dad stopped his car at the bottom of the small hill that led up to the main building of St. Francis. St. Francis, caretaker of creatures great and small, probably didn’t have a midlevel prep school in mind when he stood with his arms outstretched to the hungry birds of the forest. But here in Mountain View, New Jersey, this was his legacy.

“You want me to go in with you?” Dad asked, watching the

crowd congregating on the front lawn before the first bell, the girls in their uniforms of blue polo shirts with blue and green kilts, the boys all in khakis, blue button-downs, and blue and green ties like me.

"No," I said. "I'll be okay."

"You'll go right to Peter's office?"

"Yes." I pulled my backpack up from where I had wedged it between my feet.

"Okay," Dad said. "See you tonight. I'll be home from work by six."

I got out of the car, shut the door, and turned back to look at him. He gave me a thumbs-up and drove off. I stood at the bottom of the hill for a moment, then took a deep breath and made my way up to the building, through the front doors, and down the familiar hallway to Peter's office.

He was sitting at his desk doing something on his computer when I came in. He looked up and smiled when he saw me.

"Welcome back, Jeremy," he said.

MIRA

First days of school were not designed to be easy, and this one was no exception. Mira had thought that it might help to have Sebby here with her on this morning, but as soon as he met her on the bench at the bottom of the small hill that led up to the main building of St. Francis, she knew that it had been a mistake to invite him. He was a reminder of her other life, her real life, and that had no place here.

It was an unseasonably warm day for September, and the wool of her school uniform kilt was lying hot and itchy on her legs. The tights that she was wearing underneath to keep her thighs from rubbing together when she started to sweat were not helping the situation. This was weather that seemed to be stuck in someone's vision of an idealized childhood summer. Blue sky, sparkling sun, eighty-two degrees. A day for ice cream and Slip 'N' Slides, for falling asleep in the grass with a Popsicle melting in your hand.

"Shouldn't this place have a big iron gate or something, to keep out the riffraff?" Sebby said. He was lying with his head in her lap, playing with the pleats of her kilt.

"I think we're the riffraff," she said.

"Exactly."

If she could have picked her own outfit for this day, it might have made things easier. Possibly the silk muumuu with puffed sleeves, red with a white bamboo pattern, paired with a

neon yellow belt and green slip-on sneakers. Pink lipstick, silver painted nails. Then she would have at least felt protected in the armor of one of her aesthetic visions: "shuffleboard grandma goes glam." Or possibly the brown A-line button-down chiffon that tied in a bow at the neck with a lacy cardigan, "librarian chic," to commemorate her return to academia. But the uniform was meant to erase all individuality, guarding against anything that could be deemed "inappropriate attire for those representing the institution of St. Francis," as explained by the student handbook. So she had done what she could. Silver nails, but no lipstick. Out of context she found that bright pink lipstick lost its sense of irony. She tied her hair into a messy bun on the top of her head with a ribbon that hung down the back of her neck, bright green against her brown skin. Her curls stuck out of the ribbon at odd angles, on the verge of escape, betraying her inner desire to run away from this place as fast as she could.

At her old school she could wear whatever she wanted. But that was public school. Mountain View, or MouVi, as the kids called it (or at least the kids who liked it enough to enjoy giving it a cute nickname), was the regional public school where Mira had spent the past ten years. But MouVi was not prepared to handle Mira's "special needs." They had made that very clear. And after nine months of absence, St. F was the compromise.

"Look at these assholes," Sebby said, surveying the students making their way up the hill.

"Just consider them easy marks," Mira said. "More fun for you."

"An easy mark is never fun," he said, sitting up. "No

challenge to it. How am I ever going to improve myself?"

"You could try going to school. I hear it's all the rage."

"I go to school. How dare you."

"Then how come you're here with me right now?"

"I like to keep them guessing when it comes to my actual attendance. Anyway, you know school's not really my thing."

"Yeah, well I don't think it's my thing either."

"But you have such potential."

She rolled her eyes.

"You'll never get anywhere in life with that bad attitude," he said.

"Oh, god, I don't know if I can do this."

He grabbed her hand and looked into her eyes. "You can do . . ." he said, with a dramatic pause, "whatever you set your mind to." Then he started laughing maniacally.

"Okay, thank you."

"Wait, I'm not done. You can achieve . . . all of your dreams."

"No, you're done."

She stood up, pulling her worn thrift-store army bag onto her shoulder. It was the same one that she had used at her old school, the patches and buttons that used to cover it now removed.

No slogans, logos, or images allowed on any attire or accessories, declared the St. Francis handbook. *Erase all evidence of your individual personality, please. Turn yourself over to the land of the soulless drones, if you wouldn't mind.*

"How about I reach for getting through this day without having a nervous breakdown?" she said.

"It's a start, I suppose." He stood up and kissed her on the cheek. "Don't pretend that you're not destined for greatness, my love."

Mira was impressed with herself that she managed to stay away from the nurse's office for the entire morning. She got through her classes by sitting quietly in back-row desks. It was easy enough to go unnoticed amid the excitement of first-day reunions of returning students comparing new hairstyles, new shoes, new mannerisms picked up over the summer.

But lunch was a different story. It inherently demanded interaction. The cafeteria was made up of twenty large, round tables set up to divide the student population into a self-mandated hierarchy based on a complicated algorithm of shared history, shared interests, and shared status. And so Mira found herself holding her damp lunch tray piled with food that definitely did not fit the rigorous requirements of her mother's elaborate dietary-restriction plan, looking out over the sun-filled second-floor cafeteria and attempting to stave off a slowly rising panic. The anti suicide windows were cracked open to the warm air, younger students gazing down longingly at the juniors and seniors who enjoyed "outdoor privileges" during their free periods. Like prison, you earned it through years of good behavior.

An unlikely rescuer appeared at Mira's side in the form of her neighbor, Molly Stern.

"Miranda! Oh my god!" Molly gave her a kind of half hug in an attempt to not topple the lunch trays they were both holding.

"Hi. Hey, Molly," Mira said.

"My mom said she thought she heard that you were coming to St. F this year, but she wasn't sure and I didn't want to get my hopes up if it wasn't, like, totally for sure happening."

"Well, I'm here," Mira said. "It's happening."

Molly lived down the street from Mira in a house that was enormous even by the standards of their McMansion-loving neighborhood. They had played together as kids, sometime afternoons of lemonade stands and sidewalk chalk. Even then Molly had had an air of desperation about her. She had three older brothers who were infamous for launching street-hockey balls into people's windows. Something in Molly's face had always revealed a suspicion that fate had unfairly tricked her into life without a sister, and she would never quite forgive it.

They'd lost track of each other when Molly started at St. Francis and Mira followed her older sister to Mountain View Elementary. Mira caught glimpses of Molly on their street every once in a while over the years, but this was the first good look at her she was getting since puberty had hit. Her nose was still too big, her face had not grown to fit it, but to compensate she had cultivated a huge mane of hair to try to balance things out. A few diamonds on a pendant hung from her neck in a style that was popular with a lot of the St. Francis girls.

"You have *got* to come sit with us," Molly insisted, grabbing Mira's arm and leading her to a table whose occupants were deeply engrossed in the passing around of an issue of *Cosmo*.

"Ladies," Molly said when they arrived at the table, sitting down in two conveniently empty chairs, "this is Miranda. We've known each other since forever."

"It's actually just Mira now."

"What?"

"I just go by Mira. No one calls me Miranda anymore."

"But on our street we always did," Molly said. "Molly and Miranda's Lemonade Stand. Remember? Oh my god, we were so cute. We live on the same street," Molly informed the table.

"Well, it's just Mira now," Mira said again.

"Oh, well, I love nicknames. I wish I could have one, but my name is already so short. Just Molly! That's all anyone's ever called me."

Sarah, the blond and perfectly coiffed unofficial leader of this particular lunch table, snickered and whispered a mocking "Just Molly!" to her number two, Anna, an Indian girl with a tight ponytail and a permanent smirk.

The girl sitting on Mira's other side stuck out a formal hand to shake.

"I'm Rose," she said.

She had a dyed black pixie cut and severe glasses with large black rectangular frames.

"Hey." Mira shook her hand.

"How's your first day going?" Rose asked.

"It's okay," Mira said. "I just had English with Mr. Sprenger."

"Everyone calls him Peter," Rose said.

"Oh my god, you are so lucky that you have Peter," Molly said. "He is the absolute hottest."

"He's also a good teacher," Rose said.

"Yeah, I guess," Molly said. "I'm, like, 'What did you say,

Peter? I was too busy staring at your face.'" She looked around the table for confirmation. "Right?"

But Sarah had other topics on her mind.

"So you're a freshman?" Sarah asked Mira.

"Sort of," Mira said. "I didn't finish last year at Mountain View, so I need to retake a bunch of stuff. They let me into sophomore English and history, but I'm stuck with freshman classes for everything else."

"She's so not a freshman, though," Molly said. "She's older than me. You should be, like, a junior."

"I'm sixteen," Mira said, worried from the emphatic nature of Molly's tone that they might think she was in her thirties.

"Wow," Sarah said. "Mountain View, huh? Did you get a scholarship to come here?"

Molly jumped in before Mira could respond. "I can't believe it's been so long since I've seen you," she said. "We used to do all kinds of crazy stuff on our street when we were little. Didn't we?"

Molly had a terrible habit of ending almost everything she said with a question, as if she couldn't be sure about things until she had taken a poll of everyone in the room to find out what they thought.

"Lots of lemonade stands," Mira said.

"So what happened?" Sarah asked.

"To the lemonade stands? I don't know. Winter?"

"No, at Mountain View," Sarah said. "Molly said you were having a lot of problems."

Molly started tearing nervously at a bag of chips.

"Honestly, Sarah, I didn't say that."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought I heard you say those exact words right before you went over to ask her to sit with us." Sarah looked at Anna in mock confusion. "I guess I misunderstood."

Anna snickered.

"I was sick," Mira said.

"Like, in the hospital?" Sarah said.

This was more than Molly could take.

"Sarah, you are being really rude. It's Miranda's first day."

"So I'm not allowed to ask her questions? I'm just making conversation."

Mira stood up.

"I gotta go get something else to eat," she said, picking up her tray. "This grilled cheese is like plastic."

"Oh," Molly said, sounding disappointed. The initiation into the group had evidently not gone quite as planned.

"Well, hope you're feeling better, Mira," Sarah said in a sugar-sweet voice that could be heard two tables over. "And not still feeling sick." She said the work *sick* like it was some kind of hilarious euphemism.

"Thanks," Mira said.

She made her way to the trash can and dumped the rest of her lunch in it, piled the damp tray on top, and walked through the cafeteria doors.

Downstairs she headed down the hall to the nurse's office. She turned over her permanent doctor's note to the nurse, gave in to the sagging comfort of the standard-issue cot, and tried not to cry.

JEREMY

No one talked to me on that first day back except for Peter. Not that I gave them an opportunity. Head down, I counted the minutes to the end of each period, knowing I just needed to be able to say that I made it through the day.

When I got home after school, the front door was unlocked and I let myself in.

"Dave?" I pushed my shoes off my feet and set them in their place on the carefully curated shoe shelf by the front door.

"I'm in the kitchen," Dave called back.

I dropped my backpack at the bottom of the stairs and followed the smell of bread baking into the kitchen. Dave was laying out cookies on a baking sheet.

"Hi," I said. I sat down on a stool across from him. "You're home early."

He shrugged. "Work was slow," he said.

"You're not here to check on me?"

"I'm here," he said, uncovering a fresh loaf of bread from the bread box on the counter, "to make you a snack." He cut off a large slab of soft bread and spread fresh peach preserves on top. Preserve making was a new hobby of his. Half of the basement was currently filled with colorful jars that he couldn't give away fast enough. Dad said he should start a stand on the side of the road if he was going to keep this up.

Dave handed me the bread on a plate.

"Thanks," I said.

"Cookies will be ready in ten minutes," he said.

"Cookies and bread?"

"Don't tell your dad. He already thinks I'm trying to fatten us all up."

"And you're not?"

Dave smiled. "Eat your snack."

I took a bite. It was still warm.

"You're not going to make me talk about my day?" I said, mouth still full.

He picked up the baking sheet and bent down to put the cookies in the oven.

"Do you want to talk about your day?" he asked, closing the oven door and setting the timer.

"No," I said.

"Okay, then."

He cut himself a slice of bread and spread on preserves, and we sat and ate in silence.