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Opening extract from

Love, Stargirl

Written by

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Please print off and read at your leisure.

-As of this writing we have sixteen grandchildren.
To each of them this book is dedicated:

Amanda
Will
Jill
Ashley
Dan
Ryan
Zachary
Courtney
Rachel
Natalie
Michael
Sarah
Kathy
Leah
Angel
Lana

January 1

Dear Leo,

I love beginnings. If I were in charge of calendars, every day would be January 1.

And what better way to celebrate this New Year's Day than to begin writing a letter to my once (and future?) boyfriend.

I found something today. Something special. The thing is, it's been right in front of me ever since we moved here last year, but today is the first time I really saw it. It's a field. A plain old vacant field. No house in view except a little white stucco bungalow off to the right. It's a mile out of town, a one-minute bike ride from my house. It's on a hill – the flat top of a hill shaped like an upside-down frying pan. It used to be a pick-your-own-strawberries patch, but now it grows only weeds and rocks.The field is on the other side of Route 113, which is where my street (Rapps Dam Road) dead-ends. I've biked past this field a hundred times, but for some reason today I stopped. I looked at it. I parked my bike and walked into it. The winter weeds were scraggly and matted down, like my hair in the morning. The frozen ground was cloddy and rock-hard. The sky was gray. I walked to the centre and just stood there.

And stood.

How can I explain it? Alone, on the top of that hill, in the middle of that "empty" field (Ha! – write this down, Leo: *nothing* is empty), I felt as if the universe radiated from me, as if I were standing on the X that marked the centre of the cosmos. Until then I had done my daily meditation in many different places in and around town, but never here. Now I did. I sat down. I barely noticed the cold ground. I held my hands on my thighs, palms up to the world. I closed my eyes and dissolved out of myself. I now call it washing my mind.

The next thing I noticed was a golden tinge beyond my eyelids. I opened my eyes. The sun was seeping through the clouds. It was setting over the treetops in the west. I closed my eyes again and let the gold wash over me.

Night was coming on when I got up. As I headed for my bike, I knew I had found an enchanted place.

January 3

Oh, Leo, I'm sad. I'm crying. I used to cry a lot when I was little. If I stepped on a bug I'd burst into tears. Funny thing – I was so busy crying for everything else, I never cried for myself. Now I cry for me.

For you.

For us.

And now I'm smiling through my tears. Remember the first time I saw you? In the lunchroom? I was walking towards your table. Your eyes – that's what almost stopped me in my tracks. They boggled. I think it wasn't just the sight of me – long frontier dress, ukulele sticking out of my sunflower shoulder bag – it was something else too. It was terror. You knew what was coming. You knew I was going to sing to someone, and you were terrified it might be you. You quick looked away, and I breezed on by and didn't stop until I found Alan Ferko and sang "Happy Birthday" to him. But I felt your eyes on me the whole time, Leo. Oh yes! Every second. And with every note I sang to Alan Ferko I thought: *Someday I'm going to sing to that boy with the terrified eyes*. I never did sing to you, Leo, not really. You, of all people. It's my biggest regret... Now, see, I'm sad again.

January 10

As I said last week, I wash my mind all over the place. Since the idea – and ideal – is to erase myself from wherever and whenever I am, I think I should not allow myself to become too attached to any one location, not even Enchanted Hill, as I call it now, or to

any particular time of day or night.

So that's why this morning I was riding my bike in search of a new place to meditate. Cinnamon was hitching a ride in my pocket. As I rode past a cemetery a splash of brightness caught my eye. It was a man sitting in a chair in front of a gravestone. At least I think it was a man, he was so bundled up against the cold. The bright splash was the red and yellow checked scarf he wore around his neck. He seemed to be talking.

Before long I found myself back near my house, in a park called Bemus. I climbed onto a picnic table and got into my meditation position. (OK, back up...I'm homeschooling again. Gee, I wonder why – my Mica High School experience went so well! Ha ha. So I have to meet all the state requirements, right? – maths, English, etc. Which I do. But I don't stop there. I have other courses too. Unofficial ones. Like Principles of Swooning. Life Under Rocks. Beginner's Whistling. Elves. We call it our shadow curriculum. ((Don't tell the State of – oops, almost told you what state I'm living in.)) My favourite shadow subject is Elements of Nothingness. That's where the mind wash comes in. Totally wiping myself out. Erasing myself. (((Remember the lesson I gave you in the desert?))) Which, when you think about it, is really not nothing. I mean, when I'm really doing it right, getting myself totally erased,

I'm the opposite of nothing – I'm everything. I'm everything but myself. I've evaporated like water vapour into the universe. I am no longer Stargirl. I am tree. Wind. Earth.)

OK, sorry for the detour (and parenthetical overkill)... So there I was, sitting cross-legged on the picnic table, eyes closed, washing my mind (and getting school credit for it!), and suddenly I felt something on my eyelid. *Probably a bug,* I thought, and promptly washed away the thought, and the something on my eyelid just became part of everything else. But then the something moved. It traced across my eyelid and went down my nose and around the outline of my lips.

Then a voice, woman's, harsh: "*Dootsie!*"

Then: "Hello. My name is Dootsie. I'm a human bean. What are you doing?"

I opened my eyes. A little girl was sitting cross-legged in front of me. A lady was hurrying towards us, appearing stricken, saying, "I'm *so* sorry. My daughter gets away from me sometimes. I'm *really* sorry."

"It's OK," I said. I was groggy, like waking up. I looked at the little girl. Dootsie. "I was meditating. I was being nothing."

Dootsie frowned. The sun brought rusty highlights to her curly hair. She reached out and touched me again. She laughed. "You're not nothing." She poked

my knee. "You're right there."

"To me I was nothing," I said. "It's hard to talk about."

She frowned again. Suddenly her mouth and eyes shot open. "You pretended!"

I nodded. "Sort of."

She studied me. "Are you a magician?"

"Nope."

She beamed. "I'm a magician!"

"Really?"

"Aren't I, Mummy?"

"A regular Houdini."

Dootsie climbed down from the table. "I can make myself disappear. Watch."

She squeezed her eyes shut. She whispered something I couldn't make out. She stood at attention and turned around three times. She whispered again. A slow-moving grin came over her little round face.

I looked around. "Where are you?"

She giggled. "I'm right here. You can hear me but you can't see me."

I swished my hands in front of me. "Hello?... Hello?... Dootsie?... Are you there?"

Dootsie's eyes goggled. She whispered, "Mummy...she doesn't even *hear* me!"

Her mother winked at me. "Dootsie...say something

to the nice girl so she'll know you're there."

Suddenly Dootsie's eyes double-goggled and she shrieked, "A mouse!" and came leaping at me, very visibly. Cinnamon must have wondered what all the talking was about. He had poked his head out of my coat pocket, and before I knew it, he was cradled in the little girl's hands.

"Actually, he's not a mouse," I told her. "He's a rat."

She rubbed her cheek against his cinnamon fur.

"Put your nose up to his," I said.

She did. Cinnamon's tiny tongue came out and kissed her on the tip of her nose. She squealed.

While Dootsie was nuzzling Cinnamon, her mother held out her hand. "I'm Laura Pringle."

We shook. "Stargirl Caraway."

Dootsie gaped. "*Stargirl*? That's your *name*?"

"Sure is."

"You're new in town?" said Mrs Pringle.

"Since last summer," I said. "We live right over there" – I pointed – "Rapps Dam Road."

"Not the house with the brown shutters, by any chance?"

"Exactly."

She smiled, nodded. "My brother. Dootsie's uncle Fred and aunt Claire. They used to live there. Dootsie knows your house as well as her own."

Dootsie held out Cinnamon. She whined, "Mum-*mee*...she has a rat and the best name and she sits on tables. I want to be her!"

Cinnamon was getting fidgety. I took him back. "Hey, I was just thinking I want to be *you*. I mean – 'Dootsie'? Names don't come any cooler than that. Plus, you can make yourself disappear. You are *so* cool. Do you take a cool pill every morning?"

She looked at me all serious. She shook her head. "No."

"So I guess you're just naturally cool, huh?"

She nodded. "I guess."

"Tell you what," I said. "I've never been cool, and I've always wanted to be. So how about we trade places? You be Stargirl and I'll be Dootsie."

Her eyes rolled up to the trees. Her finger pressed her bottom lip. "Not yet," she said. "I want to be Dootsie some more." She thought again. "Till I'm ten."

"Okay," I said, "when you're ten we'll switch."

"Okay."

We shook on it. Then Mrs Pringle said it was time to leave me in peace, and off they went, Dootsie whining, "I want a rat!"

January 15

I take field trips. Hey, who doesn't? Who says I'm not a normal student? In fact, I take lots of field trips. My mother sends me to a small area in town where my assignment is to hang out for the day and then write a poem about my experience there. I might stay for ten minutes or ten hours – however long it takes me to come up with a poem. I take my notebook and do the poem right there.

Today was a real challenge. The destination was "the stone piles". (My mother slips a card under my bedroom door with the field trip location.) She meant the old abandoned cement plant. There's the rickety dull green skeleton of the building and some rusting equipment and three piles of stones about as tall as me. They used to be much higher, I hear. People keep taking the stones for their gardens and stuff, and kids throw them. Well, here's how it went:

FIELD TRIP:
FOREVER AT THE STONE PILES
How long have I been here?
Not a clock in sight. What the heck – call it
forever.

The stone piles and me.
It's one thing to walk past
a pile of stones.
It's another to sit with one
forever.
Do that and you begin to
learn about things you thought
you knew,
like silence
stillness
smithereens.
And now
(can forever have a now?)
I hear something – footsteps—
no not steps—
gravelsliding shlurping—
footshlurps—
and here he comes—
navy peacoat, moss-green knit
pullover cap with perky pom-pom moss-green
tassel,
slow, slumpy—
if he were a Snow White dwarf
he would be Droopy—
round, puffy, whiskered face—
donut dough with gray and black whiskers—

shuffling, drooping toward me,
sees me – or does he?—
there's a stone pile silence and stillness
in his eyes—
says, croaks, "Are you looking for me?"—
shuffles on by, doesn't wait for
an answer.
I want to call out, *Hey!... Wait!*
but he's moving on,
the back of him now
shuffling...shuffling...green pom-pom bobbing
bobbing bobbing

January 16

Pounding on the front door woke me up. My clock said 6:15. I put on my bathrobe, wobbled down the stairs. My father was long gone to work. My mother creaked from her doorway: "Who this early?"

I opened the door. For a half moment all I saw was the house across the street. Then I looked down. It was Dootsie. "Where's Cimmamum?"

I called back to my mother, "It's the little girl I told you about. Dootsie."

I brought her in. She wore pajamas under her coat. Her slippers were Miss Piggys.

"Where's Cimmamum?"

"Cinnamon's sleeping," I said. "Like you should be."

My mother came down, stared at the slippers. "Dootsie? Where are your parents?"

"Are you Stargirl's mummy?" said Dootsie.

"I am."

"Are you Starmummy?"

We laughed.

The doorbell rang. It was Mrs Pringle, eyes wild. "I'm *so* sorry. Dootsie's gone. Did she—" Then, looking past me: "Dootsie! Thank God!" She scooped up her daughter and breathlessly told us she had been listening to talk about Cinnamon for days, and when she found the empty bed this morning, the first place she thought of was her brother Fred's old house.

Dootsie reached out and tugged on my mother's sleeve. "I want pancakes."

Five minutes later Mrs Pringle, Dootsie, Cinnamon, and I were at the dining room table while my mother mixed pancake batter in the kitchen.

"She's getting worse," Mrs Pringle was telling us.

"I'm getting worse," said Dootsie. She was playing with Cinnamon, standing him up by his paws and making him dance.

"It started with climbing out of her playpen," said Mrs Pringle. "Then getting lost at the mall. At the

beach." She shuddered at a memory. "Now" – she looked at her daughter, wagged her head, smiled four parts love, one part exasperation – "she's learned how to unlock the front door."

"Does she cry when she gets lost?" I said.

"Never."

"So she doesn't think she's lost."

"Far as she's concerned, she's never been lost in her life. And there's nothing she can't do. She thinks she's thirty-five."

Dootsie was in her own world. She lifted Cinnamon's feet off the table and let him swing. "Whee!" She twitched her nose against his. She giggled as he climbed to her shoulder and nosed into her ear, then sat on her head. Suddenly she yelped, "Wait! Let me!" She bolted for the oven as Cinnamon flew into my lap. My mother held her at the skillet while she poured batter onto the sputtering griddle.

Mrs Pringle looked at the ceiling. "Help!"

January 19

My happy wagon is almost empty, Leo. Only five pebbles left. Happywise, I'm operating on only 25 per cent capacity. Remember when I first showed my wagon to you? How many pebbles were in it then? Seventeen?

And then I put another in, remember? I never told you this, but before I went to bed that night, after we kissed for the first time on the sidewalk outside my house, I put in the last two pebbles. Twenty. Total happiness. For the first time ever. It stayed that way until I painted that big sign on a sheet and hung it outside the school for all the world to see...

STARGIRL
LOVES
LEO

Was that my mistake, Leo? Did I overdo it? Did I scare you off? It seems like ever since then I've been taking pebbles out of the wagon. And now it's down to five and I feel rotten and I don't know how to feel better.

So I played hooky today. My mother trusts me to play hooky every now and then. (In fact, we have a course called Hooky, but not for credit.) I just got on my bike and rode. Rode and rode. Now that I think of it, I was heading west. To Arizona? Somewhere along the way I heard a sound. I looked up. A Canada goose was flying across the gray sky. Honking. I've never seen a solo goose before. They always fly in V-shaped flocks, or at least in pairs. Had he been left behind? Was he trying to catch up, calling, "Hey, wait for me!"? Had

he just lost his girlfriend and was calling out her name? Was she dead? Or flown off to Arizona with another goose? One voice honking across the sky. The loneliest sound I have ever heard.

And then I thought of the bundled man in the cemetery. I turned back. I hadn't realised I'd come so far from town. I rode to the graveyard. There he was, same spot, sitting in an aluminium folding chair, green and white strapping. This time I went in. His chin was on his chest. He was dozing. Most of his face was lost behind the brilliant red and yellow checked scarf. An old-fashioned black domed lunch box sat in the grass under the chair.

I was afraid to go too close. I foot-pushed my bike around behind him. There were two names on the gravestone: Grace and Charles. Under her name were the dates of her life. Under his name were his birth date and year, then a dash, then nothing. Death day to come. Under that was TOGETHER FOREVER.

Grace. It was her second date that surprised me – she died four years ago. And still he was here. Grace. I think she gave him the scarf. I think she called him Charlie. *Grace*. I whispered her name.

I backed away as quietly as I could.

January 27

I babysat Dootsie today. Her mother and father said they needed to "escape".

Dootsie lives on Ringgold Street, a short bike ride away – but a long walk for a little girl on a cold day at six in the morning. I still can't believe she did that. When I arrived she was invisible. You know she's disappeared when you see her standing at stiff attention with her face scrunched and her eyes squeezed shut. She was in a corner in the dining room. I said to her mother, "Well, it looks like Dootsie's gone. Nobody here for me to babysit. I guess Cinnamon and I will have to go home. Bye."

As I turned to go, Dootsie screamed. "No! I'm here! I'm here! I'm just imizible!" She came running. "Cimmamum!"

So I stayed and the Pringles went out and Dootsie played with Cinnamon and then we painted her room. She paints her room almost every day. She's allowed to paint anything she wants in her room except the windows. Walls. Doors. Furniture. Think: balloon filled with 50 paint colours bursts and splatters room. Think: squashed aliens. Think: little-kid paradise. Don't think: little-princess room with canopy bed and ruffles and frills

and pink. So there I was, brush in hand, letting loose the bedroom-painting maniac that hides in all of us.

Then we talked about you.

Dootsie: "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Me: "I'm not sure. I used to."

Dootsie: "What's his name?"

Me: "Leo."

Dootsie: "Is Leo a human bean?"

Me: "We're all human beans."

Dootsie: "Do you love him?"

Me: "I think so."

Dootsie: "Does he love you?"

Me: "He did. And then he didn't. I think he will again."

Dootsie: "When?"

Me: "Someday."

Dootsie: "Where is he?"

Me: "In the state of Arizona. Far away."

Dootsie: "Why?"

Me: "Why what?"

Dootsie: "Why is he far away?"

Me: "He goes to school there. I moved here to Pennsylvania." (Oops...now you know. We moved to your home state. Well, I won't narrow it down any more than that.)

Dootsie: "Did he kiss you?"

Me: "Yes."

Dootsie: "Did he kiss Cimmamum?"

Me: "Yes."

Dootsie: "I don't wanna talk about him anymore."

So we talked about other stuff and painted some more, and then she said, "Let's go visit Betty Lou."

"Who's Betty Lou?" I said.

"Our neighbour. She's afraid to go out. She's diborced."

This sounded interesting. I left a note on the dining room table in case the Pringles came home early, and we went next door and rang the bell. The door seemed to open by itself. No one was there, but a voice said, "Come in."

"She's behind the door," Dootsie said, and waltzed in. She waved. "Come on."

I went in, the door closed, and standing before me was a person in a purple bathrobe and bright red slipper socks. Dootsie pointed at me. "This is my friend Stargirl. She kissed a boy named Leo."

The person shook my hand, smiled. "Betty Lou Fern." Dootsie thrust out her hand, which Betty Lou shook also. "Did she tell you I'm afraid to go out?"

"Right after she told me you're the neighbour."

She laughed. A big, bold laugh. "She tells everybody. The whole town knows I'm agoraphobic.

Isn't it silly?" She waved us on. "Come into the kitchen. I'll make us hot—EEYOWWW!"

Suddenly Betty Lou was standing on a dining room chair, screaming, "A rat!"

Cinnamon was poking his head out of Dootsie's coat pocket.

"It's just Cimmamum," said Dootsie. She pulled Cinnamon out and offered him to Betty Lou. Betty Lou screamed louder.

I took Cinnamon. "Cinnamon is my pet rat." I lowered him deep into my pocket. "He's really tame and friendly."

"But he's a *rrrat*." She snarled the word. "There's a *rrrat* in my house." She stepped up onto the table. The teased top of her black and grey hair was flattened against the ceiling. She was trembling.

"I'm really sorry," I said. "We'd better go."

"No!" shrieked Dootsie. She jabbed her finger. She scowled. "Betty Lou, you come down here. *Right now*."

"I can't."

And then a new look of horror came over Betty Lou. She covered her eyes with her hands. "Stop!"

I looked at Dootsie. She had rolled her eyeballs up till they disappeared. Mucho creepy. "Are you coming down?" she said.

Betty Lou squeaked, "Are you going to keep the

beast out of sight?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to let its tail touch me?"

"No."

"Put your eyes back."

"Okay." Dootsie's eyeballs rolled back down into place. "I did."

Betty Lou came down and made hot chocolate. She took donuts out of the freezer and warmed them in the microwave. "I always have something good to eat for Dootsie. That's how I lure her over here. Since I'm afraid to go out, I have to find ways to make people visit me."

Dootsie piped, "I'm her best visitor!"

Betty Lou laughed. "She's right. She visits me almost every day."

"And every day I get a donut!"

Betty Lou nodded. "Once a week I have a dozen delivered from Margie's Donuts."

She took a bite of her crème-filled. "Mmm. Margie calls them the best in the world. She's right."

I asked her, "Do many people have agoraphobia?"

"More than you might think." She glanced nervously at the living room. I had taken off my winter coat and put it on the front porch. Cinnamon was warm in the pocket. "Don't rodents flatten themselves?"