



**NOT  
ALONE**

**BOOKS BY FREDERIC MARTIN**

**The Vox Oculis Series**

Not Alone

The Innocence of Westbury

Forest

# NOT ALONE

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A VOX OCULIS NOVEL

FREDERIC MARTIN



NTHSENSE BOOKS

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## AUGUST 2031

*“As humans, we perceive the world through our wonderful senses of taste, touch, sound, smell, and sight. All these senses combine in our brain to create this rich, beautiful reality that we live in. It is these senses that allow us to not only perceive, but to interact with the world.*

*As humans, we naturally tend to believe that the world we perceive is the only reality. But consider for a moment a dog’s world. Dogs can only discern two basic colors, and yet can see in five times less light than we can. Their ears have a range of hearing that is three times higher than ours, and their noses have a sense of smell that is forty-four times more sensitive than ours.*

*What is their reality? Imagine if you had the senses that a dog has. Think of how your brain would have to rewire itself to handle these different senses. Can we even imagine it?*

*I ask this question because I am here today to tell you about some very, very, very rare people that have senses, in particular eyes, that perceive the world much differently than the rest of us. Their eyes can perceive twice the range of color and actually radiate a light we can’t even see.*

*Their eyes have several other amazing features that I’ll tell*

*you about later in the talk, but the point I want to make now is this: reality for these rare individuals is so different from ours that it is unimaginable and incomprehensible to most of us. So incredible and incomprehensible, it is magical. But like so many magical things, to some, it is threatening . . .”*

— FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON GENETIC  
VARIANCE, CASTLETON UNIVERSITY, AUGUST 14TH, 2031

**JUNE 2011**





## ANOTHER YEAR OF SURVIVAL

Blue's eyes were closed. She had closed them so she could open her mind to the familiar sounds that surrounded her now. There was the whine of the car tires on warm asphalt, the muffled hum of the motor that was buried somewhere behind the dashboard in front of her, the occasional rush of a car racing by in the other direction. And over it all was the soothing soft rumble of the rushing wind just above her head, coming from a slot formed by the slightly rolled down window. Blue felt the pressure of the seat gently pushing her about as the car followed the lumps and rolls and curves of the road. She felt the warmth of the sun as it moved to different places on her body mirroring the movements of the car like a solar compass. Shadows of passing trees created a pink-orange pulsing light show on the inside of her closed eyelids. The shadows gave the illusion that instead of being inside a car, she was in the middle of a stampede of giants who were racing the opposite direction and rocking the ground with their massive strides. She felt a kinship to the tree-giants because she wished she was racing the opposite direction, too. She didn't know the destination of the giants but it had to be better than where she was going.

She had made trips like this before. Many times. Each one was

supposed to be the last, the one that resulted in a permanent situation. Instead, each one resulted in a return trip. Return to what? Brookhaven Shelter, that dismal holding tank for the unwanted, or a respite house where there was at least someone who was trying to be helpful, or wherever else they had room to keep her until the next family who might take her came around. And then off she went again. She had long ago abandoned hope that the next place would be the one that actually worked, where she could create some sort of normal stable life like the one every single kid around her seemed to have. For Blue, this car and the woman who drove it, Mrs. Jamison, were the only stable parts of her life.

Blue had started to fantasize that instead of stopping, they could just keep going. They could live in this car, driving and driving forever, visiting a hundred new places each year. They would never stay for long—just long enough to experience something new but not long enough for something bad to start happening. Then they would hop in the car and take off for another new place. They would never need to get to know anyone else. Blue would never have to pretend to be someone she was not. She would never again have to stand by her familiar beat-up old duffel bags and watch as Mrs. Jamison drove off, carrying hope and stability with her. Blue sighed. She was going to have to go through the ritual again. There was no driving off into the sunset for her.

She concentrated on the sounds again to stop these uncomfortable thoughts from rattling around in her brain. The rumbling wind was soothing and she eased the window down a tad more to make it louder. The distraction worked for a while, but the thoughts managed to elbow their way back in and circle round and round. It was impossible to stop her brain sometimes, but she managed to at least guide it to thinking about less stressful things, like some of the things Mrs. Jamison had said earlier in the trip. Well, not “said” exactly, more like what she thought. What Mrs. Jamison had said out loud were the details of the new situation, which Blue had listened to politely but wasn’t interested in

processing just then. She caught the gist of it, there was a lot of blah, blah, blah about the new family, and something about Mrs. O'Day and blah, blah. Blue tucked the words away for a later time when she could control her reaction to them. She didn't want to deal with them just then. Thankfully, Mrs. Jamison didn't rattle on and on. She only gave Blue the essentials and then stopped. It was like she knew how much Blue could handle at a time, and then she knew when to be quiet.

When Mrs. Jamison was quiet, Mrs. Jamison was thoughtful. Blue paid more attention to Mrs. Jamison's thoughts than her words, because they were more than just the monotonous drone of pointless information about Blue's new situation. They were the deep thoughts of the true Mrs. Jamison, and they comforted her.

*"I DON'T KNOW HOW THIS GIRL MANAGES TO SURVIVE ALL THESE CHANGES . . . THREE FAMILIES AND A GROUP HOME IN FOUR YEARS,"* thought Mrs. Jamison. She looked at Blue and Blue gave her a small half-smile. *"AND THE TROUBLE SHE'S SEEN, AND LOOK AT HER. HERE SHE SITS, AS CALM AND PEACEFUL AS A SAINT . . . I HONESTLY DON'T THINK I COULD DO IT . . . SHE MUST HAVE SOME INNER STRENGTH I DON'T HAVE . . . WHY CAN'T THERE BE MORE FAMILIES OUT THERE WILLING TO TAKE THESE OLDER KIDS . . . ALL THEY WANT IS THE YOUNGER ONES . . . I GUESS I CAN'T BLAME THEM . . . IT'S HARD TAKING IN THESE KIDS WHO HAVE SEEN SO MUCH TROUBLE . . . THANK GOODNESS WE GOT THE O'DAYS THIS TIME."*

Blue couldn't hear everyone's thoughts, and some people's thoughts she didn't want to hear, but Mrs. Jamison was a rarity, a truly good soul, so she didn't mind listening in on her thoughts. They had a musical, lyrical quality to them. They were the sounds of a thoughtful person. They were a far cry from the bitter, spiteful thoughts of truly vicious people, people Blue sometimes couldn't ignore, people she sometimes couldn't control her reactions to. Sometimes those people's thoughts just crossed a line, and Blue couldn't let them get away with it. And that is one of the reasons why she was sitting in this car. Again. Another year, another new foster family, a new school, new vicious kids, new idiot teachers,

new trips to principal's office, new breakdowns, new violent outbursts, new counselors, new therapists.

Another year to survive.

The car slowed down and Mrs. Jamison pulled to the curb next to an old Victorian-style house. It had gray shingles and white trim, which gave it an ancient, wise look. A small yard was surrounded by a low white fence, and lilacs were tucked about the foundation of the house like a fragrant and colorful scarf around an old lady's neck. From the front door came a solidly built woman whose age was hard to determine but whose face showed a lot of experience. Mrs. O'Day, no doubt. She had a nice smile, Blue thought. It was a comforting smile, even to Blue's hardened eyes. Not overdone, not forced, not artificial. It was very natural. She noted it, but took no encouragement from it. Never get optimistic, it will just make it worse later when you get let down. Again.

She closed her eyes and took one last note of the pressure and warmth of the car seat on her legs and felt the vibration of the car stop as Mrs. Jamison turned it off. Blue sighed, took a breath, opened her eyes, and opened the door. As she got out, she put on her practiced act of being an ordinary girl joining an ordinary family looking forward to an ordinary year. It was like putting on an old well-worn sweater. But underneath the sweater, her heart was empty.

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**WILL**

**W**ill was awake and had been for some time, but he kept his eyes closed just for the pleasant sensation: no more school. He didn't have to jump out of bed onto the cold floor and struggle into his clothes while stumbling down the hall. No more squinting into the glare of the brightly-lit bathroom only to have the door slammed in his face by his little sister, Rose, as she slipped in ahead of him.

No, those mornings were gone for a while, replaced by the luxury of sleeping in—letting the sun warm him in bed. He knew it would end all too soon, in a couple of weeks when his summer job started. But now it was nice to just bask in the glory of having gotten through 9th grade and looking forward to being in 10th without having to deal with being at the bottom of the pecking order anymore.

Being a freshman sucked. He had no idea it would be so sucky. The only decent part about it was that he managed to squeak onto the JV basketball team. For once he actually thanked God for living in a small Vermont town with only a Division 2 high school team. There was no way he would have made it on a Division 1 JV team. And now he was a sophomore! That word had such a delicious

sound to it, Will thought. It sounded like freedom. It was like getting released from prison.

It was so pleasant just lying there with that thought that he didn't even mind when Rose came in and plunked herself down on his bed with a bowl of cereal in her hand and a significant look on her face. She looked away and munched thoughtfully for a while, glancing at Will from time to time, waiting for him to get annoyed. It wasn't working. There wasn't much that could knock Will out of his good mood. She leaned over toward him, close to his face, and slurped a spoonful of cereal as long and slow and as annoyingly as she could. Then she chewed it open-mouthed, smacking loudly. Will just laughed.

"Wow, are you in a good mood today!" she said, trying to sound disappointed. Will could tell she wasn't really. She could be ridiculously annoying sometimes but today it was just an act. She was glad school was over, too.

Rose leaned back and sat cross-legged, concentrating on her breakfast. "I heard the O'Days took in another kid," she said as she sucked down another spoonful and glanced slyly at him.

That *did* catch him by surprise, but he wasn't about to let on. "Oh my goodness!" he said. "The O'Days took in a foster child! What a shock! What will the neighbors say!"

Rose snorted and laughed.

The O'Days were the neighbors across the street and down the block. They lived in a huge old Victorian house. The whole neighborhood had always treated "Ma Beth" and "Pa Bill" O'Day almost like second parents. A new foster kid at their house was as normal as a March snow storm.

"Have you seen him . . . her . . . IT . . . yet?" asked Will.

Rose snorted again. "No, but I know it's a girl. Fourteen I think." Rose frowned. "Why can't they ever get a girl who's closer to my age?"

"Well, I think it's because they keep most girls your age in a cage at the zoo," said Will, "or they should."

Rose stuck her tongue out. It was all milky and covered with granola crumbs.

“Gross! See what I mean? You animal,” Will said. But Rose had succeeded in getting his attention. A girl. Fourteen was only a year or two younger than he was. Probably an eighth grader, he thought. Make that ninth grader now. An incoming freshman. Lucky her.

“I don’t suppose you heard what grade she’s in?”

“Nope, and we zoo animals would never tell you if we did. We stick together,” said Rose. “Sam said her nickname is Little Fox.” Sam was the youngest O’Day and the same age as Rose. “Perfect for being in the zoo. I think I’ll call myself something zoo-ey—maybe Meerkat!”

“Little Fox? That’s not her real name.”

“So . . . that’s even *more* interesting,” said Rose. “Sam said her actual name is Blue. Don’t you think that is a cool name? I wonder if it is short for something else, like Blooo . . . oom? Blossom?”

“How about Blueberry? Or Blooper, or Bluto?”

Rose laughed. “That would be really biz-arre.” She had recently locked onto the word ‘bizarre’ and used it every chance she had, as only a nine-year-old sister can, with a long buzzing “bizzzz” and a slow, dangling “aarr”.

“Anyway, that’s all Sam knew except that he says she doesn’t talk much and just stays in her bedroom a lot.”

Not unusual for a new foster kid at the O’Days, thought Will. “I bet I would hunker down in my room for a while if I were a newbie in that house.”

“Yeah, or if you did something wrong.” She looked at Will with a sly grin.

“And . . . that would be?”

“She had an ‘incident’ the second day she was in the house.”

“An incident? The second day?” said Will. “How long has she been there?” He thought his good friend Wu would have told him about it at school, but come to think of it, Will had been concentrating so much on final exams, he really didn’t see Wu much in the

past week. Wu was another foster kid at the O'Days. His full name was Ben Wu, but everyone called him "Wu".

"Since last Wednesday, I guess," said Rose.

Right in the middle of exams, thought Will. "Huh," he said. "So what was this 'incident'?"

Rose picked up her empty cereal bowl and started heading out of Will's bedroom. "Uh, I think I hear Mom calling..."

Okay, thought Will, now she is starting to be my familiar annoying sister. "So are you going to tell me?"

Rose turned and said limply, "Tell you what?" And then she started accelerating out the door.

He jumped out of bed and chased her squealing down the hall. He caught up to her, grabbed her around the waist and started tickling her until she finally yelled "Stop . . . stop . . . stop!" between gasps of laughter.

Rose finally managed to get out the answer. "She . . . killed . . . the screamer!"

"What?" He stopped tickling her. Rose was still trying to get her breath. "She killed the screamer?"

"Yeah!" said Rose.

The screamer was a relic of technology that survived at the O'Day household because they got by on a lot of second-hand stuff. It was a remote control for their ancient cathode-ray tube television. Will and Rose and their parents had a peculiar reaction to those older remote controls that no one else had. Some caused a slightly annoying ringing in their head, but the O'Day's TV remote created an excruciating, high-pitched screech. It was almost unbearable to Will and Rose, so they had christened it 'the screamer' and had often thought about putting it out of its misery themselves. But it appeared that Blue had beaten them to it.

Will looked at Rose. In his head, he formed words, "*YOU DON'T THINK . . .*"

Deep in the cortex of Will's brain these words generated an electrical impulse that filtered through an intricate web of neurons



that were as rare as they were ancient in humans. All Will felt was a slight tingle at the back of his eyes that was as familiar as breathing to him. What he didn't feel was the invisible stream of photons that resulted from this tingle and went straight into the eyes of his sister.

*"I DON'T KNOW!"* she replied. Her words formed in his head as if he were thinking them to himself. She continued, *"SAM SAID SHE THREW IT OUT THE DOOR AND BOLTED RIGHT UP TO THE THIRD-FLOOR BEDROOM THE REST OF THE DAY!"*

*"WOW, SHE TOOK THE THIRD-FLOOR BEDROOM?"*

The third floor was more of an attic than a regular floor. It was usually the last choice for anyone living in the O'Day's house. With the summer coming on, it was also the hottest, most miserable place in the house. He wondered how long 'Little Fox' would last up there.

Will looked away from Rose, but she continued out loud, "Sam says she chose it! She could have had Nate's room, and Nate would have had to move to the third-floor bedroom, but she wanted it."

A name of 'Blue', a nickname of 'Little Fox', the third-floor bedroom, and the apparent executioner of the screamer. Will didn't know what to think. He knew why he and Rose wanted to destroy the screamer, but he didn't know if that was the same reason Blue actually did it. On the other hand, what else could it possibly be?

"Well, wouldn't be summer if we didn't have a crazy story from the O'Day house."

"I know, right?" said Rose with an impish grin.

"Ugh! Don't say that stupid phrase. You sound like a valley girl," he said, knowing exactly where this was going.

"I know . . . right?"

"Okay, now you're just trying to be irritating."

"I know . . . . . right?"

"You're asking for it."

"I know . . . . . RIGHT?"

Will lunged for her but she was ready and had a head start. She ran down the hall, lobbing "I know, RIGHT?" over her shoulder

until she ducked into her room and slammed her door behind her with a final squeal.

“You crazy animal!”

From behind the closed door came, “I know, RIGHT?” followed by hysterical laughter.

He stood in the hall. Yeah, right, goofball. You win. He laughed to himself. He liked his sister, she was fun. But his mind was distracted. This incident with the screamer and the new girl—there couldn’t be any other reason for it, could there? Then again, a lot of crazy characters had come through the O’Day’s house. He was just hoping that this might be the kind of crazy he had been looking for his entire life.

## THE PARK

**I**t was past noon by the time Will got dressed and ate some breakfast. His mom was already out of the house, his dad was at work, and Rose was next door with a friend. Will decided it was time to ride down to the park and see if Wu was at the basketball court.

Will hopped on his bike. His route took him right past the O'Day's house. Just as he was passing by the gate at the end of the O'Day's side yard, he glanced to his right and up at the third floor of the O'Day's house. He caught a glimpse of a face in the single gable window that was near the peak of the steep roof. It was the face of a girl with long dark hair. She was looking straight out as if seeing something on the horizon. It had to be the new girl.

The third-floor bedroom was a familiar room. When it was vacant, and it often was, he and Wu would go up there. From that gable window, you could look out over the tops of the neighbor's trees all the way across the valley to the countryside on the other side of the river. He couldn't blame her for wanting it. It may have been a small room and hot in the summer, but it had the best views of any house on the street.

Will got to the park and, as he expected, Wu was there. Wu spent a lot of time on the basketball court at the park, by himself or with whoever showed up. He was alone today, just dribbling intricate patterns on the court and working on his shooting.

“Hey, Wu,” Will said as he hopped off his bike. “I hear you have a new foster sister.”

Wu set himself for a shot and let it fly. The ball soared gracefully and went through the hoop. Nothing but net. “Yeah, first one in a while. First sister that is.”

Will joined Wu on the court, grabbed the ball, and passed it back to Wu. “So an older sister, younger sister? Has she got boobs yet?”

Wu chucked the ball at Will. “Watch it there, that’s my new sister you’re talking about. She’s younger and no, not really. At least none to speak of.”

Will chased the ball, grabbed it and made a layup. “So must be weird having a girl in the house. What’s she like?”

Wu retrieved the ball and dribbled it thoughtfully for a moment or two. “Hard to say. She hasn’t said a word to me yet, but I think she’s okay.” He paused. “She is . . . different.” He took another shot. “Kind of serious-looking all the time.”

Will retrieved the rebound and tried a layup. “So in other words, pretty much as disturbed as the rest of you.”

“Maybe, but I’m sure she’s a better shot than you.” The ball bounced off the rim. Wu and Will fought for the rebound, and Wu came down with it. “After all, I don’t think there is anyone who could be worse.”

“Very funny, Mr. Freakishly Tall Asian Orphan Boy.”

Wu just smiled and swished another pretty shot from the foul line. Wu had been with the O’Days longer than any of the other kids. He was abandoned as a baby, probably because he had a severe cleft palate, and a state agency picked him up. The O’Days took him in when he was four years old and found funding to fix

his cleft palate with plastic surgery. Now Wu was fifteen, six feet tall and still growing. He was also the star on the JV basketball team, and the Varsity coach was eyeing him hungrily. Wu was far from handsome, but he wasn't ugly either, and he definitely had his head on straight.

"So, what's different about her?" asked Will, ". . . besides the fact that she hasn't said anything to you, which I don't find a bit strange."

"Oh, you are just so hilarious today!" Wu dribbled the ball as he walked toward Will but then he got serious. "Well to start, she has a pretty interesting name: Blue. I've heard of dogs named Blue, but never a person." He stopped dribbling and held the ball. "And clearly she is a hard case, or she wouldn't have been admitted to the hallowed hallways of the O'Day insane asylum. And speaking from experience, I think this is a head-hard case."

"A head-hard case. What a surprise. Are any of you not head-hard cases?"

Wu bonked him in the head with the ball. "Looks like your head's pretty hard, smart ass."

Will laughed as he snatched the ball out of Wu's hand and did a fast break layup. "So what does the head-hard case have against your remote control?" Will looked back to see how Wu would react to the question.

Wu snorted and said, "Yeah, that was really something. I mean, remember Sean, when he first came? First thing he did was punch a hole in the wall and scare the crap out of all of us!"

Sean had been an interesting member of the O'Day household, and pretty harmless, unless you were a wall. He never hit anyone but had a compulsive self-abuse problem.

"Well, this came out of the blue," Wu said smirking and giving Will a sidelong glance. Will grimaced. Yeah I get it, thought Will. Blue came out of the blue. He didn't even have to say it out loud. He just rolled his eyes at Wu.

Wu went on. "I mean the caseworker warned us that she was kind of prone to compulsive behavior, whatever that means, but she didn't say anything about something like this. You know she moved into the third-floor bedroom?"

"Yeah, I heard through Rose through Sam."

"Well, she's just been staying there almost all the time so far. And we've been leaving her alone. Ma Beth figures she'll come out when she's ready. Somehow she slips out of her room when no one is looking and sneaks down to the bathroom or down to the kitchen to, you know, eat and wash and go to the bathroom. She doesn't eat with us at the table, she just sneaks down sometime at night and grabs food from the refrigerator and sneaks back to her room."

"That's wild. Kinda cool, actually. Of course, I can't blame her for not wanting to eat with you animals."

"Yuck yuck Mr. Comedian. So anyway, last night I was in the rec room, you know next to the kitchen. I made a snack and was watching TV. Nothing much was on, and I was kind of mindlessly running through the channels using the remote control. Then the next thing I knew, she was standing right in front of me with the remote in her hand. I had no idea she was around and then *boom*—there she was. I didn't even feel her grab the remote out of my hand! It was like she materialized out of nowhere. Well, she looked at me. I tell you, she had a weird look on her face. It wasn't wild, or angry, or sad, it was just kind of . . ." Wu had to think for a moment, ". . . well it was like 'here we go all over again.' Then she threw the remote out the back door smack against the patio wall and ran up to her room. Man, she is quick and very quiet." He had a touch of admiration in his voice and he cracked a little smile.

Will ruminated on this. She was quick. Quick as a little fox. "That's pretty wild. But not the wildest story to come out of your house," he said.

"True," said Wu, "Never a dull moment with the O'Days, right?"

Will said, "You got that right." He grabbed the ball from Wu and

took off down the court. The conversation was over for now. They got down to the business at hand which was playing basketball. They played “horse” a few times and Will managed to actually get up to “h-o-r” once but only because Wu was going easy on him. Some other kids showed up and they pretty much used up the rest of the afternoon playing basketball.

As it got close to dinnertime they both headed back home. Will walked his bike back with Wu, and Wu told Will more about Blue’s background. Turns out her real first name really was just Blue, not short for anything else, and she came from a long string of foster homes.

“Apparently nothing has worked out yet,” Wu said. “No details, just nothing worked out. She doesn’t have any family, so if she doesn’t settle in somewhere she’ll just wind up aging out.”

Will knew that most orphans who go through foster homes wind up either back with family members or getting adopted. Unfortunately, a lot of them never find a permanent home, and they wind up “aging out”; they turn eighteen and leave the foster system and out on their own without ever having had anything they could call a family. Will knew all this because of all the O’Days he had known. He spent many hours in their kitchen, and Mrs. O’Day would tell him all about the foster system and how it works.

“So how did she become an orphan?” asked Will.

“Her family died in a house fire when she was ten. She was the only survivor,” said Wu. He looked at Will. “Can you imagine that? Losing your whole family when you’re ten? Man, that sucks.”

“Yeah, but you lost your family when you were a baby.”

“But I didn’t even know them. I can’t even tell you what they looked like.” Wu paused and then continued. “They said she had a lot of trouble at first. I mean, who wouldn’t after that! They didn’t give a lot of details, but I guess it was a long time before they even tried her out in a foster home. It must have been a disaster if we’re the fourth home she’s been in. They told us that she was very reclu-

sive and hard to communicate with, and moody. I don't know. She seems pretty okay to me. I think she just likes being left alone."

They both walked thoughtfully the rest of the way to the O'Day house. Will broke the silence as they arrived. "Well, good luck with her. You better lock up the rest of your remotes, though, if you want them to survive."

Wu gave him a shove and said, "Hey, don't diss my sister." He wasn't smiling. That's the way Wu was. Blue wasn't even there for two days, hadn't said a word to Wu, and he was already protecting her.

"Hey, sorry, man. I think it's great you got a sister. She sounds a lot less boring than you other zombies." He held up his fist.

Wu's severe look faded. He wasn't exactly smiling, but he gave Will a fist bump and said, "Tell me about it, stiff."

Will watched as Wu went in the house, but didn't move to get on his bike and head home. Instead, he looked up to see if Blue was still there in the window. For some reason, maybe because of what Wu had told him, he wasn't surprised to see her in almost the same spot as she had been earlier. Her face was a little pinker now because of the light of the early evening. The darkness of the room behind her, combined with her dark hair, made her face almost luminescent, but her expression was just as wan and distant as it was before.

Will looked back down and started to get on his bike, and then stopped. From what Wu had said, it wasn't likely. Blue was probably more of a troubled kid with a compulsion to destroy things. That was more the mold of the O'Day orphans. But, still, he had to try it. He looked up at the window again. She was still staring, clearly lost in thought. Was it too far to try? It was still pretty light out. He knew *he* could pick it up from that far, even during the day, but he was not sure how sensitive she was, if she was at all. What the heck, it wasn't like anyone else would hear it, at least no one he'd met in his lifetime, outside his family.

He gave it a try. He started with a "*CLICK, CLICK, CLICK,*"—some-



thing he used to get his sister's or parent's attention. Everyone in his family had a different way of getting each other's attention. His father's sounded like he was clearing his throat. Will liked to click. The click was easy to project and would bounce off of reflective objects better than other sounds.

She didn't respond. He felt the familiar disappointment rising in his gut. Still, he kept his eyes on her and clicked a few more times, and then he saw her move. Her head turned to one side, and then the other. She looked puzzled and then startled. Then she looked down straight at him. As soon as her eyes were on his, in his head he said, "HEY," like when you met a friend on the street. She instantly froze and her mouth went slightly open and then, as if she realized she had let some surprise show, she snapped it shut again. Then, with just a moment's hesitation, she slapped the curtains closed and disappeared.

Will stood there, just a little bit dazed. He was not sure that that had really happened. He had been hopeful, because of the story about the screamer, but he honest-to-god had not expected a reaction. He had been disappointed so many other times in his life that he had pretty much given up hope of finding anyone outside his family that could communicate the same way they could. He had tried a thousand times with a thousand different people. The result was always the same. A thousand failures.

Oh, he had gotten reactions that he *thought* could have been real, but they always turned out to be just false reads. Mirages. Wishful thinking. Was this a mirage? Was he just imagining it because he wanted it to be true? She had reacted to his "HEY," hadn't she? Or had she? It could have been coincidence. Maybe she was reacting to something else and happened to look down and then, when she saw him, was surprised. What girl wouldn't react like that if a boy was staring at her?

No way. No one had ever reacted like this before.

He looked back up. Curtains still closed. Damn it! He waited, but just for a moment. He wanted to try again, see if he could find

out for sure, but he didn't want the O'Days to spot him and wonder why he was still hanging around. "Oh just standing here staring at Blue." Right, you weirdo. He took one last glance. Closed curtains. Damn.

He started walking his bike home, thinking. It had to be true. It needs to be true. For once in his life, it needed to be true. He pounded his handlebars with his fists. He needed to do something else to find out for sure. This was going to drive him nuts until he knew the answer. He stopped. Just go back to the O'Days, he thought. Go up to the third-floor bedroom, hammer on the door until she opens up and confront her face-to-face. Why not? Screw the consequences. Just do it, he thought. For once in your life do something off the straight and narrow. Why the hell not? He turned his bike and took a step and then his irritating brain monitor woke up. "*Whoa, there, don't you think that would be a bad start, Will?*" Who cares! "*What about Wu and his family, wouldn't they find that rude?*" Oh shut up, dammit, you sound like my mother! "*Now now, watch your language!*" Oh God. He was his mother. Damn.

Problem was, his annoying brain monitor was probably right. If Blue was what he was hoping she was, he should be careful about it. No one knew about their family trait and they were careful about that secret. She was probably keeping it secret, too. It's not exactly something you would advertise if you were alone and on your own.

He would think about it overnight. Come up with some approach. He just wasn't sure what it would be. Just as he came to this conclusion, he realized he was standing in front of his house. He must have just kept walking while he was thinking. At that exact moment, his mom stuck her head out the front door and said, "Hey there Mr. Heavy Thinker, why don't you put away that bike and wash up for dinner?"

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A lone figure stood under the trees watching the two boys as they

left the basketball court. A hand raised a cigarette to lips buried in a tawny, well-trimmed beard. A tiny red ember glowed as the man took a long pull. After a pause, a plume of gauzy white smoke streamed out, piling into a confused cloud that rose in a lazy swirl that partially obscured the pensive face behind it.

The man followed the boys with his eyes as they walked away. The tall lanky one had a ball under his arm, and the shaggy, scrappy one pushed a bike. Nice bike, the man thought. He took another pull on his cigarette and gazed at the deserted court. It was lumpy with age and had cracks and low patches where accumulated dirt created treacherous footing. Stubborn bits of grass poked out here and there, but the kids had made the most of it. They had danced lightly over the slippery dirt patches and instinctively adjusted for the odd angle of the ball whenever it bounced off a jagged crack. They actually weren't half bad—might even hold their own in the upper east side, he thought. He was glad they'd left, though. It was getting towards business time and the fewer non-customers around, the better, and these boys weren't customers. At least not yet. You never knew in these little rural towns.

He took a last pull from the cigarette before dropping it to the ground and grinding it into the dirt. He exhaled a last swirl of smoke and watched as it danced with the breeze before finally dissipating into the cobalt blue sky. He was getting to like it here. Business was good, law enforcement was lax, and there was no competition. And now he had a new kid to help him—meaning a lot more money for him for not a lot of work—as long as this kid panned out. They didn't always, but it seemed like this one would. Had the right hard-luck background and fly-under-the-radar attitude, plus a strong motivation to make a quick buck and stay out of jail. All good qualities. But most importantly, this kid would keep his mouth shut. He had made him keenly aware of what would happen if he didn't.

But right now, it was a beautiful sunny late afternoon, the park

was quiet, and the sight of his first customer walking into view made it perfect. It was a reliable customer that didn't freak out and make a scene. Just a quick swap and everyone was happy.

Yeah, he liked this town. Maybe he would stay longer than he had originally planned.

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