

Our Last Adventure: In Memory of Martha

A story by Vivian Ralickas



ALDO has once again partnered with YouthAIDS to launch its 2009 ALDO Fights AIDS (AFA) campaign. This year ALDO's world-class designers have created three unique AFA Tote Bags to raise money in support of YouthAIDS' education and prevention programs in South Africa.

To accompany the totes ALDO commissioned "Our Last Adventure: In Memory of Martha," a fictional narrative that elaborates on the bond of friendship shared by three high school kids and celebrates the life of Martha, a teen who died as the result of an accident. The story speaks to the universal sense of loss experienced by those who grieve the untimely death of a loved one. This is especially significant to the AIDS pandemic: it kills one child every minute and, with over 15 million children orphaned to date, continues to rob generations of their parents. The consequences of these deaths are far reaching — the impact on the families, friends, and communities of those affected by the disease cannot be overestimated.

Martha's death was the result of an accident; had she received help in time, she would have lived. The importance of education and knowledge are delivered through the story's positive, life-affirming message in a way that is in keeping with YouthAIDS' motivational outreach programs and initiatives that educate and inspire youth to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS.

The point here is simple: HIV/AIDS is a preventable disease. With adequate funding and support, young people can learn to be proactive about staying healthy and coping with the disease. With YouthAIDS, a little goes a long way. \$10, the cost of an AFA tote, can help educate and protect a young person from HIV for one year with life-saving information, products, services, and care to last a lifetime.

Join ALDO in the fight against AIDS

Chapter 1: Getting Lost



The sun loomed large in the tawny, late afternoon sky. We walked slowly, in silence, as the oppressive heat bore down on us. To lie down, even if for a brief second.... The horizon stretched ahead endlessly: a sea of straggly pine trees punctuated by open spaces of dry mud. High above the hills carrion birds circled in the distance, and we could hear swarms of flies buzzing nearby. As we made our way through the ravaged woodland leading off from the abandoned logging road, our heavy footfalls echoed softly on the faded, barren soil. A thin film of dust, stirred up by our movements, coated our clothes and every inch of exposed skin on our bodies. I could feel the blind pressure of Martha's hand on mine as she tightened her grip involuntarily. The sweat streaked down her forehead, tracing a sinuous path on her delicate, dust-covered face. Her dark brown eyes held mine as she bit down hard on her swollen lower lip. My throat constricted — I turned away from her and stopped. Long shadows distorted by the deep cracks in the dirt extended behind us. In a gruff voice Ramy insisted, "We have to keep moving." "Hold on, Martha needs water," I replied lightly, trying to conceal my anxiety. She seemed to be getting worse. Although all three of us had been lucky, getting away with superficial cuts and bruises, the accident had shaken her up pretty badly. She walked along, half in a daze, barely making eye contact with Ramy and I. Once or twice she almost tripped over. Concerned, we slowed down our pace and kept on either side of her, reaching for her hand whenever she seemed to struggle to find her footing. As the path narrowed and became more tortuous Ramy walked ahead, steering us away from holes. Now we stood facing each other under the cover of thin pine trees. Ramy was glaring at me. I let go of Martha's hand and nervously looked away. Out of the corner of my eyes I watched him kick aimlessly at the dirt as she began to fumble through her backpack in search of her water bottle.

Earlier that morning we'd set off on another one of our adventures, usually the product of some ridiculous scheme dreamed up over late-night shenanigans. Since grade eight, almost every weekend in the summer and

well into the fall we'd hang out at the park down by the lake. A whole bunch of us, me, Ramy, Martha, Tom and his sister Sue, Mike, Jason, and TJ, would camp out on the bleachers and get silly, tossing pebbles into the water by the light of the moon. It was on a night like this, on a warm weekend in early October just a couple of months before the King Kong remake hit the theatres, that we'd come up with the now infamous "gorilla guerrilla" plan. Dressed up in gorilla costumes, over thirty of us stormed through afternoon rush-hour traffic on Halloween. Martha and Kate went as Jane, wearing white dresses and blonde wigs, and the rest of us took turns chasing them past oncoming cars.

As always, it had all happened over nothing. Late one night Ramy and TJ started wrestling with each other for no reason, and Kate and Martha kept calling them monkeys. Then all of a sudden everybody just went ape shit, squatting and grunting like baboons. Even the girls joined in after a little while, squealing more than grunting and giggling hysterically. That's when Martha had another one of her ideas. "Hey! We should totally do this for real!" she shouted out to all of us. At first no one seemed to notice, but she insisted, yelling and gesturing to get our attention. "Whaddya mean, for real?" Ramy had answered, moving towards her with an exaggerated, bestial swagger. The others snickered. "This isn't real enough for you?" he grunted as he lifted her off her feet and threw her over his shoulder. Martha's cheeks flushed. She punched his back in protest as he spun her around. "Ramy! No!" she shrieked, half-laughing. Ramy wouldn't stop. "Come on! Put me down!" Her voice had a shrill edge to it — I could tell she was getting upset. Ramy always managed to upset her. I could sense that the rest of them were about to start up again, too. TJ and Mike whispered excitedly, so I jumped in before they got carried away. "Come on guys, let 'er talk!" I yelled out. Frowning, Ramy lowered her onto the grass. When Martha got up, she looked straight at me, smiling. I just stood there, grinning back.

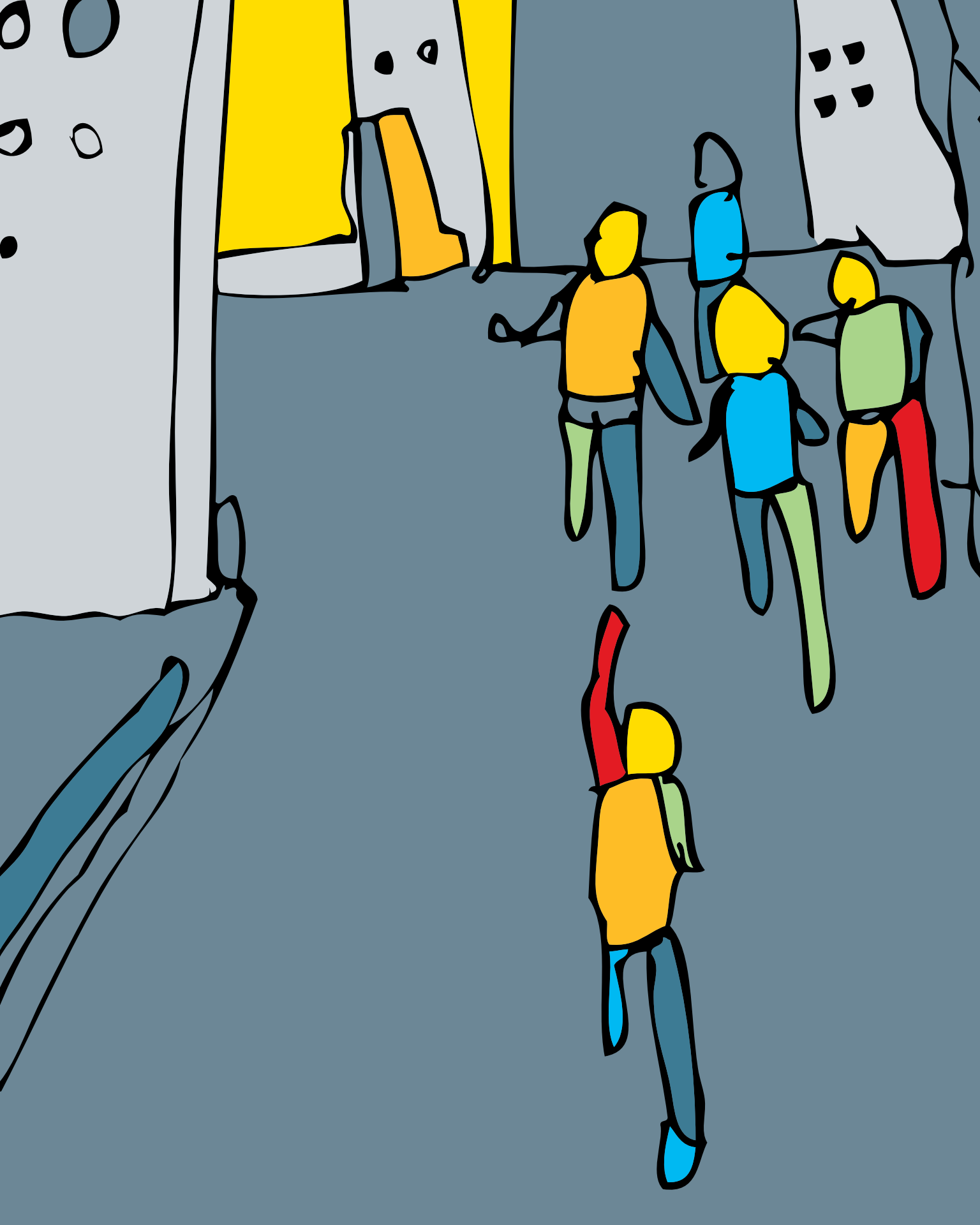
So she told us. It really was a great idea. Before she'd finished explaining it everybody wanted in. Word got around too, so during the two weeks before we staged

the event our small group of eight swelled to more than three dozen. “If we’re gonna do this,” I insisted during the heated brainstorming session that followed Martha’s explanation, “we need a plan.” Everyone gathered around closer. “We need to know where and when to do it for maximum effect. Like, what’s the best place? The best time? The best day?” “Halloween!” they all shouted. “That’s on a Monday,” Kate pointed out, “not a great night for partying — and we’re at school all day.” “What about right before dinner, at rush hour? Then lots of people will see us,” Mike added thoughtfully. “Yeah — traffic will move slow, so we can come out of nowhere and just swarm them! They’re gonna freak out!” Ramy interrupted excitedly. And so it goes. Some of us went all out and rented these really cool, full-on gorilla costumes. Others made their own, stapling or sewing fake leather strips and fur to old sweaters and track pants. What a day that was! Yeah.... Not everything went according to plan, though. My parents hadn’t been too thrilled to pick me up at the police station, locked behind bars. Martha and Ramy made fun of me for weeks for getting caught. They even started calling me JB — short for jailbird. “What were you thinking, JB? Standing there, in the middle of the intersection? Didn’t you see us scatter when the sirens started blaring?” Ramy blurted out in disbelief the next time I met up with them. “At least I have guts. Besides, I’m not the only one who got caught,” I replied sorely. “Yeah, you coward,” Martha teased Ramy, “you ditched your costume pretty fast.” “Well, at least my butt didn’t end up all over the net,” he answered boisterously. The three of us couldn’t stop laughing. Video footage of our event ended up on You Tube, showing the backside of two Janes running gleefully, surrounded by a frenzied herd of gorillas. We even got a write-up in the local paper with the headline: “Monkey Business on Main Street.”

This time around our plan didn’t seem crazy at all. If anything, it was one of the tamest we’d ever carried through. I mean, everybody goes camping. No big deal there. “Wouldn’t it be cool to go someplace where no one could find us — someplace off the charts, you know?” Martha had said one night in the spring to Ramy

and I. “You mean somewhere Google map can’t find?” Ramy inquired casually. “Yeah right,” I said grimly, rolling my eyes, “they can probably give you an infrared reading of our exact location — there’s no place you can go these days without being found.” “Lighten up, cybergeek,” Ramy scoffed, “I bet we could go under the radar if we really wanted to.” Martha nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I mean, we just have to find some place secluded and forget to bring our cell phones.” “Yeah, but where? We can’t get too far over a weekend,” I replied stubbornly. “Ok, maybe not,” Martha considered, “but —” “Hey! What about heading up through the abandoned logging road?” Ramy broke in, “there hasn’t been anyone up there in years.” “Oh, yeah! And we could do some survival camping, you know? Like, no cell phones, no tents, just basic stuff — a map, a compass, sleeping bags, canned food... we could pick berries along the way and drink from streams!” Martha responded enthusiastically. “Oh boy. Here we go,” I mumbled to myself. “Come on, JB — you too chicken?” Ramy said mockingly while elbowing me in the arm. “What kind of boy scout are you?” “If we’re gonna do this,” I answered in an false tone of exasperation as Ramy smiled and Martha’s eyes gleamed with excitement, “we’d better figure it out right.” “Of course,” Martha chirped in. “Ok. We need a map. And we need a plan,” I continued soberly. “We need to decide what we’ll need in terms of provisions,” Martha rejoined. “And where to ditch the car,” Ramy added meditatively, “so we can get back to it.” We looked at each other for a couple of seconds, wide-eyed and tense with anticipation. “This is going to be awesome!!!!” Martha exclaimed. “Hey,” she continued eagerly, “we should keep a bogus log too — and maybe, say, hide it in the woods in a bottle or something for someone to find someday — make it look like we were stranded, or being hunted or something crazy like that.” “Steve,” Ramy said in earnest, “you should write it.” “Game on!” I replied to both of them, “I love it!”

Chapter 2: In the City



We couldn't have asked for better weather that Saturday. The blue sky stretched for miles without interruption, and the breeze blowing through the car windows smelled dry and green. Although it was only mid-morning, the heat was already palpable. It rose off the asphalt, distorting the horizon framed by the windshield. It was a little like looking at scenery through a glass of water. Beside me everything was a blur of colours as we cut through the landscape.

"Aw, stop skipping ahead, Ramy! I like that song!" Martha complained. Ramy, who sat in the backseat, had leaned over and reached for my mp3 player, which was hooked up to the car's stereo system. "Relax, Mar. I just wanna see what else Steve's got in here." Engrossed by the road map, I paid little attention to Martha or Ramy as they squabbled over music. "Hey, Mar," I interrupted, my eyes still on the map, "make sure to turn off after the next exit — there should be an unmarked dirt path that leads directly to the old logging road." "Ok, I'll look out for it," Martha replied anxiously, both hands firmly gripping the steering wheel of her parents' old Buick. Ahead of us the winding, black ribbon of highway seemed to unfurl itself as we drove. "That's it," I exclaimed suddenly as we sped by a discreet, overgrown path branching off the highway. "Oh crap! I passed it!" Martha muttered in frustration. "Just put 'er in reverse," Ramy broke in, "there's nobody behind us." "You can't reverse on a highway!" I retorted. Martha slowed down and pulled over onto the soft shoulder. The car came to a full stop before she started to drive backwards. "Yeah, good one, Mar," Ramy said in encouragement. I shook my head, smiling in disbelief. Martha shrugged her shoulders and smiled back mischievously, her eyes fixed on the rear-view mirror. "What else did you want me to do? The next turnoff is, like, a million years away!"

We drove a good distance on the narrow dirt road. The crisp air of the open highway gave way to the damp smell of moss and moulding leaves, and the chirping of birds replaced the deafening noise of the wind that had blown through the car windows. As we made our way

deeper into the grove, the narrowness of the path, with its arc of trees whose branches partially obscured the sunlight, made it seem like we were travelling through a portal to another world. The further away we got from the highway the more the car jerked about on account of the rough terrain; it made me feel like we were in some sort of amusement park ride — so much so that I had to look away from the map to keep myself from getting sick.

"Wow! This road's gonna destroy your parents' suspension!" Ramy commented as we made our way along. "I know!" Martha answered, "That's why I'm going so slow — plus they said I'd get this car next year for college, so I gotta be careful!" "Have you decided where you're going yet?" I asked, folding the map. "No...it kinda depends on what program I get into," she countered matter-of-factly. "I applied to English 'cause I heard their admission standards are low, but I think I really wanna study art.... I'm just not sure if my portfolio's good enough." Come on, Mar," I protested warmly, "you don't give yourself enough credit. You rocked art class all through this year!" She blushed and I noticed the corners of her mouth curl up into a smile, but she kept her eyes focused on the road. "What about you, Ramy? You figured anything out yet?" I enquired, turning back to face Ramy. "I dunno" he replied evasively, "I might take some time off before I go to college." "I bet you've got it all figured out, though," he said quickly, nodding his head. "Well..." I hesitated, a sheepish smile spreading across my face. "Come on, Steve," Martha insisted, her voice full of warmth and admiration, "own up to it. You're the smartest kid in our class." "Yeah, dude," Ramy, declared in agreement, "I've been copying my homework from you since grade seven!" "Ok..." I said, still trying to sound modest, but I was too excited. I carried on, eager for a chance to talk about the future. "I'm hoping to get into this co-op program in computer engineering," I continued enthusiastically, looking over at both Ramy and Martha, "then I can design artificial intelligence. How cool, is that?!" "So you're gonna be one of those mad scientists we see in the movies?" Ramy countered jokingly. Martha started laughing, so he went on: "Hey: you can design yourself

a girlfriend! You know, a hot robot who'll do whatever you want 'er to!" I could feel my cheeks burning as I rolled my eyes and groaned in response.

The brightness up ahead and the unmistakable smell of felled pine pointed to the end of our journey on the narrow forest path. Martha proceeded carefully onto the old logging road. Although it was broader, its muddy, irregular surface meant that she had to swerve to avoid ditches carved out by the rain. "Look, Mar, over there it gets smoother," I said cheerfully. She smiled. "We're gettin' close, guys!" Martha stepped on the gas and sped up a little. I could tell that she was getting more comfortable driving. When we hit an even stretch of road, she reached over for the mp3 player. Manoeuvring the steering wheel with her left hand, she fiddled around with it. "Steve," she said, turning quickly to face me for a second, "can you flip through this for me? I wanna listen to Feist." "Sure," I replied. Behind me, I heard Ramy sigh loudly. "Hey! You've had your turn," she called out to him in mock defiance, "now I'm gonna play something I wanna listen to!" "Oh yeah?" he countered, "Not if I do this!" He reached over with both hands and tried to seize it from me. "Gimme a break guys!" Martha whined. She looked over and attempted to grab hold of the player with her right hand. The three of us ended up fighting over it like a bunch of kids: I struggled between giggles to fend off Ramy, whose grip loosened the harder he laughed, while Martha's right arm wrestled in earnest to take it away from us. We carried on like this for a little while, until all of a sudden I heard Martha scream. In the flash of a second the car skidded and swerved — I felt myself get pulled forward and jerked back just as abruptly before coming to a dead stop.

At first I was so stunned I couldn't move. I just sat there, eyes wide open, unblinking. Tall grass, weeds, thin tree trunks: I could no longer see the road through the cracked windshield. We must have crashed into a ditch. "Everybody ok?" I called out faintly, my voice cracking. "Uhhhhhh...." Ramy moaned in response, "What the hell happened?" I groped around for the seatbelt and pulled myself forward. My neck ached. I turned slowly to face Martha. Her head hung to one side: eyes closed,

face bruised, lower lip swollen. I gripped her right shoulder and shook her lightly. Her limp body offered little resistance. "Holy shit, Ramy! I think Martha's unconscious!" I yelled out as I glanced over at him. "We gotta wake her up!" Ramy lay stretched out in the back, legs twisted towards me, his hands partially covering his face. "Can you get up?" I continued breathlessly, "How bad are you hurt?" "I think I'm ok," he replied, shaking his head. He sat up and stretched his neck. "Uhhh...." he mumbled as he steadied himself. I heard a dull pop when he rotated his left shoulder, fist closed. "I'm good," he said soberly. Using his right arm to steady himself, he lurched forward towards Martha. "Mar," he whispered in her ear, "wake up." No response. We looked at each other in alarm. "Let's get out of the car," he urged, "and get to her from the outside." I tried to open my passenger door but it was jammed. "Give it a good push," Ramy advised while he kicked his door open, "it'll give." I gave it a shove but it wouldn't budge, so I had to crawl out the backseat after Ramy.

As I made my way out Ramy grabbed the handle of Martha's door and gave it a firm tug. It swung open. He reached in for her, holding two fingers to the side of her neck. I stood close behind him, watching intently. "She's...got a pulse," he stated hesitantly. "Martha," I said with impatience, "come on, wake up." We both stared at her nervously, hoping for a sign.... After what seemed like an eternity her head moved slightly and her eyelids fluttered. She opened her eyes. "Martha!!!" Ramy and I both shouted in relief. She stared blankly at us for a few seconds. "Uhhhhhh...." she moaned. "Are you ok?" "Where does it hurt?" Ramy and I asked at the same time. "My head," she mumbled as she raised her left arm feebly. "We're going to get you out of here," Ramy affirmed in a decisive tone. Her unbuckled her seatbelt and placed his right arm around her waist. "Steve, you lift her legs." I grabbed both her legs and waited for his signal. "On three: one, two, three...." I promptly raised her legs. "...Lift!" he commanded as he strained to move her upper body. "What the hell was that?" Ramy barked. "I dunno," I sputtered nervously, "I picked her up on three, not on lift. I didn't know you were gonna say 'lift'!" "Put 'er back down," he said shaking his head

in exasperation, "let's do this again." Martha winced as we struggled to move her back into her seat. "So, uh, just to be sure, on three or on lift?" Ramy rolled his eyes and broke into a smile. "Am I the moron here?" he said mockingly. "Let's do it on 'lift,' yeah?" I smirked and nodded in assent.

Once we managed to get Martha out of the car, we lowered her legs-first onto the grass. "Can you stand up?" Ramy asked her quietly. She nodded weakly. Ramy kept his arm around her waist to steady her. "Here, this way," I said, pointing to the hood. As the two of them made their way over, Martha stopped unexpectedly and almost fell over. When I reached over to help Ramy raise her up she pushed me away and struggled to free herself from Ramy's hold. He and I looked at each other for a moment in bewilderment. "Mar?" I said anxiously as we lowered her onto the grass. "Uhhhh..." she mumbled, and then started to throw up. We crouched down on either side of Martha and waited for her to finish. As I watched over her my mind started to race. I considered our options. "Ugh... that was so gross," Martha grumbled. We helped her get to her feet. She smiled, wiping her mouth on her shirtsleeve. "Oh, dude, that's even grosser!" Ramy teased. She chuckled faintly. "Ok," I chided in jest, "suck it up, princess! You haven't lost your sense of humour, so you can't be as bad as all that."

"Guys, we gotta figure out a plan," Ramy spoke up as we leaned against the hood of the car. "We need help, that's our first priority," I stated. Martha nodded in agreement. "The car's out of the question," Ramy continued, "there's no way we can get it out of that ditch." "Yeah, even if we're lucky enough to get it to start," I added. "Can't we call for help?" Martha started to say in a still feeble voice, but stopped herself. "No cell phones! Duh... that was bright..." "Hey, it doesn't matter anyway," I replied, trying to make her feel better, "they'd be out of range." "And we can't just wait for help to drive by," Ramy considered. "Yeah... the road's been closed for years, no one comes through here anymore," I affirmed, finishing his thought. "I guess our only choice is to walk," Martha declared bleakly. "Hold on a sec," I said to

myself, and went to look for the map. Using the hood as a table, I stretched it open so we could all look at it. "That's us here," I explained, tracing my finger along the highway, "and that's the closest town there." "Hum..." Ramy reflected, "it looks to be roughly four kilometres away. I think we can reach it by nightfall." "We'd better pack light," I added, "and bring only what we need." They both nodded. After a pause Ramy and I both turned and looked at Martha. Some of the colour had returned to her cheeks and she seemed more alert than before, but... "It's ok, guys," she reassured us, "I'll be fine." All three of us stood there a moment, staring at each other without saying a word. "Ok," Ramy called out like a drill sergeant, "let's do this!" "Yeah!" Martha and I answered with all the determination we could muster.

That was three hours ago... Martha took a few sips of water before putting her bottle away again. Her hands shook. "The town's about two hours west of here," Ramy observed as he held the compass to the map, "if we give 'er we can make it before dark." The tremor in his voice betrayed his concern. "Can you make it?" I whispered to Martha. "Yeah, I'm good," she replied quietly, her lips barely moving. Her pupils were so dilated that her eyes seemed almost black. I stood there for a second without knowing what to do. Ramy put his arm around Martha's shoulder. "Everything will be alright," he reassured her, handing the map and compass over to me with his free hand. I glared at him. Ramy returned my stare with an air of indifference. "Your turn, Steve," he stated flatly. I started down the path, head down, fists clenched; I can't explain why, but I suddenly felt rage welling up in me. What if we're lost? I thought to myself. At this pace we'll never get anywhere! No sooner had that thought entered my head than I regretted thinking it. What a selfish jerk I am! Martha was hurt — it wasn't her fault she had trouble keeping up. I glanced behind me; Martha was looking down at her feet while Ramy held her hand and spoke softly to her. She was smiling. I could feel my head begin to ache.

We made our way through the forest at a snail's pace, and it wasn't just on account of Martha. Often the trail was so overgrown that we had to improvise as we went along over gully, rock, and dirt. I still kept the lead. Having to concentrate on staying true to our course kept me from thinking about other things...and gave me the chance to relax a little....“Hey, Steve,” I heard Ramy call out after we'd been walking in silence for some time, “how 'bout a quick break?” We had reached a small clearing. In spite of the open space, the air was no less damp and heavy than in the forest. “Sounds good,” I said casually, turning around to face them. Martha had made her way over to a large, moss-covered rock. She sat down on the ground and leaned against it for support. “What's for dinner?” she asked half-yawning, with an indolent smile. The thought of eating something was a welcome relief. I had been so focused on getting us through the forest that I never realized how hungry I was. “Let's see....” I rummaged through my pack. “I've got a bag of chips, some pop....” Ramy said while he dug through his bag. “Why don't we lay everything out?” Martha suggested. With slow, haphazard movements, she pulled out a towel from her pack and spread it on the ground in front of her. Ramy and I gathered around, sitting on either side, and began to toss whatever food we'd brought with us into the middle.

Soon a small pile formed in front of us. When we were about done, Martha turned her bag upside down right above our little mountain of goodies and gave it a quick shake. “My turn!” she exclaimed. To my surprise, over twenty different chocolate bars came tumbling out of her pack. “All you brought are chocolate bars?” I asked, incredulous. She smiled. “You can have one.” “One? Are you kidding me?” I replied in amazement, “You've got enough there to feed a small village!” “Oh, yeah, I forgot...” she absentmindedly mumbled to herself as she proceeded to dig up a small bag of chocolate-covered cashews from a zipper pouch. I shook my head. “How did you plan to make it through three days on those?” I demanded, trying to control my frustration. Ramy couldn't stop laughing. “See, Ramy doesn't think I'm crazy,” she said stubbornly. Ramy looked over at me

with a self-satisfied grin. “So, JB, what did you bring?” he asked as he groped around the pile. “Nuts?” He picked up a small bundle wrapped in a clear plastic bag. “Dried fruit?” He shot Martha a complicit smile. “Did your mom pack your lunch for you or something?” Martha giggled. He sure knew how to piss me off. My head started to ache again — it felt as though someone was crushing my temples in a vise. “Come on, guys, gimme a break, alright?” I protested angrily. “No one said you had to eat any of what I brought.” Martha stopped laughing. Now she looked at me steadily, her brows furrowed, a look of concern spreading over her face. “Hey, take it easy — I was just kiddin' around,” Ramy countered, still grinning smugly. “No need to get upset.” I was too infuriated to reply. I thought I'd lost my appetite, too — when I reached over and grabbed a handful of nuts I almost choked on them.

We sat there for some time, burdened by an awkward silence. Ramy sat cross-legged, staring abstractedly at the bag of chips from which he was eating. With my legs extended in front of me, I leaned back on my elbows and tried to focus on the trees directly in my field of vision. Martha still sat in front of the boulder, only now she shifted around nervously, unwrapping one of her chocolate bars as audibly as she could. I think she was trying to get our attention, but neither of us took the bait. “This is so lame!” she cried out suddenly. “We're supposed to be having FUN!” Ramy straightened up and glanced over at me. I looked at Martha with a sheepish smile. Her eyes were tearing up. “You two,” she said pointing at each of us, her voice shaking, “kiss and make up!” Ramy and I stared at each other uncomfortably. “Like, NOW!” she commanded in a shrill tone.

Ramy extended the bag of chips he'd been holding. “Want some chips?” he asked me reluctantly. I hesitated. “Only if you take some nuts.” “Are they salted?” he said matter-of-factly. “Course not,” I replied in a deadpan tone. “Hum... I dunno. I like 'em salted,” he countered. “Oh, for goodness' sake!” Martha exclaimed before we could carry on any further. “You guys suck!” In a fit of rage, she pulled her towel out

from under our snacks and started to cram it back into her bag. Ramy and I looked at each other and started giggling. “Come on, Mar, we’re just messin’ with you!” I pleaded. She shot us each a hard, steely glance. “You’re so cute when you’re angry!” Ramy added playfully as he grabbed her wrists to keep her from putting away her chocolate bars. “Damn you,” she cursed, struggling to break away from him. “Uh huh, is that the best you can do?” he teased and held her fast. They were both smiling in a way that made me uncomfortable. “Ok, guys,” I said nervously, “so we’re good then?” Ramy let go of Martha. “Ask her,” he replied, trying to sound indifferent. “Yeah,” Martha answered, eyes lowered and cheeks flushed, “uh, we’re good.”

By the time we finished our meal we were tired but in considerably better spirits. When we set off again on what thankfully turned out to be an uneventful two and a half hour trek, Ramy took the lead. “Ok, here’s where we are,” he explained to Martha and I after we’d finished packing. “Here’s where we need to go,” he continued, still pointing at the map. “Two hours, maybe less.” “Well, now that we’re all sugared up,” I said smiling, “I’m sure we’ll make good time.” “Yeah, I feel a lot better, guys,” Martha announced as she swung her backpack over her shoulders. “There’s nothing like chocolate to cure a bruised head!” We marched on eagerly at first, heads held high and a bounce in our step, talking and laughing at nothing in particular, but that energy was short-lived. By the middle of the second hour a feeling of lethargy stole over us, weighing down our movements. Hunched over and yawning at every turn, we fought to move forward. “Hey Ramy,” I called out after we’d laboured to climb up a steep incline framed by gnarled roots, “let’s take a quick break?” Standing a few steps ahead, he stopped and turned to face Martha and I. “It’s getting dark and we’re almost there. I really think we should push on,” he replied candidly. Martha seemed to be too tired to protest, so I let it go. For a long while we walked on single file, Ramy at the front and me at the rear, barely saying a word to each other. I made an effort not to lose my footing while keeping an eye on Martha. It was

getting more difficult to see that path on account of the increasing darkness.

Some time thereafter we reached another clearing. This time, though, the oppressive forest air gave way to a cool breeze that boosted our morale — so much so that even Martha seemed to have regained her strength. She no longer hesitated before stepping forward and stooped less as she walked. As I looked past her I noticed a faint, yellow glimmer bleeding through the thinning wall of scrawny tree trunks a short distance away. Ramy sprang ahead of us. “We made it!” he yelled out. Martha and I both sighed in relief. We hurried to catch up to him, and the three of us ran eagerly towards the grassy slope leading to the town. As we made our way down, staggering over rocks and slipping on bald patches of mud, we caught glimpses of paved streets lined with old, two-storey brick buildings. Our path led us to what looked like a back alley. Bricked-in yards obscured by overgrown shrubs framed the narrow lane. We moved ahead carefully, keeping close to each other. A little further down a faint, syncopated rhythm welcomed us, followed by the enticing smell of fried food. “Mmmmm, fries!” Martha exclaimed, grinning. I salivated at the thought of eating real food.... All of a sudden we heard a sharp crash and the sound of muffled voices. All three of us stopped, alert. Under the dim streetlights I noticed Ramy’s dark eyes narrow. He nodded, his fists clenched: “It’s ok. Let’s go,” he said resolutely. The two of us moved in closer to Martha. When we turned the corner, we noticed a group of people standing around an open doorway halfway down the street, drinking and laughing. We approached them cautiously. They seemed older than us. A tall, dark-haired guy had his arm around the waist of a thin blonde girl wearing a really tight black tank top. I think she was drunk — she seemed to have trouble standing up. Two other guys talked loudly to a girl with long black hair. “Hey, maybe they can help us,” Martha whispered enthusiastically. I wasn’t so sure about that. I could tell by the hard look on his face that Ramy wasn’t either. “I dunno, let’s be careful,” I mumbled back.

Before we could decide what to do Martha had made her way over to them. "Hey there!" she said. All five of them turned towards us. Ramy shook his head and muttered something under his breath I couldn't make out. Luckily, the black-haired girl smiled back. "Mind the broken glass, hon," she warned as Martha approached, pointing to the fragments spread over the pavement. Now she eyed us closely. Before we could answer, she asked, cautiously: "Are you guys alright?" Martha looked straight into her eyes: "We were in an accident," she replied. "Well, that explains the bloody faces," the black-haired girl observed with a touch of humour, "Go on, hon." She waited for Martha to continue. "Our car's in a ditch five kilometres south-east of here," I cut in after a pause, "we need to find a way to get back to Arkham." "Hum...." she mumbled pensively. "Hey, Sam, doesn't Phil drive over that way on Sundays?" said a tall, brown-haired guy in a red shirt. "That's right," added the one holding up the drunken blonde, "I remember he let some hikers ride with him a couple of weeks ago." "That's right!" Sam exclaimed, smiling. "Ok, here's what you do," she continued eagerly. "Make your way to Stan's Diner before noon tomorrow and ask for Phil. Tell him Sam sent you, and you'll be home before dinner." "Wow! That's great!" Martha declared as she looked at Ramy and I in the hopes of gaining our approval. Ramy didn't seem convinced. His arms were still crossed tightly across his chest. "Who's this Phil guy?" he demanded, his head tilted back so he could look down at Sam. Sam started laughing. "Don't worry, she replied casually, "my cousin's not a serial killer." "Yeah? How do we know?" He countered defensively. "You don't," she stated point-blank with a cheeky smile, "but if it makes you feel any better, he's the local forest ranger."

Chapter 3: Jukebox



"How's this for an ending?" I said, raising my glass. Ramy and Martha both joined in, smiling. "Cheers!" we shouted in unison.

For a while we just sat there, picking at the fries we ordered and staring at nothing in particular. Ramy was leaning forward, his forearms resting on the table. His attention seemed focused on something on the far wall. Martha had curled up in the booth beside him, her legs folded under her. She seemed to be struggling not to fall asleep. The place was almost empty; Sam and her friends had already left, and aside from a couple sitting at the bar who spent most of their time talking to the barmaid we were the only ones here. "Check this out — this place has a jukebox!" Ramy exclaimed, pointing past the bar: "Gimme some change, Steve. I wanna see what they've got!" So that's what he'd been staring at. I threw some coins on the table and closed my eyes. A couple of minutes later the catchy, upbeat ballad *Rodeo Love* flooded my ears. I looked over at Martha; she was smiling. "I love the Billygoats!" she sighed. The rhythm was contagious; even though I was exhausted, I couldn't help tapping my feet to the music, and I could hear Martha singing along whenever she remembered the lyrics: "Ain't gonna be the one.... But I'll be there when...." "Come on, Mar, let's dance!" Ramy, who had made his way back to our table, held his hand out to Martha. "Nooooo... I'm so tired. I just want to sit here. You go," she replied, her eyes half-closed. He looked over at me, shrugged his shoulders, and began dancing solo, pulling the most ridiculous moves I've ever seen — even for him. Martha and I broke into giggles. He was hamming it up for us, and the more we laughed the more absurd his gestures became, until we felt compelled to join in. Halfway through the song all three of us were jumping and clapping our hands, swinging around arm in arm, and singing in earnest. We were so worn-out, relieved, but, most of all, happy — the happiest I've ever been, I think.

When we left the bar, we decided to spend what was left of the night out under the stars. "After all this we didn't even get to camp!" Martha had said in a tone of feigned indignation after we'd finished our drinks and got up to leave. "What kind of survival trip is that?" So we made

our way back through the alley to the grassy hill and began to climb up, sluggishly, struggling to find a foothold in the muddy soil and loose rocks. Once we were back in the forest, we looked around for a good spot to set up camp. In our haste to find help we hadn't brought much gear with us, so we were fortunate that it was still balmy in the woods. We opened up the only sleeping bag we had, the one Ramy had attached to his backpack, and stretched it over a soft bed of dry pine leaves. With just enough room for the three of us to lie down, Ramy and I positioned ourselves on either side of Martha, who chose the middle. As I shaped my backpack into a pillow and Ramy moulded the earth beneath his portion of the sleeping bag into a headrest, Martha lay down on her back with her towel rolled up under her head. The faint light of the moon filtered through the sparse canopy, casting a silvery glow over everything around us. It reminded me of the cold nights we'd spent huddled together talking in Martha's parents' car, watching the snow fall and drift into random patterns under the dim light of the streetlamps.

In the winter, if we weren't indoors on account of the cold playing D & D with the gang, Martha would manage to borrow her parents' car — provided she promised never to go too far with it. Then me, Ramy, and Martha would drive to the park and just sit there, talking until late, turning on the engine when our fingers went numb. I liked those nights best for some reason. Sometimes when we got quiet I'd drift off, from the melancholy buzz that exhaustion brings on, watching the ice crystals form a pattern on the windshield. I remember how we would giggle our asses off and then turn serious all of a sudden, discussing heavy topics like the meaning of life, death, and the like. It was on one of those nights that I first talked about sex with a girl. We must have been 14 or 15 at the time. Ramy, who sat in the backseat while Martha and I were in front, had just confirmed a rumour that Martha was bugging him about — that he'd supposedly messed around with Natalie, TJ's older sister. "Ewwww! You got to first base with Natalie?" I exclaimed in disbelief. An image of Natalie had flashed in my mind: shaggy blonde bob; glossy lips; black tank top; tight flared jeans, thong underwear sticking

out; pointy high-heeled boots. Her room was in the basement. One time when we were over at TJ's playing video games, I saw her getting ready to go out while she was talking to someone on the landline; she had a flower tattoo on her lower back... it made her look dirty. The worst part of it was, she caught me looking and blew me a kiss from the crack in her bedroom door. After that I never went over to TJ's anymore. "She's, like, a complete slut! Supposedly," I carried on, stuttering like an idiot, "she's even going out with some college guy — he'd totally kick your ass if he found out!" Martha's eyes widened, her cheeks flushed; she held her breath and gave Ramy an odd sideways glance. My back tensed up, and I could feel my palms get clammy. A knot formed in my stomach that made it hard for me to swallow. "What's wrong, Steve? You never kiss a girl or something?" Ramy taunted. "What? No. I mean, whatever! I'd rather not have than swap spit with a girl like Natalie!" I enjoined defensively. Barely able to speak between giggles, Martha lay into me too: "So, Stevie, what kinda girl would y'a French, then?" I felt cold sweat drip down my back and a shiver run up my spine. I stammered. "Well, eh, I dunno, I guess." "Ha! Ha! Maybe he's gay!" Ramy yelled out as he nudged Martha. I didn't respond. Instead, I just sat there, in the front passenger seat across from Martha, eyes downcast, arms crossed, pouting. "Come on, dude. Relax. I'm just kidding," Ramy offered in apology. I eyed him crossly. Sometimes he could be such a prick. But then at least he'd tease us both more or less the same, so it evened out in the end. "So, Mar, what about you?" Ramy asked innocently. "Me? What?" Martha replied, feigning ignorance: "What are we talking about?" With a sly grin, he kept pressing her: "Come on. You ever make out before?" Her almond eyes narrowed; she flashed him a mysterious smile. "Maybe," she replied, tilting her head coyly, "maybe not." A big grin spread over her face. Overwhelmed with curiosity, Ramy leaned forward, edging closer to Martha: "Oh yeah, who was the guy?" He asked. I held my breath in anxious anticipation. "Ha! Like I would tell you!" she answered stubbornly. The air between us was charged — I felt uneasy, like I was standing on the edge of a cliff. Then Ramy spoke up.

He just couldn't leave it alone: "Mar, come on, what's the big deal? We won't tell anyone — right, Steve?" Martha shook her head; she refused to talk. We sat there, in silence, for some time before one of us was able to muster the courage to speak again. Although we never discussed it, that night I realized something had changed. Something hidden in our interaction — a lining of sorts — had become visible. Whenever I became aware of it after that it always made me feel self-conscious.

"Do you think this is our last adventure?" Martha asked softly, breaking the spell of nostalgia I'd fallen under. "No, of course not," I answered, but my tone lacked conviction. Ramy didn't say anything at first; he just lay there, his arms folded behind his head, staring at the patches of sky that broke through the thin cover of pine trees. After a while he asked, in a contemplative tone as he turned towards Martha, "Why should it be?" "But we're all going to different schools..." she replied, "With new people..." "Why should that stop us?" Ramy asked quietly. "Yeah," I enjoined, "We'll always be friends." Martha yawned and nodded lethargically. Her eyes were close. When she spoke again, her half-articulated words made me think that she was talking in her sleep. "K," she mumbled, "Let's swear a pact then." She paused to catch her breath and then continued. "Once a year. One adventure. Right after school ends." "Count me in," I answered happily. "Let's do it," Ramy added with enthusiasm. Martha was smiling peacefully when she fell asleep shortly thereafter, her pale face framed by a tangle of soft brown curls.

Ramy, too, had passed out not long after Martha. Ensnared in his portion of the sleeping bag, he snored lightly, his hands close to his chest. Although exhausted, I was too restless to keep my eyes closed. A nervous energy stirred inside me that I could barely contain. I turned over and edged in closer to Martha. We lay side by side, our faces inches apart. I was near enough to hear her breathing. For a long time I just lay there, immobile, staring at her, tracing the contours of her face in my mind. The almond outline of her eyes... the

smoothness of her freckled, suntanned skin... the fullness of her bruised lips.... "Martha...." I whispered. She didn't respond. "Martha..." I continued emphatically, "I...." Her eyelids fluttered. "Mmm...." she mumbled, eyes half-open. "Hi," I said softly. She smiled. "I can't sleep, Mar." She sighed. "Mmm... why not?" I hesitated. "I dunno... I guess I'm going to miss this." "But we're gonna do this again, Steve...." "Yeah... I mean..." I stuttered, my voice cracking, "I'm going to miss... you." Martha's eyes opened alertly. "You wanna know a secret?" She held my gaze without blinking. "Sure." "Remember that night in eighth grade? It was freezing out — we parked and —" "Yeah, I think I remember...." I cut in nervously before she could finish. How could I forget? That conversation had become one of those founding moments of personal history that will haunt me forever. "Well..." she paused. Too anxious to speak, I held my breath and bit my lower lip. She was slow to reply. "I've never actually, you know, kissed someone before...." I sighed loudly, overcome by a deep sense of relief. Thank the stars it was too dark for her to see clearly the look of joy that must have spread over my face. I was genuinely startled by her revelation. Now she looked at me intently, eyes wide, as if she waited for something. "Maybe I should," she said quietly, in a strange, resolute tone I'd never heard before. I was speechless. Her words poured over me like a wave of cold water — I shivered, closing my eyes, and then... we kissed. Or, rather, Martha kissed me, and I kissed her back. I'll never forget the softness of her lips or the sweet taste of her mouth, how I hesitated, remembering how she'd been hurt... the warmth I felt, the sense of peace... of an endless horizon.... We fell asleep holding hands.

I woke up the next morning cheered by the sunshine streaming through the cover of trees. I looked over at Martha and Ramy. Both were still asleep. I stretched my arms and yawned lazily, trying to shake the stiffness from my body. "Hey Mar," I whispered as I leaned in close to her. She looked so peaceful.... I kissed her cheek lightly, in fear that last night had only

happened in my imagination. She did not stir. Might as well let her rest — we still had a few hours to go before heading over to the diner. I reached over for my pack and grabbed some nuts and my water bottle. I was starving. Staying up late always made me hungry. "You still eating those nuts?" I heard Ramy mutter in a groggy voice. He was smiling. "Why?" I answered jokingly, "You want some?" "Are they salted?" "Oh, don't get me started...." I warned, chuckling. He grumbled and laughed in response. He then got up, stretched, and made his way towards the forest. "Hey? Where you going?" He looked back, raising an eyebrow. "You really wanna know?" "No. I'm good," I replied, trying to hide my embarrassment, "Go for it."

"Hum..." I thought to myself after Ramy had disappeared into the bush, "maybe Martha won't mind if I sneak one of her chocolate bars...." Still feeling too lethargic to get up, I leaned over, twisting my body awkwardly, and tried to grab the backpack at her feet. I *almost* reached it. What did happen was that I lost my balance and fell right into her. "Crap! Now I'll get in trouble for stealing chocolate and waking her up!" I chided myself. To my surprise, Martha didn't move or flinch. Something wasn't right. "Martha?" I said nervously, shaking her shoulders with both hands. Her face remained placid. "Ramy!!!! Something's wrong with Martha!" I called out frantically. Ramy made his way back in a hurry, buckling his belt while he ran. "She won't wake up," I continued shrilly as he approached. Brows furrowed in concern, he crouched down near Martha. Holding one side of her face, he slapped the opposite cheek with his free hand. "What the —" I protested, shocked by the violence of his gesture. "Wait," Ramy cut me off. He opened her eyelids one at a time. Oddly, her pupils didn't contract. "Steve," he said decisively as he looked straight at me, "I'll stay here to make sure she doesn't stop breathing. You run into town and get help."

The weight of Ramy's words, coupled with the expression on his face, made me feel as though a hole had just been torn up beneath my feet. I struggled to hold onto whatever I could not to fall in. Panic-stricken,

I raced madly down the hill towards the town. Thanks *Good-bye.*
to the adrenaline coursing through my veins I barely noticed the pain when I tripped on a rock in the alleyway and twisted my knee. What happened next is all jumbled together in my memory — I recall feeling divided, like a part of me was talking to the waitress at Stan's Diner while the other half stood by, watching by the sidelines. A local police officer who happened to be having breakfast was kind enough to call the ambulance. He drove me back to the campsite. The two of us hurried up the hill to find Ramy holding Martha's head in his lap, his face a dull, ashen colour....

.... By the time we got Martha to the county hospital it was too late. She died within a few hours, never having recovered from the coma. Slow internal haemorrhage caused by acute head trauma.... At least I think that's what the doctor said. I can't remember the details.... All I know is that we could have saved her, had we gotten help in time. We never realized how bad she got hurt....

* * *

.... *Martha....*

.... *I'm back here, now, almost two years later.... Where we camped that night, the place where it all ended.... On this hillside park that was once the edge of a forest.... Talking to the grass and the flowers, wishing that somehow you could hear me....*

.... *I saw Ramy again at the funeral.... We sort of lost touch not long afterwards.... It wasn't easy.... You looked so peaceful, lying there, in your blue summer dress... hands clasped below your chest, sheltered by the billowy white satin.... I didn't come back much after that... what with going away to school and all, and then the co-op program....*

.... *Standing here, it all comes rushing back to me: your laughter, your smile... our kiss.... I'm so sorry.... I leave this story in a bottle, like we had planned such a long time ago, to tell you something I never had the courage to say while you were alive... I love you, Mar. I always have. I always will.*