



EAGAN

I'm fatalistic. I've always had the feeling that time was running out. After 9/11, I started reading end-of-the-world-type books: *Alas, Babylon*; *Lucifer's Hammer*; *On the Beach*; *The Stand*. Then I started hoarding bottles of water and granola bars under my bed. Last year I spent my birthday money on two hundred batteries, which I kept in a shoe box at the back of my closet.

Of course, I never intended to die. I mean, really die. I thought I'd be one of those who *survived* the end-of-the-world catastrophe. In the end, what did me in was a freak accident. No end of the world, just the end of my world. If I had to do it all over again, I'd have eaten those granola bars.

The odd part is that the whole thing started in such a small way.

I was off by an inch. No, less than that. Half an inch. The size of a shirt button. Hardly worth mentioning. Most people barely notice half an inch. Except for my geometry teacher,

who made us estimate to the nearest *quarter* inch. Mrs. Koster said accuracy was of the utmost importance.

But it's not. Not always. Like the curb I backed onto last month when I was parallel parking for my driver's license test. I'd swerved too sharply and the back tire of Mom's blue Chevy slid half an inch off the pavement. I swallowed hard, thinking how embarrassed I would be when I had to tell everyone that I flunked. I thought of Mom watching from the redbrick building across the road, of the disappointment I'd have to see on her face. I thought my life was over right then and there.

But the nice man with the bushy brows said that mistake only reduced my score by five points. Not enough to fail me. Half an inch didn't keep me from getting my driver's license.

In gym class when I threw the basketball, if I aimed at the center of the net, half an inch didn't make a bit of difference. The ball still went through the hoop.

Half an inch. Slightly less than the diameter of a dime.

Most of the time I wouldn't even have noticed if I was half an inch off. Even in figure skating, half an inch can be covered up. If you move half an inch on your sit spin, you might not even get a deduction.

But sometimes half an inch is *really* important. If your timing is off and you miss your triple lutz landing, you could end up on your butt on the cold ice. Or worse, you could do what I did. You could go flying off into the boards and hit your head on the edge, a tiny half inch of sharp white board, and if you hit it just right like I did, you die.

Half an inch. It's enough to cause dreams to fall apart, enough to make the difference between life and death.

I should have listened to Mrs. Koster when she told us what a difference half an inch could make.



Amelia

I sat cross-legged on the gray carpet of my bedroom floor drawing a picture of a horse, absorbed in the details of the horse's head. The eyelashes weren't right. They were too long. Too feminine. He was a stallion, after all.

I glanced up as a stallion on TV snorted. A man yanked on the reins and the horse turned around. They sprinted off into the sunset, leaving a haze of trail dust in their wake.

I didn't notice Mom right away. She was at the door, her whole body rigid, gripping the doorknob. When I looked up, she reminded me of Kyle's little car when it's wound tight, just before he lets it zoom across the floor. And I knew what it was even before she opened her mouth. I knew something big was about to happen.

"The beeper went off," I said.

Mom nodded. Her voice was rushed. "We have to leave right away. Aunt Sophie is coming over to watch Kyle. Your dad is going to meet us there."

Her eyes held mine for a long moment. I nodded and held

back tears. For weeks I'd imagined how it would be when Mom told me, how I thought I'd feel. I'd pictured myself jumping up and down in excitement, both of us bursting into happy tears. Two months of waiting. People die every day waiting for the call. Now I was one of the lucky ones.

But in that instant I couldn't think of luck or happiness. I froze, trapped in that moment, afraid to speak.

A commercial for batteries came on. I turned my head and watched as the Energizer Bunny zoomed back and forth. I would have run out of power halfway across the screen. I didn't have the energy to jump up and down with excitement. Every morning I woke up tired.

Mom finally sprang to action. She reached down and yanked my packed suitcase out of the bedroom corner with shaking hands. Her mouth trembled.

"Is there anything else you need to pack? Do you want to put your notebook and drawing pencils in here?"

My fingers grasped a brown pencil. My fingertips were blue and chubby, as if they'd already accepted the lack of oxygen and were hibernating. I listened to the beat, the sound of my heart, swishing like a washing machine. Was it possible that sound would go away? That I'd stop feeling like I was carrying a stack of books on my chest and be able to walk down the steps in my own house?

A picture of me sits on my dresser. I'm posing with my soccer team when I was eight, before I got sick. The girl in the picture is as strange to me as the photos of my dead grandmother. I'm supposed to remember her, but I don't.

"Drawing pencils?" Mom reminded me, her hand outstretched.

I held out the pack to her. "What if it doesn't fit?" I said, my left hand covering my heart as if I were pledging allegiance.

"Oh, there's plenty of room in here . . . ," she started, but then stopped. Mom looked at me hard, like she looks when she's working her crossword. Finally she reached over and touched the side of my face. "I have a feeling about this, honey."

"Okay." I swallowed. Mom knew I was sick before I knew it myself. She has a sixth sense about that stuff.

I closed my notebook filled with horses. They're all I draw—horses. The only thing I've ever drawn since I was little. The only thing that relaxes me. Arabians, Morgans, Thoroughbreds, Palominos. I've researched them all: their anatomy and muscles and bones, the different breeds, how the light shades their faces. I've ridden one once, a mare the color of the clay pots outside my window, cinnamon and rust. Her name was Dusty.

I was about to turn off the TV when the news came on. They were reporting on an accident on Interstate 35. I stopped and stared, hoping that wasn't where my heart was coming from. The last few months I'd paid closer attention to the news, listening for the ages of victims, wondering if they died on the spot or at the hospital, wondering if the doctors saved their hearts.

I didn't want to live through another person's death. But it was part of the deal. Dr. Michael had said, "People are going to die regardless of whether you live or not. Their gift to you might help ease the pain of the family and friends who are mourning that person's loss."

in a HEARTBEAT

But the fact remained that someone else had to die for me to live. Someone else had to grieve for me to be happy. And every night at dinner, when my family prayed for a new heart for me, we were praying for that to happen.