

## CHAPTER ONE

Late in the winter of my seventeenth year, my mother decided I was depressed, presumably because I rarely left the house, spent quite a lot of time in bed, read the same book over and over, ate infrequently, and devoted quite a bit of my abundant free time to thinking about death.

Whenever you read a cancer booklet or website or whatever, they always list depression among the side effects of cancer. But, in fact, depression is not a side effect of cancer. Depression is a side effect of dying. (Cancer is also a side effect of dying. Almost everything is, really.) But my mom believed I required treatment, so she took me to see my Regular Doctor Jim, who agreed that I was veritably swimming in a paralyzing and totally clinical depression, and that therefore my meds should be adjusted and also I should attend a weekly Support Group.

This Support Group featured a rotating cast of characters in various states of tumor-driven unwellness. Why did the cast rotate? A side effect of dying.

The Support Group, of course, was depressing as hell. It met every Wednesday in the basement of a stone-walled Episcopal church shaped like a cross. We all sat in a circle right in the middle of the cross, where the two boards would have met, where the heart of Jesus would have been.

I noticed this because Patrick, the Support Group Leader and only person over eighteen in the room, talked about the heart of Jesus every freaking meeting, all about how we, as young cancer survivors, were sitting right in Christ's very sacred heart and whatever.

So here's how it went in God's heart: The six or seven or ten of us walked/wheeled in, grazed at a decrepit selection of cookies and lemonade, sat down in the Circle of Trust, and listened to Patrick recount for the thousandth time his depressingly miserable life story—how he had cancer in his balls and they thought he was going to die but he didn't die and now here he is, a full-grown adult in a church basement in the 137th nicest city in America, divorced, addicted to video games, mostly friendless,

eking out a meager living by exploiting his concertastic past, slowly working his way toward a master's degree that will not improve his career prospects, waiting, as we all do, for the sword of Damocles to give him the relief that he escaped lo those many years ago when cancer took both of his nuts but spared what only the most generous soul would call his life.

AND YOU TOO MIGHT BE SO LUCKY!

Then we introduced ourselves: Name. Age. Diagnosis. And how we're doing today. I'm Hazel, I'd say when they'd get to me. Sixteen. Thyroid originally but with an impressive and long-settled satellite colony in my lungs. And I'm doing okay.

Once we got around the circle, Patrick always asked if anyone wanted to share. And then began the circle jerk of support: everyone talking about fighting and battling and winning and shrinking and scanning. To be fair to Patrick, he let us talk about dying, too. But most of them weren't dying. Most would live into adulthood, as Patrick had.

(Which meant there was quite a lot of competitiveness about it, with everybody wanting to beat not only cancer itself, but also the other people in the room. Like, I realize that this is irrational, but when they tell you that you have, say, a 20 percent chance of living five years, the math kicks in and you figure that's one in five...so you look around and think, as any healthy person would: I gotta outlast four of these bastards.)

The only redeeming facet of Support Group was this kid named Isaac, a long-faced, skinny guy with straight blond hair swept over one eye.

And his eyes were the problem. He had some fantastically improbable eye cancer. One eye had been cut out when he was a kid, and now he wore the kind of thick glasses that made his eyes (both the real one and the glass one) preternaturally huge, like his whole head was basically just this fake eye and this real eye staring at you. From what I could gather on the rare occasions when Isaac shared with the group, a recurrence had placed his remaining eye in mortal peril.



Mom: “Hazel, you deserve a life.”

That shut me up, although I failed to see how attendance at Support Group met the definition of life. Still, I agreed to go—after negotiating the right to record the 1.5 episodes of ANTM I’d be missing.

I went to Support Group for the same reason that I’d once allowed nurses with a mere eighteen months of graduate education to poison me with exotically named chemicals: I wanted to make my parents happy. There is only one thing in this world shittier than biting it from cancer when you’re sixteen, and that’s having a kid who bites it from cancer.

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Mom pulled into the circular driveway behind the church at 4:56. I pretended to fiddle with my oxygen tank for a second just to kill time.

“Do you want me to carry it in for you?”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. The cylindrical green tank only weighed a few pounds, and I had this little steel cart to wheel it around behind me. It delivered two liters of oxygen to me each minute through a cannula, a transparent tube that split just beneath my neck, wrapped behind my ears, and then reunited in my nostrils. The contraption was necessary because my lungs sucked at being lungs.

“I love you,” she said as I got out.

“You too, Mom. See you at six.”

“Make friends!” she said through the rolled-down window as I walked away.

I didn’t want to take the elevator because taking the elevator is a Last Days kind of activity at Support Group, so I took the stairs. I grabbed a cookie and poured some lemonade into a Dixie cup and then turned around.

A boy was staring at me.

I was quite sure I'd never seen him before. Long and leanly muscular, he dwarfed the molded plastic elementary school chair he was sitting in. Mahogany hair, straight and short. He looked my age, maybe a year older, and he sat with his tailbone against the edge of the chair, his posture aggressively poor, one hand half in a pocket of dark jeans.

I looked away, suddenly conscious of my myriad insufficiencies. I was wearing old jeans, which had once been tight but now sagged in weird places, and a yellow T-shirt advertising a band I didn't even like anymore. Also my hair: I had this pageboy haircut, and I hadn't even bothered to, like, brush it. Furthermore, I had ridiculously fat chipmunked cheeks, a side effect of treatment. I looked like a normally proportioned person with a balloon for a head. This was not even to mention the cankle situation. And yet—I cut a glance to him, and his eyes were still on me.

It occurred to me why they call it eye contact.

I walked into the circle and sat down next to Isaac, two seats away from the boy. I glanced again. He was still watching me.

Look, let me just say it: He was hot. A nonhot boy stares at you relentlessly and it is, at best, awkward and, at worst, a form of assault. But a hot boy...well.

I pulled out my phone and clicked it so it would display the time: 4:59. The circle filled in with the unlucky twelve-to-eighteens, and then Patrick started us out with the serenity prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. The guy was still staring at me. I felt rather blushy.

Finally, I decided that the proper strategy was to stare back. Boys do not have a monopoly on the Staring Business, after all. So I looked him over as Patrick acknowledged for the thousandth time his ball-lessness etc., and soon it was a staring

contest. After a while the boy smiled, and then finally his blue eyes glanced away. When he looked back at me, I flicked my eyebrows up to say, I win.

He shrugged. Patrick continued and then finally it was time for the introductions. “Isaac, perhaps you’d like to go first today. I know you’re facing a challenging time.”

“Yeah,” Isaac said. “I’m Isaac. I’m seventeen. And it’s looking like I have to get surgery in a couple weeks, after which I’ll be blind. Not to complain or anything because I know a lot of us have it worse, but yeah, I mean, being blind does sort of suck. My girlfriend helps, though. And friends like Augustus.” He nodded toward the boy, who now had a name. “So, yeah,” Isaac continued. He was looking at his hands, which he’d folded into each other like the top of a tepee. “There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“We’re here for you, Isaac,” Patrick said. “Let Isaac hear it, guys.” And then we all, in a monotone, said, “We’re here for you, Isaac.”

Michael was next. He was twelve. He had leukemia. He’d always had leukemia. He was okay. (Or so he said. He’d taken the elevator.)

Lida was sixteen, and pretty enough to be the object of the hot boy’s eye. She was a regular—in a long remission from appendiceal cancer, which I had not previously known existed. She said—as she had every other time I’d attended Support Group—that she felt strong, which felt like bragging to me as the oxygen-drizzling nubs tickled my nostrils.

There were five others before they got to him. He smiled a little when his turn came. His voice was low, smoky, and dead sexy. “My name is Augustus Waters,” he said. “I’m seventeen. I had a little touch of osteosarcoma a year and a half ago, but I’m just here today at Isaac’s request.”

“And how are you feeling?” asked Patrick.

“Oh, I’m grand.” Augustus Waters smiled with a corner of his mouth. “I’m on a roller coaster that only goes up, my friend.”

When it was my turn, I said, “My name is Hazel. I’m sixteen. Thyroid with mets in my lungs. I’m okay.”

The hour proceeded apace: Fights were recounted, battles won amid wars sure to be lost; hope was clung to; families were both celebrated and denounced; it was agreed that friends just didn’t get it; tears were shed; comfort proffered. Neither Augustus Waters nor I spoke again until Patrick said, “Augustus, perhaps you’d like to share your fears with the group.”

“My fears?”

“Yes.”

“I fear oblivion,” he said without a moment’s pause. “I fear it like the proverbial blind man who’s afraid of the dark.”

“Too soon,” Isaac said, cracking a smile.

“Was that insensitive?” Augustus asked. “I can be pretty blind to other people’s feelings.”

Isaac was laughing, but Patrick raised a chastening finger and said, “Augustus, please. Let’s return to you and your struggles. You said you fear oblivion?”

“I did,” Augustus answered.

Patrick seemed lost. “Would, uh, would anyone like to speak to that?”

I hadn’t been in proper school in three years. My parents were my two best friends. My third best friend was an author who did not know I existed. I was a fairly shy person—not the hand-raising type.

And yet, just this once, I decided to speak. I half raised my hand and Patrick, his delight evident, immediately said, “Hazel!” I was, I’m sure he assumed, opening up.  
Becoming Part Of The Group.

I looked over at Augustus Waters, who looked back at me. You could almost see through his eyes they were so blue. “There will come a time,” I said, “when all of us are dead. All of us. There will come a time when there are no human beings remaining to remember that anyone ever existed or that our species ever did anything. There will be no one left to remember Aristotle or Cleopatra, let alone you. Everything that we did and built and wrote and thought and discovered will be forgotten and all of this”—I gestured encompassingly—“will have been for naught. Maybe that time is coming soon and maybe it is millions of years away, but even if we survive the collapse of our sun, we will not survive forever. There was time before organisms experienced consciousness, and there will be time after. And if the inevitability of human oblivion worries you, I encourage you to ignore it. God knows that’s what everyone else does.”

I’d learned this from my aforementioned third best friend, Peter Van Houten, the reclusive author of *An Imperial Affliction*, the book that was as close a thing as I had to a Bible. Peter Van Houten was the only person I’d ever come across who seemed to (a) understand what it’s like to be dying, and (b) not have died.

After I finished, there was quite a long period of silence as I watched a smile spread all the way across Augustus’s face—not the little crooked smile of the boy trying to be sexy while he stared at me, but his real smile, too big for his face. “Goddamn,” Augustus said quietly. “Aren’t you something else.”

Neither of us said anything for the rest of Support Group. At the end, we all had to hold hands, and Patrick led us in a prayer. “Lord Jesus Christ, we are gathered here in Your heart, literally in Your heart, as cancer survivors. You and You alone know us as we know ourselves. Guide us to life and the Light through our times of trial. We pray for Isaac’s eyes, for Michael’s and Jamie’s blood, for Augustus’s bones, for Hazel’s lungs, for James’s throat. We pray that You might heal us and that we might feel Your



love, and Your peace, which passes all understanding. And we remember in our hearts those whom we knew and loved who have gone home to you: Maria and Kade and Joseph and Haley and Abigail and Angelina and Taylor and Gabriel and...”

It was a long list. The world contains a lot of dead people. And while Patrick droned on, reading the list from a sheet of paper because it was too long to memorize, I kept my eyes closed, trying to think prayerfully but mostly imagining the day when my name would find its way onto that list, all the way at the end when everyone had stopped listening.

When Patrick was finished, we said this stupid mantra together—LIVING OUR BEST LIFE TODAY—and it was over. Augustus Waters pushed himself out of his chair and walked over to me. His gait was crooked like his smile. He towered over me, but he kept his distance so I wouldn't have to crane my neck to look him in the eye. “What's your name?” he asked.

“Hazel.”

“No, your full name.”

“Um, Hazel Grace Lancaster.” He was just about to say something else when Isaac walked up. “Hold on,” Augustus said, raising a finger, and turned to Isaac. “That was actually worse than you made it out to be.”

“I told you it was bleak.”

“Why do you bother with it?”

“I don't know. It kind of helps?”

Augustus leaned in so he thought I couldn't hear. “She's a regular?” I couldn't hear Isaac's comment, but Augustus responded, “I'll say.” He clasped Isaac by both shoulders and then took a half step away from him. “Tell Hazel about clinic.”

Isaac leaned a hand against the snack table and focused his huge eye on me. “Okay, so I went into clinic this morning, and I was telling my surgeon that I’d rather be deaf than blind. And he said, ‘It doesn’t work that way,’ and I was, like, ‘Yeah, I realize it doesn’t work that way; I’m just saying I’d rather be deaf than blind if I had the choice, which I realize I don’t have,’ and he said, ‘Well, the good news is that you won’t be deaf,’ and I was like, ‘Thank you for explaining that my eye cancer isn’t going to make me deaf. I feel so fortunate that an intellectual giant like yourself would deign to operate on me.’”

“He sounds like a winner,” I said. “I’m gonna try to get me some eye cancer just so I can make this guy’s acquaintance.”

“Good luck with that. All right, I should go. Monica’s waiting for me. I gotta look at her a lot while I can.”

“Counterinsurgence tomorrow?” Augustus asked.

“Definitely.” Isaac turned and ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Augustus Waters turned to me. “Literally,” he said.

“Literally?” I asked.

“We are literally in the heart of Jesus,” he said. “I thought we were in a church basement, but we are literally in the heart of Jesus.”

“Someone should tell Jesus,” I said. “I mean, it’s gotta be dangerous, storing children with cancer in your heart.”

“I would tell Him myself,” Augustus said, “but unfortunately I am literally stuck inside of His heart, so He won’t be able to hear me.” I laughed. He shook his head, just looking at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Augustus half smiled. “Because you’re beautiful. I enjoy looking at beautiful people, and I decided a while ago not to deny myself the simpler pleasures of existence.” A brief awkward silence ensued. Augustus plowed through: “I mean, particularly given that, as you so deliciously pointed out, all of this will end in oblivion and everything.”

I kind of scoffed or sighed or exhaled in a way that was vaguely coughy and then said, “I’m not beau—”

“You’re like a millennial Natalie Portman. Like V for Vendetta Natalie Portman.”

“Never seen it,” I said.

“Really?” he asked. “Pixie-haired gorgeous girl dislikes authority and can’t help but fall for a boy she knows is trouble. It’s your autobiography, so far as I can tell.”

His every syllable flirted. Honestly, he kind of turned me on. I didn’t even know that guys could turn me on—not, like, in real life.

A younger girl walked past us. “How’s it going, Alisa?” he asked. She smiled and mumbled, “Hi, Augustus.” “Memorial people,” he explained. Memorial was the big research hospital. “Where do you go?”

“Children’s,” I said, my voice smaller than I expected it to be. He nodded. The conversation seemed over. “Well,” I said, nodding vaguely toward the steps that led us out of the Literal Heart of Jesus. I tilted my cart onto its wheels and started walking. He limped beside me. “So, see you next time, maybe?” I asked.

“You should see it,” he said. “V for Vendetta, I mean.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll look it up.”

“No. With me. At my house,” he said. “Now.”

I stopped walking. “I hardly know you, Augustus Waters. You could be an ax murderer.”

He nodded. “True enough, Hazel Grace.” He walked past me, his shoulders filling out his green knit polo shirt, his back straight, his steps lilted just slightly to the right as he walked steady and confident on what I had determined was a prosthetic leg. Osteosarcoma sometimes takes a limb to check you out. Then, if it likes you, it takes the rest.

I followed him upstairs, losing ground as I made my way up slowly, stairs not being a field of expertise for my lungs.

And then we were out of Jesus’s heart and in the parking lot, the spring air just on the cold side of perfect, the late-afternoon light heavenly in its hurtfulness.

Mom wasn’t there yet, which was unusual, because Mom was almost always waiting for me. I glanced around and saw that a tall, curvy brunette girl had Isaac pinned against the stone wall of the church, kissing him rather aggressively. They were close enough to me that I could hear the weird noises of their mouths together, and I could hear him saying, “Always,” and her saying, “Always,” in return.

Suddenly standing next to me, Augustus half whispered, “They’re big believers in PDA.”

“What’s with the ‘always’?” The slurping sounds intensified.

“Always is their thing. They’ll always love each other and whatever. I would conservatively estimate they have texted each other the word always four million times in the last year.”

A couple more cars drove up, taking Michael and Alisa away. It was just Augustus and me now, watching Isaac and Monica, who proceeded apace as if they were not leaning against a place of worship. His hand reached for her boob over her shirt and pawed at it, his palm still while his fingers moved around. I wondered if that felt

good. Didn't seem like it would, but I decided to forgive Isaac on the grounds that he was going blind. The senses must feast while there is yet hunger and whatever.

"Imagine taking that last drive to the hospital," I said quietly. "The last time you'll ever drive a car."

Without looking over at me, Augustus said, "You're killing my vibe here, Hazel Grace. I'm trying to observe young love in its many-splendored awkwardness."

"I think he's hurting her boob," I said.

"Yes, it's difficult to ascertain whether he is trying to arouse her or perform a breast exam." Then Augustus Waters reached into a pocket and pulled out, of all things, a pack of cigarettes. He flipped it open and put a cigarette between his lips.

"Are you serious?" I asked. "You think that's cool? Oh, my God, you just ruined the whole thing."

"Which whole thing?" he asked, turning to me. The cigarette dangled unlit from the unsmiling corner of his mouth.

"The whole thing where a boy who is not unattractive or unintelligent or seemingly in any way unacceptable stares at me and points out incorrect uses of literality and compares me to actresses and asks me to watch a movie at his house. But of course there is always a hamartia and yours is that oh, my God, even though you HAD FREAKING CANCER you give money to a company in exchange for the chance to acquire YET MORE CANCER. Oh, my God. Let me just assure you that not being able to breathe? SUCKS. Totally disappointing. Totally."

"A hamartia?" he asked, the cigarette still in his mouth. It tightened his jaw. He had a hell of a jawline, unfortunately.

“A fatal flaw,” I explained, turning away from him. I stepped toward the curb, leaving Augustus Waters behind me, and then I heard a car start down the street. It was Mom. She’d been waiting for me to, like, make friends or whatever.

I felt this weird mix of disappointment and anger welling up inside of me. I don’t even know what the feeling was, really, just that there was a lot of it, and I wanted to smack Augustus Waters and also replace my lungs with lungs that didn’t suck at being lungs. I was standing with my Chuck Taylors on the very edge of the curb, the oxygen tank ball-and-chaining in the cart by my side, and right as my mom pulled up, I felt a hand grab mine.

I yanked my hand free but turned back to him.

“They don’t kill you unless you light them,” he said as Mom arrived at the curb. “And I’ve never lit one. It’s a metaphor, see: You put the killing thing right between your teeth, but you don’t give it the power to do its killing.”

“It’s a metaphor,” I said, dubious. Mom was just idling.

“It’s a metaphor,” he said.

“You choose your behaviors based on their metaphorical resonances...” I said.

“Oh, yes.” He smiled. The big, goofy, real smile. “I’m a big believer in metaphor, Hazel Grace.”

I turned to the car. Tapped the window. It rolled down. “I’m going to a movie with Augustus Waters,” I said. “Please record the next several episodes of the ANTM marathon for me.”

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Augustus Waters drove horrifically. Whether stopping or starting, everything happened with a tremendous JOLT. I flew against the seat belt of his Toyota SUV each time he braked, and my neck snapped backward each time he hit the gas. I might

have been nervous—what with sitting in the car of a strange boy on the way to his house, keenly aware that my crap lungs complicate efforts to fend off unwanted advances—but his driving was so astonishingly poor that I could think of nothing else. We'd gone perhaps a mile in jagged silence before Augustus said, "I failed the driving test three times."

"You don't say."

He laughed, nodding. "Well, I can't feel pressure in old Prosty, and I can't get the hang of driving left-footed. My doctors say most amputees can drive with no problem, but...yeah. Not me. Anyway, I go in for my fourth driving test, and it goes about like this is going." A half mile in front of us, a light turned red. Augustus slammed on the brakes, tossing me into the triangular embrace of the seat belt. "Sorry. I swear to God I am trying to be gentle. Right, so anyway, at the end of the test, I totally thought I'd failed again, but the instructor was like, 'Your driving is unpleasant, but it isn't technically unsafe.'"

"I'm not sure I agree," I said. "I suspect Cancer Perk." Cancer Perks are the little things cancer kids get that regular kids don't: basketballs signed by sports heroes, free passes on late homework, unearned driver's licenses, etc.

"Yeah," he said. The light turned green. I braced myself. Augustus slammed the gas.

"You know they've got hand controls for people who can't use their legs," I pointed out.

"Yeah," he said. "Maybe someday." He sighed in a way that made me wonder whether he was confident about the existence of someday. I knew osteosarcoma was highly curable, but still.

There are a number of ways to establish someone's approximate survival expectations without actually asking. I used the classic: "So, are you in school?" Generally, your parents pull you out of school at some point if they expect you to bite it.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m at North Central. A year behind, though: I’m a sophomore. You?”

I considered lying. No one likes a corpse, after all. But in the end I told the truth. “No, my parents withdrew me three years ago.”

“Three years?” he asked, astonished.

I told Augustus the broad outline of my miracle: diagnosed with Stage IV thyroid cancer when I was thirteen. (I didn’t tell him that the diagnosis came three months after I got my first period. Like: Congratulations! You’re a woman. Now die.) It was, we were told, incurable.

I had a surgery called radical neck dissection, which is about as pleasant as it sounds. Then radiation. Then they tried some chemo for my lung tumors. The tumors shrank, then grew. By then, I was fourteen. My lungs started to fill up with water. I was looking pretty dead—my hands and feet ballooned; my skin cracked; my lips were perpetually blue. They’ve got this drug that makes you not feel so completely terrified about the fact that you can’t breathe, and I had a lot of it flowing into me through a PICC line, and more than a dozen other drugs besides. But even so, there’s a certain unpleasantness to drowning, particularly when it occurs over the course of several months. I finally ended up in the ICU with pneumonia, and my mom knelt by the side of my bed and said, “Are you ready, sweetie?” and I told her I was ready, and my dad just kept telling me he loved me in this voice that was not breaking so much as already broken, and I kept telling him that I loved him, too, and everyone was holding hands, and I couldn’t catch my breath, and my lungs were acting desperate, gasping, pulling me out of the bed trying to find a position that could get them air, and I was embarrassed by their desperation, disgusted that they wouldn’t just let go, and I remember my mom telling me it was okay, that I was okay, that I would be okay, and my father was trying so hard not to sob that when he did, which was regularly, it was an earthquake. And I remember wanting not to be awake.



Everyone figured I was finished, but my Cancer Doctor Maria managed to get some of the fluid out of my lungs, and shortly thereafter the antibiotics they'd given me for the pneumonia kicked in.

I woke up and soon got into one of those experimental trials that are famous in the Republic of Cancervania for Not Working. The drug was Phalanxifor, this molecule designed to attach itself to cancer cells and slow their growth. It didn't work in about 70 percent of people. But it worked in me. The tumors shrank.

And they stayed shrank. Huzzah, Phalanxifor! In the past eighteen months, my mets have hardly grown, leaving me with lungs that suck at being lungs but could, conceivably, struggle along indefinitely with the assistance of drizzled oxygen and daily Phalanxifor.

Admittedly, my Cancer Miracle had only resulted in a bit of purchased time. (I did not yet know the size of the bit.) But when telling Augustus Waters, I painted the rosiest possible picture, embellishing the miraculousness of the miracle.

"So now you gotta go back to school," he said.

"I actually can't," I explained, "because I already got my GED. So I'm taking classes at MCC," which was our community college.

"A college girl," he said, nodding. "That explains the aura of sophistication." He smirked at me. I shoved his upper arm playfully. I could feel the muscle right beneath the skin, all tense and amazing.

We made a wheels-screeching turn into a subdivision with eight-foot-high stucco walls. His house was the first one on the left. A two-story colonial. We jerked to a halt in his driveway.

I followed him inside. A wooden plaque in the entryway was engraved in cursive with the words Home Is Where the Heart Is, and the entire house turned out to be festooned in such observations. Good Friends Are Hard to Find and Impossible to Forget read an

illustration above the coatrack. True Love Is Born from Hard Times promised a needlepointed pillow in their antique-furnished living room. Augustus saw me reading. “My parents call them Encouragements,” he explained. “They’re everywhere.”

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His mom and dad called him Gus. They were making enchiladas in the kitchen (a piece of stained glass by the sink read in bubbly letters Family Is Forever). His mom was putting chicken into tortillas, which his dad then rolled up and placed in a glass pan. They didn’t seem too surprised by my arrival, which made sense: The fact that Augustus made me feel special did not necessarily indicate that I was special. Maybe he brought home a different girl every night to show her movies and feel her up.

“This is Hazel Grace,” he said, by way of introduction.

“Just Hazel,” I said.

“How’s it going, Hazel?” asked Gus’s dad. He was tall—almost as tall as Gus—and skinny in a way that parentally aged people usually aren’t.

“Okay,” I said.

“How was Isaac’s Support Group?”

“It was incredible,” Gus said.

“You’re such a Debbie Downer,” his mom said. “Hazel, do you enjoy it?”

I paused a second, trying to figure out if my response should be calibrated to please Augustus or his parents. “Most of the people are really nice,” I finally said.

“That’s exactly what we found with families at Memorial when we were in the thick of it with Gus’s treatment,” his dad said. “Everybody was so kind. Strong, too. In the darkest days, the Lord puts the best people into your life.”

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