

TURTLE
BOY

For Gabi.
With you everything is possible.

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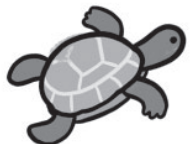
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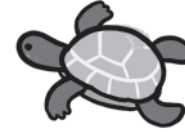


M. EVAN WOLKENSTEIN



PART ONE

PROLOGUE



“Hey, Will,” said Jake. “Got your chin!”

He snatched at my face, pinching his thumb between the knuckles of his index and middle fingers.

His big, dumb friend Spencer guffawed, “Hwah-hwah-hwah,” and the two of them walked off together, leaving me with my PB-and-J sandwich.

Got your chin? What did that even mean? I had no one to ask. I always sat alone at lunch. At the opposite side of the table, some fourth graders were building a catapult out of drinking straws.

I forgot all about Jake’s little taunt until a few weeks later, when I was sitting at my desk, waiting for fifth-grade social studies to start. He walked into class, hands cupped like he’d caught a grasshopper.

“I found it!” he announced, peeking between his hands. “Will’s missing chin!” A bunch of other kids laughed, and I could feel my face burn with shame, but at what? What was so funny about my chin? As soon as the bell rang, I grabbed a hall pass and went to an empty

restroom to look at my reflection. It was my usual face: glasses, big front teeth, chubby cheeks. My chin seemed very uninteresting.

That night, everything became clear.

I was brushing my teeth when Mom's make-up mirror caught my eye. It magnified everything; my nose was monstrous. My eyes were large and looming. Then I held the mirror out to the side. From this new angle, I could see myself the way others did.

I'd seen my face in the mirror a million times, but I'd never noticed. I knew it hadn't grown that way overnight. Now I know that bad things can happen a little at a time.

That Saturday night, I was holding the make-up mirror to my face. I'd been checking it at least twice a day. If my chin had shrunk, maybe it could grow back.

"What are you doing with my mirror?"

Mom's voice startled me. She was standing behind me in her old nightgown. I slammed the mirror down on the counter so hard, I nearly broke it.

"Will? What were you looking at?"

"Nothing," I said. I pushed past her into the hallway, but she followed me.

"Stop," she said. I turned and glared at her. "What were you doing?"

"Looking at my face," I said quietly.

"Why? What's wrong with it?" she asked, coming closer.

"Something's wrong with my chin," I said. "Look, see?" I turned my face to the side. "It looks weird."

"Who told you that?" she demanded. "What idiot said there's something wrong with your face?"

"A kid at school," I said reluctantly. I didn't want her to know I was getting teased.

"Will, don't you ever let anyone tell you how you look." She sounded angry, though I knew it wasn't directed at me. "Except your mother," she went on, her voice softening. "And I'm telling you, the only thing I see when I look at you is a handsome young man who looks a lot like his dad."

"Are there pictures of Dad without a beard?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, but I promise you, there was nothing wrong with his face. I loved his face."

She took a big breath, as if she'd just climbed a hill, and told me it was way past bedtime.

"It's only eight o'clock," I objected.

"Past my bedtime," she said.

She drifted off to her room. I don't have any brothers or sisters, so the house suddenly grew quiet. I went down the stairs to the living room, then to the kitchen and back up to the hall, reviewing each of the framed

photographs: Dad and Mom on their honeymoon in Hawaii. Dad and Mom at the hospital after I was born. A grainy selfie of Dad and Mom and me with a blurry playground in the back. I'd looked at these pictures a million times, and in each one, the face beneath Dad's beard was a mystery.

A few weeks later, Mom told me she'd had a chat with my doctor about my chin. I was going to meet a surgeon.

"A *surgeon*?" I shouted. "No! No hospitals! You know how I am!"

"Yes, I do know how you are," she said. "And his office isn't *in* a hospital. It's in a *clinic*."

As if that made a difference. I hate hospitals and anything that has to do with them, probably due to the fact that Dad died in surgery when I was four. He was only getting a hernia fixed – a tiny tear inside the abdominal cavity – but something went wrong and he never came home. Even now I get jittery and jumpy when I go to the doctor, even when we drive by a hospital. But it's not like I have a bunch of traumatic memories. I can barely remember the room, the bed, the monitors.

The next morning over breakfast, Mom looked awful, like she hadn't slept. She apologized for making the

appointment without telling me.

"I do think your face looks absolutely fine," she added. "Let's have the doctor tell us that too."

But that's not what happened.

The surgeon, Dr Haffetz, stuck his gloved fingers into my mouth and pulled my cheeks – side to side, up and down – yanking my upper lip up towards my nose, and my bottom lip down to my chin so hard, I thought he was going to rip my face off. After a few minutes, he pulled off his gloves and turned to Mom and me.

"There's quite a gap between the mandible and maxilla," remarked Dr Haffetz. "That's the lower and upper jawbones. I don't know what your father looks like, but maybe you take after him?"

"He does look a bit like his father," Mom said firmly and decisively, steering us around a heavy topic. "And his father looks perfectly fine."

I appreciated that Mom wasn't revealing any more than necessary about Dad.

"Maxillofacial conditions like this can go in all sorts of directions," Dr Haffetz explained, balling up his gloves and throwing them into the trash. "They can be minor and purely cosmetic, or they can develop into more serious conditions. They can make it hard to eat, hard to speak – sometimes they contribute to sleep apnoea."

"What's that?" I asked quickly.

“Oh, like snoring,” Mom interjected. “Your father’s snoring could wake the dead.”

I noticed that Mom had switched from the present tense to the past, but Dr Haffetz didn’t seem to pick up on this.

“Snoring is a symptom of sleep apnoea,” he corrected, “but apnoea itself is caused by a blockage of the airway during sleep. It can strain the cardiopulmonary system, which can lead to heart damage. It’s definitely not something to play around with.”

He went on to explain that there wasn’t much to be done – not at my age, not while my bones were growing. I’d have to wait at least a couple of years for my face to finish developing.

“And then what?” I asked.

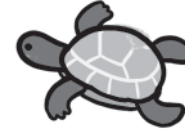
“It’s too soon to tell,” he said. “Sometimes occlusion can be treated with orthodontic appliances. Sometimes it requires a reconstructive surgical procedure.”

The only thing I hated more than my chin was the hospital. The idea of getting any sort of operation made my stomach churn.

Mom must have picked up on what was happening inside me, because she put her arm around my shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Will,” she said. “You’re only in fifth grade. You’ll be in seventh grade before you even need to think about the next step. That’s two full years away.”

CHAPTER 1



All that happened two years ago.

Now it’s the first day of seventh grade. Mom is driving me to school because I missed the bus.

“Is it possible you *tried* to miss the bus?” she asks, her eyes on the road. “Sometimes you’re late for things – you know, accidentally on purpose.”

Truthfully, it isn’t the bus’s fault. It’s my feet’s fault. Halfway to the bus stop, they froze. They *would not move*. I stood there, riveted, until the bus cruised past my stop, barely slowing down before gliding on its way.

I get these mini-panic attacks sometimes. Like at the start of summer, when I went to volunteer at a soup kitchen. Mom dropped me off outside an old church, and the receptionist pointed the way to the cafeteria. Halfway down the hall, I could hear the laughter of the other volunteers and kitchen staff. All I could think was *What will they think when they see my chin?*

My brain said *Go*, but my feet said *Nope, no way*.

I was at the soup kitchen because of Rabbi Harris.

He was making all the kids who were starting the seventh-grade Hebrew school class do forty hours of community service – something to do with us having Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and becoming adults in the Jewish tradition, that we needed to take on responsibilities and give back to the community. The thing is, I didn't want to do anything on the list. All the options involved meeting new people or going somewhere I've never been before, and I really, *really* like my routines.

We have a sheet of paper that an adult is supposed to sign each time we volunteer, and I totally could have forged the supervisor's name – Mom wouldn't have suspected anything – but I'm not like that. I'm not a liar.

Over dinner that night, I confessed that I'd hidden in the church parking lot for two hours instead of going into the cafeteria. Mom dropped her fork on her plate with a loud *clank* and went and got Rabbi Harris's list.

"We're going to find you a new place to volunteer," she said. She went down the list of Rabbi Harris's suggested volunteer opportunities: tutoring, retirement home, community centre, backyard or basement clean-up.

"No," I responded after each one. "No, no, no."

"Will!" she finally said, nearly shouting. She took a deep, exasperated breath. "You can't go through life turning down every opportunity that comes along. You need to get out there and *do* something."

"Why should I?" I asked back. "You never do anything."

"We are not talking about me," she said harshly. "We're talking about *your* Bar Mitzvah responsibilities, which require you to do more than sit in your room all day taking care of your turtle collection."

I resented the phrase "turtle collection", but that's pretty much what I did for the rest of the summer: I hung out in my room and read books and took care of my specimens. I have four kinds: a box turtle, a painted turtle, a musk turtle, and a small snapping turtle. I don't know anyone else who loves turtles the way I do. I'd much rather be in my room, taking care of my turtles and their habitats, than doing anything else – with one notable exception: walking the trails of the Back 40.

The Back 40 is the nature reserve behind school. Some trails I've walked a hundred times. Some I've barely seen. In the Back 40, with the sun and the breeze, I can move freely, taking big steps and scanning the sky for soaring hawks, or I can inch along, searching the ground for herps. "Herps" is a nickname for reptiles and amphibians. It comes from the Latin "to creep". I love looking for herps: toads and frogs and tiny garter snakes and especially turtles. In the Back 40, I'm alone but I'm never lonely.

When my science teacher, Ms Kuper, first brought us out there in sixth grade, she explained that it was called

the Back 40 because in the 1800s, farmers in Wisconsin used to be granted plots of land: forty acres in front of their homes, and forty at the back. Our Back 40 isn't forty acres, she explained, it's more like four – and it was never part of a farm. It's too marshy and full of bulrushes and trees. But that's the nickname the Prairie Marsh School gave it when the county lent the land to the school a long time ago, Ms Kuper said, when some of our grandparents were probably sitting in that very classroom.

My parents weren't from Horicon: Dad grew up in California, and Mom grew up in Milwaukee. They met and got married in Berkeley. That's where I was born. We only came to Wisconsin because my aunt Mo lives an hour from here, and after Dad died, Mom wanted to be closer to her sister.

At first, I hated Marsh Madness. That's what Ms Kuper called the class excursions into the Back 40. We were supposed to be looking at the flora and fauna. I only noticed the mosquitoes and mud. But then I realized that no one ever went out there after school. That meant it could all be mine.

I spent more and more time there, spotting red-winged blackbirds flying overhead, listening to the whoop of the whippoorwills, their feathers camouflaging them in the trees. One by one, as spring turned into summer, I caught my turtle specimens. I didn't tell anyone about it

– not even Ms Kuper. You could say that I secretly brought the Back 40 home with me and kept it in four large rectangles of glass in my room.

Mom and I drive in silence. There may be no way to escape going to school, but I've invented a way to keep people from seeing my face. I've started wearing an extra-extra-large hooded sweatshirt, even when the school is hot and stuffy, so I can draw the strings and close it around my face. Also, I fill my backpack with big books, partially so I have something to read when I eat lunch alone, but mostly so I can set up a wall in front of me.

On the bus, the front seat is mine. Nobody can turn and see my face except the driver. Last year, my best friend, Shirah, would get annoyed because her volleyball friends sat way in the back and she wanted to sit with them, but we had a deal: I copied her maths homework and she copied my science homework. To do that, she had to sit in the front with me. We didn't see it as cheating – we helped each other.

I hope we'll continue that routine this year. I hope we're over our rough patch. Back in third and fourth grades, Shirah used to come over every Saturday after synagogue, and we'd play hide-and-seek or we'd invent new snack recipes, like Nutella, Cheerios and

marshmallows microwaved into a steaming blob.

In sixth grade we weren't how we used to be. Shirah made the volleyball team and got a million new friends. Now we only hang out at Hebrew School and on the bus.

"You're awful quiet," Mom says. "Nervous?"

"No," I say.

"Not even a little?" she asks, a hint of a smile in her voice.

I shake my head.

"Okay, so what are you feeling?" she asks.

"Nothing," I say.

"Nothing at all?" she presses. When I don't answer, she adds, "Will, I wish you'd talk to me. I want to be helpful."

"If you want to be helpful, let me be home-schooled. You don't even have to do anything, I'll read my own books."

Mom laughs, even though I'm not really joking.

We pull up to the kerb outside school. "Have a great day, Will," she says. "I think seventh grade is going to be much better than sixth."

"I don't," I say, getting out of the car. "I think it's going to be a living nightmare." I slam the door.

"Beep!" she calls, leaning closer to the open window. "Will? Beep!"

This "beep" thing started a long time ago, just after

Mom and I moved to Horicon from California. I hadn't met Shirah yet, and Mom didn't have any friends, so we would go to the budget theatre on weekends – they showed reruns and oldies for five dollars. In one movie, a bunch of secret agents were synchronizing their watches before a mission. Mom and I started doing the same thing whenever we were going separate ways. She'd say "beep" and touch her watch and I'd answer "beep". I loved it.

But that was when I was little. I think it's totally stupid now. I don't want to tell her that, though. I don't want to hurt her feelings.

I muster a grumpy "beep" and turn towards the school. Once Mom drives away, I draw the strings on my hood and push through the school's glass doors. The lobby and halls are empty.

This is bad. This is very, very bad. The receptionist sees me through her sliding window, standing there, frozen.

"Hello, young man," she says, and points to the double doors. "Go in quietly; the assembly has started."