

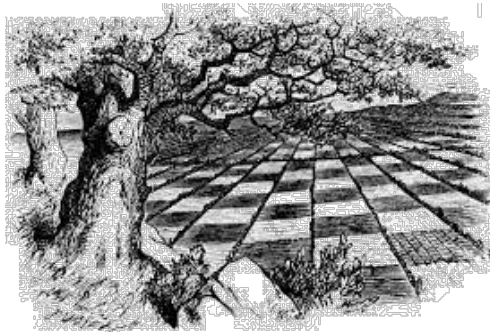
FISH IN A TREE

Written by
Jeff Stockwell

Based on the Novel By
Lynda Mullaly Hunt

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Netflix

Writer Representation:

*Alex Lerner, Kaplan Perrone Entertainment
Charlie Ferraro, United Talent Agency*

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

MRS. HALL

Ally. Do you think you might ever
get around to *starting*?

MRS. HALL, 30s, with an I've-Got-A-Lesson-Plan-To-Get-Through
focus, stands front of a FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM, gazing at:

ALLY NICKERSON, 12. With lively eyes that register
stubbornness and vulnerability in equal measure.

The STUDENTS around her SCRIBBLE AWAY. Ally's page is blank.

ALLY

Could you repeat the prompt please?

MRS. HALL

(irritated)

What are *three things* the *Ancient
Egyptians introduced* that shaped
our civilization?

She's right over Ally. If we hadn't noticed earlier, it's
unavoidable now: Mrs. Hall's very pregnant.

Ally inhales, starts to move her pen across the page...

She's *drawing*. A profile, in the Egyptian Priestess style.
Artfully, playfully caricaturing Mrs. Hall's features.

MRS. HALL (CONT'D)

We're writing, Ally. Not drawing.

ALLY

I thought we were coming up with an
answer, Mrs. Hall. I'm *answering*.

MRS. HALL

Ally. Do the assignment.

Ally holds up her page: Mrs. Hall's priestess portrait is
part of a column of beetles and bird heads.

ALLY

Hieroglyphics. That's one.

Mrs. Hall leans in: clearly, even though she's a fine soul,
she has put Ally on the list of: *I Have 25 Students And
Limited Resources; You, Sister, Take Up Too Much Of My Time.*

MRS. HALL

A *paragraph*. Now. Please! Just give it your best.

Ally returns the tight smile. Looks down to her hand now... and finishes the priestess's expression: a dour frown.

MRS. HALL (CONT'D)

I mean it.

Ally stops, takes a deep breath. Something in her...giving up. She takes the page... And CRUMPLES IT UP. Points to it there in the center of her desk.

ALLY

And paper. The Ancient Egyptians invented paper. Two down.

She looks up, and stubbornly meets Mrs. Hall's GLARE.

ALLY (CONT'D)

And one to go.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

Ally stands alone. And alone, whatever armor she wears to make it through the day has fallen away. She looks all-but-overwhelmed - and hides it by standing right up close to...

A BULLETIN BOARD covered in PSAs: *Drink Water Not Sugar! Handwashing Is Your Superpower. Helmets! Be Hard-Headed!*

Ally begins REARRANGING THEM, making deft folds and tears here and there before tacking everything back in place.

She sits, slumps, looks sullenly across the way past...

The FRONT OFFICE LADY, a scowling I Used To Be Into Punk sort now trapped in a blouse and skirt...

To THE DOOR. An ominous door. The PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE door...

THUMP! A MAN, late 20s, PLOPS DOWN by Ally. Extricates an I-pad. Scans it for his notes. Exhales. Seems...*nervous*.

Ally steals a glance: nose bent, stocky frame can't fit in the buckety child-sized seat. And his front tooth DANGLES.

FRONT OFFICE LADY (OC)

Brody Daniels?

He snaps the tooth back in place with his tongue, twists to see Front Office Lady has come into the hall.

FRONT OFFICE LADY (CONT'D)

No need to wait out here. These seats are for our *troublemakers*.

MR. DANIELS

Oh. Oh, right. The *troublemakers*.

She returns to her desk. MR. DANIELS pivots to face Ally...and gives her a *THUMBS UP*. Ally's unsure what it means: *Go Troublemakers? Wish me luck?*

The Door suddenly OPENS. A bickering COMMITTEE GROUP exits...

Leaving the over-extended PRINCIPAL - MRS. ORO, 60s in The Doorway. She signals Mr. Daniels that she needs him to wait. And shakes her head at Ally and points the way: *In*.

Ally stands. Behind her, the board is now a CLEVER COLLAGE:

The Handwashing kid cleans up in the giant glass of water, the Helmet kid, headbutts the thug in the *No Bullying* poster.

INT. MRS. ORO'S OFFICE - DAY

Ally sits in the hot seat, while Mrs. Oro scans her computer screen. She picks up an Etch A Sketch Mrs. Oro keeps on her desk. Turns its knobs - something's taking shape: A SNOWMAN.

Mrs. Oro locates a file. Sees Ally looking down at her lap.

MRS. ORO

Ally Nickerson. The records from your last school *still* aren't here.

In ALLY'S LAP: The Etch-A-Sketch line keeps skittering through the gray: A HOT SUN bearing down on the snowman...

ALLY

Which last school? I mean.. this is my...seventh.

(trying for light)

Lucky seven?

MRS. ORO

As you're interested in numbers, how about these? You've been at Liston Middle School for *six* weeks. You've been sent *here eleven* times.

The ETCH A SKETCH -as the snowman holds up a branch arm..to give the sun a DEFIANT "You'll Never Melt Me!" FIST.

MRS. ORO (CONT'D)
 We've had zero luck getting your
 parents in. So it would be
infinitely wonderful if we can just
 learn from you. Why do you think
 you so frequently disregard your
 teacher and disrupt your class?

Mrs. Oro leans in towards Ally, who erases the Etch-A-Sketch
 and looks up, dodging eye contact, to an INSPIRATION POSTER.

In its background a HAND REACHES ACROSS ABOUT TO GRASP
 ANOTHER HAND.. It's covered in LARGE LETTERS - A QUOTE...

Mrs. Oro turns in her seat, looking at the poster too.

MRS. ORO (CONT'D)
 A useful strategy. Isn't it? How
 about we read it aloud together?

ALLY'S POV: The letters make no sense. The longer we look at
 them, the more UNSTABLE they seem: shimmering...

MRS. ORO (CONT'D)
Sometimes...

SKITTERING like beetles, trails BLURRING, letters shifting...

ALLY
 I don't need to read it aloud, Mrs.
 Oro. Believe me, I get it.

MRS. ORO
 I don't know about that. I think
 you might need to work on it. How
 might we start?

She awaits a response. Ally's looking cornered....

But there's a knock, and the Office Lady opens the door --
 for a pushy DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR type who shoulders in...

And Ally's instantly up and on her way. Mrs. Oro moves to
 deal with the incoming - and still call after Ally...

MRS. ORO (CONT'D)
 Mrs. Hall begins maternity leave
 tomorrow. New teacher. New start.

Ally skirts the still-waiting Mr. Daniels' gaze, her features
 locked in a struggling-not-to-be-humiliated glower.

MRS. ORO (CONT'D)
 I don't want to see you here again.
 To be clear: once more and you'll
 be heading to *lucky number eight*.

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - DAY

Students lingering, playing, chatting... filing out into a neighborhood of old houses and bland apartment buildings.

We'll get to know these kids later..but here's a glimpse:
 Cocky MAX wrestles with pal MARCO. Hulking ALBERT shuffles off. Proud SHAY gabs with her fawning clique.

Ally passes intense-looking KEISHA at her bike. Shoulders her backpack, looka at the sun. Another day done down the mines.

INT. MEGA DRUG STORE - AFTERNOON

Ally enters the large store, starting along the aisles...

Until she spots a WIRY WOMAN tending shelves. Ally sneaks behind her as she moves along repricing merchandise.

The woman spins. Sticks a **50% OFF** tag on Ally's forehead.

WOMAN
 50% Off! Can almost afford you now.
 (noting her glum features)
 Oh, no. Again? Not again.

Ally's lip trembles. The On-For-School Armor falls away...until she's *on the verge of tears*. Because this is her mother, MRS. NICKERSON. Early 30s. Young...but bone-tired.

ALLY
 (an outpouring)
 I was being... *stubborn* and not doing an assignment the way Mrs. Hall wanted us to do it and I...I shouldn't have been a jerk to her. Because tomorrow's her last day. She's having her baby and I don't want her to think I don't like her because I really do!

Mrs. Nickerson puts an arm around Ally - she has a sleeve of tattoos, one a stars 'n stripes ribbon that says: ARMY WIFE.

MRS. NICKERSON
Stubborn sure runs in the family.

A SUPERVISOR glances down from the end of the aisle. Mrs. Nickerson turns back to her work.

MRS. NICKERSON (CONT'D)
 We've *all* got a lot on our plates,
 you know that, Ally, I really need
 you to make this work.

Ally GROANS, drops her forehead on her mom's back.

MRS. NICKERSON (CONT'D)
 It's gonna be better, guarantee
 you, when you make some friends.

ALLY
 There isn't anybody!

Mrs. Nickerson turns back, takes in her frustrated girl.

MRS. NICKERSON
 I got to finish this up, Ally. How
 about you go pick out a pretty
 congratulations card for your
 teacher? I bet she'll like that.

Ally nods. Starts off. Then looks back at the shelves...

ALLY
 Mom. Put the Goldfish down where
 the tortilla chips are. You want
 the little kids to see them, right
 in their face. They love Goldfish.
 And parents'll buy them because
 they're healthier than candy.

Mrs. Nickerson considers this, taps her brow. *Good thinking.*

INT. MEGA DRUG STORE - GREETING CARD AISLE - DAY

Ally moves along the rack of bright cards. The LETTERING that denotes each section (Anniversary, Graduation...) is a BLUR.

But her eyes eat up all the patterns and colors...and settle, on a BEAUTIFUL CARD with a bright, burst of bulging IRISES.

She RUNS HER FINGER along the creamy paper. *Feels nice.* She actually SMILES. Feels better. This will be a lovely gift.

EXT/INT. NICKERSON CONDO GARAGE - EVENING

CLOSE ON A "SOLDIER ON!" bumper sticker, as a well-worn Camry pulls up to a down-at-heels CONDO COMPLEX. Ally and her Mom.

The garage door opens. There's a lanky teen there, TRAVIS, 16. He's surrounded by.... three outdated VENDING MACHINES.

Ally gets out, fussing with the card she chose.

TRAVIS

We're on with Dad tonight, right?

Mrs. Nickerson nods, smiles, roughs his hair. Heads in.

ALLY

I'm first!

TRAVIS

Nuh-uh. Age before beauty.

She shoulders him into a disassembled vending machine. Parts clatter. Ally retrieves one, looks to see where it goes...

ALLY

Where you get directions to fix it?

TRAVIS

There's no directions. That's why I'm so good at it.

He grins. She grins back..bolts for the door. He grabs her.

INT. NICKERSON KITCHEN - EVENING

Mom's On A Tight Sked: she gets a microwaved lasagna on the table, some wet lettuce and dressing - and disappears...

Ally unloads her school bag. Books, books...lots of homework.

Travis finishes scrubbing up, sets a laptop at the head of the table. Turns it to facing out from the chair there.

TRAVIS

It's time! Mom!

Mrs. Nickerson comes in, putting her hair up, now wearing maroon MEDICAL OFFICE SCRUBS. A Skype ring tone sounds...

Ally leans in near the computer. The screen FILLS with SGT. NICKERSON, mid 30s, in fatigues, tired eyes lighting up.

ALLY

Daddy!

SGT. NICKERSON

Ally!

TRAVIS
 (lifting the lasagna)
 You're missing an awesome dinner.

Sgt. Nickerson lifts a tin with watery powdered egg mush.

SGT. NICKERSON
 You're missing an awesome
 breakfast!
 (looking to his wife)
 Hey Baby! Maroon scrubs. Stylish!

The DOORBELL RINGS. Ally moves to get it. Travis SLIDES the computer across the table, closer to his mother.

MRS. NICKERSON (OC)
 You're jealous 'cause your fatigues
 only come in tan.

Ally reaches the door. Checks the peephole. Opens it...

To FARAH, 20s. Also in scrubs. She hands the adorable ABBAS, 1, -- and ten bucks - to Ally, who happily accepts both.

SGT. NICKERSON (OC)
 That color *is* nicer. 'Cept for the
 fact I need to be camouflaged.

She follows Ally in, sees Mrs. Nickerson, now wiping tears. Farah signals she'll wait outside. Ally helps Abbas wave *Bye*.

SGT. NICKERSON (OC) (CONT'D)
 Hey! None of that. I'm fine.
 There's *nothing* going on. All good.

Mrs. Nickerson nods, gets a smile on, best foot forward...

MRS. NICKERSON
 Everyone's good here too. Travis is
 studying for his Equivalency -
 right, Trav? - and's full time with
 your buddy. Ally likes her school --
 don't you Al? She was just telling
 me she's making friends.

Ally and Trav exchange a *Not Exactly Reality* look...

SGT. NICKERSON
 And how about *you*, honey?

MRS. NICKERSON
 Don't you worry on us. You've got
 plenty to focus on. I'm good..but I
 have to go to work. Loveloveyou.

Mrs. Nickerson turns the screen to face Ally & Travis, her smile collapsing once she's off camera...

SGT. NICKERSON
 Loveloveloveyouback!
 (a beat, to Trav)
 How's Bloom treating you, Trav?

TRAVIS
 He says I'm the most "intuitive"
 mechanic at the garage.

SGT. NICKERSON
 I'm sure you are!

TRAVIS
 Just wish I could fix up the guy's
 bad back. He's having a hard time.

SGT. NICKERSON
 Happens when your hummer rolls.
 Good man. Glad it's working out.

TRAVIS
 It is. Too bad the other manager...
 he's kind of... a tool.

SGT. NICKERSON
 Oh? I know you'll work it out, even
 if some orders are tough to follow.
 (looking at Ally)
 Ally In Wonderland! What about you?

ALLY
 I, I...
 (pause)
 I really really miss you, Dad.

SGT. NICKERSON
 (finally cracking a bit)
 You *know* I miss you guys. So much.
 Every minute of every day.

Ally's eyes brim. So much to say that isn't being said.

INT. ALLY'S BEDROOM - EVENING

ALLY
 Sometimes I wish I could just
 scream out everything inside.

Ally has a fruit roll spread on the table. She's carefully
 CUTTING INTO A GUMMY BEAR.

ALLY (CONT'D)
*How do you all do it? How do you do
 it so fast?*

She reshapes the gummy bear so that it has outstretched arms, stubbly little legs and an open, panicked-looking mouth.

ALLY (CONT'D)
 I'm like my brother. Mom and Dad, they don't accept it. At the teacher meeting at our old school, they told Mom, right in front of Travis, that she shouldn't expect too much, he might just be *slow*.

She sticks the gummy bear on the fruit roll -- among others.

ALLY (CONT'D)
 Mom looked like she was going to punch the lady in the stomach. But she also looked like *she'd* been punched in the stomach. And we moved after that anyway. New start. That's what she said. They all say that. But it's the same ol' start, over and over again.

TRAVIS (OC)
 Ally, you have my phone!?

She looks OUT HER WINDOW. Travis is in the driveway, calling.

She hands the fruit roll-gummy bear tableau... To Abbas. In his porta-playpen, grinning, focused on her every move.

She picks the phone up. Starts RECORDING. Close in, finding angles, trying all sorts of stuff...as Abbas gobbles.

She stops. Looks to a shelf. There's a DISPLAY of COLLECTABLE COINS. She takes down a book.

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND & THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS. There's tape over the *Alice*, so the title reads differently. She touches and mouths it, *her name: ALLY'S ADVENTURES...*

Opens the book. It's inscribed. FOR MY WONDROUS GIRL! HAPPY BIRTHDAY! LOVE, DAD. *Touches* the handwriting. Looks to the shelf- the photo of her father there, arms around the family.

She leafs through, from illustration to illustration:

-Alice contemplating the written instructions Drink Me.

-Alice being lectured by the stern chess-piece Red Queen.

-Alice at the tea party with March Hare, Mad Hatter and the Doormouse -- clustered like kids at a cafeteria table.

Ally leans in to study the WORDS there, with longing...

TRAVIS (OC) (CONT'D)
I need my phone, sis!

Ally gets up, goes to Abbas, chin covered in fruit roll gore. She cleans him up. Holds the phone up. Shows him:

ALLY
Anyway kiddo, your job - wherever
you move to, wherever you are - is:

THE PHONE SCREEN - ALLY'S LITTLE FILM

It's framed cleverly. The roll-up spread out like a field. Abbas, a drooling giant, looming over it all...

ALLY (OC) (CONT'D)
Don't let 'em know you're slow.
It's brutal out there. They know
you're slow, they go after you..

The group of terrified gummy bears Ally modified seem to be SCRAMBLING TO GET AWAY FROM HIS SLOBBERING MAW...

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

ALLY (VO)
...and they'll eat you alive!

Gummy bears cross-fade into FIFTH GRADERS TUSSLING EACH OTHER as they crowd a bowl of chips on a table...

Ally, sitting alone , doodles SKETCHES of what she sees:

-The Snack Table Mob as they step back, chip bowl DEVoured.

-Mrs. Hall, truly looking ready to burst, sits with two colleagues, RAMROD and FUNKY. She holds up a card featuring a CRADLE, gives a wave of thanks to a STUDENT.

-KEISHA carries a tray of lovely CUPCAKES, hands them out...

-ALBERT's a BEARISH boy in a black t-shirt with block letters that say FLINT - eyes tracking the moving cupcakes.

-Mop-topped, hyper OLIVER punches at a bunch of pink-and-blue BALLOONS. 'Til Ramrod snatches them away.

-Self-assured, put-together SHAY sets flowers -- an over-the-top arrangement -- on the desk. Mrs. Hall gives her a hug..

(It's clear by now: it's an IN-CLASS MATERNITY-LEAVE PARTY.)

KEISHA (OC)
You *just* drew all that?

Keisha's there, handing Ally a cupcake. Ally moves her arm to COVER HER NOTEBOOK and its various sketches...

Albert hungrily bites his cupcake in half. Surprised to find - INSIDE- a little baby-shaped cookie. He lifts it out.

ALBERT
How do you get dough of two different consistencies to cook properly at the same time?

KEISHA
I prebake the cookies a little and pour the cupcake dough around them!

FUNKY COLLEAGUE (OC)
(in background)
From Dougie Sortino..

Miss Hall opens another student card -- locates DOUGIE, the kid, who gave it to her. Smiles and waves.

ALLY
Wait. You just *made* all these?

Ally seems impressed, but it's not clear- and Kesha tightens:

SHAY
(arriving)
Would anyone else make anything so disgusting?

Shay's consigliere, JESSICA, is happily mid-bite...but adopts Shay's look of disdain. Drops her cupcake on the floor.

KEISHA
Your mother. She cooked you up.

SHAY
Mrs. Hall definitely liked my flowers more'n your lame cupcakes. Nobody wants to bite a baby.
(to Ally)
Do *you*?

But Ally's distracted by Albert. His shirt rides up, exposing a purple BRUISE, even as he retrieves Jessica's cupcake from the floor, considers the DIRT on it....and CHOMPS IT anyway.

ALLY

Gross!

It's reflexive but plays into Shay's dissing. Keisha darkens.

FUNKY COLLEAGUE (OC)

From Ally Nickerson.

Ally's attention is drawn to Mrs. Hall, as she's handed her next gift: ALLY'S BEAUTIFUL CARD.

She watches with anticipation, as Miss Hall reads her card...

Funky Colleague leans in to read...frowning. Mrs. Hall's eyes find Ally. No wave. She just looks SAD.

Ramrod Colleague, fuming, starts Ally's way...

EXT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE OF CLASS - DAY

Ramrod Colleague is MR. MULDOON, 50s. A true...martinet. He shakes the open card in Ally's face.

MR. MULDOON

I am so sorry for your loss!

ALLY

My loss?

Mr. Muldoon holds the card in her face. There's Ally's signature. And there, in black script, is the message:

Ally tries to focus. The words SQUIGGLE, like snakes...

MR. MULDOON

Why in the world would you give a pregnant woman a *Sympathy* card?

ALLY

I....I....didn't..

MR. MULDOON

Don't tell me you didn't mean to.
What are you going to say next - *I can't read?*

Ally tightens, struggles to gather herself...

ALLY

I *meant* sorry for her loss because she is *losing* us here at school. Because she's leaving. So it's her loss. And mine. And your loss too.

Muldoon glares. And Ally manages to hold it. He huffs, uncertain, hands her back the card.

But we're certain, by now... watching Ally do all she can to keep her face earnest, keeping her secret: *Ally can't read.*

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - DAY

Ally watches as Mrs. Hall waddles to her car as Funky Colleague carries a box of her gifts and sets them in. She sighs, turns to look over the schoolyard.

Shay and her clique are laughing, chatting, deep in the business of comparing their identical FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS.

Keisha, working out something in a notebook, is trying to keep Oliver, who flits around trying to read it, at bay.

Albert's alone near a tree, Max & Marco mocking him for gathering acorns. They see Ally, smack their foreheads -*Duh!*

There's the END OF RECESS BELL. Ally slumps. Miserable.

INT. HOMEROOM/CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Kids settle into their desks. A STOCKY figure - a janitor? - is in the open supply closet at the back of the room...

MRS.ORO (OC)

Good afternoon Room Five! Is everyone in from recess...

Ally turns. The Principal, Mrs. Oro, is in the doorway. Shay and her cohort dart into the class, take their seats.

MRS. ORO

To welcome your substitute teacher?

The class waits for someone to step in alongside Mrs. Oro.

THUMP! The "janitor" drops a stack of workbooks on the front desk. Smiles nervously. Tongues a dangling tooth into place.

MRS. ORO (CONT'D)
Mr. Daniels will be filling in for a week or two, while we finish arrangements for Mrs. Hall's maternity leave replacement.

Max elbows Marco. A *temporary sub? Meat!* Mrs. Oro's PHONE VIBRATES - an "all yours" nod to the sub - and she's OFF. Mr. Daniels stands there a beat, processing the quick intro.

MR. DANIELS
 Uh so, yes, let's see. I'm Mr Dan..

OLIVER
 Is your nose broken?

MR. DANIELS
 Not.. anymore.

OLIVER
 My uncle broke his 'cause the sidewalk smacked him in the face. That's what he said. But really - my mom said-- it was because of *Dipsomania*. Do you know what that means? It means he was *blind drunk*.

Mr. Daniels isn't sure what to do with this. Looks at the INSTRUCTIONS that Mrs. Hall has left. **FIRST DAY ACTIVITIES.**

MR. DANIELS
 Okay, here's what we're going to do. You're each going to write a paragraph about something at this school you'd like to improve.

Ally tightens. Closes her eyes. Head in her hand.

MARCO
 That's easy. One word. *Everything*.

SHAY
 It's *actually* a great assignment. There could be some useful ideas the student council can then do.

Jessica nods in dutiful agreement. Shay grins reassuringly (er...ass-kissingly!) at Mr. D, who smiles, appreciative.

ALBERT
 You don't plan implementation, do you? Isn't this just to assess our writing levels?

MR. DANIELS
Well..it's.. ummm, yes it's..

OLIVER
Albert said *asses*. *Asses! Asses!*

MR. DANIELS
Could you calm down please?

MAX
He can't calm down. He's too weird.

OLIVER
My mom says I don't even know I'm
not being calm!

Ally GRINS. In Class Paragraph is not happening - this Sub is
at loose ends...and the class is RESTLESS, NOISY..

Except, suddenly...there's a shrill WHISTLE. Like a ref's.
Mr. Daniles brings his fingers down from his mouth.

MR. DANIELS
Okay everybody. Let's just start
writing. Now.

The kids start getting their stuff. Ally's face falls.

Mr. Daniels checks the plan left for him...and the WORKBOOKS.

ALLY holds her pencil to the paper. Stares. Finally...tries a
word. A backwards E..followed by an L and a sort of S.

ALLY
(to self)
Less homework.

It's a bridge too far and...she quickly ERASES it.

MR. DANIELS
You need to get started.

He's there, setting her workbook down. Waits. Ally waits too.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Or do you have a question?

Ally looks up at him as he nods toward her paper.

ALLY
Have you ever been blind drunk?
Like Oliver said...

OLIVER
My mother said it. About my uncle.

MR. DANIELS
(he's had enough)
What's your name?

MAX
That's Vera Thicke, Mr. Daniels.

MR. DANIELS
Vera Thicke, start writing.

The class SNICKERS loudly. And Ally...glares at Mr. Daniels and SCRUNCHES UP her PAPER into a wad.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Front office. Now, Miss Thicke!

Ally's up. Already marching to the door.

MARCO
That's gotta be arecord! What you gonna get for breaking the record, Vera?

Mr. Daniels' face is a wash of emotion. Tough start. Finally he notices Keisha, eyes on him, hand-up, serious.

MR. DANIELS
Yes? What?

KEISHA
Just so you know, her name is *not* Vera Thicke.

EXT. HALLWAY - DAY

As Ally motors down the hall, face screwed tight, hands clenched, so deeply frustrated that she can scarcely hear...

MR. DANIELS (OC)
Hey! Could you stop please?

She turns. There's Mr. Daniels, hurrying up.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Look, I'm sorry about calling you something that's *completely not* your name. I wasn't thinking and...
(a little overwhelmed)
Uh, so... what *is* your name?

ALLY

Ally.

MR. DANIELS

Ally. We met before, didn't we?

Ally says nothing. Mr. Daniels looks down toward the office.

MR. DANIELSS

Yeah, well I forgot that *Mrs. Oro* is...busy. So come back to class.

Ally..still says nothing. Finally.

ALLY

I'm not getting punished now?

MR. DANIELS

(thinking)

Do you know what a penalty box is?

ALLY

No.

MR. DANIELS

Come and find out. Your choice.
It's not awesome. But it's better
than those Trouble Maker seats.
Super uncomfortable. Right?

Ally looks down the hall to Mrs. Oro's, then to the class door...where Oliver has just been shoved out. She sighs.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Ally REENTERS the classroom. It has naturally gone off the rails, everyone (except for Albert) BUZZING.

Mr. Daniels claps his hands. There's minimal response. So he HEFTS A TABLE OVER HIS HEAD, carries it across the room....

He has everyone's attention now.

MR. DANIELS

I'm not sure the best way to get
your attention. The whistling, that
was a bit... much. But it can't be
lifting up furniture either, so...
(sets the table down)

How about we start again. I'm Mr.
Daniels. This is my first day, we
all know. But I mean, really, my
first day.

(MORE)

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
I've never had a fifth grade
homeroom. Until recently, I used to
play hockey.

He rubs his nose - smiles at Oliver.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
It can get a little rough.

He moves some chairs in behind the table.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
And in hockey if you're out of
line, you're taken off the ice and
have to sit for a while. But not in
some other place. Next to the rink.

Turns, finds Ally watching from the doorway.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
So you're still watching the game.
That's how you understand what
you're missing.

He pulls out a chair, beckons to her.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Ally, you've got a ten minute
penalty for being kinda rude to me
in my first five minutes here.

He's being so direct about it. She sits. Avoids Max's smirk.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
And you, what's your name?

Max is surprised to see Daniels looking at him.

SHAY
Max Ferraro.

MR. DANIELS
Max Ferraro. Ten for being kinda
mean with the name you made up.

Max gives a "for real?" look. Mr. Daniels waits. He comes and
sits. Then Mr Daniels SITS HIMSELF in the penalty box.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
And I get ten minutes for being a
dupe and hurting Ally's feelings.

OLIVER

If you're in the penalty box, who's gonna teach the class?

MR. DANIELS

Hand please. You are...

OLIVER

Oliver Wendel Holmes Sanchez.

MR. DANIELS

Oliver Wendel Holmes Sanchez.

(smiling)

Get on up there and teach us something we don't know.

Oliver darts up front, barely able to contain himself:

OLIVER

You ever wonder why sometimes you feel like suddenly out of nowhere you need to throw up? Hands please?

Keisha raises her hand. Then another kid. And..another kid. Then Albert with an *Oh I Know This!* look. Oliver beams.

OLIVER (CONT'D)

That's called Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome. It's from too much emotions, panic or anxiety or being really excited about something. Like, for instance getting a hoverboard for your birthday...

ALLY looks around: no one is focused any more on the confrontation-drama she was just part of. She glances at Mr. Daniels. Something about this classroom has just...changed.

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - AFTERNOON

Ally exits. The usual Pick-Up/Home-home rituals. Keisha at her bike looking guarded. Shay, Jessica and their clique chatting over by their MOTHERS' Lexuses.

Ally looks at them longingly. And Shay sees her looking. She actually...smiles. Like she's about to say something...

A HONKING. A THROATY patched-together GTO has pulled up. Travis leans out, smiles. Ally just keeps walking.

TRAVIS

Seriously?

He keeps pace with her.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
 Oh, wow. I remember this. Can't be
 seen going home in a crappy car,
 right? Man, eleven *sucks*.

Ally quickly gets in. Shoots him a look.

INT. CAR - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Ally scrunches low, just enough to peer out the window.

ALLY
 I'm *twelve* by the way.

TRAVIS
 (just grins, he knows)
 And this car isn't actually crappy,
 It's a Work In Progress.
 (pause)
 Speaking of which, I gotta stop by
 the shop to drop off a part.

Ally notes a trio of YOUNGER BOYS, skidding their bikes to
 head down an alley... And spots Albert further down it.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
 So...another day of Fake It Til You
 Make It?

Ally looks at Travis...clearly he's been there.

ALLY
 Yeah, but where do you make it to?

TRAVIS
 You make it to the next grade or
 the next school and you hope
 something will be different but it
 never is and Mom and Dad don't
 really understand or maybe they do
 understand, cause it was probably
 the same for them and that's why,
 finally, they let you drop out!
 (raps his steering wheel)
 And then you've made it. Real life
 begins!

He grins. She wants to grin. But slumps down lower.

EXT. AUTO REPAIR SHOP - DAY

Ally sits in the car, watching Travis with manager BLOOM, 30s, in the work bay. There's a 1950s COUPE there. Travis hands him a VINTAGE PART. He nods at Travis approvingly.

But Ally can also see the glassed in front office...another manager, VEITCH, 50s, there, doing paperwork.. watching them.

He comes over holding a thick MANUAL. Waves Travis over to a second bay, pointing out the undercarriage of the car. Travis glances at the manual. Nods...as Veitch lectures.

Travis nods. Then turns to head back to his car. He opens the door, grin evaporating.

ALLY

Is that Dad's friend?

TRAVIS

The super nice guy who understands old cars better than anyone who spends all their time with their nose buried in a manual - *yes. That one is Dad's friend.*

ALLY

Does he know anything about...how long Dad has to be over there?

Travis shakes his head. Exhales. Regroups. Looks at her. He holds the manual up...and tosses it in the back. Grins.

TRAVIS

If Dad *was* here, bet I know something he'd do with us now.

He locks eyes with Ally. She smiles. Nods. *Yes please.*

EXT. STREET- DAY

Ally and Travis park on a run-down former "downtown" stretch, long-gutted by the surrounding malls.

She jumps out, clearly excited. It's a PAWN SHOP.

INT. PAWN SHOP - DAY

It's a wreck of place. Stuff piled everywhere. Ally's checking out the CASES, blowing grime off to peer in, to the consternation of the BURLY MAN behind the counter. She spots something, signals to Travis.

BURLY
You need somethin'?

TRAVIS
We're looking for coins.

Burly says nothing, just rolls a toothpick in his mouth. Until Travis pulls out a ROLL OF BILLS. Burly reaches down as if to retrieve a gun...and comes up with SPRAY CLEANER.

Travis takes it. Clears the case. He and Ally study the mess of stuff there...coins mixed with brooches and old watches.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
That half dollar. How much?

ALLY leans in for a better look: a walking woman draped in a sheet, with the sun's rays behind her.

BURLY
That's in mint condition: 80 bucks.

TRAVIS
That's worth 40. Thirty two really, but you can make eight bucks - that's a 25 percent mark-up.
(blowing some dust back)
Or it can sit here for another 20 years. Might be worth more then.

Ally absorbs Travis's bartering chops. Then looks at the man: He says nothing. But his toothpick has stopped rolling.

EXT. PAWN SHOP - DAY

Ally and Travis walk out to the car. Travis reaches into his pocket. Hands her... the Walking Liberty Coin.

She sets it on the hood. Takes out..a phone gets the light glinting off it as she moves in CLOSE.

ALLY
Travis. It's beautiful. It's..

ALLY'S FILM OF THE COIN

The Woman really does look...empowered. Striding towards us, the sun's rays emanating from her in a super-hero aura. Ally angles it so she actually starts to GLOW.

TRAVIS
A Walking Liberty. 1933. Dad's dad was born in 1933.
(MORE)

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

He's the one started the family coin collecting. Grandpa and this kick-ass lady were both minted in the same year.

Ally repockets the coin, leans into her brother. Stays there.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

What?

ALLY

Are you any good at making friends?

Trav glances down at her. Sees...her seriousness.

TRAVIS

Hard isn't it, moving all the time?

ALLY

That's...one of the hard things.

TRAVIS

It's okay to take your time to find 'em. You know how dad always says *"you're only as good as your friends, so choose them wisely..."*

ALLY

"You want the ones who have got your back."

(pause)

You got people who got your back?

TRAVIS

I got you, Ally. You got my back.

(grabbing for phone)

And my phone most of the time!

She spins, dodges...holding the phone up. Filming him.

INT. ALLY'S BEDROOM - EVENING

Ally sits on her bed. Homework books are spread around. Unopened. She's looking at *Ally In Wonderland*.

A Tenniel drawing of Wonderland: a CHESSBOARD countryside. Looks over to the photo of her father, closes her eyes.

SGT. NICKERSON'S VOICE

"It's a great huge game of chess that's being played -all over the world, if this is the world at all."

Ally studies the illustration. She's got this part memorized.

ALLY

"How I wish I was one of them! I
wouldn't mind being a Pawn, if only
I might join - "

CAR SOUNDS outside. She looks to the window. Mrs. Nickerson,
in her store togs, exits the Camry. Settles back against it.
Looks to the sky. Clearly tired after another long day.

ALLY (CONT'D)

"- though of course I should like
to be a Queen, best."

Ally's finger traces the chessboard illustration, moving from
square to square, black-white-black-white...

INT. CLASSROOM - MORNING

..BLACK AND WHITE. The checkerboard of the classroom's
LINOLEUM TILES. Classmates moving over it. As Ally enters..

To find Mr. Daniels finishing putting NAMES on the desks.

MR. DANIELS

Good morning everyone! You've got
new seats. Find yours, settle in.

A universal GROAN, which he ignores.

Jessica is Greatly Annoyed to see that she's not next to
Shay. Ally is chagrined to find her seat is in the front row.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Time to set the world on fire!

Keisha leans in, listening. Max rolls his eyes.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

I want us to think of us as a team.
We have different people with
different strengths. We're here to
help each other...To win. Together.

MAX

What are we going to win?

MR. DANIELS:

Hand up please. That's a very good
question. What do you think?

JESSICA
Sitting wherever we want.

OLIVER
Extra recess! Extra recess! Ex..

Mr. Daniels nods at Oliver...and RUBS HIS OWN NOSE.
Somehow... Oliver smiles and *actually quiets*.

MR. DANIELS
I was hoping for something more
like.. *knowledge*. Or *confidence*.

Mr. Daniels starts handing WORKSHEETS out.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Speaking of knowledge. Here's a
list of prepositions and pronouns.
I want you to write a story...about
anything you can think of. Have
fun. But it's also a story where I
want you to use every preposition
and pronoun. At least twice...

He hands the sheet to Ally, who tenses. Scrambles..

ALLY
If we're a team, what's our name?
Teams have names.

Mr. Daniels...actually...stops. Takes the bait.

MR. DANIELS
You're right. They do. How about
some ideas? The Room Five...?

SHAY
Champions!

MARCO
Ninjas!

JESSICA
Seat Changers!

KEISHA
Room Five Fantásticos.

MR. DANIELS
Room Five Fantásticos! I *really*
like the sound of that.

ALBERT
That's because of the alliteration.

SHAY
The *a little* what?

ALBERT

The pleasing quality when the
initial sound of successive words
is the same.

MAX

That's got nothing to do with
naming a team, you dwee...

ALLY.

Seattle Seahawks. Pittsburg
Pirates. Philadelphia Flyers...
Room Five Fantasticos.

MR. DANIELS

Fantasticos it is! Well done!

Albert grins at Ally: *thanks for the help*. Keisha actually
looks grateful for the support too. Before Ally can respond..

OLIVER

Go! Go! Fantasticos!

Other kids pick up the chant, most of them sardonically..
with Max and Marco adding DESK THUMPS.

It's loud. Mr. Daniels..raises his hands and...CONDUCTS IT!

ALLY AND CLASS

Go! Go! Fantasticos!

Ally sees IN THE CLASSROOM DOOR WINDOW - Mrs. Oro and a GUEST
passing. They glance in. Mrs. Oro looks ready to intervene.

But with a dramatic flourish, Mr. Daniels SIGNALS STOP. And
they do. Like a choir. Or a team. He nods approvingly..

But he now notices the concerned observers - goes for the
sheepish grin. Mrs. Oro... moves on.

MR. DANIELS

So, Fantasticos - Prepositions!
Pronouns! For an hour in-class
tomorrow, you all get to write and
show me what you got! Sound good?

ALLY'S face going from I'm Enjoying This to... frozen. Like a
deer in headlights. Sounds *terrible*.

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY

A BUSTLING LUNCHROOM. Ally assesses the Ever Forbidding turf:

She can't help but glance at the Shay posse, fussing over the matching red bracelets that Shay distributes. (Jessica slips a new friendship bracelet on. Happily waggles it.)

Max and his gang, playing some sort of tabletop game with finger-goalposts and folded-paper football.

And Albert...sitting alone in his permanent FLINT shirt. Reading. Though Oliver flits by curious about the book..

And Keisha, working alone at one end of a long table...where, at the other end, a group of flaky classmates chitter away.

Keisha glances up at Ally from her notebook scribbling...

OLIVER (OC)
Watch your step!

Ally startles. Oliver has skittered over. He nods to where Mr. Muldoon has come in to assess the cafeteria...

OLIVER (CONT'D)
Minefield Muldoon!

...Even as Muldoon spots the boisterous boys at their table football game. He moves in...snatches the paper football.

Oliver makes a puffed-cheek "KABOOOOM" sound, skitters on..

Ally heads to a lonely table by the window. Sits, looks out so she has *somewhere* to look. Sighs. Then notices...

OUT THE WINDOW

A view of the faculty parking lot. And there, sitting in the open hatch of his beater Subaru, is Mr. Daniels.

He's eating his lunch there. Alone...but engaged in a phone conversation. Talking. Nodding. Animated.

She looks back over the cafeteria, eyes going to Shay's table...to find that Shay is watching her.

And holding up a braided BRACELET. Ally's surprised, tries to hide it. Shay's waving her over now. And Ally...approaches.

SHAY
So...Max, What a tool, huh?

ALLY
Yeah. I'd say a hammer.

JESSICA
A hammer?

ALLY
Well, you know. Always out to nail
people.

SHAY
I got it. And Albert. Freak, right?

ALLY
He *is* a walking Google page who'd
get a better grade than me if he
just blew his nose into the paper.

Shay... grins. And holds her wrist up, waggles it.

SHAY
You're funny. You like these?

ALLY
They're nice. Where'd you get 'em?

JESSICA
Shay *makes* them for us.

ALLY
Oh? Yeah. Cool color.

Shay nods approvingly. Looks to her friends. Back at Ally.

SHAY
How pathetic can someone get?

Ally tightens. But Shay's pointing...at Albert.

SHAY (CONT'D)
Albert! It's bad enough you wear
the same stupid shirt every day.
Don't you have money for new shoes?

Shay hits Ally on the arm and points at his feet: the BACKS
OF HIS SNEAKERS HAVE BEEN CUT OUT.

ALBERT
Given the fact of how quickly I'm
growing right now, I'd rather spend
it on a chemistry set.
(lifting his foot)
These are comfortable this way.

SHAY
You look practically homeless.
(turning to Ally)
What do you think of Albert and his
Homeless Man shoes?

The group of girls pivots to Ally. All ears. Her moment.

ALLY

They're pretty dopey. Kinda being a weirdo, Albert. Like usual.

Shay beams. Ally grins, but has to turn and face Albert now..

JESSICA

Ally's right. Go google Weirdo, Weirdo!

He's studying her a crack in his Ignore Them armor starting to show...before he shuffles off.

The girls laugh. And Ally...looks *torn*, guilt rising... Just as Shay holds a bracelet out to her.

SHAY

You want one? They're friendship bracelets.

ALLY

Yeah? No, I mean.. I know.

JESSICA

Thought I was getting the next one.

SHAY

You still owe for the last one. I'm not giving you another 'til you pay for what's already on your wrist!

(to Ally)

So..Ally, you want one?

JESSICA

You're going to give her one?

SHAY

No, I'm not going to *give* her one.

(to Ally)

Twenty dollars. For materials.

Ally processes all this. Her hand starts rummaging in her pocket. Finds something. Settles there.

ALLY

Twenty dollars. For... the string?

JESSICA

Omigod. She *makes them* herself!

Ally opens her fist. The Walking Liberty is there. Power Woman. Travis's gift. She studies it a beat, tucks it back.

She glances over at Albert, back by himself. Realizes that though they can't hear, kids are watching this exchange.

ALLY

(quietly)

Jessica, they're called friendship bracelets because friends give them to each other to show that they are friends. You're not supposed to have to pay for that.

Jessica almost replies but then...isn't sure what to say... But Shay, she strikes fast - and loud, so EVERYONE HEARS:

SHAY

Wow - I hope dumb isn't contagious! These are *friendship* bracelets, Ally. You can't just come ask to buy one. They're only for *friends*!

She takes in Ally with a hooded-cobra stare. It's on.

INT. CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Ally looks pretty miserable as, up front, Mr. Daniels finishes up a lesson, tapping a CHART of the SOLAR SYSTEM.

MR. DANIELS

My very excellent mother just served us nachos.

KEISHA

Wait what? Nachos?

Something suddenly STINGS the back of Ally's head. Her hand goes there... a paperclip dangling from a rubber band.

MR. DANIELS

That's the easy way to memorize the planets in order from the sun. It's called a mnemonic. Useful trick. The more useful tricks you know, the better!. There's a lot in life you're going to forget, but *this'll* stick in your head forever.

(tapping the planet chart)

My-Mercury Very-Venus Excellent-Earth Mother-Mars Just-Jupiter Served-Saturn Us-Uranus Nachos-Neptune..

Ally looks around. Shay gives her a "poor baby" sneer. Max, the culprit, just sits, grinning, watching Mr. Daniels.

ALBERT

I feel bad for Pluto. Pluto's a planet for years then someone just decides - not anymore? Too small. Orbit not right. It's not fair.

MR. DANIELS

Albert! You might just be the most thoughtful person I know. I feel you. *My very excellent mother just served us nachos...*

He turns back to the chart...and marker-draws another planet.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

..*Perfectly.*

(checking planner)

So, guys, that's about it for your unit on the Solar System.

Just behind Mr. D, Ally sees Marco aiming a paperclip on a rubberband...at Albert. Shoots. Dings him. Albert ignores it.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Next, we start a unit on *Migration*. The process of organisms moving from place to place and why, considering how difficult it is, they do it. Anyone have any ideas?

ALLY

Their dad's in the military?

Mr. Daniels nods, *nice one...*and suddenly SPINS, hand out, to CATCH the shot that Marco has just taken. It's impressive.

MR. DANIELS

We are a team. Working here *together*. Isn't that right, Marco?

He waits for Marco to nod. Points him to the penalty box.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Speaking of which...every team needs its captain. Which brings me to: the election for Room Five Fantásticos' representative to the Liston School Student Council.

Jessica's hand is already up. Mr. Daniels nods.

JESSICA

I nominate Shay.

Shay twists to give her an approving look. Already got that "This Is So Mine" grin as she glances around the class..

MR. DANIELS
You guys have done this before!
Okay, then. Another nomination?

He looks around. Shay looks around. Nobody makes a move.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Can't have an election with one
nominee. C'mon folks, step up.

No takers. No takers. Until a kid's hand shoots up.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Keya! Talk to me.

KEYA
Can I go to the bathroom?

Mr. Daniels nods. KEYA disappears. Shay raises her hand..

MR. DANIELS
Go ahead. Free the pee.

SHAY
I'd like to *nominate* someone.

MR. DANIELS
Shay! Good sportsmanship! Who will
you nominate?

SHAY
Ally Nickerson.

MR. DANIELS
Great! Ally, you accept?

Ally glances at Shay whose looks say: *Humiliation Time*.

ALLY
Uh...no?

MR. DANIELS
You should run. The whole class
would benefit from an election with
two *talented* candidates.

He says this to everyone, but his gaze ends on her.

ALLY
Just get it over with.

JESSICA
(jumping right in)
Okay! How many people vote for...

MR. DANIELS
Oh, no, no no. Not just yet.

JESSICA
We vote right after nominations!
Always! In third *and* fourth grade.

MR. DANIELS
And in *fifth* grade we're going to
learn about elections while we have
one. Shay and Ally, you'll each
develop your platform. What will
you focus on as our representative?
Talk with your *constituents* to help
shape your campaign, and the speech
you'll each be making.

ALLY
Speech?

MR. DANIELS
A good campaign's about knowing the
issues, figuring out how to
approach them and getting your
ideas across. Any more questions?

MAX
You sure we shouldn't vote now? How
long you actually going to be here?
Will you even be around in a week?

MRS. DANIELS
Well...I *am* here on a day to day
basis while the district decides on
Mrs. Hall's replacement. But even
if *I'm* not here, I'm sure the
person they hire will greatly enjoy
learning about what matters to you
all as you campaign.

Ally's head sinks to her desk. *What's she been pulled into?*

EXT. SCHOOL - AFTERNOON

Ally exits. Glances around at the kids heading off. Squints
up at the sun. Another day done down the mines.

EXT. CONDOMINIUM - AFTERNOON

Ally approaches the condo. The garage door is open. Travis is there among his vending machines, all smudged up.

TRAVIS
Mom's not with you?

ALLY
She had a last-minute double. I would have called you but... aren't you supposed to be at work?

TRAVIS
Did an early shift so I could take Bloom to a doctor's appointment. His back's so bad he can't drive.

Travis wrestles one of the vintage vending machines front and center. He hands her a quarter, nods for her to try it.

It RATTLES. THUNKS. THUNKS AGAIN. And an empty classic glass bottle CLUNKS down the bottom of a chute.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
Not one of these machines anywhere I can't figure out how to get into and pull apart. This one's almost 70 years old. Worth a bundle.

She nods, but Travis wants a more energetic response, goes to muss her hair, waving his greasy hands like zombie paws..

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
What? You don't think that's exciting? I almost have enough to buy rolling tool cabinets. And someday my big neon sign! *Nickerson Restoration. We Fix Everything!*

He gets her in a playful headlock. Moves his oily hand in...

ALLY
Stop! Stop Travis!

TRAVIS
Uh-oh. Let it out. 1001 Reasons Why School Sucks. Reason 412 is...

He waits. Ally slumps.

ALLY
The mean girls.

TRAVIS

Mean Girls are the worst. Right up there with Mean Boys.

ALLY

But I was one of them today!

TRAVIS

Oh? Hmmm. I know you pretty well. You're not mean. You're just kinda prickly sometimes. Like a cactus.

Ally just sits there. Stewing.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

Okay. And reason 413 is...

ALLY

The new sub says we have to write *in class* tomorrow for an hour!

TRAVIS

An hour? Who is the Torture Expert?

ALLY

Mr. Daniels. Brody Daniels.

TRAVIS

Brody Daniels? Like Philadelphia Flyers Brody Daniels?

ALLY

Uh...I don't know.

TRAVIS

(talks to his phone)

Siri. Brody Daniels. Play-offs.

He scrolls a second. Holds the phone up to Ally:

It's video of a HOCKEY GAME. A PLAYER dances down the ice, shouldering past STOCKY DEFENSEMAN...

And ROCKETING the puck. It BOUNCES off the goal's cross bar. The player PIVOTS. WHAM! the beat Defenseman FLATTENS him...

And the Player is UP, GLOVES OFF for both, helmet's flying. The two go at in their awkward padding, punch after punch...

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

How hilarious would it be if it was actually *that* guy?

Ally leans in to study the defenseman. Enlarges the frame...

ALLY

It's.. him. That is him.

TRAVIS

Seriously? The team goon. They hired *him* to get you to sit around quietly and... write?

ALLY

Well, he's just subbing.

TRAVIS

A sub! Subs are even more clueless than goons. This will be *easy*.

He moves to a stack of old-sheet work rags. Shakes one out.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

We Fix Everything!

He drapes it over Ally's shoulder, sizing it all up.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

As Mr. Daniels hands out sheets of blank paper...until he reaches Ally. She's sitting there with her arm in A SLING.

MR. DANIELS

Oooo. What happened to you?

ALLY

I tripped on my cat on the stairs.

MR. DANIELS

Broken?

ALLY

(she has practiced this)
A moderate Grade 2 sprain. Some ligaments may be damaged.

Mr. Daniels nods. Ally exhales. On her way. Free and cle...

MR. DANIELS

I've got a cat too. A Siamese. What kind do you have?

ALLY

It's a...kind of a, you know, orangey. He's got a lot of fur that's...orange.

Mr. Daniels looks at her. Looks at her sling.

MR. DANIELS

I'm having a hard time telling what she's actually thinking.

ALLY

What?

MR. DANIELS

My Siamese. Your cat like that? No idea what's going on in her head. Cats just don't want you to know.

Ally's unsure - is he razzing her..or believing her? Mr. Daniels goes to his desk, comes back. Drops a book. *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar.*

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

You can *read* a story. Good ones in here. Roald Dahl. Possibly a jerk, but maybe that's why he's so good at writing about bad grown-ups.

Dangle-tooth smile. Ally tries out a grin. Gulps. Nods.

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON A SEA OF LETTERS: They swim against their page, like fish trying to hold position against a current... wiggling...

Ally Looks up from her book, around at the classroom of kids going hard at their papers with their pencils...

She returns to the page. The letters WOBBLE so much it hurts to try to focus on them. She closes her eyes, rubs her brow.

Looks up to see Mr. Daniels, consulting the lesson plan, his notes. He looks briefly over at her. A bit...UNSCRUTABLE.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Dougie reads the School Announcements, fast and confident.

DOUGIE

...permission slips for the field trip to the Butterfly House. And tomorrow morning, there's a Spirit Assembly! Parents are invited.

MR. DANIELS

Thank-you Dougie. Nice work on the announcements.

Mr. Daniels sets a battered sports-equipment bag on his desk.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 Okay Fantasticos. Ready to set the
 world on fire? I have a new
 challenge for you. I'm going to
 break you up into groups...

He starts pointing out the kids who will work together - of
 course, working against the grain of the cliques..

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 Your job with each of these will
 be: figure out *what's inside*.

He hands out FOUR SHOE BOXES, held closed with rubber bands.

Oliver starts THWACKING the elastics on his box. Until Mr.
 Daniels RUBS HIS OWN NOSE and Oliver nods...and stops.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 You can do anything to the box
 except open it.

Four groups. Four boxes. Each with a number marked on top.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 You have five minutes with each
 box. Write down your guesses and at
 the end, we'll open them up!

The kids look...intrigued. Shay rattles her group's box, no
 intention of handing it over to the others, including Albert.

Ally looks over her group: 8 kids, including Max, Oliver and
 Jessica who, Shay-like, commandeers their box..

JESSICA
 Forget it. It's impossible.

Oliver grabs the box back, shakes it wildly.

OLIVER
 It's heavy. Banging around.
 A baby kangaroo with pocket rocks!

Max takes it. Rattles it..

MAX
 A wooden block. Like your head.

He tosses it to Ally who catches it with her "good" hand.
 Instead of shaking it like everyone, she holds it to her ear.

Tilts it. Whatever's inside...slides down toward her, hits.

ALLY

Rolling not sliding. Must be round.
But you're right, Oliver. Heavy.

Max grabs it back. Tries the same thing. Hmmmm...

MAX

Probably a baseball.

Mr. Daniels calls time. Max scribbles *BASEBALL* on their list...and nods to Ally as the groups trade boxes.

MUSIC OVER

Jessica's on it, imitating how Ally manipulated the last one.

Max flips the box around, listening... feeling... he's definitely got it. Writes it down: A SPONGE!

Oliver grabs it, taps on it. Then puts his ear down to listen. Gives Max the thumbs up: it's a sponge...

But also hands the box to Ally, who listens, moves it around. Indicates that there are more than one. And they're small.

Max crosses SPONGE off their list and replaces it with MARSHMALLOW. Ally corrects him - he adds THREE.

CUT TO:

As the boxes change groups, Ally glances around:

-Oliver grabs Box Number 3 and starts SNIFFING it madly.

-Shay's bossing her group. Albert's clearly frustrated by her over-control. When he catches Ally's eye....he looks away.

-Keisha pretends to peek into her group's box, says something...everyone laughs.

-Oliver's finishes SNIFFING the heck out of theirs...

OLIVER (OC)

So. *Not* a hotdog. C'mon, Ally - we should just let you do it.

JESSICA

What do you mean?

OLIVER

She's definitely the best at this!

The others DON'T DISAGREE. It catches Ally off guard... She takes the box, holds it carefully across her chest. Tilts it front to back, side to side, lost in concentration.

MR. DANIELS
(arriving)
How's it going with this group?

He looks at their ANSWER list...purses his lips, nods.

ALLY
It's like a stubby wand - it moves a lot when I tilt it one direction, but not when I tilt it the other. But it also doesn't make sense.

MR. DANIELS
Why is that?

ALLY
I can't get it to hit the sides. The more I shake side to side the more it hits the top and bottom.

She shakes it, feels the weight shift... *brightens*.

ALLY (CONT'D)
You taped it I think! *You cheated!*

She says this excitedly, but the loud "You cheated!" gets the attention of the class: *Ally getting in trouble..*

Mr. Daniels steps back and.. LAUGHS. Shakes his head

MR. DANIELS
That's impressive. I was told *no one* would likely figure it out.

He takes the box, and opens it to show - a MAGIC MARKER with string tied around it and taped to hang in the middle.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Ally Nickerson shoots, scores!

He holds his hand up, waggles it. Ally, without thinking, PULLS HER ARM OUT OF THE SLING. Hand up for the HIGH FIVE.

And then realizes what she's done. Smiles sheepishly. Mr. Daniels just nods, shakes his head...smiles back.

EXT. NICKERSON CONDO - EVENING

Three cars in the drive now. Camry, GTO, old Windstar...

ALLY (PRE-LAP)
Ready? Here it goes...

INT. NICKERSON KITCHEN - EVENING

A SMART PHONE SCREEN-SHOT: Abbas on a play blanket, surrounded by a mess of toys, smiling up at the camera.

A jaunty cover of *Taking Care of Business* starts and, in Time-Lapse, he starts high-speed WRIGGLING all around the room, interacting with every toy, again and again...

FARAH (OC)
(laughing)
Oh my! How did you do that?

THE DINNER TABLE

Everyone's clustered around to watch. Farah's there too...eating before the evening shift with Mrs. Nickerson.

ALLY
It's easy. I time lapsed two hours into one minute.

TRAVIS
Abbas, way to get around on your back. You'd be great in the shop!

FARAH
You say it's easy, but no, you have a gift for it. So...creative.
(to Mrs. Nickerson)
She get that from you, Sarah?

MRS NICKERSON
Me? No.. I don't think so.

FARAH
Sure she does. We pass so much on to our children. Why do you think Abbas is so good at making a mess?

Abbas concurs...by slamming down his bowl of applesauce.

ALLY
Yeah, mom. What were you good at? When you were our age?

Mrs. Nickerson thinks, shakes her head.

MRS. NICKERSON

Well, I liked biology. My lab partner did all the write ups, but I was the one who rocked at identifying all the body parts.

ALLY

That's why you work in medicine!

MRS. NICKERSON

Ally, I answer phones and clean up after the doctors and nurses...

(pause)

I was also pretty good getting into trouble at school. Like you two.

She checks the time, gets up, starts to clear. Farah too.

TRAVIS

My Getting Into Trouble days are behind me.

MRS. NICKERSON

Yours too, Ally? Have you made some friends yet?

ALLY

(changing subject)

I did really well today in this thing that Mr. Daniels had us do.

MRS. NICKERSON

Mr. Daniels?

TRAVIS

The goon!

ALLY

He's the substitute. For now.

(pause)

And I got nominated for student council.

MRS. NICKERSON

What? Wow? Ally, that's great!

ALLY

Not really. No one's going to vote for me. I mean, literally no one.

MRS. NICKERSON

I'm glad school is going better. It sounds like there's a lot going on.

They're leaving. Farah nuzzles Abbas...hands him to Ally.

FARAH

Abbas is definitely voting for you!

ALLY

There is..a lot. Oh! There's like a spirit assembly tomorrow. And parents can come.

The ladies grab their bags to exit. Mrs. Nickerson gives Ally a kiss on the head. But her looks says: *You know I can't.*

EXT. SCHOOL - MORNING

Ally walks by the chain-link fence by the school parking lot.

MR. DANIELS (OC)

Good idea. Thanks. Having a private signal is way more supportive than constantly correcting him in front of everyone.

(pause)

I rub my nose. Yes, *that* nose.

There's Mr. Daniels in the parking lot, sitting in his open car - engaged on the phone. Ally slows...curious...

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

So many different learning styles. The mystery box project was perfect. Keep the ideas coming.

He pivots as he talks..and Ally, suddenly worried about snooping...drops down, out of sight, behind the low wall.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Really, could not do this without your help.

Ally sees...a car has pulled up a little ways down the curb. Jessica gets out. ALLY panics - if Jessica sees her squatting there, she'll look like an idiot. And if she stands..

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

I'd love it if they'd hire me to be the replacement teacher for the rest of the year. But, man, I got a lot to learn...

She starts scooting, ridiculously, beneath the low wall...

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 (with a laugh)
 Right! Fake it 'til you make it.

She's clear. Pops up. Walks around to the school yard.

There are some parents milling. Shay's with her MOM at a COSTANZA FLORISTS van, unloading FLOWERS. Jessica rushes up to help...Shay clearly chastising her for being late.

Keisha with her PARENTS, guiding them through the unfamiliar landscape. They have a First Generation Immigrants look of - very UnKeisha-like - *reserve*.

INT. AUDITORIUM - MORNING

Ally gets in line as Mr. Muldoon organizes the kids. Shay, following behind, has a basket full of lovely ribbon-wrapped bouquets, officiously handing one to each girl...

Keisha can't help it, she buries her nose in her bouquet, takes in the smell. Goes in again, wagging her face...

And a BUD BREAKS OFF, bounces against...Mr. Muldoon's shoe. He looks around. Behind him, Oliver mouths his warning:

OLIVER
The Minefield.

Oliver does his EXPLOSION routine, hands wagging for effect. But safely back in position before Muldoon turns to see...

Shay. Pointing at Keisha, the headless flower in her bouquet.

MR. MULDOON
 What do you think you're doing?

KEISHA
 I just...

MR. MULDOON
 If that's how you're going to treat a gift from a classmate's family -- with a complete lack of respect and gratitude - then you'll be the only girl without flowers.

He snatches the bouquet from Keisha's hands. Shay smirks.

KEISHA
 Mr. Muldoon, I didn't...

Mr. Muldoon holds up his hand. Moves on.

Ally looks at Keisha. She's actually QUITE UPSET. Humiliated.

Ally knows the feeling. She grips her own bouquet. Tightly... TWISTS IT, until half of it breaks free from its ribbon...

INT. AUDITORIUM - DAY

The kids file out, all the girls with bouquets. Ally and Keisha take position, side by side. As Shay glares daggers...

And Mr. Muldoon starts conducting...just noticing the HALF-BOUQUETS that Ally and Keisha hold, petals fluttering.

Too late for Muldoon to do anything... but let them sing.

KIDS SINGING

*My country 'tis of thee, sweet land
of liberty...*

Keisha smiles out at her parents, watching proudly.

EXT. RECESS PLAYGROUND - DAY

Kids playing wall-ball. Max & Marco show some younger kids their best UFC moves. Over by an oak tree, Oliver hurls acorns at the sky. Muldoon, across the way...takes notice.

Albert, squatting, is carefully gathering the same acorns. Until he's HIT by one. He spins, looking for the attacker...

Max and Marco grin innocently till he looks away..then smirk over at Shay and her gang, who nods approvingly.

Ally just watches it all...alone. Until Keisha PLOPS down.

KEISHA

They suck. Like vampires. And they're gonna suck forever. Every time they talk to you, just say: Begone, flaming jerkbull vampires - you're going to suck forever!

ALLY

I'll try that next time.

Ally looks to Albert, back to his acorn study as, beyond him, the others wait for Mr. Muldoon - who has collared Oliver - to move on so they can attack again...

KEISHA

How does Albert do it? I get mad
and mouthy. You get rude and crazy.
But he just, I dunno..

ALLY

Soldiers on.

The girls exchange a look. Look back towards the tree.

CUT TO:

ALBERT carefully scrapes the side of an acorn, studying it.
AS TWO PAIRS OF FEET come up and stop in his field of view.

He looks up to see Ally there. With Keisha.

KEISHA

Hey Albert. What are you doing?

Thunk! An acorn lands. Max and Marco just keep lobbing them.

ALBERT

This green stuff on the side looks
like moss, but I am concerned that
it is a fungus. If this is the
case, this tree may be in danger.

Ally's not sure how to build from that. Keisha nudges her.

ALLY

Albert. I'm sorry about..teasing
you about your sneakers before.

ALBERT

That didn't bother me. No need to
apologize.

KEISHA

It didn't bother you at all to have
a bunch of jerks make fun of you?

Thunk! Another acorn drops in - bounces off of Albert's
chest. He's...implacable.

ALBERT

The kids that band together and
humiliate other kids don't tend to
be the actual innovators as adults.

(MORE)

ALBERT (CONT'D)

They remain focused on group-think and social power, while kids like me tend to rethink how the world can work and become our true leaders in science, technology, business and the arts.

ALLY

Keisha just said that too! Kind of. Her version is "They're gonna suck forever."

ALBERT

That *is*...shorter.

Keisha turns and shouts back towards Max and Marco.

KEISHA

Hear that! You guys suck and will never be innovators!

She scoops up acorns to throw...but Albert reaches out, intervenes. There's a yellow BRUISE on the underside of his arm...glimpsed for a moment before he lowers it.

KEISHA (CONT'D)

Why not? You could cream those guys!

ALBERT

That would be...useless.

KEISHA

Are you kidding me? You're huge. If I were you, I'd pulverized them.

She demonstrates a couple of quick Pulverizing moves...though they look pretty ridiculous. Albert watches blankly.

ALLY

(laughing)

Albert. Do you want to sit with Keisha and me at lunch?

ALBERT

Why?

ALLY

Well...you sit alone. And we sit alone - so I thought that we could all sit alone together.

Thunk! An acorn bounces between them. Albert grabs it up before Keisha can.

ALBERT
 That isn't a logical.
 (standing)
 But I suppose so. I guess I've got
 to eat somewhere.

INT. CAFETERIA - DAY

SLURRRRRRRRRRRRRRP! Ally and Keisha watch as Albert drains his milk carton, shaking it so the last drops fall on his tongue.

ALBERT
 Who decided a half pint of milk was
 enough? I could really use two.

The three of them sit together over by the window. (An arrangement that *might* recall The Mad Hatter's Tea Party...)

KEISHA
 Can't you just ask your mom for
 extra money in the morning?

Something about this question pains Albert. But he skirts it, shakes the carton for another drop. Gives up.

ALBERT
 I just wish whomever decided on
 school milk portions did some
 research on how much kids actually
 like to consume!

Ally smiles, looks past Albert, out the window.

Where she sees Mr. Daniels -eating his lunch at his car. On the phone, his planner open, scribbling things down.

ALLY
 Mr. Daniel's private time...

Albert looks, sees. Rubs his palms on his jeans.

ALBERT
 Do you like him? Mr. Daniels?

ALLY
 He's okay.

KEISHA
 Oh c'mon. He's better than okay.

ALLY
 He doesn't have much experience.
 (leaning in)
 (MORE)

ALLY (CONT'D)

I heard him asking for help. That's what he's doing out there.

KEISHA

What's wrong with asking for help? My family wouldn't have made it over here without help. I'll never have my own baking company without a lot of help.

(glancing at Muldoon)

Most of these teachers are like - on the brink. Mrs. Hall was nice but super distracted by being pregnant. Daniels - it's like he's used to a whole lot going on around him. He *sees... everything*.

ALBERT

I'm not sure about him. I do not think he is a trusting person.

KEISHA

What? Why?

ALBERT

He inquired about my bruises. I think he hypothesized that they came from my home environment. I told him no, but then I had to speak to the school psychologist.

Ally and Keisha glance at each other.

ALLY

I've been kinda wondering about your bruises, Albert. To be honest.

KEISHA

Yeah, Albert. Me too.

ALBERT

If you've been wondering about something than why didn't you ask about it before?

ALLY

I...*didn't* really know you. I guess I thought you wanted it...private.

ALBERT

Everyone's got stuff they like to keep private too. Don't you?

Ally looks a little panicked at this...is he on to her?

KEISHA

Yeah! Nobody gets to look at her drawings. Even though she's an amazing artist.

Ally nods, but Albert's look says - *there's more than that.*

JESSICA (OC)

Excuse me everybody!

They turn to see Jessica standing, Shay and crew around her.

JESSICA (CONT'D)

Hey! I just wanted you all to remember to Vote Shay, because...

(lifts a poster board sign)

Shay's The Way.

SHAY'S CREW

Shay's The Way. Shay's The Way.

They spread out among the tables...enlisting Max and Marco and others...until most of the room is chanting.

Oliver jumps up on a table, chanting and conducting gleefully... Until, suddenly he signals STOP.

OLIVER

Shay's The Craze would rhyme better. Or *Shay's A Phase.*

KEISHA

Yes! If she's just a phase then we can all grow out of it. *Shay's a phase! Shay's a phase!*

Shay GLOWERS and her girls get the chant going again.

ALLY

You're...fearless.

KEISHA

Gotta keep knocking her off balance with your campaign.

ALLY

I don't have a campaign.

KEISHA

Oh really? Well, you've got a couple of campaign *advisers*. Albert, you're a man of great words. She needs a slogan.

Albert look a little surprised at the assumption.

ALBERT

Ummmmmm....

KEISHA

And *you gotta* start thinking about your speech. Just copy the experts!

ALBERT

What are *you* going to do?

KEISHA

Me? I'm gonna do what I always do. Cupcakes. Lots 'n lots of cupcakes.

Ally just looks at them. Exhales. Smiles.

INT. CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Mr. Daniels moves up and down the rows as kids finish up a MATH QUIZ. Ally's cranking through *this* with ease. The BELL.

MR. DANIELS

Quizzes on my desk! Please remember the worksheets due tomorrow..

The kids waste no time packing up, filing out. Ally's just about to go, when Mr. Daniels looks up from his desk.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Oh. Ally. Can I talk to you a sec?

ALLY

Uh...okay. Sure.

Mr. Daniels slides a piece of paper in front of her.

MR. DANIELS

Now that your arm is better, I was hoping you could just scribble a little something here about yourself. Anything, really - and we can count the assignment complete.

ALLY

Now?

MR. DANIELS

Now would be great.

Ally DARKENS. But puts her pencil to paper. A line..which becomes a square...As she quickly drafts a CUBE.

She starts scribbling it in... Darker. And Darker.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Whoa. Hang on.

ALLY
You said scribble - *anything*.

MR DANIELS
About yourself.

ALLY
This is about myself.

Mr. Daniels purses his lips. Nods.

MR DANIELS.
Is it a picture of something?

ALLY
It's a picture of a dark room.

Mr. Daniels ignores her sardonic tone. Just looks at it.

MR. DANIELS
A dark room, so...if the assignment
is to tell me something about
yourself, why did you draw a
picture of a dark room?

ALLY
I thought you were a hockey player.

MR. DANIELS
I played hockey before this. Yes...

ALLY
Cause now you sound like you want
to be some kind of psychologist.

MR. DANIELS
No. But I do think it helps me be a
better teacher if I understand how
you're thinking...

ALLY
I'm *thinking* it's a room full of
hockey pucks. All the pucks from
all the goals you didn't score
because you were fighting.

MR. DANIELS
Ally! Watch yourse...
(pause, breath)
(MORE)

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 You're good at distracting folks
 from the issue at hand, aren't you?

He gets up. Shakes his head. Clicks his tooth into place.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
*The goals I didn't score because I
 was fighting. You're onto
 something. Maybe something you
 should consider: the goals you
 don't score. Because you are
 fighting.*

Ally says nothing. Just waits. Waits. And Mr. Daniels, still
 a bit irritated, packs up. Leaves.

INT. ALLY'S ROOM - EVENING

Ally on her bed. Books and homework spread out. It's
 unbearable. She pulls out Travis's phone. Stands it. Sets
 the timer. Moves the homework over her legs. Snap! Shifts
 the papers a little further up. Snap!

CUT TO:

Ally has "*Ally*" *In Wonderland* open alongside her notebook.
 She's copying some Tenniel illustrations:

-Alice befriending the hulking Tweedle Dum and Tweedle
 Dee...who now look quite a lot like Albert.

-Alice befriending the Cheshire Cat, who grins down assuredly
 from the tree, with features very much like Keisha's.

CUT TO:

Ally's got the coin collection out, drawing an enlargement of
 the Walking Liberty figure, glancing at a mirror, trying to
 put own face there. Not happy with it. Erases everything.

CUT TO:

Ally stares at her workbook. Glaring at the instructions.
 Trying...trying to write something there. It's painful.

CUT TO:

Ally perusing laptop YouTube. BEST SPEECHES OF ALL TIME. One
 thumbnail portrait looks sorta like Abbas. She clicks on it.

WINSTON CHURCHILL
 We have before us an ordeal of the
 most grievous kind.

She flops back on the bed. Picks up the phone. Holds it above. Plays the little stop motion video she made earlier:

WINSTON CHURCHILL (CONT'D)

We have before us many long months
of struggle and of suffering. You
ask, what is our policy?

ON THE PHONE SCREEN: Ally's books and papers, swirl around her on the bed, rise up...and BURY HER.

EXT. STREET - MORNING

As Ally, with that ever-overloaded schoolbag, walks along. Past a bodega, a couple vending machines out front. Notices Mr. Muldoon is at one, back to her. *Tiptoes* quickly past.

INT. CLASSROOM - MORNING

Ally enters the classroom, still mostly empty. No Mr. Daniels yet. But Albert and Keisha are there. Keisha hands her a bag.

ALLY

What's this for?

Keisha scrunches her shoulders in mock *no idea*. Ally opens it. There's a cupcake. Something written in ICING on top.

Ally fishes the cupcake out. Oliver immediately starts hovering around, mimicking the Nemo seagulls...

OLIVER

Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.

Ally runs her finger along the icing word, trying to...

OLIVER (CONT'D)

Vote. Vote. Vote. Vote.

That's what it says. She breaks it open, tosses Oliver half. Then sees...there's a dough word inside: ALLY.

OLIVER (CONT'D)

Ally. Ally. Ally. Ally.

Ally grins at Keisha, shakes her head...wow.

KEISHA

You need to come over so we can
make a whole bunch to pass around.
(turning)
Albert. You're on.

Albert nods, and ceremoniously unrolls a POSTER. Block letters that read **ALLY IS YOUR ALLY! GIVE HER YOUR VOTE!**

Ally studies it, nodding...but, of course, unable to...

KEISHA (CONT'D)

"Ally is your Ally"? Hmmmmmm.

ALBERT

Ally is your ally!

(pause)

It's a homonym. A word with the same spelling but different sounds and meanings. Your name also spells ally. Like in a war. An ally is...

The Shay crowd, alas, comes in with flyers. See the poster.

SHAY WING GIRL

"Ally is your Ally?" Omigod!

(mocking)

And "Shay Is Your Shay!"

SHAY

Shouldn't her slogan be:
*The world gets dumber every time
Ally Nickerson speaks?*

KEISHA

Shouldn't you all be playing with colored string somewhere?

They move on, papering the walls with *Vote Shay! She's SenSHAYsional!* Albert reconsiders his poster.

ALBERT

Not everybody's going to get it.

But Ally's just... steadily infused with...appreciation.

ALLY

Ally. Someone who's on your side.
Who's got your back. Like you,
Albert. And you, Keisha.
(big smile)
I get it.

INT. CAFETERIA - DAY

Ally's POV out the window: of Mr. Daniels. Eating at his car, on another energetic phone call. Full of movement, nods, note-taking, and...a PROTRACTED SLURRRRRRP.

KEISHA (OC)

So this shirt you wear every day..

She turns back to the lunch table. Albert's just finished with his mini-carton - and sets it down.

ALBERT

I do not wear the *same* shirt every day. I have five identical ones.

KEISHA

Uh, okay. Anyway, I Googled "Flint." It's a place in Michigan. And a kind of rock. And something people use to light campfires. In other words, your shirt makes no sense. Please explain. I'll pay you.

She slides her unopened milk carton over. But Albert fidgets.

ALLY

Albert. You bought the same shirt five times. Now I want to know too.

She slides her milk over to him too. He looks at the milks. At the girls. They're genuinely attentive. Finally...

ALBERT

Flint is an immortal genius from the original run of *Star Trek*. Season three, episode nineteen. It's titled "Requiem for__"

A BURST of laughter. Across the way, Shay and her entourage have now welcomed Max and Marco into their lunchtime fold.

ALLY

So.. Flint is a smart guy?

ALBERT

He goes to his own planet and puts up invisible barriers so others won't sense life-forms there. He creates robots to stay with him.

KEISHA

Sounds super weird. Why doesn't he just live on Earth, with *people*?

ALBERT

He once lived on Earth. But he left. He says it's to "retreat from the unpleasantness of Earth and the company of people."

A glance at Shay's table. She's watching them. Like a hawk.

ALBERT (CONT'D)

(soft, but intense)

I can see why someone would want to avoid other people. A great number of them are not very kind.

ALLY

Albert, wow. That's.. I'm sorry for, like prying into your..

KEISHA

Yeah, same. Sorry if...

ALBERT

I was not implying that it is you who are not kind to me. I consider you two...more than allies. You're my...*friends*.

Ally and Keisha look at each other. Then at Albert. Smile.

VOICE

Hey! You three.

They turn... Mr. Daniels is there. Smiling.

MR. DANIELS

Glad to see some campaign materials in the classroom!

(to Albert and Keisha)

Can I borrow Ally for lunch recess?

They all look at each other. Look at Ally. She shrugs.

INT. SCHOOL LIBRARY - DAY

It's empty now. Ally sits at a reading table, just staring at it. Mr. Daniels looks around at the books.

MR. DANIELS

Ally, I didn't mean to put you on the spot yesterday. But I do feel like I did learn something from it.

(he sits across from her)

I get the feeling you don't like writing. Or reading.

There it is, the thing Ally does not want poked at. Mr. Daniels waits, no judgement. She inhales. Nods.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
So, what *do* you like then?

ALLY
Buffalo wings.

MR. DANIELS
(laughing)
What do you like about *school*?

ALLY
Leaving.

Mr. Daniels grins, but just waits. Waits more.

ALLY (CONT'D)
I like math. I like to draw.

MR. DANIELS
You *are* good at equations. Do you
draw other things than black boxes?

ALLY
Yeah. Like..all kinds of stuff.

MR. DANIELS
You're good with a pencil.

ALLY
Yeah. I guess. Yeah.

MR. DANIELS
So then, do you find the writing
more difficult than drawing?

ALLY
Writing is easy. It's just..boring.

MR. DANIELS
Oh! Well.. maybe we can do some
things to make it less *boring* for
you. Get you excited about it.

ALLY
Nobody's *excited* about writing.

MR. DANIELS
I don't know. It's a great way to
explore. And be creative. Don't you
have a favorite book?

ALLY
Not really. No.

MR. DANIELS

C'mon. There's one. Mine - and I gotta admit, I've *always* been a big fan of so-called kids books - is... *Where The Wild Things Are*. "Let the wild rumpus begin!" Sounds like the start of a hockey game.

ALLY

Ally in Wonderland. I mean, *Alice*. *In Wonderland*.

MR. DANIELS

Great! Why do you like it so much?

ALLY

My dad reads it to me. I mean, *I'd read it* with my dad. And I like it because... it's about living in a world where nothing makes sense. *That* makes perfect sense to me.

Mr. Daniels thinks on it. Grins. And snaps his dangling retainer tooth back into place.

MR. DANIELS

Ally. That's...a cool answer. Wow, I mean..a smart answer. Really. You have a lot going on in there.

He waits. Hopes there might be more from her.

ALLY

Can I go now?

MR. DANIELS

You can.

(pause)

Lewis Carrol. He wasn't a writer at first. He was a *Mathematician*. That's probably why when he did get around to *writing* something, he had so many wild and original things cooking around in his head.

Ally isn't sure what to say...but you can see it in her expression: He's hit on something here.

INT. NICKERSON KITCHEN - EVENING

Mrs. Nickerson lays out dinner...moving at speed. Clearly stressed. Ally fetches the laptop. Brings it to the table...

ALLY
We have a Dad call, right?

MRS. NICKERSON
Sweetie, he can't get on tonight.
Unpredictable Operational
Activities.

Ally closes the laptop, hides her disappointment.

MRS. NICKERSON (CONT'D)
Don't know where Travis is anyway.
(dropping into a seat)
Speaking of unpredictable, the
store keeps changing my shifts.
They don't factor in that you're
juggling two jobs, but they won't
pay you enough to just have one.

Ally isn't sure what to say....Mrs. Nickerson realizes she
has broken the unspoken rule of *Everything's Fine*.

MRS. NICKERSON (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, honey. Farah's off this
week. She's my go-to for...venting.

ALLY
It's okay. I'm... honored.

There's the GRUMBLE of the GTO in the drive.

MRS. NICKERSON
There's Trav.
(relaxing a little)
So...your school left a message.

ALLY
They...did?

MRS. NICKERSON
Mr. Daniels? He said something
about you coming in early some
mornings and about him talking to
people about getting *extra support*
for you. Do you really need..?

The door bangs open. Travis. He's AGITATED.

TRAV
Bloom had to take medical leave.
Veitch is in charge of the whole
shop now. And I got let go.

MRS. NICKERSON

Oh, Trav...really?

TRAVIS

What he said: *Gonna have to let you go.* Go where's the question?!

MRS. NICKERSON

Well maybe you can finish your equivalency...

TRAVIS

I can't finish, Mom! You know that!
(intense)
Bloom said it. I'm *intuitive*.
Intuitive's great for a mechanic.

Ally studies her mother's face as she serves - fiercely trying to normalize an anxiety she does not want to show.

MRS. NICKERSON

It'll be alright. Sit down and...

TRAVIS

How am I going to make any money? I need to make money. I have my car. I gotta buy parts for the machines and I'm helping you! Make ends meet! I'm helping you!

MRS. NICKERSON

Shhh. We'll figure it out.
We'll figure everything out.

Travis is getting teary....but bangs off towards his room...

MRS. NICKERSON (CONT'D)

Trav...

She starts after Trav, turns and sets Ally's dinner down...

MRS. NICKERSON (CONT'D)

You're all set here, right Ally?
You got everything you need, right?

Ally looks at her. Works reassurance into her features. Nods.

EXT. STREET NEAR SCHOOL - MORNING

Ally walks along the sidewalk, past the half-filled faculty parking lot. Sees Mr. Daniels car is there. Continues on..

Into the schoolyard. It's empty...a few teacher's arriving.
It's EARLY.

INT. CLASSROOM - EARLY MORNING

Ally enters. Mr. Daniels is taking down a FOOD PYRAMID poster that hangs by the "penalty box." Sees Ally. Smiles warmly.

MR. DANIELS

You guys know the food pyramid.
Think I can take this down and you
won't all start eating buckets of
sugar?

Ally nods. He rolls out a poster and starts tacking it up:

A photo of a HOCKEY PLAYER, horizontal, about five feet above the ice in front of the net, as if he's flying, not skating.

ALLY

Who's that?

MR. DANIELS

Bobby Orr. Number 4. Boston Bruins.

ALLY

Looks like he's wiping out.

MR. DANIELS

That's what I love about it. He
looks like he's wiping out. But,
really, he's scoring the goal that
won the team the NHL championship.

He plops down at his desk. Gathers some materials.

ALLY

Mr. Daniels, why did you stop
playing hockey?

Mr. Daniels clicks his retainer tooth. Grins.

MR. DANIELS

Wanted to keep my winning smile.

Ally doesn't say anything. Just watches him.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

And...I met someone who liked the
idea of me with a winning smile.
Someone who helped me see that
skating around in circles wasn't
gonna get me where I need to go.

He smiles again at her. Pulls his chair around so he's alongside. Holds up a book: *Where The Wild Things Are*.

CUT TO:

Mr. Daniels works with Ally...as she leans in over the book.

ALLY

Wolf. One sound. *Wolf*.

MR. DANIELS

There are four sounds. W..

(he raps on the desk)

..o..(rap)..l..(rap)...f.

(rap)

Try it.

Ally repeats, rapping the desk with each sound.

ALLY

W...o....l...fff.

(pause)

So I'm supposed to drum my way through the whole book?

MR. DANIELS

We're just exploring ways for your brain to register how words can be broken up. You're doing great.

He looks up, past Ally, sees Shay in the hall. Waves to her. She moves on. Ally leans in on the page. Stops at HALL NOISE.

ALLY

I can't concentrate now. The other kids are coming. It's *impossible*.

Mr. Daniels smiles, takes a piece of paper and a marker and writes a word on it. Holds it up to Ally.

MR. DANIELS

Remember - break it into chunks.

ALLY

Im..(rap) po..(rap) Important?

MR. DANIELS

No, but a good try. It says *impossible*. Like you just said. So fold it. Right past the IM.

He guides her to fold the paper. And then fold it back.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Rip that first chunk off. Go ahead.

Ally tears the strip of paper with IM on it away.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Now throw that little piece with
the IM on it in the trash. C'mon.

Ally tosses it...hits the can.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Gone. Forever. So.. What you got
there? What's that say?

Ally looks it over. Already knows, but sounds it out.

ALLY
Pos (rap) Si (rap) Ble (rap).

MR. DANIELS
You got it. Not *impossible* anymore.

Ally looks at the word carefully. Mouths it: "Poss.I.Ble."
She wants to look sure. She doesn't look so sure.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
As you know, I'm new at this. So
tomorrow I'm going to meet with the
district to see if they've got some
experts around to join our team.

Mr. Daniels slides the book over. Grins. *Take it.*

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Let The Wild Rumpus Begin!

EXT. ALLY'S CONDO - NIGHT

No Camry and No GTO in the drive. A light in Ally's room.

INT. ALLY'S ROOM - NIGHT

There's a faint tapping. ABBAS is asleep in a port-a-cot.
Dribble-Snoring. But over on Ally's bed...

Homework spread around. Math worksheets. The laptop screen
with something on Whale Migration. Ally on her belly...
Focused on *Where The Wild Things* are. Tapping it out.

She stops. Closes it. Looks at all there is to do. Turns to
the computer. Thinks.

ALLY
 (loud whisper)
 Hey Cortana. Speeches. No old guy
 who looks like Abbas stuff.

CORTANA
 I am having trouble hearing you.
 Can you ask again, more loudly?

Ally grins, leans in closer.

EXT. HALLWAY - DAY

Ally comes down the hall looking...hopeful. Even as she
 slides by Shay and crew - 'cause Keisha's there, waiting.

KEISHA
 Easy week! Field trip tomorrow! And
 I asked my mom -this afternoon's
 perfect so- shake n' bake!

Keisha happily wiggle-bumps her as they enter Room 5...past
 the handmade sign there: *HOME OF THE FANTASTICOS*.

Shay, behind, scowls at their energy.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - CONTINUOUS

Kids are milling about, chatting.

SUBSTITUTE
 No dilly-dallying. No talking. Take
 your seats immediately...

There's a grim, sad sack MAN, short-sleeves and tie, 40s - a
 CAREER SUBSTITUTE. He waves Mr. Daniels' TEACHING PLAN.

SUBSTITUTE (CONT'D)
 (reading from planner)
 For the first hour, writing
 assignment. "Tell me *about a person*
you know who is brave."

Ally tries to hide her ALARM.

MAX
 Who are you?

SUBSTITUTE
 I *did not* see a hand!

MAX
 (shrugging his hand up)
 Who are you?

SUBSTITUTE
 I'm Mr. Murk. Replacing *Mr. Daniels*.

OLIVER
 What do you mean by replacing?

SUBSTITUTE
 This isn't question time! You have your assignment. Start working!

Oliver retreats. Ally gulps, risks raising her hand...

ALLY
 What if we have to go to the nurse?
 I'm feeling kind of sick, because I think I ate something...

The Substitute waves her off, not even listening.

SUBSTITUTE
 Write. Now.
 (checking instructions)
 Oh...and where is Ally Nickerson?

Ally's hand's back up. The teacher sees.

TEACHER
 Look at that. You don't have to fake a trip to the nurse now.
 (reading the notes *aloud*)
 Special circumstances...yadda, yadda. Ally Nickerson does not have to write. Let her know she can use her other skills. Draw a picture of her brave person, etc..."

SHAY
 That figures. She can work on her coloring. And there will be Play-Doh and nap time and picture books!

She makes an Enthusiastic Pre-School Teacher face at Ally...and RAPS out each syllable with her knuckle.

SHAY (CONT'D)
 And, Ally, you can practice writing your name! Al.Ly.Nick.Er.Son.

The LAUGHTER is instant - it WASHES over Ally. She tenses. Gulps. Reddens. Even the Substitute smirks..before snapping:

SUBSTITUTE

Enough! Write. All of you. I don't want to hear a sound except...

RIPPPP! Ally pulls a page out of her notebook and hurls the notebook down. It slides across the floor... over *by Shay*.

She storms up, drops the page on the Sub's desk.

ALLY

I'm done with this!

She's deeply upset. Almost gulping for air...

SUBSTITUTE

This is *blank*.

ALLY

It's not blank. I drew a ghost. In a blizzard.

SUBSTITUTE

That is not the assignment!

ALLY

A *brave* ghost. That blizzard is miserable and frozen. Like you. And your dead cold career!

SUBSTITUTE

Out! Right now. Out and down the hall and...Out. Out. Out!

Ally, worked up, keeps GULPING. She tries to reign it in in..but the spasms INTENSIFY.

OLIVER

This is what I was telling you guys about! That's what it looks like...

The Sub barely has time to react as she looks up, moves to cover her mouth, but...

OLVIER

Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome!

INT. NURSE'S OFFICE - DAY

Ally sits on the cot there. She has a PE T-shirt on. Holds a bucket in her lap. The NURSE opens the door.

Keisha's there. Albert

behind her.

KEISHA

That was awesome! I mean, what a jerk! Are you still sick? You're not really sick are you?

Ally tips the bucket her way. It's empty. Keisha beams.

KEISHA (CONT'D)

Great! Cause I already bought all the supplies!

Keisha beams. Albert grins at Ally. Holds up her BOOKBAG.

INT. KEISHA'S HOUSE - AFTERNOON

A small, pleasant kitchen. (Keisha's FATHER can be seen out the window, tending to a meticulous lawn.)

Keisha's REVVED UP to have Ally and Albert in her kingdom. She hands Ally an apron -- not really registering how SUBDUED she is - and tosses Albert a ROLLING PIN.

ALBERT

So, when do we eat?

KEISHA

Albert! We're cooking for the campaign!

Albert's face falls. Keisha gestures to the OVEN behind them...the light's on: there's SOMETHING BIG in there.

KEISHA (CONT'D)

There *will* be eating. But first we need to work on the cupcakes. People vote with their stomachs.

ALBERT

Actually, people vote with...

KEISHA

Not now Albert. Okay, Miss Future Leader. You get to practice being in charge.

ALLY

Of what?

ALBERT

Can I at least have some of that
milk?

Keisha hands Albert a glass..and nudges the carton his way,
even as she slides A COOKBOOK over to Ally.

KEISHA

The recipe! I think we need to
change it a little..so the cookie
dough cooks at the same rate as the
cake.

Ally tenuously opens the book to the table of contents.

Albert's gulping straight from the carton. Keisha grabs the
milk away...and gets her mixing bowl ready.

THE COOKBOOK

The letters the usual BLUR. But with drawings in the margins.

KEISHA (OC) (CONT'D)

Okay, what's the first thing?

Ally stares at the book. Keisha pokes her. Ally startles.

KEISHA (CONT'D)

I asked, what's the first thing?

Ally looks at the cookbook. Her features..TIGHTEN. Closes it.

ALLY

I can't do this.

KEISHA

Do what?

ALLY

This whole thing. It's a waste of
time.

KEISHA

What *whole thing*?

ALLY

Nobody wants words in cupcakes.
They want whipped cream. They want
chocolate chips. They don't want
something they have to, to *read*!

Keisha's gob-smacked. She starts steaming. Albert finishes
another pull off the milk carton. Sets it down. Sighs.

ALBERT

Anger can be a substitute emotion.

The girls glare at him, both loaded. Behind them all, the room's getting a bit SMOKIER...

ALBERT (CONT'D)

It feels better to be angry than to be in pain. And being angry distracts you from identifying your vulnerability. It's a shift from self-focus to other-focus.

ALLY

Where are you coming up with that?

ALBERT

A therapist I worked with.

ALLY

Your family can't afford milk and you have a therapist?

ALBERT

(to Keisha)

She's doing it to me now. Part of the distraction.

ALLY

You're the one who distracts everyone with all your pointless facts to make sure that you never have to tell anyone *how you get those bruises!*

This lands. Albert looks hurt. And actually flares. A little.

ALBERT

My bruises are *my* bruises. I do not make them everyone's business by turning the whole class upside down every time someone almost notices them, the way you do, every time someone almost notices the fact that you *can't read*.

Ally SLAPS the carton out of his hand. It spills everywhere.

Just as, behind them, out of the already hazy stove area, a big BLACK CLOUD OF SMOKE ROILS FORTH...

KEISHA

Oh! Oh no!

She grabs the oven door. Pulls her hand back in pain. Grabs an oven mitt, yanks it open. The CAKE there is in FLAMES.

Albert grabs the fallen carton of milk and SPLASHES the rest of it over the flames... There's a huge HISSESSSS.

CLOSE ON THE CAKE PAN

The CAKE has charred & milk-melted into a tarry goop. Blackened cookie letters poke up through it at angles.

You can just make out the ruin of the word: **FRIENDS**.

INT. NICKERSON CONDO - EVENING

Ally schlumps herself up the drive...to the open garage door.

Travis is trying to open an old vending machine. Going angrily at the rusty lock with a ring of old keys.

TRAVIS

Another day down the mines?

Something CLICKS but it still won't release. Only then, does he look over at Ally. Sees she's tear-streaked.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

You okay, sis?

ALLY

They all know. They all laughed at me. He said in front of everyone I shouldn't bother writing!

TRAVIS

Who said? The goon?

He jiggles another key, gets it in the lock. Stuck.

ALLY

No, the substitute! That's what Mr. Daniels told the substitute to say. *Ally can't do it!* I thought Mr. Daniels was on my side!

TRAVIS

Even if he is, as soon as he isn't around, you're screwed. Mr. Bloom gave me a shot because he was Dad's friend and even though I was doing amazing - without having to read anything! - the next guy in charge fires me.

Travis takes a crowbar, finds the door seam. Jams it in.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)
I'm telling you now, Ally. Forget
'em all. It's not worth it!

He jiggles the key. STOMPS on the crowbar. The machine pops open, a cobwebby MESS inside.

INT. ALLY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Ally flops onto her bed. Curls up. Glances over at her shelf. The coin collection. The Alice Book. The things that usually give her solace... And turns OFF the light.

EXT. SCHOOL - MORNING

Ally's walk to school. Definitely not early today. Kids outside everywhere. And she remembers: Field Trip.

Muldoon and Principal Oro watch as kids file onto a bus.

Ally searches- no sign of Albert or Keisha. Sees Mr. Daniels there, checking kids in. He smiles. She just moves past.

INT. BUS - MORNING

Ally steps in. Max and Marco commandeer the back. Shay's clique giddily wave phones, making faces at..

Keisha and Albert, sitting together. Ally glances at them, apologetic. But they still look FRESHLY UPSET.

She flops down by Oliver, up front. He's busy pestering the driver about pulling the door lever when it's time...

EXT. MUSEUM - DAY

Fifth graders pile off the bus alongside a NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM. There's a large greenhouse structure off to one side...with a separate entrance. The BUTTERFLY HOUSE.

INT. BUTTERFLY HOUSE - DAY

There are a LOT OF MONARCH BUTTERFLIES in the air.

The kids have been broken into small groups, an ELDERLY DOCENT monitoring each. Mr. Daniels moves from group to group, guiding them thru their WORKSHEETS...

Ally stands with unfamiliar classmates by some milkweed plants. The Docent points to a CHRYSALIS that is HATCHING...

And Ally can't help it, as she looks.. It's AMAZING. She turns, reflexively looks for Albert and Keisha, wanting to share the experience. Sees them across the aisle, smiles...

ALLY

You guys *have* to see this.

Keisha comes over...but full-on Take No Prisoners glare:

KEISHA

We saw *these*. That good enough!?

She holds up her phone. ON THE SCREEN: There's a posted image - Ally's long-ago DOODLE OF KEISHA WITH A BAKING TRAY.

But the baking tray is filled with little PILE-O-POOP EMOJIS instead of cupcakes. *Someone* has done some editing...

ALLY

Wait. What?

Keisha scrolls to another drawing. It's Albert, comically HUGE in his shirt, which now (a la editing) says: FLOG ME.

ALLY (CONT'D)

That's not...How did you get those?

It sounds incriminating...but before she can explain...

KEISHA

You're worse than Shay. She's *openly* a mean jerk. She doesn't *hide* anything.

Keisha leaves. Ally looks around, sees other kids watching. They got the images. They've been waiting for the face-off.

There's Albert. Watching her too. Mr. Implacable. But something in his gaze now is just...incredibly sad.

And there's Shay, wagging her friendship bracelet..shooting her a mocking *What? No Friends* pout.

Ally bolts for the nearest DOOR, one with a sign: NOT AN EXIT. In big bold letters.

DOCENT

That's not an exit! Can't you read?

Ally SHOULDERS THROUGH..the air-whoosh carrying BUTTERFLIES with it. The docent yanks the door closed. But Ally's GONE.

EXT. BUTTERFLY HOUSE - DAY

Ally motors across the lawn away from the butterfly house.

Even as THREE BUTTERFLIES flutter on by her. She stops.
Watches them flit upward, taste the wind... Disappear.

And it cracks her. She just Folds Up. Arms along her head.
Blocking out the world. Trying to control herself...

Breathes. Breathes. Tears. Tears. Lots of them.

QUIET VOICE

Ally.

She doesn't respond. But finally looks up. Mr. Daniels is
squatting...a respectful distance but...eye to eye.

ALLY

Just leave me alone.

MR. DANIELS

Well, I'm not going to do that.

ALLY

You told that sub to tell me to
draw and not bother with writing -
right in front of everybody!

MR. DANIELS

I'm so sorry, Ally. That was *not*
how he was supposed to handle that.

(pause)

Subs can be really clueless, you
know? Especially on the first day.

Ally says nothing. Head in knees.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Can you tell me what just happened?
Was it because of yesterday?

ALLY

It's because of every day. Every
day that I do stupid things
because...I'm stupid!

MR. DANIELS

Oh, Ally. You actually believe
that, don't you?

ALLY

Why wouldn't I?

MR. DANIELS

Because you are certainly *not* stupid. You have a quick wit, and great sense of humor! When I asked why things migrate and you said because their dad's in the army...

ALLY

That was just an unfortunate stroke of luck. My dad *is* in the army.

MR. DANIELS

An unfortunate stroke of luck? How many kids your age say things like *unfortunate* stroke of *luck*?

ALLY

Say! Say! But how come I can't read!? How come I can't write!?

Mr. Daniels sits on the ground next to her.

MR. DANIELS

Aw Ally. This thing that makes school frustrating... I think you have something called dyslexia.

ALLY

Dyslexia?

MR. DANIELS

It means that, yeah it's hard for you to read and write, but not because you're dumb - your brain just figures things out differently from other people.

Ally keeps her face in her knees.

ALLY

Differently means Really Slow...

MR. DANIELS

Differently means someone who can think "outside the box." I mean you literally think outside the box. Remember? You're great at solving problems, you see things in a way that other people can't!

Ally manages to nod. Yes. She remembers.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

And differently means brave, Ally.

ALLY

I am so not brave.

MR. DANIELS

You come to school, knowing it will be hard. Knowing other kids might razz you. Day after day you come and try again. *That's* brave.

ALLY

Fake it 'til you make it.

Mr. Daniels cocks his head - that's *his* expression for himself after all. He smiles. Nods.

MR. DANIELS

You're going to make it, kiddo. I met with the district people. They said they can test you, and arrange for a reading consultant to come help at our school. They're busy. It'll take a while. But in the meantime, I've been doing some research and there's some more stuff we can do. You and me. We can learn about it together.

Ally wipes the tears from her face with the back of her hand.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

You *are* smart, Ally. And you're going to learn to read. And write.

ALLY

I wish you were right.

MR. DANIELS

Don't be so hard on yourself. You know, a wise man once said, "Everyone is smart in different ways. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life thinking that it's stupid."

Mr. Daniels stands, extends his hand..and she takes it.

ALLY

Did a wise man *really* say that?

MR. DANIELS

Actually, that was my wise fiancée. She's a teacher too.

(MORE)

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

She's been giving me help since my first day in Room Five. You guys were brutal. Remember? I was a wreck! I mean, we're talkin' tears.

He smiles. Tooth dangling. Ally can't help it...she smiles too, and wipes what's left of her tears away.

EXT. NICKERSON CONDO - NIGHT

Camry in the drive. GTO out. Neighborhood quiet. It's late.

INT. NICKERSON CONDO - NIGHT

ON A BALL OF FLAME It's a drawing. Beautifully penned on the cover of her notebook...as Ally adds some touches...

All while watching YouTube. Headphones on. Watching a speech clip. It's MICHELLE OBAMA.

MICHELLE

You should never view your challenges as a disadvantage. Instead it's important for you to understand that your experience facing and overcoming adversity is actually one of your *biggest* advantages. And I know that because I've seen it myself, and not just as a student working my way through school...

She stops the clip. Painstakingly writes on an INDEX CARD. Tries out an Enthusiastic Speaker expression..

ALLY

I'd be good for Student Council because I...I've seen it myself...

She looks at card. The scrawl there. Crunches it up.

EXT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Ally enters. TV's on. Mom's head poking up from the couch.

ALLY

Mom, can I practice with you...?

Mrs. Nickerson, in her scrubs, is SOUND ASLEEP. Ally studies her --her mom's features actually at rest -- emotion welling.

ALLY (CONT'D)

It'd be easy if I got to make a speech about you, Mom.

(quietly)

How hard you work, how you give everything you got for Travis and me, day after day after day even when you're never sure it can ever be enough but you don't show that to us you just show us how much you love us and how much you want us to be happy.

She sits softly alongside her mom. Listens to her breathe.

ALLY (CONT'D)

Mr. Daniels says I'm brave, Mom. But you're the really brave one. So if I am brave, it's only because I get *that* from you.

And then...the THROATY RUMBLE of a familiar car in the drive.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Travis is reaching into the back of his car as Ally, per her way, sneaks up behind him...

Travis turns, surprised. The BUCKET he's lifting out TIPS NOISILY onto the drive. COINS. Lots and lots of them.

TRAVIS

Ally! You need something?

ALLY

I...have to make a speech tomorrow. And I...Where'd you get all this?

Travis kneels, starts scooping coins back into the bucket.

TRAVIS

You just... go to the bank and exchange your money for coins. I wanted to go through them and see if there's anything special.

She kneels to help him scoop coins. Sees, on the car seat, Travis' big ring of vending machine keys...and his CROWBAR.

EXT. SCHOOL - MORNING

Ally approaches campus. Past the faculty parking lot. It's early, only a few teachers about.

INT. HALLWAY - MORNING

As she reaches Room Five. Looks unsure. Stares at the sign.

MR. DANIELS (OC)
Home of The Fantasticos.

There's Mr. Daniels inside. Smiling. Waiting for her.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Mr. Daniels sits on the edge of his desk.

MR. DANIELS
So, the way your magical mind is
wired it's likely you have trouble
learning words with just your eyes.

Ally nods. And Mr. Daniels lifts into view..a big sheet of shiny SHEET METAL and a can of SHAVING CREAM. Bizarre.

ALLY
What else am I supposed to use?

MR DANIELS
There's lot of ways for information
to reach the brain. Think of the
five senses. Taste. Smell. Hear.

ALLY
Touch.

MR. DANIELS
Right! We're going to use *more* of
your senses to practice letters and
sounds. Like what we were doing
with reading, drumming out the
syllables. Same thing with writing.

Mr. Daniel lays the sheet metal on Ally's desk. Then hands her the shaving cream.

ALLY
Uh...okay...

MR. DANIELS
Just fill this sheet with foam and
we'll get started.

Ally sprays some shaving cream onto the metal sheet.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Rub it all around. Cover it.

She does. Now there's a big sheet of gooey foam on her desk.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
So, what's your favorite letter?

Ally looks at the strange set-up. Back at Mr. Daniels. Dips
her finger into the shaving cream. Squoogles out a big...**A**.

They get to it. Student and teacher. Engaged. In a *MONTAGE*:

- Ally working on more foam letters. Z. Z. Z. She tips
forward, as if she's falling asleep. Mr. Daniels laughs.

-Mr. Daniels writes SET THE WORLD ON FIRE on the whiteboard.
Ally moves along the words..rapping/sounding them out.

-Mr. Daniels lays a TINTED SHEET of plastic over a worksheet.
Ally leans in. The letters pop thru the color, clarify...

-Ally does more foam writing...a word this time: TREE.

And there's THE FIRST MORNING BELL.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Ally. Great work. How's tomorrow?

He gathers the teaching aids. Hands her the tinted plastic
sheet. Ally nods. Yes. Mr. Daniels gives the thumbs up.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Okay. One more. Big one. All yours.

Mr. Daniels writes something across the whole front board.
Ally goes up...raps her way across, sounding it out.

ALLY
Wel.Come.To.The.Stu.Dent.Co.Con.Kyl

MR. DANIELS
Council.

ALLY
Coun.Cil....Con.ven.tion.

Mr. Daniels goes for a high five. Ally returns it... just as the first wave of kids come in, Mr. Daniels welcoming them.

MR. DANIELS

Are you all as excited about the speeches this afternoon as I am?

Keisha and Albert come in and Ally tries for eye contact. Fails. And then it's Shay and her crew, revved up, chanting.

SHAY'S CREW

Shay's the way! Shay's the way!

Ally locks her smile in, but her eyes betray her: *Oh God!*

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY - AFTERNOON

Everyone's in. Mr. Daniels, claps, getting things underway..

MR. DANIELS

Alright, we're back on the Campaign Trail. Shay, heads or tails?

SHAY

Heads.

Mr. Daniels flips. Heads it is. Shay shoots an insistent look at Jessica, heads to the front of the room.

JESSICA & ACOLYTES

Shay's the way. Shay's The Way.

SHAY

Shay's The Way. I was so honored when my *friends* came up with that.

She holds her arm up, wiggles her bracelet. The girls wiggle theirs back. Shay pulls out a stack of index cards.

SHAY (CONT'D)

And today, I'd like to outline the several things I'll do, as your Student Council Representative, to pave *the way* forward for us all.

Ally looks down at her few cards. Her anxiety is palpable.

SHAY (OC) (CONT'D)

I will *advocate* for extra recesses.

Max starts supportive DESK THUMPING, which others pick up..

SHAY (CONT'D)
 And longer lunch times. With better
 lunches. Freshly popped pop corn.
 Maybe even a milkshake machine...

Even OLIVER joins the thumping. Ally glances at Albert and Keisha. Are they about to thump desks? Albert looks *tempted*.

SHAY (CONT'D)
 I promise bigger hallway lockers.
 With mirrors. And phone chargers.

Ally stares at her cards, fingers sweating up the edges. The supportive noise for Shay builds all around her...

SHAY (OC) (CONT'D)
 Because my first act as your
 Student Council Representative will
 be to secure the right to using
 your phone during the school day!

The THUMPING AROUND ALLY grows, an insistent drum beat. Shay produces a bouquet of daisies..starts handing them out.

SHAY (CONT'D)
 And, of course, there will be a
 "friendship flower" for everyone,
 every day, to remind you that..

She shoots Jessica a stern look: *Your cue! Now!*

JESSICA AND FRIENDS
 Shay's the way! Shay's the way!

MR. DANIELS
 Thank you Candidate Costanza! Well
 organized. And *engaging* promises.
 (pause)
 Which brings us to...

Ally's got her head bent over her cards. Focusing. She looks up. Meets his gaze. Shakes her head a tiny bit: *No. I can't.*

But he's looking at something else now. She follows his gaze:

The Bobby Orr Poster. Up in the air. Looks like a wipe out. But it's actually...a winning score. He sees that she sees...

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 ...Candidate Nickerson?

And Ally...heads for the front. Sighs. Sets her cards down.

ALLY

*The world gets dumber every time
Ally Nickerson speaks.*

(pause)

Somebody said that once. Or twice.

Things are a little uncomfortable. A few eyes shift to Shay.

ALLY (CONT'D)

So, here I am *speaking*. Which means, according to that person, you guys are getting dumber by the second. By the time I'm done, you'll all be grunting and trying to eat each others' fleas.

Somme laughter...and, yes, a couple of grunts.

ALLY (CONT'D)

I've been to a lot of schools and one thing has always been the same. Why do we spend so much time making each other's days *harder*? School's like spending the day trying to pull a tire through a keyhole.

More chuckles as kids *picture* it.

ALLY (CONT'D)

Which is why I have felt lucky *here*. In Room Five. Where I've met some people who taught me things.

(glancing at Keisha)

Like don't be afraid to shout down the jerkballs that are trying to mess up your confidence.

(glancing to Albert)

Or there's too much interesting stuff in the world to waste time paying much attention to those jerkballs in the first place.

(pause)

Both good strategies. Even though, like everything, I mess them up.

A deep breath. And another one... Here it is:

ALLY (CONT'D)

'Cause things are messed up for me. My head's full of ideas. But writing's... I'd rather eat hair.

(MORE)

ALLY (CONT'D)

I don't know why but the things in my brain get lost on the way down my arm. And reading for me is like *aaaaarrrrghhhhhhh!*

She looks out at everyone, eye contact, naturally.

ALLY (CONT'D)

You ever feel that? Just so... frustrated. Anyway, I'm sorry if that sometimes makes *me* be the one acting like a jerkball.

(nod at Keisha)

As far as student council goes, ummm..maybe I could start a chess club? Knowing how to play chess would be good. It's like, practicing how to move forward, right? I know I couldn't get *any* of what Shay talked about done...

(a glance at Albert)

But I would try to be your ally. And I promise if I was your representative to do my best to help you not feel *aaarghh*. Whatever that means for you, here at school.

Everyone's quiet. The opposite of Shay's "rally." Ally tries a smile. Wipes her brow. Returns to her desk. Spent.

MR. DANIELS

Thank-you, Ally.

(to class)

Now that the candidates have shared their platforms, you need to engage with each other, sharing *your* thoughts on what you heard, so that in two days, you are ready to vote!

The BELL sounds. Ally just absorbs it all: Mr. Daniels moves to thank Shay...as her cluster pops up to compliment her. Though Jessica holds back a beat, eyes on Ally. Not unkindly.

Ally realizes...where are Albert and Keisha? She looks for them. Sees they're already heading out the door.

Ally breathes, tries to muster the courage to follow them. But, even as she stands, Mr. Daniels is there.

He looks emotional, not sure how to convey his pride in her. Finally, spots her notebook, the BALL OF FLAME drawing.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
 I like this. Way more than that
 black cube. You got something going
 here, Ally. It's good. You could
 really make something out of it.

He smiles warmly. She..nods. Wipes her eyes. Heads off.

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - END OF DAY

Ally comes out onto the school yard. Kids move off in all
 directions - a few milling about. She sees who she's looking
 for. Keisha and Albert just outside of the school yard.

Keisha's on her bike, heading off. Albert goes the other way.

ALLY
 Keisha!

Not clear she hears; she's disappearing. Ally turns, starts
 after Albert. He notices, picks up speed. And Ally runs.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - DAY

Ally runs, her bookbag banging, finally reaches Albert. But
 he just keeps walking.

ALLY
 Albert! Can I walk with you?

ALBERT
 There's no need to do that. In
 fact, it's better if you do not.

ALLY
 I want to be friends again!

ALBERT
 Yes. I understood the subtext of
 your speech.

ALLY
 Then why is it better if I don't
 hang out with you now?!

VOICE (OC)
 Hey Punching Bag! Wait up!

Ally turns to see FIVE YOUNGER BOYS, 3rd graders from school,
 approaching. Albert picks up speed...

ALBERT
Just keep walking.

The boys SPRINT UP, and encircle them. They're much smaller than Albert, but they're cocky as hornets.

BOY 1
Wow. This your *girl*-friend?

ALLY
What is up with you guys?

Boy 3 simply CHARGES through Ally, leaping up to do his version of an MMA kick, catching Albert IN THE BACK.

Albert stumbles, but doesn't react.

ALLY (CONT'D)
Hey! Cut it out! Get lost kid!

BOY 2
You get lost, girlygirlfriend!

He darts in and throws punches against Albert's chest. Again, Albert doesn't react much -- but he *is* wincing.

ALLY
Stop it! Stop it!!

Ally GRABS the kid from behind, and whips him around so that he stumbles back. Pissed, he glowers...CHARGES HER...

And COLLIDES WITH KEISHA, as she glides in, drops her bike.

She whips him around fast and he tumbles back onto his bum.

KEISHA
You heard her, cut it out!

But the other four boy buzz in, kicking and jabbing...

KEISHA (CONT'D)
Albert - *these* punky little kids are the ones who've been bruising you? Please just smooch them!

ALBERT
I don't think it's within my nature to hit someone. And it seems to me that as I'm larger than they are, if I were to defend myself, I would receive the blame for the fight.

WHOOOMP! Another little f@#ker flies in with a kick.

And something in Ally just LETS GO. She PLOWS INTO THEM, using her shoulder to flatten the first. She grabs the second by his HAIR..and twists his arm behind his back.

The kid BURSTS INTO TEARS, shouting...

KID 3

Max! Max!!!

Ally's confused. But Keisha sees that one of the other kids has run toward the adjoining half-rotted FENCE.

Keisha beats him there, YANKS DOWN the loose fence to expose MAX AND MARCO. Phone-RECORDING IT ALL through the fence gaps.

MAX

(surprised, covering)

Hey. Leave my brother alone.

Ally reads the whole scene.

ALLY

You get your brother and his little pals to pick on Albert because you know he'll never hurt them - just so you can watch!?

Keisha gets right up in Max's face. Poking his chest.

KEISHA

That's messed up. You guys have always been lame, but now you're full-on psychopathic losers!

Max reacts, pushes Keisha back. She stumbles over the fence chunk, goes down...kinda HARD. Max steps in over her..

MAX

Stay out of it Keisha! It wasn't a problem until you two made it o...

WHAM!! Max doesn't finish. He is KNOCKED ON HIS ASS.

ALBERT

You don't touch my friends. Do you understand that?

Albert! He squats, LIFTS MAX, THROWS HIM INTO THE FENCE. And turns, now, to Marco.

MARCO

I didn't touch...

Albert SHOVES him....he goes down fast and hard.

ALBERT

Do. You. Understand. That?

He steps in. Marco nods, scrambles up and sprints away.

Ally helps Keisha up. They look to the squad of little punks disappearing down the lane. Then to Max, curled up, groaning.

Then to Albert. They're...beyond impressed.

KEISHA

Albert. Looks like we just got you off that private planet of yours.

ALLY

Your shirt's gonna have to stand for something else now.

They smile. He exhales. Manages a smile too.

ALBERT

I could really use...a milk.

INT. ALLY'S KITCHEN - EVENING

Ally works on her reading. Mouthing syllables as she softly raps. Until a splotch of pureed pumpkin hits the page.

Abbas is happily eating across the way. She watches his little mitts drawing lines in the mush on his tray. Reaches over...WRITES SOMETHING in it.

Travis comes in, pulling on a jacket. Goes to the fridge. Pulls out the milk. Chugs it from the carton.

ALLY

What is it with boys and chugging out of cartons?

Travis finishes chugging, wipes his mouth.

TRAVIS

We love the way it irritates girls.

He grins - first one Ally's seen in a bit - and turns to go.

ALLY

Where you going now?

TRAVIS

Out and around.

Ally hesitates....calls after.

ALLY
To break into vending machines?

TRAVIS
What are you talking about?

ALLY
When you get change from banks it comes in coin rolls, not buckets.

Travis darkens, starts to leave. Ally breathes deep: *Brave.*

ALLY (CONT'D)
Just so you know, Travis, you're the one who's always had my back. You guide me. You make it easier for me that Dad isn't here. And I don't think you ever lied to me. Not even once.

Travis...sits. Sighs. Doesn't meet her gaze. His ends up on Abbas's tray. The word there: MESS

ALLY (CONT'D)
He has me write on weird surfaces. Shaving cream. Or blue or pink sand. So I can *feel* it.

TRAVIS
What are you talking about?

ALLY
Mr. Daniels. He's teaching me. He's doing lists of words like *light* and *might* and *fight* that have the same sounds. He puts the letters that repeat in red and the initial consonant in black.

TRAVIS
Initial consonant. Listen to you!

ALLY
He makes the words into pictures. It helps me remember them.

She pulls her pad over. Scribbles on it. Holds it up to him. It's *FISH*...but there's a FISH SHAPE around it.

ALLY (CONT'D)
What's that say?

TRAVIS
Ally, bug off.

She holds it closer to him, waggles it, won't back off.

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

F..ish.

She scribbles another, with roots below and branches above...

TRAVIS (CONT'D)

Tree.

(sarcastic)

Great. Now draw something so I can read things like *Unemployment Benefits Application*.

ALLY

I don't know what to draw for that. And I don't know what to draw for *Vandalism* either. Or *Theft*.

Travis flushes, shakes his head. Back on his feet.

ALLY (CONT'D)

But I got *your* back too, remember? Trav. I could try to help you.

TRAVIS

Ally! It's *too late* for me! You don't understand. You're still a kid. No matter what you think, you don't know anything about anything!

Ally's stung by his anger...but..absorbs it..

ALLY

A substitute emotion.

TRAVIS

What?

ALLY

Albert says anger's a substitute emotion. You do it to distract people and yourself from the thing you don't know how to deal with.

TRAVIS

Albert says? Who's Albert?!

ALLY

He's my friend. Next to you, he's the brightest guy I know.

Travis shakes his head. But Ally holds him in her gaze. He turns to see Abbas is looking at him too - holding his little hand up in an offering. It's covered in pumpkin goo...

Travis takes some on his fingertip. Studies it. Touches Ally's nose with it. Shakes his head... and leaves.

EXT. STREET NEAR SCHOOL - EARLY MORNING

Ally walks along with a stick, making a line in the dirt, talking to herself, practicing....

ALLY

Do you know anyone who...Can you
recommend a, a... Yaahh! Mr. D!
Could you talk to my brother?

As she passes along the low wall by the faculty parking lot.

MR. DANIELS (OC)

She said I knew I was there on
temporary basis and it's not
procedure to hire full-time
replacements out of the substitute
pool.

She stops, unseen, surprised to hear how...UPSET HE SOUNDS.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

I know. Yeah, I can sub elsewhere
while I get the certificate. It's
just... I really like this gang. My
Fantasticos. We're *getting*
somewhere together.

Ally ducks down. Scoots along. Listening, of course.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

She decides this week -someone from
"the district-mandated channels."
(sigh, defeated)
It doesn't seem to matter! This
principal is so overextended, she's
just...inflexible. There isn't
anything else I can do!

He pivots toward where Ally was. No sign of her.

INT. MRS. ORO'S OUTER OFFICE - MORNING

CLOSE ON: That Front Office Lady. And her scowl.

FRONT OFFICE LADY
Haven't seen you in a while.

Ally's up against her desk. She gestures to the Troublemakers Seats - and the couple of scraped-up morose kids there.

ALLY
I didn't get *sent* here. I just
wanted to...*talk* to Mrs. Oro.

Front Office studies Ally even more suspiciously now. She makes a deal of looking over her scheduling screen.

FRONT OFFICE LADY
Busy lady. Next Tuesday. 7:30 AM.

ALLY
Next week is too late!

She closes the book firmly. Back to work. Ally....Breathes deep. Turns. Looks across at the Trouble Maker Seats.

EXT. CAFETERIA - DAY

Lunch is underway. Muldoon on patrol (though Max and Marco are clearly subdued.) Ally, Keisha and Albert at the table.

ALLY
They're going to fire him!

KEISHA
What are you talking about?

ALLY
They won't keep him because they're
required to have someone with the
right amount of experience.

ALBERT
Experience *is* a good measure for..

ALLY
Albert! You think there's anyone
who can come in now and do a better
job *with us* than Mr. Daniels?

ALBERT
I do...not.

ALLY
We've got to talk to the principal!
But the principal doesn't have time
to talk.

KEISHA

Maybe you can when she comes to
congratulate you after...

Keisha opens her large pack, lifts out A BOX. Opens it:
stacked CUPCAKES. They all say, in icing on top: VOTE.

KEISHA (CONT'D)

You get *elected*.

Oliver skitters over, his sugar sensor ticking.

Ally smiles at the beautiful cupcakes. Holds one up. Bobs it
in her hand. Likes its heft.

ALL

Keisha. You know I love your
cupcakes. And I know I'm supposed
to hand 'em out to win. But I need
to use this...for Mrs. Oro.

KEISHA

What's a cupcake got to do with
her?

She follows Ally's gaze to where Shay and her bracelet girls
harass a new offbeat-clothing-choice Unfortunate. Looks back
at Ally, bobbing the cupcake in her hand. Like a snowball.

KEISHA (CONT'D)

(getting it)

At least take a bite.

Ally does so. Nods. Licks her lips...and HURLS THE CUPCAKE.

It EXPLODES goo-ily against Shay's chest. She's stunned,
looks down at the little cookie word stuck there: ALLY.

Looks up. Just in time to see that Keisha has launched one at
her. And Albert. And, giddily, Oliver too. *Incoming!*

INT. MRS. ORO'S OFFICE - DAY

Mrs. Oro looks beyond put-out. She glares across at Ally...

MRS. ORO

The Policy on instigating a Food
Fight is clear. The disciplinary
response may include expulsion.

And KEISHA next to her and ALBERT. And OLIVER, who can't keep
his hands off her etch-a-sketch...which she snatches away.

MR. ORO

Do you realize how disruptive,
disrespectful and dangerous...

Albert puts his hand up. Keisha too. (Oliver now fidgets with her NAMEPLATE: *Dolores Oro*) And Mrs. Oro snaps...

MRS. ORO

Young man, this had better be
extremely relevant!

ALBERT

Technically, we did not instigate a
food fight. We threw cupcakes-- but
no one threw food *back*. There was
no actual fight. It was a food
attack.

Mrs. Oro's taken aback by this explanation. Turns to Ally,
whose attention seems to have drifted off behind her.

MRS. ORO

What do you have to say? Your
presence is disappointing - and as
I warned you before, most
definitely means...

ALLY

*Sometimes the bravest thing you can
do is ask for help.*

MRS. ORO

Excuse me?

Ally points to the poster behind her: the HANDS CONNECTING...

ALLY

That's what your poster says. The
last time I was here I couldn't
read it. And it's still not easy.
I've been sounding it out the whole
time my friends have been talking.

MRS. ORO

I don't understand your point.

ALLY

Mr. Daniels has been teaching me to
have confidence in myself. Mr.
Daniels has been teaching me to
read. Mr. Daniels figured out
something that I didn't really want
anyone to figure out.

(MORE)

ALLY (CONT'D)

Something no one ever really figured out. Including you, Mrs. Oro.

MRS. ORO

Mr. Daniels?

ALLY

He's the best teacher I've ever had in all the schools I've been in and it's not just me, everyone in the class will tell you, so instead of bringing in someone we don't know and who doesn't know us again you should take a minute to talk to the kids Mr. Daniels teaches and you'll realize he's awesome not just as a kind, good guy...

OLIVER

(spinning the name plate)
And funny. He's funny. Mostly.

ALLY

...but as a professional teacher who is great at his work and is always learning how to do his job better and better! *You just can not fire a guy like that!*

Mrs. Oro opens her mouth to speak. Stops. Takes Ally in. Looks back at the poster behind her. Turns back to Ally.

No one says anything for a long moment. The air is...charged. Oliver holds the nameplate out to Mrs. Oro.

OLIVER

Dolores means pain doesn't it? Is it weird to have the name *Pain*?

INT. CAFETERIA - AFTERNOON

Under the supervision of a JANITOR. Ally, Keisha, Albert and Oliver are doing serious Clean The Cafeteria duty.

Shay and entourage pass the entrance in a practiced exhibition of Group Smirk.

The quartet glance at each other, get back to scrubbing.

EXT. SCHOOL - AFTERNOON

Ally, Keisha, and Albert exit. Subdued. The other kids have left. Keisha pops on her bike. Ally and Albert start home.

INT. NICKERSON KITCHEN - DAY

Mrs. Nickerson and Ally are at the kitchen table...

SGT. NICKERSON (OC)
 ...never even seen a goat before
 and there he is, collecting the
 strays we come across when we're
 out on..when we're.. Well, there
 must be six or seven around the
 camp now. He calls 'em The Kids.

Sgt. Nickerson's face fills the laptop across from them. He looks, well...spiritually exhausted. Sighs..smiles.

SGT. NICKERSON
 Anyway everything's fine. I mean,
 we are on it. On it. How about you,
 babe? How 'bout *my* kids?

MRS. NICKERSON
 Nothing for you to worry about
 here. We're all...chugging along.

SGT. NICKERSON
 You know I like the good news.
 Trav? You there? What's the report?

MRS. NICKERSON
 He's...out now. But...Ally's here!

SGT. NICKERSON
 Ally-bug! What you got for me?

Ally reaches over to the side and holds something up to the screen... ALLY'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND. Sgt. Nickerson leans as close to the screen as he can..

SGT. NICKERSON (CONT'D)
 Oh honey, I wish I was there to
 read it to you. But I can't see
 clearly enough from here.

Ally leans close to the screen too. Takes a breath. *Brave.*

ALLY
 Dad?

SGT. NICKERSON

Ally?

ALLY

Do you know... how I can't really read and Travis can't read and we all really don't talk about it much and Travis and I do everything we can to keep it hidden and we're all working so hard and not really sure what to do and no one's really ever showed us what to do?

Sgt. Nickerson looks a little taken aback. Sits back. Sighs.

MRS. NICKERSON

Ally....

SGT. NICKERSON

(leaning in close again)

Yes, Ally. I do know that.

Ally meets her father's gaze. Smiles a tenuous smile.

Opens the book. Studies the page, takes a breath. Reads..

ALLY

"I could... tell you my adventures -beginning from this morning," said Alice a little... timidly;"

BEHIND HER - In the doorway. Travis has come in. He's leaning against the door jam. Watching. Listening.

ALLY (CONT'D)

"but it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then..

Travis's eyes find his mother's. They're glistening. Just holds he gaze, 'til his glisten too.

ALLY (CONT'D)

"Explain all that!" said the Mock Turtle. "No, no!" said the Gryphon in an im..pat..ient tone. "Ex..plan..ations take such a dread..ful time."

Ally looks around at her mom and brother. Then back at her dad. Even on the screen his eyes glisten too. He's BEAMING.

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - MORNING

Ally approaches the campus. Another day down the mines. But her features now aren't filled with resignation. There's a lot more brewing there, as she looks over the yard..

Mrs. Oro is showing an unfamiliar PROFESSIONAL-LOOKING WOMAN around the grounds.

Shay and her crew line the entrance, chanting "Shay's The Way"... and handing out single flowers as students enter.

But there's Albert, over by his tree. He starts towards her.

As Keisha, on her bike, skids in. Smiles. Climbs off. And the three head in together.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Mr. Daniels gestures to a WORLD MAP of MIGRATION ROUTES...

MR. DANIELS

So, Fantasticos, that's it for our unit on Migration.

He glances at the Penalty Box. Ally. Albert. Keisha. Oliver.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

And the thing is, migration is part of all of our lives. As humans, we are on the move. We make changes in response to our environment. We emigrate, we push into new territory, we move on..

Ally glances at her pals - *Where's he going with this?*

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

(almost soulful)

I guess my point is.. As you guys move forward, remember to bring your best game to it. Your talents - --remember to use them to set the world on fire!

The friends TENSE. He's about to announce he's leaving?

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

So, where does that bring us? We can't let *today* get by without...

(claps his hands)

Our election!

He writes CANDIDATE 1 and CANDIDATE 2 on the whiteboard.
Looks around his desk for something. Can't find it.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
Oh! Hang on. I left something in
the teacher's lounge. Be right
back.

And he darts out. Shay immediately addresses the penalty box.

SHAY
(loudly, for all to hear)
Pre.pare.to.get.bur.ied..
Al-ly Nick-er-son.

KEISHA
Why are you saying it like that?

SHAY
It's good to sound it out. Just to
be sure she understands.

Keisha looks ready to pounce. But Ally stays her. *Let it go.*

SHAY'S CREW
(starting their chant)
Shay's...

Oliver leaps up on the table, crows loudly...

SHAY'S CREW (CONT'D)	OLIVER
The way!	A phase!

SHAY'S CREW (CONT'D)	ALBERT
Shay's the way! Shay's the Way!	Ally's Your Ally! Ally's your ally!

MR. DANIELS
(coming back in)
Alright! Electoral spirit!

He has a box and moves along, handing everyone something...
Starting with the penalty box.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)
First, I want to thank our
candidates for running. You've both
done us a great service!

Ally looks at what she has just received: a nice NOTEBOOK -
the cover bearing an embossed motto: FANTASTICOS FOREVER!

MR. DANIELS

And remember, no matter who wins,
we are all Fantasticos. Forever!

(waving a notebook)

A little team present. From me to
you. And I'd like you to use the
first page to write down your vote.
Shay Costanza or Ally Nickerson.
Tear it out. Fold it up. Pass it
in. And our poll workers...

(gestures to Max & Marco)

...will count and mark them here.

He indicates the two columns on the board.

KEYA

But there's no names there!

MR. DANIELS

The names will be added *after* the
votes are all marked. In the words
of Dougie, head of your Board of
Elections, it'll make it "totally
suspenseful."

Ally looks around nervously. The kids are busy scrawling.
She looks at her own page. Isn't sure what to do with it.

And Ally writes. Carefully printing.

Marco collects the votes. Max begins the count. Checking each
paper, making a mark in one column or the other.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

While the votes are being
tabulated, I want to announce we're
having a special visitor today.

This news fills Ally and friends with concern....

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

She's excited about coming, though
because of your energetic, full-of-
questions Fantastico reputation,
she's a bit nervous meeting you for
the first time.

Behind him, Max continues to mark votes on the board...

OLIVER

(can't keep it in)

What if we don't want her to meet
us for the first time?

MR. DANIELS

Well, Oliver. I know that *you* will still give her a warm welcome.

The column on the left is getting more votes... even as Max, suppressing a smile, marks yet another.

Finally, Max tallies them. He signals to Mr. Daniels. He goes to board, blocking it as he writes names along the top.

He turns - there's Shay's name. On a column with 15 votes.

Ally studies the board, stunned. Column two says ALLY: 22.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Shay. You ran a well-organized campaign with some inventive ideas that might well inspire change.

Shay slumps angrily in her seat. Ally looks around. Kids, even ones she scarcely knows, are glancing at her, smiling.

MR. DANIELS (CONT'D)

Congratulations, Ally.

Someone starts clapping. Fast. Oliver. But it's backed by Albert and, as she stands up to dance...Keisha. Until the better part of the class is clapping. And drumming desks.

KEISHA AND ALBERT AND OLIVER

Al-ly! Al-ly! Al-ly!

They're celebrating her in classic team-chant style. Syllable by syllable calling her name.

Shay just sits there, staring daggers at her campaign team...except for Jessica. Because Jessica's now smiling at Ally - and, along with the rest of the class, CHANTING.

CLASS

Al-ly! Al-ly! Al-ly!

Keisha shouts to Shay, all smiles... Can't help herself:

KEISHA

It's good to sound it out! Just to be sure we all understand!

Ally looks to Mr. Daniels, who smiles really brightly at her, so clearly proud. And she starts the smile back when...

There's a KNOCK at the door. It cuts through the chant.

Mr. Daniels moves to get it. Ushers in a STRIKING WOMAN, early 30s, skirt and blouse, the one with Mrs. Oro earlier...

MR. DANIELS
Fantasticos. Madame President Nickerson. It's my honor to introduce you to Miss Julie Gutie..

ALLY
No!

MR. DANIELS
Excuse me?

ALLY
We don't want to meet her!
(to woman)
No offense to you, I'm sure you're great but..I've just been elected. That means I get to speak for everyone here. We really want Mr. Daniels to stay. We aren't the Room Five Fantasticos without him!
(she turns to the class)
Am I right? Tell her I'm right.

KEISHA
She's right!

OLIVER
She's right, right, right....

JESSICA
She's right! Wait, what's happening?

ALBERT
That lady is our new teacher.

Everybody goes QUIET. The WOMAN looks surprised, and... a bit emotional. She turns to Mr. Daniels, shakes her head...

And BEAMS. Gives him a SQUEEZE. And a really *loving* smile.

MR. DANIELS
Miss Gutierrez is my *girlfriend*.

ALBERT
Your *girlfriend* is the new teacher?

MR. DANIELS
There *is* no new teacher. My *girlfriend* Miss Gutierrez came cause she's heard a lot about you.

MISS GUTIERREZ

Yes. A lot!

MR. DANIELS

And I wanted her here when I told you that they have just, in their infinite wisdom, decided to hire me to work with you for the rest of the year. So...I'm the new teacher.

(to Ally)

That make sense? Not quite clear on what the confusion's about.

ALLY

It was about.. I. We thought there was... Yes! That makes sense! That absolutely completely makes sense!

Oliver, bless him, RUNS RIGHT UP TO MR. DANIELS and gives him a crazy big HUG, before HUGGING MISS GUTIERREZ TOO.

ALBERT

Mr. Daniels! Mr. Daniels! Mr. D...

Albert's starting a chant? It's a solo effort at first but...

MAX

Mr. Daniels! Mr. Daniels! Mr. D...

Max joining Albert? With DESK THUMPS. The class kicks in.

CLASS

Mr. Daniels! Mr. Daniels!

Mr. Daniels looks to his gal. She's mighty impressed... And he looks out over the kids, finds Ally. Smiles.

ABCUT TO:

INT. MEGA-DRUG STORE - DAY

Mrs. Nickerson moves down an aisle with a price marker. Hears footsteps...no sneak-up this time. Ally's sprinting to her.

ALLY

They voted me class president. The kids in my class! Not the teacher, just *the kids*. I'm president!

Mrs. Nickerson just takes in her literally bouncing girl.

ALLY (CONT'D)
 And Mr. Daniels is staying! And Albert and Keisha and I made sure that happened. And Oliver too. All my friends. We did it together!

Ally stops. Her Mom's price-marker has dropped to the floor.

ALLY (CONT'D)
 Mom?

And Mrs. Nickerson ENFOLDS her in a hug. Leans back.

MRS. NICKERSON
 Oh Ally, I'm so proud of you!

More hug. Ally MELTS into it, eyes closed. Opens her eyes:

Two LITTLE KIDS are watching the hug. Until they notice the GOLDFISH at eye level, grab bags...and hurry after their dad.

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - AFTERNOON

Dismissal time. Ally and SEVERAL OTHER KIDS, including Jessica, sit at playground tables playing CHESS. Ally considers the board. Makes her move...

ALLY
 Checkmate.

MR. DANIELS
 How did I not see that?

Yes, she's playing Mr. Daniels. There's a sign next to him that says AFTER SCHOOL CHESS CLUB - ALL WELCOME! He smiles, tooth dangling...and clicks it back in place.

ALLY
 You didn't let me win, right?

MR. DANIELS
 Ally. Hockey defenseman here. I'm not *capable* of *letting* someone win. I think you're just...

He pulls out a sheet of paper, writes down a word. Slides it over to her... She silently mouths it... RAPS along.

ALLY
 Invisible? No..wait...

Ally sounds it out again. Rapping. She looks at him.

ALLY (CONT'D)
Invincible.

There's a familiar THROATY RUMBLE. Ally sees the GTO pulling up to park. Travis climbs out. He's carrying a bag.

ALLY (CONT'D)
 There's Travis. That's Travis.

He spots Ally, comes on to the yard, past The Minefield (who sees he's legit..and gives him the nod.) He hands Ally the shopping bag; she looks into it...grins.

ALLY (CONT'D)
 Travis, this is... *The Goon.*

Mr. Daniels starts to think that through...as Travis puts his hand out, a little nervously.

TRAVIS
 Mr. Daniels. Hi. Travis Nickerson.
 I've heard..a lot about you.

MR. DANIELS
 Hi Travis. I've heard a lot about you too. So, you're working towards your general equivalency degree?

Travis looks to Ally, her gaze so...*reassuring.* He smiles.

TRAVIS
 I...am, yes.

MR. DANIELS
 Great. Pull up a bench. Let's figure out how to start.

Travis sits. And, Ally stands, takes in the school yard:

Muldoon closes in on Oliver; Max & Marco wrestle *each other.*

Shay, huddled with her Jessica-free entourage, hawks her friendship bracelets, still at it. Ever at it.

Back to Travis and Mr. Daniels, deep in conversation.

And, then Keisha by Albert...only *she's* the one gathering acorns. Ally grabs her bag, walks across to them.

KEISHA
 According to Albert, these were used as the basis for breadmaking for all sorts of tribes..

ALBERT

The Chumash, the Iroquois, the
Passamaquoddy, the Yurok, the...

KEISHA

All sorts of tribes, Albert.
(re the bag)
What you got? You been baking?

ALLY

I've been thinking. We should all
wear something that shows we're
friends.

KEISHA

Please tell me you're not into
bracelets now...

Ally pulls out a STACK of BLACK T-SHIRTS. Hands Albert the
first. He shakes it out: **FLINT**.

ALBERT

I love it! How did you know?

ALLY

Flint *is* the perfect shirt for you,
Albert. Not because of the hermit
guy on the planet thing but because
*you take the strikes against you
and turn them into something else,
something useful.*

Ally hands Keisha a shirt. She unfolds it. It says **STEEL**.

ALLY (CONT'D)

You're Steel, Keisha, because
you're strong. Full of purpose.

Keisha holds it up. It's actually nicely fitted. Grins: *Cool*.

Ally shakes out the last shirt. It says FLAMMABLE MATERIAL.

KEISHA

Flammable Material?

ALLY

Well...I do flare up pretty easy.
But when I catch the sparks that
you two make, I kinda feel like...

She flips the shirt over. There, descended from her notebook
sketch, is a beautiful graphic of a BLOSSOM OF FLAME..

ALLY (CONT'D)
Together we can set the world on
fire!

Keisha and Albert, flip their shirts: - there it is: Ally's awesome graphic. They all pull their shirts on...and stand there in a half circle, studying each other. Flame Blossoms.

SHAY
Nice loser shirts!

Ally looks across to where Shay and crew sit, leering.

ALLY
Not everyone is going to get it.

Albert takes in his friends, adjusts his shirt, SMILES BIG.

ALBERT
I get it.

KEISHA
I get it too.

Ally throws an arm around Keisha and another - as much as it'll reach - around Albert.

A little wall of fire now, the three of them together:
They're already starting to GLOW.