

## Mississippi, U.S.A.

It's been hours and hours since our last stop. If I ask *are we there yet* again Dad said he would turn the car around so I keep my mouth shut, and just repeat in my head *are we there yet are we there yet are we there yet* as I look out the window at the scrub pines and bushy magnolias lining the roadside, interspersed here and there with NO TRESPASSING signs nailed to the trunks of the spindly trees. Dad said we needed to have a trip, just us guys, so we left Mom and Nancy at home. Dad lost his job a few months ago and hasn't been himself, or at least that is what Mom keeps saying. Dad is not himself when he stays in bed all morning or when he sits on the couch watching TV during dinner. We're not supposed to say anything when he does that; it makes Mom upset and she says we shouldn't worry ourselves about adult affairs. We're supposed to just eat our meatballs and mashed potatoes and talk about what we did at school. I'm wondering when we can stop pretending that everything is fine.

Even though Charlie is younger than me he is sitting in the front seat because we don't want him to throw up again. It still smells like vomit here in the backseat from when he threw up this morning. We had only been in the car for half an hour, finally leaving the city and travelling west when he said *I'm going to throw up* and Dad said *No you're not* and Charlie did throw up. I was happy that he showed Dad, but then I had to help him and Dad clean and vacuum the car at a gas station car wash. Even with the windows open and a breeze blowing my hair off my head, I can still smell it. It doesn't help that the air blowing in is hot and thick with humidity. Everything feels sticky and the pages of my book are limp. I slump over.

One of the good things about being in the back seat is that I can lie down, as long as I keep my seatbelt on. The buckle is uncomfortable, digging into my kidneys but the change in view is worth it. Now I can look at the tops of the trees and the never-ending power lines instead of just the tree bottoms and middles. Some kind of vine with bright orange blossoms is growing all over everything. The flowers are pretty but the masses of vines are creepy. We learned in science class how vines can choke trees and kill them. They strangle the life out.

I hold my book overhead and try to read but the words on the page keep jumping whenever Dad hits a bump. *One of the most fascinating events in space is the creation of the supernova, which occurs—BUMP—which occurs when a white dwarf—BUMP—dwarf is suddenly and fantastically destroy—BUMP—ed—*. Sigh. Even in the best of circumstances I have a hard time focusing on this book. Mom told me I had to read something *educational* this summer, not just every Percy Jackson book that the library had. When I picked up *Let's Explore Space!* off the shelf I thought there would be more pictures of astronauts. But instead it's all about red planets and white dwarfs and black holes.

I sit up again and when I look out the window I notice that the trees have thinned and I can see brown water in the distance.

"I can see it!" I yell, and Charlie looks out his open window.

"Is that the beach?" Charlie asked Dad, sounding dubious.

“Good old Mississippi Gulf Coast, boys! We’ll be out there in no time.” Dad beats out a rhythm on the steering wheel, something Mom always tells him to stop doing when she’s in the car with him. I’m happy that he’s happy.

At the next stoplight we turn towards the beach. Dad drives along the beachfront boulevard for a few blocks and angles the car into the parking lane. There’s an elevated sidewalk next to the car and on the other side stretches a wide expanse of rich white sand. The sun glints off the brown water and through my open window I can hear the gentle slosh of the soft waves. As soon as Dad turns the key in the ignition Charlie and I have our shoes off and our doors open and we’re jumping off the sidewalk and running towards the water. I can hear a car door slam and Dad laughing behind us and when I turn around he’s running too. And we all run down the beach together. The brown water is cool and we splash each other. Dad picks us up just like when we were little, tucking me under one arm and Charlie under the other. He grunts with the effort and breathes heavily as he carries us out, further and further from the shore. The water is shallow and I can see tiny fish swim and swirl around his feet as he walks. I listen to his breathing and Charlie’s giggles and I relax into the rhythm of his steps. My hands and feet dangle in the water and I grab handfuls of it, wishing I could hold the Gulf in my palms. I hope Dad never stops walking.