

ONE

It was an ordinary January afternoon, a Thursday, when they came for Matt Donaghy.

They came for him during fifth period, which was Matt's study period, in room 220 of Rocky River High School, Westchester County.

Matt and three friends – Russ, Stacey, Skeet – had formed a circle with their desks at the rear of the room and were conferring, in lowered voices, about Matt's adaptation of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe into a one-act play; after school, in Drama Club, the four of them were scheduled to read *William Wilson: A Case of Mistaken Identity* for the club members and their advisor, Mr Weinberg. It was a coincidence that Mr Weinberg, who taught English and drama at Rocky River High, was in charge of fifth-period study hall, and when a knock came at the door of the room, Mr Weinberg went to open it in his good-natured, sauntering manner.

"Yes, gentlemen? What can I do for you?"

Only a few students, sitting near the front of the room, took much notice. They might have registered a note of surprise in Mr Weinberg's tone. But Mr Weinberg, with his greying sandy hair worn longer than most of his male colleagues' at Rocky River, and a bristling beard that invited teasing, had a flair for dramatising ordinary remarks, giving a light touch where he could. Calling strangers "gentlemen" was exactly in keeping with Mr Weinberg's humour.

At the rear of the room, Matt and his friends were absorbed in the play, for which Matt was doing hurried revisions, typing away furiously on his laptop. Anxiously he'd asked his friends, "But does this *work*? Is it scary, is it funny, does it *move*?" Matt Donaghy had something of a reputation at Rocky River for being both brainy and a comic character, but secretly he was a perfectionist, too. He'd been working on his one-act play *William Wilson: A Case of Mistaken Identity* longer than his friends knew, and he had hopes it would be selected to be performed at the school's Spring Arts Festival.

Typing in revisions, Matt hadn't been paying any attention to Mr Weinberg at the front of the room talking with two men. Until he heard his name spoken – "Matthew Donaghy?"

Matt looked up. What was this? He saw Mr Weinberg pointing in his direction, looking worried. Matt swallowed hard, beginning to be frightened. What did these men, strangers, want with *him*? They wore dark suits, white shirts, plain neckties; and they were definitely not smiling. As Matt stared, they approached him, moving not together but along two separate aisles, as if to block off his route if he tried to escape.

Afterwards Matt would realise how swift and purposeful – and practised – they were. *If I'd made a break to get my backpack... If I'd reached into my pocket...*

The taller of the two men, who wore dark-rimmed glasses with green-tinted lenses, said, "You're Matthew Donaghy?"

Matt was so surprised, he heard himself stammer, "Y-Yes. I'm – Matt."

The classroom had gone deathly silent. Everyone was staring at Matt and the two strangers. It was like a moment on TV, but there were no cameras. The men in their dark suits exuded an authority that made rumpled, familiar Mr Weinberg in his corduroy jacket and slacks look ineffectual.

"Is something w-wrong? What do you want with – me?"

Matt's mind flooded: something had happened at home to his mother, or his brother, Alex... his father was away on business; had something happened to him? A plane crash...

The men were standing on either side of his desk, looming over him. Unnaturally close for strangers. The man with the glasses and a small fixed smile introduced himself and his companion to Matt as detectives with the Rocky River Police Department and asked Matt to step outside into the corridor. "We'll only need a few minutes."

In his confusion Matt looked to Mr Weinberg for permission – as if the high school teacher's authority could exceed the authority of the police.

Mr Weinberg nodded brusquely, excusing Matt. He too appeared confused, unnerved.

Matt untangled his legs from beneath his desk. He was a tall, lanky, whippet-lean boy who blushed easily. With so

75 many eyes on him, he felt that his skin was burning, breaking into a fierce flamelike acne. He heard himself stammer, "Should I – take my things?" He meant his black canvas backpack, which he'd dropped on to the floor beside his desk, the numerous messy pages of his play script, and his laptop
80 computer.

Meaning too – Will I be coming back?

The detectives didn't trouble to answer Matt, and didn't wait for him to pick up the backpack; one of them took charge of it, and the other carried Matt's laptop. Matt didn't follow
85 them from the room; they walked close beside him, not touching him but definitely giving the impression of escorting him out of study hall. Matt moved like a person in a dream. He caught a glimpse of his friends' shocked faces, especially Stacey's. Stacey Flynn. She was a popular girl, very
90 pretty, but a serious student; the nearest Matt Donaghy had to a girlfriend, though mostly they were "just friends", linked by an interest in Drama Club. Matt felt a stab of shame that Stacey should be witnessing this.... Afterwards he would recall how matter-of-fact and practised the detectives obviously
95 were, removing the object of their investigation from a public place.

What a long distance it seemed, walking from the rear of the classroom to the front, and to the door, as everyone stared. There was a roaring in Matt's ears. Maybe his house had
100 caught on fire? No, a plane crash... Where was Dad, in Atlanta? Dallas? When was he coming home? Today, tomorrow? But was it likely that police would come to school to inform a student of such private news?

It was bad news, obviously.

105 "Through here, son. Right this way."

In the corridor outside the classroom, Matt stared at the detectives, who were both big men, taller than Matt and many pounds heavier. He swallowed hard; he was beginning now to feel the effect of a purely physical anxiety.

110 Matt heard his hoarse, frightened voice. "What – is it?"

The detective with the glasses regarded Matt now with a look of forced patience. "Son, you know why we're here."

TWO

That JANUARY AFTERNOON, when Ugly Girl struck out.

Not that I was hurt, *I was not.*

Not that I gave a damn, *I did not.*

Not that any of you saw me cry, *nobody ever saw Ugly Girl cry.*

All through school, if I'd had to wait to be chosen for any team, I'd have waited at the sidelines like the other left-behind losers. Fat girls, girls wearing thick glasses, girls lacking "motor coordination", asthmatic girls who puffed and panted if they had to trot a few yards. But Ugly Girl was one of the best athletes at Rocky River High. Even the guys had to acknowledge that fact, however they hated to. So Ms Schultz, our gym teacher (kind of an Ugly Girl herself, big boned, clumsy in social situations, with coarse swarthy skin and kinky hair), always named me a team captain. She'd call out "Ursula Riggs" like she hadn't any idea the name was ugly, and even

when she chided me – "Ursula, be careful!" – "Ursula, that's a foul!" – you could tell she favoured me, in secret. *Ugly Girls got to stick together, right?*

In seventh and eighth grades I was a swimmer-diver, and that was my happiest time. But swim team didn't work out. Ugly Girl's body wasn't built for the diving board, or for water. Or for critical eyes. In high school I got into "land" sports – "contact" sports. Soccer, field hockey, volleyball, basketball. There Ugly Girl excelled. Junior year I was captain of the Rocky River girls' basketball team. We were on a winning streak, though I surely wasn't what you'd call a popular captain, and if I was in one of my Fiery Red moods, I wasn't what you'd call a team player. I was out to score, and I scored.

Ms Schultz scolded me, in the way that teachers who like you can scold, letting you know they expect more of you than you're giving. "You're a gifted athlete, Ursula, and I know that you're a very good academic student too. When you want to be." Pause. "I wish I could rely upon you more, with your teammates." I didn't like hearing this, but I just shrugged and stared at the floor. My clunky feet. Ugly Girl wished she could rely upon herself more too.

I didn't have many friends in Rocky River. (My mom and little sister were into "friends".) But that was a Boring Fact.

Strange: how stuff that used to bother me in middle school, had the power to make me hide away and cry, didn't bother me at all now. Since that day I woke up and knew I wasn't an ugly girl, I was Ugly Girl.

I laughed, and it wasn't a nice feminine laugh like my mom encourages. It was a real laugh, deep in the gut.

I would never be ashamed of my body again; I would be proud of it. (Except maybe my breasts. Which I strapped in like I was on swim team, and kind of flattened, in a sports bra.)

160 My hair used to be this pretty fluffy blonde, the baby pictures show. Now it's darker. For the hell of it someday I'd like to shave my skull, like a skinhead. Or maybe trim my hair in a crew cut. Or dye it black. Or bleach it. Except my dad wouldn't approve and my mom would die of shame. They had their prissy notions of *girl* like my kid sister, Lisa. Lisa is an aspiring ballerina, and Mom's gaga about her dancing classes.

165 What pissed me was until just recently my Grandma Riggs was into comparing Lisa and me. "Ursula, dear, when are you going to *stop growing*?" Like this was a joke, or something I could control by an act of will, which made me hate the Grandma Riggs I used to love.

170 Why do old people who've known you since infancy think they actually *know you* and can say insulting things?

175 "I'll stop growing, Grandma," I said, trying to keep it pleasant, "when you stop getting older. OK?"

That was mean. That hurt Grandma. Ugly Girl didn't care.

180 Lots of people I was starting to hate who I used to like a lot. But when you like people, you can be hurt. I'd made a few mistakes with girl friends, and one or two guys I'd thought were my buddies, and I wouldn't make these mistakes again.

185 What I liked about being so tall was I could look just about any guy eye-to-eye, even older guys on the street, or actual adult men I didn't know. Unlike other girls, I didn't shrink away like a balloon deflating if guys teased me or said crude things meant to embarrass. How do you embarrass Ugly Girl, exactly?

Around school you hear girls talking about their boyfriends, certain "sexual practices" expected of them, sometimes right in the school building, or in the parking lot behind; and hearing such things made Ugly Girl just laugh. As if Ugly Girl would *go down* for any guy, or any human being, ever!

190 I'd grown taller than my mom by the time I was thirteen, and I really liked that. Mom was one of those "petite" women who watch their weight constantly, and are anxious about lines and sagging in their faces, as if the whole world is staring at them and *cares!* It felt good, too, to be almost as tall as my dad (who was six feet three, weighed over two hundred pounds), so he'd have to treat me more like an equal than just a child.

195 Most of all it felt good to be as tall as, in some cases taller than, my teachers. Not one of the Rocky River female teachers was Ugly Girl's height, and always I made sure I stood straight, like a West Point cadet, when I spoke with them. Everyone was cautious around Mrs Hale, our guidance counsellor, who could sabotage your chances of getting into a good college by putting something negative in your file, but not Ugly Girl. My favourite teachers were Ms Zwilich, who taught biology, and Mr Weinberg, who taught literature, and I wasn't afraid to stand up to them, either.

200 I could see that my teachers didn't know what to make of me. There was Ursula Riggs, who was an excellent student, a serious girl with an interest in biology and art, and there was Ugly Girl, who played sports like a Comanche and who had a sullen, sarcastic tongue. It was Ugly Girl who was susceptible to "moods" – these ranged from Inky Black to Fiery Red. In a