

LOUIS SACHAR

**FUZZY
MUD**

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
2:12 P.M.

A long line of cars stretched from the front of Woodridge Academy all the way out to Richmond Road, blocking traffic. Many of the mom and dad drivers had tears in their eyes. They hadn't been told the names of the missing children, only that their own children were safe.

At the front of the school, each car was met by a teacher who first verified the identity of the driver, and then went to the proper classroom and escorted the student to the car. These children were often caught off guard and embarrassed by their parents' hugs and kisses.

A uniformed officer kept watch.

It was a slow process, and it had just gotten even slower. There was one car stopped in front of the school that hadn't moved for a long time.

The dad driver who had patiently waited in line so long, silently counting his blessings, had told the teacher who'd come to meet him that his name was John Walsh. He had shown her his driver's license and said he was Marshall Walsh's father. "He's in the seventh grade."

The teacher had smiled at him and said she had known Marshall since he'd been in the fourth grade. "He's a great kid."

Mr. Walsh waited. He watched as other cars pulled up behind him and in front of him. Parents and children were united. The cars drove off, and other cars took their places.

Still, he waited, growing more anxious with each passing second. His hands gripped the steering wheel.

Mrs. Thaxton's voice resounded over the PA system, which could be heard outside as well as in the classrooms. "Marshall Walsh, please report to the office."

Mr. Walsh trembled.

Mrs. Thaxton's voice rang out a second time, sounding a bit more frantic.
"Marshall Walsh, come to the office, now!"

A little while later the teacher returned to Mr. Walsh's car, not with Marshall but with a police officer.



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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
2:20 P.M.

Tamaya was shaking as she took the juice box from her sack. Using her teeth, she tore the plastic wrapping away from the straw.

Chad, still down on the ground like a wounded animal, rubbed his blistered hands over his arms to try to keep warm. “What are you doing?” he rasped.

“Just hold on a sec,” said Tamaya. She had to concentrate very hard to keep her hands steady as she punctured the juice box with the pointy end of the straw.

“Okay, hold out your hand.”

She placed the juice box in his hand and felt a rush of revulsion as his fingers touched hers.

She wiped her fingers on her skirt as she watched him fumble with the straw, and then stick it between his swollen lips.

Chad sucked up all the juice, and continued to suck until the sides of the box collapsed inward.

“You want a sandwich?” she offered.

She removed the lid from the plastic container. It was peanut butter and jelly, with the crusts removed. She thought about what Mrs. Latherly had said, and almost laughed. *Gee, I hope you’re not allergic*, she thought.

He sprang at her. She gasped as one hand slammed into her neck. His other hand grabbed her shoulder. She stumbled backward as he ripped the lunch sack from her hand.

The sandwich fell to the dirt.

Chad sat back down. He groped around inside the sack and pulled out a granola bar.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she told him. “I was giving it to you.”

He tore off the wrapping, then ate the bar in three bites.

“You’re going to choke if you’re not careful,” she warned.

“I know who you are,” he said as he chewed the last of the bar. “You’re Tamaya, Marshall’s little friend.”

“So? I never said I wasn’t.”

“You did this,” he accused. “I’ve been thinking of all the things I’d do to you if I ever saw you again, and here you are.”

Tamaya bit her lip. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know the mud would make you blind. Anyway, you shouldn’t have been beating up Marshall. And you said you were going to beat me up next.”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t,” said Chad. “Just because you’re a girl.”

“The mud hurt me too,” Tamaya told him. “My hand and arm are all covered in blisters, and maybe my face too, I don’t know. There’s something really bad in that mud.”

He took several deep, struggled breaths. “Is anyone else looking for me?” he asked. “Do they even know I’m gone?”

“The whole school knows. Everyone thinks you joined a motorcycle gang or something.”

He made a noise that could have been a laugh.

Tamaya looked at the sandwich lying on the ground between them. She wanted to pick it up but was afraid to get too close to him.

“The whole time I’ve been out here,” he said, “I’ve just kept thinking, *No one knows, no one cares*. Over and over in my head. *No one knows. No one cares*.”

“Well, your parents have to know,” she pointed out.

“Maybe.”

“Like when you didn’t show up for dinner. Or at bedtime?”

“Yeah, right,” Chad said. “Maybe when they came to tuck me in and read me a bedtime story.” He made that same distorted laughing sound again, which quickly degenerated into a retching cough.

Tamaya worried he was going to throw up.

The coughing stopped, and Chad took several short quick breaths. “What else you got in here?” he asked, holding up her lunch sack.

“My sandwich is on the ground,” she told him. “I’ll get it for you, if you promise not to jump at me again.”

He said nothing.

She cautiously moved closer, keeping her eyes on him. The two halves had been sliced diagonally. She bent over and quickly picked up one half and then the other.

He remained where he was.

She shook off the dirt the best she could. “Okay, I’m going to hand it to you now. You don’t have to grab it.”

She held out one half of the sandwich. He reached up, then grabbed her by the wrist, hard.

She didn’t make a sound.

He twisted her wrist as he took the half sandwich from her.

“Why are you so mean?” she asked.

He took a bite, and then another without finishing the first. As he continued to chew, she could tell he was having trouble swallowing.

“Sorry there’s nothing more to drink,” she said. “There’s some sliced fruit in the sack.”

He dug around in her lunch sack and got the plastic container. He grimaced as he swallowed the last of his mouthful. "This?"

She watched him fumble with the lid.

"You're going to spill it!" she warned, and quickly stepped up and took it from him.

He let her.

She removed the lid and handed it back to him. "Apples and pears."

He ate a slice of fruit, savoring its wetness. He took another bite of the sandwich, smaller this time, then another slice of fruit.

"The jam is homemade," she said, filling the silence. "From real strawberries. It has less sugar than the kind you get in the store. My mom made it."

She didn't know why she was telling him this. She felt stupid.

"It's good," Chad said, to her surprise.

When he finished his half sandwich, she gave him the other half. "Can you see at all?" she asked.

"Only up real close, like just before I smack into something. I can tell something's there, then, bam!" He made the same laughing noise.

He ate a small bite of the sandwich, followed by a slice of pear.

"You must have been really cold," she said. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Who are you, my mother?"

"Sorry for caring," she said.

"I bet you and your family have dinner together every night, don't you?"

It was more of an accusation than a question. She answered anyway. "Just me and my mom. If she's not working too late. My parents are divorced. I don't have any brothers or sisters. My dad lives in Philadelphia."

"Does she read you bedtime stories too?" he asked.

Another accusation.

"Sometimes we take turns reading to each other. She likes to keep up with what I'm doing at school."

She waited for him to say something, to mock her, but he didn't say anything.

He ate the last slice of fruit, then licked the bottom of the container, trying to get every last drop of liquid.

He let her take the empty sack from him. She gathered up the containers and bits of trash and put them all back inside the sack. She was no litterbug.

"No one knows, no one cares," Chad muttered.



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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
2:41 P.M.

Marshall banged a stick against one tree, then another, as he wandered aimlessly through the woods. He broke the stick in half and flung the halves in opposite directions.

He didn't know why he did that. He didn't know why he did anything anymore.

He didn't know why he hadn't told Mrs. Thaxton the truth. He didn't know why he'd snuck out of school. He didn't know why he'd returned to the woods.

It certainly wasn't to look for Tamaya. If she wanted to go searching for Chad, that was her problem!

Mostly, he'd just needed to get away. Away from Mrs. Thaxton. Away from his teachers. Away from everybody. If he could have gotten away from himself, he would have done that too.

Nothing made sense anymore. Tamaya should have been glad that Chad wasn't in school. And Mrs. Thaxton acted like Chad was some kind of star pupil. "Did anyone see Chad yesterday? Did you talk to him? What did he say? Where was he going?"

He was going to beat me up, Marshall thought, kicking leaves. *That's where he was going!*

What was he supposed to do, meet Chad on Richmond Road so he could get the snot beat out of him? Would that have made everybody happy?

He kicked a rock, then walked quickly after it, picked it up, and threw it as far as he could.

"Chad's been picking on Marshall all year," Andy had said. "For no reason."

They all knew—Andy, Laura, Cody, everybody. So why didn't anyone do anything? Why hadn't they stuck up for him? Why had they let Chad make his life so miserable, day after day after day?

But that wasn't the real question, and he knew it. The real question was this: Why hadn't he stuck up for himself?

And he knew the answer to that too. Because he was a coward, like Chad had said. "A thumb-sucking coward!"

If Laura thought Chad was mean, then what did she think of Marshall? *Nothing*. He was just a bug that Chad stepped on.

He thought about the way Tamaya used to look up to him, like he was her hero. *Some hero*. When it came down to it, she was the one who had protected him. She'd smashed the mud into Chad's face. And now she was out searching for Chad, because he had been too scared to tell Mrs. Thaxton the truth.

He wondered if Tamaya could possibly be right about the mud. It didn't seem possible. Somebody would have put up a warning sign or something. She'd probably just touched some weird kind of poison ivy.

He stopped. Just ahead, some kind of animal was crouched atop a dead tree trunk, ready to pounce.

Keeping his eye on it, he slowly bent down and picked up a rock.

The sun, shining through the treetops, caused a crisscross of shadows and light over the creature, making it difficult to tell exactly what it was. Possibly a raccoon, or maybe a badger, he thought, although he wasn't sure he knew exactly what a badger looked like. It appeared to be snarling.

Whatever it was, since it was out during the day, it might be rabid.

He rolled the rock over in his hand. "Hey!" he shouted at it.

It didn't move.

He threw the rock toward it, hoping to scare it away. The rock bounced off the tree trunk, and the animal still didn't move.

Marshall picked up another rock and took a few steps closer. "Go away!" he shouted, then took a few more steps.

Maybe it wasn't snarling.

He boldly took another step.

Maybe it wasn't alive.

He moved closer.

Maybe it wasn't an animal at all but just somebody's mud-soaked sweater.

He almost laughed. *Now I'm even afraid of sweaters!*

Beneath the mud, he could see the maroon color and the partially obscured words *Virtue and Valor*.

He realized whose sweater it was.

On the other side of the tree trunk was a large puddle of dark mud covered in a fuzzy scum. He saw a mud-covered sneaker and a rolled-up white sock, also splattered with the mud.

The sock did it.

Something wrenched inside him. All his feelings of shame, self-pity, and self-hatred vanished. He was no longer thinking about himself at all.

"This is really bad," he said aloud.



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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
2:55 P.M.

Tamaya held one end of a long stick, and Chad trailed behind, holding the other. “I’m ducking under a branch,” she announced, then crouched down, lower than necessary for her, but she had to watch out for him too.

The stick was about six feet long, thicker at Chad’s end, with a slight bend in the middle. Tamaya had broken a bunch of twigs off it, but a few of the nubs still remained. She held the cloth sack between her hand and the stick to keep it from rubbing against her blisters.

Somehow, she’d have to get him across the gully. She thought about trying to go around it, but then she might never find her way back to school. Her best chance was to try to retrace her steps exactly.

“I just am,” Chad said. “I don’t know why. I just know I am.”

She had no idea what he was talking about. “You are *what?*”

“You asked me why I was so mean. I’m just saying, it’s not like I don’t know it.”

Tamaya had never expected him to actually answer that question. “Well, if you know you’re mean,” she said, “then why don’t you just stop being that way?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re not being mean to me now.”

“I could. I could just pull the stick from you and hit you with it, even if I couldn’t see you. You’d probably scream, and I’d be able to tell where you were. The more you screamed, the more I’d hit you.”

“I wouldn’t scream. I’d sneak away.”

“I’d still probably hit you with it a few times anyway.”

“Probably,” Tamaya agreed. It was an odd conversation, she realized, but

he didn't sound angry, and she didn't feel scared. "But then you'd be left out here, all alone and lost again."

"I know. It doesn't make sense. But that's the kind of dumb stuff I do."

Tamaya thought about what he'd said earlier, about thinking that nobody had noticed when he hadn't come home. "You have any brothers or sisters?" she asked.

"Two sisters and a brother."

"So they would have noticed when you didn't come home?"

"They're perfect," he said, not answering her question. "Good grades, never get in trouble. I'm the only bad one."

Tamaya wanted to tell him that wasn't true, but it was hard to think of something good to say about him. "No one's all bad," she said at last. "The kids at school like you."

"That's just because I'm different. I'm not smart like the rest of you. Half the time I don't get what people are saying. It's like everyone's talking a foreign language. The only reason I go to your school is to keep from going to jail. And it's costing my parents lots of money. That's all they care about. How much money I'm costing them."

Tamaya wondered if he really would go to jail or if that was another one of his exaggerated stories, like the crazy hermit and his pet wolves.

"Sometimes I don't get home until real late," he said. "No one notices. Or if they do, they don't care."

"Where do you go?" she asked.

"Here in the woods. I climb up as high as I can climb, and then just look down at the world. I bring some wood, and hammer it into the trees to make steps. I climb a little ways up, then nail a couple of boards to the tree, and then climb up on them and nail more boards. I always want to get higher."

Talking about his tree-climbing seemed to give Chad more energy. That was encouraging. He'd need all his strength to make it across the gully.

"I saw your tree!" she realized. "It's one of my markers for getting back to school. Follow the white branch, and then turn at the tree with the wood nailed to it."

"That's how I saw you and Marshall," Chad said. "From up there."

He said it like it was something to be proud of, in spite of all that had happened.

Tamaya wondered if he'd also seen the crazy hermit from up in his tree. Maybe that was how he'd gotten the hole in his pant leg too; not from a wolf bite, like he'd said, but from climbing trees.

Thinking about all this, she had momentarily stopped paying close attention, and suddenly looked down to see a puddle of fuzzy mud directly in front of her.

"Stop!" she exclaimed.

Chad took another step.

The stick pushed her forward. She had to hop sideways to avoid the mud, and fell into a tangle of bushes.

"What happened? Are you all right? What happened?"

Twigs scraped her face and arms. "Don't move," she warned. "The mud is right in front of you. Just don't move."

Her hair was caught, and she carefully untangled it as she extricated herself from the bush, still holding on to her end of the stick. "Okay," she told Chad, "you're going to have to try to go around this side of the mud, but there's not a lot of room."

She led him between the bush and the mud, watching every step he took as twigs scraped her legs. “Stay as close to the bush as you can. You have to walk sideways.”

He made it safely around the mud, and they continued on down the gully. Fresh scratches covered her arms and legs, but Chad was a lot worse, so there was no point in complaining. “Next time I say stop, you have to stop!”

“Sorry.”

“You almost pushed me into the mud.”

“Sorry,” he said again.

The ground became steeper. Tamaya warned Chad about the gully down below. She knew he was big and strong enough to make the jump. The tricky part would be getting him to a good jumping-off place, and then making sure he jumped in the right direction.

“I can do it,” he assured her.

As the ground became very steep, she had to turn around and walk backward. It was like going down a ladder. She gripped the stick tightly with both hands. “Whatever you do, don’t let go of the stick,” she said.

“I won’t.”

She directed every step he took. “There’s a rock just a little ways down, in front of you. Careful...careful...”

She watched his foot settle into place as she inched her way backward. “Okay, don’t move.”

She twisted her neck around. The gully seemed wider than she remembered, and the mud deeper. Just below her there was a rock jutting out from the dirt, above the gully. That seemed like the best place to jump from.

“I’ll go first, then you,” she told him.

“Okay.”

“I’m going to drop the stick now.”

“Okay.”

She counted in her head. *One...two...*

On three, she dropped the stick, although she still held her lunch sack. Her feet slid beneath her, but she kept her balance as she spun around and stepped down hard onto the rock.

The rock instantly gave way.

Tamaya tumbled. Her knees banged hard against the side of the slope. She shut her eyes just in time as she somersaulted into the mud.

Her feet hit the bottom of the gully and she forced her head up to the surface. Her eyes remained closed. She could feel the warm muck clinging to her face and over her eyelids. She tried to move, but it was impossible.

“Did you make it?” Chad called.

“No!” she screamed. “I’m stuck!”

She could feel grittiness on her teeth and gums. It tasted like nail polish remover. She tried to spit it out.

“Help me!” she called, then spit again.

“I don’t know what to do! What do you want me to do?”

“Get me out of here!”

For a moment Chad didn’t respond. Then she heard him, closer than before. “Try to grab the stick!” he shouted.

She stretched out her arms, but there was nothing to grab on to. “Where? Where is it?”

It cracked against the side of her head.



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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
3:33 P.M.

Tamaya was trapped in a ditch, shouting for help, and Chad was beating her with a stick. That was how it looked to Marshall from the side of the hill.

“Hey, leave her alone!” he shouted, but they were too far away to hear him.

He hurried down the hill, slapping at branches to slow his momentum.

Chad continued to swing the stick like some kind of wild man.

“Leave her alone!” Marshall shouted again.

They still didn’t hear him.

When he reached the steep drop-off, he dug the edges of his sneakers into the dirt and slid back and forth, like a skier, down toward the gully.

“Chad!” he shouted.

Chad stopped midswing.

“If you want to fight someone, fight me!” Marshall challenged.

“Marshall!” screamed Tamaya. “Save me!”

“Drop the stick!” he commanded. He edged his way downward.

Chad continued to swing it. “I’m trying to help her.”

“I said leave her alone!”

“The mud’s really bad, Marshall,” Tamaya called to him. “Chad’s blind. He’s trying to get the stick to me!”

For the first time, Marshall finally could see Chad’s grotesquely blistered and swollen face. *Blind?* He had to turn all his thoughts inside out and backward in order to try to take in what was happening.

“I’m almost there,” he called back. “Just quit swinging that stick!” He slid the final few feet to the edge of the gully and then tried to reach out to

Tamaya. "I'm here," he said. "Hold out your hand."

She was too far away. "Don't let the mud get on you," she warned.

He didn't care about himself. He let one foot slide down the side of the gully into the mud as he reached for her. The mud was well past his knee when the tips of his fingers touched Tamaya's. Mud pasted her face. Her eyes were shut tight.

"Lean a little toward me," he urged as he inched just a little bit closer.

She bent toward him.

He grabbed her hand. "I gotcha!"

He pulled hard, but she wouldn't budge. "Try to take a step," he urged.

"I'm trying!" she screamed.

It was hopeless. He looked at Chad, standing motionless on the other side. "Chad, we need you."

"I can't," Chad answered.

"You have to," said Marshall.

Chad took a tentative step, then stopped. "I can't," he repeated.

Marshall let go of Tamaya. It took all his effort just to raise his own leg out of the mud. He moved along the side of the gully until he was safely clear of Tamaya.

"Jump toward my voice," he told Chad. "Jump as hard and as far as you can."

"I can't."

"Just do it, you thumb-sucking coward!"

"Hey!" Chad shouted, then came flying toward him.

Marshall grabbed him by the arms as he landed, to keep him from falling backward into the gully. "C'mon," he urged.

He guided Chad back to Tamaya, and they each stepped down into the mud.

Tamaya stretched out her arms.

Marshall grabbed one hand, and Chad found the other.

They pulled.

She still wouldn't move.

"Keep pulling!" Marshall urged.

A deep grunt came from somewhere inside Chad, and Tamaya moved just a little bit closer.

They kept pulling. Another grunt, and Tamaya took a small step. Then another.

"Put your hand on my shoulder," Marshall told her. As she did, he wrapped his arm around her waist and then pried her up and out of the mud.



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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
3:55 P.M.

Marshall took off his sweater and used it to wipe the mud away from Tamaya's eyes. He and Chad had managed to pull Tamaya up the side of the hill to where the ground was less steep. Chad now sat, head down, breathing hard and unevenly.

Tamaya could feel the pressure of Marshall's finger behind the soft sweater fabric as he gently rubbed each eyelid.

"Okay," he whispered to her.

She was afraid to open her eyes.

"I'll get you home, no matter what," Marshall promised.

She listened a moment to Chad's raspy breathing, then allowed her eyes to open.

Marshall appeared blurry at first, but that might have been from keeping her eyes so tightly shut for so long. She blinked. His face was pale and worried.

"I can see you," she told him.

He gave her a small smile.

She took the sweater from him and used it to wipe the rest of the mud off her face, and then her neck and arms. She knew it wouldn't stop whatever was in the mud, but she took comfort in knowing that she'd be home soon. She could take a bath, wash her hair, and go see Dr. Sanchez.

"Here, use this too," Marshall said. He pulled his school shirt up over his head, turning it inside out in the process.

"No, you'll get cold."

"I'm all right."

She took his shirt and used it to clean the inside of her mouth. She

rubbed it over her teeth and her gums. She wrapped her tongue with it, then twisted it back and forth.

She cleaned her ears, and then her nose, using her pinky to stick the cloth up each nostril.

“Here. Thanks,” she said, but Marshall just put up his hands.

She let the shirt drop.

Chad groaned as Marshall helped him to his feet.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Couldn’t be better,” he rasped.

She hoped he’d have the strength to make it back. It was already getting dark.

Marshall held Chad’s arm as he led him up the hill. Tamaya was on the other side of Marshall.

“You’re a good guy, Marshall,” Chad said. “Sorry about...”

His voice trailed off, and Tamaya was afraid he might pass out, but then he seemed to gather his strength again. “You want to know why I hated you?”

“I already know why,” Marshall told him. “You thought I called you a liar.”

“You called me a liar? When?”

Tamaya’s bare foot stepped on a sharp twig, but she suppressed the pain. The important thing was to keep going.

Marshall reminded Chad about the time he had bragged about riding his motorcycle into the principal’s office. “I said, ‘No way!’ but I just meant it like, ‘Wow, that’s so cool,’ not that I thought you were a liar.”

“Oh, yeah, I knew that,” Chad said. “I was just giving you a hard time. Besides, I *was* lying. I’ve never even been on a motorcycle.”

Marshall gave a short laugh as he shook his head.

Tamaya knew this was between Marshall and Chad and she should keep out of it, but she couldn’t help herself. “Then why’d you hate him?” she blurted. “He never did anything to you!”

Chad took a deep breath, then said something that sounded to Tamaya like *lasagna*.

“What?” asked Marshall.

“Your birthday is September twenty-ninth,” Chad said.

“How do you know?”

“And your mom made your favorite dinner.”

“Lasagna,” said Tamaya. So he really had said that.

“I heard you talking about it at school.”

“So?” asked Marshall.

“So, you know when my birthday is?” Chad asked.

He didn’t.

“September twenty-ninth,” said Chad.

Tamaya was having a hard time trying to put all this together. “And that’s why you hated Marshall?” she asked. “Because you have the same birthday?”

“No one cooked me lasagna,” Chad said. “No one did anything. You want to know what my dad said? ‘Why should we celebrate the day you were born?’ ”

“That sucks,” said Marshall.

“That’s still no reason to hate Marshall!” Tamaya insisted.

“I’m not saying it is,” said Chad. “I’m just trying to explain, that’s all. I

figure I owe you that.”

Tamaya was trying to make sense out of Chad’s logic, when her foot kicked something hard. This time she couldn’t suppress the pain. She cried out as she fell onto the leaf-covered ground.

Marshall and Chad stood over her. “Are you all right?”

Her foot throbbed. She hoped she hadn’t broken anything. “Man, oh, man,” she said as she winced in pain. She took a couple of breaths, and the pain subsided a little bit. “It’s just so dark, I can’t see where I’m stepping!”

“What are you talking about?” asked Marshall. “The sun’s out. There’s plenty of light.”

Tamaya closed her eyes. When she opened them a second later, the world had gone completely dark.