

the nickname “DOD Almighty.” The teachers whisper it, invariably with respect and admiration, but only among themselves. Despite their efforts to hide it from her, she knows. Nothing escapes her attention here.

The newscast ends and the programming shifts to music. Miss O’Donnell switches off the radio, and basks in the silence. Out in the hallways, the doors are closed, as they always are when classes are in session. It is so quiet here, someone entering might think it to be a vacation day. Closed doors and absolute silence are two of her many regulations. This is her school, and those are her rules.

A door opening breaks the peace. An eleven-year-old boy exits his fourth-grade classroom, relying on the wall for support. His skin and face shine, practically glow, and his hair is an unusual brownish yellow color, like a perfectly drawn choirboy on a Christmas card. His body is long and gangly, and he has the unmistakable loping stride characteristic of muscular dystrophy.

The journey from classroom to restroom is a long one for David, and today he finds it even more trying. Throwing one leg in front of the other and sliding his hand along the wall, he persists until finally he arrives at the bathroom. The door feels heavier than usual but he wrests his way inside. He balances against the sink to rest.

Glancing up, he catches his reflection in the mirror. Beads of perspiration form on his forehead and trickle down his cheeks. He’d like to reach up and wipe them away, but he’s afraid to let go of the sink. Instead, he lowers his head and watches the droplets plop into the bowl, winding around on the smooth surface until they disappear down the polished chrome drain.

David inhales, then makes his way along the row of sinks, using them for support. He stumbles and catches himself, avoiding a disastrous fall, but he’s unable to regain his

balance. His heart pounds as he struggles to stand upright, pushing forcefully against the porcelain surface.

Something in his body has changed, but he refuses to give in to it. Holding himself up with his arms, he waits for the muscles in his legs to respond, as they always have before. Arms quivering, he becomes even more determined. When the quivering intensifies into spasms, David feels his control slipping swiftly away, and despite intense effort, his arms and legs give out. He collapses to the floor and lies there exhausted, breathing labored, too tired to move. His clothes are damp from the prolonged exertion. They cling sticky and heavy to his skin.

David isn't frightened. He knew someday this would happen. The doctors made it clear he would eventually lose the ability to walk without assistance, and sometime after, the ability to walk altogether. He just hadn't expected it so soon. He hadn't expected it today.

Lying with his cheek to the floor, he contemplates the perfectly straight lines of shiny tiles, and he's grateful Mr. Merrick keeps it so clean. The cold surface feels good on his skin, cooling his body and relaxing him.

Inevitably, energy returns. He rolls to his stomach, spreads his legs apart, and pushes himself up onto his hands and feet. He developed this trick as a way to stand up, but this time he falls. He makes another attempt, then another, and is forced by exhaustion to rest. It's now very clear—he is not going to stand, yet he has to get back to the classroom for help.

David struggles to the exit and heaves his body into a sitting position. He grabs the handle and opens the door, just enough to slip his hand around its edge. He pushes away as forcefully as he can, and falls over onto his side. The door swings back and closes on his body, trapping him.

He waits for his breathing to ease back to normal. Gathering his strength, David drags his legs free. Once in the hall, he rests