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LOOKING FOR ALASKA

JOHN GREEN



HarperCollins Children's Books

One Hundred and Thirty-six Days Before

The week before I left my family and Florida and the rest of my minor life to go to boarding school in Alabama, my mother insisted on throwing me a going-away party. To say that I had low expectations would be to underestimate the matter dramatically. Although I was more or less forced to invite all my "school friends", i.e. the ragtag bunch of drama people and English geeks I sat with by social necessity in the cavernous cafeteria of my public school, I knew they wouldn't come. Still, my mother persevered, awash in the delusion that I had kept my popularity secret from her all these years. She cooked a small mountain of artichoke dip. She festooned our living room in green and yellow streamers, the colours of my new school. She bought two dozen champagne poppers and placed them around the edge of our coffee table.

And when that final Friday came, when my packing was mostly done, she sat with my dad and me on the living-room couch at 4.56 p.m. and patiently awaited the arrival of the Goodbye to Miles cavalry. Said cavalry consisted of exactly two people: Marie Lawson, a tiny blonde with rectangular glasses, and her chunky (to put it charitably) boyfriend Will.

"Hey, Miles," Marie said as she sat down.

"Hey," I said.

"How was your summer?" Will asked.

"OK. Yours?"

"Good. We did *Jesus Christ Superstar*. I helped with the sets. Marie did lights," said Will.

"That's cool." I nodded knowingly, and that about exhausted our conversational topics. I might have asked a question about *Jesus Christ Superstar*, except (1) I didn't know what it was and (2) I didn't care to learn, and (3) I never really excelled at small talk. My mom, however, can talk small for hours, and so she extended the awkwardness by asking them about their rehearsal schedule, and how the show had gone, and whether it was a success.

"I guess it was," Marie said. "A lot of people came, I guess." Marie was the sort of person to guess a lot.

Finally, Will said, "Well, we just dropped by to say goodbye. I've got to get Marie home by six. Have fun at boarding school, Miles."

"Thanks," I answered, relieved. The only thing worse than having a party that no one attends is having a party attended only by two vastly, deeply uninteresting people.

They left, and so I sat with my parents and stared at the blank TV and wanted to turn it on, but knew I shouldn't. I could feel them both looking at me, waiting for me to burst into tears or something, as if I hadn't known all along that it would go precisely like this. But I *had* known. I could feel their pity as they scooped artichoke dip with chips intended for my imaginary friends, but they needed pity more than I did: I wasn't disappointed. My expectations had been met.

"Is this why you want to leave, Miles?" Mom asked.

I mulled it over for a moment, careful not to look at her. "Uh, no," I said.

"Well, why then?" she asked. This was not the first time she

had posed the question. Mom was not particularly keen on letting me go to boarding school and had made no secret of it.

"Because of me?" my dad asked. He had attended Culver Creek, the same boarding school to which I was headed, as had both of his brothers and all of their kids. I think he liked the idea of me following in his footsteps. My uncles had told me stories about how famous my dad had been on campus for having simultaneously raised hell and aced all his classes. That sounded like a better life than the one I had in Florida. But no, it wasn't because of Dad. Not exactly.

"Hold on," I said. I went into Dad's study and found his biography of François Rabelais. I liked reading biographies of writers, even if (as was the case with Monsieur Rabelais) I'd never read any of their actual writing. I flipped to the back and found the highlighted quote ("NEVER USE A HIGHLIGHTER IN MY BOOKS," my dad had told me a thousand times. But how else are you supposed to find what you're looking for?).

"So this guy," I said, standing in the doorway of the living room, "François Rabelais. He was this poet. And his last words were, 'I go to seek a Great Perhaps.' That's why I'm going. So I don't have to wait until I die to start seeking a Great Perhaps."

And that quieted them. I was after a Great Perhaps, and they knew as well as I did that I wasn't going to find it with the likes of Will and Marie. I sat back down on the couch, between my mom and my dad, and my dad put his arm around me and we stayed there like that, quiet on the couch together, for a long time, until it seemed OK to turn on the TV, and then we ate

artichoke dip for dinner and watched the History Channel and as going-away parties go, it certainly could have been worse.

One Hundred and Twenty-eight Days Before

Florida was plenty hot, certainly, and humid too. Hot enough that your clothes stuck to you like Scotch tape, and sweat dripped like tears from your forehead into your eyes. But it was only hot outside, and generally I only went outside to walk from one air-conditioned location to another.

This did not prepare me for the unique sort of heat that one encounters fifteen miles south of Birmingham, Alabama, at Culver Creek Preparatory School. My parents' SUV was parked in the grass just a few feet outside my dorm room, Room 43. But each time I took those few steps to and from the car to unload what now seemed like far too much stuff, the sun burnt through my clothes and into my skin with a vicious ferocity that made me genuinely fear hellfire.

Between Mom and Dad and me, it only took a few minutes to unload the car, but my un-air-conditioned dorm room, although blessedly out of the sunshine, was only modestly cooler. The room surprised me: I'd pictured plush carpet, wood-panelled walls, Victorian furniture. Aside from one luxury – a private bathroom – I got a box. With cinderblock walls coated thick with layers of white paint and a green-and-white chequered linoleum floor, the place looked more like a hospital than the dorm room of my fantasies. A bunk bed of unfinished wood with vinyl mattresses was pushed against the room's back window. The

desks and dressers and bookshelves were all attached to the walls in order to prevent creative floor planning. *And no air-conditioning.*

I sat on the lower bunk while Mom opened the trunk, grabbed a stack of the biographies my dad had agreed to part with and placed them on the bookshelves.

"I can unpack, Mom," I said. My dad stood. He was ready to go.

"Let me at least make your bed," Mom said.

"No, really. I can do it. It's OK." Because you simply cannot draw these things out for ever. At some point, you just pull off the Band-Aid and it hurts, but then it's over and you're relieved.

"God, we'll miss you," Mom said suddenly, stepping through the minefield of suitcases to get to the bed. I stood and hugged her. My dad walked over too, and we formed a sort of huddle. It was too hot, and we were too sweaty, for the hug to last terribly long. I knew I ought to cry, but I'd lived with my parents for sixteen years and a trial separation seemed overdue.

"Don't worry," I smiled. "I's a-gonna learn how t'talk right Southern." Mom laughed.

"Don't do anything stupid," my dad said.

"OK."

"No drugs. No drinking. No cigarettes." As an alumnus of Culver Creek, he had done the things I had only heard about: the secret parties, streaking through hayfields (he always whined about how it was all boys back then), drugs, drinking and cigarettes. It had taken him a while to kick smoking, but his bad-ass days were now well behind him.

"I love you," they both blurted out simultaneously. It needed

to be said, but the words made the whole thing horribly uncomfortable, like watching your grandparents kiss.

"I love you too. I'll call every Sunday." Our rooms had no phone lines, but my parents had requested I be placed in a room near one of Culver Creek's five payphones.

They hugged me again – Mom, then Dad – and it was over. Out the back window, I watched them drive the winding road off campus. I should have felt a gooey, sentimental sadness perhaps. But mostly I just wanted to cool off, so I grabbed one of the desk chairs and sat down outside my door in the shade of the overhanging eaves, waiting for a breeze that never arrived. The air outside sat as still and oppressive as the air inside. I stared out over my new digs: six one-storey buildings, each with sixteen dorm rooms, were arranged in a hexagram around a large circle of grass. It looked like an oversized old motel. Everywhere, boys and girls hugged and smiled and walked together. I vaguely hoped that someone would come up and talk to me. I imagined the conversation:

"Hey. Is this your first year?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I'm from Florida."

"That's cool. So you're used to the heat."

"I wouldn't be used to this heat if I were from Hades," I'd joke. I'd make a good first impression. *Oh, he's funny. That guy Miles is a riot.*

That didn't happen, of course. Things never happened like I imagined them.

Bored, I went back inside, took off my shirt, lay down on the heat-soaked vinyl of the lower bunk mattress and closed my

eyes. I'd never been born again with the baptism and weeping and all that, but it couldn't feel much better than being born again as a guy with no known past. I thought of the people I'd read about – John F Kennedy, James Joyce, Humphrey Bogart – who went to boarding school, and their adventures; Kennedy, for example, loved pranks. I thought of the Great Perhaps and the things that might happen and the people I might meet and who my roommate might be (I'd gotten a letter a few weeks before that gave me his name, Chip Martin, but no other information). Whoever Chip Martin was, I hoped to God he would bring an arsenal of high-powered fans, because I hadn't packed even one and I could already feel my sweat pooling on the vinyl mattress, which disgusted me so much that I stopped thinking and got off my ass to find a towel to wipe up the sweat with. And then I thought, *Well, before the adventure comes the unpacking.*

I managed to tape a map of the world to the wall and get most of my clothes into drawers before I noticed that the hot, moist air made even the walls sweat, and I decided that now was not the time for manual labour. Now was the time for a magnificently cold shower.

The small bathroom contained a huge, full-length mirror behind the door and so I could not escape the reflection of my naked self as I leaned in to turn on the shower faucet. My skinniness always surprised me: my thin arms didn't seem to get much bigger as they moved from wrist to shoulder, my chest lacked any hint of either fat or muscle, and I felt embarrassed and wondered if something could be done about the mirror. I pulled open the plain white shower curtain and ducked into the stall.

Unfortunately, the shower seemed to have been designed for someone approximately three feet, seven inches tall, so the cold water hit my lower ribcage – with all the force of a dripping faucet. To wet my sweat-soaked face, I had to spread my legs and squat significantly. Surely, John F Kennedy (who was six feet tall according to his biography, my height exactly) did not have to *squat* at *his* boarding school. No, this was a different beast entirely, and as the dribbling shower slowly soaked my body, I wondered whether I could find a Great Perhaps here at all or whether I had made a grand miscalculation.

When I opened the bathroom door after my shower, a towel wrapped around my waist, I saw a short, muscular guy with a shock of brown hair. He was hauling a gigantic army-green duffel bag through the door of my room. He stood five feet and nothing, but was well-built, like a scale model of Adonis, and with him arrived the stink of stale cigarette smoke. *Great*, I thought. *I'm meeting my roommate naked*. He heaved the duffel into the room, closed the door and walked over to me.

"I'm Chip Martin," he announced in a deep voice, the voice of a radio DJ. Before I could respond, he added, "I'd shake your hand, but I think you should hold on damn tight to that towel till you can get some clothes on."

I laughed and nodded my head at him (that's cool, right? the nod?) and said, "I'm Miles Halter. Nice to meet you."

"Miles as in 'to go before I sleep?'" he asked me.

"Huh?"

"It's a Robert Frost poem. You've never read him?"

I shook my head no.

"Consider yourself lucky." He smiled.

I grabbed some clean underwear, a pair of blue Adidas soccer shorts and a white T-shirt, mumbled that I'd be back in a second and ducked back into the bathroom. So much for a good first impression.

"So where are your parents?" I asked from the bathroom.

"My parents? The father's in California right now. Maybe sitting in his La-Z-Boy. Maybe driving his truck. Either way, he's drinking. My mother is probably just now turning off campus."

"Oh," I said, dressed now, not sure how to respond to such personal information. I shouldn't have asked, I guess, if I didn't want to know.

Chip grabbed some sheets and tossed them on to the top bunk. "I'm a top bunk man. Hope that doesn't bother you."

"Uh, no. Whatever is fine."

"I see you've decorated the place," he said, gesturing towards the world map. "I like it."

And then he started naming countries. He spoke in a monotone, as if he'd done it a thousand times before.

Afghanistan.

Albania.

Algeria.

American Samoa.

Andorra.

And so on. He got through the A's before looking up and noticing my incredulous stare.

"I could do the rest, but it'd probably bore you. Something I learned over the summer. God, you can't imagine how boring

New Hope, Alabama, is in the summertime. Like watching soybeans grow. Where are you from, by the way?"

"Florida," I said.

"Never been."

"That's pretty amazing, the countries thing," I said.

"Yeah, everybody's got a talent. I can memorise things. And you can...?"

"Um, I know a lot of people's last words." It was an indulgence, learning last words. Other people had chocolate; I had dying declarations.

"Example?"

"I like Henrik Ibsen's. He was a playwright." I knew a lot about Ibsen, but I'd never read any of his plays. I didn't like reading plays. I liked reading biographies.

"Yeah, I know who he was," said Chip.

"Right, well, he'd been sick for a while and his nurse said to him, 'You seem to be feeling better this morning,' and Ibsen looked at her and said, 'On the contrary,' and then he died."

Chip laughed. "That's morbid. But I like it."

He told me he was in his third year at Culver Creek. He had started in ninth grade, the first year at the school, and was now a junior like me. A scholarship kid, he said. Got a full ride. He'd heard it was the best school in Alabama, so he wrote his application essay about how he wanted to go to a school where he could read long books. The problem, he said in the essay, was that his dad would always hit him with the books in his house, so Chip kept his books short and paperback for his own safety. His parents got divorced his sophomore year. He liked "the Creek", as

he called it, but, "You have to be careful here, with students and with teachers. And I do hate being careful," he smirked. I hated being careful too – or wanted to, at least.

He told me this while ripping through his duffel bag, throwing clothes into drawers with reckless abandon. Chip did not believe in having a sock drawer or a T-shirt drawer. He believed that all drawers were created equal and filled each with whatever fit. My mother would have died.

As soon as he finished "unpacking", Chip hit me roughly on the shoulder, said, "I hope you're stronger than you look," and walked out the door, leaving it open behind him. He peeked his head back in a few seconds later and saw me standing still. "Well, come on, Miles To Go Halter. We got shit to do."

We made our way to the TV room, which according to Chip contained the only cable TV on campus. Over the summer, it served as a storage unit. Packed nearly to the ceiling with couches, fridges and rolled-up carpets, the TV room undulated with kids trying to find and haul away their stuff. Chip said hello to a few people, but didn't introduce me. As he wandered through the couch-stocked maze, I stood near the door, trying my best not to block pairs of roommates as they manoeuvred furniture through the narrow front door.

It took ten minutes for Chip to find his stuff, and an hour more for us to make four trips back and forth across the dorm circle between the TV room and Room 43. By the end, I wanted to crawl into Chip's minifridge and sleep for a thousand years, but Chip seemed immune to both fatigue and heatstroke. I sat down on his couch.