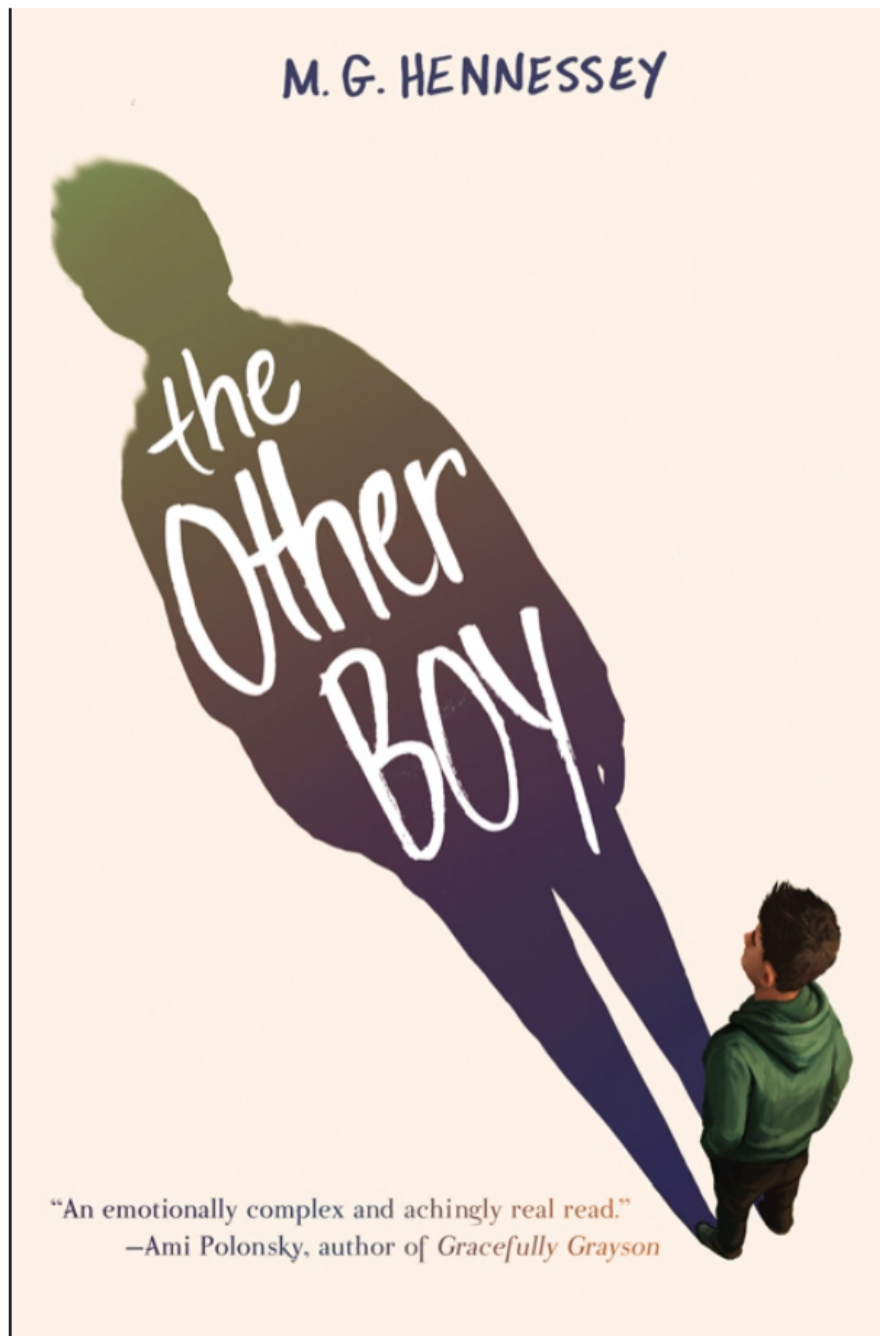


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“All right.” Briskly, she closed the folder, adjusted her glasses, and looked at my parents. “Why don’t you two step out for a minute while I do a quick exam?”

Dad looked disgruntled, but Mom was already gathering up her purse. After they left, Dr. Anne did the normal routine: checking my eyes and ears, pressing her fingers along my stomach and back. The whole time, she asked questions. “Still no side effects from the blocker?”

“Not really,” I said. When I was nine, I’d started getting implants of a hormone blocker in my arm. Just a headache every once in a while.”

She nodded and flipped open the chart again. “And we put in the last one a year ago, so we’ll switch that out for you today. So how have you been feeling lately?”

“Fine.”

“No bad thoughts?” she asked, flipping over my arms to examine them.

“No, I’m good,” I assured her. “Really.”

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“Great.” Dr. Anne gave me a real smile then, showing all her teeth. “I think maybe it’s time to decide whether to start the testosterone.”

“Okay,” I said, experiencing a thrill of excitement. This was the main reason we were here. It was why I’d been willing to miss such an important baseball game.

She patted my leg. “All right. Let’s call your parents back in.”

I kind of tuned out while Dr. Anne ran through the medical stuff. Dad nodded along, while Mom just looked bored and a little annoyed; we’d talked about all this before.

But then Dr. Anne got to the part about starting testosterone shots. “Most of the other boys Shane’s age will be kicking into puberty high gear over the next year,” she explained. “Ideally, it would be great if he could develop along with them.”

“Sure, sure,” Dad said, but I wondered if any of this was registering. Dad had a bad habit of acting like he was listening when he really wasn’t.

“There are drawbacks, of course.” Dr. Anne’s eyes slid across to my mother, who suddenly looked worried.

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Dad's forehead wrinkled. "What kind of drawbacks?"

Dr. Anne gave him a patient smile. "Basically, so far the hormone blockers have prevented Shane from going through female puberty. But once we add testosterone to the mix, he'll develop as a man. His voice will deepen, he'll get an Adam's apple and more body and facial hair, he'll be more muscular."

That all sounded great to me. I could hardly wait to start shaving; heck, I might even grow a mustache.

"Okay," Dad said slowly. "But if he stops taking the shots, that's reversible too, right?"

"Not entirely," Dr. Anne said. I could tell she was choosing her words carefully. "Some of the changes will be permanent. Others could be reversed surgically, or they'll just go away. But Shane will have skipped female puberty, which means he most likely won't be able to have children naturally."

There was a long moment of silence. I could see Dad processing this, and I didn't like the look on his face. "It's cool," I interjected. "Mom and me have already talked about it—"

"Wait," Dad said, holding up a hand. "You're telling me she'll never be able to have kids?"

"He," Mom growled. It drove her crazy when he used the wrong pronouns. Honestly, it drove me crazy, too, but in a different way. Kind of an all-the-air-sucked-out-of-the-room way.

"Not naturally, no," Dr. Anne said calmly. "And that's a serious decision."

"I'm fine with it," I said hurriedly. "Really, I—"

"You're twelve," Dad said. "You don't know what you want."

I stared at my sneakers, feeling sick. This all seemed to be spinning out of control, and there wasn't anything I could do to stop it.

"So we're supposed to decide this today?" Dad said incredulously. "It just seems really fast."

"We've been discussing it for a *long time* now," Mom said.

The way she said *long time* made it pretty clear what she meant, and she wasn't wrong. If Dad had ever come to a doctor's appointment before, this wouldn't be such a surprise.

Dr. Anne looked uncomfortable. "We don't have to decide anything today, of course. Shane can come back in six months, or a year."

"I think that would be best." Dad sat back, looking relieved.

"No!"

My parents looked at me with surprise, as if they'd forgotten I was in the room.

"Don't you get it? All the other boys in my class are going to be changing. The girls already have. And I'll still look like a little kid." Tears welled up in my eyes. "I don't want to be left behind."

"Shane, everyone develops at different rates. If we don't start today, it's not the end of the world," Dr. Anne said soothingly.

But it was. I'd been looking forward to this appointment for months. After brushing my teeth at night, I'd stand in front of the mirror and puff my chest out, imagining how it would look once I started testosterone. I'd flex my puny biceps and picture them doubling in size. I'd practice deepening my voice until it almost sounded like Dad's.

And now, it was a wasted trip. Even worse, my team was probably losing without me, which meant our season would be over. And it was all my fault.

I stared down at the floor. One of the tiles was chipped. I focused hard on that, trying not to cry.

"Can we have a minute?" Mom asked in a strained voice.

"Of course." Glancing at her watch, Dr. Anne said, "Why don't I come back after checking on another patient?"

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There was a heavy silence after the door closed behind her. Dad was looking everywhere but at us. Mom was glaring at him.

"I can't believe you," Mom finally said.

I stiffened. They had a rule about not fighting in front of me, but I got the sense that was about to be broken.

"This just caught me off guard." Dad ran a hand down his face. His eyes settled on me, and he tried to smile. "I guess I should've come to more appointments, huh?"

I shrugged. *Probably. Too late now.*

"This is the only reason we came up this weekend," Mom said, the anger plain in her voice.

"I don't see why waiting is such a big deal," Dad said defensively. "The doctor doesn't seem to think so."

"I do," I muttered.

"Shane, honey, I've been on board with all the rest of it. The **blockers** and . . . whatever." He waved his hand vaguely. "But this . . . I mean, it's so permanent."

Exactly, I thought. This would permanently make me who I was supposed to be all along.

"Well, we both have to agree," Mom said, "since we share legal custody."

Dad exhaled hard. He looked old, and tired, and in spite of everything I felt a pang of sympathy. He was trying, but this was all just too complicated for him sometimes.

Still, when he said, "I can't decide this today. Sorry," something withered inside me. Without looking at us he left, shutting the door behind him.

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promised to try and convince Dad, but I didn't hold out much hope. I'd probably be on **blockers** until I was eighteen and legally old enough to decide for myself. Imagining six more years of this made me want to scream.

Afternoon sunlight flooded in, casting everything in a bright yellow glow. Stella's cat was asleep on a perch in the window. I rubbed his head while I stared out across the rooftops. A fog bank was descending from Twin Peaks, like an ominous cloud of white gas out of a horror movie, creeping across the city and smothering it block by block. Soon the house would be enveloped, and I'd barely be able to see across the street.

Which would match my mood, anyway. My phone buzzed and I dug it out of my pocket. There were two texts from Josh. The first read, **Dude, we won!!! 4-2.**

I should've been stoked about that—winning meant we'd go to regionals in a couple of weeks. But instead, I felt resentful that they'd been able to win without me. The next text said, **Call me. It wuz totally awesome.**

I tossed the phone on the dresser, not in the mood to talk to anyone. Instead, I lay down on the bed and glared at the ceiling. I'd never been so angry with my dad before. First, he surprised me with his new fiancée, then he completely destroyed something I'd been looking forward to for months.

I punched the pillow hard. If he didn't want a son, fine. Turned out I didn't really want a dad anymore, either.

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I was pretty bleary at school the next day, because Dad and I stayed up late eating junk food and watching a movie about alien robots. But I felt about a million times better. On the phone last night, Mom promised to talk to Dr. Anne about the **testosterone**. She said we might even be able to get it in a day or so.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. Dr. Anne had said the changes might take time: it would be just like regular puberty, and everyone went through it at different rates. But I was kind of hoping I'd at least start growing chest hair, like Dad.

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The next morning I examined myself in the mirror, lifting my arms and flexing my biceps. Then I leaned in to check if I'd sprouted a mustache yet.

Nothing, which was a little disappointing. Mom had given me the first shot as soon as we got back from the drugstore. I'd never liked needles, but this one was pretty small and hadn't hurt much. And heck, I'd do pretty much anything for chest hair.

When Dr. Anne had explained over Skype how testosterone worked, she'd warned that it would take time to notice any changes. I'd jokingly asked if doubling up on the shots would make it go faster; she'd laughed, but then got really serious about how bad things could happen. "Just stick to the dosage, Shane," she'd said. "Trust me, it'll all come in time."

Easy for her to say—she wasn't in junior high.

At least *something* was happening, even if I couldn't see it yet. I pulled on a shirt and took the stairs two at a time. Mom was in the kitchen, holding her head in both hands. When she saw me, she smiled weakly. "How are you feeling, honey?"

"Fine, Mom. Normal."

"Good."

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But Dad explained that we don't all have the same dream."

"That was cool of him," I offered.

"Oh, my parents are great," Madeline said. "Even though they don't totally get me, they're always on my side." She laughed and added, "You should see my mom's face when we go shopping. She hates all the clothes I like. But she never says anything."

"Cool," I said again, thinking about my dad. Even though he'd agreed to the testosterone, it was pretty obvious he still hoped that one day I'd wake up and want to be a girl. Most people weren't lucky enough to have both parents on their side all the time. It explained why Madeline never seemed to care what people thought about her. I wished I could feel that way.

Halfway through the movie, there was a knock at the door. Madeline's dad stuck his head in and said, "Shane's mom is here."

In the hallway, I made a point of shaking both their hands and thanking them for having me over. Her parents seemed a lot more relaxed. I said, "Bye, Madeline. See you."

"Bye." Her cheeks were flushed again, and she looked happy; she bounced a little on the balls of her feet and waved as we drove away.

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“Definitely.” Alejandra was a few inches taller than me now. Her hair was longer, and her face had thinned out. She was also more . . . developed.

Catching me looking at her chest, she laughed and said, “Yup, these are new too. Thanks, **estrogen!**”

“Um . . . congratulations?” I muttered, slumping down in the chair and secretly wishing the floor would swallow me up. I felt a sudden pang for the elementary group. Playing tag and swinging across monkey bars sounded pretty good right about now.

“Thanks.” Alejandra laughed again, but not unkindly. Sizing me up, she asked, “So which grade are you in now?”

“Sixth.”

“Yeah? Are you on the T yet?”

“Just started,” I confessed.

She nodded her head approvingly. “You’ll see. Big changes coming soon.”

“I hope so,” I muttered.

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mom agreed to let me **transition** in fifth grade. So I came back from Christmas break wearing the skirt uniform to school instead of the pants. People I thought were my friends called me names. I got beat up every day, and when I told the teachers, they said that was God’s way of punishing me.”

“Seriously?” I said, dumbfounded. “How is that legal?”

She shrugged. “Catholic school. But you said your principal was cool?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Except he didn’t know what to say, really.”

She nodded knowingly. “People bend over backward to be nice, acting like you’re all fragile or something. They don’t realize it makes you feel like more of a freak.”

“Totally,” I said. “You should’ve heard my coach today. He actually compared me to a kangaroo.”

“What?” Alejandra burst out laughing. “You’re kidding!”

“Nope.” I shook my head, unable to suppress a grin. “He said he didn’t care if I was a girl, a boy, or a kangaroo.”

Alejandra leaned in again. “You should show up tomorrow in a kangaroo costume!”

I laughed. “Yeah, that would be hilarious.”