Presently, Clyde is the Champion tombstone-jumper. It was I before Clyde joined our group, but he is such a wonder to watch I am not unhappy to relinquish my title. Last night Clyde cleared the three and a half foot Kowolski tombstone. He says the secret is wanting it badly enough. Let all who have ears, hear. For Clyde, desire is not a feeling or a thought, but a thing you can touch, as palpable as flesh. He imagines his want as a second, secret heart, lodged deep in the belly. He gets a running start, and just as his feet leave the earth, this second heart shudders, propelling him heavenward. There is no other way to say it: I have seen a person fly. Clyde is an angel, fallen by mistake into this land of Cain.

I believe we are all here by mistake.

Since we met in sophomore English, it has been Nicko, Perry, Sheila and me, hanging around the graveyard, and now Clyde, too. At school and elsewhere, people called us Freaks, so we took that name and made it Holy. The ties that bind us feel as ancient as the dirt that keeps these corpses warm.

During the day the graveyard hosts mourners and tourists, but at night it belongs solely to us. Our graveyard sprawls over dozens of acres. It goes where it wants to go. It tells no one’s secrets. We speak quietly here, or not at all. It’s exactly our kind of place, a second, secret home.

It is dangerous to be different in this town. Even the population bows to rigidity: there are exactly one thousand people, and that Number never changes. When one arrives, another dies. The Freaks didn’t believe my theory, but when Clyde moved here with his mom, we found two fresh graves.

In another time and place, no one would consider Clyde Freakish. Girls love his shaggy black hair and dark complexion,
and if he cared to, he could be a star athlete. But in this town his old-mannish name is enough to ruin him, and he arrived midway through senior year, which is bad news for anyone. He and his mom have spent the last few years alternately running away from and reuniting with his dad—he’s an ex–Green Beret, still shell-shocked from Vietnam, and with a psych history to boot. When he’s not on his meds, Clyde’s dad is delusional, violent, in and out of jail. I was at Clyde’s house three days ago when his mom received a letter, full of apologies and promises. She hugged Clyde and me both, pressed us so hard I could feel her ribs. “Boys, what can I say?” she said, tears muddying her voice. “When he’s good, he’s so very, very good.” We knew he’d be back. Never mind that when they first arrived, Clyde and his mom had three black eyes between them.

Perry is the only black kid in our school. Once there were more, but they have followed all points of the compass away from this so-called Heartland. Perry is not good at basketball or track, though the coaches pester him to play. He speaks fluent Spanish and Italian, which he taught himself, and made a perfect score on his SATs. A month after a drunk driver crossed the double yellow line and killed Perry’s brother, his parents announced that they had been called as prophets to a dying world. Now they hold worship services in their living room. The congregation prays for Perry—they say he is puffed up with false knowledge, too big for his britches. His parents believe that universities are the Devil’s training ground and have forbidden him from going. When they discover that Perry won a scholarship and will be my roommate in the fall, he’s sure to be disowned.

Sheila is overweight and what my parents call “slow.” They say the word as if it is a sexually transmitted disease. Sheila is nearly twenty and still in high school, but she is working hard to be delivered with us in May. She does not want to be left behind, and we refuse to let her. She lives in a trailer with five younger sisters. She shares a bed with two of them. Her mom is a drunk. Her dad does things to her. She has a history of running away. Perry
and Sheila are sometimes a couple, sometimes not, but we all take
turns holding Sheila while she cries. We are glad to help. When
it is my turn I stroke Sheila’s hair—it is silken and white-blonde,
like nothing you’ve ever seen.

Nicko is poor and lost an arm in a dirt bike accident. He has
not seen his mother since he was six, when she flipped the family
the bird and roared away on the back of some guy’s Harley. Her
long blonde braid whipped goodbye in the wind. When you walk
in Nicko’s four-room house—which I have been allowed to do
only once—you step on trash or kick it to the side. We Freaks
have become accustomed to Nicko’s scent. When my parents are
away I do his laundry at my house. Afterwards Nicko can’t stop
sniffing his shirt. He says he smells like money.

I look and smell and talk differently from the other Freaks. All
the elements are there to make me normal. My mother is a bank
vice-president; my dad is an elementary school principal. They
are both Sunday school teachers. We have a big house; I wear nice
clothes. I am different because of The Habits. There are rituals
that must be done. The Number 214 is special. The Freaks wait
patiently when I am seized with the need to count to 214; they
do not laugh when my watch says 2:14 a.m. and I have to touch
a tombstone with the date February 14th. There are four such
tombstones—we Freaks scouted them out and engraved them
in our minds. At ten after two we move without speaking to the
closest one.

A couple of weeks ago, right in the middle of tombstone-
jumping, the urge to walk around a mausoleum 214 times attacked
me. The Habits had never interrupted a game, had never arrived
without cause, and I was sure it meant I was lost. I bowed to their
command and began walking and crying, crying and walking.
The Freaks were as upset as I was. It was Sheila who saved me.
“Hey,” she said. “What if you break the Number up? What if you
do it two times, then fourteen?” Something hidden in my brain
went soft and said Yes—even then I knew it was a one-time deal.
The Freaks joined me. We walked around quicker each time, till we were sprinting. We fell down dizzy and laughing.

A recurring nightmare wakes me up: I must count each beat of my friends’ hearts—if I stop they will die. I am not entirely convinced it is only a dream.

My parents know something is off, that I am not Optimally Well-Adjusted like the neighbors’ kids, but they do not know about The Habits. Here is a curious thing: sometimes I am as normal as the next guy. Sometimes The Habits disappear completely. If I’m sufficiently distracted, I can even forget that I am different. Nicko and Perry invented tombstone-jumping just for me: the game keeps my mind occupied. The Habits get worse when I’m stressed. When Sheila disappeared for a week, the thought popped into my head that I had killed her. The part of my mind that is like other people’s knew that I hadn’t—but then The Habits reminded me never to assume. What if, for instance, I had blacked out? I had to knock my head against the wall 214 times to atone, and 214 more to bring Sheila back from the dead. The Habits are powerful, as mighty as my parents say Prayer is. I am not convinced. They couldn’t alter reality, or time. The secret is wanting something badly enough.

Tonight Clyde wants to repeat the Kowolski jump. As soon as Perry shows, we will begin. Perry is the Scorekeeper. In his back pocket, he carries a notepad with a stubby pencil pushed through its spiral. He keeps score for individual nights, as well as weekly. I am still winning for the weekly, even though the coveted Kowolski jump gave Clyde a hundred points and automatically earned him the title of Champion for two days, fourteen hours. I am winning for the long run because I am wiry and double-jointed and am the best at Tricks. I can jump a stone and land squarely on the flat footstone every time—that’s 20 extra points. If you do anything fancy while you’re in the air—spinning, reciting an entire limerick, doing a herky jump or a flip—it’s extra. I can’t jump as high as Clyde, or as far as Nicko, nor can I sing choruses in Spanish, like Perry, but I am the only one who can pull off an
airborne split. Every time, the Freaks flail their arms, pump their fists, miming wild cheers, as if they’ve never seen this Trick before. Sheila is the Tricks Judge and her word is final. She sometimes gives 25 points for a Trick and 50 for the same one the next night, but we would not think of complaining.

We are at the memorial for those who donated their bodies to science, our regular meeting place. Cold banners of wind rush from the Northern Plains, sending dead leaves skipping across our consecrated ground. I try to stamp down a cartwheeling cigarette box, but it is too quick. We huddle in a tight circle, draw our hooded black sweatshirts tighter. Across from me Clyde dances with cold and nerves—he never settles down until we’re in the darker, more secluded corners of the graveyard. Nicko is to my left; the stump of his arm presses into my shoulder. Once, he let me see it. I expected a tiny, handless arm, or a smooth, flesh-colored bump, but what I discovered was a misshapen mound, angry red and infected-looking, like a new wound. The Numbers hustled forward and I counted until Nicko could convince me that it didn’t hurt at all. One day, he assured me, he’d get it fixed up right. My right side from shoulder to calf touches Sheila’s left. When she shifts I detect a faint odor of cigarettes and BO and some sort of flowery deodorant. It is not unpleasant. Before I can stop it, a Bad Thought surfaces: I am pleased that Perry is late and hope that he stays home tonight. Bad Thoughts call for atonement, but I try and stave off The Habits by concentrating on the roiling cloud of insects swarming a security light’s football-sized bulb. I strain to discern each individual whine and buzz.

Perry emerges from a stand of trees. Something flashes in his hands.

“Little gift from Mama,” he whispers.

We risk moving into the security light’s orangey-pink glow to see what it is. The flashing thing is tin foil. Perry removes it to reveal a paper plate loaded with squares of cake. There is white icing, pieces of letters, sugary pastel flowers that I already feel crunching then melting in our mouths.
“Tina’s birthday,” Perry explains. “Lucky number 7.”

We forget ourselves, we whoop and holler. We are happy about the cake, of course, but deeply impressed that Perry has made off with so much. We know his mother didn’t really send it. We know his mother is really in bed, where all our parents are at this hour. We don’t want to think about what Perry’s parents would do if they knew their son had snuck out of the house, if they knew Perry was with us. None of our parents know about the Freaks. They do not know about the graveyard. We are as good at keeping secrets as the dead.

“Let’s take it to the south side and have a picnic,” Clyde suggests.

We agree that it is a good idea. The south side is hidden, flanked by hills and abutting a wooded area. We would like to be buried there. People would have to make a special effort to come and see us. But for now, it is an excellent place for a nighttime picnic. It is the newest section, with few tombstones. We will sit in a circle on an open stretch of grass. When the wind blows, weeping willows will brush our bodies like kind fingers and stars will wink at us through the branches.

When we pass the Towering Jesus, which marks the area where twenty-three Sisters are buried, all named Mary Benedicta, Nicko stops. “Shh,” he says. He clamps his wallet chain to his thigh to hush its trilling.

We drift off the paved pathway and onto the grass, ready to hide. Our footprints melt the skim of the year’s last frost—already, daffodils sprout yellow fences around many tombstones.

“Company?” asks Perry. He pinches the tin foil tightly around the paper plate’s edges.

“There,” whispers Nicko. “Close to the south gate. I saw something move.”

It is not the first time we have encountered others in the graveyard. When this happens we become invisible. Unseen, we ride the wind to secret places and wait out the intruders. Cops on spook duty are easiest to avoid: you can hear their cruisers
for miles, and the rare occasion one is on foot he announces himself with a quavering flashlight. Occasionally there are others: pranksters, vandals, slumber party girls eager for a scare, and what Sheila dreamily calls “lovers.” I feel silly using the word—it sounds like soap operas—especially when the “lovers” we see are kids our age or younger who grope and fumble and then scurry off, but Sheila adores the word, adores the idea. Afterwards, we clean up beer cans and cigarette butts. With sticks, we pick up used condoms. We bury the evidence of our unwelcome guests in the unconsecrated ground just beyond the tree line. Once, we saw the deli owner and his wife having sex on the grass. It was the first time we’d witnessed anything like it—slow and tender, worthy of Sheila’s beloved word. Nicko and Clyde and I watched and then rushed off to separate, secluded places. Sheila led Perry into the trees.

“Lumpas,” whispers Clyde.

We turn due south and follow without a word. This takes us closer to the intruders, but among the Lumpas is our favorite hiding place, and the best spot for spying. Within a steep hill overlooking the south side, a whole family called Lumpa sleeps underground. I imagine them tucked lovingly into the earth, stacked nearly atop one another like drawers in a filing cabinet. At the top Finnius Malcolm Lumpa and his wife Naomi watch over their slumbering brood. Even the babies have enormous tombstones, perfect for crouching behind. We Freaks are patient. We can wait anybody out.

We move silently up the hill, avoiding the security lights, and scatter ourselves behind stones. Mine is Beloved Wife and Mother, Margaret Charles Finley Lumpa, born June 22, 1876, died February 14, 1934. Sheila favors the twin girls’ shared stone because two cherubs ride its spire, Nicko always takes the World War II vet’s, who died one month short of his 100th birthday, and Perry accompanies Stanley Lumpa, whom he calls the crazy, forgotten uncle. Clyde is the only one who ranges from stone to stone. Most of the time he feels at home up top with Finnius, but
occasionally he visits Elizabeth Angelica Lumpa, who died when she was seventeen.

Clyde is our eyes tonight—he’s with Finnius, positioned highest, and I am several feet downhill. The moon is a flat, indifferent disc, sputtering light between straggly clouds. I can just make out Clyde’s silhouette against the night sky; he waggles one finger, then shrugs.

On my belly, I shimmy three stones downhill just as the moon ducks for cover. I tap Perry’s shoulder once. His only exposed flesh is his face, so I take off my glove and draw a question mark on his cheek. One definite, don’t know if there’s more. The signal goes down the hill until it makes its way to Nicko. Nicko sends back a familiar question, one he made up and we all approved, indicated silently by drawing double F’s: “What flavor of foe?”

Clyde draws a U in the air—unidentifiable—and I agree. We haven’t heard any cruisers, the jocks usually travel in packs, and whoever has joined us, they’re too quiet to be kids on a dare. Clyde makes a “V” sign with two fingers and shrugs.

I send down the Might be vandals signal. We are relieved. Vandals don’t want to be seen any more than we do.

I try to become as still as Clyde. I become wood; I become stone. I ask for Finnius Lumpa’s blessing. I want to be the one up top, the one who deduces the intruders’ identity. I close my eyes and imagine my ears detaching themselves, floating over the crest of the hill and down to the flat valley to eavesdrop. They return heavy with knowledge. It’s only a couple of junior high kids, I’ll report. Just scrawny twelve-year-olds, telling ghost stories. Then I’ll add something special for Sheila. They’re here on a dare, trying to impress the girls. Finnius Lumpa smiles down at me, proud of his adopted great-great-great grandson.

“Come on out!” yells a voice from below, and it is no twelve-year-old but a man. “It’s time to go home!”

The sleeping bones buttoned in the ground quake in outrage: our most sacred place has been profaned.
“Shit!” Clyde says. Not a curse but a clear, high panic. He joins me behind the safety of Margaret Charles. “We gotta run!” he hisses. “Everybody scatter.”
At once Sheila, Nicko, and Perry spring up. It is like the ghosts of the Lumpas rising from their graves. The Numbers begin their steady march forward, gathering speed. I lightly bump my head against Margaret Charles’s cool, damp marble. It hurts already but I imagine a mother with a cool, damp cloth for my forehead.
“Can’t,” I manage to say.
Nicko, Perry, and Sheila sink back down, waiting for Clyde’s cue.
“You don’t get it, man,” Clyde whispers only to me. His slim fingers claw my shoulder; his breath puffs hot and urgent in my ear. “It’s him. It’s my Dad. He’s all whacked out—I can tell.”
But this can’t be. Even if he were in town, he wouldn’t know to come here. I relax a little. The Numbers begin retreating to their secret place.
“Clyde,” I say. “I think we should just wait it out, like usual. It can’t be your dad. No one knows about the graveyard, how could he—”
“—My mom does. She always knows where I am, Max. Christ, he must’ve really worked her over.”
Clyde is nearly vibrating with fear. He rushes to Perry’s stone before I can answer. In the quiet the dead leaves under his careless feet sound like fireworks, or machine gun fire.
“I found you!” yells the man who may or may not be Clyde’s dad.
The Numbers rush forward, 214 miniature bludgeons. I rock and chant, as quickly as possible. Sheila is beside me the next moment, her soft arm around my shoulders.
“Run for the east gate!” Clyde commands.
“Come on,” says Perry. “He knows we’re up here.” He tugs Sheila’s arm. Nicko has already begun running.
“Wait,” says Sheila. “Max is sick again.”
“Jesus Christ,” says Clyde. “Listen—Max, Sheila, not a word. Stay hidden. Perry, go.”

Perry obeys and sprints after Nicko. Clyde leaps up, screaming. He is an avalanche thundering down the opposite side of the hill, directly toward the intruder. He is a Sioux warrior shrieking bloodlust. In the midst of The Numbers I find it in myself to feel sorry for whoever is down there.

Seconds later footsteps from the east crash toward Sheila and me, and I think we’re being attacked from all sides. But the runners rush right past us, and as they gain the hill I catch a silhouetted glimpse of two figures in hoodies—it’s Perry and Nicko returned to help, summoned by Clyde’s cry.

In the valley on the other side of the hill, from the place where we were to have our picnic, there is shouting and scuffling and deep, thumping noises. There are cries of pain and yelps of anger from four different voices. We Freaks hear every noise; we feel every blow.

And yet it is far from me, withdrawing farther all the time. What I am intensely aware of is The Numbers. They are flying, flying, and this time I can see them whizzing past, dazzling white and blinding, as tangible as the stones that stitch this ground together. But one shout crescendos over the rest. I feel Sheila’s hands on both my shoulders, gripping tightly. I feel nails. She is shaking me.

“Max!” she screams. She shakes me again. “Max, shut up!”

I realize the loudest shout is coming from me. I have been screaming The Numbers.

“Good,” says Sheila. “Now come on. We’re going down.”

I blink in the bright light that no one else sees—hundreds of luminous numbers hang suspended in the cold air. “Did I finish?” I say. It is the first time I have ever been unsure. “Did I get there?” Sheila’s slap sends me tumbling. My head smacks a Lumpa footstone.

“Goddammit, Max, there’s no time for this shit!” Sheila screams. “They need us!”
I spin in the cool, dewy grass while Sheila plunges down the south side of the hill. I ache to help but The Habits won’t allow it. They insist that I start over from the beginning. They remind me that I am much too weak, too fragile, for whatever is happening down there that I will not—cannot—think about. Still, I creep up the north side of the hill, in steps so miniscule I hope The Habits won’t notice. When I reach Sheila’s post I can go no farther. So I count and bang my head against the tombstone of the twins, Sheila’s patron saints. It is possible that The Habits could save us all. I am the best at Tricks. If I chant enough times, in exactly the right way, perhaps the earth will spin backwards, just this once, just enough that we can start over and go somewhere different tonight. I want this badly enough. The Habits are powerful, more powerful than Prayer.

I win in the long run.

I can’t stop, can’t go down there, not even for Sheila.

A man’s shout cracks through The Numbers. “You’ll never run off again, will you, boy?”

Clyde screams back. “Fuck you, sir!”

And on the hill a miracle is taking place: I count faster than humanly possible. When I have run through The Numbers three times, The Habits decide they are well pleased and release me. I clamber up to Clyde’s tombstone and try to see what’s happening. I arrive just in time to hear someone running away. I strain into the darkness and am rewarded with the sight of a man scaling the south gate.

The Habits have worked. I plunge down the hill to rejoin the Freaks and tell them the good news.

At the bottom I’m tackled, wrestled to the ground and punched, but I recognize Nicko’s wheezy grunts, feel his clumsy left hooks. “Nicko, it’s me!” I say. “It’s me, Max!”

“Where were you, man?” he says. He punches me once more, not as hard. He turns from me. “Clyde? Perry? Sheila? Where is everybody?”
“Over here,” says Clyde, thick-voiced. He spits and I know without seeing that he dyes the grass red. “I don’t know what happened. Me and Perry were on him, and then Perry got knocked down—”

“—No, that was me that went down,” says Nicko. “Perry pulled me back up.”

Sheila’s pale, terrified face blooms out of the darkness as she flicks her lighter. I want to put my arms around her but she’s lighting two cigarettes like she always does, one for herself and one for Perry. He’ll be the one holding Sheila. The two red tips bob away down the tree line.

“All I know,” says Clyde, “is that there were fists flying everywhere. I hardly knew what or who I was hitting—shit, I laid my knuckles open on somebody’s teeth.”

“My nose is busted,” says Nicko. “What the hell was that, man? That was more than just a fist.”

“Billy club,” says Clyde. The words shove a wedge into his voice and break it in two. We wait in silence for him to recover. I reach 73 before he speaks again—from now on, this Number will be special, too.

“What I can’t figure,” Clyde continues, “is why the bastard took off all of a sudden.”

“Guys,” calls Sheila.

“He took off ’cause me and you and Perry were too much for him,” says Nicko. “Hell yeah.”

I’ve been waiting patiently but I can’t stand it any longer. “No, listen! This is exactly what I wanted to tell you!” I say. “I think I scared him away! I think The Habits—”

“Guys,” says Sheila, her voice tight and shrill.

We follow the sound of her sobs to a place near the trees. Clyde, Nicko, Sheila and I crouch beside Perry, who lies still as a monument in the South side’s shorn grass. Nicko shakes Perry’s shoulder. Sheila flicks her lighter, and in the trembling flare we see Perry’s face, beautiful and smooth and serene. She strikes the lighter again as Nicko leans in to feel Perry’s head. Nicko leaps
backward, shouting, when his fingertips sink into the back of Perry’s skull.

The Freaks, except for me, are an electrical storm. They are a thousand tornados. I alone remain calm—there is only one thing to do, and it is up to me to do it. If I count enough times, in exactly the right way, everything will be reckoned perfectly in the end. We will still be Whole, One. So I start at one and chant loudly, boldly. I will not stop until The Numbers work their magic again. If I want it badly enough, it is not too much to expect a miracle twice.

Sheila climbs onto Perry’s body, covering it lengthwise with her own, and wails onto his still chest. The warmth from his body passes into hers, where, like a disease or a demon, I know it will flourish and possess her. It is up to me to stop it, or Sheila will eventually be driven out of this place for good. Nicko leans against a tombstone and vomits in the grass. He fills the graveyard with curses, and scars the innocent trees with the toes of his heavy boots. Clyde removes Perry’s glove and clutches Perry’s hand to his heart. “Oh no, oh God, oh no,” he moans, over and over. With the help of The Habits I can see each of Clyde’s words tumbling from his lips, small but bright stars that gather in a heap on Perry’s chest. It is more than I could’ve hoped for: Clyde now has the gift, too.

“Max, stop it,” Sheila pleads. “For once, just please stop it.”

It’s a shame she doesn’t understand, a shame that I can’t stop counting to tell the only people who loved me that The Habits have never been more necessary. I can’t stop to tell them that the second, secret heart in my belly strokes out this picture: the five of us sitting in a circle in the grass, not minding the dew that soaks our jeans, eating our fill of birthday cake. I want this badly enough. I hold the picture before me, count my way toward it. Nicko stands. “If you don’t knock it off, Max, I’m gonna put my fist down your throat. Have some respect.”

Clyde stands, too. “No more,” he says. “Nicko, no more.”

I have already begun walking. As I climb the Lumpa hill alone, still counting, an all new thing begins happening. I feel The Numbers taking over, the self I knew dimming to the zero point. Soon I will be Only Numbers, pure power. There will not even be enough of me left to be a Freak.

At first the voices are so quiet that I think the sound I hear is the wind rustling the treetops. But the sound grows and I realize that the Lumpas have awoken and are counting with me. The chorus grows louder, richer, until the whole city that sleeps underground is chanting—the throaty rumble of men, the piping cries of women and children, even the shrill keening of infants. It is the most glorious harmony imaginable. I fall to my knees in gratitude—for the assistance from my true kindred, for the miracle that is about to occur.