

misfits inc.  
no. 1

the  
vanishing  
chip

mark  
delaney

To Robert Larkin  
1906-1998  
*My Grandfather*

For your laugh,  
For the way you sang an Irish ballad—your voice never wavering,  
not even on the high notes,  
For the way you took my face in your hands and kissed my forehead,  
This is for you.



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# chapter one

*Friday, lunch*

g et him, Joseph!”  
“Yeah, Joseph, wipe ’im out!”

Peter Braddock ignored the cheering. He was losing his war against Joseph Vargas. But he would not go down without a fight. He stared at the chessboard in front of him, his hand hovering over one of the pieces.

*Time, he decided, for some fancy play off the board.*

He quickly made a move—one that hurt his position more than it helped him—and then leaned back in his chair and began to smile. Joseph looked up at him quizzically, and Peter kept on smiling as though his move were the most brilliant chess move anyone had ever played.

It was the last week of classes, the week before final exams, and the last day of the Ninth Annual Bugle Point High School Lunchtime Chess Tournament. Mr. Blair, the physics teacher, had started the tournament, and it soon became a tradition. At the end of each school year,

2 the top dozen chess players met in the science lab during lunch, set up the plastic chess sets, and battled for the title of Chess Champion. Usually only seniors played. This year, for the first time, a sophomore had qualified and was competing for the title of champion. That sophomore was Peter Braddock.

Peter watched Joseph study the position of the pieces on the board, searching for a trap. Joseph looked closely at the board, then back at his opponent.

“Your move,” Peter said, and then examined his fingernails as though they were far more interesting than Joseph’s chess play. Sweat began to form on Joseph’s forehead. He reached for a piece, changed his mind, reached for another, then finally made a bad move with his queen. *Good*, Peter thought. *He’s still winning, but he’s starting to doubt. He thinks I’m up to something.* Peter was up to something, but it had nothing to do with where he placed his pieces.

In a little over three minutes the flag on Peter’s chess clock would drop, and he would forfeit the game because of time. *Confidence*, he told himself. He picked up a piece and banged it down elsewhere on the board, appearing, he hoped, to know what he was doing. He acted like a player who was winning, although his pieces were very badly positioned. Joseph studied the board for a long time, hesitated, then made another poor move.

The moment Joseph set down his piece, Peter’s hand was already moving. He picked up a knight, swept it in

an L pattern across two rows of squares, and slammed it right down in the middle of Joseph's territory. *Bam!* Joseph swallowed hard then moved again, and almost before he set down his piece, Peter was charging. He swept in his bishop diagonally—*Bam!*—and Joseph lost a rook. *Bam!* and one of Joseph's knights disappeared. *Bam!* and Peter's pawn was driving away his queen. *Bam!* and the defenses around Joseph's king crumbled.

*BAM!*

"Check," said Peter.

Silence. No one was cheering for Joseph anymore, and certainly no one was cheering for Peter. Most of the seniors had lost to Peter in the early rounds, and they were, quite frankly, hoping to see the tall, skinny sophomore with the round glasses and the clump of dark hair falling into his eyes lose in the final. Who did this kid think he was, anyway?

Peter knew that Joseph only had two legal moves. If Joseph moved his king one space to the right, Peter would bring down his queen for checkmate. If he moved it one space to the left, Peter would bring down his rook with the same result. Finally, his cheeks burning with frustration, Joseph gave Peter the sign of defeat: He touched his forefinger to his defenseless king and toppled it over. It made a meek tap when it struck the board. Joseph shook Peter's hand, then left the table without saying a word. In fact, all the seniors got up to leave. They crowded around Joseph,

4 clapping him on the back and congratulating him on his play.

None of the students said a word to Peter. He told himself he didn't mind. Once, when he was in the fifth grade, Peter won a countywide spelling bee. The second-place winner was a popular eighth grader from the local middle school. When the contest was over, Peter, his mother, and his father returned to the parking lot to find that someone had soaped the word "smack," a code word often used at Peter's school, across the windshield of their car. A smack was more than just a smart person; it was someone who was *too* smart—smarter than everyone. Smart enough to be disliked.

"Well," said Mr. Blair, "you played an excellent tournament, Peter. Undefeated in five rounds. Congratulations. The trophy is yours." He handed the trophy to Peter, and Peter looked at the bold lettering engraved on the brass plate: Chess Champion. He smiled and tucked the trophy under his arm.

"Thank you, Mr. B."

"Hey, hey, Peter!" a voice called. Mattie Ramiro had been watching the tournament from the back of the lab, quietly passing time by taking apart his Walkman radio and putting it back together. At the start of the game he had eyed a microscope, but Mr. Blair had asked him to leave it in one piece, thank you. Now he rushed to meet Peter, sidestepping the scattered chairs like a cat gracefully strolling through knickknacks on a shelf.



Mattie was a freshman. He stood only about four feet, ten inches tall, and the top of his head barely came to Peter's chest. On Mattie's first day at Bugle Point High, Peter had taken the time to show him where his home-room class was, and somehow Mattie had managed to locate Peter in the break between each class that day. Peter had become Mattie's high school tour guide, although Peter suspected that Mattie was finding his way around just fine. He kept locating Peter, didn't he?

It was not quite true to say that Mattie had become Peter's close friend. He followed Peter constantly. He talked constantly. He needed constant help and attention from Peter. He was sort of like Peter's...puppy dog.

"Peter," said Mattie now, "you were *losing*. I'm no expert, but for a while it looked like Joseph was walking all over you."

The two left the science lab and began making their way to their fifth-period classes.

"Really?" Peter asked. "You thought I was going to lose?"

"You were behind. I *saw*," said Mattie. "You were down a piece, and Joseph had the better position. How did you win?"

Peter frowned as he considered the question. "Sometimes," he said, "I guess it doesn't matter what your position is or how good your opponent is. Joseph *thought* my position was better. He *believed* I was the better player. Once he had that mind-set, he didn't stand a chance."

6 Just then the bell rang. Peter reached into his pocket and removed two folded sheets of paper. He handed them to Mattie.

“These notes are for the others; they’re about today. Do you mind?...”

Mattie took the notes and slipped them under the cover of a book. “You got it,” he said.

Peter knew the notes would get delivered. Mattie, if nothing else, had proven that he had an occasionally annoying talent for locating people during the five minutes between classes.

They turned to head off to their classrooms, but Peter stopped and watched Mattie as he walked away. “Hey, Mattie,” he called, “thanks for hanging around the tournament.”

Mattie turned, grinned, and gave Peter a thumbs-up.



As soon as he was out of Peter’s sight, Mattie took the notes from his book and stared at them. They made his fingertips tingle. One for Byte. One for Jake. Peter obviously had not written a note for Mattie because Mattie already knew what the notes said. On other occasions Peter told Mattie the news and Mattie delivered notes to the others.

But somehow, Mattie realized, the notes with the weird, scrawled emblem Peter had placed upon them were a sign of membership and belonging. And Mattie didn’t get a note, ever.

Mattie didn't feel that the others did not accept him. And yet, the fact that there was no slip of paper with his name on it, no special emblem for him, bothered him immensely at the moment.

No, it wasn't Peter's fault. It was something else. It was the same feeling Mattie had carried with him since he was five years old.

But he wasn't in the mood to think about that.



*Friday, fifth period*

Although they'd been in class with her all year, hardly anyone spoke to the girl who sat in the very back of the class.

She had long, stringy blond hair and rarely spoke. She often wore high-top sneakers with her dresses. Sometimes her thick-lensed granny glasses with gold wire frames slipped a bit, and she crinkled her nose in an odd way to shift them back up.

And she never went anywhere without her notebook computer.

Today, as usual, she entered from the door in the back of the room. Walking past a long row of her classmates made her stomach tighten—she didn't know what to say to them. They seemed so different from her, chatting and gossiping loudly. The back door was just easier.

She sat down just as the bell rang.

8 Mrs. Mellon walked over to the lectern where she kept her computerized attendance sheets. Every day she bubbled in the names of the students who were absent.

“Jason?”

A football player threw up a hand. “Yeah, here.”

“Monica?”

A tiny brunette slid into her seat. “Right here.”

Mrs. Mellon continued. She always called out the name of each student and expected each student to respond. The girl with the stringy blond hair had prayed fervently all year that Mrs. Mellon would change that habit. But here it was the last day of school before finals, and Mrs. Mellon was still calling out names.

“Eugenia?”

The girl crinkled up her nose beneath her glasses and drew in a breath.

“Eugenia? Byte?”

She answered almost in a whisper. “Here.”

As Mrs. Mellon finished taking roll, Byte opened up her computer, clicked on the database file called “School,” and selected “Eng./Per. 5.” Mrs. Mellon would be going over the study guide for the final exam, and Byte wanted to be ready. Most of the other students scribbled their notes into spiral notebooks. Byte, however, always typed her notes. She could type faster than she could write, and the computer helped her stay organized.

“The study guide for your final,” said Mrs. Mellon, “is on the side chalkboard. You may take the next five minutes to copy it down before we review it.”

Byte was almost finished inputting the material. Mrs. Mellon had arranged the class into groups, but Byte usually preferred to work by herself. She began reviewing some of the major literature terms she had learned during the year and stored in her database: *internal conflict*, *allegory*, and the funny sounding one, *onomatopoeia*, which Byte always remembered by saying “gee-it’s-good-ta-see-ya.” Each time Byte highlighted a term and selected an icon, her computer program searched out its definition and one or two examples of its use.

Mrs. Mellon walked between the rows of desks and casually glanced at the work the students were doing.

Mrs. Mellon arrived at Byte’s desk and looked at her computer. “This plastic casing looks different—darker than before. Have you upgraded from your Toshiba?” she asked.

Byte nodded and continued tapping the keys. At the beginning of the school year, Mrs. Mellon had been a computer novice, but during fifth period she had often paused by Byte’s desk to ask a quick question about some glitch she was experiencing on her computer at home. Byte had noticed recently that Mrs. Mellon’s problems with the computer were growing less frequent and her questions more sophisticated.

“Yes,” said Byte. “My mom’s company buys a lot of machines for research, testing for bugs and such.” She looked at the teacher and smiled. “Luckily Mom lets me play with the leftovers.”

Mrs. Mellon nodded. “Did you have any problems transferring your files?”

Byte shook her head. “Uh-uh. The new version converts them for me. I don’t lose any formatting at all.”

Byte clicked on a document icon and the hard drive whirred. At the top of the screen, in bold letters, the word *theme* appeared. Below it was a definition, and below the definition were the titles of three short stories the class had read back in September when they were learning about theme. She moved the mouse and clicked again. Now the title of one of those three short stories appeared, followed by the study questions Mrs. Mellon had assigned, the answers to those questions, and the vocabulary words—with their definitions—from the story.

“This is not a standard database,” said Mrs. Mellon.

Byte nodded. “Right. The computer came with a database loaded, but it wouldn’t let me do some of the things I wanted. I had to modify it a little.”

Mrs. Mellon smiled in appreciation. She scooted an empty chair next to Byte, sat down, and looked directly into Byte’s eyes. “You know, you have a very special gift, Byte,” she said. “Not everyone is blessed with so much talent. You keep using yours, all right?”

Byte’s cheeks warmed with the compliment.

Later, when the class period ended, Byte closed her computer, slipped it into its padded carrying bag, and slung it over her shoulder. She grabbed her books and headed out the back door, eyes cast downward as she walked.

As she made her way through the crowded hallway, she felt a finger tapping her left shoulder. She turned, but all she saw were the tired faces of the students filing past her. None of them appeared to want her attention or even looked at her. Byte frowned. She was certain she had felt *something*. Shrugging her shoulders, Byte adjusted the load of books in her arms and continued down the hallway.

As she neared the end of the corridor, she felt the tapping again, this time on her right shoulder. Instead of turning toward her right, she spun impulsively to her left, expecting to catch a certain sneaky freshman in the midst of his getaway.

“Mattie?...” she called.

She saw nothing, just the same faces as before. This time, however, one or two of them seemed a little annoyed that she was slowing down the traffic.

Byte started walking again. She looked momentarily at the computer bag dangling from her shoulder. *That’s weird*, she thought. *I would never have left it partially unzipped like that.* A folded paper rested in the snug opening. Mattie had done it again.

She tugged the note from her bag and studied the familiar emblem: a drawing of a square that was both slightly inside and slightly outside a circle. This design was Peter’s idea. It was supposed to represent two things that could never fit together, a square peg and a round hole. Below the emblem two words were scrawled: *We’re on!*

Byte slid the note into her pocket and smiled.



Mattie watched Byte from a distance to make sure she found the message. When she did, he went to his sixth-period class with a smile on his face. He knew that for the next hour, Byte, instead of concentrating on French, would be trying to figure out how he had slipped the note into her bag and how he had gotten away so quickly. *Let her wonder*, he thought. Somehow, the weirder the others thought he was, the more at home he felt with them.

He was in a better mood already.



*Friday, sixth period*

“Armstrong!” shouted coach Grimes. “Go in for Dennis.”

Jake hesitated. *Armstrong. Wow. The coach wants me. He’s giving me one more chance.* Jake grabbed his helmet—one of the few that had no scratches or grass stains on it—and tugged it on. *I won’t blow it this time.*

Jake lined up at middle linebacker. It did not matter to him that today’s game was only a practice scrimmage, or that those were really his teammates on the other side. He had to prove himself. He was bigger, stronger, and faster than nearly all the other players. He knew he was. The coach knew he was. Now he only had to show he was *better*. Today’s spring game, part of the tryouts for next year’s team, was his last chance to prove it.



The offensive team broke from its huddle, and the quarterback began calling his signals. Jake lined up over the center, Mike Gilbert, a junior who was crouched and ready to hike the ball. The center glared at Jake. Jake knew what he was thinking: *It's only Armstrong. Armstrong the pushover.*

*Not this time,* thought Jake. *Ignore him. He's trying to psych you out.*

"Two, sixty-eight. Two, sixty-eight. *Hut! Hut! Hut!*"

The center snapped the football into the quarterback's hands. Helmets crashed together as a rush of bodies collided.

Jake watched closely and saw the quarterback run back, twist to his left, and hold out the ball. The halfback ran right into it and gathered it into his gut. The hand-off could not have been more perfect.

But Jake—quicker than Mike, better balanced, yet at least forty pounds heavier—faked a move to the right, ran left, and watched the center throw a block at empty air. Jake passed him so swiftly that Mike fell face first into a wet patch of mud where a sprinkler head had leaked. Jake met the halfback at least five yards behind the line of scrimmage. *Hit 'im!* Inside him, his father's voice grew insistent. *Hit 'im cleanly! Make the runner respect you.*

Jake lunged and wrapped his arms around the halfback's knees. All he had to do was drive through with his shoulders, ram them *hard* into the halfback's midsection, and Jake would pancake the guy.

But instead of driving the quarterback into the grass, Jake found himself lifting the boy up with one arm and dropping him gently out of bounds. All the practice, all the ability, all the pep talks—none of them meant anything when they ran up against Jake’s basic nature.

Mike, who was still lying in the wet grass, looked across the field and shook his head. From fifteen yards away, Jake could hear what he was saying: “What a wimp. Armstrong stinks.”

The whistle sounded.

“Armstrong and Gilbert. Get over here. *Hustle.*”

Jake ran to the sideline and yanked off his chin strap. His football uniform, he noticed, was perfectly clean. His helmet still had no scratches on it. He glanced down at the number blazoned across his jersey. It was the number his father had once worn. Jake had specifically requested it. He wondered if maybe he had made a mistake, given himself too much pressure, too much to live up to.

Mike also ran across the field, stopped at the sideline, and removed his helmet. Coach Grimes frowned at Mike. “Gilbert,” he said, “You badmouthed other players all last season. You know players on my team *always* show other people respect. That’s it—hit the locker room, then turn in your gear.”

All the players on the field were silent, their eyes set on Mike. The center, his own eyes wide, said nothing. He turned his red, dirty face to scowl at Jake. His look said *This is your fault*. He tossed his helmet to the ground

and walked off the field, picking up his empty gear bag from the bench.

“Jake?”

“Hmm?” Jake had barely heard the coach speaking to him. “What? Oh, sorry coach.”

Coach Grimes took a deep breath and looked at Jake as though just now realizing something. “Jake,” he said, “take some time out. Have a seat on the bench. We’ll talk later.”

Jake understood. He had failed to make the team. Oh, he knew what the coach would say: *Maybe a second string offensive position. Or maybe another sport like soccer or cross country...*

Jake squeezed his eyes shut. He had always been muscular and athletic, and these days he regularly ran or lifted weights. Yet he knew the pain and disappointment of losing, and something within him simply refused to be the cause of that feeling in someone else. Jake was uncomfortable in the role of a competitor.

He sighed. At least he still had his music. At a time like this, when thoughts of his father hung over his head, nothing lifted his spirits like playing his clarinet. That idea brought a weak smile to Jake’s lips. He figured he’d be playing the clarinet a *lot* when he got home today.

He sat on the bench, and something drew his attention to his gear bag, which was lying at his feet, the name tag staring up at him. He was certain he had zipped it, certain he had left no schoolwork in it, and yet there it was, half open.

A folded paper rested inside.

It had to have been Mattie. No one else could have approached the bench by the field, opened his gear bag, placed a note inside, and vanished without anyone knowing he had been there.

Jake opened the note and saw the circle and square emblem at the top and the two-word message underneath. He smiled. It hurt to have failed, to have lost his chance to play on the team next fall, but the message from Peter helped him forget about the hurt—at least a little bit.

*Peter, Byte, Jake, and Mattie*, he thought. *Square pegs in round holes. Misfits.*

At least they had each other.