Roaring Orchards

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ROARING ORCHARDS

by

Dan Ionascu
Bachelor of Arts
Williams College
1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts

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ABSTRACT

Roaring Orchards

by

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The seeds of Roaring Orchards were planted during a spring drive to Williams College. In one of the outdoor malls spread along the roads that lead east from the northbound curl of the Taconic Parkway, there is on Sundays a small farmers’ market. I stopped to get a carton of blueberries from the produce tent, and wandered to a table stacked with used books for sale. Most were illustrated biographies of baseball players and how-to books, but there were also a few dusty yellow paperbacks. I bought The Palm at the End of the Mind, Nostromo, and The Portable Chekov. It wasn’t until I got back to my car that, flipping through the pages of Chekov, I found teeth marks on the margins of the pages. I enjoyed for a moment imagining that these weren’t the work of a child but the result of a more visceral frustration with Chekov’s understated depiction of grief. That those teeth marks betokened an exasperation, a silent scream that inscribed what Chekov so often left unsaid. Roaring Orchards grew out of an attempt to articulate that impulse.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................................................... iv

ROARING ORCHARDS ....................................................................................................................... 1

VITA ................................................................................................................................................... 122
Tidbit tried to remember what she had just been thinking about, but was at a loss. The morning heat was stunning; her head felt like a sugarcube crumbling slowly in a hot glass of tea. The thought, whatever it had been, was gone. She stared at her hand digging idly in the soft earth and tried to focus on the sickly flutter she still felt under her ribs. It had been a worry, that much Tidbit knew for sure from, and not a worry about anything far off but about something that was going to happen to soon. She wasn’t sure of anything else, except that she would recognize it if she thought of it again. But her only clue to the thing was this nebulous anxiety whose object had burned away in the late summer heat, a charred hole in the blank page of her mind.

Tidbit pushed the sharp, dry evergreen leaves and tawny branches from her face and crawled along under the juniper shrub. It was cooler in the shade of the bushes than it had been in the sun, and her sweaty shirt now chilled where it stuck to her back. The juniper shook with the movements of all the other Obstreperous Girls, who were also searching for the razor blade Bev had dropped somewhere in the shrubbery that ran along the front of the Classroom Building. Tidbit was sure that the blade wasn’t lost in the dirt any longer, that either Bev or one of the other girls had grabbed it.

She stopped and sat in the soft dirt, leaning back against the brick wall of the Classroom Building. Looking up Tidbit could see, between the edge of the shrubs and the wall of the Classroom Building, some of the morning clouds smudged across the blue sky, while the rest had gathered themselves into bright white knots to hover above her. The black powerlines sang darkly overhead, vaulting from the building behind her to telephone poles that led to the street. Tidbit blew at a loose strand of hair that hung down in front of her face, bit her bottom lip and tried to think.
She tried to think about what her worry had been, to figure out what it was that she had to be afraid of, but nothing especially threatening came to mind. This was supposed to have been a pretty easy day. For the past two weeks, Obstreperous Girls had been repainting the trim on the Classroom Building. They had made a game out of seeing who could get the most paint on the window whose frame she was painting without Marcy saying anything. At first, they just loaded their brushes with lots of paint and went real slow over the top of the frame, letting thick white drops of paint trail down along the glass. Then someone came up with the method of pressing down hard while painting the sides of the frames, so that the hairs on the brushes bent and then sprayed tiny spots of paint all over the window. Tidbit was pretty sure she had won the game yesterday by simply painting right over an entire window. She had been curious to see how anyone would beat that.

On the way to the Classroom Building, they'd stopped by the dumpsters to throw out the garbage from the dorm. That was the point when the day had taken on its own strange face, when she hurled the bag of garbage she was carrying as high as she could and saw it sail into the air, the tied, puckered end spinning around the circumference of the white bag like an orbiting moon, then the whole thing pausing in midair, at the height of its arc, before crashing into the green metal dumpster. It scared one of the stray cats who lived off the trash on campus out of the dumpster, screeching. The angry orange thing, all spine and ribs, had jumped from the lip of the metal bin gracefully to the ground and darted past the girls and off to the north end of campus.

Tidbit grabbed the second bag of garbage from Bev, who had carried it over her shoulder from the dorm, letting it bounce against her back as she bumped along. Tidbit swung the bag back and forth a couple of times before leaning back and launching it underhand. The second bag flew into the air and paused just like the first one, spinning around itself, but Tidbit had overshot. Rather than dropping neatly into the dumpster it sailed past it and got caught on the tall picket fence that served to keep the dumpster area out of sight. The bag tore and its contents slid to the ground. It was mostly full of paper waste from last quarter, old handouts and math and spelling
worksheets, but also contained the remains of this morning’s breakfast: oatmeal, pancakes, and jalapeno poppers.

The rest of the dorm had grumbled at her, but no one was really awake enough to bother making much of it. Obstreperous Girls cleaned up the mess and headed to the Classroom Building with the painting equipment, the brushes and big telescoping aluminum ladder and the gallon cans of paint with wire handles that left pink indentations in their palms. Then Marcy had told them to drop everything right there, on the road that ran in front of the Classroom Building. She opened up the fanny pack she always wore back-to-front around her belly and took out enough retractable razors for all of them to use, and told them that today they were to scrape off all the paint they’d gotten on the windows.

“Look at how this looks!” she’d said, flapping an arm in the direction of the building. “This is sloppy, sloppy work, and it takes out of the community when you’re supposed to be putting back in.” Marcy had prepared more to say, she had put together a whole speech on the walk over, anticipating that the girls would argue, but no one did. They didn’t much care. It meant their painting game was over, but Tidbit had pretty much ended it yesterday, since there didn’t seem to be any way of getting more paint onto a window than by painting it. And they were interested in the razors.

“That’s right,” Marcy added. “That’s the idea behind a Reciprocity Detail. And not paying attention to what you’re doing just makes more work for you later.” With a sudden surge of confidence she said, “Can you imagine if Gabriel saw this? I shudder to think. And you should too.” The girls looked up at her, waiting to see if she was done.

This is how it always was, Marcy thought. When she steeled herself for a confrontation, the girls took the opportunity to demonstrate their indifference; as soon as she would relax, they would be at her with some sudden crisis. She had found this to be absolutely axiomatic. Marcy was tall and lean, ropy in the way her olive skin showed the tendons and veins in her hands and arms and neck. Her high, wide forehead and sharp cheekbones dominated her face and her red-
rimmed eyes protruded slightly, an aspect that was exacerbated, or seemed so, when she closed her eyes and sighed slowly to show the girls what an effort it was not to lose patience with them. When things in the dorm were going well, the girls liked to talk about how pretty Marcy could be if she would only do this or that. They agreed that her hair was hopeless.

It was getting hotter, even in the shade of the juniper shrubs. All the girls crawling around digging for the razor blade were knocking up a cloud of fine dust that Tidbit could feel rising to choke her. Through the spidery orange branches of the shrubs, she saw Marcy’s legs and hiking boots marching back and forth. “Are you girls all looking?” Marcy called out nervously. “You better all be looking hard.”

Tidbit wondered about Marcy’s insistence on calling the girls careless for messing up the windows. She must have realized that they’d been more deliberate than sloppy, but she couldn’t accuse them of having done it on purpose. That had been the fun of the game, Tidbit realized, pushing Marcy to the point where she’d have to react but couldn’t really. If Marcy admitted that she knew it had been done intentionally, it would mean that she knew someone was responsible; if someone was responsible there had to be a consequence, and it would be Marcy’s job to find out who was and wasn’t guilty and to figure out what to do with the ones who were. Marcy knew the amount of time and grief it would take to get anyone to confess, and how much more would be involved if no one did and she had to force the girls into turning on one another. But once she started investigating, there was no stopping short of the complete truth. Because that’s how the school worked; if a rule was broken, everything stopped until it was dealt with. Open, willing, clean and honest.

So Marcy pretended that no rules had been broken, that getting paint all over the windows had been a mistake, and the girls went along. Scraping paint off the widows got boring quickly, though, and the girls soon did get careless. So no one was surprised when after only twenty minutes Bev announced that her razor had fallen out of its holder and into the junipers, although
Marcy did say, “I can’t believe this shit.” She collected all the retractable razors and sent the girls
to find the missing razor blade.

Tidbit turned to see Carly and Rachel chasing one another in her direction, crawling quickly
between the wall of the Classroom Building and the back of the shrubs, giggling wildly and each
pulling back juniper branches to let them spring back and hit the other in the face.

Carly stopped in front of Tidbit, panting. A silly grin played around her mouth, like she was
about to say something but couldn’t until she caught her breath.

She tapped Tidbit on the shoulder. “Hey, Tidbit, can I ask you a question?” She was
kneeling and her face was only inches from Tidbit’s.

“Sure. I was wondering where you were,” Tidbit said. Carly continued to tap her on the
shoulder.

“I’m right here. Can I ask you a question?”

“I said yes.”

Carly nodded toward her hand, which was still tapping Tidbit on the shoulder. “Is this
annoying?” she asked.

“Har dee har har,” Tidbit said.

“Ha ha,” Carly said, and then she collapsed face first into the dust, where she started laughing
much harder. Tidbit looked up and saw that Rachel, who had been kneeling behind Carly, had
yanked Carly’s ankles so that her knees had slipped out from under her. Rachel crawled forward
and laid down on Carly’s back.

“Hi, Tidbit,” she said. “Found the razor?”

“Hi,” Tidbit said. “Nope.” She looked down at Carly and asked, “How’re you feeling?”

“Okay,” Carly said. Her voice was strained by the weight of Rachel on top of her.

“Anything yet?” Tidbit asked.

“Anything what?” Rachel said.

“Tidbit gave me some sleep meds this morning in exchange for me doing her dishes.”
"You're on them now?" Rachel asked. She looked down at Carly lying under her and smoothed her hair. "I couldn't tell."

"Too heavy," Carly said, and rolled to her side so that Rachel slid off her back.

Rachel had only been at the school for a few weeks. At home she had worn her hair dyed black, but girls at the school weren't allowed to use dye, so in the past weeks her blond roots had begun to show in a thick stripe down the center of her scalp where she parted her hair. It looked like the white hair running down a skunk's back and tail. "How'd you get extras?" she asked Tidbit.

"I have a PRN for them. I've been asking for them at night all week and then tonguing them," Tidbit said. Rachel looked doubtful, so Tidbit continued, "If we get in bed and turn off the lights before Marcy comes in with meds, I just ask her not to turn the lights back on. Because I'm trying to sleep, which is what I need the meds for anyway. Then she can't really check very well." Rachel considered this. She seemed to accept Tidbit's account.

It occurred to Tidbit that the meds could be what she had been worrying about. If Marcy found out she'd been tonguing meds, let alone trading them, there would be no end of trouble. They would put her on liquid meds and maybe take away the sleep meds, which she really did need. She hadn't slept well since she'd begun tonguing them. But Tidbit didn't think that was what she had been worrying about; there was no click of recognition. Although maybe, she thought, she wouldn't be quite so positive if she did think of it again.

"So what's it like?" she asked Carly.

"It's like, it's like, it's like. I dunno. I feel sort of twisted up. Like part of me's puffy like a balloon and part of me's tight like the pin that pops it."

"The balloon that popped the pill that popped it," Rachel chimed absently. She sounded hurt. Like most new students, Rachel had developed one intensely possessive friendship, in her case with Carly. This seemed to her a type of betrayal, not to have been offered any of the meds and not to have been told about them.

6

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"And I keep thinking I see tiny black birds hopping from branch to branch in the shadows of these bushes," Carly added, "but when I look to find them they're not there. You guys see anything like that?"

Rachel and Tidbit just looked at one another and rolled their eyes. Rachel pulled an evergreen leaf off of the shrub above them and began twisting the stem into a circle. "So do you guys think Bev just took the razor blade?" she asked. "What for? Is she a cutter?"

"You seen her belly?" Tidbit asked. "But this seems kinda elaborate for Bev."

"She did that to herself?" Rachel asked. "Shit. I just always thought someone did that to her. She didn't do that with a razor, though."

"Who knows," Tidbit said. "If you ask her about it, she just acts upset and starts rubbing her face."

"Hmm. You look different," Rachel said to Tidbit.

Tidbit shrugged, and self-consciously raised a hand to tuck her loose hair behind her ear. Then the sudden, quickened unraveling of a line of thought speeding toward its conclusion made her gasp. Before the pieces could settle, Marcy interrupted, screaming at Obstreperous Girls to all come out from under the juniper shrubs right away. Carly and Rachel crawled to the corner of the Classroom Building where the shrubbery ended and they could duck out easily. But Tidbit, sure now of what was coming, fought her way through the insane tangle of pulpy branches directly in front of her. She knew now what she'd been worried about.

Tidbit let the dry leaves and twisted twigs press and scrape against her face and shoulders. She breathed in the sugary scent of the pine. When she emerged on the other side, the rest of the dorm had assembled around Marcy, who was holding Tidbit’s glasses by the end of one earpiece and swinging them around in a circle. Everyone waited for Tidbit to stand up and join them. Marcy’s posture seemed to suggest a cool disappointment in her dorm’s behavior, not quite unanticipated, but when she spoke a bare wire of fear and anger burned in her voice.
"I don't think you girls realize what a serious situation you're all in. Right now I have no choice but to assume that the razor blade isn't missing but that one of you has it, and you're hiding it, and god knows what you're planning on doing with it, to yourself, or each other, or any---" she pointed the glasses at Tidbit and started over. "How the hell do you think you're going to find a razor blade lost in the dirt without your glasses? Tell me exactly, Tidbit, I'd really like to know," she said.

Tidbit waited a beat for Marcy to continue, then said, "Well, I was just---"

"You know what, don't even bother. I'm just so sick of all of you right now. Really, physically sick of you." Marcy's head bobbed when she was angry, so that the cluster of keys she wore on a string around her long neck rattled. "You know where I found these?" she asked, stabbing Tidbit's glasses in the air in front of the girls' faces. "Tidbit, where would you guess I found your glasses?"

"Bridget had them?" Tidbit said.

"That's right, Bridget had them. And why don't you tell everyone what Bridget was doing with your glasses when I saw her."

"Burning ants," Tidbit said.

"Yes, Bridget was using them to bum ants. That's at least two people not looking for the razor, plus of course very cruel. As for the rest of you, --"

Bridget had been hopping up and down and now she interrupted. "But there's a huge anthill right next to the wall of the Classroom Building. If we don't do anything, I think they're going to invade the building."

Obstreperous Girls stood quietly, staring at Bridget or down at their feet. Bridget was thirteen, younger than the rest of the girls. She was short, and pudgy, and had a short bowl haircut that made her face look like a doorknob with eyes. "Tidbit's glasses have the thickest lenses," she added by way of explanation. In the silence that followed, she pinched a large black ant off of her thick elbow. Marcy looked as though she might cry.
“Now this is the deal,” Marcy finally said. “Lunch is in three hours, and I’m not allowed to make you skip lunch. But I can’t take you into the Cafeteria when one of you might be hiding a razor blade. So if you haven’t found it in two hours, we’re going to go back to the dorm and you’re all going to be strip-searched before we go to lunch. Do you all understand that?”

A wave of dull rage flickered briefly through the dorm and was smothered. The girls kicked at the dirt and dug their hands into their pockets. Only Rachel said stridently, “You can’t do that. It’s punitive. I thought you’re not allowed to punish us just because a few people aren’t looking.”

“It’s not a punishment,” Marcy said, more confident of herself as the girls got more upset. “It’s a consequence. It’s the only way I can make sure that all of you and everyone else on campus is safe. If you have a better idea, I’d be glad to hear it.”

The girls knew nothing would come of arguing. They had all been there long enough to become adept at the dark algebra that governed the school; one thing followed clearly from the last until you arrived at the most awful conclusions, with no way back. It was the logic of a bad dream, of the house you swear you won’t enter as you move inexorably toward it. Only Rachel persisted.

“But what if none of us have it?” she said. “What if the razor’s just lost in the bushes? Then you’d be searching all of us for nothing.”

“Right, but I can’t know whether the razor’s still missing or if one of you has it,” Marcy said. “The only way to be sure no one’s hiding it is either for me to get it back or to search all of you.”

Marcy was right, or at least they couldn’t point out where she was wrong. But the girls didn’t stop Rachel because she’d have to learn how the place worked at some point, and because she was still willing to say what the rest of them wouldn’t bother to.

“You’re not allowed to strip search us alone anyway,” Rachel said.

“I’ll get a couple of the girls from Regular Kids to help,” Marcy said.

Tidbit wasn’t really following. The whole thing made her sad. She stared out at a young Japanese maple tree that stood just past the far corner of the Classroom Building. The tree had a
thin trunk and smooth, straight branches that seemed to stay perfectly still as the papery, purple leaves rose and swayed in the shifting heat.

“You’re punishing us for not looking,” Rachel pleaded.

“I don’t care whether you look or not,” Marcy said, “I just want you to find the damn thing. If you all sit in the dirt and braid each other’s hair for two hours and then someone hands me the missing razor, we won’t have a problem. But if you want to avoid being searched, then I think maybe a better strategy would be to get your dormmates to stop wasting time and to start looking.”

“This just sucks,” Rachel said. “It’s always Bridget and Bev and Tidbit messing up and we’re the ones who pay for it. We spent our morning picking up garbage and now this, just because those three can’t do one fucking thing right.”

“Rachel!” Marcy said, “that’s—“

“I don’t have it!” Bev screamed, rubbing her fists up and down against her face. “I told you, I don’t have any razors!” Despite the heat, Bev wore a maroon velour dress over her jeans, and a black knit cap on her head. The dress bore at least a dozen food stains which were dull against the general glinting of sun off the velour.

“Oh, shut up, Bev,” Rachel shouted. “We’ve got to tie your shoes for you and wipe your chin, and now we’re going to get strip-searched because of you. I’d rather not listen to your histrionic displays on top of—“

“Hey!” Bev said, suddenly still. “What did you say to me?”

“I just said you don’t need to—“

“No, that word you used,” Bev said, stepping toward Rachel and pulling the hat off her head to reveal a skull that was bald except for a few wisps of blond hair around her ears and at the top of her forehead. “What word did you just call me?”

Marcy stepped between them. “Put your cap back on,” she told Bev.

Rachel stepped away. “What word?” she asked, quietly.
“That word you just used! What was it?” Bev’s face was red and her throat swelled with anger.

“What—”

“Hestronic!” Bev screamed. She threw her cap at the ground and tried to reach past Marcy for Rachel. “Define hestronic!” Bev managed only to bounce Marcy back and get tangled in her arms before their attention was drawn to the sound of many footsteps and casual banter floating through the late summer air. Bev twisted around quickly to see who was coming; Marcy and Obstreperous Girls all turned to see the Teachers’ Group round the corner of the Classroom Building and head toward the entrance.

The day before classes began each semester was the Teachers’ day to plan and schedule classes for the coming semester, and to finish grading papers and tests from the last one. For the day, they were relieved of all responsibilities on campus, including the need to follow the campus dress code, and they marched toward Obstreperous Girls in jeans and old t-shirts, cutoff shorts and faded summer dresses that revealed pale legs stuffed into wool socks and sandals. They wore baseball caps and hemp necklaces and bracelets with studs. They wore facial jewelry they’d had to work carefully into piercings that had begun to grow shut, all the happy signs of their special day. The Teachers leaned back as they walked and laughed loudly. Only four of the five Teachers were there, but their strange parade made them seem more numerous. They carried thermoses of coffee and rolled sheets of oaktag, boxes of student work and student files, bunches of magic markers and colored pencils held together by bright rubberbands, and bottles of glitter glue.

Marcy rearranged her hand around Bev’s shoulder to try and make things look friendlier and more under control than they had recently been. The girls waved at the Teachers, glad of the distraction and hopeful that they could waylay someone long enough to find an ally against Marcy. They called out greetings and questions, they joked and flirted as best they could in the face of a floating panic that rose as the Teachers simply smiled and continued making their way.
to the building. To the students at the school, the Teachers possessed a certain magic; because they spent less time in the dorms, they seemed simultaneously less substantial and more sane than any of the other adults around. But they all passed by without stopping, and Obstreperous Girls were left alone again, in a small circle around Marcy.

The disappearance of the Teachers left a silence that was filled only by the dull buzz of a brown car that had pulled slowly past the campus gates and was making its way under the outstretched branches of the Two Willows to the Mansion. It wasn't a car that any of the girls recognized. It was unusual that a car came onto campus that the students didn't recognize.

"All right, girls," Marcy said. She sounded tired. "Let's get back to work."

The girls shuffled back to the juniper shrubs, but were stopped by a scream that came from near the Mansion. As quickly as they turned to look, the scream was silenced. A man stood outside the driver's side of the brown car, which was now parked next to the Mansion's front steps. Obstreperous Girls continued to watch as the front passenger's door opened and again a scream escaped from inside the car. A woman climbed out and shut the door, and the scream was silenced, like in a cartoon. This explained the presence of a strange car: it was, the girls realized, an intake.

"Girls," Marcy said, and they ducked reluctantly back into the shrubbery to look for the razor. Tidbit crawled around for a bit, looking for a space large enough for her to lie down comfortably. She found a spot between the stems of two different bushes whose branches had grown into one another overhead. Tidbit crawled in on her elbows, inched up to where she could see the car, but nothing was happening. The man and woman were gone, into the Mansion probably, and the car was still. Tidbit was trying to figure out whether she could hear a muffled screaming still coming from inside the car when Rachel came squeezing into her space and collapsed next to her.

"Tidbit, what the hell's wrong with you?" she asked. "Why would you let her use your glasses for that? It's so stupid. She's just burning ants in front of everyone."
"I was kind of worried Marcy’d get mad when she saw," Tidbit said. "Then I forgot about it."

"I’m so pissed. She thinks she can do anything to us and get away with it."

"It’s not that big a deal," Tidbit said.

"It’s fucking humiliating."

"Well, yeah, there’s that." Tidbit thought she saw something move behind the windshield of the brown car, but it was too far away for her to be sure. "Where’s Carly?"

"She was getting groggy from the meds she took. She wanted to lie down." Rachel edged forward so she could see the car too. "Am I the only one who’s angry about this bullshit, Tidbit? It’s so fucked up."

"No, you’re not the only one who’s angry about it, it’s just that we’re naked around each other all the time, Rachel. And we’ve been crawling around in the dirt all morning because no one can trust us with a little fucking razor blade. And they’re right because we can’t even trust each other. It’s so fucked up it’s funny." She had been straining to see the car by the Mansion, but nothing new was happening, so she looked down to watch her fingers draw circles in the dust. "Try to keep it funny, Rachel," she said. "I mean shit, this is all such a nightmare it almost has to be a joke. It’s like, how much more degraded can we get?"

Rachel couldn’t tell whether Tidbit was being serious. She said, "Marcy’s just afraid that she’s going to be the one—"

Tidbit held her hand up for Rachel to be quiet. She heard something from inside the car now, a distant wailing. There was a thud, then another, a regular banging that was getting louder and slowly gaining speed. The reflection on the windshield trembled with each thud, and with each thud Tidbit could just make out the sole of a shoe hitting the inside of the glass. Then two soles, kicking the windshield together until the shatter-proof glass began to spiderweb. Finally the kicking came bicycling, one foot after the other. The girls could hear the screaming with perfect
clarity as the grey-green sneakers of the new kid kicked the crumpled window away from the frame of his parents’ car.

After a few moments, a group of staff members and Regular Kids ran out of the Mansion. They dragged the new boy from the car and held him in a WIGGLE until he stopped yelling. It took five of them to hold him still on the ground. Then they led him up the Mansion steps and inside. As time passed, the few Obstreperous Girls who had still been looking for the razor blade gave up and waited for Marcy to lead them back to their dorm in the Mansion to be searched. They sat talking to one another quietly, or drew elaborate pictures in the dust. By the time Marcy said it was time to go, most of the girls had fallen asleep beneath the bushes, drooling in the heat of the afternoon. Those still awake crawled around and woke the girls who were sleeping.

Rachel and Tidbit had to help support Carly, still woozy from the meds, on the way back. They told Marcy when she asked that Carly had turned her ankle looking for the razor.

As they walked with Carly between them, Rachel asked Tidbit, “Does WIGGLE stand for anything?”

“It’s a wonderful invitation to grow and gain a limiting experience,” Tidbit said.

The east wall of the Teacher’s Lounge was taken up by an enormous window that was sealed shut. This made the room uncomfortably warm in the mornings, especially when more than a few Teachers were crowded into the room, as they were now. A torn and twisted set of bamboo blinds were lowered over the window to keep the sunlight out, but the string that held the left side of the bamboo slats together had gotten tangled in the pulley mechanism at the top so that this side was only lowered half way, leaving the blinds hanging at a rakish angle and casting an uneven yellow shadow across the room.

Dedrick was sitting in the corduroy recliner, with a stack of math exams and a sleeve of styrofoam cups in his lap. “Hey Spencer,” he said, “what’s up with your dorm?”
“They’re not my dorm anymore,” Spencer said. He was looking out the window where the girls had just passed. “I’m still with Obstreperous Boys, at least until they’re done with Building Bridges.” He sat down on the couch under the large window.

Dedrick struggled with the plastic wrapper on the sleeve of cups. “But the girls wuv you,” he said. “Building Bridges. That’s such a dumb fucking name. It should be called ‘Building Bridges – Get it?’ How’s it going?”

“The bridge is done. All they have left to do is the sign.”

“No, I mean the emotional bridges between the boys. How’s that going?”

“Oh, fuck you,” Spencer said and laughed. The other Teachers in the lounge looked up.

“Let’s watch the language, boys,” Doris said, “the language.” The plastic wrap on the sleeve of cups finally tore and half of the cups spilled out of Dedrick’s lap and onto the floor. He leaned out of his chair to try and reach them.

“What’s the sign going to say?” Josephine asked.

“Something about how only one person is allowed on the bridge at a time,” Spencer said.

“The boys are still trying to reach a consensus about how to phrase it.”

“It’s good there’s a bridge there,” Dedrick said. “It’ll save everyone the trouble of just stepping over the pond.”

Spencer picked up one of the styrofoam cups and threw it at Dedrick’s head. “It’s an Ornamental Pond,” he explained slowly. “It’s an Ornamental Bridge.”

“Your guys really put the mental in the ornamental,” Dedrick said.

“Oh, that’s good, Dedrick,” Spencer said. “It took Obstreperous Boys almost a whole afternoon before they thought of that.”

“That’s why I teach math,” Dedrick said.

“Where’s Karla?” Doris asked. “How is she late again? I can’t believe one of my Teachers is late on the one day we have to prepare for the semester. For the semester. You know, having
this day is a favor Gabriel does for us, but he doesn’t have to. It’s an insult to him to be late. It’s an insult to him.”

“I think she wanted to spend some time with Felicitous Girls in Zen Gardening before classes started again,” Josephine said. “I saw her riding her bike that way earlier.” Dedrick began to hum the Wicked Witch of the West’s theme.

“Well, this isn’t the day for that,” Doris said. “She’s had all summer for that. Getting all the pupils into the classes they need, and coming up with those classes, and all the IEPs, that responsibility is ours for today. Ours for today. And we have this day, but we all have to be here.”

“We’re all here, Doris,” Spencer said. “Karla’s the one who isn’t.”

“Well, I don’t want to be the only one who’s the one who’s always confronting her,” Doris said. “It’s you she’s disrespecting as much as me when she’s late.”

“There’s plenty of stuff we can do until she gets here,” Spencer said. “We all have papers to grade, and the four of us can start coming up with our classes.” He tore open a bag of pretzels with his teeth, placed it on the coffee table in the middle of the room, and took a manila envelope from the floor near his feet.

“That’s not the point,” Doris said. “That’s not the point but you are right. Now Dedrick, we’ll have you do the beginners math class again, but we need a new name for it.”

“We just gave it a new name this semester.”

“Well we have to come up with a new name every semester, because if educational consultants look at their pupils’ transcripts and see that the transcripts have them in the same class twice, they think we’re not following the individual educational plans. That we aren’t following them. So what was it last time?”

“God, I don’t remember,” Dedrick said. “Do you guys remember what we decided on last time?”
Spencer laughed and choked on his pretzel. “You don’t remember the name of the class you’re teaching? I’m gonna throw another cup at you.” He picked one up and threw it, but it only flipped end over end and landed on the floor next to Dedrick’s chair. Dedrick reached above his head to the bookcase that stood against the wall behind him and pulled down a book. He picked up the cup, tossed it in the air, and used the book to bat it back in Spencer’s direction. Dedrick connected, but the cup missed. He looked down at the book in his hand. It was Bacon’s New Atlantis. He threw it at Spencer.

“I think,” Josephine said, “it was something about humble beginnings.”

“That’s right, it was Humble Starts and New Beginnings,” Dedrick said. “See, I know,” he told Spencer.

“So, any ideas?” Doris asked.

Dedrick thought for a moment. “How about ‘Mathlab’?”

“I don’t know,” Doris said. “I don’t know about that one. We tried that one before but the pupils started calling it ‘Methlab’.”

“Math on the Run,” Spencer suggested.

“Definitely not,” Doris said. “Gabriel definitely wouldn’t like that one at all.”

“How about Make Mine Math?”

“Fun With Numbers.”

“Counting Without Fingers.”

“Don’t Step on the Math, Man.”

“Guys,” Doris said, “guys, this isn’t helping.”

“What?” Spencer asked. “I thought that last one was pretty good.”

There was a knock on the open door. “Good,” Doris said, “now we can get started.” But when she turned to see that it was Ellie and not Karla in the doorway, Doris excused herself to go and call the Felicitous Girls’ dorm from her office upstairs.

“Hi, Teachers,” Ellie said, “can I crash your party?”
“Sure,” Dedrick said. “How come you’re not with your boys?”

“Roger said Gabriel thought they weren’t working hard enough on the Dirt Pile, so he’s supervising them this afternoon.”

“Gabriel’s supervising them?” Spencer and Dedrick asked simultaneously.

“No, Roger’s supervising them,” Ellie said. “What’s up with those blinds?”

Dedrick, Spencer, and Josephine all turned to look at the bamboo blinds hanging askew. “I don’t know,” Dedrick said. “It’s always been like that. I thought we were going to have some dorm fix it for a Reciprocity Detail, but it’s still like that.”

Ellie walked across the room and climbed up onto the arm of the couch that sat beneath the large window. She untangled the string from the slats, but was too short to reach the pulley mechanism at the top. She wore jeans and a small black t-shirt. “What are you guys doing?” she asked as she tugged at the string to even the blinds.

“We need a new name for beginner’s math,” Dedrick said, watching her stretch to reach the top of the blinds. “Any ideas?”

“I always sucked at math,” she said.

“That’s good,” Spencer said. “Maybe a little blunt.”

“I don’t know,” Dedrick said. “I think we might have a winner. But we’ll have to ask Doris.”

“Oh!” Ellie cried as the blinds crashed to the floor behind the couch and a thick ray of dirty lemon light flooded the Teachers’ Lounge. The whole room seemed suddenly airless and tight, hot and brimming with dust motes. With a sigh, Ellie jumped down off the arm and collapsed into the couch next to Spencer. “I hate this fucking place,” she said.

Ellie was small and blonde, with eyebrows so pale they were barely visible, and a round pink nose. Her eyes were a light, light grey. She waited for some response, but the Teachers had retreated into themselves. They all hated working there, and they all stayed for what they believed were bad reasons. Finally, Dedrick asked, “Are you thinking about leaving?”
“I think about it every day. And then I think maybe it’s just that I haven’t had a weekend off since July. Because of all the new staff showing up and then quitting. That one guy didn’t even stay a full day. I’m so jealous of all the people who get to take off.”

Again, no one said anything for a time. Spencer turned back to the folder of papers next to him on the couch and began reading through them, and the other Teachers went back to their work as well. Ellie picked up the styrofoam cup that Spencer and Dedrick had been knocking back and forth and filled it with pretzels. She leaned back in the couch and put her feet up on the lime green table; it occurred to her that all the furniture in the lounge was painted or upholstered in various shades of green.

“Hey, you want to hear something funny?” Spencer asked. “For the final essay for my social studies class last semester, I had them write an analysis of some piece of advertising—“

“Did you say semester?” Ellie asked.

“Sesmester,” Spencer said. “We have six of them. It’s the only way that five Teachers can give enough courses so that all the pupils can take what they need.”

“ Weird.”

“Yeah. But anyway, they had to write about advertising. Check this sentence out: ‘Shiny cereal boxes use crazy characters to convince parents to be their children’s breakfast.’”

“Whose is that?” Josephine asked.

Spencer flipped the page over. “William Yoder,” he said. “Some of these kids are incredibly stupid.”

“Wow,” Dedrick said. “I’d believe his parents became his breakfast. They might yet.”

“Is he one of your serial killers?” Josephine asked.

“I know he’s on our list, but not very far up,” Spencer said. “Do you remember?” he asked Dedrick.

Dedrick shook his head. “Check,” he said.
Spencer got up and reached over Dedrick’s head to grab a notebook from the shelf. Doris walked into the room as he flipped to the middle of the notebook. She sat back down in her chair. Spencer found what he was looking for and said, “Well, we have William down for being cruel to animals, but nothing about bedwetting or awkwardness around the opposite sex. Not very promising.”

“What’s this about now?” Doris asked.

“Nothing,” Dedrick told her.

“I have a funny sentence in one of my papers too,” Josephine said. “This one begins, ‘Ironically, William Blake decided to name his poem about the chimney sweeper ‘The Chimney Sweeper’.’ Isn’t that insane?” Josephine asked, and laughed.

“What does that mean?” Spencer asked.

“I have no idea.”

Dedrick chewed slowly on a pretzel. “Maybe,” he said, “they’re so used to being lost and confused in school that they find it ironic whenever anything makes sense.”

“What do you think, Josephine?” Spencer asked. “Have you taught them badly or too well?”

Doris interrupted here. “Karla should be on her way. In the meantime, let’s talk about electives. About electives. Spencer, we need an English elective for the pupils who’ve already finished their required courses.”

“I didn’t know I’d have to come up with one this time. Didn’t I just do ‘A Stranger Among Us’ a couple of semesters ago?”

“Yes, but several of our pupils completed the state requirements since then, since then.”

Ellie sat up with her cup of pretzels. “What’s ‘A Stranger Among Us’?”

Dedrick had folded one of his exams into a paper airplane and threw it toward the open door. It veered sharply left, crashed into the wall and drifted slowly to the floor. “‘A Stranger Among Us’,” he said, “was Spencer’s brilliant class about unreliable narrators.”

20

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“The kids were hardly ever there, and the ones who were were always on so much medication that, well, it wasn’t a very high functioning situation. Bev drooled on her desk all through ‘Diary of a Madman’.”

“A clear but ultimately unpersuasive analysis I think,” Dedrick said.

“Is Bev on your serial killer list?” Ellie asked.

“All the theorists are,” Dedrick told her.

“So,” Doris said, feeling that she had indulged their digression long enough. “For this semester?”

“I don’t have any ideas,” Spencer said. “I was pretty unhappy about how things went last time.”

“You should teach a class called ‘Books Dedrick Can Reach From His Chair’,” Dedrick said. He reached behind his head and, without looking, knocked a number of books from the shelf behind him. They tumbled down over his head, some landing in his lap, some hitting the arms of the corduroy chair and landing on the floor.

“Guys, we really need to get this done today,” Doris said sadly, “today.”

“Doris, we’ll change the name,” Spencer said. “What’ve you got?” he asked Dedrick.

Dedrick began reading off titles and tossing the books one at a time across the room to Spencer. “Aristophanes’ plays, ‘Famous Monologues from TV Teleplays’, ‘The Writings of Kropotkin’ – better not use that one.”


“I think he’s some Marxist,” Spencer told her.


“Whoa, whoa,” Spencer said, struggling to catch or dodge the flying paperbacks. “That’s enough”
“You really think this will make an okay elective?” Doris asked.

“I do,” Spencer said.

“I definitely do,” Dedrick added.

“What will we call it?” Doris asked.

“Cooking With Butter,” Spencer said.

The phone rang in the atrium. “This better be Karla,” Doris said, and left to answer it.

“What’s up with her?” Dedrick asked.

“With Doris?” Josephine said.

“No, with Karla.”

“I think she just got really close with those girls over the summer. They put on one of her plays in the Greek Ruins.”

Doris returned and said, “Ellie, they need you in the Mansion. You’ve got an intake.”

“Oh, great.” She struggled up out of the couch and said, “Sorry about the blinds. Am I a part of this meeting or can I just go?”

“I think we need to spin it,” Doris said.

“Okay. This is my consensus to leave the meeting,” Ellie said.

“Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

“All right. See ya’, Teachers.”

Benjamin got up to wander around the Reception Room, where he’d been left alone for what seemed much too long. He was anxious to get the tour over with and go home, and he was anxious to know what they were telling his parents. It worried him that they didn’t want him there for whatever it was. His parents were too susceptible, he knew, and he found himself less
worried about what all this might mean for himself than that the people at the school would be trying to confuse them. They’d forced him into coming up here for a tour, but if they were being talked into bringing him back to stay, he’d have no choice but to stay furious at them. He knew how much it hurt them, but it was his only recourse; he couldn’t be away from them, they need him to look after them. If they didn’t realize that, it just proved that they needed him to help make decisions like this.

Behind the couch on which they’d left him, there was a small table with flower vases. One was in the shape of a pyramid, glazed light blue, with maroon flowers coming out of an opening at the top. The other vase was pale green and round. The flowers in that one were yellow. There was a Persian rug on the floor, and bookshelves against one wall, and a small fireplace. In the back corner of the room, there was a baby grand piano.

Above the mantle there hung a portrait of Gabriel, sitting on a horse. The proportions were off, or else it was a horse with very short legs, and Gabriel wore some sort of uniform with epaulets and gold braids hanging from the shoulders. There was a curved sword hanging from his belt. Gabriel looked straight out of the painting with a blank look on his face, except that his eyebrows were raised in a way that made him look both a bit doubtful and as if he were inviting the viewer to be impressed. The horse stood with Gabriel on its back in the foreground of the painting, at the near edge of a large field, and visible in the distance between the front and back legs of the horse a building was burning.

Benjamin could hear people walking around and talking on the other side of the doors to the Reception Room. The doors were heavy and slid out of the walls to meet in the middle, but there was a crack between them through which he could see a few of the people who had dragged him out of the car and into the Mansion standing around, leaning against the furniture. They had said strange things to him when they were holding him down outside. It was like they were encouraging him to freak out, telling him, “Fight all you want, we’re going to keep you safe,” and, “Just let it all out.” It had surprised him enough that he had stopped screaming, and just
stared at them, and they seemed disappointed that he didn’t struggle more. One of the boys, who
didn’t look much older than Benjamin himself, had even brushed the damp hair out of his face
and asked him if he was sure he was done. Benjamin assumed that now they were standing guard
outside to keep him from bolting, but there were windows in the Reception Room that he figured
he could get out of just as easily.

He turned back to take a closer look at the painting. The building that was burning in the
distance, the one he could see between the horse’s legs, seemed to be a barn. There were more
horses near it, one reared up on its hind legs, one lying in the grass to the side of the building.
This second horse was on fire, and there were other horses sticking their heads out of the barn,
their strong throats and faces framed by swirling brushstrokes of black smoke. The trees behind
the barn were in the grip of a wind evident nowhere else in the painting, their branches swinging
out and upward so that the gray-green undersides of the leaves showed against the darkening
gunmetal sky. The paint itself was thick and choppy, and especially in the little scene with the
burning barn, it looked wet and greasy. Benjamin could see how each flame rising from the barn
or from the body of a horse was laid on by the soft, thin tip of a paintbrush.

Benjamin turned toward the entrance when he heard the doors being dragged open. He was
ready to tell his parents to forget about the tour, that these people were manipulating them and
they should just go home. Gabriel who walked in first, followed by a girl Benjamin hadn’t seen
before. Gabriel was a short and paunchy man with a tan so deep that his skin looked almost
orange. He wore a dark grey suit over a light grey shirt and around his neck he had a light, mint
green scarf that trailed behind him. Benjamin stepped to the threshold to look for his parents in
the Great Hall but Gabriel grabbed him tightly by the arm and led him back into the Reception
Room. In his other hand, Gabriel carried a small gift bag.

“Where’s my parents?” Benjamin asked. “Where’d they go?”

Gabriel didn’t say anything, just sat down in the flower-patterned armchair across from the
couch and removed a fork and a plastic container from his small bag. The container held a small
Benjamin looked to the girl for help but she was watching Gabriel remove a silver pepper grinder from the bag and grind pepper over his salad. Next he tucked the corner of a dusty rose napkin over his scarf and into the collar of his shirt. He began eating his salad.

“Benjamin,” Gabriel said with his mouth full of food, “this is...” he looked up at the girl, who smiled down at him.

“Ellie,” she said.

“Ellie,” he said. “She’s going to be your DormParent in Felicitous Boys. I’ve asked her to come over and bring you to meet the dorm.”

The blood rushing to Benjamin’s face pained him behind the eyes; he flushed with a surfeit of anger and fear that left him stuttering for lack of what to ask or say first. “I, I’m just here for a tour,” he finally said. “Where are my parents? They said I only had to come for a tour.”

Breathing heavily, he looked wide-eyed at Gabriel. But the true facts of his new situation were assembling in his head, slamming up against one another and knocking up images of how idiotic he had been sitting there waiting for his parents to return. Gabriel, he couldn’t help noticing, had a bit of something stuck to his chin.

Gabriel stuffed another forkful of salad into his mouth, and after trying once or twice to talk through it, he looked up at Ellie and gestured for her to explain.

“Your parents decided to enroll you,” she said. “They’ll send your things. Until then, you can borrow what you need from other boys in the dorm.”

Benjamin bolted through the open doors and into the Great Hall, but stopped short when the crowd of people there stood up to get in his way. He turned back to Gabriel and asked, “Can’t I just talk to them? This is so stupid. Where are they?”

“They’ve already left,” said Ellie, who had followed Benjamin into the Great Hall. “You’ll be able to call them this weekend, and you’ll see them on the next Parents’ Sunday.”

Gabriel turned toward Benjamin and Ellie from his seat in the Reception Room. He nodded to the people who had been standing guard, and they all left. Then he said, “Behave yourself,” to
Benjamin and gestured with his fork for Ellie to take him away, absently waving in the air the endives and radish he had just speared.

Ellie took Benjamin by the hand. “You ready?” she asked.

Benjamin felt the need for some drastic action, but he had no idea what to do, or what the consequences might be. If his parents were really gone, it wouldn’t do any good anyway. Ellie was leading him back to the Office, which was just inside the front entrance to the Mansion. He was lightheaded and his vision blurry, but certain details of the Great Hall appeared to him with hallucinatory vividness.

There was a chill in the enormous room, and the cold empty smell of furniture polish. The Hall seemed to dwarf whatever furniture it held within itself, and although each piece was large they all seemed thin and provisional, as though made from paper. Benjamin watched a tall, narrow dinner table with spindly legs and an inlaid top as high as his chest recede as he followed Ellie past it. To his right as they left the Great Hall was an empty, cavernous stone fireplace sour with the faint breath of ashes.

In the Office, Ellie let go of his hand. The secretaries all turned and smiled brightly at him. On one of their desks, Benjamin saw his bookbag sitting dejectedly, half collapsed over itself. They must have gone out and come back in again, he thought. He had left the bag in the car. His parents must have found it there when they went to leave, and brought it back in before leaving again. Just to bring it to him. It was a stupid thought. The image of his mother running back into the Mansion, shaky on the steps, while his father waited impatiently in the car behind the crumpled windshield, and then her stealing out again. But they must have.

It was a paltry thing that just hung there, opaque and obvious. They must have gone out and come back in again. Inert and weightless as a clump of dirt in his fist. But it was dizzying too. He looked down into the long, open drawer of a filing cabinet and tried to fight back the huge clotted swelling in his chest. Benjamin sighed and felt his breath flutter, but it was only when he paused to scratch an itch on his cheek that he realized he’d begun to cry. The phrase echoing
through his head now, which he could neither place nor understand, was Why are they always so afraid? The tears came faster, sobs swept from within him beyond his ability to control.

The Office Ladies’ lipsticky smiles faded in the aquatic, flickering light of their computer monitors. Students generally were on their best behavior in the Office, so much so that the Ladies often doubted the reports of Teachers and DormParents who, the Ladies had plenty of occasions to remark to one another, were quick to complain and not all that reliable themselves. There had been incidents; once when Obstreperous boys were on Reciprocity Detail, chopping wood for the fireplaces in the Mansion, a boy had run away. Roger brought the whole dorm directly to the Office to file a Runaway Report, and William Yoder had wandered over to an empty desk, raised an axe high above his head and let it fall, burying the blade’s edge in the desk top. Obstreperous Boys had stood still, stunned and laughing for a moment, until Roger turned from the fax machine, realized what had happened, and lunged across the room to restrain William. But the Office Ladies understood William, and knew he was just being difficult. They had all been at the school long enough to be scared only of kids who were out of control. Benjamin seemed to be out of control.

Ellie was relieved that this crying jag and whatever might follow it was happening in the reassuring presence of the Ladies in the Office, that it hadn’t begun when she was alone with him. She rubbed his back and let him cry himself out, and when with long, heaving breaths Benjamin swallowed his sobs, she patted him gently and grabbed his bookbag off of the desk.

“C’mon,” she said and led him out of the Office. Benjamin looked pleadingly over his shoulder at the Ladies, who only raised again their smiles which now barely hid a profound but passing worry, whether for his sake or theirs, or Ellie’s, he couldn’t be sure. He followed Ellie back into and across the Great Hall to the foot of a wide wooden staircase next to which, through bleary eyes, he saw an enormous, brightly painted rocking horse with a coarse wooly mane. He wondered how he had missed it before.
“Keep up with me,” Ellie said, and took his hand in hers. The staircase had thick wooden banisters that turned elegantly, then turned again, leaving them on a carpeted landing. The staircase continued up, and Benjamin tried to see where it ended as Ellie led him across the landing and down a wide hallway that turned to become much more narrow. Narrow enough that Ellie had to let go of Benjamin’s hand and lead the way. She stopped in front of a metal door that read FIRE EXIT ONLY: ALARM WILL SOUND, but no alarm sounded when she pressed the bar and walked up three steps to another corridor that Benjamin was relatively sure sloped downward as they proceeded.

The higher floors of the Mansion were hotter and smelled of dusty wool carpeting. The walls were white, and were scuffed and dirty close to the floor, where they seemed to have been repeatedly kicked or bumped into. Benjamin hadn’t gotten a very good look at the building from outside before being dragged in, and he had no idea where he was now. He couldn’t put together any coherent picture of the building as he followed Ellie around corners and through doors. The hallways in this part of the Mansion were identical, with blond wooden doors in brushed metal doorframes on each side. Ellie entered one of these, and Benjamin followed her into a sort of office with metal shelves on one side. Ellie took a set of white sheets from a folded pile that sat on one of the shelves, and wrote something in a book that sat open on a desk in the corner. She led him out of the room through a different door than the one through which they had entered, into another corridor.

Each door in the corridor had a page torn from a spiral notebook taped to it, and a list of girls’ names was written on each page with varying degrees of elaborateness. There were imitation graffiti tags in ballpoint pen, bubble letters in magic marker decorated with flowers, obsessively penciled names spelled in letters with teardrops running down their sides to suggest either melting wax or dripping blood. After a few more turns through the maze of the building’s upper floors, Benjamin gave up trying to remember how to get back out and settled into watching Ellie walking ahead of him.
His bookbag was slung over her shoulder, and swung briskly across her back with each step. Her black t-shirt didn’t quite reach the top of her jeans, the waistband of which see-sawed slightly with her hips as she walked. Benjamin slowed down some to increase the distance between them, at first to be better able to watch Ellie and then, when she didn’t notice him lagging, to see how far ahead of him she would go before realizing. When she rounded a corner and passed out of sight, Benjamin stopped. In the moment it took Ellie to recognize the absence of his footsteps, he opened a door on his right and slipped into a room and quietly closed the door behind him.

The only light came through a window high on the wall, and Benjamin stumbled down the two wide steps that led down into the room. There was a futon couch against one wall of the room, and opposite that there was a desk with a computer on it. Benjamin walked quietly around the room once, and noticed that there was someone asleep on the futon. He came closer and saw it was a heavy, middle-aged woman with dark, curly hair. He quickly returned to the door to see if he could hear Ellie coming back down the hall to look for him. He didn’t hear anything, but was afraid that maybe he just couldn’t hear her through the door.

Benjamin looked back at the room to see if the woman on the couch was stirring, and remembered the looks on the faces of the staff members who had dragged him out of his parents’ car. It was a combination of theatrical consternation, even sadness, and an insistent grimness that barely hid their enthusiasm at getting to overpower someone, each responsible for a limb that he or she could twist, fold, or pull any way at all. For all he knew, Ellie had been one of them, or might be calling for them now. Benjamin opened the door and turned to close it quietly, almost bumping right into Ellie.

“What were you doing in there?” she asked.

“I fell behind,” he said. “I thought you went in there. What’s that room for?”

“No, I went around that corner.” Ellie pointed behind herself. “That’s one of the therapy rooms. If someone had been in there, you and I would both be in a heap of trouble.”

“How do you know no one was?” Benjamin asked.
He thought he saw Ellie’s mouth soften into a tiny smile. “Because,” she said, “I don’t hear any trouble. Kids here aren’t allowed to walk around alone. Come on. When you’re with Felicitous Boys, you’ll always need to be within arm’s length of the other boys.”

“How come?”

“That’s part of Gabriel’s system. It’s called your GROUP, which stands for genuine relationships occur in uncomfortable proximity.”

She led him around the corner and through a door that led into a kitchenette. The kitchenette was attached to a good sized lounge, furnished with three large couches arranged around a small square table and thin wool carpeting that was worn to strands in parts. There was a large TV on a shelf bolted in one corner of the room. The TV was on with the sound off; it showed a bunch of ATVs being raced around an indoor dirt track.

They walked through the lounge to a hallway with bedrooms on either side. Ellie walked into one and tossed Benjamin’s bookbag on the lower bunk of one of two bunkbeds in the room.

“This room’ll be yours,” she said. She dropped the sheets onto a blue plastic mattress that lay on the floor between the two bunkbeds and said, “That’ll be your bed for now. I don’t think you’ll need a blanket yet, but if you do there are some up in the Attic to use until your parents send the rest of your stuff.”

Benjamin nodded and nodded and couldn’t think of anything to say. None of this seemed to him real at all, and yet it was too dreary to be anything but real. The only color in the room came from the comforters and pillows on the four beds. Benjamin suddenly felt exhausted. “Where is everybody?” he finally asked.

“Felicitous Boys is out on a Reciprocity Detail. I don’t remember what they did to get it, but they’re across the street working on the Dirt Pile. We’ll head over there once we go through your things.” She sat down on the bed next to his bookbag, unzipped it and began removing things. She pulled out a CD player tangled in the wires of its headphones, a stack of CD jewel boxes, half a candy bar still in its wrapper, a crumpled soft-pack of Camel Lights, a few grimy bills, a six-
pack of grape soda with two cans missing, a torn book of matches, a roll of quarters wrapped in
tape, and a black sweatshirt, the hood of which had been cut off and reattached with safety pins.
She folded the sweatshirt carefully. “Wow. Well, you can’t keep any of these things,” she said,
still looking down at the odd assortment. “I guess you could keep the sweatshirt if you got rid of
the safety pins. They’re sharps. Maybe you could sew the hood back on during Activity Time.
But the rest – the money, music, food, smokes – that’s all contraband.”

Benjamin shrugged. “Could I have one of those sodas before you get rid of them?” he asked.
“You can have one too.” Immediately he realized how stupid it was for him to be offering her
one. They weren’t really his any more. If she wanted one she would just take it.

“We should probably get over there,” Ellie said.

“To the Dirt Pile?” Benjamin asked.

“Yeah. But I guess we could split one of these first. You did just get here.” She pulled a can
from its plastic ring and sat back on the bed, propped up by a pillow. She pulled the tab and took
a long swig of grape soda.

“It’s warm,” she said, handing him the can.

“It was in the car,” he said. Benjamin leaned against one of the posts of the bunkbed.

For a while, they passed the can back and forth in silence while Benjamin tried to think of
something to talk about.

“Do new students always have to sleep on the floor?”

“Huh?”

He pointed to the blue plastic mattress on the floor.

“Oh. No, that’s just the only open bed. I mean, some of the rooms are empty, but we can’t
put you in a room by yourself. Once there are four people in the dorm sleeping on the floor, we
can open another room and put them all in there.”

Ellie used her feet to move the things from Benjamin’s bookbag out of her way so she could
stretch out her legs. Lying on the bed, she looked like she could be a high school student herself.
“How long have you worked here?” Benjamin asked.

“Too long,” Ellie said with a laugh, and wondered whether that was fair to say to a new student. “But it’s not that bad here,” she added. “You’ll make some really good friends.”

“Did you talk to my parents before they left?”

“Not really. They were just finishing up with Gabriel when I got to the Office.”

“How did they seem?”

“How’d they seem? I don’t know. I guess they were pretty quiet. Sad, maybe.”

“Hmm. Did they seem nervous, do you think?”

Ellie finished the last of the grape soda. “I don’t know really. They didn’t look nervous to me, but I don’t know your parents. Why?”

“Well, I just don’t know what they think they’re going to do with me stuck up here. I pretty much take care of everything at home. I do all the cooking. And shopping.”

Ellie sat up and handed him the empty soda can. She piled his things on top of the sweatshirt and scooped them up. “Both your parents work?” she asked as they left the room and headed back to the lounge.

“No,” Benjamin said. “My mom’s depressed. She doesn’t do much.”

“Oh.”

Ellie put the rest of the grape sodas in the refrigerator in the kitchenette, then looked around for a moment. The TV in the corner was now silently showing a robot cartoon. “I don’t have the keys to the MedCloset,” Ellie said, walking across the lounge to a grey metal desk, “so I’m just going to put these things in the desk. We’ll lock them up later.” She had to stuff the sweatshirt down in order to close the desk drawer. “Don’t try to get at any of these.”

Again, Benjamin had the feeling of being set up, watched, and he tried not to look at the desk as he followed Ellie out through the kitchenette and back into the labyrinthine corridors of the Mansion. Just like when he had been left alone in the Reception Room, or when Ellie had left him behind to sneak into the Therapy Room, he wondered whether he was being tested. He
followed Ellie around corners and through doors. She stayed closer to him this time. They went down a long flight of stairs in the back of the building, and ended up in some sort of basement lined with washing machines and dryers. It was dark and dusty; in a back part he could see large wooden folding tables leaning against one wall, and spider webs in the corners. They climbed a short staircase to a foyer, and exited the building onto a wide, white porch with peeling paint. Benjamin wasn’t sure where they were in relation to the part of the school he had seen. Directly in front of him, on the other side of a buckled macadam parking lot, was a garden path that led to a fountain.

Ellie took his hand again, and led him around the porch to the front of the Mansion. A long lawn ran down the hill on which the Mansion stood and across a large field to the road. There was an old weathered fence at the edge of the lawn, some of the crossbeams of which had fallen from their posts and lay angled against the grass. On the other side of the fence ran the road that led to the town of Grafflin, through which Benjamin had driven with his parents on the way to the school.

Ellie and Benjamin walked down the hill and cut across the lawn to the stone pillars and iron gate at the entrance to the school. The grass looked and smelled as if it had recently been cut. She led Benjamin off campus and across the road to a dirt path. Short driveways led off the path to a small complex of new buildings, their exteriors done in dark red aluminum siding. The path ended in a cul de sac, on one side of which was a pile of dirt at least nine feet high. A group of boys stood on the Dirt Pile, each holding a shovel and digging away at the dirt, tossing the dirt off the pile and into the thin copse of trees behind it. Behind one of the boys, who was fat and drenched in sweat, an older bearded man stood shouting, “That’s it, Pudding, there you go! Keep digging!”

When the man saw Ellie approaching with Benjamin, he called to the boys to climb down off the dirt and to get into a circle. The boys did, leaving a space for Ellie and Benjamin, who joined the boys and completed the circle.
“Boys,” Ellie said, “this is Benjamin. Benjamin, this is Felicitous Boys. And this,” she said, pointing to the bearded man, “is Roger. He’s a Supervisor.”

Roger reached across the circle to shake hands with Benjamin. “Glad to know you,” he said. There was an extreme vagueness to Roger’s face; his eyes were watery and his face splotched red near his ears and the wings of his nose. “Now boys, why don’t you go around the circle and introduce yourselves, and tell Benjamin a little about why you got sent here.” He pointed to the boy to Benjamin’s left.

“I’m Eric,” the boy said. “I skipped school a lot.”

“I’m Kenny,” said the boy next to him, who was very short and very skinny. “My parents found out that I kept not taking my meds during the day in school when I was supposed to take them. Most of the time I just forgot but sometimes I on purpose forgot. They used to go through my backpack when I came home and they saw the pills were still there, so they sent me where people would watch me closer.”

The next boy said, “My name’s William. You wanna see my dick?”

“Goddamn it, William,” Roger shouted. “That’s not funny. He’s new. He doesn’t know you’re joking.”

“No, I’m serious,” William said, “I’ll—“

“Just stop being an asshole and tell him why you’re here.”

William laughed. “I beat some kid up pretty bad and got put on probation. Then I took a bunch of rufies, just you know, to see, and I ended up staring at a wall for like two days. So they sent me here.”

“William’s here as part of his probation,” Roger added, as if William had been too humble to mention it himself.

They continued around the circle. Benjamin couldn’t keep track of it all. Someone had been sent to the school for chasing his father around the house with either a fork or a hammer, but Benjamin didn’t remember who it was. Someone’s parents were afraid that he was going to hurt
his sister. Someone else messed up his parents’ car by either scratching it with a fork or pummeling it with a hammer, whichever the one who had chased his father hadn’t used.

The fat boy, whom Roger had called Pudding when they were shoveling dirt, was still sweating when it was his turn to speak. Benjamin hadn’t noticed before that he wore eyeglasses that magnified his eyes significantly, and which kept slipping down his nose. Pudding said he’d found $10,000 in a safe in his father’s office and had spent all of it. When Benjamin asked him what he’d spent it on, Pudding just looked around the circle and said, “I took cabs a lot of places.” Felicitous Boys had all laughed at this and Pudding had blushed. A boy named Han said he’d been sent to the school for not being a good enough driver, but the words were hardly out of his mouth before everyone was yelling at him that he was full of shit, that no one got sent there for that. Han shouted over them that parents could send kids to the school for whatever reason they wanted, and that Gabriel was perfectly happy to take tuition from people whose kids had no other problem than that they couldn’t drive well, but the boys were not convinced.

When it got around to him, Benjamin said, “I’m Benjamin. I’m not really sure what I did to get sent here. My parents just left me.”

“That’s what they did to me too!” Pudding shouted from across the circle. “I hate that! They tell them it’ll be easier that way but it isn’t true, and then they tell them everything you’re going to say before you say it so they won’t believe you!”

“Yeah,” another kid, whose name Benjamin had forgotten, added. “Gabriel tells them that they’re doing something good for you, and that the angrier you get the more it proves you need to be here. And as soon as they’re gone he’ll call all the other parents and tell them to call your parents to tell them how happy they are that they sent their kids here, and about how well we’re all doing.”

“Yeah,” said Pudding, waving his shovel. “And look at us!”

Roger stopped things there, and told Felicitous Boys to get back to work. They climbed back up onto the pile of dirt and began scraping and shoveling, all except for Pudding, who waited next
to Roger. “Go on ahead and get to work without me,” Roger told him. “I’ve got to talk to Ellie for a minute. But don’t let me catch you slacking.”

Pudding wandered around to the side of the Dirt Pile where Roger couldn’t see him and sat down with his back to the rest of the dorm. Benjamin followed him. He sat down next to Pudding, who was pulling something out of his pockets and stuffing it into his mouth. “What’s that?” Benjamin asked.

“Pancakes,” Pudding said. “Don’t tell.”

Pudding didn’t offer Benjamin any, he just kept pulling pieces of pancake from his pocket and eating them. The boys on the Dirt Pile above them were throwing shovelfuls of dirt over their heads into the woods with a slow, regular rhythm. At some point Roger called to the boys that he was leaving, and that they should listen to Ellie. Soon after that, Pudding turned to face the boys up on the Pile.

“Hey, could you please watch where you’re throwing that dirt?”

“Okay,” someone called, as clumps of dirt rained down directly onto Pudding and Benjamin. One shovelful hit Benjamin in the back of the neck, getting dirt down his collar and in his ear. He felt a small rock clip him in the temple. Pudding stood up and started yelling, and when another shovelful got him in the face, he ran at the pile and grabbed for someone’s ankle. Benjamin took a step back and looked up to see whose it was. It was William’s ankle Pudding had hold of, and despite his hitting Pudding in the shoulder with his shovel, Pudding wouldn’t let go. He dragged William down from the Pile and fell on him, throwing punches.

The other boys ran down from the top of the Dirt Pile and circled Pudding and William until Ellie got there, at which point they pulled the two boys apart. Pudding picked up his glasses and began cleaning the lenses with the bottom of his shirt. William was smiling, with some blood on his teeth. He pointed at Pudding’s waist and said, “Hey, what’s that?”

A piece of pancake was sticking out of Pudding’s pocket. “Nothing,” Pudding said, stuffing it back in.
“Bullshit, nothing,” William said. “That looked like a pancake. You’ve got fucking pancakes in your pockets.” The rest of Felicitous Boys were crowding closer to get a better look.

“Empty your pockets, Pudding,” Ellie said.

“This is ridiculous,” Pudding said, taking a step toward Ellie. “William starts a fight and throws dirt and scratches up my glasses and it turns into a debate about pancakes. This is why our dorm is always getting put on restriction, Ellie, because you let people distract you from focusing on the central issues.”

Ellie’s grey eyes darkened a touch. “So are you saying you did take pancakes from breakfast and stuff them in your pockets?”

“No, but if I did, it wouldn’t be against the rules anyway.” This started all of Felicitous Boys arguing about whether Pudding was right, and it was in the middle of this argument that someone shouted that Han was running away.

The boys turned to see him sprinting past the Dirt Pile and into the sparse woods behind it. Han was short and heavy, and he seemed to be trying to gain speed as he tossed his shovel high over his head. He ran quickly, though, close to the ground with his arms pumping wildly at his sides.

“Shit!” Ellie said as the boys all dropped their shovels and started chasing after him through the trees. She ran along after them, and Benjamin jogged along behind her. The dorm followed Han through the woods onto someone’s front lawn and then onto the main road that ran past campus into Grafflin. Ellie stopped when they got to the road and grabbed Benjamin. “Go to the Mansion and find Roger,” she told him. “He should be in our dorm going over some paperwork. Tell him what happened.”

She turned back to follow the boys running down the road as Benjamin called out, “But, wait, how do I get to our—“

“It’s just right where we were before,” she yelled over her shoulder. “I’ve got to go.”
Benjamin stopped and watched Ellie and the dorm chasing Han down the road. They were a clumsy bunch, some running on the road, some on the grass to the right. The pack slowly thinned to a string, the faster ones in front, the ones behind struggling to keep up. Benjamin waited until he could just make out the last of Felicitous Boys disappearing over a slight rise in the road.

When he saw that they were gone, Benjamin crossed the road and climbed over one of the fallen crossbeams of the fence onto campus. The sun was just beginning to dip toward the tops of the mountains, and a breeze swept through the valley, sending grey ripples along the wide green lawn. Benjamin turned and looked at the road stretching away from the school in the direction opposite the one Felicitous Boys had taken. By the time anyone realized, it would be almost impossible for them to find him. He wondered what they would do, whether they had people who looked for runaways, if they would get the police involved. His parents would worry. The road ran straight as far as he could see, trees overhanging both sides. It would serve them right.

Benjamin looked up at the Mansion standing atop the hill in front of him, across the green field. It was an enormous white farmhouse to which numerous additions seemed to have been made over the years. On the side facing Benjamin, a high, peaked roof sloped steeply down, interrupted by a series of gabled windows. A wide porch wrapped around the Mansion, bordered by a balustrade that ended in fluted square columns on either side of the main entrance, where Benjamin had been led in this morning. He couldn’t see it from here, but Benjamin remembered the intricate gingerbreading around the entranceway, the latticed wood figures on either side of the main door and above the stone steps. Near him in the grass, two wasps were chasing each other in quick, erratic circles. Their legs hung loose with an almost obscene indifference as they zoomed around, bumping into blades of grass.

Benjamin would think back often, over then next months, to this afternoon and this moment. He would never be able to place it, to ascribe a cause, but standing alone in the field he felt he had suddenly stepped out of a game he’d been completely involved in up until that point. He could, right now, be anyone and feel any way he chose. His anger at his parents, his
embarrassment for them, suddenly seemed like thick, ill-fitting, colorful costumes. This feeling would return to him intermittently, over the next months, so that he would ultimately worry about ever being able to take the game seriously again. Now that he knew it was just play, now that he’d seen how completely the rules could just dissolve. But at that moment he laughed at the thought that anything, absolutely anything could happen.

Rather than heading into the Mansion directly, Benjamin headed to his left, toward the far side of the hill on which the building stood. He felt strangely immune from the place, as though simply an observer. The lawn stretched around the hill, and led him into the midst of enormous, old-growth pine trees. The trees were far apart and the ground beneath them covered with dry needles. A wooden sign nailed to one of the trees read Enchanted Forest. It really wasn’t a forest at all, Benjamin thought; there weren’t more than fifteen trees, and from anywhere among them he could still see the road on his left.

Past the trees, Benjamin began heading around to his right, uphill toward the back of the mansion. He came across a rutted gravel path that ran down to the road in one direction, and in the other, Benjamin guessed, circled around the back of the campus to meet up somewhere with the main driveway that led through the stone pillars at the entrance to the campus. There were small houses on either side of the gravel road, and past the houses a dirt path that veered off to the left. A wooden sign was nailed to a post in the ground at the start of the dirt path. It was in the shape of an arrow pointing down the path and read simply Pig Pen.

Straight ahead, there was an overgrown field that looked like it used to be a baseball diamond but was now given over to witchgrass and some scattered buttercups. The rusted backstop was still there, warmed by the sun in a distant corner by the trees. It had collapsed on one side and looked as though it was in the process of lying down in the field. Benjamin could see a group of girls working among the trees behind the backstop, dragging logs out of the woods on sleds.

The gravel path turned to the right and ran through an orchard of small crabapple trees. Another wooden sign sticking out of the ground identified this as the North Orchard. This back
part of the campus was less well tended than the side that faced the road. The grass on either side of the gravel path was hummocky and rough with weeds, and last fall's leaves lay decomposing in corners of the fields, caught up in vines and brambles. Benjamin followed the gravel path to where it passed the edge of the garden Benjamin had seen when he and Ellie exited the Mansion.

Benjamin could see the back of the Mansion across the garden. There was a path of large slate stones that had begun to sink into the ground, lined on both sides by box bushes. Halfway across the garden, the path widened to a circle, in the middle of which stood a fountain. As Benjamin approached it, he noticed a small pond to his right, under the wands of a willow tree, which was identified by another wooden sign, nailed to a post in the ground, as the *Ornamental Pond*. A toy bridge, painted maroon and green, traversed the pond.

The fountain consisted of three marble bowls, one above another. Each bowl brimmed with water, which trickled down from the smaller bowls to the larger ones below. In the top one, there sat a statue of a large, curly-headed child who held in his lap a large turtle. The turtle's head and arms reached resignedly over the edge of the bowl. Around the base of the fountain was a flowerbed. Summer was over and most of the flowers were gone or wilted, but a few late blooming chrysanthemums and day lilies weathered the heat, bright and bored.

Benjamin hurried through the rest of the garden and across the small parking lot into the Mansion. He was beginning to think that he should find Roger soon. It was too strange that he'd been left alone; he had that feeling again, the feeling that he was being tested, and if that were true, he better hurry up and find him. From the foyer, he took the stairs down into the laundry room and looked around for the back staircase Ellie had led him down to get there. He found it, but realized that he didn't know how many floors to climb. On the stairs, he could hear people moving around the Mansion, but he couldn't read the sounds to tell just where they were coming from.

Benjamin guessed he should take the stairs all the way up. They ended at a door that opened into a dark room. Benjamin ran his hand up and down the wall to his right, looking for a light
switch, but couldn’t find one. The room was incredibly hot, and smelled like sawdust. As his eyes adjusted, Benjamin saw a chain hanging from an exposed light bulb. He stepped into the room and turned on the light. He seemed to be in some sort of an attic, maybe the attic Ellie had mentioned. There were dark green file cabinets stacked in one corner, and odd pieces of furniture scattered around. On top of the file cabinets there were some folded blankets. Benjamin’s nose itched from the dusty air, and beads of sweat were rolling down his face. He grabbed one of the blankets and went to return to the staircase, but the door had locked behind him.

Trying not to panic, Benjamin hurried across the attic, stumbling over some rolled-up rugs and things, and found a door on the opposite side. This one opened onto a staircase identical to the one he had climbed. Benjamin ran down the stairs, and opened a door one floor down. He saw an enormous room with deep, light pink wall-to-wall carpeting. Benjamin let the door close and ran down another flight of stairs. The door here opened onto a small kitchenette, that led into a lounge. The TV in the corner was silently showing a toothpaste commercial.

Relieved, Benjamin looked around. There was the desk, but no one was there. “Roger?” he called. “Roger?”

A thin, anxious woman marched into the lounge, closing the door to the hallway that led to the bedrooms. “What are you doing in here?” she asked. She was angry, but she was whispering. “Who are you?”

“I’m new,” Benjamin said. “Ellie told me to find Roger and tell him that Han ran away.”

“Keep your voice down. Roger’s not here. Han Quek?”

Benjamin shrugged. “I need to find Roger,” he whispered.

“Did you check Felicitous Boys?”

Benjamin looked around. “This isn’t Felicitous Boys’ dorm?”

The woman looked at him suspiciously. “No,” she said. “This is the Girls’ Wing. Hold on.” She grabbed the receiver of the phone on the desk and dialed two numbers. She looked at
Benjamin as the phone on the other end rang and rang, nodding her head impatiently and rolling her eyes. She hung up and asked, “When did you get here?”

“This morning.”

She laughed bitterly. “And Ellie sent you to find Roger. You just wait right here. Don’t go anywhere. I’ll find Roger.”

“Thanks,” Benjamin said. But instead of heading directly out through the kitchenette, the woman headed back through the door into the hallway she had come from, closing the door loudly behind her.

Marcy walked into the large tiled bathroom where Obstreperous Girls were. Carly was getting undressed, handing her clothes one piece at a time to Kelly, one of the two Regular Kids who Marcy had called to help with the strip searches. Kelly went carefully over the hems, cuffs, waistbands and pockets of each piece of clothing, then folded it and placed it in a neat pile on the floor. Jenna, the other Regular Kid, kept an eye on the rest of the girls to make sure that they didn’t stash anything anywhere. Kelly and Jenna were dressed alike, in slim tan pants, and nice black button-down shirts. Regular Kids always looked better than the other kids on campus, because Gabriel took them all shopping at the beginning of each semester.

Once Carly had gotten undressed, Kelly had her raise her arms, turn completely around, crouch down and then stand up. Then she checked Carly’s mouth, ran her fingers through Carly’s hair and checked behind her ears. When she was satisfied, she let Carly take her clothes and go get dressed in the large shower room, where all the other girls who had already been searched waited so the ones yet to be searched couldn’t pass anything to them. Tidbit was next in line.

“Kelly, Jenna,” Marcy said, “I’ve got to go take care of something. Please just finish up the searches and take the girls to lunch if I’m not back by then.”

“Who was yelling?” someone called from the shower room. The tiled wall made voices echo strangely. “It sounded like a boy.”

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"You guys don’t need to worry about that. Girls who’ve been searched stay in the shower, and all of you guys listen to Kelly and Jenna."

Marcy left. When she passed through the lounge, Benjamin was still standing by the desk, watching the TV in the corner.

Kelly began to go through the routine with Tidbit, having her take off one piece of clothing at a time. Carly, dressed now, sat down in the entrance to the shower room, where she could see the Regular Kids. She crossed her legs and said, "Hey, what do you guys enjoy more about this: getting to see us all naked or ordering us around?"

Kelly and Jenna just looked at each other, and didn’t say anything.

"I mean, it’s one thing when Marcy’s here making you do it. But now that she’s gone, what reason do you have to keep this up other than that you’re getting off on it?"

"Carly," Kelly said, without looking away from Tidbit, "if you actually wanted to have a conversation about this, we could, but you’re not asking honest questions. You’re just trying to start a fight, and we’re not going to play into your little set-up ."

"Did you ever think," Jenna added, "that maybe we want to keep you guys from hurting yourselves? We were both in Obstreperous Girls too, you know. The more you complain about this, the clearer it is that you just don’t understand anything about OWCH. You’re still holding onto your secrets and denying intimacy, you’re not being open, willing, clean, or honest."

Kelly looked at Jenna as if she were wasting her time saying so much. She folded the last of Tidbit’s clothes, and asked her to raise her arms, then turn around.

"You two are a couple of sell-outs. I’d rather stay in Obstreperous Girls than become a RO-bot like you."

The girls ignored Carly this time, and asked Tidbit to crouch down. "You guys are looking for a razor blade. How fucking crazy do you think we are?" Tidbit asked, doing it anyway.

"You never know," Kelly said. "All right, you can get dressed."
But before Tidbit could take her things, they heard the squeak of the showers being turned on, and the sound of water splashing in the shower room. Jenna and Kelly and the girls waiting to be searched turned, but couldn’t see any of the girls in there. “Hey, turn off the water,” Jenna called, but there was no response. “I said turn it off.”

“I’ll keep an eye on these girls,” Kelly said. “You see what they’re up to.”

Jenna hurried into the shower room while Kelly and the other girls waited and listened. “You better come in here,” Jenna called. “Bev ate soap. Her mouth’s all foamy.”

“It smelled good,” Bev shouted, her voice a bit muffled.

Jenna looked at the girls she’d been watching for a moment and told them not to move before going into the shower room to help Kelly. When she was gone, Tidbit turned and put a finger to her lips for the other girls to be quiet, then slipped out of the bathroom. She left her clothes neatly folded on the floor, where Kelly had placed them.

Tidbit was surprised not to recognize the boy in the lounge. She looked down at his feet and saw the same grey-green sneakers she had seen kick through the windshield this morning. He was taller and skinnier than she had thought. He had a severe, anxious look to him, with very short dark hair, high cheekbones and a sharp chin. His eyes were small and green.

Benjamin was standing by the desk when Tidbit walked into the lounge. He quickly looked around and behind him to see if anyone else was there to catch them. Turning back, he thought it was strange that she walked toward him normally, as though nothing were out of the ordinary. He thought naked women in the movies walked differently, but then he had to think if he’d ever really seen a naked woman in the movies.

“You’re new here, right?” Tidbit asked him. She leaned against the desk.

Benjamin thought the polite thing would be to just look her in the eyes, which he did intently.

“Yeah,” he said, “I got here today.”

“I saw you kick the window out of your parents’ car.”

“You saw that?”
“Uh-huh. Did you meet Gabriel?”

“For a minute. He didn’t say much. Is he nice?”

“Nice? No, he’s fucking crazy.” Tidbit picked a pencil up from the desk and began playing with it. “My first day here, he bit me.”

Benjamin followed Tidbit’s eyes down to look at the pencil in her hands, then he remembered himself and raised his eyes. “He bit you?”

“Well, to be honest I did bite him first.”

“Still.”

“I know,” Tidbit said looking up at him. “I think it’s part of his philosophy.”

“Hmm. He was okay with me. He just ate a salad.”

“Usually he behaves better when Dr. Ollier’s around.”

“Who’s that?”

“She’s the assistant director.”

“Oh.” Benjamin felt time pass with the pulse of blood in his skull, which had slowed to a drowsy thump. By now he had made a careful study of Tidbit’s face. There was a soft, placid sense to her high forehead, straight, dark eyebrows and her wide nose between that sat happily between chubby cheeks. Her brown eyes and deeply bowed mouth suggested something else though, something Benjamin couldn’t quite place but which struck him nonetheless, an air of sensitivity or restlessness.

“Aren’t you worried about getting into trouble?” He asked her.

“In trouble? Why? We’re not doing anything, are we?”

Benjamin opened his mouth to answer, but didn’t know what to say.

“What’s your name?” Tidbit asked him.

“My name? It’s Benjamin.”

“Hi, Benjamin. I’m Tidbit. Look at this.” She turned around and held her hair away from her nape to show Benjamin a tattoo on the back of her neck. He stole a glance at the gentle curve
of her spine before looking back up at what she was showing him. It was a homemade tattoo in blue ink that said, simply, TIDBIT.

“Neat,” Benjamin said.

They heard the sound of people climbing the stairs on the other side of the kitchenette. Tidbit spun around and grabbed Benjamin’s arm. She leaned close and whispered in his ear. He was so overwhelmed by the touch of her hair against his cheek and the hot rush of her breath that it wasn’t until she had run back into the hallway and closed the door that he understood what she had said. “Don’t tell them anything. Make something up.”

Tidbit snuck back into the bathroom while Jenna and Kelly were still in the shower room, having a meeting with the girls there about why no one had been paying attention to Bev, and what she had been thinking eating soap. She grabbed her clothes and started to get dressed.

“Well,” Rachel asked her, “who was it?”

“The new kid,” Tidbit told her. “His name’s Benjamin.”

“Yeah? What’s he like?”

Tidbit smiled, pulling her pants on. “I scared the hell out of him.”

It wasn’t Roger who returned to the lounge with Marcy but a teacher who introduced himself as Spencer. Spencer took Benjamin downstairs and across the Mansion to his dorm and on the way explained what had happened. As Felicitous Boys and Ellie were gaining on him, Han had apparently decided to run up to someone’s door and try to get them to let him in and protect him. But just as the woman in the house opened her door to Han’s frantic banging, three or four Felicitous Boys tackled him off of her stoop and into her azaleas. Spencer seemed to enjoy telling the story very much. He found it all hilarious.

“Anyway,” he continued, “the rest of the dorm shown up and puts Han into a WIGGLE and totally tears up this woman’s garden. Pretty infelicitous, don’t you think?” He looked over at
Benjamin, who was listening quietly, in awe. “The woman has no idea what’s going on, I mean of course most people in town know about the school, but it’s rare that they have this kind of run-in with us, and I’m sure their ideas of this place are almost as bad as the place really is, so she calls the police. They ended up having to send like four cars and the paddy wagon. Who knew the Grafflin P.D. even had a paddy wagon? After checking everyone’s story and calling the school and some of the boys’ probation officers, they sent the kids back here, but they arrested Ellie. Roger’s down at the station bailing her out.”

Benjamin and Spencer were walking across a landing that looked over the wide, wooden staircase that led up from the Great Hall. “Right now your dorm’s in a CANDOR meeting, and Han’s sheeted in the corner. Do you know what a CANDOR meeting is?”

Benjamin shook his head. “It stands for claiming any negligence or dishonesty in our relationships. You probably don’t have anything to say there since you just got here. But if anyone broke any rules with Han or knew about him breaking rules, or knew that he was planning to run, that’s when they have to admit to it. Dedrick’s watching them now. He teaches math.”

Spencer opened a door that led into Felicitous Boys’ dorm from the side opposite the one Benjamin had entered with Ellie, through a door at the end of the corridor that led to the bedrooms. Benjamin could see the boys in his dorm sitting on the couches in the lounge, and as he got to the end of the hallway, he saw Han sitting on a plastic chair facing the corner of the room, wearing nothing but a sheet draped around him like a toga. Pudding slid over on his couch and patted the space next to him for Benjamin to sit down.

“Hold on,” Spencer said. He walked over to a man who was watching the boys in the lounge and got a keychain from him. He returned to Benjamin and led him back down the corridor to a door he unlocked. “This is the ShoeCloset,” he said. “Whenever you’re in the dorm, you’ve got to leave your shoes in here.”

Benjamin looked at him to see if he was going to say anything else, but Spencer just motioned for him to take his shoes off. Benjamin did, and handed them to Spencer, who placed
them on a shelf in the closet, next to all the other boys’ shoes. Spencer locked the door and took Benjamin back to the lounge.

Benjamin sat down next to Pudding. He noticed that each of the boys had a piece of notebook paper that he was either writing on or staring at.

“Hey, who are you?” asked the man who had given Spencer the keys.

“Benjamin.”

“Oh, you just got here today, didn’t you. This must all be very strange. It’s not always like this. Well, it’s usually a little like this. I’m Dedrick.” Dedrick handed him a piece of notebook paper. “Write down any FIBs you’ve got.” Benjamin looked down at the page and back up at Dedrick. “Any rules you’ve broken since you’ve been here, or any rules you saw being broken by other people.”

“What does FIBs stand for?” Benjamin asked him.

Dedrick thought for a minute. “Hey, Spencer, what does FIBs stand for?”

“Something intimacy blockers,” Spencer said. “Guys, any of you know what the F stands for?”

“I think it’s for ‘functioning’ or ‘functional’,” Pudding said. “A functioning intimacy blocker’s a secret you keep that keeps you from forming true intimate relationships.”

Dedrick smiled at Benjamin. “It stands for functional intimacy blockers. It’s a secret you keep that keeps you from forming true intimate relationships. Like if you fill your pockets with pancakes when you’re not supposed to and then you have to hide them from your friends.”

“Very funny, Dedrick,” Pudding said. “But we’ve been through all that already today, and I turned in that FIB. See?” He held his page up for Dedrick to see.

When Dedrick walked away, Benjamin asked Pudding, “What if you have a FIB about someone in another dorm?”


“No, just so I know how it works.”
“Well, the reason we write these all down is so no one knows what anyone else is turning in. And if someone turns in something involving me and I don’t mention it on my page, they make me sit here until I admit to it. If I say I saw someone in Felicitous Girls use a telephone, they’ll make all of Felicitous Girls sit and write FIBs until the person I accused admits to using a phone.”

Pudding looked back at his page as Dedrick headed back over to them.

“So what makes them think we have FIBs?”

“Han ran away. We always have meetings like this after someone runs away. After we’re done writing FIBs, they’ll make us each take turns telling Han how hurt we are that he was going to run away and abandon us. And if we say we’re not hurt and don’t care that he ran, they say we’re not being honest.”

“Oh.” Benjamin looked at Han sitting in the corner. He held his head in his hands and rested his elbows on his thighs.

“Guys,” Dedrick said to them, “I’m sure Benjamin has lots of questions, but you really can’t be talking when the dorm’s writing FIBs. Benjamin, why don’t you come with me and I’ll explain things.”

They went into the kitchenette, where Spencer could still see what was going on in the lounge. “So, what do you want to know?”

“I don’t know,” Benjamin said. “How come Han’s wearing a sheet?”

“That’s to make it harder for him to run away again.”

“How long’s he going to be in the corner?”

“Until Gabriel allows him back onto campus officially. Han needs to call him and ask to be allowed back.”

Benjamin nodded and looked around the kitchenette. “Can I have one of the grape sodas in the fridge?” he asked.

Spencer looked at him strangely, then checked the fridge. “How’d you know about these?” he asked.

49
"I brought them with me. Ellie put them in there."

"Oh. Well, no, you can't have one right now."

"When can I call my parents?"

"Yeah, your parents. Well, not until they've done a New Parent Orientation, which they'll probably do the next Parents' Sunday. I'm not sure when that is, but there's one every other month. But Ellie'll call them to let them know how you're doing."

"What's going to happen to Ellie?" Benjamin asked Spencer.

"Oh, she'll be fine," Spencer said, smiling. "The school has really good lawyers for this kind of stuff. It happens more than you'd think."

Carly shook Tidbit awake.

"Let's go smoke."

They were sharing a bed because when Rachel joined the dorm, there were no free beds. Marcy had put a mattress in between the two bunk beds in the room for her, but the mattress was thin and uncomfortable, and Tidbit and Carly said they would all take turns sharing beds.

Tidbit woke slowly, and said through a yawn, "Smoke? Yeah, let's get everyone up."

Carly and Tidbit got out of bed, and took the pack of cigarettes from the bottom of the tissue box where they had hidden them. Then they went about trying to get Bridget out of the bed above theirs, which usually took a while. When she finally awoke, Bridget moaned and punched her pillow.

"We have to go to the bathroom," Carly whispered.

"No," Bridget whispered back, as loudly as she could, "you just wanna go smoke."

"Get up," Tidbit said, "we've all got to go."

"No."

"If we leave you here and you get caught without your GROUP, you'll get put in the corner," Tidbit said.
"I'll just tell about your smoking," Bridget said, beetle-browed.

"Even if you did, which you won't, you'll still get into trouble for not turning us in earlier," Tidbit said. "And when the rest of the dorm finds out you told, you know what they'll do, so just come on."

"And if you get a limit set on you," Carly added, "the only way out is for the dorm to vote. And everybody has to fucking consent."

"Unnnngghhhhaaa," Bridget said, getting steadily louder, as if she were going to scream, but stopped before her voice rose to where anyone outside the room could hear it. "Carly, you're such a bitch."

"Thank you for the confrontation. I'll try to take it in," Carly said.

Bridget punched her pillow again and climbed out of bed. By this time, Rachel was up. She didn't smoke and didn't approve of smoking, but enjoyed the feeling of moving through the dorm in the dark when no one knew what they were doing, and she liked being in charge of Bridget and Bev, and hanging out with Carly and Tidbit. Rachel climbed down to get Bev ready.

The girls always found Bev almost impossible to wake up, whether because of all her meds or because she was just a heavy sleeper, they couldn't tell. Rachel sat down on her bed and gently pulled back the covers.

"Oh God," she said, "she's sleeping in her dress. Who forgot to help her change?"

No one answered. Carly came over and grabbed Bev's legs and swung them around. Tidbit grabbed her under her arms and they lifted her up while Rachel took her pillow. They began to carry Bev to the bathroom, but Carly stopped just as she got to the bedroom door. Tidbit didn't see her stop in the dark, and almost bumped into her, folding Bev in half so her bottom knocked against the floor.

"Be careful," Rachel hissed. "You'll hurt her."

"Sorry," Carly said. "I forgot Burn Victim. Bridget, could you grab him?"
"Shit. Why do you always want him with you?" Bridget asked, stomping over to Tidbit's bed and looking in her sheets. She found the ghostlike doll at the foot of the bed. It was white, with black eyes and hardly any shape to it at all.

"Yeah, you don't want him to smell like smoke," Rachel said.

"I have to take him," Carly said. "He's the silent witness."

They walked quietly down the hallway. In the middle of the night, the air in the dorm hung close, like overripe fruit; dark, soft, and sickly sweet. The bathroom was cool, though, large and covered in tile. Once they were in, they laid Bev's bald head down carefully on her pillow, right in front of the door, so that if anyone tried to come in, the girls would have at least a moment's warning while whoever it was had to push Bev out of the way.

Bev, though, was used to her meds, and she slept enough during the day that she slept lightly, if at all, at night. The first night they had tried to wake her to go smoke, Bev had pretended to stay asleep so they would leave her alone. But they had picked her up and carried her, which she enjoyed. She also got to eavesdrop on their conversations without having to be a part of them, and could drift off to sleep on the tile floor whenever she might want. So, she kept pretending.

Bridget sat down cross-legged next to Bev, and rested her chin in her hands. She formed an almost perfect sphere. She watched Rachel follow Tidbit and Carly into the shower room, where there was a small window high on the wall for ventilation. Bridget looked at Bev and sighed loudly. Then Tidbit stuck her head out of the shower.

"Hey Bridget, you wanna share a smoke with us?"

Now she was stuck. She had been doing everything she knew of to demonstrate how angry she was at being woken up, and couldn't give in that easily. But of course she wanted to smoke, or would want to if she knew how. She kept her voice even. "Maybe in a minute," she said, and started counting. At thirty, she got up and joined them. As Bridget walked towards the shower, on Bev's face an eyelid popped up like a window shade on a spring. This was different, she thought.
In the shower, Carly and Tidbit were passing a lit cigarette back and forth, blowing the smoke towards the window. Rachel smiled beatifically at Bridget as she walked in. Tidbit took a drag and handed the cigarette to Bridget, who sucked on it, blew out the smoke, and handed it to Carly.

"Oh hell, you don't even know how to smoke," Carly said. "You're not inhaling."

"It's not her fault. It's her first cigarette," Rachel said, and patted Bridget on the shoulder.

"Go like this," Tidbit said. She gasped, and said "My mom's home! That's how you do it."

"My mom's home! Like you just got caught."

"My mom's home!" Bridget tried.

"Good, now try it with the cigarette," Tidbit said, taking it from Carly and handing it to her.

Bridget pressed the cigarette between her lips and inhaled the way she had just learned, and began coughing violently. Tidbit ran to get her some water before her coughing woke anyone up.

She was emptying out the cup where the girls all kept their toothbrushes when, out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Bev move. Tidbit turned to look, but Bev was still. She rinsed out the cup and filled it with water, and brought it back to Bridget.

When Carly lit up another cigarette, Bridget decided she would pass for the time being. But she felt awkward just standing with Rachel, watching Carly and Tidbit smoke. So even though she had heard about it plenty of times before, she asked, "Do you guys really think this place is haunted?"

"Ugh," Tidbit said, but she smiled. "Don't we ever get tired of talking about this?"

Carly said, "No, 'cause we can never agree. I mean, everyone agrees that this place is haunted by some very evil shit, but everyone's got a different story."

"What's yours again?" Rachel asked.

"I believe in the ghosts of the horses that died when the stables burned. You ever see that painting in the Reception Room, with Gabriel on the horse? Well, if you look in the back, there's a fire, and it stables that are on fire, and the horses are burning. And that really happened, here, where the gym is now. It used to be a huge stables. And burning is the most painful way to die,
just ask Burn Victim. Plus, the horses' ghosts can't understand that it was a mistake, so they haunt the school. They're very powerful and very very angry."

"I don't think that's it," Tidbit said. She walked over to tap the cigarette ash over the shower drain. "The stables burned when this place belonged to Alistair Grube. You can see pictures from back then in the album in the Great Hall. Gabriel lets us look at it on Sundays when we watch cartoons. But the reason the stables burned was that this place was already haunted by the ghost of Grube's daughter. She always wanted to get married in winter, and have the ceremony on Triangle Lake once it froze over. And that's what they did. Her Dad was like a bazillionaire from making chocolate, and he spoiled her. So she made him go through with her idea. But she wanted these paper lanterns around the bride and groom and the priest. And no one knows whether it was the weather or the lanterns or the weight, but the ice cracked during the ceremony, and she drowned along with the priest and two wedding guests."

"You guys are so full of shit," Rachel said. "That stuff all sounds so made up. If this place is haunted, it's probably by the ghosts of kids who died here, or were hurt here and then died somewhere else."

"Did kids die here?" Bridget asked.

"Not since I've been here," Carly said. She took a drag blew the smoke up towards the window. "But there are stories. I heard one kid once jumped off the fourth floor landing and died when he hit the Great Hall."

"And there's the story about the woman who hung herself in the attic," Tidbit said. "She wasn't a student, just some lady who worked here. But she had an awful life, and this was the only place she felt okay, and when she finally decided to do herself in, she wanted to do it here. The last thing she ever saw was the attic right upstairs from where we're standing."

"Hanged," Rachel said.

"What?"

"She hanged herself, not she hung herself. That's the correct way to say what you mean."
"No way," Tidbit said. "I'm sure you're wrong. Hanged herself? That doesn't sound right."

"Yeah, that's wrong," Carly agreed.

"Whatever."

"Did anybody ever die here that was killed by someone else, like by the staff or something?"

Bridget asked.

"Not that I ever heard of," Tidbit said, taking a last drag and turning on a trickle of water from the shower to put out the butt. "But one time when Felicitous Girls rioted this one dude on staff lost a testicle. And he'd only been working here for like two weeks." The girls followed Tidbit out of the shower room to find that Bev had disappeared.

"Oh, shit," Tidbit said.

"I'm sure she just went back to bed," Carly said.

"Yeah, but do you think she heard us?" Rachel asked, her voice unsteadied by panic. "I mean, do you think she realized that we dragged her out here so you guys could smoke?"

"Come on," Tidbit said, "this is Bev. We have to put her shoes on or she'd go out into the snow barefoot. When she wakes up she doesn't even realize her face is covered with drool, let alone who's got FIBs."

Tidbit put the toothbrushes back in the cup while Carly sprayed the shower with Lysol. Then she flushed the cigarette butt down one of the toilets, and they all headed back to find Bev, asleep atop her covers in her long maroon dress.

Because Han was still considered a risk to run away, Felicitous Boys had to all sleep in the lounge. That way, if anyone did try to run, there were more people they might wake up, more people who might catch him. They moved all the furniture in their lounge into a corner, and dragged their mattresses in. It might have been fun, but they were all too wary of one another, and to most of them it just meant that there was more noise and that it would be tougher to fall asleep.
It was Ellie’s night off, and William and Eric had taken the MedBag when Roger wasn't looking, and switched their nighttime doses of Ambien for another student's morning Dexedrine. It was just beginning to take effect while the other students were falling asleep.

“You know what we should do next time we get our hands on some Dexedrine?” William asked.

“What?” said Eric.

“We should feed it to one of those stray cats that live in the dumpster, and then lock it in Gabriel's car.”

Eric thought for a second. “We should lock Giton in there with it.”

“Yeah, the cat would shred that little Pekinese,” William said.

“Yeah yeah yeah.”

“So how do you feel about our attack on Han Quek? You got some nice shots in on that lady’s lawn.”

“I don’t really feel bad about hitting him. I guess I feel bad that he actually thought it would work, running like that. I was like, is he just asking for more? He should sneak out at night, like everyone else. It's like he wasn't even trying.”

“I know what you mean.”

“I sort of feel like I punched a little baby in the ribs.”

“Babies don't have ribs.”

“What?” William sat up and looked at Eric.

“I said, babies don't have ribs. That’s why they’re so soft and fragile.”

“That’s the most fucked up thing I've ever heard. What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s true.”

“Bullshit it’s true. You just made that shit up.”

“What did you say?”

“I said you just made that shit up.”
"So what if I did? You can still argue with me."

"Why am I gonna argue with you when I know you're full of shit? It'd be pointless. Even if I win, all I've convinced you of is that babies have ribs which everybody knows."

"No they don't. We're born without ribs. The ribs grow in later."

"Fuck this." William lay back down. For a while the boys lay there, saying nothing.

"Are you enjoying staring quietly at the ceiling?" Eric asked.

"Oh, hell. All right. They have to start out with ribs, because bone cells can't be created out of nothing. You're born with all the bone cells you'll ever have. A rib can't just appear when it wasn't there to begin with. That's a fact."

"No it's not."

"Yes it is."

"It's not. How do people go from being as small as a baby to as big as people if their bodies can't create bone cells?"

"The cells grow bigger, but there aren't any new ones."

"Consistent, but I question your premise."

"Yeah yeah yeah."

Both boys were quiet for a while, paying attention to the tingling in their heads. William felt his arm shake and sat up again. "What are we going to do about these sleeping arrangements?"

"I know, I know," Eric said.

"That asshole runs and we have to have a fucking slumber party?"

"We didn't even get to vote because Gabriel sent him up here."

"I told him we'd throw him a Blanket Party."

Now Eric sat up and looked at him, smiling. "You did?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, let's do it. Or maybe we should do someone else, like the new kid."
“No,” William said, “you know who could use a blanket party? Pudding.”

“Pudding.”

“Pudding.”

“I’ll wake everyone up.” Eric started crawling around the lobby, waking everyone except for Pudding, while William pulled the sheets off his and Eric’s beds. William waited when he had the sheets, watching Eric wake people and whisper. When they were ready, he threw the sheets over Pudding and shouted, "Blanket Party!"

The boys jumped on top of the figure under the sheets, and he began to squirm. Eric lay across his legs to keep him from getting up while William held the sheets down with one hand and started throwing punches around Pudding’s shoulders with the other. The other boys jumped on, and started wailing on Pudding wherever they found an opening, swinging their fists or digging their knees into him. The pile was big enough that some bys just jumped on top, rolled off, and jumped again.

Pudding tried to roll onto his side to breathe easier, but the pile was too heavy, and he was pressed into his mattress. He tried at least to bring his arms up to protect his face, but couldn't.

A few boys didn't join the pile, and among them was Benjamin, watching openmouthed. What seemed strangest to him was that he would have expected the boys to be yelling while beating Pudding, but they didn't make a sound. Maybe that was so they wouldn't get caught, but Benjamin couldn't be sure. All he heard was grunting, and the muffled sound of knuckles hitting bones and flesh through cotton, and an occasional breathy laugh.

Pudding was by now less aware that someone's knee was in his calf or that he kept getting hit in the same spot in his ribs, and was completely focused on getting air. Someone was sitting on his back, and he couldn't even get a breath to scream for help. He paused for a moment, trying to still his panic and focus his strength to push against them. He pushed and pressed, but the weight on him didn't move at all, and just as his strength almost failed him, the weight lightened and was gone, and he rolled over and over, panting and crying.
"You guys suck," Roger shouted as they boys all scuttled back to their own mattresses. "What the hell is wrong with you? Who's in that sheet?" The sheet clung to Pudding with cold sweat as Roger pulled it off. "Of course you're picking on Pudding, you cowards." He sent Pudding to go wash up, because he couldn't think of anything else to do for him.

Rachel watched the view out her window, as she'd gotten used to doing over the past few weeks. The trees that stretched across the broad, pitted hills on the opposite side of the valley were still bare, and although the day had warmed some, the brown earth at the top was patched with snow. Marcy usually came in at some point in the morning to make sure that she was awake and out of bed, but other than that, it was up to Rachel how she spent her mornings. For about the first two weeks of being Roomed, she had schoolwork to keep her busy, but when she hadn't made any progress, Marcy began taking away distractions. First her journal, then her schoolwork, and finally any contact with other members of the dorm. Now Rachel only saw Marcy when she brought meals, and her therapist once a week. Occasionally, other staff members passing through the dorm would stop in to check on her, but Rachel had begun to realize that people were forgetting she was there. Three times already, Marcy had forgotten to bring her a meal, and Rachel had to wait until she returned to the dorm to remind her.

First thing in the morning, Rachel would try as hard as she could to remember the conversation with Gabriel. She hoped that her sleep and dreams might have somehow shifted things in her mind, allowing the memory to drift to the surface, or moving aside whatever might be blocking it. Rachel would picture the Cafetorium and Gabriel's table. She would imagine him sitting there, telling her that she could no longer write to her father because he wasn't involved with the school. Rachel pictured the pink tablecloths, the tupperware containers Gabriel always brought his food in, the other supervisors sitting at the table, hoping that these images would trigger her memory of the conversation that Gabriel insisted had taken place. But this last part, the conversation itself, always looked slightly different to her, and it did not itself have the feeling.
of being a memory. Lately, Rachel had begun to worry that imagining the event so often, in so many slight variations, might make it impossible to recognize the actual memory if it did present itself. And if she couldn’t remember it, she couldn’t get out of her room.

So Rachel would stop trying to remember, and pass the time until the other girls in the dorm left for breakfast by staring out the window. Rachel could see the road that circled through the campus, running from the main gates to the Mansion. The other girls made enough noise in the morning that Rachel could tell when they had left, but she always waited until she saw them walk up the road toward the Cafetorium before she went across the hall to where her things were kept to grab a change of clothes. Then she would head to the bathroom, which was always still steamy and filled with the competing scents of myriad shampoos and lotions. Marcy didn’t believe that Rachel was a risk to run away, so there was never anyone scheduled to watch her and she was often alone in the dorm. There was something vaguely embarrassing to Rachel about this. The degree of trust seemed to her to suggest a lack of respect; Marcy’s confidence implied that even if Rachel wanted to run away, she wouldn’t have the guts to do it.

But today, Rachel had other concerns as she stood at the window. At some point soon, a line of cars would pass through the school gates for Parents’ Sunday. Rachel had already watched the cars of the new parents roll onto campus a couple of hours ago for the New Parent Orientation. And she could see that cars had begun to line up along the shoulder of the road outside the gates, waiting for ten o’clock when parents were allowed onto campus. Rachel’s watch was in the other room with her things, so she couldn’t tell how much longer they would have to wait. Any parents spotted on campus before ten would be sent home immediately. Rachel knew she was restricted to her room whether or not her mother showed up, but she hadn’t been able to find out if she was planning to come. She didn’t even know if she had been told that she’d been Roomed for the past three weeks. Rachel had wanted to write to tell her, but because her Rooming arose out of an abuse of her letter-writing privileges, she wasn’t allowed to.
The cars outside the gates began honking, and Rachel knew it was almost ten. A few moments before they could drive onto campus each Parents’ Sunday, the excited parents all began to honk their horns. It occurred to Rachel for the first time this morning how odd that was, since most of the parents seemed more nervous than excited once they got out of their cars. As scared of us as we are of them, she thought.

After a few seconds of honking, the cars began to pull forward through the gates. The line continued, rolling slowly on its way to the Mansion. Rachel looked carefully for her mother’s car, and waited as the parade moved along. But then, she was always late.

One car stayed outside the gates, parked along the shoulder. A man and a woman got out and shut their doors above the dust blown about their feet by a weak breeze. The woman reached in through the rolled down back window and handed a treat to a large ugly dog panting in the back seat. “We’ll be right back,” she said, rubbing its head.

“Damn it, Janice,” the man said, “you spoil that fucking dog so bad and anytime I have to take it anyplace, it whines and bitches like crazy. No pun intended.” He laughed through his nose and adjusted his suede jacket over his belly. His loose face was read and marbled like a beefsteak. His wife didn’t say anything, just brushed aside the wisps of her long white hair that the wind had blown across her face. “Not everyone carries dog food around in their pockets,” her husband added, walking toward the gates. They continued along the path through campus, past beat-up sedans and new looking SUVs with parents getting out alone or in pairs, some with the siblings of their Roaring Orchards students, some without.

They walked up the stone steps and into the Mansion. Dr. Oilier was greeting parents and offering refreshments, but the couple headed straight through the Great Hall and up the stairs, familiar enough with the complicated path to Obstreperous Girls’ dorm that they ignored the handwritten signs directing them through the building. Janice jogged ahead a little, watching her step, and when she got to the lounge Tidbit was waiting for her, and hugged her tightly.

“What’d you bring me?” Tidbit asked, pointing to a small brown bag in her mother’s hand.
"Oh," Janice said, looking down at the bag, which was folded at the top. "This is for you."

She handed the bag to Tidbit. "Candy!" she said, looking into it. "Really good candy. You guys went all the way by the mall." He father walked into the lounge and nodded to Tidbit. He mused her hair.

"Short," he said.

"My hair or me?"

"Both."

Tidbit turned to her mother. "Did you bring Tractor?" she asked.

"He's in the car."

"Hold on." Tidbit went and found Marcy, and asked to be let into the ShoeCloset to get her shoes. When she returned to her parents, Tidbit held out the bag to her mom and asked, "Do you want anything from in here?"

"Sour peach," she said, taking the bag. She took a candy from inside and offered it to her husband.

"Are there any of those Halloween candy corns?" he asked.

"No, I didn't get any candy corns."

"Aw, hell," he said, leaning over and looking into the bag. Give me one of those gummi strawberries."

"Let's go see my doggie," Tidbit said, kneeling down to tie her sneaker. Although neither Tidbit nor her mother would have admitted it, they both knew that the best part of their visit had just passed. Only their anticipation was perfect, the hope of each that she would find the other changed, less distracted by her own sadness. But they were practiced observers of one another, and quick to see that nothing had changed, that there was nothing they could do for each other. Janice put the bag of candy in her purse and fixed her purse on her shoulder. It pained her to see Tidbit trying so hard, to hear the dead spot in her voice while she was trying to sound so chipper.
Tidbit’s father cleared his throat. “I think it’s ridiculous,” he said, “that we have to keep Tractor outside the fence just because Gabe’s toy dog gets the shits any time it sees another dog.”

“Dad, Giton’s not a toy dog, he’s a Pekinese. And he’s got serious problems. Some boy saved up his Dexedrine and fed it to one of the stray cats that live in the dumpsters and then locked the cat and Giton in Gabriel’s minivan.” Tidbit didn’t like to be so chatty, especially around her father, but she was trying to make things go smoothly, and he got surly if she didn’t pay enough attention to him.

“I’m just saying there’s no reason for Tractor to have to wait in the car.”

“Yeah, let’s get going.” Tidbit hopped up and called out, “Marcy, we’re leaving.”

A call of “Okay” echoed back from the hallway.

As he opened the door to leave, Tidbit’s father almost bumped into an attractive, nervous woman wearing black slacks and a grey sweater. She held her purse tightly to her front. “Excuse me,” she said. “Hello.” She smiled and paused for a moment, expecting to speak with them, but Tidbit was in a rush to see her dog, and she and her parents continued ahead. The woman waited, watching them head down the stairs, then turned and entered the dorm. She walked through the kitchenette and into the lounge, looking around uncertainly. Families were sitting together on the couches or standing around and talking, and after circling through the lounge twice, she found Marcy and said, “Excuse me, I’m looking for Rachel?”

“Oh, Mrs. Pfaff. Hi. I wasn’t sure whether you were coming or...” Marcy always tried to look as busy as she could on Parents’ Sundays so as not to have to make any small talk. Parents made her incredibly anxious. He eye was caught by a pink coral pin Mrs. Pfaff was wearing. This was the conversation she had most been dreading. “I tried to call, but I couldn’t get in touch with you.”

“Oh? I must not have gotten the message. Did you leave a message?”

“Well, no, what I meant was that I tried to get a chance to call, but I didn’t find the—“

“Is something wrong with Rachel? Where is she?”

63
“No, no, Rachel’s fine. But she’s Roomed right now. Restricted, that is, to her room. That’s what I had wanted to call to tell you about. Of course, you’re welcome to have a short visit with her, but she’s really not supposed to be spending time with people right now. Of course, she sees her therapist, and I give her her meals and meds, but other than that. She’s restricted. To her room. So she has time to think.”

“Goodness,” Mrs. Pfaff said, blinking. “That seems awfully extreme. What did she do?” She rested one hand on her hip and with the other tucked her dark hair behind her ear, exposing a tiny diamond earring. Mrs. Pfaff seemed to be getting more comfortable. She was used to dealing with people who worked for her, and she was used to making them nervous.

“Well, she was writing letters to some of her friends, which Gabriel had told her to stop doing but she says she didn’t remember—“

“But I thought she was allowed to write letters.”

“Well, yes, it wasn’t so much the writing letters as the not remembering what Gabriel had said.”

“But if she didn’t remember, how can you hold her responsible? This just doesn’t make any sense to me.” For a moment, all Marcy could think about was that she wished she were a little more like Mrs. Pfaff. There was an intensity about her, as if all she had to do was imagine the world the way she assumed it must be, and blink her bright eyes and no one would tell her anything different.

“Well, Gabriel,” Marcy said, “you see, the Rooming was Gabriel’s idea. Because when he reminded her that he had told her to stop writing to these friends, she said he had never said that. And when he asked if she meant that he was lying, she said no but that she didn’t remember him saying that. So Gabriel told her to stay in her room until she could remember their conversation.”

“And how long ago was this?”

“About three weeks.”
“You can’t possibly be serious.” There was an uncomfortable silence. “Well, this is just unacceptable. If she doesn’t remember, how is leaving her in her room going to help her remember? I’m not paying tuition so that my daughter can be locked up staring at the walls. I could do that at home.”

“Mrs. Pfaff, I—“

“No, I’m going to need to speak with Gabriel about this. Where is he?”


“Okay then. But I’d like to see Rachel first.” She was breathing deeply now, her chin tilted up a bit.

“She’s right down the hall,” Marcy said, glad that the confrontation was drawing to an end. She led the way. They found Rachel sitting on her bed, staring at her feet. Her mother ran in and gave her a hug, kneeling beside her.

“Sweetie, are you all right?” Mrs. Pfaff ran her thumb across Rachel’s face where a tear would have been if she had been crying.

“Mom, I’m fine,” Rachel said, looking at Marcy and then back at her mother.

“Rachel, why are you letting them keep you in here? Why don’t you just remember what Gabriel told you?”

“I’m trying to remember it, but I haven’t been able to yet. Sometimes I think I’m getting pretty close, but other times it feels like the memory’s getting farther and farther away. It’s just so hard. Mom, don’t cry.”

Marcy left them there and headed back to the lounge to see about the rest of the girls, and to sneak into her apartment for a while if she could. But at the end of the hallway, she ran into Bridget and her parents and Bridget’s younger sister, who were all looking for her. Bridget’s father was a short, blurry man with only a small bit of dark hair left on his head. Her mother was taller and heavy, and walked with a cane.
“Hello Marcy!” Bridget’s mother began. “Bridget says the girls have decided to let her off campus today. Is that right?”

“It is,” Marcy said, glad to be able to give someone good news. “She’s been behaving well, and taking care of herself, and the rest of the dorm decided that she’s earned their trust to go off campus.” Marcy looked at Bridget’s father, who seemed to be taking this in skeptically.

“So what’s the rules?” he asked.

“We know the rules,” his wife told him. “Now, it’s okay for us to take Bridget to buy some clothes? She says she needs clothes, and I want to get her a haircut.” She grabbed a handful of Bridget’s hair and lifted it, as if to convince Marcy.

“Shopping’s fine,” Marcy said, “but the girls get haircuts on campus. The point is for all of you to have a nice afternoon together. So you can go for lunch, do some shopping, go for a walk, whatever you like. One of you has just got to be within arm’s distance of Bridget at all times, and she’s not supposed to go back to your motel room.”

Bridget’s father nodded through all of this, while her mother beamed at Bridget, one hand on her shoulder. Bridget’s sister watched Marcy as she talked. She looked terrified.

After Bridget’s family left, Marcy had a few moments to herself. The girls whose parent’s hadn’t come were sitting quietly in the lounge. Marcy pretended to rearrange books in the bookcase, and was about to head into her own room when Mrs. Pfaff returned.

“You know, she’s really very upset,” she said, “and I can’t say I blame her. A person would go crazy sitting alone in a room like that.”

“Rachel’s not going crazy,” Marcy said.

“No, she’s not. I agree with you there, she’s certainly not. I don’t know how you people think you’re running this place, but we leave our children with you and I’m not sure you realize what a big responsibility that is. Now, I’m going to speak to Gabriel about this, even though Rachel asked me not to. She was afraid it would make things worse.”
“No, I think talking to Gabriel would be a good idea. I don’t see how things could get worse.” Mrs. Pfaff cocked her head at Marcy. “What I mean,” Marcy continued, “is I’m sure that Rachel wouldn’t be punished for your speaking with him about this.”

“Yes, well, I expect you’ll be hearing from him.” With that, she headed out of the dorm and down to the Great Hall and the Reception Room. There were large flower vases full of orange and violet orchids on the tables where refreshments were being set out by some of the parents who were always helping out on Parents’ Sundays. Some of these were parents of former students, who had graduated from Roaring Orchards. Some were parents of children who had run away from the school.

The new students, whose parents were in the orientation, sat around a table in the Great Hall. There were two nervous looking girls and three boys. They were being watched by Tyler, one of the Regular Kids, who sat sideways in an armchair, his legs dangling over one of the arms, and flipped through a glossy magazine. Mrs. Pfaff had met him on previous visits. She smiled at him, and he smiled back. He asked if he could help her with anything.

“I’m just waiting to speak with Gabriel,” she said.

“Well he’s still in the orientation. They should be almost done. You’re welcome to go on in if you’d like.”

Mrs. Pfaff decided that she would. Tyler’s eyes lingered over her as she turned away and pushed back one of the doors to the Reception Room. She squeezed into the room and took a seat toward the back as quietly as she could. Gabriel was speaking from a large armchair in a front corner of the room to about a dozen parents, who sat on couches and chairs arranged to face him. He leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. He was wearing a light grey suit over a green sweater, and no socks.

“So the point I’m trying to make,” he said, “is that in most of your families, the child that you’ve sent to us was the most powerful member of the family. Which was a problem for you, but it was an even bigger problem for your child. Because what a child wants is to be a child, and
what does it mean to be a child? To have limits. And too often in your families, your children were denied the opportunity to be children, because you didn’t set those limits.

“And what we do here is as simple as that. We set limits and we hold your children to them, we hold them responsible. Think about that: hold them responsible.” Gabriel was up on his feet now, pacing back and forth across the front of the room, from the armchair in one corner to a baby grand piano in the other, making a cradling gesture with his arms. “Why do you think that’s the phrase? That’s what your problem children have been craving, being held, being held responsible.

“You know, when pupils here get violent, when they try to hurt themselves or someone else, we have a structure that we call a WIGGLE. Rather that simply restrain a pupil, we use their energy as an opportunity. WIGGLE means a wonderful opportunity to grow and gain a limiting experience. Because that’s what children are asking for when they act out. They’re asking to be limited. There’s nothing scarier for a child than feeling all-powerful. So a WIGGLE is when we hold them, and keep them safe, and talk to them about what they’re feeling.

“Now you should all notice too, I expect that by now you all have noticed, that when the most powerful, dominant member of your family is sent away, this also creates a problem for you at home. There’s a void, and the impulse is to see that void as a problem and to fill it with worry, to worry about your child. But the void should also be an opportunity for you, to fill it with adult activities that can replace all the time you used to spend catering to childish demands. Here at Roaring Orchards, we end each Parents’ Sunday with a cocktail party in the Mansion for all the parents, and it’s a time for us to all enjoy being adults together. And a time to roll model adulthood for the pupils. Because it’s important that they’re aware that there are certain things that are appropriate for us that are not appropriate for them. And although you’ll never get them to admit it, knowing this makes them feel safer.

“Some of you, when you took a tour of the grounds, asked me about a fountain we have in the back garden. The top of the fountain has a statue of a large infant playing with a turtle in his lap.
And I always tell parents that I’ll explain it at the orientation. The statue is based on the myth of Zeus and Aliaphone. Are any of you familiar with it?” Gabriel waited a long moment. He walked over and leaned against the piano.

“Aliaphone was a gorgeous water nymph who loved to splash in her father’s pond. And Zeus, as often happened, noticed this nymph and began to pursue her. Aliaphone was young, and innocent, and did everything she could to evade Zeus’s advances. He appeared to her in all sorts of disguises in many different forms, and Aliaphone was not seduced by any of them. But there came a day when he had her cornered, and all she could do was call to her father to save her. So her father turned her into a turtle, and whenever Zeus would try to molest her, she could now simply retreat into her shell.” The new parents tittered as Gabriel paused and spread his palms.

“Well, one day, a young child approached the turtle Aliaphone. He was a sweet infant with golden curls, and he seemed curious and friendly. Slowly, as the boy showed himself to be harmless, Aliaphone began to trust him. She came out of her shell and played with the child. But of course this was only another of Zeus’s disguises, his most ingenious, and he took his chance, in the form of this infant, to have his way with Aliaphone.” The parents were transfixed, not sure whether the story was over, or what it meant.

“The point,” Gabriel said, leaving the piano and walking closer to his audience, “is that yes, it’s true that inside each of your children there is a god.” He paused for effect and turned around the room, looking each of the parents in the eye. “But that doesn’t mean you let them go around screwing turtles! So go out there, and enjoy the day with your children, and don’t let them manipulate you.” The room erupted in laughter and applause as the Regular Kids pulled open the doors and Gabriel led the parents out to the refreshments.

The parents confidently approached their children at the table. Rachel’s mother watched a tall thin man and his wife greet one of the boys, who wore a flannel shirt buttoned all the way to the top. After brief hugs and hellos, they stood together and talked quietly before running out of
things to say. But they seemed comfortable standing there quietly, waiting, she imagined, for a chance to thank Gabriel one more time before heading to the boy’s dorm.

Mrs. Pfaff waited until the new parents had left with their children, and the only people left were some of the parents who had helped Gabriel with the orientation, who were sitting on a couch in the Great Hall. She walked up to Gabriel, who was just ending a conversation with Tyler. “Mrs. Pfaff,” he said, still looking at Tyler, “I’m sure you’re here to talk to me about Rachel.” He turned to face her.

“Well, yes,” she said, a bit disarmed. It occurred to her that she had never spoken to Gabriel before. “I’ve got to tell you, I’m a bit confused and not at all happy to hear what’s been done with her.”

“But why not?” He nodded to Tyler, who walked back toward the office.

“Well, because it’s a waste of her time, and I don’t see how sitting in a room trying to remember a conversation about writing letters—”

“Mrs. Pfaff, you’re going to be unhappy with me, but I’ve got to tell you something. This is not about Rachel. Rachel is a liar, and a pretty good one, which is why she’s here and not at home. It would make sense for Rachel to be upset about being Roomed, but there’s no reason as far as I can see for you to be upset. You’re not restricted to your room.” He paused. “Why do you think you’re letting this make you so unhappy?”

“Mr—”

“Please, Gabriel.”

“All right. Gabriel. I’m upset because she’s my daughter, and she’s very unhappy and doesn’t know what to do about getting out of her room. And I feel it’s irresponsible to—”

“Mrs. Pfaff, I think it’s much simpler than that. You’re upset because you’re too closely connected to Rachel, which isn’t good for either of you. You’re insulted that your daughter is being treated like everyone else.”
"That's not true. The situation she's in is abusive and unreasonable. She has to wait for her
dorm parent to bring her meals, and if they forget she doesn't get any. This is a form of mental
torture."

"Mrs. Pfaff," Gabriel said, taking her hand. He waited a moment and raised his thick
eyebrows.

"Michelle," she offered.

"Michelle. If you believed even one bit of what you just said, you would have taken Rachel
right out of the Mansion as soon as you were told she'd been Roomed. Because you're a good
mother, and if you believed that Rachel was being tortured you wouldn't have left her upstairs.
And if you believed that I was a person who would abuse her, you wouldn't just try to convince
me to let her out of her room. You'd get her the hell away from me as fast as you could. Am I
right about that?"

Michelle stared at him, thinking for a moment, but she had to admit that he was right.

"But you didn't take her home. You left her in her room, because you know that's where she
needs to be right now. You're embarrassed that that's what she needs, that her situation is as
extreme as that, when you see all these other children allowed to roam around campus with their
families. But that's what Rachel decided. She behaved in a way that demonstrated she needed
this time to herself, and she'll decide when she's had enough and get herself out of her room.
Don't take it away before she's done."

"But I came all the way up here to see her."

Gabriel smiled. He had strong cheekbones and dark, expressive eyes. "And you're
disappointed. You're sad because you were looking forward to spending an afternoon with your
daughter, but she set it up so that you couldn't. That was a hurtful thing for her to have done.
I'm sorry she did that to you."
Michelle Pfaff felt a bit dizzy and out of breath. She didn't quite know what to say. After a moment, Gabriel patted her hand briskly and let it go. “But you came here to have a nice day,” he continued. “That’s a lovely pin, by the way. Is it coral?”

Michelle took a moment to realize what he was talking about. She looked down at her pin. “Yes,” she said. “But wait, I’m not going to be talked around in circles like this. Rachel cannot be kept in her room like this. It’s simply unacceptable.”

Gabriel’s face dropped suddenly. “Michelle, this doesn’t make any sense to me. You’re clearly not genuinely worried about Rachel’s safety, we just established that. You’re not planning on withdrawing her from the school. But you want to stay angry. Explain that to me.”

“I don’t want to stay angry, but you’ve got to understand—”

“I don’t have to understand anything,” Gabriel said. “You need to decide: do you want to take Rachel home today, or do you want to trust me to take care of her? Because I won’t have her here without your trust, and I won’t have her here with you undermining the process. It’s crucial that she see that we agree about her treatment, that we not have any daylight between us for her to manipulate. So do you want to take her home?”

“No, but—”

“Good. Now you’re here, and you can’t let Rachel ruin your day. If she’s trying to make sure that no one can be happy unless she is, then the best thing you can do for her is to enjoy yourself without her. If she feels left out, then maybe next Parents’ Sunday she’ll take care of herself so that she can have fun with you. Wouldn’t it be nice to know that that was something she worked for, rather than something she made you work for?”

Michelle took a deep breath, and tucked a damp lock of hair behind her ear. “So,” she said, “what should I do?” She heard herself laugh sharply.

“There are plenty of wonderful people to spend time with on this campus besides you lovely daughter,” Gabriel said. “You know what I think you’d enjoy? He looked over to the parents
sitting on the couch. “Cynthia,” he called, “are you heading down to the Obstreperous Boys’ picnic?”

A woman with short, curly hair twisted her head around and stood up. “I sure am,” she said with a toothy smile.

“I’d like you to take Michelle here with you,” he said, taking Michelle’s arm and leading her toward Cynthia. “Her daughter got herself Roomed for Parents’ Sunday, and this beautiful young lady has no place to go.”

“Oh, dear. I am sorry. These kids get themselves turned ass over tit and don’t know what they’re doing. My Ross was in Regular Kids for four months before he got himself sent down to Obstreperous Boys. I’m sure she didn’t really mean to do this to you.”

“Now don’t you go apologizing for her, Cynthia,” Gabriel said. “You just take care of Michelle. And bring her back here for the cocktail party this evening. Your job is to teach your new friend to enjoy herself by the end of the night.”

“Aye-aye, captain,” Cynthia said with a laugh, and picked her purse up off the couch. She led Michelle out of the Great Hall, put on her jacket, and began to explain about the picnic.

“Now what you have to understand,” she said, is that these boys are always on restriction. If it isn’t one thing it’s another. They’re the only dorm that doesn’t live in the Mansion. They live down in the Cottage. Anyway, instead of waiting until we got to campus to find out if maybe, by some miracle, they got off restriction, we just accepted that the boys were going to have to stay within fifty feet of the dorm.”

The two women were out of the Mansion, and were making their way to the Cottage. Michelle had some trouble keeping up, still going over the events of the past half hour. She looked around. There was a marshy field crowded with tall weeds. On the near side there was a wooden arch hung with an assortment of birdfeeders. Cynthia kept talking. “So us gals and guys put our heads together and decided we’d save some time if we each brought some food and had
ourselves a little pot-luck right in the Cottage. This is four years ago, when Ross was in Obstreperous Boys, or O-Boys as I got to calling them, for the first of many, many times.

Cynthia stopped next to a neat old-model Camry and began rooting through her purse for the keys. She wore a tweed jacket lined with red felt, about two sizes too big. Michelle heard a breeze rustle the dry fall leaves in the trees above her, and felt it sift through her hair. She felt herself cooled by the wind and realized that she'd been perspiring. Cynthia opened the door and struggled with a cooler that sat on the car's back seat. She finally pulled out a large bowl covered with tinfoil.

"Potato salad," she said. "These boys go crazy if I show up without it. There was the sweetest boy here about two years ago named Fernando who said he would step off campus or punch someone before every Parents' Sunday just to get sent down to O-Boys and have some of my potato salad."

Cynthia led Michelle to the Cottage. Outside, a man with grey hair was placing meat on a portable grill. A woman was handing him the food out of a cooler that rested on the open tailgate of their station wagon. They both wore shorts and flip-flops. "Gary! Naoko!" Cynthia called, and ran over to hug them, holding the bowl of potato salad in front of her. She placed it on the tailgate, and when Michelle caught up, Cynthia was saying, "I almost didn't recognize you!" as Naoko struck a pose, one hand on a jutting hip, the other arm straight up, bent at the wrist.

"She lost ninety-three pounds," Gary said proudly. Michelle was introduced, and she shook hands with each of them. Then she listened as Cynthia talked with Gary and Naoko, who stood with their arms around each other.

"He lost forty pounds, too," Naoko said, patting his belly.

Thin blue smoke drifted from the barbecue, and the air was filled with the smell of grease burning off the grill. Michelle was a bit cold, and after standing a while, shifting her weight from foot to foot in the grass, she saw a group of boys approaching the dorm.
“Sorry we’re late,” called out a man at the front of the pack, who Michelle assumed was the boys’ dorm parent. “I just had the boys out clearing away some deadfall and—“ he stopped to separate two boys who had begun slapping each other, “and I guess I lost track of the time. I’ll just get them washed up and changed and we’ll be ready for lunch in a minute.” The boys were all wearing their blue coverall worksuits, and were carrying tools. There were a couple of handsaws and an axe. Cynthia and Naoko waved to their sons, who waved back with the tools they were carrying.

“Take your time, Roger,” Gary called out. Through all of this strangeness, Michelle had not thought much about Rachel, but now their earlier conversation came back to her in a rush. She didn’t remember what they talked about, but she remembered how she had left her, Rachel sitting in a plastic chair by the window, crying. Her top lip glistened with mucus and hair fell out of her ponytail when she trembled. Maybe I should have just taken her home, Michelle thought. She turned to see if Rachel’s window in the Mansion was visible from where they were standing, if Rachel might be able to see her with these people.

“Michelle’s daughter is stuck in her room,” Cynthia explained to the others.

Naoko gasped and placed her hand on Michelle’s arm. “That’s such a shame,” she said. “You know, Kevin can be a real wrecking ball, but I’m glad we don’t have a girl. They can be such little bitches.” She rubbed Michelle’s forearm then let go. Michelle couldn’t tell whether she heard a slight southern accent or not. She followed Naoko and Cynthia into the Cottage, thinking about Gabriel’s admonition that she enjoy herself. She carried the bowl of potato salad and tried to remember how he had arrived at that. But she figured it was all she could do right now.

Inside the Cottage, it took Michelle’s eyes a moment to adjust to the interior light, and when they did, she saw one of the Obstreperous Boys chasing another around a long table with a big empty brown garbage bag open and filled with air, both boys laughing. They swerved to avoid Michelle and Cynthia, who called out “Rossie!” The boy being chased stopped, got bumped into
by the boy chasing him, rubbed his nose and gave his mother a hug. There was an obese boy sitting on one couch reading a thick paperback, and another boy was dusting a bookshelf in the back of the room. The family that Michelle had seen outside the New Parent Orientation, with the son who wore his flannel shirt buttoned up to his neck, was sitting together on another couch, talking quietly. A pretty woman, heavily made up, was setting the table and singing to herself in what Michelle thought sounded like Russian.

"Freedy," the Russian woman said, "come help your Mama."

They boy in the back of the room threw down his spray bottle and roll of paper towels and screamed. "Can’t you see I’m doing something?" Everyone turned for a moment then went back to what they had been doing.

"Let me help," Michelle said, to which the woman responded,

"Is such a lazy boy."

"Varvara, Michelle. Michelle, Varvara," Cynthia said with a twinkle. Rossie, who had straight stringy hair, took the opportunity of his mother’s momentary distraction too turn and box the boy in the ear who had been chasing him with the garbage bag.

"I saw that," Roger yelled from the kitchen, which was adjacent to the lobby they were all sitting in. "Any more of that and nobody gets any potato salad," he said, and the whole room laughed happily together. "But seriously," Roger said, "I’ll put you two in the corner, Parents’ Sunday or not."

Lunch began with Roger administering meds, which was done rather ostentatiously, as if everyone at the table wanted to see how it was done, or to check the boys’ tongues and gums themselves, Michelle thought. After that, the meal seemed to go on forever. Gary brought in a few trays of hot dogs, burgers, steaks and sausages. Everyone was very nice. Michelle sat next to Varvara, who was unable to get over her amazement at Roger’s ability to spend so much time with these boys. "My Freedy, his so lazy," she said many times, shaking her head. She wore a
large t-shirt with the image of a unicorn on it, decorated with rhinestones. "Your daughter,"
Varvara said to Michelle at one point, "she must be very beautiful."

Gary and Naoko talked at great length about how they had managed to lost the weight, and
seemed unable to keep their hands off each other. "You're going to be so happy," they said to the
obese boy who had been reading, and who Michelle thought, though she was not sure, was their
son. "When you lose all that weight, everything's different." He had been forced to put his
paperback away for lunch, but repeatedly looked back at it resting on the shelf, anxious to get
back to reading.

The family from the New Parent Orientation was more quiet. They answered everyone's
questions politely, but did not say much more than that. The boy's name was Benjamin. The
father recognized Michelle from the meeting, and asked if she was a new parent as well. She
explained about Rachel being Roomed, trying to make it sound as reasonable as she could, but the
man still looked at her curiously.

But mostly they ate. Varvara had brought sweet potatoes and Roger had boiled whole ears of
corn, and there was bread and a deli platter from the school kitchen. The O-Boys argued very
quietly among themselves, and the parents talked when they weren't eating, but mostly, they ate.
And they were happy. And Michelle wondered, where have I found myself. Don't these people
realize where they are? Time seemed to pool here like still water, and maybe gently knock or tap
against the lobby windows, but not so anyone would notice. If this afternoon were to last forever,
and lunch never to end, Gary and Naoko and Varvara and Roger, and the O-Boys, for all she
knew, would be perfectly happy to spend forever just like this. Eating barbecue and talking about
whatever it was they were talking about; Michelle could no longer remember.

After lunch was done and the table cleared, the group broke up into twos and threes by family
affiliation, and each family drifted around the Cottage to a place where the members could talk
quietly or sit sullenly and wait out the remainder of the afternoon. Gary and Naoko and Kevin sat
together on a bed in the boys' bedroom, while Varvara and her husband commandeered a couch.
with Freedy. Cynthia and Ross went for a walk in tight circles around the dorm, and Benjamin and his family sat at a picnic table just behind the dorm.

This left Michelle to speak with the last boy, whose name she now learned for the first time was Forrest. Forrest explained that his parents weren’t allowed to be there because they had acted out on their tuition plan; they hadn’t paid their last installment. He told her that he had been sent to the school for sending a teacher threatening emails, which he didn’t think were traceable. He told her about the schools he had been to before this one. Michelle counted about thirteen, including short summer sessions of outdoor survival in Colorado, Wyoming, and Arizona, an aversion therapy program in Florida, a place in Maine that Forrest claimed was only accessible by helicopter, a ‘psychic-motion’ workshop at a hospital in Illinois, and something called ‘rebirthing’ that was only legal in Maryland, although Forrest claimed that Gabriel was going to bring the doctor who invented it to campus for a visit.

Roger overheard only the tail end of their conversation, and interrupted. “Forrest, what did I tell you last time you spewed out a story like that?” He turned to Michelle. “Forrest has a very active imagination and almost no conscience. Now Forrest, thank Michelle for visiting with you, and help me with the dishes.”

Left alone, Michelle wandered out of the Cottage and walked around the campus some. The sun had not yet set, but sat low in the sky, and the slight slowness and dimness imparted to everything else an edge of speed and harshness. Two young children ran by laughing sharply, out of breath but continuing their game. Michelle found a small piece of yellow yarn in the grass, and decided to make a little bouquet to give Rachel before she left. She looked around her, and noticed that there were some wildflowers she had passed on her way from the Cottage. She circled back to pick them, and to these she added some pretty weeds she found.

Picking the flowers, Michelle was close enough to hear Benjamin and his family at the picnic table. Benjamin was crying and had been pounding his fist against the table for some time, so that now he did it without emphasis, just keeping time with the rhythm of his speech.
“You don’t understand. This place isn’t going to do me any good. I hate it, it’ll just make me worse. You should see some of the stuff kids around here have been teaching me.”

“Benjamin,” his father said, “that’s exactly what they told us you would say, and I know it’s not true. I believe that you believe what you’re saying, but it’s what all the kids say when they get here, and a lot of them do get better.” Michelle had had the same conversation with Rachel on her first Parents’ Sunday, and had quoted Gabriel just like Benjamin’s father was doing.

“Just because they told you I’d say it doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” Benjamin said through clenched teeth, now pounding the table so rapidly that it lost all connection of what he was saying, and the pounding continued into the silence that followed.

His father laughed. “Gabriel said that you’d say that, too.” He put his hand over his wife’s hand. “Boy, have they got your number here. They’re sharp, I’ll give them that.” He patted Benjamin on the back and stood up. “Now, I think we’ve got to get you back, because we’re supposed to go to some kind of cocktail party, isn’t that right?”

“No,” Benjamin said. “Let’s just go home. Please take me home.”

His father smiled again and mussed his hair. “Not gonna happen, buddy. You’re going to be all right.”

Michelle checked her watch and realized that the hours for visiting were almost up. She took her little bouquet and headed quickly back to the Mansion.

She hurried to Obstreperous Girls’ dorm. The lounge was crowded with families saying goodbye, and it again took her some time to find Marcy, who was sitting in the hallway talking on the phone. Michelle remembered how she left this morning, and smiled sweetly and waved. She shook the wildflowers in the air and pointed to Rachel’s room, pantomiming walking to see her and flexing her eyebrows as if to ask, “Is that all right?”

Marcy shook her head and covered the bottom half of the receiver with her hand. “We’re kind of in crisis mode right now. Bridget is refusing to come back to campus.” She went back to talking on the phone, but later, when she noticed Michelle still standing there, she said, “Things
go from bad to worse,” by way of explanation, took the flowers from Michelle and waved goodbye.

Michelle figured she should find Cynthia rather than go to the party alone. Rachel’s eyes followed her out of the Mansion, and down the road that led to the Cottage. She could no longer see her mother when she rounded the corner at the bottom of the hill, at which point six other eyes took over, watching her from the small parking lot to the side of the Mansion. Zbigniew, Dedrick, and Spencer had all had a quiet day off. They had taken out some Chinese food, watched a movie, and were now going for a walk outside, watching all the drama as the parents said goodbye and then headed to the Mansion for another one of Gabriel’s parties. The sun had just dipped below the line of mountains, and would soon, when it crossed the horizon, hurl oranges and pale pinks back up to lick the undersides of the clouds.

“Who’s that?” Zbigniew asked as they all watched Michelle.

“Some mother,” Spencer said.

“Or other,” Dedrick added.

A back door of the Mansion opened with a creak and they all turned to see one of the Regular Kids carrying in a crate of oranges and limes. Behind him, in the parking lot, a young boy of about six or seven was walking bent over, dragging his hands on the ground. They walked closer to see what he was up to. The parking lot was lit at night by two bright lights, one in each corner. The boy had found a large frog, which he was shepherding in the direction of the small woods to the side of the parking lot. Just pressing the frog forward with his hands cupped, so that it would jump in the right direction. He cast two shadows, one from each of the lights, and the shadows formed a hobbled, slowly moving ‘V’ behind the boy as he moved toward the edge of the parking lot.

“Felix,” a voice called out, but it was impossible to determine from where. “Honey, let’s go.” The voice was light, and lilted.

“Just a minute,” the boy with the frog called back.
“Felix, we’ve got to get William back to his dorm. We can’t be late.”

“I’ve just got to set this frog free.” He was almost at the edge of the woods.

A deeper voice responded this time. “Felix, it’s my ass if I’m late. Now let’s go.”

Felix looked back over his shoulder, then carefully picked up the frog. He took one big step and hurled it overhand toward the trees, where the three men watching lost it in the shadows.

Felix ran back to his parents.

Spencer was laughing. “Did you see that?” he asked.

Dedrick chuckled. “An existentialist frog,” he said, “condemned to be free.”

Zbigniew added, “His dasein forever geverfenheit.”

Inside, the sounds of the party had begun.

In the Cottage, Obstreperous Boys tried to have a relaxing evening. Things were always emotional on Parents’ Sunday, especially in dorms with new students. Kevin got back to his book, sitting sprawled out on one of the couches. Ross and Forrest and Freedy were sitting on the floor, trying to remember as many details as they could about a movie they had each seen before being sent to the school, a horror movie called Pedestrian Crossing. Benjamin had the other couch to himself. He sat, alternately crying and writing in his journal. The form his writing took was to hold a pen in his fist and tear through as many pages as he could, scraping back and forth with the pen.

Roger tried two or three times to talk with Benjamin, at least to get him to calm down some. Finally he figured that he would just have to get it out of his system, that he would tire himself out by bawling and scratching. At least he’d sleep well, Roger though, and wake up much better tomorrow.

It wasn’t until the boys had been sitting around the dorm relaxing for a couple of hours that Roger noticed that Benjamin and Ross, the two boys who had gone outside to spend time with their parents, were still wearing their shoes.
“Everybody up,” he said. “Benjamin and Ross need to put their shoes away.”

“Can’t you take their GROUP?” Kevin asked. “I’m in the middle of reading.”

“Nope,” Roger said. “Parents’ Sunday is over. You guys need to be within arm’s distance at all times.”

“Ugh,” Kevin said. “C’mon.” The boys all stood up and followed Kevin to the back of the lobby to put his book on its shelf, then they all went to the other end of the room, and waited while Roger unlocked the door to the ShoeCloset. Obstreperous Boys walked in and waited as Ross and Benjamin untied and took off their shoes. The ShoeCloset in the Cottage was a bit bigger than the ones in the dorms in the Mansion. It stretched back, long and narrow, from the door to the lobby. Like the ShoeClosets in the Mansion, it had a bunch of luggage, some extra chairs, and some other old equipment. But it also had deep wooden shelves that held an obsolete and incomplete set of encyclopedias, a pair of stereo speakers, and a bunch of old sports equipment, from when Roaring Orchards used to compete against other high schools in the area. It was on these shelves that Roger had the boys leave the tools from their morning’s Reciprocity Detail, the axe and saws.

After putting his shoes next to those of the rest of Obstreperous Boys, Benjamin picked up the axe. He didn’t do anything with it, he just held it in his hands, felt the weight of it, the smooth wooden handle against his palms. The rest of the boys, when they noticed, took a step away and watched him carefully. Benjamin was a bit amazed at how powerful simply the decision to hold the axe was. Because it was the decision as much as the axe that had the boys scared. Benjamin had chosen to follow his frustration outside of the rules, and there wasn’t really any way to tell how far it would take him. He could put the axe right back and laugh at them for getting scared, or he could swing it right at one of them.

The other Obstreperous Boys felt that they had a sense of him; he’d been in the dorm for more than a week, and was a relatively open person. But they hadn’t seen him like he was today.
And they hadn’t seen him decide to let the school’s structures and boundaries roll off his back like rain.

Benjamin shook the axe back and forth a bit to better test its weight. He nodded at the other boys to take a step back. They did, and he gave the axe a test swing against the wooden shelves that held the sports equipment. Without having swung hard at all, the blade sliced about two inches into the wood.

“What was that?” Roger called, as the other boys ran out of the closet. “Benjamin? What are you doing in there?”

With his dormmates out of the way, Benjamin took some bigger swings at the shelves. He cut away at one of the posts so that a shelf of encyclopedias collapsed. Roger had begun screaming at him, telling him to come out right away. Benjamin took a swing against the concrete block wall, and the axe gave off sparks. Roger was threatening to come in, but he sounded scared and Benjamin didn’t think he would. He was surprised to feel so much confidence in a perception like that.

He hit the wall again. The sparks were giving him an idea. There was a power box on one wall of the ShoeCloset, and Benjamin tapped it a few times with the axe. He was a little bit worried about getting electrocuted, but the handle was wood, which was safe enough he thought. He took a breath. Raised the axe, and swung hard at the box. Sparks went everywhere, and then Benjamin saw he had split the metal cover of the box and mangled whatever was inside. He swung again and again, Roger screaming and Obstreperous Boys muttering to themselves, still close enough that Benjamin could hear. His last swing killed the lights in the Cottage. Benjamin was confident now that there was no way anyone was coming in after him.

Roger was on the phone to the different dorms, asking them to send down whatever extra staff was around. Most of the Regular Kids were unavailable because they were preparing food or serving drinks at Gabriel’s party. Apparently Dr. Ollier was with Bridget and her family in their motel room, trying to get her to return to campus. Even once Karla and Dedrick and Ellie
had joined him in the Cottage, they had no better idea of how to proceed. No one was willing to
go into the closet to confront Benjamin, not as long as he wouldn’t respond to them. In the dark,
they could see the occasional flashes as he struck the wall with the axe, or hear him cutting up the
shelves. Karla and Dedrick thought they should get Gabriel, Ellie thought they should try and
bring Benjamin’s parents down from the party to talk with him. Roger worried because it was his
fault the axe was in the dorm at all. Because they had stayed too long on Reciprocity Detail, he
hadn’t wanted to detour to Upper Shed to drop the tools off.

Finally, they decided to get Gabriel. “I’ll go,” Roger said. “It’s my dorm, it’s my fault, I’ll
tell him about it.”

“Yeah, but if it’s your dorm, maybe you should stay with them,” Ellie said. They talked about
this for a while, and finally decided that Dedrick should go.

Dedrick ran up to the Mansion and tried to look appropriate as he entered the Great Hall.
Parents dressed casually for Parents’ Sunday, but many who had been to the parties before brought
a change of clothes. So there was an uncomfortable mix of new, suspicious parents in oxford
shirts and barn jackets, wondering just what it was they were supposed to be doing there, and
whether it was against the rules to leave, and the old hands in formal wear, already tipsy and
waiting for the Regular Kids to go to sleep so the party could really begin. Gabriel always
opened up the spare rooms in the mansion to people who didn’t want to drive home, and if there
were more than would fit in those rooms, the couches in the therapy rooms all converted into beds
as well.

Dedrick found Gabriel in the middle of a circle of parents all dressed to the nines. Gabriel
had also put on a tuxedo. The only one in their circle dressed less formally was the woman he
had seen before, with Spencer and Zbingniew, the pretty one they didn’t recognize. She wore a
pretty pink coral pin on her grey sweater. Someone in the circle was telling an elaborate dirty
joke, and Dedrick waited in the corner for it to be done. When it was, he approached Gabriel and
tapped him on the shoulder. Gabriel turned fiercely and took Dedrick into the hall, reminding him that faculty are not invited to these parties.

Dedrick explained the situation in the Cottage, and Gabriel whispered in his ear, “Don't tell anyone here about this. I'll take care of it.”

Before leaving, he told Cynthia that he would be right back, and asked her to see to anything his guests needed. He left the Mansion elegantly, and then began storming down toward the Cottage. “That goddamn little pissant son of a bitch,” he said as Dedrick jogged next to him to keep up. Gabriel took off his jacket and handed it to Dedrick. He began working on his bow tie. “Little fucker’s got to be the center of the universe, goes crazy when anyone else is having a good time with out him.” Gabriel only stopped when Dedrick asked if he wanted him to go and tell Benjamin’s parents. “Don’t you dare bother those poor people,” Gabriel said, and continued walking to the Cottage.

The small crowd of Obstreperous Boys and faculty members standing by the door to the ShoeCloset parted when Gabriel arrived. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark, then walked to the open door. He began unbuttoning his shirt. “All right, Benjamin, you whiny little bastard. This game is over in about two minutes. I’m coming in there after you, and if you want to fight you better damn well kill me with that goddamn axe quickly. I’ll tell you right now I fight dirty. A clean fight simply doesn’t make any sense to me.”

He handed his tuxedo shirt to Ellie and stood there in his sleeveless undershirt. He had a solid paunch and flabby arms. Tufts of grey hairs sprouted from his shoulders. He lurched into the closet and after seconds of grunting and huffing, which seemed like much longer to those listening, Benjamin came stumbling into the lobby, Gabriel pushing him from behind with one hand, the axe in his other.

“Is there anybody in this room I can trust with this thing?” Gabriel asked, looking directly at Roger.
"I'll take the tools to Upper Shed," Ellie said, reaching for the axe and finally twisting it from Gabriel's grip. She gave him his shirt, which he put on and carefully began to button.

"Dedrick, you put those things away. Ellie has to help me with my bow tie. I'll deal with the rest of you tomorrow."

Ira arrived at the campus just as the sun dropped through the low-lying clouds, warming him through his driver's side window despite the snow and the cold. He pulled into the driveway, made his way past the stone pillars and the open iron gate, and parked next to a red Subaru wagon in the small carport by the Mansion. Getting out of the car, he looked around and thought that the school looked different under this early dumping of snow. He checked to make sure his car was locked, and climbed carefully over the packed snow on the Mansion steps into the Office, where Dr. Ollier had told him to meet her.

The receptionist told him that the doctor was in a meeting, but that he was expected and she would be with him shortly. She sighed and opened a drawer and pulled out a form which she attached to a clipboard. She handed it to him with a pen, and pointed him toward an armchair directly across from her desk, to the side of the front doors to the Mansion. There was something clipped about her tone, as if she suspected that he was playing a practical joke on her, and although she would play along, she wanted him to know that she didn't buy it for a second.

The Mansion was actually an enormous, nicely appointed farm house, probably first built as a retreat for some mid-level tycoon from downstate, Ira thought, to which someone had added one wing and then another. When he had been up to campus for his interview a week ago, Ira had seen the other side of the building on the tour Dr. Ollier had given him, and she had made a point of showing him the wide tower that comprised the most ambitious part of the addition. It had seemed to him like something at an amusement park, complete with a corny bell.

Ira filled out the top of the form, but was anxious and clicked the pen shut and looked around. The receptionist, whose nameplate identified her only as Alice, was going through a pile of
messages and throwing most of them into a round wire wastebasket at her side. She was old, and her white hair was done up in a perm. She reminded him a bit of a waitress who had worked at Johnny-O's Club Andy, the bar where he had spent most evenings after work for the past eight months. He realized that it had been some weeks since he had seen that waitress at the bar. Ira wondered what had happened to her. For just a second, he thought maybe this was her, sitting across from him, but knew that was unlikely. She would have recognized me, Ira thought. More to the point, this Alice definitely looked like she had been working at the school for much longer than a few weeks. Ira wondered whether he would become friendly with the her, if he would joke around with Alice when he passed through the Office.

Past Alice's desk there was a large open office with five or six desks, one secretary sitting at each. All seemed to be carefully going about their work. Occasionally a phone would ring, and someone would answer, "Hello, Roaring Orchards School for Troubled Teens, how can I help you?" and manipulate the buttons on the phone to efficiently shoot the call across to some other desk.

At the far end of the Office was an open doorway that Ira remembered led into a bigger room called the Great Hall, but he couldn't see much of it from where he sat. While he was looking, Dr. Ollier walked through the doorway, and Ira began to get up to meet her when two other people followed her into the Office. Ira sat back down. One of the people with her was a tall, stooped man with a large bald spot and thick glasses. A short, frail woman was with him. Her long, black hair was uncombed and streaked with grey. Her face was pale, and the left half of it was entirely covered with a white bandage. The bandage was affixed to her face with a long piece of medical tape that stretched from her forehead to her chin, and another that went from her nose to the edge of her left ear. She kept wiping at the corners of her right eye and the right side of her nose with a balled up Kleenex. Her hand was also bandaged. Over her arm she held a dark blue ski jacket that would be much too large for her. It had a red stripe across the chest.
The three of them were talking quietly just inside the Office, and although Ira couldn't hear them, it seemed to him from the way they were gesturing and looking that the man wanted to go back into the Great Hall, and that Dr. Ollier was trying to talk him out of it. The man half turned toward the doorway, and looked back into the Great Hall for a long time without saying anything. He looked down and said something to the woman who Ira assumed was his wife, but she was looking in her purse for another tissue and shaking her head back and forth. The man shrugged and nodded, and then Dr. Ollier led him and his wife to the main doors, next to which Ira was sitting.

As he shook hands with her, the man asked Dr. Ollier, "Couldn't you just tell for us that his mother is all right?"

"What I've been trying to explain is that he never got the letters about the accident in the first place," Dr. Ollier said, looking at the woman's bandages. "We thought it would be too upsetting, on a number of levels. So you don't need to worry about Benjamin. But now that you've come to campus at a time other than Parents' Sunday, we have another problem. That you'll have to solve with Gabriel, or with the other parents in your area. But I'll tell you, they're much tougher about this sort of infraction than he is."

"You mean he never even knew I'd been hurt?" the woman asked.

"You must be aware that DormParents read all incoming and outgoing mail. To make sure nobody's sending drugs or making runaway plans."

The couple was silent. "You'll give him this jacket?" the man asked, pointing to the one his wife was carrying. He opened the door and held it for his wife, who was trying to fold the big ski jacket she was holding. She was standing almost directly in front of Ira. It took an awkward moment, and Ira noticed that under the edges of her bandage her skin was red and raw, as if she had been burned. On her way out she also shook Dr. Ollier's hand and handed her the jacket.

"I'll tell him it came in the mail," said Dr. Ollier as she took the jacket and watched the couple leave.
"Hello again," Dr. Oilier said brightly to Ira after she had closed the door. She had fine features, around which her face had just begun to wrinkle, and a substantial waddle under her chin. Her hair was still light brown, cut short. "I've just been busy with an unsolicited parental visit. I shouldn't be much longer. Why don't you wait in my office?" She gestured to a door to his right. When Ira stood, she took the clipboard from him. "You don't need to worry about this right now," she said.

Dr. Oilier placed the clipboard on Alice's desk. She said, "This can get filled out next week along with the tax forms."

"All right," Alice said, putting the form away, "but the last two people left before they gave me any paperwork, so I don't have any contact numbers or anything. One of them put us down as a reference, god knows why, and I didn't know what to say when they asked me. Just that he had left the afternoon after he got here." Dr. Oilier opened the door to her office for Ira and he walked in and sat down, surrounded by store-bought Thanksgiving decorations hanging on the walls and windows.

It was a while before she was back. Ira took a closer look at the decorations and wondered whether the students had been involved in preparing the campus for the holiday. Was that something they enjoyed, or would they resent it? On a low dark coffee table stood a turkey with a glossy cardboard face and a body made up of a sphere of colorful folded tissue paper. The office had built-in bookshelves that held some framed photos of Dr. Oilier with groups of students and family and friends. The rest of the shelves were taken up by a series of bright blue binders. Ira thought of Alice at the reception desk and of Johnny-O's. He used to feel so comfortable in that shitty place that he often got panicky at the thought of leaving at the end of a night. It sent a thrill of fear through Ira, remembering that time and how he didn't even know how bad off he had been. He was terrified that this job wasn't going to work out.

Dr. Oilier returned. She led him out of the Mansion and past his car. "You can unpack this evening. I'd like to show you your apartment and introduce you to the dorm you'll be working
with," she told him. Ira was wearing his nice pants and shoes, and he hoped that he was dressed all right for working in the dorm. His shoes were new and still squeaked when he walked, and he remembered how conscious he had been of that on the day of his interview. It was strange that it had been only a week ago.

The Mansion was at the top of a slight hill, so that Ira could see the late light reflected across the ridge above the gentle slope of the snow. Brief tapping and scraping sounds floated through the air, and when Ira looked, he saw groups of students clustered together in front of the various dorms, shoveling snow. Dr. Ollier led him down the hill toward one of the dorms, and he noticed that the sounds of the students' work were badly synchronized with their movements; the sound took some time to reach them through the cold air. The effect was slightly disorienting, and Ira turned away and focused his attention on the blue shadows cast by the trees and the hill across the snow. The boys stopped shoveling to watch as they passed. A squat man with red goatee shouted indifferently at them to get back to work. Dr. Ollier walked past the main entrance and into a door of what looked like an annex.

There was a large, bare room with thin blue carpeting and a wood burning stove in one corner. There were two unpainted wooden doors on one wall, and one on each of the others.

"This will be your apartment for now," Dr. Ollier said. "You might have to switch when you get a permanent dorm, but we'll try to avoid that. Your room is the one straight across. We just had the boys clean it out for you this morning. In the other two rooms here are, let's see, I think Sheldon, who teaches History, is in one, and... oh yes, Zbigniew, who runs our Reciprocity Detail, is in the other. The bathroom is right there," she said, pointing to a door. Where the doorknob would be, there was just a hole cut in the door. Ira walked across to his bedroom and opened the door. There was a large boxspring with a slightly stained mattress in one corner of the room. The walls were light yellow, and there was a large window on the back wall that gave out on a view of the trunks of pine trees behind the dorm. The window didn't have any blinds or curtains. Ira looked around, trying to imagine where his things would go, but he didn't have
much stuff, and he couldn't really think of what it all was just then. "Let's go meet Felicitous Boys," Dr. Ollier said.

They headed back outside, to the group of boys they had passed in front of the dorm. There seemed to be about fifteen of them. "Ira, this is Mitchell," Dr. Ollier said, introducing him to the man with the goatee. "Mitchell, Ira has just arrived and will be with your dorm, at least for the evening."

Mitchell shook Ira's hand in both of his, and said, "Good to meet you, Hiram."

"Ira."

"What's that?"

"Ira."

"Oh, sorry."

Dr. Ollier left, and Mitchell had the boys stop their shoveling to meet Ira. "Ira," he said, "this is Felicitous Boys. You'll get all their names later. Guys, this is Ira. Now you show him you can act like a group of gentlemen and not a bunch of slobbering imbeciles. Eric, that's not funny. Wipe your chin. All right, now let's finish shoveling while there's still light."

At that, one of the boys dropped his shovel. It rattled against the ground; he waited a beat, and asked Ira, "You wanna see my dick?"

"William, for godsakes that's not funny either!" Mitchell shouted. He continued with a degree of calmness that surprised Ira. "What's the matter with you? He just got here. He doesn't know you're joking."

"I'm not joking. I'll really pull it."

"Oh William, just shut it," Mitchell said. "Now all of you get to work." As the boys went back to shoveling, Mitchell asked Ira about himself and explained a little about the dorm and the school. "Some of the staff here are all right, but we get some real wackos, too. You'll figure out which are which pretty soon."
Ira noticed that one of the boys was wearing the blue ski jacket he had seen earlier, and was shoveling furiously. He asked Mitchell about him.

"Oh, that's just Benjamin. He's pretty quiet as long as he doesn't get too overly emotional. Not a wiseass, though. Listen, there are a couple of phone calls I do need to make about something. Would you watch these guys while I go inside for a second? I'll be right back."

Ira stammered for a moment trying to find a way to refuse, but Mitchell saw his hesitation and said, "Don't worry. Kids in this dorm aren't allowed to get violent or run away." With that, he headed inside.

Ira put his hands in his pockets and turned to face the dorm. They kept working at clearing the path to the road that ran around campus, but were looking at one another in a way that he hadn't noticed before. Ira figured he was imagining it. But not a minute had passed before William, the blond boy who Mitchell had yelled at, marched up to Ira and said, "Well, get to work."

Ira looked at him and nodded, and laughed through his nose. But William was still looking up at him. He was short and wiry, and was breathing heavily.

"Get to work I said. Come on." William swung his snow shovel and hit Ira in the shins with the edge of its metal face. Ira hopped backwards. It hurt, a lot, but he tried not to wince.

"What do you mean?" he asked William, and looked from him to the other boys, who were all facing the other way and shoveling, some looking at the ground and laughing, some pretending be unaware of what was going on.

"What do I mean? Take a shovel and get to work. You think we're the only ones who should be shoveling snow? Get to work, get to work, get to work!" With each of the last of these, William swung the shovel again, catching Ira in the shins all three times. Ira held out his arms to try and push William back, but the shovel was long enough to still reach him.

William turned around and went back to shoveling snow, shoulder to shoulder with Eric. Ira's pain was bad enough that he had to hop up and down on his toes, hoping it wasn't too
obvious. He bent down to rub his shins and check if they were bleeding into his new pants, and saw that the bottom of his right pantleg was torn. But there was only a little blood. It had trickled into the hairs on his leg, and was almost clotted.

The boys finished shoveling their walk quietly, and by the time they were done it was almost dark out. Ira followed them into the dorm, where Mitchell was sitting at a desk in hallway, talking on the phone. He waved thanks to Ira, and later when he didn't ask how things had gone outside, Ira didn't tell him.

For the next few days, Ira was moved around from dorm to dorm so that he could learn how the school worked and get to meet everyone. He still had his meals with Felicitous Boys, but one morning he went with Marcy and Obstreperous Girls to take care of the campus's recycling, he spent an afternoon with Zbigniew supervising two students filling the birdfeeders and feeding the animals in the Pig Pen, and he ran some off-campus errands with Roger. He liked being busy and he liked feeling needed. But he always made sure that he wouldn't be left alone with any kids, and he still felt his face redden at meals when Mitchell got up from the table and he was left with Felicitous Boys.

After a few days, Dr. Ollier found him and asked if he could help her with something. There was a girl who had a long history of getting violent, who had just gotten into a bad altercation and was sitting in the corner until Gabriel would let her rejoin the campus community. Someone had to watch her in the corner, and Dr. Ollier knew it wasn't the most exciting job, but she wondered whether Ira might...

He jumped at the opportunity to help.

She took him directly over to Obstreperous Girls, where a room had been emptied out except for two chairs, one facing the corner and the other facing the first chair. Marcy seemed to be expecting them, and she smiled sweetly at Ira and thanked him before Dr. Ollier even told her why they were there. She explained that Tidbit was having her morning bathroom break, and
would be out in a minute. Dr. Ollier left, and Marcy went over the few rules Ira needed to know. Tidbit got a fifteen minute bathroom break every four hours, and at all other times she was to sit facing the corner. There was no talking. As she told him this, Marcy was putting on her coat and gathering her things together. She would pick up meals for both of them, Ira and Tidbit, from the kitchen. She handed Ira a portable phone and told him to call Roger or Dr. Ollier if there were any problems. She was going off campus, but would be back before dinner.

Tidbit emerged from the bathroom and asked Marcy where she was going. "You don’t need to worry about that," Marcy told her. "Ira’s going to watch you for a few hours, so go sit down and he’ll be right in." Tidbit had a bad black eye, Ira noticed, but otherwise she seemed all right. "Any questions?" Marcy asked, taking a long lanyard that held a ring of keys off from around her neck. Ira shook his head and took the keys. When Marcy left, he went into the room where Tidbit was facing the corner and sat down in the chair behind her.

He was amazed, minute by minute, that nothing happened. Tidbit sat, and Ira watched her, and that was it. Bit by bit his anxiety waned, and he got used to the idea that this was really all he had to do. He settled in. It was funny, to watch how slowly time passed. Hours later one of the Teachers came in with Obstreperous Girls, and they went straight to their lobby for Magazine Time. Ira could hear them laughing and talking, and Spencer, the Teacher who was covering them, stopped in to say hello.

"How’d you get stuck with this?" he asked.

"Oh, I just thought I could help," Ira said. "Since I’m new."

"Well," Spencer said with a laugh, "don’t let her get away with anything. She’s trouble."

At this Tidbit turned and stuck her tongue out at Spencer. "Turn back around," Ira said, then looked at Spencer and rolled his eyes.

Over the next few days, Tidbit’s black eye blossomed grotesquely; the dark bruise stretched as far down her face as her cheekbone and had swelled so that her eyeball looked like a button sewn into a cushion. The color had at first been a pearly blue-black which faded to lighter
shades of purple and red around the edges. But in the days she had spent in the corner, other hues had subtly begun to insinuate themselves. Tidbit studied her eye carefully during the short bathroom breaks she got, standing on her toes and leaning against the sink to get a closer look at the mirror. First, she noticed that the part of the bruise covering her cheek had faded to a kind of grey-green, and at the bottom of the swollen bag under her eye, a poorly delineated crescent of jaundiced yellow had appeared. But more recently, the colors had begun to shift and merge into a kind of swirling, blunted rainbow. She would occasionally pull her lower eyelid down to look at the bright blot of blood that had congealed at the bottom of her eyeball, but the dull ache this caused was sickening, and kept her from doing it too often.

Ira was getting used to this job. There was no word on how long Gabriel would make Tidbit stay in the corner, but Ira was beginning to hope it would be a while. The idea of going back to Felicitous Boys made him more and more anxious the longer he spent watching Tidbit; he liked how peaceful it was in the girls' dorm when no one was around, how he could just watch the sunlight coming through the window change direction as the morning and then the afternoon went on. And people seemed to appreciate and sympathize with him when they passed through the dorm.

In the evenings Marcy would sit down with him while the girls were doing their homework or flipping through the glossy pages of magazines and reading bits out loud to one another. Sometimes she would explain things like how she figured out the girls' allowances or filled out an Incident Report. But mostly, she would just see how he was doing, if he was getting used to working at the school, and then she would take her turn, to complain about things. Ira wondered how Marcy had such a good tan this late in the fall, but of course he didn't ask. He thought it made her smile seem brighter.

It was on his fourth day of watching her sit in the corner that Tidbit turned around in her chair and looked at him. "Do you thing you're going to stay here?" she asked him. "To work, I mean."
Something pleading in the tone of her voice made him feel like he could reply. She didn’t seem to be testing him; she sounded worried that he would leave. "Yeah, I think so," he said, although he didn’t know if he would.

"You should leave," Tidbit said. "You’re still young. Nobody who works here has a life. You should get out and enjoy yourself."

That was nice, Ira thought. He couldn’t think of anything to say to it, but it was nice of her to think of him. "I like working here," he said, surprised at how much he meant it. "And I didn’t have much of a life before, anyway." This he meant as a joke, so he laughed, but Tidbit didn’t.

"What did you do before you worked here?" she asked, crossing her arms over the back of her chair. Her bruised eye looked shiny, and Ira tried to see if her eyeball was a little yellow.

"I was a bike messenger. Actually, I rode a scooter."

"Wicked. Why’d you leave a job like that?"

Ira laughed. "Well, it didn’t pay too well, so I was thinking about quitting anyway, but then my boss figured out that I had been driving around town for two months completely stoned. So I didn’t really get a chance to quit."

"That sounds fun though. Just don’t tell any of the RO-bots."

"What do you mean?"

"Roaring Orchards-bots," she explained. "You know. Like Regular Kids, or people trying to get into Regular Kids. Or the staff who’re into their OWCH schedules."

Ira smiled vaguely. In his short stay at the school, he had developed a strategy for dealing with all the mysterious comments people made over the course of a day. There were so many rules and concepts, and not only was everyone at the school familiar with them, but they had strong opinions about everything. So Ira maintained a persistent amusement, a haze of fun that permeated his reactions to everything he heard and colored everything he said. This way, if he misunderstood or said something wrong, misused a term or offended someone, there was nothing he couldn’t easily qualify, rephrase, or backpedal away from.
But he was in charge here, and didn't feel the need to worry so much. Tidbit seemed appreciative that he was talking with her. "What's an OWCH schedule?" he asked her.

"OWCH is the therapy Gabriel invented for the school. It's complicated. But it stands for open, willing, clean and honest." Tidbit stopped at the sound of someone opening the front door of the dorm. She continued in a whisper, "You should probably tell me to turn around and face the corner," she said, turning in her chair.

"Yeah, you should do that," Ira said. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," she said, as Roger entered the room.

"Hey there Ira, how's it going?" he asked. "I'm just stopping by to have a chat with my girl Tidbit," he continued without waiting for Ira to answer. Roger was a supervisor, so Ira figured it must be okay for Tidbit to talk with him, although he realized he would look awfully hypocritical to Tidbit if he were to stop anyone from talking to her now.

Roger walked over and put a hand on Tidbit's shoulder. "So, how long are you going to stay in here?" he asked.

Tidbit shrugged. "It's not yet clear," she said.

"Well, what are you doing to get out?"

"What can I do? I'm not allowed to do anything but stare into this stupid corner. What should I do?"

"Tidbit, I don't think these are honest questions. You've been here long enough to know better than that. You need to convince everyone that you're not going to get violent again."

"How can I do that from the corner? I can't even talk to anyone."

"You're talking to me, aren't you?" Roger asked. Tidbit sighed and turned back to face the corner. "Think about that for a while, okay?"

Roger winked at Ira and patted him on the shoulder as he left the room.
The next morning, Marcy lingered before leaving the dorm. She was sitting at her desk at the other end of the hallway and Ira leaned against the doorjamb of the room Tidbit sat in to talk with her. She was telling him about a cousin of hers who was getting married, and was joking about having only fourteen months to find a date. She laughed too loud, and when she left, Ira felt a bit embarrassed.

“She likes you,” Tidbit said when he sat down behind her.

“You think?” he said, and then felt like he had given too much away. “It’s really not your place to say,” he said.

“I know,” Tidbit said. “I’m just saying.”

That afternoon, Nurse Kavita came to check in on Tidbit. The school had hired Nurse Kavita after Nurse Grace had slipped on some ice and decided to try and get workman’s compensation and Fred the Nurse had disappeared three weeks into his tenure. She was a nervous, pretty Indian woman who seemed perpetually overwhelmed by the extent of her responsibilities. She had to pour meds for every student on campus, most of whom took a heavy mixture three times a day, the exact proportions of which were constantly being adjusted by the Dr. Wahl, the school’s psychopharmacologist. Nurse Kavita had begun to take full advantage of the school’s requirement that all staff attend therapy with the school’s therapy staff. She was now seeing Stan three or four times a week.

"Oh, what is that you're reading?" She asked Ira.

It took him a moment to realize what she was talking about. Over the past few days, whenever a faculty member had seen him just sitting there by the corner, they reminded him that it was fine for him to read a book or magazine while he was watching Tidbit. They looked at him strangely when he said he was fine just sitting there, so this morning on his way to the dorm, he had stopped by the Teachers’ Lounge and grabbed something off the shelf. He read to Nurse Kavita from the cover:

"She Stoops to Conquer."
"Oh. Is it any good?"

Ira shrugged.

"Well," she said, "I just came up to take a look at the eye. You can take a little break if you like." But Ira said he was fine, and watched as Tidbit turned in her chair and Nurse Kavita took a little white flashlight out of her jacket pocket. She looked at the swollen eye carefully, pressing and pulling gently, and pausing whenever Tidbit sucked air through her teeth in pain. When she was done, Nurse Kavita told Ira, "I'd like to have her go to the clinic. I'm afraid the swelling is putting pressure on the eyeball."

"You have to talk to Gabriel about that, right?" Ira asked. "Marcy said that none of the kids can have a doctor's appointment unless you tell him they need one."

"Yes," Nurse Kavita said, putting away her flashlight. "And sometimes not even then."

Tidbit and Benjamin were pulling weeds from around one of the flower beds which lined the road that ran around campus. Benjamin had his shirtsleeves rolled up, but his shirt was still buttoned to the top. He liked to dig down into the dirt a little around the weed, to see the cool, white heart of the thing resting in the earth.

"You have a zit," Tidbit said, "on your nose."

Benjamin kept digging. "So? I have one on my ear, too."

Tidbit stopped tugging at weeds and looked at him. "I don't see it."

"My other ear," he said. He knew that Tidbit was just yanking at the weeds she saw and slicing the stems off above the earth with her trowel, and that they'd probably have to come back and weed this same place tomorrow.

"Can I pop it?" she asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't pop them."
"What? Why not? That's the only good thing about having zits. Sometimes I put it off, to save them for later, put I always eventually pop mine." She was talking slowly, drawing this out to get a reaction. "And every night before bed, I squeeze out the blackheads around my nose. C'mon, just let me pop the one by your ear. I'll let you do one of mine."

"No," Benjamin said, and couldn't help laughing a little. "I don't want to pop any of yours or any of mine. Besides, the one by my ear hurts."

"Oh, then you have to pop it," she said, dropping her trowel and crawling around to his other side. "Let me see." She took his head in her hands. Tidbit's hands were swollen from her Lithium, and they shook. Benjamin squirmed a little but let her look. Her hands felt cold against his face. "Oh yeah, this'll stop hurting if you pop it."

"Don't."

At that, she pinched the zit above Benjamin's ear and he flinched. "Ow."

"Stop moving," she said, sitting up on her knees and pushing Benjamin's head against her thigh. He smelled the grass stains on her jeans and the detergent scent from her shirt. The zipper of Tidbit's jacket scraped against his neck as she leaned over him.

"Ow ow ow," he said. "Quit it." The pain was sharp, and burned. It didn't feel like a zit that was going to pop.

"Is it hurting less or hurting more?"

"More more more more more." Benjamin twisted his head each time she pinched, rubbing against the texture of her jeans. It felt like the pain was spreading over the side of his head. His right eye was closed and pressed against Tidbit's thigh. His left was looking directly at one of her rivets. It hurt badly enough that he wondered whether she might actually do some serious damage.

"Oh, hold on," Tidbit said. She slid his head down her leg and onto the grass so that she could lean over him. He felt the ground against his cheek and her breast against his shoulder. Grass tickled his nose and half his head felt as if it might explode.
"It's about to go," Tidbit said. She seemed almost out of breath.

"Stop it, it-"

But with silent, gushing release, it was over. Tidbit gasped and said, "Ooh, that was a bad one," and wiped her hands on the grass, letting Benjamin get up.

"See," she said, "I bet it hurts less now."

Benjamin had his hand over the side of his head. "It hurts less than when you were squeezing it."

"You'll see. It'll feel better."

"You didn't make it bleed, did you?" he asked, taking his hand off his ear and looking at his palm.

"No," she said, but she had to look to be sure.

They went back to weeding their way through the flower bed until there were a few handfuls of weeds sitting next to them in the grass.

"Let's go dump these," Benjamin said. They got up and walked around to the back of the greenhouse, where there were sprawling piles of different types of garbage. There was one pile with old plastic chairs from the Classroom Building, a rusty broken tricycle, a metal bed frame, old tires, a hollowed-out washing machine. Behind that was the Compost Heap, and next to it the Burn Pile, made up of twigs and branches fallen from trees around campus. The dumpsters were further back, and Tidbit and Benjamin could see two cats on top of them, one lying in the sun, the other pacing back and forth across the dumpster's edge.

"Do the weeds go on the Compost Heap or the Burn Pile?" Benjamin asked.

"I don't think it matters," Tidbit said, and threw them on the Heap. Things were sprouting from all over the compost. Pale grass had begun to cover the less steep parts, and a few thin saplings and lots of weeds shot straight up from wherever they found themselves. At the top, a melon grew out of the previous summer's garbage.
Tidbit began heading back to the road to work on the next flower bed, but Benjamin stopped her. "Let get water for the Pig Pen first."

So they headed into the greenhouse, which smelled strongly of mushrooms, to the sinks in the back, and each filled a bucket. They walked out past the Burn Pile, down a narrow dirt path through a small copse of trees, that opened on a small clearing. There was a decrepit shack next to a small wire pen. Zbigniew, who was in charge of the Reciprocity Detail program, was fixing the gate. He didn't see them until they were right behind him.

"Oh, hello Tidbit and Benjamin," he said in his heavy Polish accent. "You can leave them the buckets right here. I bring it inside when I finish the gate." Zbigniew was a small man, and one of the nicer faculty on campus, they thought.

Inside the pen was were a pig, a goat, and lots of chickens. The goat was standing on the pig. That was how they spent their days, the pig lying on its side, the goat standing on it, scaring away the chickens. The goat was small but its ears were long, and hung down past its chin. Its brown coat was long as well, and two pale, thin horns grew out of its head. The pig was pale, and very fat.

"Do they have names?" Benjamin asked.

"Probably, but nobody can remember what they were," Tidbit said.

"We should name them."

"What do you want to name them?"

"I don't know," he said.

"We could name the pig Napoleon, like in that other book," Tidbit said.

"No," Benjamin said, "the goat should be Napoleon, because he's small but he always stands on top of the pig."

"Then what should we name the pig?" Tidbit asked.

They were quiet for a moment, as a breeze sifted through the small woods. Then they heard Zbigniew call out slowly, enjoying the sound of it, "Elba."
What amazed Benjamin was how easy it all was. He simply opened the window, removed the screen as quietly as he could, and climbed out, pulling his bookbag after him. He was so excited that he had to stifle a yelp as he stood outside the dorm and felt the wind rise around him. Ben hopped up and down for a moment, feeling the chill grass and weeds poking through his worn white socks, before surreptitiously tiptoeing around to the front of the dorm, sneaking in, and grabbing his shoes. And then he was off.

When he got to the front gate, Benjamin looked around for Tidbit, patiently at first and then with increasing anxiety. He whispered her name once and then again more loudly, and a moment later she slipped out from behind a tree in jeans and a black tank top. Her short hair was up in tiny pigtails. "Let's go," she said, looking back toward the school nervously.

They started away in silence, walking off to the side of the road, to the right of a ditch scattered with stones and litter. They knew that no one from the school would chase them, but the police would be notified, and the police could pick them up and take them back. Benjamin breathed deeply the late summer air; the trees and roadtop were slicked with moonlight, and everything seemed to hum from deep within itself. He took large strides and grabbed Tidbit's hand in his. But she was walking in a different rhythm, with smaller, more deliberate steps, and he stumbled trying to match her pace and let go. Tidbit checked her watch. She figured chances were they'd be caught before they got to anywhere interesting.

The plan was to use what money they had hoarded to get some alcohol and cigarettes, and then head down to Triangle Lake. Tidbit thought they could save time by taking a boat across the lake. Then they could hide out in one of the big houses on the opposite shore that were only used as summer homes. She wondered about Benjamin. There was something attractive about him in an abstract, measured way – he was tall, and his eyes were thoughtful when he wasn't too excited about anything. He was a spaz, and cried too easily, but she liked the way he insisted on wearing his shirts buttoned up all the way even if it was hot enough to roll up his sleeves. It wasn't to
hide tattoos or scars or anything, but just because that's how he was. She looked over at him bouncing along, looking up at the streetlights. He turned toward her and gave her a goofy smile, and all at once Tidbit felt she could jump on him right there, she was so happy he was with her. She kicked him in the leg.

"Let's hurry up," she said, and they started to jog alongside the ditch.

The two of them drifted up and down hills, following the road until they were across the street from the 24-hour MiniMart gas station. They stopped under the trees and sat down to catch their breath. Tidbit fished around in her pockets and pulled out a crumpled roll of bills held together by a purple rubber band.

"I've got eight dollars," she said. "How much've you got?"

"Six, I think," Benjamin said, and pulled his bookbag off his shoulder and started rifling through it. His bag was packed tightly, and it took him a minute to find the money.

"What's that?" Tidbit asked, pointing to something in his bag.

"What's what? That? Oh, that's a bottle of liquid fabric softener." The answer didn't seem to satisfy her. "I get a rash if I use any other brand. So I thought I should bring it." He looked at her. "I get hives."

"Where do you think you'll use it?"

"I donno. Where do you wash your clothes when you run away?"

Tidbit thought for a second. "You know, I don't think I washed my clothes any of the times I've run away." She looked at the big blue bottle for a long moment. "You've got the money?"

"Yeah, six dollars. And my I.D. What should I get?"

"Cigarettes, booze... and, like, some apples. Yeah. Apples. And some water."

"Okay. And I'll get peanut butter."

"Okay."
Benjamin started toward the store, but Tidbit grabbed his arm. "No, wait. It'll look strange if you just walk in there this late without a car having pulled up. The guy'll know. Let's just wait for someone to pull in, so it'll look like you're with them."

They sat back in the sparse woods and gazed out across at the gas station. Strings of colorful plastic flags were strung around the pumps and in front of the store window, and they flapped loudly in the wind. Benjamin and Tidbit were on the ridge of a small hill, and could see behind the gas station to Triangle Lake, although it was late enough that all they really saw were the lights of the houses around it, reflected across the dark water. The whole gas station seemed like a picture of itself, still and self contained. It was caught suspended, hovering beneath its fluorescent lights.

Benjamin was scraping bits of bark from a stick he had found and thinking that the colors on the flags were all a little off - the green flags too blue and the blue ones too green, the reds almost purple and the yellows tending toward orange - when Tidbit let out a little laugh. She rested her head on his shoulder and said, "Well, at least you didn't bring a washing machine." Benjamin didn't know what to say, but liked her leaning on him like that. He sat still, afraid that if he shifted his balance or moved Tidbit would think that he was shaking her off. He tried his best not to move, but felt the shoulder that she was leaning on, where he could feel the warmth of her cheek through his shirt, begin to shake, slightly but uncontrollably. Just then an old mint green Cadillac pulled into the gas station. Benjamin took the roll of bills from Tidbit and headed across the street. She leaned back in the pine needles, watched, and waited.

A woman got out of the passenger seat, stood up and stretched in the wind. She was old, and thin, and was wearing a summer dress and sandals. The driver's side door opened and an old man sat there, turned so that his legs pointed out of the car. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and took a white sporting cap, some sort of golf thing, off his head. They seemed to have been driving for a long time.
Tidbit looked into the MiniMart, where she could see Benjamin through the large windows, lurching through the aisles. It was fun to watch him, careful and clumsy, balancing his purchases in his arms. There was something distant about him still, even as he fumbled through the store, dropping things and picking them back up, like he was used to the trivial difficulties he created for himself, and his mind was someplace else. Tidbit thought about taking off, of just leaving him in the store and seeing if she couldn't make her way back to her friends in Worcester. She hadn't planned on running away until Benjamin asked her, but now that she was already out and in trouble, she thought she might as well get back there and have some fun. But staying with Benjamin could be fun too, she told herself. And he would be pretty lost if he came out to find her gone. She laughed to herself when she thought of that.

The old man had gotten out of his car to pump gas, and his wife was dabbing at the windshield with a squeegee when Benjamin came out of the store. The old man looked at the Cadillac and called out, "Margaret, Did you do this? When did this happen, Margaret?"

"What?" she said.

"The back fender, what happened to the back fender?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing. I'm not blind, I can see that something happened to the fender." The old man had his cap in his hand and was peering down at his car.

Benjamin heard the woman sigh. She was looking right at him, drops of soapy water dripping from the squeegee one at a time. Then she turned to her husband and yelled sharply, "If you're not blind, you can see what happened to the fender!"

Something about the scene, the woman under the lights holding a squeegee, the glint off the glass, the wind, reminded him of something, but he couldn't quite place it. For a second, he felt the sweet smell of piles of dry leaves burning. He headed across the street, bag in hand.

"Whadja get?" Tidbit asked.
He poked around in the bag and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "These," he said, handing them to her. "And this," he said, pulling out a flask-sized bottle.

"Blackberry brandy?" she said.

"It sounded good, and I thought it would keep us warm," he said. "I didn't really know what to get."

Tidbit shrugged, and opened the pack of cigarettes. She offered them to Benjamin, but he declined, so she lit one herself and took a deep drag. "That's better," she said, exhaling slowly.

"The rest is apples, and peanut butter, some water, and these," Benjamin said, pulling out a clear plastic bag of chocolates, each wrapped in colored foil. "They were on sale. My bag's kinda full," he said, "so could we stuff this in yours?"

"No." Benjamin looked at her a second, then shrugged and pulled the bottle of fabric softener out of his bag to make room for the groceries. Tidbit took the brandy and the chocolates, and the rest fit in his bag snugly. He swung the bag onto his shoulders, picked up the fabric softener, and followed Tidbit back to the road. They didn't have much more to say to each other then, so they headed quietly along the road to the lake, passing the bag of chocolates and the bottle of brandy back and forth between them, leaving behind them a trail of pastel foil wrappers, which were picked up, spun, and scattered by the breeze.

The brandy was quickly going to Benjamin's head. He felt his face flush, and swinging his arms slowly while he walked, he felt his footsteps getting heavy. The night air was thick on his tongue. Tidbit seemed a bit mellowed, too. She was bouncing her shoulders up and down as she walked singing a song he didn't recognize. All he could get from it was:

_Babe, your love's got me retarded,
the way Heloise was Abelared_
He wasn't sure he was hearing the words right, but tried to dance along with her anyway. His bookbag was heavy, though, and the heavy bottle he was carrying kept upsetting his balance.

Tidbit stopped suddenly. "Look at that," she whispered, pointing up. Under a streetlight, Benjamin saw shadows flickering in midair, shifting blocks of darkness cut from the night sky and shooting back and forth erratically. It took him a moment to focus his eyes before he realized that there were two bats flying high above them.

"Watch this," Tidbit said. She grabbed a small stone from the ground and tossed it into the air. Both bats swooped at it and veered away just before touching it. "They think it's a bug to eat until they get close," she said. She tossed another stone up so that the top of its arc was just a few feet above their heads. As they came close, Benjamin noticed that bats' bodies were larger than he would have thought. Their wings were shaped like oak leaves.

That was what the old lady reminded him of, he realized as they walked ahead. His mom at home, just a few months before he'd been sent to Roaring Orchards. Her 'days', that was what she called them, days she wouldn't – couldn't – move from the white couch in the living room at all, watching television and smoking cigarettes. Benjamin's dad sort of just went to work and came back late, and after a while didn't even try to talk to her, he just went to their bedroom and went to sleep. His mom slept on the couch, except for when, late at night, she would roam around the house doing errands. That whole time was awkward to think about for Benjamin, like he couldn't hold all the pieces of it in his head at once, but there was one night he remembered with absolute clarity. He had gotten into the habit of waking up in the middle of the night to check on his mother, and one night when he got up he couldn't find her anyplace. He went all through the house twice, faster and faster, beginning to panic but too scared to wake his father or call the police, when he noticed a faint scratching by the living room window. He looked out, and saw his mother down in the yard, in her bathrobe. She was raking the leaves on the lawn, slowly, beneath the streetlight. Benjamin came closer to the window, to cast a shadow through which he could see her better. For a while he watched her working on the lawn. She wasn't accomplishing
much, just dragging the rake through the leaves. And then she stopped and looked up at him as if she had known he was there the whole time. Benjamin put his hand up to the glass and they both stood perfectly still, looking at one another, he watching her look at him and she seeing him watch her. The glance was a thing stretched between them. Benjamin could feel his pulse in his fingertips on the glass and a sadness he didn't even knew he had seep from his chest. Then suddenly he was bored of standing there, and turned and went to bed.

Benjamin and Tidbit left the road about a quarter-mile from Triangle Lake, and headed straight through the woods toward the water. The light from the streetlamps didn't stretch far into the tress, and their eyes were soon veiled with grey. Thin branches and vines stretched across the ground, and although Tidbit and Benjamin moved slowly and carefully, trees loomed up in front of them as if from out of nowhere. Tidbit stretched her arms out in front of her and giggled.

"Where are you?" Benjamin called.

"I'm drunk," Tidbit said. "Marco," she called.

"Polo," he answered plaintively.

And so they bumped and tripped step by step through the dim shapes and indecipherable distances, until the sloshing, glittery expanse of water spread out before them. It lapped against the shore, and emitted a deep hiss that resonated in the leaves and stones all around.

"Shit," said Tidbit, "where's the boats?"

"I don't know," he said, and sighed insistently. "Are there boats?"

"Oh, yeah, there's a whole bunch of them someplace. We'll find them," she said. She grabbed his hand and pulled him after her along the shore, which they began to follow around the lake. It soon thinned to a narrow strip of dirt and rocks, so that they walked along with the lake to their right and the dark woods to their left. Benjamin and Tidbit each slipped repeatedly, on stones or mud, and only kept from falling by stomping into the water. They put the chocolates and brandy away in Tidbit's bookbag. She was enjoying herself, and the giddy feeling that each step into the dark was utterly unpredictable, a step off the edge of the world. Benjamin was not.
He slipped on a wet rock and landed in a puddle of loose silt, his leg sinking into the mud up to his knee. Tidbit had to help pull him out, yanking on both his arms, after taking the blue bottle of liquid fabric softener from him and placing it by a tree. Pulling his leg out, Benjamin lost his shoe in the muck, and Tidbit went back to fish it out while he hopped up the shore and sat down on a fallen tree.

Sitting there, squeezing the water out of his muddy sock, Benjamin felt his throat tighten and his chest swell, and a hot, fat tear sat poised on the pink shelf of his eyelid, trembling. He was breathing harder now, and faster, a panicky storm swirling around him, ready for him to fall into if—No. He wasn't going to fall apart this time, he decided, and crushed the tear, dragging his forearm across his cheek. People ran away from Roaring Orchards all the time and got into all sorts of horrible trouble, worse than this, and if this is what it was going to be like, then fine. He could do it as well as anyone else he thought, pulling on his sock and twisting his foot into the soggy sneaker that Tidbit had just handed him. She was surprised to see him produce a clean towel from his stuffed bookbag and begin drying the leg of his pants, but she only said, "They've got to be around here somewhere."

Once the two of them got going again, they stayed farther up in the woods to avoid the water, and moved slowly along, stumbling and feeling around until Tidbit fell over a huge bump, and it rang out like a gong. A boat. They were excited and started to crawl around to see if there were more, and there were boats everywhere, each one turned upside down, covering the hill like scales on a fish.

"Try to find one that's not locked to a tree," Tidbit said, and this was difficult in the dark. They felt around for chains or cables, or just tried to pull the boats away from the nearest tree, to see if a boat lock stopped them. Tidbit found a loose rowboat at the top of the hill, and they flipped it over and dragged it toward the lake. The metal hull amplified every noise as it slid across pine needles or banged into stones. When they got it to the shore, they could see it was
orange, or had been. The paint was faded where it wasn't chipped, and the name 'Donna' was stenciled across the stern in blue.

The boat bounced lightly on the waves as they pushed it backwards into the water.

"Get in," Benjamin said, leaning on the bow to keep it steady. Tidbit hunched down and scurried to the back. Benjamin stepped one foot into the boat, and pushed off the shore with his other. He dropped his bookbag and the blue bottle of liquid fabric softener at his feet, fitted the oars into the oarlocks, and jerking and tilting, they floated away from shore.

"You know what's amazing?" Tidbit asked. She was leaning back against the side of the rowboat and dragging her fingers through the water. "We were just killing ourselves to climb and crawl over the ground, to get from there to here, but now we're just floating way above it. All that's between us and down there," she said, lifting her wrist and letting water drip from her fingers, "is this." Tidbit wondered what was down there at the bottom. Seaweed, oysters,... maybe a ship had sunk. A shudder went through her as she remembered the story of Alathea Grube's doomed wedding. She took the brandy and the chocolates back out.

"You know what's at the bottom of this lake?" Tidbit asked.

"What? Hold on, just tell me if I get us off course," Benjamin said. His back was to the front of the boat as he rowed. "We should be heading toward that light," he said and pointed to a bright point across the lake. Turning, he realized that they were almost halfway there. He turned the oars so that they rested in the boat, and decided to take a rest. Tidbit passed him the brandy.

"What's at the bottom of the lake?"

"This is where Grube's daughter had her wedding, on the ice. She's still somewhere down there, in her dress, along with the minister and a guest."

"Two guests," Benjamin said. He sipped the blackberry brandy slowly and passed it to her.

"But you said you made that story up."

"When?"
"Yeah, you told me you made it up to test if Bev was really seeing ghosts."

"Oh," Tidbit said. "Are you sure?" She remembered vaguely, but the images seemed so vivid and so cold, floating beneath her, that they didn't seem to be anything she could have invented.

"Yeah, it was when she was doing her fake seizures, seeing demons coming out of the vents."

"Hmm. It's weird, it gets hard to remember sometimes." Knowing that she had made up the drowned bride only made the whole thing scarier.

"Do you think they know we're gone?" Benjamin asked.

"If they don't know yet, they will soon."

"I thought I saw some light go on just as we were leaving," he said. Benjamin took a long pull from the bottle of brandy, and then looked at it.

"Well, then, my dorm's probably in a CANDOR meeting right now. Yours too, claiming any negligence or dishonesty in our relationships. Ugh. I can just see it."

"This stuff is really sweet," Benjamin said. "It's making my tongue feel heavy."

"Marcy's probably half asleep, all pissed off and screaming at people to 'Tell the truth, tell the truth, have some guts, let go of your Intimacy Obstacles.' And they're all going to have to sit there staring at their feet until someone gives in and starts to cry about how angry they are at me. And when she decides they've been honest, then they can go." The boat was spinning slowly in the breeze, but Tidbit kept an eye on the light across the lake.

"I think this stuff is making my teeth hurt. Is that supposed to happen? I don't drink very often."

"Give me that. Are you even listening? Your dorm's probably in the same spot right now. That mesomorph Gene's not any different." They traded, brandy for candy.

"Well," Benjamin said, "Gene's problem is that he's got his own problems. I feel sort of bad for taking off like this. It might send him over the edge." Benjamin started folding the foil wrappers into little toy boats and setting them out on the waves.
"But it's not even lying. Everybody knows that everybody wants to run away. That place is a fucking gulag. If we bide our time and pretend to follow the schedule, they believe it 'cause they want to. Which is fine with me if it makes them feel better, but it's not my fault they can't tell fantasy from reality." She paused to take a drink. They had almost polished off the bottle. "I mean, the only reason anybody is ever honest around there is just for the relief that they won't get caught knowing or thinking something they're not supposed to. And then the faculty pretends that that's courageous. It's not, though. Lying, now lying takes responsibility." Tidbit seemed pleased with that, almost surprised, and nodded her head for emphasis. She tapped her feet excitedly in a bit of water in the bottom of the boat.

"Like how?" Benjamin was listening, but he was looking at the tiny pink boat he was folding. For no reason, it made Tidbit think of them as a scene on a wedding cake, a boat in a little lake of jam.

"Well, like if I say something that's obviously a lie, but it's still something you want to hear, you can kind of believe it for a little even if you know it's not true. Like if I said, 'I've always dreamed about meeting someone like you.' I like you and all, but that's not quite true. It's not even remotely true. But still, if I said it, wouldn't it be nice to hear?"

"Well, at least it'd be nicer to hear than that," Benjamin said. "Try it." He looked at her.

"I've always wanted to meet someone like you."

"Yeah," Benjamin said, "that is nice."

"Your turn," Tidbit said, smiling.

"Uhm... I couldn't stop thinking about you since the first time I saw you."

"Really? No, don't answer that. Okay,... You've never hurt anyone you've loved."

"Wait. I don't think I hurt people I've loved."

"Good one. See, you're getting the hang of it."

"Hardy har har." But he laughed.
Tidbit leaned back again and dipped her fingers into the lake, which seemed higher than it was. "I think the boat's leaking," she said.

"No, it's my turn. And besides, that's not really anything I wanted to hear."

"No, look." Tidbit kicked her feet around in the water at the bottom of the boat, which was a few inches deep.

Benjamin looked around his feet for a moment, then said thoughtfully, "Do you think that's why this one wasn't locked up?"

"Shit," they said. Benjamin grabbed the oars and started rowing. "Where's the light we're heading to?" he called.

"Over there, I think," Tidbit said, pointing. "What should I do?" She had cupped her hands and was splashing handfuls of water out of the boat. As Benjamin rowed, the water sloshed all around, soaking everything.

"Get rid of whatever you can," he said. She threw the empty brandy bottle and the chocolates that were left overboard. Then she picked up the bottle of liquid fabric softener that had floated toward her feet.

"Wait."

"Benjamin"

"Okay, but just dump it out and use the bottle to bail out the boat." Tidbit poured the contents of the bottle out over the edge of the boat. The liquid was a brilliant pale blue, and left a slick along the surface behind them. "Now I'm gonna get hives," Benjamin muttered under his breath. Tidbit pushed the empty bottle under the water in the boat and waited for it to fill up before pouring it out again over the side.

But it was no use. The water they had taken on weighed the boat down enough that with every tilt caused by Benjamin's hectic rowing, waves poured in over the gunwales. Before long, the boat was too heavy to row, so the two of them sat there, sinking.
"Just pour the bottle out and put the top back on tight. It'll float," Benjamin suggested, without much enthusiasm. The bow of the boat sank below the water, and the boat began to slip away beneath them.

"Let's go," Tidbit said.

They were surprised as they leaned into the lake and started swimming that they didn't get wet, at least not all at once. The cold water took its time, trickling down their backs and up their legs after seeping through sleeves, collars, and cuffs.

They let their bookbags sink with the "Donna". Tidbit held the empty bottle of liquid fabric softener under her chin, although she now thought of it less as empty then as filled with air. She was kicking, and moving smoothly along the waves, scared to let her legs sink too low lest they get caught on drowned wedding guests. Benjamin was swimming a nervous kind of breaststroke, but tired quickly. He dunked under to see how far the lake bottom was, and realized that it was very shallow; he could just keep his head up if he hopped along on his toes.

Which is how they proceeded, two heads disembodied by the dark water, one gliding slowly across the surface, the other bobbing up and down, moving along in slow, distended arcs. Each looked pale to the other in the moonlight. It took a while before they began to warm up from the exertion.

"Where were we?" Tidbit asked, when the shock of finding herself swimming through the lake that had just held them up so effortlessly wore off.

"Telling pretty lies, before the horrible truth interrupted."

"Oh yeah... Well, this is all going exactly as I planned."

Benjamin laughed. "Hmm. Your plan was brilliantly designed."

"Thanks. I appreciate the compliment," Tidbit said. She took in a mouthful of lakewater and spat it in his direction.

"You deserve it," he said laughing, and splashed back at her. Tidbit kicked her improvised flotation device closer to him, until she watched his bouncing slowly come to a halt just in front
of her, and he stood there on his tiptoes, balancing in the water like some huge, clumsy, waterlogged ballet dancer. She leaned forward and kissed him, which was difficult to do, pulled as they were by the breeze and slapped by passing waves. But they managed to kiss for some time, Benjamin holding Tidbit close so that she wouldn't float away. He had just begun to enjoy the feel of her tongue around his when he choked on a noseful of water.

"We'll have to try again later," Tidbit said. "No lie." They went back to kicking and hopping toward shore, and were there before they knew it. Climbing out of the water was awful. The clothes that had billowed around them, full of dark water, now clung heavy and tight, and in the wind chilled mercilessly. They dragged themselves up the shore and toward the houses, their lips blue and teeth chattering.

On this side of the lake, the woods had been cleared all the way down to the shore to make room for lakefront homes. Tidbit and Benjamin walked through the wide yards, looking into the windows and garages of one house after another, trying to find one that seemed to have no one home. It took them a long while to find a yellow clapboard house that was a good possibility, and by the time they got there, both Benjamin and Tidbit were cold and uncomfortable enough to take their chances.

"You've got to break the window by the back door," Tidbit said, looking around the edges of the lawn for a good-sized rock. "I'll tell you if any lights go on."

"I don't think that's a very good idea," Benjamin said.

"Benjamin, how else will we know if anyone's inside? Do you want to ring the bell and wait?"

"What if the neighbors hear it?"

"Okay, you just stand back where you can see the whole house, and tell me if any lights go on," Tidbit said. She found two rocks, and walked around to the bottom of the back steps, which were wooden and painted a pale green color, almost grey. She took a breath and hurled one rock through a window in the back door, winced at the noise it made, and waited. She looked back at...
Benjamin, and pointed up, asking if he saw any lights. He shook his head. Tidbit climbed the steps and used the other rock to clear shards of glass from the window, and reached in and unlocked the door. She motioned for Benjamin to follow her.

Inside, it took their eyes some time to adjust. When the darkness resolved into shapes, they found themselves in front of an umbrella rack, next to a line of pegs on the wall hung with raincoats and jackets. There was a woven rug on the floor. They crept forward, through a space with a washer and dryer. Board games were piled on the dryer, a thin cardboard box with a checkers set on top. The checkers box was missing its lid, and they saw the folded, beat-up board and pieces scattered around. Tidbit pointed to a shelf above the washer, where there was a bottle of the same liquid fabric softener with which Benjamin had been traveling.

Carefully, they rounded a corner and walked into the kitchen. The stove was on an island in the middle, over which hung all kinds of enormous pots and utensils, brushed bronze-looking things. Tidbit wandered in to take a closer look in the cabinets, while Benjamin walked through to the living room. There wasn't a lot of furniture – a couch, three chairs, a table – but it seemed solid and comfortable. He had the sense that he had often felt at home, moving around his house at night. The furniture seemed to be different at night, as if it didn't exist for his purposes then. It felt like he had intruded on a den of large, quiet animals breathing softly in their sleep, as if the couches and chairs all had their own dreams to dream in the unfamiliar shadows.

There was a tremendous noise in the kitchen, and Benjamin looked back at Tidbit. She had knocked down some of the pots, and was standing frozen. 'Sorry', she mouthed, as they waited to see if there would be a reaction from anywhere in the house. When there wasn't any, the two of them relaxed.

Benjamin found a couple of bathrobes and some towels in an upstairs closet. He changed in the bathroom, and took a quick shower while Tidbit got out of her clothes and into the robe, and warmed up under the covers in the big bedroom. She turned on the TV, and watched a little of a submarine adventure movie. The crew had just narrowly escaped from the enemy fleet, only to
be mistaken for an enemy ship by their own navy. "We can't return fire, for God's sake!" shouted the captain. Tidbit looked at the phone next to the bed. She picked up the receiver and turned it around in her hands, thought about calling her friends, about how angry they would be if the knew she could have and didn't. It would be nice to be high right now, she thought, on the featherbed in this lakehouse, but then she thought about her friends' shitty apartment, the awful days of hitchhiking it would take to get there. Tidbit imagined bringing Benjamin to meet them. She flipped through a magazine. They would fall down laughing, but she really didn't think he would mind. Maybe tomorrow. Anyway, she was almost asleep as it was.

When Benjamin was done in the shower, Tidbit went in. Benjamin looked around the bedroom. There was a fireplace, and the mantel was arranged with decorative things – a candlestick on one end, some dried flowers and a cowbell on the other. On the dresser, a hairbrush lay next to a lacquered wooden box. He opened the box, and picked through the jewelry inside. Benjamin assumed that none of it was real, although he couldn't be sure. He played with the links of a chunky gold necklace, and ran a string of pearls through his fingers. He was still playing with the pearls when he started to inspect the framed pictures next to the box. There was one with a man and a woman, a boy and girl really, next to a car. They were both facing the camera and laughing, but the boy was hugging the girl around the waist, from behind, and holding her up in the air. The car was a black Trans Am. The girl's hair was straight, light brown, and she had bangs that hung down in front of her wide, laughing face; her hands were on the boy's strong, thin forearm. Benjamin ran his finger along the girl's tanned left leg. Tidbit was done in the shower, and she was leaning her head against his back. Behind him, the black car looked dusty and hot, parked in the grass. Benjamin felt the steam still rising off Tidbit, and the smell of shampoo.

He was surprised, when he turned around, to see that she was naked. He doubled the string of pearls, trying not to seem nervous or strange, and put them on her; he let her lead him to the bed.

Tidbit kissed him deeply, then rolled on top of him, looking down. "You're weird," she said.
"Why?"

"I don't know why, but you are. I came out of the shower and was talking to you, but you just kept looking at that picture."

"Sorry, I didn't hear." He didn't like to be called weird. "Do you still like me?"

Tidbit pretended to think about it. "I like you enough to sleep with you."

"Your therapist would be really proud. That's a good answer. Very clear."

Tidbit lay down looking at Benjamin. She drew her fingertip along the line of his cheek.

"You're so cute when you're condescending," she said.

"Wow. We're going to be together forever," he said.

Now Tidbit smiled. "They're never going to catch us," she said.

They went to sleep, lying in each other's arms, lying in someone else's bed, as morning was breaking.

Benjamin got up well before Tidbit did, and went downstairs to wash their clothes. He was starving, and as the clothes were washing, he hunted through the kitchen for food. He found a box of Froot Loops, but not milk, so he wandered around the living room with the box, eating. Lines of sunlight shot through the blinds on the widows, and swelled on the floor. Benjamin remembered his mother telling him that when he was a baby, he would try to pick up the sunlight as it lay on the floor of his playroom. When he heard the washing machine finish, he put their things in the dryer and went back to roaming the house. About fifteen minutes had passed before he realized that he had forgotten the fabric softener. But when he went to add it, there was an older woman standing in the back doorway, staring at the machine. She looked up.

It was the woman from the picture upstairs, he could tell, although she was much older.

"Your face changed," he said. "From the picture, the Trans Am.". It continued to change as he stood there.
"I'll call the police," she said, and gasped. Suddenly, Benjamin knew exactly what she meant. He looked back over his shoulder, at the steps that went upstairs. Then he pulled open the dryer door and grabbed his pants. "Sorry about all this," he said, vaguely waving behind him, and pushed past her, running away.

Tidbit was having a dream. She dreamt that she was lifeguarding, sitting in a tall, tall, chair above a rectangular pool behind a small motel. Board shorts, sunglasses, whistle. There was only other person at the pool, a fat older man with hair all over his belly. He was sleeping on a lounge chair, stretched out on his back, perfectly still, with a newspaper spread on his lap. Tidbit began to wonder whether he was sleeping or dead. She tried to tell whether he was breathing, if his chest was rising and falling, but she couldn't tell from her chair, which suddenly seemed much higher than it had been. She couldn't get down, she realized, the chair was enormous and there wasn't a ladder. She tried to think of what she could do for the man down there, to at least see whether or not he was alive. She could throw something at him, her whistle or glasses, but she worried about that. He might get hurt, or angry, and he was huge, like an elephant seal or an elephant seal's carcass. He was probably fine, she told herself, and if he was just sleeping, she wouldn't want to wake him. Five minutes, then she would figure out what to do. Five minutes passed, and with growing uneasiness, she decided to give it ten more. The man didn't move at all. Just as she was beginning to panic, considering sliding down the pole that supported her chair or jumping into the pool far below like some circus performer, she heard a honk. Then more honking. Spots appeared and grew in the sky, until she saw a remarkable flock of geese heading for the pool. They flew past her, over her head and on either side, close enough to touch, big and real. And they landed in the pool, and then when there wasn't any more room in the pool, they landed on the deck. The geese splashed and made a noise, one overwhelming noise, and pecked at the man on the chair. Tidbit was so relieved to see him wake up startled and angry, shaking his rolled newspaper at her, cursing her in words she couldn't quite make out.
She woke to see a big face peering at her from under a sharp, blue hat. Officer Mimosa was as surprised when she opened her eyes as she was, and jumped back. Another policeman was standing in the doorway to the bedroom. "Sarah Lampkin?" he said. "Let's go."
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