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House Matters: A Novel

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by

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PAUL

I've found that nothing jolts me awake like a Mexican radio station; some guy yammering away unintelligibly at lightening speed in a syncopated rhythm littered with occasional English - place names or consumer brands that won't translate - and a musical score comprised of trumpets, trombones, accordions, and tubas. *Accordions and tubas* – it's like a Mexican polka, and it hits my brain, triggering my hand to shoot over and flail at the alarm clock until it stops.

Scrambling out of bed, I fling the covers to the floor, and run over to the window. With my hand on the curtain cord, I pause to offer a silent prayer to any deity who wants to help a guy miss any amount of high school - One, two, shwing! The curtains part to reveal a lightly frosted window pane through which I can barely see the surrounding landscape because of a thick, white, billowy blanket of freshly fallen – *snow!* Woohoo!

“No school!”

My excitement is checked, however, when my mother's voice comes barreling in from another part of the house, like a heat-seeking missile, “You'd better check anyway.”

Rolling my eyes, I grumble over to my PC to check the school district's website. Although I would never attempt this logic with my mother: as few times as it does snow here, why can't we just assume there's no school? And if there is, just play dumb? Naturally, I hear her voice in my head saying, “There is no *playing* dumb. Not using an available resource to confirm *is* dumb.”

Although I actually visit the school district's site a lot for things like the football schedule and lunch menus, I refuse to add it to my Favorites folder; that just seems wrong to me somehow; like setting the car stereo preset to Mexican radio.

OK, here it comes, please, please, please... Urgh. The Home Page is so lame. Principal Trask thinks he's all cool, starring in a Flash movie introducing Skyview High School. Dork. Ah, here it is: *For Tuesday, January 25, the San Gorgonio mountain communities have received an average snowfall of six inches overnight...blah, blah, blah...Skyview Unified School District remains open and...*

"Ah crap!" I mutter, shoving the mouse aside in protest.

Once again, the ubiquitous voice of my mother: "I heard that." It makes me wonder sometimes if she's bugged my room. I doubt it; she can't even set the clock in the Ford Explorer. "Into the shower Paul. You wanna brown bag it today or do you prefer to dine in Chez Cafeteria?"

"Le cuisine de merde, sil vous plait."

"Paul," comes the stern reply, causing me to snicker. By the way, *merde* means shit, which, incidentally, I picked up from her. Why is it that the first foreign language words we learn are invariably the dirty ones? Anyway, if I have to go to school today, brown baggin' it in wet weather always translates to soggy sandwich, so I guess I'll chance it in the cafeteria. Eating in the cafeteria always makes me think of that old army show *M*A*S*H*; I've caught a couple of episodes on late-nite TV and it's pretty funny. The mess hall guy, I think his name's Igor, is always seen slopping down a grayish-green blob of semi-ingestible nutrient onto the soldiers' metal tray with a *splorch*. The best

part, though, is the look on their faces when they receive it - it's a cross between thankful and horrified. Our cafeteria...well, let's just say I'll be at the vending machines for lunch and not the hot line. The school nurse (er, "healthcare professional") prefers the vending machine's bruised apples and stale hostess products to the hot line, and that's endorsement enough for me.

All this thinking about food has made me hungry, so I skip the shower, slip into my jeans and sneakers, grab my warmest hoodie and my backpack, and head straight to the kitchen for a gigantic bowl of my favorite cereal Cap'n Crunch. Man I love that stuff. Sometimes I'll eat it right out of the box, no milk or anything; just shovel handfuls in my mouth and crunch crunchity crunch crunch crunch. I love the taste, I love the texture, the way my cheeks and tongue go kind of numb after eating enough of it. I can't think of a better way to start my day, except maybe jelly doughnuts and a glass of freezing cold milk. So good.

It's usually ready for me in the morning, with the box, bowl, milk and spoon on the kitchen table, but today the Cap'n's not on deck. What's here is half of a huge grapefruit, a tiny bowl of what looks like granola, a Dannon lowfat plain yogurt, a glass of pulpy orange juice, and some money for lunch. Weird. Mom must be on one of her famous diets again. She's always trying to lose weight; not sure why. I think my mom's a beautiful woman. I wouldn't go so far as to call her hot, that'd be kind of creepy, but she definitely turns heads; I see it happen all the time. She likes it too, but pretends to be annoyed; total tease.

One time we were sitting in the guest lounge of a tire store waiting for some new tires and this really attractive guy kept staring at her. She'd look away uncomfortably and tell me the guy was 'such an asshole' for gaping at her the way he was.

"Men are such pigs," she said. "Can't they ever learn to control themselves?"

Finally, he got up and came over and I watched my mom sit up straight and give herself a once-over, looking all eager. Turns out he was watching a game on the television set mounted on the wall behind us, just over our heads.

"Pardon me, ma'am. Do you mind if I turn up the volume?"

Mom looked pissed.

"Actually I do mind," she said, in a real snippy tone. "I'm sitting here with my son and we're having a conversation, and I don't want to have to shout over some stupid sports commentator babbling on about some ball landing in the wrong hole, or some idiot who makes way too much money for playing a ridiculous game he never grew out of as a child." The guy didn't say a word, just went and sat back down. I was a little embarrassed.

No worries, I'll get it myself. Mom must've been expecting me to hop in the shower first. I open the pantry door to find no Cap'n. Not only is there no Cap'n, it's cleaned out of everything. No marshmallows, no cookies, no Pop Tarts, no extra-butter supreme popcorn, no twinkies. Oh my God, no Sour Cream n'Cheddar potato chips and no Salsa Verde Doritos. What's going on here? It's like we've been hit by the neighborhood junk food bandit. Nothing but canned goods, pasta, Hamburger Helper, and Rice-a-Roni, and a hundred boxes of Nutra System energy bars. At least there's still

my tub of black licorice – I guess the junk food bandit likes red, like everybody else. I think red licorice is kind of gross, personally.

“Mom,” I call out.

No answer.

“Mom!”

“I’m outside clearing the driveway,” she yells.

“Where’s all the food?” I scream back.

No reply and I start to yell out again, when I hear the front door open. Mom comes into the kitchen, snow shovel in hand.

“Where’s the Captain Crunch and the rest of the food?” I ask, before she gets a chance to speak.

“Look honey...”

Great. ‘Look honey.’ That’s always a bad sign.

“...you’re going on a diet. You’ve put on some weight and you need to lose it before you look like a big, fat beach ball. It’s unshapely and I won’t have it.”

“What are you talking about? I look the same as always,” I say.

“You don’t. You’ve grown two waist sizes since last summer and your fingers are getting a little pudgy.”

It’s true that I’ve outgrown some of my clothes but I haven’t really thought about it. Nobody looks at me anyway.

“I’m a growing boy,” I say, getting really irritated.

“I’ll say. Growing like a sow for slaughter. Even Rachel said so, when she was over the other night.”

“Rachel? Your rat-faced friend with the buck teeth? She could chop wood with that overbite. Why the hell would I care what she thinks?”

I went a bit too far. Mother throws the shovel to the ground, swiftly moving towards me like a she-bear. She grabs my shoulder, squeezing hard, forcing me down into the seat.

“Ow! That hurts,” I say. When mother’s angry she screams and yells, but when she’s really pissed, I mean about to explode through the roof, she gets cold and calculated.

She bends down getting right up in my face. The acrid stench of stale whiskey and cigarettes stings my nose and she looks at me with the eyes of a serial killer.

“First of all, you watch your mouth when you’re talking to me. You got that.? Now, you will eat what I tell you to eat, do you understand me, young man?” she says, squeezing harder. “Do you understand me?.” Her voice is quavering and I can feel flecks of spittle against my cheek. I close my eyes waiting for it to end. “Do you?” she says.

A muted “Yes” is all I can manage.

She calms down, releases her grip and smiles. “Look, if there’s one thing I don’t want it’s a fat kid. I’ve put a nice, healthy breakfast here for you and you’re going to eat it. You’re going to eat it and you’re going to lose that weight. Do you want to be a big, ugly fatty?”

I assume the question's rhetorical and just sit there, staring at my lap, waiting for her to calm down.

'Well?'

"But I don't like..."

"I don't remember asking you what you like and what you don't like," she says, banging her fist on the table. "Christ you men are all a bunch of babies. I don't like this and I don't like that. None of you know what's really good for you."

She's winding up again, so I keep my mouth shut, hoping it'll end soon.

"I've thrown out all the junk food. And if I catch any in this house, there'll be hell to pay, mister. You got that?"

I don't dare look at her.

"Christ! I work my ass off to put a roof over your head and food on the table and all you do is complain. Do I get one ounce of gratitude? No. Not one, goddammit. Do I ask you to shovel the snow? No. Now sit there and eat your breakfast. I have to finish clearing the car out so I can get to work. Did you take a shower?"

"Yes," I lie. I just want to get out of here.

She relaxes and smiles, tousling my hair. "That's my good boy," she says, picking up the shovel. "Enjoy your breakfast. I love you, my darling," she says, going back outside.

I take a deep breath and relax. She's like Jekyll and Hyde, I swear to God. One minute she's Carol Brady and the next she's a demon from Hell. The slightest thing sets

her off and I never know when it's coming. Sometimes I think she's psychotic, but I Wikipedia'd it and she doesn't fit that profile. Actually, she's an alcoholic.

She doesn't think I know. She's got booze hidden all over the house; taped behind the microwave, under the middle couch cushion, one in the tank of the toilet. I stumbled across that one when the toilet wouldn't fill back up. I took the lid off and found an eighth of vodka blocking the flapper. I was tempted to take the green olives from the fridge and empty them in there as a joke – a toilet martini - but I think it's safer letting her live in the fantasy of my ignorance. I did mess with her though.

“The downstairs bathroom toilet had a problem filling up,” I'd said to her.

A panicked look flashed across her face; I thought she was going to shit her skirt.

“I just jiggled the handle, though, and it's OK now. You may need to call a plumber or something.” She thanked me and told me she'd have a look. It was gone by the time I got home from school that day. It's probably the one she now keeps in the umbrella in the hall closet, but that could've been there before. She's probably got more stashed in the house, but I let it go.

She starts first thing in the morning before she thinks I'm up. My room's above the kitchen and I can hear the rumble of the ice maker in the fridge, and the tiny tinkle of ice hitting the glass. When I get downstairs, there she is reading the Wall Street Journal and drinking her OJ on the rocks. I mean the OJ's in the fridge, already cold, so why the ice? Does she think I'm stupid? There's no ice in my orange juice here.

“Can I have some of your orange juice?” I'll say.

“Get your own,” she'll say, laughing it off.

Yeah right. She hides it during the day, but drinks in the open when she gets home from work, from the booze on the bar in the entertainment room. Vodka's her work-a-day drink while whiskey is her nighttime libation. There's a bottle of Gentleman Jack and a bottle of Absolute vodka, as well as Rose's lime, and a set of hideous Aztec coasters a friend brought her back from a cruise to Ensenada. And, as much as she drinks, they're always more than three-quarters full, probably to give the impression that she's easy on the stuff; a little drinkie-poo at night never hurt anybody, right?

I can also smell it; smell the vodka in her glass. I've heard it said, by her and others, that vodka is odorless. Bullshit. Either that's what alcoholics would like to believe, lulling themselves in to false sense of secrecy, or their sense of smell is so messed up from all the boozing, that they do think it's odorless. It smells kind of like rubbing alcohol, but not as caustic. With the amount of booze she burns though, she'd probably drink Aqua Net if she had to. She does have a can of that in her bathroom. I read about it online. Some hardcore alcoholics use surrogates around the house when there's no liquor to be had: mouth wash, perfume, and cold medicine. *Hey bartender, how 'bout a NyQuil on the rocks with a Listerine back.* I wish she would drink mouthwash, at least her breath would smell better.

I know it's been hard on her since the divorce ten years ago. What a nightmare that was. I just wish she wouldn't take it out on me. I have enough problems of my own. When she's sober, she's all right, but when she drinks, I'm scared to death of her. At least she doesn't hit like dad did.

I look out the window and see her trying to clear away the berm left by the snowplows, then glance down at my meager rations. There's no way I'm going to eat this crap. I'd rather starve to death. That'd show her.

One more check to make sure she's shoveling and I dump the granola, the yogurt, and the orange juice into the garbage disposal. Then I scoop out the nasty pink meat of the grapefruit, throwing it down there as well, careful to make sure there's no residue in the sink. I turn on the garbage disposal with the hot water running and run to the bathroom to spray the inside of the shower, dabbing the towel on the walls to make it look like I dried myself. I'm hanging the towel back up when I hear the garbage disposal shut off. Oh my God...

"Paul!" comes mother's voice from the kitchen. "Did you throw this food down the garbage disposal? I could hear it outside, you know? Paul. Answer me."

I lie to her a lot. I don't think I'm a bad person or anything but I'm scared that if I say the wrong thing, she'll go ballistic. I don't think there's any lying my way out of this one, though, and I panic and bolt out the back door.

"Paul Matthew Sherman! Get back here this instant or else you're really going get it. Paul!"

"Thanks for the dee-licious, noo-tritious breakfast, mom, but I don't wanna miss the bus," I yell over my shoulder, taking off down the street. I swear I can still hear her screaming at me a quarter mile down the road. No telling what's going to happen to me when I she gets home from work. I'll worry about that later, I'm safe for now, until I get to school anyway. Hopefully she'll have calmed down by the time I see her this

afternoon. She usually does. She gets pretty heated in the moment and usually simmers down over time.

As bad as it can get at home, though, school is a thousand times worse. At least at home there's only one mother and, for the most part, things can be quite pleasant. I just do what she wants and all is usually well. At school, though, I seem to be a bully magnet. No idea why. I dress like everybody else, I think I look like everybody else, yeah, I get really good grades, but I keep to myself and try to stay out of everybody's way. But it's rare if I can make it through the day without being shoved, kicked, or ridiculed. I think I've been subjected to every type of indecency and indignity there is. At least I've never been shoved into a locker; that's so cliché. And it's been going on since about the fifth grade; I'm a Sophomore now. I think the worst, as far as beatings are concerned, as opposed to mere humiliation, was when I inadvertently helped a couple seniors with their snack time purchase.

It was two years ago when I was a freshman. I'd only been in high school for a few months, hardly enough time, I thought, for upper classmen to figure out I was a punching bag; I didn't even know any upper classmen. I was waiting behind them to grab some barbeque corn nuts from the vending machine. Their money got stuck and they were shaking it trying to get it out. One turned to me and said,

“Hey Freshman, gimme another dollar, I'm outta money.”

I ignored him but he came towards me, “I said, gimme a dollar.”

“I'm not giving you a dollar,” I said.

He turned to his friend, “Oooo, tough little Freshman, isn’t he?” And the one grabbed me and started shaking me, while the other laughed. Naturally, a crowd started gathering. Why are people so attracted to other people’s misery? Of course, nobody stepped in to help. I tried to squirm away but the guy had a pretty tight grip on my arm. He kept shaking me demanding money, which I refused to relinquish.

“If you don’t give me the money, I won’t get my food, then I’ll really get angry and kick your ass.”

Even if I knew how to fight, this guy was at least four inches taller than I was and I knew any punch I’d attempt to throw would only be delivered right back at me, and a lot harder. So I tried to wait it out, getting jostled around like a rag doll. I guess his friend could see how much fun he was having and decided to join in by grabbing my other arm, shaking me as well, continuing to demand money. I thought about calling for help, but I didn’t want to add shame to humiliation; there were no teachers in sight anyway. I did keep telling them to let me go, but that only made them happier about what they were doing.

Finally I snapped and said, “Why don’t one of you two assholes put your little tiny dicks inside the coin slot and see if you can jar the money loose?” They certainly made me regret it.

“I have a better idea, faggot, why don’t we see if we can just knock it loose,” said one of the guys, and swung me by the arm into the vending machine with an astounding amount of strength. My right shoulder exploded in pain and I cried out.

“Hey that’s a great idea, let me give it a try,” said the other one, grabbing my arm, swinging me into the vending machine again. They each did it a couple more times, the only item getting knocked loose was one of my teeth when my face hit the coin return. As soon as they saw blood, they bolted, and I was left in a crying heap right there in the hallway. I made it to the school nurse who, naturally, asked me what had happened. I lied though and said I lost my balance on the stairs, falling on the metal railing. I know she didn’t believe me, but life was bad enough without being labeled a tattle-tale.

I lied to mom too when I got home. I had to. I got beat up on the bus, once, in the sixth grade, for the unspeakable act of standing up from my seat in front of an eighth grader. We were coming home from school and the bus had stopped so, naturally, I stood up with everybody else to get off. Talk about the wrong place at the wrong time: This eighth grader, Chad Markowitz, I didn’t even know him at the time, told me I’d disrespected him and, after the bus was gone, he knocked me on the ground and kicked me in the stomach so hard I threw up. I got home and told mom what had happened; big mistake. I knew where he lived and my mom took me over there to have a ‘little chat’ with his parents. That was so embarrassing. His mom didn’t say a word but his dad was obviously pissed.

Chad approached me the next day with a group of his friends and told me his dad had beat the shit out of him for what he’d done to me. Then he stood back and watched as his friends took turns acquainting me with the asphalt. He told me if I said anything, he’d *murder* me. I believed him, too. I’d never seen anybody look like such a wild animal. I

felt like Piggy in Lord of the Flies. I went home with a nasty scrape on my face from the asphalt. I think that's when I started lying to mom about my beatings.

That's pretty typical of life on a school bus. On a regular bus, it used to be that the outcasts would sit at the back of the bus but on a school bus, that's where all the popular kids sit. I'm not sure what they're doing back there, but guys like me are not welcome anywhere within the last five rows. And the bus drivers are useless for crowd control, hell, they can barely drive. Maybe they're as scared of some of the kids as I am.

The bus ride home isn't so bad because I can get to the bus early enough to get a seat in front. But now, in the morning, it's tough finding a spot anywhere. My stop for the number 28 bus is the last one before we head to school and it's usually packed. I arrive about half an hour early every day to make sure I get a seat as close to the front as I can. I'll drop my backpack down in the front of the line to save my spot, then I can relax a little until the bus arrives. Everybody at this stop is pretty cool; I stay out of their way and they do me the favor of pretending I don't exist.

There was this one asshole, Frankie Malezzo, who insisted on being at the front of the line. I tried arguing with him once...once. He didn't have a problem with me being second, as long as he was first, and I learned quickly to let him have his way. Thankfully, he got his driver's license, last year and he hasn't been here since.

I can see the bus stop. Yes! First one here. The snowplows are still making regular sweeps of the neighborhoods, so I do my best to position my backpack just far enough from the street to avoid being buried, but hopefully close enough to avoid a challenge for being too far away to be considered first in line.

Various large, natural rock formations ranging in size from a shopping cart to a Volkswagen Beetle are scattered throughout the area and utilized for a range of activities including ‘girl talk,’ making out, smoking pot, or my favorite, resting against while reading until the bus arrives – unless, of course, the ground is covered with snow. Seven-fifteen on my cell phone, so about 30 minutes to go. I look around for something to keep me occupied and pause when I spy a shadowy form atop one of the larger rock formations. The filtered light through the wispy layers of fog makes it difficult to see clearly from where I’m standing. After a few steps forward, I see that it’s...that guy. I don’t know his name. I don’t think any of us here at the No. 28 last stop knows it, but for the month he was riding with us, he was a hot topic of conversation. And in the three months he’s been absent, it looks like his appearance hasn’t changed. He’s tall, about 6’4”, with jet black hair and pasty white skin, every visible part of which is covered with tattoos, except his face, adorned with multiple strange piercings. Although he’s never gotten close enough to any of us for a good look, strategic and poorly concealed rubbernecking on the bus has revealed metal objects lining his ears, eyebrows, lower lip, cheeks, and nose. And he smokes like a chimney – no, make that a forest fire.

He’d piqued the curiosity of a couple of the girls, who labeled him mysterious, dying to find out more. After they finally got the nerve to bounce over in his direction, they quickly shuffled back towards the group with ashen skin and vacant expressions. I don’t know what happened, and still don’t, but I was amused at how quickly the conniving cats became the timid mice. I’d hate to go through airport security with this

guy, but other than that, he'd earned my respect. I'm sure he had no interest, whatsoever, in my respect, which is probably why he earned it.

I'm not sure how he'd managed to scale the slick surface of the rocks to achieve his current height, but there he sits, arms folded across his knees, smoking a cigarette. Maybe he was able to scale the side using his face. I chuckle at the thought before offering a tight-lipped smile, raising my right palm in an Indian-style greeting. No response. He just looks at me with the same stolid expression I remember him having. I wonder why he's back. I thought he was one of the fortunate ones who got his license and became liberated from the big, yellow paddy wagon. I could get mine, but with just the one car at home, I don't see the point. I'll just go find a reasonably dry place and wait for the bus.

NATE

The house is cold, even on the warmest of days, but today especially. It snowed like hell last night and I thought the wind was going to blow this toothpick house right into the forest. My alarm's going off but I'm already awake; been up for hours. Nobody sleeps much around here.

Graduation's in six months and I don't know what the hell I'm going to do. "You're outta this house when you graduate. I'm talking the same goddamn day. Got me, you little prick? Or your 18th birthday, whichever comes first." He doesn't even know when my birthday is. June, but after graduation, thankfully.

My stepdad is such an asshole. Denny Lumpkin, for Chrissake! Anyone with a name like that has got to be an asshole, or retarded; and he's both. Why the hell did my mom marry him, anyway? Why'd she marry the first one? Why does anybody marry anybody? But especially Denny. A 6'1" two-hundred-seventy-five pound hairy refrigerator and dumb as paint, with a sick temper. Violent, too. He hit my mom, once. Once. I try to stay out of his way, but don't fuck with my mom; she's been through too much already.

He can't fight worth shit, either. He's got a pretty solid punch, but sometimes the trick is not so much being able to throw a good punch, as it is being able to take one. And he's such an ape, he puts all his power in the first strike, so as long as I can take it, he's not ready for what's coming back at him; and he wasn't.

"Turn that goddamn alarm off and get your lazy ass outta bed", says Denny, banging on my door.

I'm so not in the mood for this right now. "Yeah, fuck you, too," I yell back.

Denny storms into my room. "What did you say, you little asshole?"

I sit up in bed and look right at him. "I'm sorry. I said, '*fuck* you.'" I'd like to keep going but I know when to quit. Usually.

The alarm's beeping like crazy.

"Just hurry and get in the fuckin' shower you little prick. I'm trying to get to work. There's gonna be lots of tows and pull-outs today," he says, slamming my door on his way out.

"You can start by pulling our own head outta your ass, you stupid sonofabitch," I say, under my breath.

He yells at me through the balsa wood walls. "And if there's no school, you get to come and tow cars with me, you lazy little prick," he says.

Before I get a chance to respond, I hear the slooshy rattle of snow-chains on enormous tires and realize the school busses are indeed running. What a relief. Christ! I'm actually looking forward to going to school? I can tell this is gonna be a fucked up day already.

I pass on the shower, I just want to get the hell outta here. Dickhead's usually asleep when I'm getting ready, and I have no desire to get into it with him now. I've slept in my clothes, so I change my shirt, slip on my Docs and my favorite fur-lined flight jacket and grab my cigarettes. Mom's still not up.

I exit through the back door in the kitchen and decide to at least try the fridge on the way out: Canned beer and CocaCola, three old pizza boxes, condiment jars of untold

ages, and a handful of plastic containers with failed experiments. I chug a Coke and check out the pizza. This one looks all right. Smells all right. I just hope these mushrooms were part of the original order. I shove a couple of slices in my mouth and head out.

Shit, only three Camels left. Shit, it's cold. Shit I don't want to go to school today. Shit, shit, shit. I guess I could ditch. Ditching sucks in this kind of weather, though. It's great in the Spring and Fall. There's nothing I like more than sitting on the edge of Serrano Lake with a couple packs of smokes; the forest side, though, not the beach side. I'll sit in the forest, smoke my cigarettes and just listen to the breeze through the trees, the animals running around doing their animal things. It's like music, really. It's like a nature rock and roll band, but instead of the electric guitar, bass guitar, drums, it's the water lapping on the lake shore, the tons of birds chirping everywhere, the wind through the trees. The sounds seem so random, like noise, but it all flows together in perfect rhythm and harmony. I usually fall asleep, especially if I'm stoned. I like sleeping in the forest.

I also like the forest side of the lake because I like watching the weekday lake goers swimming, sunbathing, paddleboating, whatever; just enjoying themselves like they don't have a care in the world. Maybe they don't. Must be nice. I can spend all day like that, watching the people, imagining the easy lives they must lead, going to the beach on a weekday. But not when it's below freezing.

I take a soothing drag off my Camel menthol. The electric jolt of morning nicotine inhaled at two degrees below freezing sizzles my system, and I'm ready for anything. I like smoking menthols. Nobody bums 'em.

I crunch out into the snow towards the bus stop, past Zombie, my '79 Ford LTD. It's over thirty years old and looks like it's survived World War III but I love this car – when it runs. It's dead right now. Not sure what's wrong with it this time, I've replaced just about everything. It's been pretty faithful for the last couple years, but lately it's been cutting out a lot. I'll figure it out. It's the only time I can ever expect anything from Denny. He likes it when I work on the cars; mine or any of the other ten or so littering the yard. Normally, this place looks like an Iraqi village after we've bombed the shit out of it. Except in the snow. It's sort of peaceful, and cemetery quiet.

I trudge through the forest, avoiding the roads, which remain pretty icy until the sun is high in the sky. And between the snow plows, school busses, and Flatlanders, the forest is much safer. Flatlanders, tourists. They come up from LA for a weekend in the snow in a Ford focus and a t-shirt, probably packing a bathing suit. Like their snow experience will be just like watching it on their high definition TV from their beach condo. It's these dildos who Denny makes all his money off of. He takes it kind of easy on the locals, mostly because they'll come after him if he screws 'em, but to the flatlanders from down the mountain? It's like protection money, almost. It kind of sucks, but it's hard for me to feel sorry for people that oblivious.

The forest is faster than taking the road and I'm already here. I'm not sure what time it is but I'm sure the bus isn't even close to arriving. I haven't been here in a few

weeks, but it looks the same. I'm not sure why I was expecting anything different. A bunch of large rocks scattered around a wide patch of dirt on the side of Forest View Drive. I think there was a house here at some point. I heard it burned down.

Some of the rocks are pretty large, and they're good for hiding behind to smoke or whatever. I kissed Jennifer Seely behind this one, right here. She's hot. Well, I take that back, she's not so much hot as she is available. I think that makes her hot. She moved soon after that.

I hop up on the largest rock and light a Camel. It's the early kid. Paul Sherman, I think his name is. He still gets here twenty minutes before people start arriving which is about 30 minutes before the bus gets here. Christ, I am early. He's probably trying to get a good seat. We're the last stop and the bus is packed. Almost three to a seat all the way back. I don't have a problem, though. People get outta my way. Not sure if it's the 15 piercings on my face, sixteen all together, or all my tattoos or both but the back seat always parts when I approach. Saves me the trouble.

This Paul kid, though, he's lucky to find a seat on the floor of the bus. Unless he's the first or second on, all hope is gone of finding a seat with two kids who will let him sit down. One in a seat's hard enough for this sorry bastard. One dude spit on the seat next to him to stop Paul from sitting down. He'd rather have spit on the seat than that kid; harsh. He sat down, though. Not sure if he thought it was his best option, or just said, 'fuck it', but he sat right down on the dude's spit. Everyone around them started laughing and making fun of him. This Paul kid didn't flinch, though. He rubbed his ass

around in it saying stuff like, “There! You like it? Is that fun for you?” Pretty pathetic, but it was kind of funny.

It’s just him, too. Nobody else on the bus gets hassled, and there’s quite a few dorks on this bus. He’s what I’d call a target. One of those sorry sons of bitches that has the misfortune of being singled out as everybody’s punching bag. I see this poor bastard up against a wall or locker four or five times a week. He just patiently waits for the beating to end, not quite playing dead, but definitely playing limp. He never fights back and there are never teachers around when it happens. He is pretty mouthy, though. I always hear him talking some shit. I have to admit, he asks for it sometimes.

A few months ago, I was heading back from Smoker’s Grove and saw Paul on the bleachers eating lunch by himself. A couple of varsity bozos were heading out of the gym and spotted him and started talking about him. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, I was pretty far away, but they were laughing and pointing; Paul was oblivious. Then, one of the bastards threw their football right at him, all the way across the field – I must say it was a nice throw – hit Paul in the chest and he fell backward. They both laughed and congratulated each other and went to retrieve their ball. Paul was pissed and grabbed the ball and ran; they chased him. He ran to the edge of the bleachers and they cornered him on either side, demanding their ball.

“Give us back the ball you little faggot,” one of them said. I remember it because Paul said,

“*I’m the faggot?*” he was really seething. “You’re the ones dressed like each other, I figured you two were boyfriends. Aren’t all you football freaks a bunch of fags, anyway? You all run around in tight pants, grabbing each other’s asses.”

Then he started swishing around with the ball, “Oooo, nice play, honey. Here wanna slap my ass? Sure I do baby,” and gave his own butt a couple of slaps. “If I’m the fag, I guess that’s why you threw the ball at me, right? Making a *pass* at me, were you? Whaddyou want, a three-way? Even if I was a fag, I’d still want to keep within my own species.” Then he chucks the ball over the railing into the woods.

They both rushed him but Paul got lucky this time. Just as they grabbed him, the coach came out of the gym and put a stop to it. Yeah, sometimes he asks for it.

Paul plops his books down at the front of the line, sees me and waves. I’m not waving back. Fuck that. As sorry as I feel for this poor bastard, I’m not about to wave. It’d be like feeding a stray dog, and I’d really hate to have to kick his ass, too. He grabs a book out of his backpack, sits Indian style on it and reads. I’m trying to make my cigarette last.

“Hey *Paula!*”

Oh shit. Frank Malezzo. What a fuckin prick he is. He’ll pick on anybody, as long as they can’t fight back. The more afraid of him they are, the meaner he is. And this Sherman’s ripe for the picking. Can’t fight worth shit, though. Like my asshole stepdad. Except the difference is my stepdad packs all his weight behind one powerful punch, Frankie here throws a lot of punches with nothing in them; like wet Kleenex. But

to someone like this Sherman kid, the fear and intimidation adds the extra weight he needs.

Frankie tried his shit with me. We were in the fifth grade and this whiny little Teresa Montrose bitch cried to Frankie that I stole the swing from her. I didn't. But she was a crafty victim even then, and ol' Frankie was a willing tool, so he came over and tried to pull me off the swing; big mistake. He told me to apologize and give her the swing back. And I'm like, 'who the fuck does this salami think he is?' He started towards me.

"One more step and I'm going to punch you in the face," I said. He did, so I did. Frankie fell flat on his ass and I started walking towards him. He scrambled backward like a crab with scoliosis. "Swing's all yours," I said to Teresa. She tried to kiss up to me after that, hero worship kind of thing, probably. Fuck no. She's hot now, too. But what a mess. She tried to get one of the teachers fired last year because, as rumor had it, she tried to use her boobs to get a better grade on her Spanish final. When it didn't work, she told everybody that the teacher, Mr. Evans, made advances towards her. From what I understand, she ripped her own shirt trying to make it look realistic. It backfired though when the teacher, Mr. Evans, ended up coming out of the closet to avoid being labeled a pervert. High school being what it is, he had to put up with a ton gay jokes after that, and some of the parents wrote hate mail, but it's all blown over now. At least for Mr. Evans. Teresa had already been labeled a tramp but after that nobody went near her. She ended up transferring to the continuation school.

“I can’t get the car out and I’m stuck taking the bus. Aren’t you lucky?” says Frankie. This jerk is always looking for a fight. I’m sure he’s going to boot Paul’s books.

“Thanks for saving my place in line...Paula!” says Frankie, launching Sherman’s books into the forest.

“Asshole!”

Did he just call Frankie an asshole?

“Did you just call me an asshole?” says Frankie.

Oh shit. This dude’s fucked.

“Uh. I was talking to the asshole behind you,” says Paul.

Nice recovery. And Frankie’s actually turning around to see who’s behind him. What a fuckin’ dumbass. Leave it alone, dude.

“Chasing your tail?” says Paul.

Oh, man, he’s really asking for it

I watch the etch-a-sketch in Frankie’s brain trying to draw a picture of what’s going on. Looks like he got it. Oh shit, this little dude’s gonna get creamed.

Frankie turns around and rushes Paul who stands his ground. Frankie pushes into Paul’s chest with both hands and he falls back hard.

Paul scrambles quickly to his feet. “You asshole! You... stupid WOP cocksucker, asshole!”

No shit. Did that really come out of that dude's mouth? He must be pissed. Yeah, that you understand, don't you...WOP cocksucker, Frankie. That's pretty funny. That dude's got quite a mouth. And it looks like it's getting him into trouble.

Frankie lunges at Paul who dodges and starts running towards the forest. Smart move. Paul's doing a good job out maneuvering Frankie, but Frankie's as fast as evil, catching Paul and throwing him to the ground.

"WOP cocksucker, huh?" says Frankie, kicking Paul in the stomach, twice.

Paul's gone fetal and is crying. Frankie kicks him again. "Stop it! Leave me alone. I was here first!" says Paul.

"You want me to stop?" says Frankie, kicking him again.

"Then say you wanna suck my dick," says Frankie, poised for another foot in the gut. "Say it!"

This guy is such an asshole.

"All right," says Paul. "All right. 'You wanna suck my dick'."

Whoa, I can't believe he said that. Frankie kicks him again, harder and Paul cries out, and it looks like he's going in again.

"Fran-kie!" I turn to see Valerie DeLane waving to Frankie. Saved by the bimbo. And she has no clue her beloved is beating the shit out of some dude. She's got the biggest tits in the school, though.

Frankie's brain is short circuiting; Enemy...female. Like any Neanderthal, his dick wins out and he spits on Paul before joining Valerie. The others are starting to arrive.

I hear the bus approaching and watch everybody scramble to get in line. Everyone but Paul. Dude's still in the dirt, curled up like a newborn, crying. Poor sorry bastard. He's crying so hard he's drooling and his mouth is full of fucking sand. Meanwhile, Frankie's up at the front of the line with his arm around Valerie.

That's fucked up. That is so fucked up I can't stand it. Yeah, this dude asked for a lot of it, but no one deserves to be treated like that. Now, swing-bag is rewarded with the front of the line and a big titties? No fuckin' way, man. I can't stand for that. I'm sure I'm making a big mistake here, but...

I take a long, last puff on my cigarette, jump down off the rock, and quickly find Paul's backpack. I drop it next to him, as I walk towards Frankie. The bus is just now pulling up.

I grab Frankie by the back of his shirt and pull him down to the ground.

"Hey!" comes out of his mouth before looking up and seeing me. He freezes. I grab his backpack and launch it deep into the forest.

"You like picking on helpless people a little too much, I think." He starts to get up and I throw him back down on the ground. "You wanna fuck with *me*? Huh? Maybe I wanna be first in line. You ever think of that? Or maybe Paul Sherman wants to be first in line." I throw Frankie down again hard and lift him back up.

"Stop it!"

"Oh, like you *stopped it* for Paul over there?"

Everybody turned to look at Paul, sitting up, spitting dirt out of his mouth, trying to recover some sense of dignity.

“Paul,” I yell. He stops and looks at me. “Paul. Come here.”

The sorry little dude picks himself up and shuffles over. I’m holding on to Frankie by his scruff, and pull him in close to my ear.

“Paul. Frankie here has something to say to you. Don’t you Frankie?” Frankie is silent. I squeeze harder.

“OK! I’m sorry Paul. And, I’d like to invite you to be the first one on the bus today,” says Frankie, as I continue to apply pressure.

“You didn’t smile,” I say. “Smiiii...le.” It’s a phony, forced, insincere smile, but it’s an attempt.

“See? It’s not so hard to be nice. Is it?” I say, speaking into Frankie’s ear again.

“No fuckin’ way, man, I’m not saying that,” says Frankie. I hurl him to the ground then pick him up by his scruff, squeezing hard.

“Um,” starts Frankie. “Paula is a really pretty name. Will you go out with me sometime?”

The bus stop erupts in laughter and I feel all the energy fall out of Frankie. I check out Paul. Paul’s not enjoying this in the least. He’s looking at Frankie as kind of pathetic. Does he actually feel sorry for this prick who just beat the shit out of him? Interesting.

I release Frankie as the bus door opens with a hydraulic hiss. He bolts in the direction of his books.

I motion for Paul to board and notice that the bus is practically tipped on its side, with everyone’s smashed up against the windows watching. Paul steps up..

“Hey, what’s going on out there,” barks the bus driver at Paul. Melvin Crabtree, what a scalawag; somewhere between ultimate prick and total scumbag. He sells pot to a lot of the kid’s parents, including mine and some of the others on this bus. Not very good shit, either. He’s always worried someone’s gonna rat him out. He doesn’t sell to the kids, though, at least as far as I know. And I’m sure I’d know. I guess he has some standards, low as they must be.

“Give it a rest, *Mel-vin*,” I say. He sees me and shuts up quick. I think he trusts me less than most, probably because of my appearance. I have no reason to rat this sorry bastard out, but he doesn’t know that.

The bus is overflowing and, as expected, almost all three to a seat. I feel I have to see this thing through and at least get this dude to school without too much grief. I spot two freshmen four rows back and motion for them to make other arrangements. They beat it quick and I corral Paul into the seat, sitting down next to him. I catch Melvin staring at me before starting the bus. The noisy gossip quiets to a quickened murmur around us, and it’s not long before everyone moves on to more interesting things.

Christ, I could use a cigarette. First period? Metal shop, nice. I’ll head on out to Smoker’s Grove, and have a nice relaxing smoke. Looks like I got off easy with dorkus here.

“Do you fly much?” he says.

Christ! I spoke too soon. What did he just say? I hope he shuts up soon. I do my best to ignore him.

“I mean with all the...” he says, waving his hand around his face, calling attention to my piercings.

Is he serious? Man, this dude really is a dork supreme. I sit back and try to fall asleep to the drone of the engine.

“Uh, thanks? For your help back there?” he says.

Shut...up. Shut up. Well, at least he appreciates it and isn't all 'let's clean up the rest of the school', or worse, he thinks I'm his bodyguard or something. It's happened before. I was in the seventh grade. It was P.E., Christ! I hate P.E., and this sorry bastard of an eighth grader had been tied to a shower pole with towels, by a couple of sixth graders. It's bad enough when members of your own class harass and humiliate you, but when underclassmen do it...? That's messed up. The eighth grader's feet had been bound together at the bottom and his hands were behind his back. He was completely naked and a few jets were aimed on him, drenching him in cold water. He was crying really hard and we were all standing around, while the fuckers who did it laughed their asses off. They were high-fiving each other and some shit, and we were all just standing there, like a bunch of dumbasses.

All of a sudden, he looked at me I'll never forget it. I was looking around to see if anybody else was going to help. And it didn't look like it: Twenty or so guys standing around naked, or with a towel, gawking at the misery of this poor kid who was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time. Two sixth graders just pulled a shirt over this scrawny kid's head, drug him naked and screaming to the pole and tied him there. He didn't do a fucking thing to deserve it. Some were even enjoying it. One asshole walked

up and repositioned one of the jets to better soak his head. What a prick. I remember wondering if I should help this sorry sonofabitch. I might get some shit from a couple of people, but, hell, I'd get off easy compared to this kid, when suddenly his head snapped up and he looked right at me. He didn't scan the crowd or single me out or anything like that, he just looked up, like he knew I was standing there. Freaked me out. I could see his icy green eyes through the wall of wet blond hair stuck to his face. He said,

“Please help me.”

I looked around, positive everyone was staring at me, but nobody was. I turned back to the kid and his head was back down. It was like it never even happened. Weirdest fucking thing. I kept staring at him to see if his head would come up again and thought I'd better help him out before it actually did

I untied the kid and handed him a towel. He was thanking me in between the sobs and the scattered groans from the crowd for spoiling the fun. Mason, I think he said his name was. I stood him up and walked him toward the lockers, past Coach Byle's office. That fat muther-fucker had stood there and watched the whole thing. What a *sonofabitch*. I could hardly believe it. That's so like him, though. He's such a meat helmet, always calling us 'ladies' and 'tiger meat' or some shit, and going on about how the strong *should* victimize the weak, whenever possible, to ensure they become strong, otherwise they'll end up, well, naked and tied to a high school gym shower.

I was glad to do it, too. But it went to the kid's head. He started telling kids who picked on him that I was going to kick their ass and I started to get shit about being his fucking bodyguard. I tried to ignore it. One day, though, he picked a fight with Stevie

Sanchez in my name. Stevie's a short, round dude with a lopsided smile, really pointy teeth, and wicked mean. The kind who would welcome the opportunity to pick on someone like Mason; or Sherman, for that matter. But this little towel bitch from the gym told Stevie to meet him during lunch at the edge of the football field by Smoker's Grove, to get his ass kicked by the both of us. Naturally, I showed up. I could tell Stevie was a little nervous. I've never had to fight him, but I was sure he could hold his own.

"C'mon jerkoff," said Mason, putting up his fists like a cartoon character. "You've met your match now. We're really gonna kick your ass."

Is this kid for real? What a fuckin' dumbass. It was the laugh that really got me, though. It was mean, wicked, real Lord of the Flies kind of primal cackle. I had no intention of fighting Stevie and this little bag of shit was too drunk on my power to reason with.

I walk past Stevie, up to the kid, and punch him in the stomach. He doubled over and fell on the ground out of breath. I started walking away and Stevie snarled his pointy lopsided smile, moving in for the kill. I made it clear to let him alone, though. The pain and humiliation was enough. Unlike gym kid, Stevie got it. I could tell Stevie really wanted to teach him a lesson, but he realized this was not the time. There was about twelve of us and we all left Mason there on the ground. I could hear him crying from Smoker's Grove. I think he transferred to the continuation school.

Paul seems different. I think he just wants to be left alone. The way the shit comes flying out of his mouth, though, I bet he wants to fight back. Maybe he doesn't know how to fight. I wonder if he'd fight back if he could. The way he looked at

Frankie, so pathetic. Maybe he just dislikes fighting, thinks it's beneath him, or something. Nah, I'll be his mom tells him not to.

"Why don't you fight back?" I didn't realize I'd said it until after it was out of my mouth.

"YOU talkin' to me?" he says, like a tough guy.

I can't believe I started this but too late now. "I said, why didn't you just punch Frankie in the face or hit him with a rock or something? Lemme guess, your *mom* tells you fighting's bad."

"Hardly! She keeps telling me to beat the crap out of him."

"Your mom sounds cool."

"She isn't," he says, turning away. "Anyway, I don't really know how to fight. I know that probably sounds retarded. What a dork, huh? Can't fight. I figure I'd just shake the proverbial hornet's nest and really piss somebody off who only wanted to irritate me at first, or just cause a mild amount of pain. I don't think I'm a coward or anything. I just think that my mouth can do more damage than my fists, with less consequence."

Yeah, damage to whom? I let it go.

"By the way, my name's..." he says.

I cut him off, though, "I know your name...Paula."

"Great. Where am I going to find another tattooed up metal head to come up and kick *your* ass," he says, turning to look out the window

Maybe he's not a total loss.

“Wanna learn?” I say.

“Learn what?”

“To fight.”

“Learn to fight...” he says. I think I caught him off guard. “I dunno. I’ve never really thought about it. I guess I’d love to learn, but I’d probably just end up getting my ass kicked. But, then again, what if I didn’t and I really learn how to throw a punch? Wow, that’d be great. Nobody would mess with me but what if I met someone who could fight better, who could do some real damage and knock my teeth loose or break my nose? I really don’t want my nose broken, but maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if...”

This dude’s a fucking wind-up toy.

We’re here, and I stand up just before the bus comes to a complete stop. Everyone’s scrambling to get off and he’s still going.

“Lemme know, dude,” I say.

He kind of comes to, “Uh, yeah. Why not?”

“Cool. We’ll talk more on the ride home. Save me a seat,” I say, then shove my way out the door. Christ, I need a cigarette, and head out to Smoker’s Grove.

Smoker’s Grove is the only place in the school, maybe the planet, where it doesn’t matter who the hell you are, as long as you’ve got a cigarette. I’m not saying it’s a friendly place, or anything like that, but even the dorkiest of dorks won’t get chased off if he’s here smoking. Prison rules, kind of. He might get bullied for a cigarette, but only if the guy’s really out, and it doesn’t happen very often. We try to keep it to cigarettes only, no pot: It’s Smoker’s Grove, not Stoner’s Grove. It happens sometimes, as long as it

doesn't get out of hand. Besides, the stoners have their own place and it's anywhere but school. On school days, the stoners are usually at Willie's place, beneath The Hole, and on the weekends, they're hanging out with each other. I join 'em sometimes. I wouldn't call myself a stoner, though. I wouldn't call myself anything, really, except Nate. Sometimes I'll smoke pot with my mom. My mom smokes a lot of pot. I understand, though. I don't blame her.

Shit, only two Camels left. Smoke 'em if you got 'em, right?

"Well, hi there Nathaniel. Did it just warm up, or is it you?" comes a voice from behind. I didn't hear anybody coming.

I turn and see Trina Malovich moving through the snow like a big cat. Her eyes are on me and her head's barely moving as her hips slide like sugar through the trees. Her face got kind of fucked up in a car accident last year. She lost a handful of permanent teeth and she has a scar that runs from the edge of her mouth to her left ear. At some angles it looks like she's smiling; kind of creepy. It didn't change her personality all that much, though, she's always been kind of a bitch. But in a good way. And smart, wicked smart. She gets really shitty grades, but I heard she got like 1500 on her SATs. She's always getting in trouble for not paying attention in class and distracting everybody. I'm sure I would have spent some time with her in detention if they didn't separate the boys from the girls.

In Algebra, when we were Freshmen, she was talking to Myrna Wolmen (who in the fuck would name their child Myrna, anyway? How could a parent look at their new born baby girl and say, 'Myrna') and, I have to admit, they were pretty loud, and the

teacher interrupts them and calls Trina up to finish the problem he was working on. He thought he was going to embarrass her, but not only did she solve the problem, she corrected a mistake he'd made.

“If you know the material, Miss Malovich, why don't you pay attention and allow others to learn?” he said.

She went off on him, “Do you really think anybody but the nerdiest of nerds can learn anything about math from you? Maybe you know what you're talking about, but nobody out here surely does. It's like listening to the SIMS. At least I'm keeping people awake.”

He just started sending her to detention after that. Authority is always the refuge of a scoundrel. She's right. He's boring as fuck, and he mumbles out that math shit like he's drunk.

“How 'bout a cigarette?” she says.

If it wasn't my last one, I'd have no problem with that at all.

“Hey, Trina. Nope. Only got one left,” I say.

“Gimme a cigarette or I'll kiss you and make you look like me,” she says, turning her left cheek into my face. She starts moving her cheek around, so it looks like her scar is talking to me, “C'mon, Nathaniel, gimme a cigarette...gimme, gimme, gimme.”

“Thanks for the show, but uh uh.”

“Well, at least I made you smile,” she says. “You never smile.” She turns to look at me and gets right up in my face, but not in a threatening way. Her lips are close, not quite touching, her sweet, sticky breath creating little warm puffs against my cheek. I've

never really thought about Trina as anything but, well, cool. Now, she's close enough to lick.

"Why don't you ever smile, Nathaniel," her words are a little cold, almost mocking, but kind of sensuous in a way, sexy. Is she flirting with me or making fun of me? Part of me wants to push her back and tell her to get the hell out of my face, and the other part of me is frozen in expectation. I don't make eye contact, or move, just anxiously wait in the moment.

"I like you Nathaniel," she says.

"You like me because I have cigarettes," I say, taking another drag off my Camel. I'm still not making eye contact, but it doesn't matter. The top of her head of long, black hair, barely reaches my brow and she's staring straight ahead, as if talking to a tiny man sitting on my cheek bone.

"True, but beyond that... Not sure what it is....," she says.

"Let me know when you figure it out, OK?" I say.

"Maybe if I had a cigarette, it'd help," she says.

"You know? Maybe it would," I say, looking at her, taking a long drag.

A second later, she's already three feet from me walking away. She turns around,

"All right, Nathaniel, it's clear you're not gonna share. Mr. Bradshaw keeps a pack in the back of his desk, I'll go swipe a couple from him," she says.

I'm watching her as she walks away; cute butt. Real curvy, sticks out in all the right places. She turns around and catches me staring at her ass.

She smiles, "I meant what I said, Nathaniel."

“C’mere,” I say, holding out my cigarette.

She smiles at me, approaches, and takes the cigarette. The orange ember sizzles in her lips as she takes a deep, lungful of smoke, which shoots out in fit of coughing.

“Holy shit, I forgot you smoked menthol,” she says. “You shoulda warned me.”

“You know what they say about beggars?”

“That they shouldn’t smoke?” she says.

I reach over for my cigarette.

“Not so fast,” she says, taking another long drag. “Thanks,” she says, passing it back.

“You’re welcome,” I say, as we collapse against a tree, passing the cigarette in silence.

PAUL

After AP English and an Algebra test, the morning's encounter is still fresh in my mind, and I find the day creeping by more sluggishly than normal. Especially now, in US History, the warbling voice of the teacher is filling my head like white noise, as I speculate about what Pierced-guy has in mind – and why the sudden interest.

“Paul? Mr. Sherman?” comes the voice of authority. I sit up attentively. My eyes refocus to find Mr. Ober, the US History teacher, looking at me expectantly, bands of yellow goo streaming between old, cracked lips as he talks; building up in the corners. You really wanna pay attention in this class, or you'll get the stinky trash breath of Mr. *Odor*.

He's older than God, deaf as a post, with classic, coke-bottle glasses - and he's actually pretty cool. He randomly segues into how he's descendant of “real-life, sure as shootin', San Francisco miner forty-niners.” He's got pictures of old mining towns and groups of miners up all over class. And the railroad didn't make it to California until *after* the Gold Rush, so these people came here by covered wagon. Harsh.

He really knows his stuff, but his lectures are like watching a television test pattern; a real academic coma. The American Revolutionary War, one of the most exciting and dynamic events in world history, should inspire pride and patriotism, not noonday naps and bathroom smoke breaks.

“Uh, what - Mr. Ober?”

“What was that?” he asks, leaning noxiously close.

“I didn't hear the question,” I say, much louder.

“What did you say?”

“I said, What’s the question!” Laughter.

From the back of the room, loud enough so only the class could hear, comes, “You’ll have to excuse Paul. He’s just thinking about his new *boyfriend* he met on the *bus* today.” More laughter.

Doug Hartford. He’ll say anything for a laugh. He’s a minor inconvenience, like a television commercial, and only in this class. Around school, he doesn’t give me the time of day; that’s fine with me. He’s harmless.

“What’s so funny?” asks Mr. Ober, throwing the class a look of irritation before turning back to me. Still not knowing the question, I shrug my shoulders.

Mr. Ober sighs and shakes his head, “Did anybody do the reading?” he asks rhetorically, turning to the blackboard to continue his lecture.

Meanwhile, Doug continues to get more laughs, this time at the teacher’s expense. “Hey, Mr. Ober...Did you fart? I know you did, Mr. Ober, I heard it.” says Doug followed by fart sounds; Mr. Ober is oblivious. I don’t know why fart jokes are so funny but they are, so I spend the last ten minutes of the school day enjoying Doug’s show as Mr. Ober drones on. It’s pretty mean, but at least it’s not at my expense for a change.

The final bell rings and the clamor of everyone’s hasty departure, ultimately reaches the front of the class. Seeing the general scurry, he glances at the clock above the blackboard and rests the chalk back in the dusty, metal blackboard tray, discontinuing his lecture. I offer a polite wave goodbye before leaving the class to get to the awaiting busses.

Pierced-guy told me to save him a seat which is a lot easier on the bus ride home. The busses are already parked in the school's circular driveway so it's just a matter of getting there first. It's usually us targets who are the first to arrive and I'm the third today after George, the really overweight kid, and this new, really quiet girl who just transferred in from Kansas or Nebraska or somewhere – one of the square States.

I grab the third seat behind the driver and plant my books in the space next to me. I have a good chance of holding this seat, at least until the bus gets really full. At that point, either Mr. Crabtree will make me move my books, or someone will shove them on the floor and sit down. But for now, I just rest my forehead against the frosty window and stare out across the snow-covered parking lot. Teachers and students clear away the newly fallen snow from their windows and check their tire chains for the precarious drive home along the icy main road that winds its way along the perimeter of the mountain.

“Uh, hem.” Pierced-guy is standing at the edge of the seat, waiting for me to move my books. I put them in my lap and he plops down next to me.

The noise level continues to rise as the seats rapidly fill. Mr. Crabtree gets on, belts himself in and looks over his menagerie in the extra-wide spy mirror. Everyone's seated and the engine starts.

“So what's your name, anyway?” I ask.

Silence. What a surprise.

“OK, then, “How bout Pierced-guy?” No reaction. “Security risk? Antenna head? Pin cushion.” Nothing. “Lightning Rod? Spare Parts? Metal Shop...” I add.

He turns. “I see what you mean about your mouth. I’m Nate,” he says extending his hand. Nate’s handshake is like his stare - firm and steady, unwavering - committed. I learned about handshakes from Mr. Single Neighbor Man when he dropped by one weekend seeking my mom’s help on some random domestic dilemma – I think he’s hot for her. Anyway, my introductory handshake inspired from him a lesson on shaking hands *like a man*. He knows Dad’s not in the picture and was piling on the alpha-male pretty thick. Turned out to be way cool, though. I learned a lot. For example, a firm handshake shows confidence, but too firm is overcompensating, like they’re hiding something. Limp handshake – forget it, don’t trust ‘em. Vertical palm – greetings on an equal level, Palm up – here to serve, Palm down – I’m in charge.

“So, you wanna learn how to fight, huh?” he asks, still making eye contact.

“I guess. I’m not really sure what that means at this point, but I’m game,” I say.

“All right. You wanna follow me to my place after we get off the bus? You can help me dig my car out and we’ll start our first lesson.”

“Dig your car out?” I say, sarcastically. “And I suppose you’ll want me to paint the fence and sand the deck while I’m at it?”

He throws me a *no such thing as a free lunch* look and I shrug, “Yeah, that’d be OK. I’ll call my mom while we’re walking and let her know.” I try to engage Nate several times during the ride home but he sits there quietly, unresponsive; staring straight ahead.

I feel the hairs on the back of my neck prick with the subconscious awareness of unwanted attention. Turning around, I see self-conscious stares quickly look away, followed by hushed conversation. Some keep staring, flipping me the bird and a scowl.

As the last stop on the home delivery route, the only passengers remaining are those who had boarded with me this morning; except for Frankie.

“I wonder where Frankie is? He must’ve gotten a ride home with someone,” I mutter to no one in particular.

“He never got on this morning. Didn’t you notice?” asks Nate.

I hadn’t noticed. Nate told me that Frankie ran into the forest to get his backpack and never emerged. We both figured the embarrassment was too much for him to deal with.

“Great. I wonder what bit of nastiness he’s planning in retaliation,” I say.

“Well, whatever it is, hopefully you’ll be ready for it when it happens,” says Nate. He stands up to exit before the bus has completely stopped. Mr. Crabtree spotted him in the spy mirror above his head, “Please wait until the bus has come to a complete stop.” It stopped before he could finish.

Nate is the first one off, “Thanks *Mel*. See you next time,” says Nate, his back to the driver as he stepped off the bus. I notice Mr. Crabtree’s expression turn sour, but he says nothing, continuing to glare at Nate as he walks away.

“Mel? Is that his name, or are you just being sarcastic?” I ask.

“Melvin. Melvin Crabtree. And he can’t marry out of that name,” says Nate. We both laugh. “Apart from being a creepy, old bus driver, he’s one of the biggest pot dealers

up here. He supplies many of the parents, including mine, with really exceptional weed, so I see him at my house occasionally. He doesn't say much and he grumbles a lot, avoiding any kind of interaction with me when he's over. I could care less, but I think he's probably nervous that someone will rat him out, so I like to fuck with him."

"No shit," I say, and we continue the walk to his house in silence.

Straight as the crow flies, Nate lives directly behind the bus stop on Pine Willow road. It's one of the smaller side roads, steep and winding, completely inaccessible to the snow plows. During summertime, it's the roads like Pine Willow that are ideal, as opposed to the main roads, like Crestview Drive, where I live. The smaller roads and throughways are nestled much deeper within the forest canopy; and the increased shade and sparse traffic add a dreamlike quality to the lazy days of summer. My uncle, on my mom's side, and my aunt, have a house on just such a street, Vantor Court, on the other side of town from where I live; overlooking Serrano Lake. Now, though, in dead of winter and especially after a good snow, the Pine Willows and the Vantor Courts are treacherous enough on foot, much less trying to maneuver a car. And those without 4-wheel drives are pretty much screwed until things start thawing out.

We move off the main road and onto the smaller residential streets, and I pull out my phone to call mom.

"Hi mom, I..." Naturally she has more than a few words about what happened this morning, but she's still at work so she's relatively cool.

"I know mom. I'm really sorry about this morning, it just caught me off guard..."

She launches into a tirade about respect and how much she loves me and just wants what's best for me. I just let her go, looking over at Nate who's doing a great job of pretending not to listen.

"Look mom, I'm gonna stay at school and use the computer lab, OK? Mr. McMartin will drive me home....I don't know, probably around dinner time. Yes. Yes, mother, I understand. OK. I love you too. Bye."

"Liar, liar," says Nate.

"Yeah, well, trust me on this. She'd believe that before she'd believe I met some cool guy on the bus that wants to teach me how to fight. I don't think she'd go for that anyway."

"Why?" says Nate. "I thought she endorsed you kicking some ass? Or did you lie about that too?"

"She did. Look, I'm not a liar, well, not to you, just to her...You don't understand."

"So you think I'm cool?" he says.

"Well, uh, yeah. I guess. You're not a target like me, and you don't seem to take any crap from anybody. I think that's pretty cool."

"Target?" he says.

"Well, that's what I call it, being a bully magnet. There's a handful of us around the school. Ellis Parker, Peter Montrose, Stan Krinkle. I dunno any girl targets. Wonder why? Because if there's one place chivalry's dead, it's Skyview High."

"Boobs," says Nate.

“Huh?”

“Boobs. Not chivalry. It’s why you don’t see many girl targets. They’re there, all right. It’s just that they’re only picked on by other girls,” says Nate.

“Like who?” He ignores my question and we keep walking.

It’s 4:30pm and the setting sun has already shrouded this area in shadow, dropping the temperature by at least ten degrees. Ranger utility vehicles have salted the roads in this area to provide additional tire traction, but those of us on foot are still highly susceptible to invisible ice patches.

In the best weather conditions, house numbers are difficult to spot – even more so on these smaller roads - and we mountain folk find our way around using landmarks more than signage. Although the houses are fairly new, built within the last 20 years, this is a rustic suburbia, at best, with sturdy, well-built homes, individually landscaped – no cookie-cutter quarter acre lots, with perfectly manicured lawns and paved driveways. In fact, I don’t recall seeing two similar constructions adjacent to each other in the six years I’ve lived here.

Nate had said that all the houses in his neighborhood look ‘lived in’ but his looks condemned. There’d be no mistaking it. *A log cabin Abraham Lincoln wouldn’t live in*, was Nate’s comment. About 50 yards ahead, within a thick cluster of pine trees, stands a small, two story, log cabin style house with a lime-green A-framed roof. It has no border fence and its perimeter is littered with the corpses of numerous vehicles in various stages of disrepair. A variety of pieces and parts lie scattered among the trees, jutting

through the pristine package of newly fallen snow. Looking at the post-apocalyptic scenery, I think Nate is right.

“I hope I’m not digging out any of *these*,” I say, as Nate bolts towards one of the snow-covered wreckages, scurrying up the side. I stay grounded as he stands on the hood looking around.

“Don’t worry about it. My stepdad’s an independent tow truck driver – he’ll pull ‘em out. He buys broken or barely working junk, real cheap, then Frankensteins it up to at least garbage and sells it. Or he parts it out.” Looking down at me, “I’d strongly recommend not buying parts from Mikhail’s Motors.” He leaps off the hood into the loosely packed power and we continue on.

We approach from the back and Nate deftly maneuvers us through the debris towards the rear entrance. We pause, though, at this crappy old jalopy; the kind of car seen littering overpasses in any version of dystopian America.

“Meet Zombie,” says Nate, proudly. “’79 Ford LTD.”

“More like Christine,” I say, offering a sign of the cross in mock respect.

“It gets really shitty gas mileage, wobbles like an egg on a pool table, and is about as reliable as blind heart surgeon, but man, I love this car. More room than an SUV and when it is running, it halls ass. None of that bucket seat bullshit, either; great for getting’ real close.”

“What’s wrong with it?” I say.

“Not sure. I’ve replaced just about everything in it. I like working on it so when the weather clears up, I start tinkering around. Until then, I’m stuck with the fuckin’ bus.”

Nate leads me from Zombie to the rear entrance. The back door is covered by a tattered screen door with a pale, green wooden frame, chipped and splintered, hanging on a single hinge. Nate pulls it open, motioning for me to hold it while he reaches for his keys. On the door is a crude, homemade sign - Beware of Kitten. The weather has caused the door to stick and Nate offers a solid shove while turning the handle. It opens with a loud pop, and a large, protective Rottweiler bowls past Nate and lunges at me.

“Oh crap!” I back against the house, holding the screen door in front of me for protection. The dog jumps on the screen, barking ferociously, the wildly snapping jaws sending streams of sticky saliva through the mesh, spraying my face. I’m not sure if I’m more terrified or grossed out. Nate calms down the dog and he runs back inside. I remain frozen in relative safety pinned between the house and the screen.

“You all right?” asks Nate.

“Kitten?” I say, from behind the screen.

“Yup. My brother Patrick’s idea,” said Nate. “In addition to being our beloved family pet,” he says sarcastically, “he’s a pretty ferocious guard dog. Max thought it’d be funny.”

“Funny,” I say, flatly.

He leads us through a kitchen I would expect to find on the Titanic, after it had sunk. Pots, pans, and cutlery are scattered liberally across all available surfaces, some

containing food in various stages of decay - the sink contains a man's leather boot with a child's pinwheel toy sticking out of it. On we go.

We continue down a hallway to a "T" intersection and I follow Nate to the right, up the stairs. I hear movement behind me and cringe, thinking it's the dog, but turn to find it coming from the dimly lit room across the hall. A spindly woman with straight, black shoulder-length hair and vacant expression sits cross-legged on a lumpy, well-worn, green corduroy couch. The heavy cloth curtains covering both windows are closed, and an abnormally large flat screen TV provides an eerie light flickering through patches of swirling smoke. Kitten is resting on the floor at the woman's feet, keeping a watchful eye.

"Mom." says Nate. "She's comfortably numb. We'll forego the introduction."

Turning to continue the ascent, I glance up at Nate who is staring at his mom. I see a small but deep crack appear on the surface of his tough-guy shell, as a look of discomfort, possibly pain, flashes across his face. It's gone in an instant. "Shall we?" says Nate, continuing the climb.

Nate fumbles in his pocket, retrieving a set of keys, and proceeds to unlock his bedroom door. "You keep your room locked? That's so cool," I say. "My mom'd never go for that." He ignores the comment and ushers me in, locking the door behind us.

A PC in the corner radiates a soft, blue glow, giving the room an other-worldly feel. His clothes are all over the place, covering the twin bed, the dresser, and much of the computer desk. A bass guitar, carefully resting on its stand, sits in a clutter free area next to his bed, and a big, black cloth beanbag takes up the corner opposite the PC.

Dozens of opened Coke cans surround the keyboard and monitor, sharing space with several full ashtrays.

“You want a Coke?” he says, reaching into a small fridge in his closet.

“Sure, thanks,” I say.

We open our sodas and Nate falls back onto the beanbag lighting a cigarette. I look around for a reasonably clear spot to sit, shoving aside some clothes on the bed.

Nate stares at the ceiling, taking deep, long drags from his cigarette, attempting to blow smoke rings.

“Where’s your brother, Max?” I ask.

“So you wanna learn to fight?” he asks. “How come?”

I let it go. “I dunno. I thought maybe as a fallback to my academic career,” I say, a little irritated, not really understanding the question.

Nate smiles in between puffs, “You’re a fuckin’ smartass. I hope we can get your fists to do as much damage as your mouth.” He sits up and continues, “Whaddyou wanna learn? You wanna learn to kick the livin’ shit outta these pricks? Break some bones? Partial paralysis? Or something more long term, like sterility?”

I think for a moment, “Um, well, I’m not interested in opening a big, fat, can of whoopass or anything like that. Hell, I’d just like to be on my feet when it’s finished, or at least give ‘em a run for their money; ya know? Let ‘em see that I’m not just gonna roll over and play dead any more. Maybe if I represent even a moderate threat, I’ll get left alone.”

“Good answer,” Nate nods approvingly. “I don’t wanna be coaching the next bully of Skyview High.”

Nate flicks the cigarette butt in a nearby empty trashcan and gets on his feet. “OK, get up and stand over here,” says Nate. We trade places and I stand facing him with my back to the beanbag. “Let’s see what we got.” Nate rushes me and I shout in alarm, reflexively curling up for protection. He shoves me back for a hard landing on the soft, plush beanbag.

“Hey! Take it easy,” I say.

“Do you know anything about fighting?” asks Nate.

I shake my head.

“How ‘bout virtual fighting: Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat...?”

“Nope.”

Nate rolls his eyes in disbelief, “No wonder they call you Paula.”

“Fuck you, too, shrapnel head,” I say, getting up to leave.

Nate’s posture visibly relaxes, “Dude... I’m just messin’ with ya. It’s my way.”

He extends his hand and helps me up.

“Before we get into fighting, let’s cover some basics,” says Nate.

“I knew it. Gimme the paint brushes,” I say.

Nate ignores that, and says “First, I wanna show you defense; stance and posture. Are you right or left handed?”

“Right.”

“K. When you think things are going to get physical, you need to plant yourself firmly and stand at the ready. But once you do, it’s game on by sending the message that you’re ready to engage. You run or back down after taking a stance, dude? I’d recommend continuation school. Even girls will wanna kick your ass.” Nate’s eyes are locked onto mine and I nod in solemn understanding.

He lights another cigarette and continues, “If you’re right-handed, in a defensive stance, you wanna put your right foot forward. Feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent; stand up straight, and square your shoulders with a very slight bend at the waist.”

Nate demonstrates, I mimic.

“That’s perfect,” says Nate. “If you’re gonna fight my Grandma; Quasimodo.”

With a fresh cigarette dangling from his lips, Nate brusquely helps me with positioning while he talks, “Don’t hunch your back, the bend is slight. If you’re too erect, you can’t fake, if you’re too hunched you can’t strike. You wanna look solid but you’re actually kinda loose. The point is to be ready to respond to any type of attack.”

He steps back for a look and I put up my fists, trying to look menacing. “I’d say to leave your arms down at your sides for now. That’d be an unwelcome invitation.” Nate positions my arms, “Your elbows should be like your knees and back - not straight, not bent, just loose and ready.”

“How’s that?” I ask.

“Better,” says Nate, making a minor adjustment. “That’s it. Good.”

“I feel kinda silly,” I admit.

“That’s the other thing – attitude. If you feel silly, you’re gonna look silly.” Nate pauses, “Don’t think tough and aggressive, think proud. Like you said, show ‘em you’re not gonna play dead any more. You might still get your ass kicked, in fact, the reality is, if they’re serious about it, you will get your ass kicked; for now. But stand tall. At the very least you’ll earn their respect.”

I relax back into a normal posture, “Respect? Why the hell would I care about earning the respect of some unevolved meat popsicles?”

Nate shakes his head and lights another cigarette, “Shit dude, I thought you were smart. Not knowing how to fight? That’s understandable. Not knowing why you need to? That’s just ignorant.” Nate plops down on the bed. “Why do they bully you?” he asks.

“My guess is to cover up latent feelings of general inadequacy?” I say.

“I’d have to agree,” says Nate. “But, do you think they know that on a conscious level?”

I have to laugh, “You mistake their speech and movement for actual consciousness – more like un-consciousness, like Zombie out there.”

Nate continues, “So if he’s fighting you and has no real sense why, and you’re fighting him back, not knowing why...sounds like you two should be friends.”

My mouth opens with a retort that never comes. I turn that over in my head and realize he’s got a point. I’ve never actually thought about the mental aspect of fighting, that there’s something more at stake than a battered body and bruised ego. Nate’s not teaching me how to fight, he’s teaching me how to compete - on a real primal level.

Learning how to fight won't help me win fights, so much as help me avoid them. Most people fight because they're weak, not strong, and they're out of the game at any display of battle readiness – moving on to somebody weaker. The ones that stick around? Those are the real battles, the battles with something worth fighting for.

Still in his crosshairs, again Nate asks, “Why do they bully you?”

“Because they can.”

Nate nods and says, “Sheer ability will keep them from hurting you. Respect will keep them from wanting to.”

A muffled machine noise fills the room, “Shit. My stepdad's home. Later man, you know the way out.”

PAUL

“Hi Nate. C’mon in,” I say. Although I’ve been very nervous about Nate coming over, he’s here now, and I can feel myself loosening up a little. That, and the fact that Nate looks like he’s going to shit his pants. There’s a saying that goes something like, when things are at their worst, people are at their best. It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to me and I don’t know how true that really is, but I have a little different take on it: When people are at their worst, others are at their best. I call it the Dirty Laundry effect. There’s a song called Dirty Laundry. I’ve heard Mr. Bradley at school listen to a lot. He’s always playing us 80s tunes, that talks about how misery not only loves company, but attracts spectators.

*I make my living off the evening news
Just give me something, something I can use
People love it when you lose, they love dirty laundry*

Now, I’m not happy or anything that Nate’s uncomfortable, but the fact that he’s uncomfortable, I mean, like, ready to jump out of his skin uncomfortable, say ‘boo’ and he might rip the door off the hinges trying to get out uncomfortable, that his uncomfortable-ness, well, makes me feel more comfortable. I dunno why and, frankly, I’m not that concerned about it. I don’t think I’m a bad person or anything. I’m just not gonna judge it too harshly. I’ll leave that in the good hands of the American Psychiatric Association and other think tanks that attempt to provide us all with the dumb explanations for the unexplainable depths of the human character; how ridiculous.

Nate steps in and gives me the ol’ eye bounce; probably at what I’m wearing. I wouldn’t call it exactly dressing for dinner (that’d be a suit or a tux) but Mom insists I

wear slacks and a button-down if company, of any kind, is coming over for dinner. She says it's polite and respectful, to show them that we care about their presence in our home enough to step out of our 'drab day-to-day' as she calls it, and affect a certain 'humble pretense'. I think it's more like she wants everyone to think we're the perfect Norman Rockwell family. She even put one of his paintings in the kitchen; the Thanksgiving dinner one. She got it when grandma died three years ago. I don't think *inherited* it is the right word as grandma had 'willed' her art collection to Uncle Charles, mom's other brother in LA, but he didn't want it. He wanted the rest all right. He's into art and the collection's worth quite a bit, but he didn't want that one. Mom sure wanted it, and she'd have found some way, of a more, well, mendacious nature, to acquire it. I think Uncle Charles – Uncle Charlie, but he's the only one in the family who lets me call him that – knows this, and, as much as he expressed his dislike for all things Norman Rockwell, I'm sure he would have given it to her anyway for this reason. In the end, mother always gets what she wants.

“Dude. I feel like a whore in church,” says Nate.

“Don't worry about it, man,” I say. “I don't know a lot of whores, well, any whores, for that matter, but I can't picture one in fatigues.”

Besides the fatigue pants, the beige, desert kind, not the drab indigenous forest green kind, Nate's got on a plain, black 'T'; what, I think, is a bombardier jacket; black doc martins with white skulls, hand-painted on the toes; and a grey, wool ski cap. And, of course, all his face metal. Well, OK, maybe a whore in the army.

“May I take your coat,” I say in an overly gracious way. I hear mother coming in from the kitchen and lean in close to Nate’s ear, “Well, alrightie then.” Nate throws me a quizzical look before turning to meet Mom, who walks in looking radiant, I must say, in a stunning black-and-white pants suit. I’ve seen her wear it once to a business conference. Well, business boozefest. Where a bunch of management-types sit around drinking and smoking way too much, congratulating themselves on not being at the bottom of the ladder, any more. I went with Mom to one once, in L.A. She’s a Regional Finance Manager, and she manages the three Mountain Trust Credit Unions, within the various communities up here. One of her managers, Thom Thomas – Thom Thomas! Can you believe that name? It’s one thing to give someone two first names, like Bob George, but to give them the same name, and spell them the same? How ridiculous. I’ll bet he had as bad a time in school as I do.

Anyway, Thom’s kid, Andrew, is my age, and since he was stuck going with his dad to the conference, Mom thought she’d take me as well. I got to miss a couple days of school – woohoo! – and we got to share our own hotel room; adjoined to Mother’s.

We both like to swim and spent most days at the pool in the perfect SoCal weather. Seventy five degrees with the hotel’s palm trees high up in the azure sky, and just when the sun would get a little too hot, a mystic breeze would bring us back to paradise. Andrew’s a good swimmer and he certainly has the body for it; I guess the right word would be *lithe*, and muscular. I remember hearing that word, lithe, while watching the Summer Olympics, men’s gymnastics competition. This one Russian gymnast on the horse was incredible. Up and over, down and around, he slung himself

around that thing for hours. He was kind of skinny but really muscular with really powerful arms. I remember the announcer saying something about his *lithe physique* and I looked it up: *characterized by easy flexibility and grace; athletically slim*. I Tivo'd it and watch it every once in a while.

Andrew doesn't look quite like Gymnastikov - I don't remember the guy's name – but he sails through the water at lightning speed. Cool boardshorts, too. I prefer boardshorts to bikini briefs, on most guys. Hell, I'd prefer burlap to bikini briefs on most people. Except for the Olympic swimmers, there should be a law against them.

Besides swimming, one day, they sent us to Universal Studios, which was cool, but other than that, we didn't really hang out. He spent most of the free time going floor to floor, skulking after the housekeepers, stealing towels and sneaking into the open rooms to grab booze minis from the fridges. I went with him for a while, the first day, but I got bored and I also didn't want to get caught. No telling what Mom'd do. So, while he did that, I mostly rode up and down in the outside glass elevator. Spectacular views, even in the beige-colored atmosphere of Los Angeles city proper.

Back to the suit. It's sharp. Black slacks and a black jacket with an hourglass waist, with a white shirt underneath, and a really wide collar, extending out, over the black one of the jacket. Mom curled her blonde hair and is wearing it up for the occasion along with diamond earrings and necklace from a matching set. Oddly enough, these were also willed to Uncle Charles, which, I'm sure he must've given to mother for the aforementioned reasons.

Nate goes kind of rigid as mom hurls herself at him. “You must be Nate. I’m Barbara. Welcome to our home. Please, won’t you come in?” she says with sincere graciousness, opening her arms wide, inviting a hug.

Mother thinks that everyone in high school, or younger, is a kid and the appropriate greeting is a hug. Care to change his diapers, too? And, ‘you must be Nate’, what a ridiculous thing to say. I understand, it’s a pretty common intro when you meet people you’ve been expecting to meet, but it sounds dumb. Who else would be coming over, for Chrissakes? *Oh, mom, I forgot to tell you, Nate couldn’t make it, but since you’ve bought all this stuff for dinner, I invited this other guy. Just someone I met walking home from school.*

Nate steps back a little bit and starts to extend his hand for a handshake. He stops, though, and his arm falls back down. Mom has long arms and tends to envelop people, especially those as thin as Nate, crushing them in her bear-like grip. When mom’s arms engulf Nate, I see him tense up again, looking like he might try to wriggle out of it, but a second later, his arms come up and return the embrace, like old friends who’ve become reacquainted. Mom starts to release him and I catch Nate lingering for a second longer before lowering his arms and stepping back. Nate’s shoulders have fallen and he looks like he’s ready to sit down instead of bolt.

“Dinner’s almost ready. You boys go into the living room. I’ll be right in with drinks and hors d’oeuvres.” she says, stepping back to give Nate a motherly once-over. “All rightie then,” she adds before disappearing into the kitchen.

“Care to explain that?” says Nate, stoically.

“Yeah. Later. You watch, mom’s gonna ‘turn in early’ tonight. After she goes to...goes into her bedroom, I’ll clue you in,” I say. “Trust me. It’s cool.”

“Paul, honey, have you given Nate a tour?” says Mom, from the kitchen.

Of course I haven’t given him a tour, he just walked in. Christ, I hate that passive-aggressive crap. What she wants to say is, take Nate on a tour of the house, but it comes out all candy coated. Drives me nuts. I’ve asked her about it, and she doesn’t seem to get it, telling me it’s just my perception. I’m not entirely on board with that.

And tours, I’ve never understood that custom. Whenever somebody comes over to the house for the first time, she insists on giving them a tour. Here’s where we eat, here’s where we hang out, here’s where we remove our waste products and bathe (strikes me as an odd pairing of room function), here’s where we sleep and keep our underwear, with special note of ‘here’s my son’s messy room’, how ridiculous. She says it’s to make guests feel more comfortable, in that by showing them our home, it will open up the whole house to their perception, instead of one or two rooms; less secrecy, more openness or something like that. I guess. I know when I get ‘the tour’ at someone else’s house, I feel uncomfortable. What am I supposed to say to “here’s the bathroom?” - “We have a toilet just like that in our home.” I just usually end up saying “oh,” or “how nice.” It’s kinda creepy.

“You wanna tour?” I ask.

“Sure,” says Nate.

“Good idea, there might be a quiz,” I say, adding a smile. It’s obvious, by his expression, that Nate can’t tell if I’m kidding or not, but we both let it pass. Truth is, there might be.

I live in a two-story house in the colonial revival tradition; modest but nice. The living room, TV room, kitchen and a full bath are downstairs. Three bedrooms and another bath are upstairs; master bath shared with the hallway. The downstairs has a porch accessible from any room and the upstairs master bedroom has a balcony. I keep trying to talk mom into letting me have that room, but no go. There’s no garage, which I think is a little weird, but very common in the homes up here.

From the entry way, Nate and I step down into the living room. A spacious area with hard wood floors, soft leather furniture, a grand fire place and a big, bay window with an amazing view of Serrano Lake.

“The living room,” I say, and continue on towards the TV room. I turn back towards Nate to see him right where I’d left him, taking things in. With a stern and solemn expression, his eyes pan around the room. I watch him slowly approach the fireplace looking over the photos, knick knacks, and some of my awards for scholastic achievement. I wish she’d put ‘em away instead of barfing them all over the living room. It feels like a museum diorama in here.

Nate reaches for the picture of Mom and Uncle Charles in his Duesenberg SJ sports coupe.

“So, do you wanna continue the tour?” I say.

“Is this your Dad?” says Nate.

“No. That’s Uncle Charles, mom’s brother. Dad’s really not in the picture...get it? Yuk. Yuk,” I say.

“You don’t have to talk about it. It’s cool,” he says.

“What makes you think I don’t want to talk about it?” I say.

“Well, when you get frustrated, you start to crack jokes.”

“What’choo wanna know?” I say.

“Whatever you want to tell me.”

“Well, he was a solid size 11 shoe, blood type A, and...” Nate interrupts me.

“Dude...”

“OK. I just don’t talk about him a lot. Um. Ok. He was a beater. He beat us both. I don’t remember him beating me, but mom says he did.” Nate carefully places the picture back and turns towards me.

“As the story goes, I had just learned to write – actually, I could read and write before Kindergarten, and...” Nate’s staring at me deadpan.

“Right. Anyway, I had apparently made him this father’s day card with my newly discovered alphabet and I went in to where he was watching TV to give it to him. Father’s Day, Sunday, so he was watching some kind of sporting event, which is what he did on Sundays – so I’ve been told. I interrupted him to hand him my card and mom says he swept his open palm across my face, knocking me across the room. So, in what was I’m sure a very melodramatic moment, she left him then and there. On Father’s Day.”

“No fuckin’ way. That takes balls.” says Nate.

“I guess. I don’t remember. In fact the only memory I have of my father is of him chasing my mother around the dining room table at my grandpa’s house, on dad’s side, knocking my mother on the ground, and banging her head against the cheap, tacky, and I’m sure filthy, linoleum. While his parents watched. How ridiculous! What proud parents they must’ve felt like.”

“Dude. I... dunno what to say,” says Nate. “Do you still keep in touch?”

“Pun intended? Only financially,” I say. “He sends checks which help maintain this lifestyle to which we’ve become accustomed, but other than that... From what I understand, he tried to smooth things over after she left, but his attempt at ‘smoothing things over’ ended up hospitalizing her for about a week. Now, there’s a restraining order.”

“Fuck. And I thought my stepdad had already won the asshole-of-the-century award,” says Nate. “Does he live in the area?”

“He’s in Reno. Nevada. C’mon. How ‘bout the rest of that tour?” I say, quickly moving towards the next room. Nate takes his time.

“The TV room,” I say, fanning out my hand across the comfortable couch and beanbag arranged around a lazy-Susan coffee table, all in front of a 60” flat screen, and of course the bar in the corner.

“Beanbag,” says Nate, nodding, looking around the room with the same solemn expression; almost sad.

“Besides my room, it’s the best room in the house. Try the beanbag,” I say.

“I’ll pass,” says Nate, combing over the room’s details

“You OK?” I say.

“What’s next?” says Nate.

We go back in the living room and cross the connecting hall into the kitchen, shuffling around the butcher’s block to avoid a collision with mom. “Almost ready,” she calls out. “I hope you like ham, Nate.”

“Mom! He’s Jewish, for Chrissakes.” I say, affecting anger.

“Oh. Nate. I, um...

Nate socks me in the arm, kinda hard. “He’s kidding Mrs. Sherman. I’m not anything. Nate’s just being a dick. Er...a jerk,” says Nate.

“More like an asshole, if you ask me,” says mom, sarcastically, slicing through the discomfort.

“Dude, you’re so weird,” says Nate, as we continue on.

The dining area is part of the kitchen but separated by a strategically-placed counter. Our dining table seats six, not sure why since it’s usually just the two of us, and although it’s set for three, mother’s gone way overboard. Shocker! No china or crystal, thankfully! But one, individual, place setting has enough silverware and glasses to accommodate people at all six seats to eat any kind of meal comfortably. Yellow linen table cloth with matching napkins, salad fork, dinner fork, desert fork, dinner knife, teaspoon, soup spoon (we never even eat soup, and I doubt we will tonight), service plate (for the dinner plate, --how ridiculous! serving a plate on a plate.), bread plate with butter knife, water goblet, and a red wine glass at each setting, like Nate and I are having wine. I don’t know if mother’s trying to impress Nate, embarrass me, or both, but I just wanna

put a grenade in my mouth right about now. We don't have many people over and mom doesn't have many friends either. Sometimes she'll have office people over for drinks and munchies but not very often. She's brings guys over on dates and will cook them dinner. She really goes all out for that. Kind of like what we have here, but even more over the top; sometimes she pulls out the silver or pours champagne. I like it when she does that, she always lets me have a glass. I rarely see them again, though.

Although mom didn't grow up poor, by any means, her side of the family is a little bit, well, *river*, as in 'other side of the river'. Not like, two empty kegs and a three-legged dog in the front yard, kind of *river* but, I'd definitely watch the rims of soda cans at a family gathering for 'chew residue'. So gross! I think it's mom's way to show the world that she's not like that. Not exactly better, just not like the rest. I think she's kind of embarrassed of her family, our family, I guess. Not sure why. Uncle Charles is with her, though, and will have nothing to do with them. The family is close, at least in terms of proximity. They're all in Southern California, but apparently very avoidable. Mom's good for holidays and birthdays and other big family things, but other than that, she avoids them like a mud puddle. From the dining area, we move down the exit hallway dumping us back at the front door and the staircase.

"Staircase directly across from door. Bad Feng Shui. Lots of evil spirits inhabit this house," I say ascending the stairs, pretending to look around for spirits.

"Dork," mutters Nate.

I stop and feign a fall backwards. I expect Nate to put up his hands, but he doesn't, and I look back to see him leaning up against the banister.

“Thanks. Thanks a lot. You’d let me fall.” I say, only half meaning it.

“No, I wouldn’t have. Not if you were really gonna fall,” says Nate. “C’mon, dude, hurry up. I’m hungry.”

“Here’s the bathroom,” I say, opening and closing the door quickly, continuing down the hall. “This is mom’s room. Off limits. Here’s the spare bedroom.” I try another quick open-close, but Nate shoves his way in to the room.

There’s a bed, a nightstand with a really ugly touch-sensor lamp, probably Grandma’s - I think she even had a Clapper - a dresser, and an old-looking standing full-length mirror. There’s a window, but it always sticks, and it always smells like old feet in here. Uncle Charles has stayed in here a couple of times and a few of mom’s dopey, drunk friends have passed out in here. Nate’s looking around like he’s in church.

“You sure you’re OK?” I say. Nate just straightens a picture on the wall and follows me out.

“And there’s my room,” I say, pointing to the door at the end of the hall. I turn to go back but Nate ignores the cue, barging into my room.

“Unlocked,” I hear him mutter.

“Yeah, um, polite,” I say, annoyed, following him in.

Piles of clothing, mostly dirty, create a mine field on the tan, shag carpeting. Across from the unmade, queen-sized bed is my flat screen; crap, I forgot to clean the catsup stains off it. It’s mounted above a dorm-style fridge, on which are my Game Cube, Wii, and X-Box; in a tangled mess. My computer tower rests underneath a corner desk sectional complete with two dressers on either side. Both have hutches full of books.

There's also a cool, antique-style globe under a dirty shirt in a floor stand in the corner opposite the desk. And, of course, a well-worn beanbag. I've got to admit, the room smells a little funky, probably from the week's worth of dirty dishes scattered around the bookshelves, with food in various stages of decay.

"Dude. You should take better care of this room," says Nate, kind of annoyed.

"The maid's on vacation, but you're welcome to take over if you want," I say.

"No offense. It's just that you have a cool room and you treat it like a public restroom," says Nate, adding, "must be nice."

"You'd certainly think so, wouldn't you?" I answer. Nate's about to say something, when mom calls from downstairs.

"Dinner's ready boys."

"Let's eat," I say, and we make our way downstairs.

Mom's at the head of the table and Nate and I are on either side of her. I'm almost surprised she didn't have name cards. Nate sits down and puts his napkin in his lap. I sit down and reach for the ham.

"Dude," says Nate.

"What?" I say. Nate's just staring at me.

"Wait for your mom," he says.

I'm a little pissed off. I think that's kind of rude, but I don't wanna cause a scene, and lean back, waiting impatiently.

"Whaddyou want to drink, boys?" says mom, from the kitchen.

"Coke," I say.

“The same for me Mrs. Sherman, please,” says Nate.

Mom brings in two Cokes and a glass red of wine and we can all, finally, dig in: Ham, scalloped potatoes, green beans and sourdough French bread. So good. The ham’s glazed with brown mustard and brown sugar; kind of a candy shell. Mom’s a good cook and this is one of her best, usually reserved for company. Everything is passed around the table and we fill our plates. Nate’s plate looks like it was shoved under the door of a prison cell; there’s hardly anything on it.

“I thought you were so hungry,” I say, with my mouth full of food.

“There’s plenty,” he says.

“So, Nate...” starts mom.

Christ! Here comes something really stupid and embarrassing.

“...I’d like to thank you for helping Paul with that sonofabitch, Frankie, kid. That little asshole has bothered Paul for years,” says mother. “I tried calling his parents a while ago, when Paul first had trouble, but they were as bad as he is. I’m sure his mother’s on drugs.”

And you’re not? Mom drinks enough alcohol to sterilize every syringe of every drug addict on the planet but, because it’s legal, she doesn’t recognize it as a drug. Smoke a joint, though, and you’d be a contemptible drug addict, worthy of the death penalty. I’d never tell her Nate, or his mom smokes, pot.

“Mom. C’mon.” I say, getting irritated and more than a little embarrassed. Nate’s listening intently, weaving bites of food into the conversation. Or rather, lecture.

“And the father. Well, he just screamed obscenities at me then hung up. I’m glad you taught him a lesson,” finished mother. I’m mortified.

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Sherman. But, may I give you my opinion?” says Nate.

“Of course,” says mother.

“I think you should let Paul fight his own battles. Calling another kid’s parents? He might as well wear a sign that says, pick on me,” says Nate. I wish I’d sink into the chair and disappear.

“If Paul could fight his own battles, then I wouldn’t have to,” says mother. “Paul, honey, will you please get me some more wine?”

“Already?” I say.

Mother ignores me, but Nate throws me a harsh look. I go get the wine.

“If he can’t, he can’t. But he needs to figure it out for himself. That’s the only way he’s gonna learn; with all due respect, Mrs. Sherman.”

I give mom her wine and she takes a hearty gulp.

“Besides,” continues Nate, “I’m teaching him how to take care of himself.

Oh, crap. I didn’t even think this would come up. I should have said something. I should have fucking said something.

“Excuse me?” says mom. She heard him all right.

Nate looks at me realizing he’s just struck the match in front of the dynamite. He recovers. I reach for more food.

“I’m teaching Paul some defense techniques so when he’s approached again he might stand a chance against those pricks,” says Nate. The bonding attempt fails.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea. He might get hurt. Fighting’s dangerous and senseless, especially at this age. That’s what parents are for, to take care of these things,” says mother.

“I disagree,” says Nate.

“More wine?” I say.

Nate continues. “I taught my older brother Patrick how to fight. Best thing I ever did for him. One word and he knew I’d beat the shit out of anybody for him, but he wanted to learn how to fight; so I taught him. One day, we were at Recreation Park, and some little prick, I think it was that little Muller kid - the one who committed suicide last year? - walked right up to Patrick slowly, casually, and started talking shit. I don’t think the kid ever saw the roundhouse kick that broke his nose. Patrick was never picked on again.” Nate stops and his eyes sort of glaze over, “At least not by other kids.”

If there’s one thing mom isn’t, it’s speechless; until now. She’s nursing her wine and Nate looks over at me, deadpan, then resumes his meal. Mom finishes her wine and puts her glass down in front of me. I take the hint.

“Well. That’s fine for your brother, but for Paul, I don’t want him fighting,” says mother. I return with the wine.

“Paul wants to learn,” says Nate. “And he’s getting good at it.”

“It’s not up to Paul to decide,” she says.

“Why not?” says Nate. Their eyes meet. To my surprise they both turn away at the same time. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a tie in a game of chicken with mother. She can stare the paint off a car, if she feels her point’s not being made.

“He can make these decisions when he’s eighteen,” she adds with finality. Safely, barricading herself behind a wall of legality.

Nate lets it go, thankfully. “Paul, please pass the potatoes. Wonderful meal, Mrs. Sherman,” says Nate. I sit eyeing mom’s wine glass, waiting for round two.

NATE

“Mrs. Sherman, that was an excellent meal,” I say.

“Paul, honey, did you enjoy the meal?”

“It was all right,” he says. I can’t really tell if he’s serious. I look over at Mrs. Sherman and she’s looking at Paul with irritation, then embarrassment. She recovers.

“Well, why don’t you two boys go in the living room?”

Paul and I head out while Mrs. Sherman grabs a handful of plates and heads into the kitchen.

“You want some help Mrs. Sherman?”

“No. But thank *you* for offering”

We both plop down on the couch.

“Your mom can really put away the wine,” I say.

“You noticed. It’s a little embarrassing.”

“It’s gettin’ her through the day,” I say.

“Yeah, all twenty four hours of it. You don’t know...”

Paul shuts up as his mom enters with a tray of Cokes and glasses.

“You boys relax, I’m going to clean up in the kitchen,” says Mrs. Sherman. “Can I get you boys anything else right now?”

“No thank you,” I say.

“No. Thanks,” says Paul, a little on the cold side. If his mom heard it, she’s ignoring him, and heads back into the kitchen. Nice figure. She seems like kind of a cool Cougar.

I reach for a Coke.

“Want some Jack in that Coke?” says Paul.

“Dude, I doubt she spiked our Cokes. But that’d be pretty cool if she did.”

“No. I mean, do you want some Jack in your Coke?” He’s serious.

“Under the cushion here.” Paul shoves his hand under the cushion I’m sitting on and I scoot out of his way. He roots around for a minute and brings back his hand with an eighth of Jack Daniels. I can tell it’s been open but it’s just about full, like someone’s been taking sips from it. He holds it up with a pissed off look on his face.

A plate drops in the kitchen. “Goddamn it!” yells Mrs. Sherman. “Sonofabitch!”

Paul closes his eyes tight like he’s praying for something.

“You OK Mrs. Sherman?” I say.

“Yeah,” she’s making kind of a racket, knocking things around. She appears in the doorway with her left hand wrapped in a wet dishrag with pinkish streaks.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” I say, starting to get up. I look over at Paul who’s still in prayer, keeping still.

“Oh, I’m all right. I just sliced my hand open on a plate. That’s all. The price of a wonderful dinner,” she says with forced laughter, before going back in the kitchen.

Paul’s doing his best to ignore the situation, but I feel kind of bad for Mrs. Sherman and get up to go in the kitchen.

“That’s what she wants,” says Paul. “She’s hosting a pity party and we’re all invited.”

“She’s hurt, man. It looks like she cut herself pretty bad,” I say. “Unless that was just wine on the dishrag.”

“If it was wine, she’d be suckin’ the rag, trying to get it out,” he says.

“Well, I’m gonna see anyway.”

“Ouch! Christ. Damn it this hurts,” says Mrs. Sherman, followed by breaking glass. “Shit.”

I stand in the kitchen doorway and see Mrs. Sherman fishing a broken plate out of the sink with her right hand, her left still bandaged, resting on the counter out of harm’s way.

“Are you OK? Do you need some help Mrs. Sherman?”

“Nate? Thank you so much for coming to my aid. I’m glad somebody cares,” she adds in an elevated tone. “I’m fine, though. Really. Go back in with Paul.

She continues fishing broken glass out of the sink and I go back in with Paul,

“What’s your problem, anyway, man? Your mom goes out of her way to fix a killer meal and you’ve been a little bitch to her all night. So she takes a drink...”

“...or twenty,” says Paul.

“Well, she works hard. That’s all I’m sayin’.”

I like Paul’s mom. I think she’s kind of cool. I can see where she can be a pain in the ass, though. She’s real opinionated and I’m guessing that her word is the first and last around here. But Paul’s got it fuckin’ easy. What I wouldn’t give to live in this house. And that meal. My mom used to cook like that, but not in a long time. Beanbags and X-boxes? And no fuckin’ Denny.

“You have no idea what it’s like around here,” says Paul.

“Well it can’t be all that bad. Lemme see that,” I say, taking the Jack. What Paul here needs is a little anarchy. I spin off the cap in a single flick, it rolls onto the floor underneath the table and Paul scrambles for it.

“What’re you doing? Are you crazy?”

I pour a good shot and a quarter into my glass and at least a double shot into Paul’s glass while he’s underneath the table. He quickly comes back with the lid,

“Put it back quick, before she comes back in here.”

I deftly screw the lid back on and replace the bottle, just as Mrs. Sherman comes in with a glass of wine in her freshly gauzed hand.

Paul’s looking like he shit his pants as his mom sits down on the couch opposite us, rubbing her hand, wincing occasionally.

“Thank you again for dinner, Mrs. Sherman,” I say, reaching for my Coke. I take a hearty swig. “Ahhh”

“It was certainly my pleasure. I don’t get to cook big meals like that very often.”

Paul grabs his Coke and takes a gulp, gagging a little. He shoots a panicked look over at me.

“Cheers, my friend,” I say, raising my glass.

“Oh, cheers,” says Mrs. Sherman, joining in.

Paul clinks glasses with us and immediately puts down his Coke. I look over at him, taking another big gulp of mine.

“So Nate, honey, you’re intelligent, good-looking, why do you put yourself together like that?” says Mrs. Sherman. Paul reaches for his Coke.

At least she asked. I have to give her credit for that. I’ve met parents before who haul that elephant all over the room, looking at me the whole time like they’re wondering if I’m housebroken. At least she has the balls to voice her discomfort. Now I don’t know if she’s really interested or if it’s a rhetorical question, and she’s just being a bitch, but she did ask.

“Same reason you do, Mrs. Sherman. It’s how I feel the most comfortable.”

Paul’s nursing his Coke trying to look small. I continue,

“There are a lot of groups at school, you know that. You had ‘em too, right? You can’t escape it. I don’t really belong in any of them.”

“Because you look like...that,” she says.

“Not really. It has nothing to do with the way I look. I could dress like the preppy kids or the geeks or any of the groups, but I still wouldn’t fit in. Well, I would ‘til I open my mouth.”

“Aren’t you treated differently? Why draw so much negative attention to yourself.”

“Well, Mrs. Sherman, I’m just being myself, really. If I’m attracting negative attention for being myself, that’s not my problem. Negative or not, most people pretty much leave me alone”

“Don’t you think that might be because they’re afraid of you?” she says.

“Are you afraid of me, Mrs. Sherman?”

She smiles and shakes her head. Paul might as well have a nipple on his Coke, taking slow frequent sips.

“That’s because you’re getting to know me. But I’ll bet if you saw me on the street, you’d think, ‘what a degenerate’.

“She still thinks that,” mutters Paul. I ignore it, so does Mrs. Sherman.

“If I dressed and acted like everybody else, I’d be surrounded by douchebags all day long and have to be like them to fit in. And, as soon as I try to do my own thing, I’d be out on my ass...ear. Besides enjoying the tattoos and the rest,” I tug at a couple of my nose and eye-brow piercings, “this gives me more freedom to be who I want and more selective about who I have around me.”

“Well, I think it’s more like a cry for help, if you ask me. Besides, who’d hire you for a job?” she says.

I ignore the ‘cry for help’ comment. I’m pretty good at math, but I don’t think I can count as high as the number of parents and counselors who have asked me the job question. “I bet Mike at Mike’s Tattoo would hire me. I’ve gotten enough work done there.”

“A tattoo parlor? What kind of a future is that?” she says.

“Future? Mrs. Sherman, I haven’t graduated high school yet. Maybe Mike’s got a 401K plan but I’m not thinking that far ahead.”

“All I’m saying is...” she starts, but Paul cuts her off.

“Can I get you summere wine mom?” he says.

“Oh, I’m out. No, no, I’ll get it. Would you like another coke?” she says, fumbling the tray around her hurt hand, shards of pain and discomfort streaking across her face.

“Yes, please, Mrs. Sherman,”

As soon as she disappears I grab the bottle and put another couple of healthy bolts in our glasses. Paul’s freaking out.

“What are you doing? Once was bad enough. She’s gonna notice it’s gone!”

“Relax, she won’t. Does your mom drink tea?” I say.

“Tea? What’re you talking about?”

“Dude. Does your mom drink tea or just coffee?” Paul’s getting flustered,

“Just coffee.”

“Perfect. Then she really won’t figure it out. Brew some black tea and dilute it with water to make it look like Jack. She’ll just figure it’s a bad batch. Works only once though.”

Mrs. Sherman comes back in with more coke and a full glass of wine. As freaked out as he is about the booze, he’s sure not letting go of his glass.

“So Nate, what do your parents do?”

“You wouldn’t approve,” says Paul under his breath. Again, we both ignore it.

“My mom doesn’t work and my stepdad’s an independent tow truck driver.”

“Oh.” she says.

“I knew she wouldn’t approve. She never approves.”

“Paul, sweetie, that’s not a very nice thing to say to your mother.”

“Oh?” says Paul.

I can see Mrs. Sherman getting pissed. “Now listen, Paul,” she says, through a clenched smile. “I just don’t think that’s an acceptable way to speak to your mother.” She could cut cement blocks with her tone.

“You mean in front of people,” he says.

“Young man, this is not the time...”

“What do you do, Mrs. Sherman? Paul tells me you work in a bank?”

She’s glaring at Paul who’s looking away, then snaps back to gracious hostess, “Credit Union, actually. I’m a regional finance manager for Mountain Trust Credit Union.”

“How long have you done that? Do you enjoy it?”

“Too long and not really,” says Paul, under his breath.

“Paul! That’s enough. What’s gotten into you?” she says.

I look over at Paul clutching his Coke, shifting uncomfortably. The left side of his mouth is twitching a little bit and he relaxes back into the couch, both hands on his glass.

“Cheers again,” I say, holding up my glass, smiling at Paul. Paul kind of comes to and smiles and raises his glass with us.

“So, Mountain Trust Credit Union,” I say.

“I’ve been there for three years now,” she says, keeping a watchful eye on Paul.

“I like it. It pays the bills.”

Yeah, and plenty to spare. “Did you go to school for that?” I say.

“Well, sort of. I have a Bachelor’s Degree in Business Statistics.”

Paul laughs, “She’s got a BA in BS.” That’s actually pretty funny so I laugh and Mrs. Sherman strains out a smile and some small, polite laughter.

“Well,” she says. “I think I’m going to turn in a little early.” She stands so I stand as well; Paul doesn’t get up. She extends her arms for a hug and I allow her to envelop me in her, caring embrace, even though it is a bit lopsided; her left hand held back at a safe distance. Still, with only the one hand, she’s holding on pretty tight. I hug her back. It feels good. Definitely a mom hug

“It was very good to meet you, Nate. You’re welcome in our home any time. We’ll have to have you over for dinner again.”

“Thank you. It was a pleasure meeting you and great dinner.” I say.

“C’mon sweetie, give your mom a hug goodnight.”

Paul is staring up at us with a grin on his face. “That is a touching family moment right there. A touching family moment.” He quickly stands and gives his mom a short hug. “Night mom. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I love you.”

My mom used to be a lot like Mrs. Sherman; loving, affectionate, real mom of the year stuff. That was before dad tried to kill her. Shot her with a .38. Still don’t know why. I wasn’t home, I was at my grandma’s house; I was only five. Dad’s in jail now for a very long time; I hope. Mom recovered her health, but lost her mind in the process. She mainly gets stoned on the couch and watches TV or listens to music. Funny thing is

she's got an income from the sonofabitch. Apparently his life insurance policy pays out in the event of long-term disability, including incarceration. Then came Denny; fucker.

Mrs. Sherman grabs her empty wine glass and fills it before disappearing up the stairs. Paul flops back down on the couch.

"Turn in a little early. That's code for move the drinking to the bedroom."

"You've sure been drinking enough tonight," I say.

"Yeah, thanks to you."

"I didn't make you drink it, you know."

"Fuck you," he says, good naturedly. We clink our glasses.

"Have you ever been drunk before?" I say.

"Once," he says, sitting up in a real conversational way. "I found I like beer. My mom threw a party here and I had to play waiter for the cocktail part of it; before dinner. Anyway, while I was fixing a plate of food for my bedroom, I didn't eat with them, not like, 'the help can't eat with the guests', I just preferred not to and mom didn't mind. Where was I?"

Dude's really started talking. I just sit back and let him go,

"Beer," I say.

"Beer. Oh right. So while mom and her work cronies are eating a wonderful meal, lamb chops, I think it was. She makes pretty good lamb. Yeah, she's actually a really good cook. It's got this demi-glaze and reduction sauce that,"

"Dude. Beer," I say.

“Oh yeah. The beer smelled pretty good; Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. So I tried it. I drank a bottle in the kitchen then took a couple more up to my room.”

“Three beers?” I say. “I wouldn’t call that drunk.”

“What would you call drunk, then?”

“I think you’re pretty close to it now.”

“Cheers,” we say in unison, clinking our glasses together.

“I like your mom. She’s cool.”

“She’s not,” says Paul, as his smile fades. “You’ve just seen the party face. The company face. The *look, aren’t we the perfect family face*. The kind you see on TV. But she can be mean. I’m tellin’ ya, you have no idea.”

“You *asshole!*” comes Mrs. Sherman’s voice from upstairs. It sounds more like it’s coming from the kitchen. It’s quickly followed by a crack and glass breaking.

“*Goddamn it!*”

Paul takes a huge gulp of his coke, holding his glass close, his eyes circling the top, watching the cubes floating around.

Paul takes another drink of Coke. I don’t know what to say and don’t say a thing. Paul continues,

“She put me on a diet. A diet, for Chrissakes.” Paul’s definitely under the influence and has stood up. He’s sort of gliding around the room, getting louder.

“She treats me like a goddam marionette,” he says, moving his arms and legs like they’re being manipulated. “Eat this, Paul. Eat that, Paul. Wear this. Uh uh, not that, it’s not very flattering. No, that makes you look a little funny. No, you can’t do that, you

might get hurt. Uh, you probably shouldn't try that, it's dangerous. Watch your mouth, watch your temper, mind your manners. Fuck manners!" says Paul, kicking the corner of the couch, hard.

I just sit back and let him roll.

"And when she doesn't get her way. Christ. When she doesn't get her way. You can't believe how mean she can get. I mean, shit."

A door opens upstairs and I see light streaming out into the hall.

"Dude, I think your mom's coming down."

"Oh shit," says Paul, planting himself on the couch, holding fast to the Coke. His head is down and he's trying to look invisible, taking sidelong glances anticipating her arrival.

Mrs. Sherman flicks the switch at the top of the stairs, bathing the stairway in light. She stands at the top of the stairs in a gossamer nightgown barely tied in front. Under the shimmering opaque folds I can make out the faint outline of bare flesh. She's got a great body, I have to admit.

"Paul. Thash a li'l loud."

Paul doesn't look up. "I'm sorry," he says sarcastically. "I guess you couldn't hear yourself *scream*, right?"

"Thash it. To bed, young man."

"You go back to bed. I've got company."

Mrs. Sherman is livid. She's clenching her fists and breathing heavily and her face is getting real red; she looks like a volcano ready to blow.

“Nate, I think ish time for you t’go home now. Thank you sho much for...”

Paul’s still staring into his glass. “Nate’s not going anywhere. Why don’t you grab another bottle of wine? You’ll be asleep before you can say Betty Ford.”

Mrs. Sherman ties her nightgown cord with purpose and starts down the stairs with heavy feet,

“Wha’di you say to me, you li’l ashhole?”

She’s hammered. Between them, I can’t tell who’s had the most to drink.

“How dare you shpeak like that to me you li’l shonofabitch. Nate you need to leave. Now.” She takes her right hand off the banister, motions towards the door, and misse the next step. She falls flat on her ass, hard; her legs stretched out in front of her.

She sobers up quick. “*Goddamn* it! Now look what you made me do. Paul! Get in here and help me.”

Paul rolls his head over towards his mother, sees she has fallen and starts to laugh; more to himself than anything. I don’t think Mrs. Sherman can see or hear him from her vantage point.

“Dude, are you gonna go help your mom?”

Paul’s rolls over on his side and is laughing pretty hard now.

“Are you laughing at me for Chrissakes? You just wait ‘till I get up – ow!”

I leave Paul on the couch to help Mrs. Sherman.

“Nate. I thought I’d asked you to leave. Well, since you’re here,” she says, extending her hand. The fall sobers her somewhat and she winces as I pull her up to her

feet, her right hand quickly grabbing the banister for support. She sees Paul laughing on the couch and clenches her teeth; her face going red.

“Don’t mind Paul, Mrs. Sherman. I just told him a really funny joke.” She knows I’m lying but allows it to distract her. “May I help you back upstairs?”

She’s glaring at Paul,

“Sure.”

“You fell pretty hard,” I say. “Put your arm around my neck.”

Mrs. Sherman turns around and puts her right arm around my neck, giving me almost her full weight to support.

“You’re very strong Nate. Thank you.”

“Well, you’re just very light.” If there’s one way to make any woman on the planet feel better, tell them they look young or thin. Not so much beautiful. Not sure why. I can tell a girl she’s beautiful a million different ways, poetry or prose, but it never seems to work as good as young and thin. Instant points.

“You’re sweet,” she says.

I help her to her bedroom door where she stops me.

“Thank you, Nate. Any farther would be indiscreet.”

She grabs the handle and stops, turning around to look at me. “Good night, Nate,” she says, pausing before turning the handle and going in.

“Good night Mrs. Sherman.” Did she just hit on me? She’s attractive, but... I have no problem fooling around with a woman Mrs. Sherman’s age, in fact I’ve done it before. My first. Naturally, it was the babysitter. Aunt Janine, my mom’s sister, couldn’t

come over to babysit and had one of her friends do it. Angela, thirty-nine, or so she said; I was fifteen. She bartends and cocktails at The Open Door, a smelly dive bar in top town. The roaches even stay out of that place. The Open Sore.

When I opened the front door to greet her, I was eye level with a humongous set of milk bags. I know I was staring at them because she crouched down a little to make eye contact. She busted me out, but I was much more aroused than embarrassed. Six times. Four in the living room and once in the kitchen and once in the bathroom; after we'd taken a shower. From virgin to veteran in one night. Haven't seen her since, though. I think it would have been different if I was hanging out with her kids. Then again, maybe not. But in this case, I wasn't about to go there.

I go back downstairs and find Paul asleep on the couch. It'd be great to just let him sleep it off there, but his mom can't find him passed out.

"Paul," I say, close to his face. Nothing. I pinch his nose, restricting air flow and he springs awake gasping for breath. His brow is deeply furrowed and he's looking around the room, landing on me and smiling.

"What? Oh shit, mother," says Paul in a panic.

"Relax," I say, sitting next to him. "She's in bed; wasted. Maybe she'll forget it."

Paul gives me a look.

"I'm just sayin'," I say, and we share a laugh. Let's clean up the evidence then I'll take off." I turn my head in the kitchen and Paul puts his hand on my shoulder,

"Nate. Why are you so nice to me?"

“I don’t know. You’re short, you’re weird, you’re a total fuckin’ outcast, physically awkward, socially inept,” I stop, pretending to think about it. “You’re right, man. Fuck off. Actually, it’s cause I wanna bang your mom.”

Paul pretends to puke and we end up laughing. He didn’t press it and I didn’t offer. I’ve never really thought about it before. Our friendship just sort of happened. All those things I said are actually true, but he’s a good guy. I think he reminds me of my brother; not sure why.

I wash the glasses and put them in the dish strainer.

“Actually,” says Paul, “we need to put ice and coke in the glasses and put them back on the table. Washing the glasses like this is pretty outta character for me, and would more likely to raise suspicion.”

“Good thinking.”

“It pays to be vigilant when breaking the rules. I’ll pick up that tea tomorrow and try your tea trick.”

“Some advice from one who’s been there: Take some aspirin and Vitamin C before bed and keep at least a couple bottles of water handy,” I say, grabbing my coat out of the hall closet and opening the door. “Thanks again for dinner, man.”

“Thanks Nate. Thank you...”

I nod and head out into the night.

PAUL

Senior Square. What a nightmare. It's not even a square, really, it's more like a trapezoid, but Senior Trapezoid is way too nerdy, which defeats the purpose of it having been named. It's nothing more than the connecting point, the convergence, of the cavernous hallway system of Skyview High. There are many of them, actually, but it does contain the ramp down to the cafeteria which, I'm sure, singles it out from the rest. So much so that some senior class of some bygone year donated a bunch of benches as a senior present. Probably so all future seniors can take relaxing seated sojourns from harassing the underclassmen – er underclasspeople; whatever!

Senior class present. There's a winning idea. A senior class giving the high school a gift for the last four years, is like a prisoner giving a warden a gift for parole: Gee warden, thanks for the non-digestible food, the nightly butt-rapes, and the toilet-water wine. I'd like to humbly provide you with this parting gift – a hand-crafted, bamboo partition panel for my cell to accommodate toilet privacy if not simply as a tasteful appointment.

The unwritten rule is that only seniors and their friends and those from whom favors (plagiarized homework, for example) are being extorted may pass unscathed, without so much as a dirty look. For those whom fortune has not smiled upon, such as I, we can expect just about anything. And, the cafeteria's close proximity doesn't help. In fact, they stopped serving Brussels sprouts, not because nobody was eating them – do they even eat them in Brussels, or do they just ship them here, hoping uncultured Americans won't know the difference between crap and haute cuisine; like Evian – but

because someone was caught with a slingshot nailing underclassmen with them. Carl, the school chef - cook, whatever! - told me that he was happy to see the Brussels Sprouts unexpectedly moving, but not surprised when they ended up in the kitchen trash after being scraped off the walls. It was actually kind of a big deal, the whole Brussels Sprouts thing, but personally, I think the only reason was because Vicki Trask, the Principal's daughter, was hit in the head – twice, in a crossfire. She's not a target, in fact, she's one of the extremely few popular people who are nice, but she was definitely at the wrong place at the wrong time. I'd have thought she'd be a bitch, really, being the principal's daughter and all. You know, 'I'm the principal's daughter, so don't mess with me kind of attitude'; maybe I'm just projecting.

Anyway, it's especially bad today; well, all Fridays. I think it's all the potential energy stored up in all of us, even the teachers, who are forced to go through the motions of a fabricated living arrangement, waiting for the two days of relative freedom when we can just be ourselves, existing in our own world, without the awkward surrealness of a forced high school society. Enter an underclassman, however, and the potential energy quickly turns kinetic.

“Ouch!” Great, I'm not even there yet and I'm already shuffling for my books.

“Sorry Paul,” comes the meek reply.

“Ellis. Dude.”

“Sorry. Bumper cars,” replies Ellis.

“Crap,” I say, slowly standing to a more dignified posture. “Who was it?”

“Not sure.”

“Was anything said, or were you just shoved?”

“I think I heard ‘whoops!’,” says Ellis after some thought.

“Chad Burgen. What a tool,” I say, rolling my eyes.

Bumper cars, like the ride at most County Fairs, consists of someone shoving a target into somebody else, usually another target, or any solid object decidedly harder than flesh; the proverbial stuffed animal awarded for maximum humiliation or pain. If there are no other targets around, a wall or any underclassman will do. The really tough one is when a target is shoved into one of the ruling elite, you know those types who inhabit Senior Square, waiting to be triggered into an obscene act of meanness. They’ll know that the target was shoved into them – like a target would throw themselves at anyone, especially one of the ruling class, ‘please, sir, just a touch of your royal presence, alms of your magnificence’ – yet they’ll usually play it up like the target was trying to start something, then the poor kid will really get it. It always draws a crowd, especially when it happens in Senior Square. It’s funny, too, that all the morons that play this absurd game, have little things they say to announce the game in play. Chad, as we’ve seen says, ‘whoops’; Marissa Goolop – yes, even girls get into the act, but with a name like that, I can’t blame her a whole hell of a lot, she should marry soon, rumor has it she’s pregnant - says, ‘ex-CUSE me’; Kham Foster’s is ‘dork’. The worst, though, is Jacob Feldstein and he says nothing at all. In fact, he’s a sneaky asshole who has actually broken noses, shoving people into solid surfaces. Naturally, the school addressed the problem. They even attempted to be cool about it, using our nomenclature, ‘bumper cars’. But, when push came to shove, pun most definitely intended, the offender would

act all innocent and claim everything from “late for a test” to “narcolepsy”. You know, if these meat popsicles put as much time into being human, as they did avoiding it, well, I guess I’d have no story to tell, now would I? They’ll say anything to avoid taking responsibility for being an asshole.

“You going through, Ellis?” I ask, as we both stand upon the threshold of Senior Square: A positron collider representing the melting pot of adolescent groups and personality types. I sort of envy the ghosts. The ones who don’t seem to fit into any group at all but who go unobserved and unobstructed throughout the school. I’ll catch one of them deftly making their way through the crowd, sometimes making contact with others, but whose earthly high school presence is so ephemeral, I think it escapes notice, then they vanish again to the extent that I wonder if I even saw them at all, and I can’t recall ever seeing the same person twice. They’re the ones who are sometimes, by accident, left out of the yearbook, or get mistaken for staff or faculty; who can be in a class with you all year and you never discover their name, and who you only really notice when you’re in line behind them, handing in your textbooks. I don’t know any of them - if I did, I guess they wouldn’t be ghosts – but they’ve got to have it easier than the rest of us. Unless they’re, so ghostlike they have no friends or identity. I think that would be more tragic than being a target wearing a bulls-eye shirt, hat, shoes, and glasses, with a *Kick Me* sign taped to their back.

“Uh, yeah. I think I’m gonna brave it,” Ellis gulps hard.

“I’ve already had a Hell of a day, I think I’m gonna ‘chicken’ it around the back way,” I say.

“Well, be careful. I just came from Mr. Lasseter’s class and, from the window, it looks like some of the sports jack-offs set up a garrison on the benches outside the cafeteria’s field entrance,” says Ellis stoically, contemplating his options.

“Christ! You know, I understand that throwing or bouncing a ball takes up only a very small part of their brain, but why do they use the rest for bullying and being assholes?” I ask.

“Well, you see, Paul, it’s because...”

“Rhetorical.”

“Uh, sorry.”

Ellis Parker. I like him. Math whiz. With the stereotypical social awkwardness of anyone whose brain power and function is not on the same trajectory as the rest of us.

To get an idea of how his brain works, we were in math class together in the seventh grade and the teacher introduces us to variable math, you know, x equals this and y equals that – the only practical benefit I can see, so far, of higher math, is knowing how to find the common denominator between the amount of hot dogs and buns it will take to make an even set – anyway, the teacher writes some dumb equation on the board like, $x = 8$, then, he writes another equally as dumb one where $x = 14$. Ellis, literally, ran out of the classroom crying because x equaling two things simultaneously could not occur in a sane and structured universe. I’m guessing if any day could be pinpointed as the day he became a target, that’d be it. He’s even smarter than I am; and he applies himself; and, he’s an all around nice guy. Non-sequitur, but really nice. He’s one of the

few of his kind and, of the handful at our school, the only one who is conscious of his social awkwardness but makes an attempt.

Lunchtime is in full swing now, and the crowd is beginning to airfoil around us.

“Well, I’m going through,” says Ellis with uncertainty. “Angela Forte, um, wants some help with her trig homework,” Ellis says with a big, shit-eating grin, all thoughts of the potential horrors that await suddenly forgotten.

“Dude! That’s awe...Do you think it’s legit? You know she dates a guy on the football team, and...”

Sometimes the jocks will get their girlfriends into the act by luring an unsuspecting target into an ambush then watch and giggle while their Neanderthal boyfriends beat the crap out of them. Really sick stuff. But if they’re confronted, as many of the targets are tattle-tales, they’ll just act all Barbie and weasel out of it, lying for their boyfriends to get them out of any trouble. It’s hard to believe that this is an educational institution, with as dumb as the Administration acts sometimes.

“I think it’s all right,” says Ellis confidently. “She approached me while I was by myself in Mr. Lasseter’s, prepping the board,” continued Ellis, with a cow-eyed expression. Ellis actually preps the blackboard for the teacher – there’s nerd, then there’s uber-Nerd. Not for extra credit, he doesn’t need it, in fact with his extra credit alone, I’d get a C, he simply loves math. Weird. But, in my book, his massive brainpower definitely makes him above reproach, even commanding respect.

He turns serious, “She told me, well, that she needed help and then she started crying an’ all and...” He stops and turns back to survey the madness.

“I’m just gonna go down through maintenance,” I say with a sigh. “Peter, the maintenance guy, will let me through.” You know, I don’t know what’s worse, the pain and humiliation inflicted on me by my own kind, or the self-inflicted pain, humiliation, and guilt – Jesus, I sound Catholic! – of hanging my head, skulking about the rusty innards of our poorly maintained school. Definitely the former, and I turn to head the other way.

“See ya, Ellis. Have fun factoring her polynomials,” I say, fighting to turn around in the crowd.

“Well, actually, the lesson plan is…” says Ellis, to my back.

“Expression,” I shout above the din, jutting up my hand.

Crap. Here comes that Feldstein prick. If he sees me I’m dead. I look around, planning my escape. I got brave a couple weeks ago, and shoved my middle finger in his face before disappearing into a crowd. He made some idiotic, snide comment about me in Spanish class, so, on my way out, I flipped him the bird and bolted into the hallway traffic. He won’t get physical in class but I don’t want to think what he’d do to me if he cornered me in a hallway. And I doubt he’s forgotten about it.

No doors, locked windows, and the restroom’s behind him. I think I’ll take my chances in Senior Square. He hasn’t seen me, so I crouch a little and worm my way back in the other direction. He hasn’t spotted me. There’s a bottleneck in Senior Square, however, as a group of people has stopped, blocking most of the way. Turning around, I can see Feldstein getting dangerously close, and I work to skirt the edges of the crowd. It looks like they got one and they’re all standing around gaping. It reminds me of this

really cool Ray Bradbury story I read last year, The Crowd, in one of his anthologies. It was about this guy who got in a car wreck and was instantly surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. Turns out that the onlookers were recent car wreck fatalities who came back to ensure other crash victims share their fate. So here they are, students from all classes and social types, all coming together to sickly share in the misfortune of this poor ...

“Ellis!” I shout, surprising myself. A couple people turned around at my voice, creating a part in the crowd. I shove through to kneel beside Ellis who is on the ground feeling around for his glasses, which lay smashed underneath one of the benches, naturally full of seniors.

“Ellis, you OK?” I ask. Ellis is choking back tears. Talk about insult to injury. I bend down to help him up. Lucky for both of us, the fun had already been had and I help Ellis recover the remaining part of his dignity and his glasses.

“Hey! Clear the way! Senior coming through!” comes the booming voice of Jacob Feldstein as he enters Senior Square.

Looking over my shoulder, I see people moving or being moved out of the way as he barrels through. He’s just about six feet tall and built like a King Kong, and dumb as a box of hammers. Since Ellis and I are still crouched, I hook his arm and wriggle us towards the wall. There’re still a few residual onlookers discussing the recent festivities and I’m hoping they’ll block Feldstein’s view.

No such luck.

“Hey look, everybody. Looks like some Geekasaurus took a big shit in our Senior Square.” booms Feldstein.

Muffled, nervous laughter.

“Somebody should clean this mess up,” he says and starts kicking at us. Ellis assumes a crash position, curling up with his hands over his head.

“C’mon Ellis, get up. Let’s get outta here. Let’s go,” I say, genuinely terrified.

Ellis is frozen like any frightened prey and I work to pull him up. Every time, I’m almost to my feet, though, Feldstein kicks me and I go sprawling.

“Go. Go. Go. Move it. Move it. Move it. Move it,” he says, a kick with every word. “And here’s one for that middle finger of yours. You should have more respect for your elders,” says Jacob, kicking me hard behind my left knee.

“Layoff Jacob, you prick. I’m trying to get us out of your sacred shrine, just back off,” I say, with increasing frustration.

“Don’t talk, douchebag, just move. I think your dorky little friend likes it, he’s not even budging,” says Feldstein, now kicking only Ellis.

Ellis roly-poly’s into an even tighter ball and Feldstein turns it up a notch.

“C’mon fagit. Or do you like being kicked in the butt?” And he starts aiming for Ellis’s backside.

I snap.

“Fuck OFF!” I shout and grab Feldstein’s pant leg. With a quick, short, jerk, Feldstein’s feet are pulled out from underneath him and his books go flying. An extremely loud thud of his tailbone striking linoleum and the associated cry of pain, sends a shockwave through the throng. Incredibly, the crowd hushes and a wide area starts to clear around us.

Oh my God. What have I done? I'm dead. I'm so dead, are only some of the panicked thoughts running through my head.

I've never seen Senior Square so quiet and, of course, there's never authority around when you need it. Ellis hasn't budged, still curled up tight and Feldstein's face is contorted in pain, which quickly turns to bloodlust.

"I'm gonna kill you, you sonofabitch," Feldstein spits, slowly standing, rubbing his tailbone.

In a move that still surprises me, I spring up, taking a defensive stance. It's almost instinctual and I feel kind of outside myself. With my right foot forward, feet shoulder width apart, and my knees slightly bent, I raise myself up tall and proud, ready for whatever may come next.

Jacob Feldstein's malevolent eyes are locked onto mine and he rises slowly into attack position. Tense and fearsome looking, Feldstein hocks a big loogie off to the side as he shakes his arms and cracks his knuckles, raising his fists to battle readiness.

"This is fun enough when you just take it, but now that you're gonna try to fight, I get to really kick your fuckin' ass," he said, lunging forcefully.

In a flash, I find myself moving to parry his blow with surprising agility - against a right-handed fighter. Jacob, it turns out is left handed and I moved right into his thick, meaty fist. Now, I've been poked, prodded, socked, and punched, but I've never been impaled, and have never felt such pain. He hits me square in my right eye with a powerful hook that sends me twirling like a ballerina, falling face first over poor roly-

poly Ellis, thwacking my head on one of those sturdy senior gifts. I'm conscious, but definitely down for the count.

"That's it?" says Feldstein. "That's all I get? Get up, you little fuck, we're just getting started."

I may be brash but I'm not stupid, staying prone, flat on my face, the cool linoleum providing small comfort to the eye resting on it, that will most assuredly be black and blue by day's end.

"C'mon! Get up! Stop snuggling with your boyfriend," he says, but I don't make a move.

Apparently bored now, Feldstein decides to move along, offering both Ellis and I a farewell kick. "Dorks," he adds. "Lemme know if you want another go," he laughs before disappearing down into the cafeteria.

Ellis still hasn't budged and all I can do is lay there, bruised face and battered ego, rolling my one good eye up at the crowd. Some are laughing, some disgusted, but most just casually eyeing the scene. Including Nate, shaking his head, smirking as he strolls casually by.

"Meet me at The Hole after school," he says, out of the corner of his mouth and disappears into the crowd.

I call mom and tell her I'm going to hang out in the Village after school, I still haven't told her about Nate. That's what we call Crestview proper, The Village. The other part, where I live, is called Top Town. The Village sounds a little Provincial to me, but it's much better than 'downtown'. I mean downtown is LA or New York or Chicago,

but not a small, Podunk mountain town that doesn't even have a traffic light. I think the town started as some kind of kitschy winter retreat in the spirit of San Moritz, Switzerland. Not that I've ever been to Switzerland – one of these days – but The Village shops and other business (there're lots of bars) are built in Swiss chalet style; gabled roofs with wide eaves, decoratively carved balconies, with brightly colored - OK, garish - weatherboarding. There's also a camp site called Camp Switzerland and a party pavilion known as the San Moritz Lodge, where they have weddings n'stuff, in summer, mostly. All that's really missing from the scene is the lederhosen, which can actually be seen during Oktoberfest.

The number 33 school bus drops me off at the corner of Zurich Street and Lake Drive, right across from The Hole. It was a particularly hellish bus ride home as word got 'round of my fight, er, beating, and it was open season. Thankfully, it was all verbal. I'm sure the thick, billowing cloud of noxious exhaust masks my middle finger from view as the bus pulls away, but I feel a little better at any rate.

The Hole is a burger stand – an excellent burger stand. It was originally named The Hole in the Wall, but decades of not so temperate weather conditions has stripped off the rest of the cheap, plastic sign. A few years ago, some righteous wack-os waged a crusade to repair the sign because of sexual innuendo. I get what they're talking about now and find the campaign pretty ridiculous and somewhat ignorant. The cool people won out, though, claiming that it's part of town culture and that it's up to the business owner to change it, not city government – like a handful of old people meeting in a bar, once a month, constitutes a government of any kind. More like shuffleboard on the Lido

deck. Can you mix vodka with prune juice? Anyway, the media coverage was great. That's when I tried their burgers, along with most of Crestview. There's no such thing as bad publicity, especially when it's coming from the Catholic church. God bless the irony of it all.

It's been there forever, too, long before I was born, and run by this guy who supposedly worked there as a teenager, with the original owner, who had it willed to him when the guy died. Rumor has it, you understand, I've never met him. I'm sure he's the one serving me when I go there, but he seems kind of curmudgeony, so I avoid conversation involving anything but good, greasy food and chocolate malts. And the fries. Whoa! Screw those no trans fat laws. How ridiculous! You want good fries? Fry 'em up in good ol' lard. I'm talkin' stick to your bones, plug up your heart, rendered animal fat. Anything else is not a french fry. They're off limits now, with my forced dietary regimen, but I'll sneak them when I can. The Hole has an unusually large parking lot, too, for a business this size and is a favorite hangout for those with licenses and the means to use them, in other words upper classmen, and not a good place for targets, so I'm not here a lot.

I have a seat on one of the three picnic benches near the order window. I guess he could be inside, there is a small eating area with a pretty cool vintage jukebox. But after a quick look I don't see him, so I hunker down to wait.

"I hear it's National Kick Paul's Ass Day," comes the muffled voice of a full mouth of food behind me. "Is now a good time, or should I take a number?"

I spring off the bench in case the asshole's gonna hit me from behind – these jerks are unscrupulous, and turn to face my assailant. There stands Nate with his usual stolid expression, intently finishing his triple cheeseburger.

“Holy... Nice eye patch. Arrrrr!” he says, stifling a smirk. “Too bad you didn't move that quickly this afternoon,” he says, in between enormous bites. “C'mon.”

Nate leads us to a white metal security door on the side of the building. Above the gold doorknob is a numeric keypad and Nate places what's left of the burger in his left hand, keying in the code with his right. After stepping in front of me to block the view.

“Don't trust me, huh?” I say, half joking.

“Do you trust me?” Nate throws over his shoulder.

I start to speak and realize that I don't trust him completely and am not sure what to say. Beep, beep, beep, beep. A deep, resonant buzz sounds and the door clicks open.

Nate turns to face me. “Exactly,” he says, turning back around. “I get it and don't take it personally. I don't trust you entirely, either. It'll happen.” Nate turns towards me again, “Or it won't. I guess we'll have to see,” says Nate, raising his eyebrows.

With the burger restored to his eating hand, Nate continues to munch, leading us through the door and down a steep, dark mineshaft of a hallway; it must be sloping downward at 40 plus degrees with creaky, termite-ridden stairs and sweaty walls. The metal door closes behind us leaving the hallway pitch black.

“Tornado comin' Pa? Should I bring the chickens down?” I say, sarcastically and a bit nervous.

Nate stops descending and I stop as well, not sure how far I am behind him.

Beep, beep, beep. Buzz. Click. A more normal-looking door opens outward and a soft, yellow light streaks up the staircase as Nate continues on.

“Do I, uh, have security clearance for this?” I say, following close behind.

Across the threshold, I find I’ve stepped into a real swanky pad; totally unexpected. Sunshine yellow shag carpeting stretches wall to wall with an enormous plush, black, U-shaped sofa with pillows to match the carpet. A black and white, square marble table sits neatly in the middle of the horseshoe sofa, on which sits two lava lamps, one red, one blue; an abalone ashtray (which, personally, I think is kind of rude, using some dead animal’s shell to keep used, dirty, butts – it’s like fish tacos at the city aquarium cafeteria – really?); *Rolling Stone*, *Maxim*, and *Vanity Fair* magazines; and a decorative vase, yellow, with green frogs. In front of the sofa proudly sits a 65-inch plasma screen TV, massive, the wall behind backlit with sunken ceiling lights. It’s got an aquarium on either side, each about 30 gallons, and underneath are four rows of shelving containing hundreds of DVDs. Floor lamps in each corner, opposite the mega-screen, provide just enough light to see clearly, but not enough to, say, read. Intimate, I’d have to say.

Nate walks past the marble table and flops down on the sofa near the end of the horseshoe. The sofa slowly envelops his form and Nate relaxes into its folds, splaying his arms and legs out wide. “Ahhhhhhh. Have a seat.”

I slowly move into the room, continuing to check it out and slide in to the corner opposite Nate. “Does the burger dude live here?” I ask, still taking everything in. On the

far wall, opposite the entrance, are two small refrigerators, one dormitory style, the other specifically for wine, nestled under a large, shiny metal sink with pilsners and wine glasses suspended in shiny metal holders mounted to the ceiling. To the right of that, on top of the counter is what looks like an old, I mean old, record player, you know, the kind with the flower growing out of the turn table, and the big, weighty needle, with a small ceramic white dog with black ears looking into quizzically down into the mouth of the flower. Under that are three shelves of records.

“Wild, huh?” says Nate, a satisfied look creeping across his face. “Dude, relax. You look really constipated. Here, have summa this.” says Nate, reaching for the frog vase.

I stop looking around, focusing on Nate. “Oh, that’s a...bong...” I say.

Nate pulls out a lighter, solemnly bowing down to the sacred object on the table. The flint sparks, the flame ignites just above the bowl and Nate looks up at me over the mouth, “You’ve seen Pineapple Express?” he asks rhetorically. “This shit is intergalactic. I can hear people talking on other planets,” he says, taking a long, deep hit.

I’ve never smoked pot, nor cigarettes. I smoked a ham, once, a couple Easters ago - ba-dum-bum, thank-you-very-much...g’nite! - but certainly never anything illicit. My mom’s a total drug Nazi and she’d kill me. My uncle’s kids, across yonder lake, I think inhale more THC than oxygen on any given day. Their parents know they do it and so does my mom and, although they do it around me, they won’t let me partake. My mom can be embarrassingly scary sometimes. I think fear is a pretty cheap way to get things done, just ask our State Department, but it is effective; it’s very, very effective.

“No thanks,” I say.

Nate takes another deep hit, shrugging his shoulders as he leans back into the sofa. “You ever smoke?”

“Not really.” Pregnant pause. Nate’s deadpanning me across the table and his eyes start to glass over. “Well, no. I mean, I’m not averse to it or anything. Whatever. All my cousins smoke. We’re not real close but I visit them sometimes and they’re always passin the duchie. My mom’s a freak about this kind of thing and I’d really like to live to at least get my driver’s license, and...”

“Gleep, gleep, glorp. Gleep glorp,” pops Nate, with a wide, toothy grin. “Intergalactic, man. I’m tellin’ ya.” I can see Nate coming back to down to Earth. His eyes refocus and he sits up in a more conversational position.

“Is this a ‘cool pad’ or what?” he says, looking around. “Welcome to The ‘real’ Hole,” he continued, wide grin collapsing into a self-satisfied smirk. He almost looks content. Seeing him without expression so often makes this look almost unnatural, but it suits him.

“I, um, uh... I dunno what to say. I mean the burger shack upstairs looks like it should be condemned, not to mention guilty of several health code violations I’m sure are being overlooked, but this...wow,” I say, and begin to relax, allowing myself to sink back into the sofa.

Nate gets animated and sits up, excited. “I know, man, isn’t it great!” He reaches for the frogs but sits back, clutching them in his right hand, the hamburger wrapper crumpled in the abalone shell. “Remember the fight to keep it The Hole? Well, this is the

main reason, because of this hole. Sandy Shores. That's the owner. His, like, great-great grandmother was a silent film actress and used to come up here, to Crestview, in the 40s. She bought a cabin up here and Sandy's parents inherited it in the 70s and moved in. Sandy went to work for the owner, flippin burgers. The owner died and left it to Sandy. This apartment has always been here, but Sandy really mojo'd it up. Before, it looked like an old RV, rolled down a hill, set on fire then put out with a sledge hammer; he showed me pictures."

Nate looks around. He stops, looks at me all serious, "Five other people besides Sandy have that code." I nod slowly, he relaxes.

"I didn't realize that The Hole would produce such a, um, comfortable lifestyle," I say.

"It doesn't," says Nate. "Who d'you think supplies ol' Melvin Crabtree his shit? Do you want something to drink?" he asks.

"Look, is it cool that we're down here? I mean, smokin' this guy's weed, drinkin his stuff?" I'm not sure why I'm nervous, but I feel like I've broken in to this guy's house. I mean, I don't even know him. Like any minute he's gonna burst in and call the police, or worse, my mom.

"Dude. Hit the bong or relax. It's cool," says Nate springing off the couch towards the fridge. "Pepsi, water, beer, Kool-Aid."

"Pepsi, please." I catch the Pepsi and Nate grabs a water and sits back down.

The electric whir of each tank's dual filtration system seems to be getting louder. I find myself zoning on one of the tanks. I can hear Nate playing with the frogs.

“So what happened today, man?” asks Nate.

“Jake Feldstein...”

“God, that guy’s a DICK!” says Nate. “If there’s anyone who needs his ass kicked, it’s him. I’d love to try, personally, but he kinda stays outta my way, and if there’s one guy I’m not gonna pick a fight with, it’s the Incredible Hulk.”

“I hear that. Anyway,” I say, “Jake was pushing through Senior Square and I was crouching to help Ellis Parker, who’d been tripped on his way through, and Jake started kicking us both to expel us from his precious corner of filthy linoleum and ass-faded benches, and I guess I snapped. I grabbed his pant leg and pulled his feet out from under him, knocking him right on his tailbone.” I pause to reflect, feeling a smile coming on. “Everyone heard him hit the ground, and he yelped out in pain. It was great!”

Nate is smiling. “Looking at that purple flower on your face, it didn’t end up too great.”

“Best laid plans,” I say. “I got up and took a defensive position, just like you showed me. I was hot as Hell and ready to do some damage.”

“Well then,” asks Nate. “What happened?”

“Jacob’s left handed.”

“Bwaaa-haha! Oh my God. That’s great.” Nate is rolling with genuine laughter at the irony and I join him. “Talk about left field. Ha ha. Not exactly serendipitous, was it, but I’ll bet you learned something. That’s one of the unfortunate things about learning to fight, there’s some pain involved. Like learning to snowboard. And both are rewarding, if done correctly.

“Well, I would say lesson learned, but dunno how to foresee that in the future, you know? Either my opponent’s left handed or he’s taking a defensive stance waiting for me to take an offensive one,” I say, shaking my head. “Glad I have *two* eyes.”

“Wanna tip?” asks Nate, looking clever.

I nod.

“You’ll eventually learn the difference, but before it becomes intuitive, throw the guy something,” explains Nate.

“Why? To distract him while I kick him in the face? That’s not very sportsman like,” I say.

Nate takes another hit and laughs. “Not throw something *at* him. Throw something *to* him; to catch. A pencil, a book, anything. He’ll usually catch it with his dominant hand.

“Wow. That’s a great idea, Nate. Thanks,” I say and stop to reflect, letting it sink in.

Nate’s long arms drape languidly over the top of the sofa. He’s leaning back into the soft leather, eyes closed, head tilted slightly back. As he stretches back, his shirt lifts to reveal a thin, sliver of pale skin, tattooed naturally. It looks like a tiny dolphin diving down his waistband.

“Does your mom know you’re gay?” I hear Nate say.

It takes a minute to register. “What?”

“Do *you* know you’re gay?”

“Hey, fuck off. Just fuck...OFF! What are you playin’ at?” My blood’s boiling now. “You bring me here, acting like my friend... What is this, some kind of underground pot bordello. Are you and Sandy Shores gone come up and rush my beach? What’s going on here? What’re you talking about? Am I being filmed for distribution on YouTube?” I look around the room. “What, are you some kind of asshole working for the sports retards to see how much you can humiliate me? I’m outta here,” I say, standing to leave. Nate’s just staring at me, still looking content.

“Whoa, dude. I’m the one stoned, so why are you so paranoid?” he asks. “I’m sorry, man, I didn’t mean to piss you off. I guess I kind of barged in to that one. How do you really ask a question like that anyway, there’s no real segue?”

I stop and stare at Nate, angry and uncertain what to do. I’m angry, but not sure what I’m angry at. Angry he pretended to be my friend? Angry he thinks I’m a fag? But there’s something else there, a level of anxiety I can’t attribute to anger.

“My brother’s gay, dude. The one that’s off at college?” continues Nate. His expression slowly morphs into a contrite look of concern and compassion and I’m completely disarmed. I sit back down, still not sure what to do or say and just sit there, irritated.

“Not to sound mean, man, but the expression on your face... You look like a total mouth breather. I’m talkin’, in the bar at 6am, Crestview Top Town mouth breather,” says Nate, trying to break the ice.

No good. I'm angry, agitated, and very anxious. "I'll see you later man. Thanks for the uh..." I say, sweeping my hand around the room, before leaving Nate alone in the pot bunker with the crazy look of compassion smeared across his face.

PAUL

Assemblies are the worst. Well, ok, not quite as bad as PE, but they're pretty bad. Especially the sports ones; the ones where the football team is doing something insipid. That's a great word; insipid. Can't remember where I heard it. It just slithers over the tongue, reeking of condescension and disdain. I have to admit, that actually paying attention and getting good grades adds to my abuse, but it sure beats being stupid. It reminds me of a quote by Aristophanes, I learned in mythology class:

Youth ages, immaturity is outgrown, ignorance can be educated, and drunkenness sobered, but stupid lasts forever.

When it's not to rah rah rah for the home team, they corral us all for other things like serious discussions or vaudeville acts. They had a hypnotist once and some guy who talked to his pet chicken. We almost had a cool medium come in, one of those people who can channel your grandparents or a dead goldfish, stuff like that. It got killed, though, when all the religious wackos started screaming demonic possession and pacts with the devil. So, what? Like the son of God's the only one who's allowed to come back from the dead? How ridiculous. It worked out though. As they say, no such thing as bad publicity, and with the ton of publicity the medium got, she ended up on local news, then a couple talk shows, and was able to open her own little psychic hut somewhere in Santa Monica. I wonder if she had predicted *that*?

All these people, penned within the confines of the school gym, teachers strategically positioned at all the exits like Secret Service agents, well actually more like beat cops following shoplifters around, trying to look casual, standing at the exits to

prevent our escape. And we all want to escape. Well, almost all of us. As much as the assemblies are supposed to bring us all together in school spirit and camaraderie, it's really so the popular kids can show off; the cheerleaders cheer in their dumb little costumes, the football players flex their oversized muscles. Sometimes the marching band plays and that's pretty cool. I remember when Ellis Parker was going to the National Science Fair as a finalist, I recommended an assembly to encourage that. Naturally it was squashed - like football players are the only ones who need cheering. How ridiculous.

In any case, it gets us out of class and we'd certainly rather be stuck here with each other, than stuck in class with each other. And it's always at the end of the day, so at least we get to leave right afterward.

There's a ridiculous hierarchy, too. We're all grouped by class level; Freshmen with Freshmen, etc. Well, for the most part. As a general rule, underclassmen, persons, whatever, may sit only within their class or below. Seniors, naturally, can sit anywhere they want. We're all supposed to be here, together, as a school, yet we're grouped by class, fostering no equality whatsoever, putting power in the hands of a ruling elite. And from what I can see, the outside world is set up the same way; just like high school. What a depressing thought that is.

Underclassmen can be invited to sit in the bleachers of the upper classes. And, oddly enough, while there, that person is under the full protection of the entire class, with all rights and privileges, therein. Sometimes seniors will condescend to sit with the underclassmen, but there's usually a girl involved, and it's usually the under class girl

who's invited to sit with the seniors. Occasionally female upperclass, will date an underclass guy and invite him to sit in the senior bleachers, but, oddly enough, these intruders aren't subject to the same protection as their female underclass counterparts. I think it also depends on who's doing the inviting. And, of course, it's the asshole coach who 'guards' the exit by the senior section. And it's usually his jock cronies that cause the trouble in the assemblies, beating up underclassmen and whatnot, to which he turns a blind eye. They even grab Freshmen, usually targets, and bring them into their area, then act surprised that they're there and start whaling on them. And the stupid coach is like, "all right, all right, that's *almost* enough," taking his time getting to the commotion. Invariably the underclassman is blamed and expunged to their section. Principal Trask usually sides with the coach; not sure why.

The one group that seems to be excluded from the event is Nate's crowd. They're never at assemblies. Not sure if they've found a really good hiding place, or maybe they've left for the day; those who drive, anyway. My guess is that the ones who are here are hiding out in Smoker's Grove. Personally, I don't think the school wants them here, so nobody bothers to look. I know they're looked on like terrorists. I think the whole Columbine thing had something to do with it, and people are kind of afraid of them. Admittedly I was, until I met Nate. Personally, I think the powers that be would rather not have them gather in a place where not only all of the student ruling elite gather, but all the administrative elite as well; Principal, VP, the cook. I don't see Nate in the senior section, so he's probably out smoking.

There's no football game scheduled this weekend, so I'm not sure what the topic is. There's a table set up next to Principal Trask's podium with a man and a woman seated next to Mr. Evans and the Associate Student Body President. They're chatting away and having a good time. Parvati Hamilton is the ASB President and she's pretty cool. She's one of those enviable people who exists within the complete spectrum of the high school social scene. She's the opposite of a 'ghost', in that everybody knows who she is and likes her. And she's smart. She beat me out of a couple writing competitions. Her brother's on the football team, too but I don't think that has anything to do with her popularity among the jock crowd. I don't know what position he plays, but, guaranteed, he's the best looking one of the bunch. Sometimes, when I don't feel like going right home, I'll hang out in the bleachers after school and watch them practice. All the meatheads' girlfriends are there, of course, and occasionally there's even a nerd contingent heckling the players, but I just find a nice, quiet corner and keep to myself. As dumb as I think football is, I do come to a few games and check out practices.

The auditorium is just about full and it looks like things are ready to begin. Mr. Trask has stood up and he's adjusting his mic.

"Please stand for the school alma mater," he says, as a thousand people snap to attention.

Images of Hitler's Wehrmacht come to mind as people remove their hats and some even put their hands over their hearts. How ridiculous. Personally, I can barely stand it on a national level. I was OK with it until I learned in Civics that countries like North Korea, Communist Russia, and Nazi Germany have similar pledges, that I began to

boycott them. I'll pledge allegiance to our Constitution, but not a cheap piece of colored fabric. It's so not the same thing. I mean, the flag's supposed to represent the Constitution, but it usually boils down to representing whatever the person in power wants it to represent. Like the Patriot Act: I can't figure out what's patriotic about surrendering twenty five percent of our Constitutional rights, guaranteed us by the Bill of Rights. That I didn't learn in Civics, naturally, I had to research that on my own. Of course, when I brought it up, half the morons in the class called me a terrorist. Skyview, Skyview, Uber Alles.

The dumb song is over and everyone sits back down, except for the scattered few who, like me, never stood in the first place.

"Ladies and gentlemen, members of the student body, faculty, and staff," begins Principal Trask. He goes on for a while thanking us all for being here, as if we had a choice, and how wonderful our school is and how the light of heaven is shining down upon us all, gracing us with its divine brilliance. Not quite that dramatic, but blah, blah, blah.

"I'm pleased to announce that with the help of Mr. Evans and Parvati Hamilton and the local chapter of PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, we are establishing our own Gay and Lesbian Student Union on campus. We understand that..."

A gay and lesbian student union? I wonder what that's all about? I didn't even realize that we had any gay kids at the school. I mean in high school everyone is gay, right? That just seems to be the majority of the name calling. Besides 'dork' and the

usual profanities, ‘fag’ is probably the most common insult of all. I’ve certainly been called that enough times. But a gay and lesbian student union?

I’m looking around the auditorium and see mixed reactions. In the Freshman and Sophomore bleacher across from me, some people are making barf gestures, while others are affecting exaggerated limp-wristed movements. One girl actually put her arm around another one and, did I just see one guy grab another guy’s hand? What’s going on here? This is weird; bizarre even. I can’t believe it. Like anybody would have the courage to attend meetings. I assume the National Guard will be posted outside the room. It looks like Parvati is speaking now,

“The union will be open to all members of the student body. Not only gay and lesbian students but their friends as well, to create a safe, supportive environment, free from ridicule,” she pauses. “Our own Mr. Evans will be the president pro tempore until the union, itself, can elect a president and officers.”

“I nominate Paul Sherman for president,” comes a voice from behind me. The assembly bursts into laughter. Great! Naturally I’m the butt of the first joke. I turn around to see Frankie staring right at me and I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. He doesn’t look mean, though, nor does he look nice; just deadpan, like he just woke up from a dream. He keeps staring at me. I haven’t seen him on the bus since that day, but I knew I hadn’t heard the last of him.

“Get him out of here,” says Principal Trask, booming into the mic. An immediate hush overtakes the crowd; Frankie’s still staring at me. “Take him to my office, now. I’ll speak with him after this assembly.”

A couple of faculty members escort Frankie off the bleachers. His head is down and he merely slinks away with them following. I assumed that I'd be barraged with a volley of follow-up jokes but Principal Trask has taken definite command of the room.

"I had assured the Co-chairs of PFLAG," he says, motioning to the man and woman at the table, "that our student body was much more mature than it apparently is. So in light of this little incident, allow me to say that heckling, jibing, bullying, or any derogatory comments made or any harassment of this group will receive zero tolerance, up to and most definitely expulsion. Is that clear?"

The question is obviously rhetorical and Principal Trask slowly moves his gaze around the room, looking at each individual student along the way. Apart from the occasional cough, the room is unbelievably silent.

"And now, a word from our sponsors," he says, lightheartedly, as the woman from the table gets up to speak.

"Good afternoon everyone. My name is Eileen Brennan and I am..."

Of all the dumb clubs and organizations at the school, this is probably the only one I'd have even the slightest chance of joining; just as a friend, of course. I tried joining some the clubs on campus, but received a less than warm reception. I hadn't realized how popularly unpopular I was until that. I remember walking into the Wildlife Club, a club designed to study and appreciate the various flora and fauna indigenous to this region. They take field trips and get to take class time to go wander around in the woods by the school looking for deer and snakes and wild flowers.

It was Meet-and-Greet week where all the clubs were set up in classrooms during lunch and we could go check out the ones we wanted. Mr. Nordbloom, the Biology teacher, was walking around the room, mingling with members and potential members, talking about nature and properties of nature, so I wandered around trying to interact with a few of my fellow students but was essentially ignored. Mr. Nordbloom left at one point and Sylvia Mann came right up to me, like it was her appointed duty, and said, “I don’t think this is the right place for you, Paul. Why don’t you try one of the dorkier academic clubs?” Now, as used to being excluded as I should be, I have to be honest that that genuinely hurt my feelings. Then some guy, I didn’t even know, turned around and said, “what are *you* doing here, Sperm-man? Go find another club.” Then I got angry, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize this was Circus Club, for all you goddamn freaks. Or is it just the assholes and snobby bitches club?” The guy started toward me, so I beat a hasty retreat.

Then I tried to join the Gaming Club; I thought I’d be a shoe-in for that one. It’s primarily online gaming and takes place in the computer lab and much of the dork set are members; lots of guys and girls from the math and chess clubs, as well as a few jocks. I play Halo and Call of Duty online at home sometimes but only when mom’s not around. She doesn’t like the violence. And I don’t need any kind of permission to join this club. I walked in and some of the computers were taken, but mostly people were negotiating fighting teams. I sat next to Stan Krinkle. He’s good friends with Ellis Parker; total math whiz, too, but still nothing like Ellis. He’s a nice enough guy and tends to suffer the same fate as me in PE, never getting picked for any of the teams, so I thought it’d be kind of safe sitting next to him.

Turns out, though, that he was snatched right up. Apparently he's an excellent sniper and the teams were actually fighting over him. Naturally, when the dust on the battlefield cleared, I was left without a team. At least I didn't suffer the indignity of any insults and Stan threw me a look of commiseration before donning his headset, preparing for battle. I've heard that Mr. Borden, who oversees the club and the lab, is good about ensuring an equal rotation of all members within the teams – unlike the Coach during PE – but, again, I knew where I wasn't wanted and bowed out gracefully. And what if I couldn't perform like the others on my team, anyway? I'm sure I'd be subject to plenty of *unfriendly* fire. As for the academic clubs, I have no interest. I do enough school work on a regular basis and math problems and competitions are not my idea of a good time.

So, maybe I'll check out the gay and lesbian club. Everybody calls me a fag anyway, it's not like I could get any more heat. Then again, being affiliated with a group like that, might open up a whole new world of hurt that I can't even imagine at this point. They probably wouldn't want me either. That'd suck, being an outcast from the outcasts. It's times like this that I wish I had a brother or a sister, preferably a brother, an older brother, who'd be my best friend and help look after me. I don't know. He'd probably turn on me too.

The speakers finished speaking and we all gave obligatory applause and Mr. Trask begins excusing us to the busses by class, in descending order. Sometimes, though, he lets the Freshmen go first, I'm assuming as a gesture to make them think they're not as insignificant as they're usually made to feel.

As soon as he calls for the Juniors, I bolt for the lockers to get the rest of my books, so I can get to my bus for a good seat. We're out a little earlier than if we'd been let out of class and the menagerie is milling about the locker area, immediately forming into their cliques. I shove my way into the throng, grab my books and head down the hall towards the busses. Crap? Who do I see coming right at me? Jacob Feldstein. Great, he spots me but says nothing. Maybe he'll act normal for a change.

No such luck. He starts humming Hail to The Chief really loud and when he passes me he says, "I think you'd make a great president," knocking my books out of my hand. Thankfully everyone is too self-absorbed to join in, so I bend down and gather them up.

Behind me I hear a yell and a thud, and turn around to see Jacob sprawled on the floor from just having been tripped.

"Sorry 'bout that," says this girl standing over him. She had obviously tripped him. I don't know who she is, but I've seen her around. She's really tall and always wears black, and she has this gnarly scar on the left side of her face. I heard she got it in a knife fight at the school. She looks over at me, and I can only wonder if I'm next. But she winks at me. At least I think she did; I'm sure that was a wink. I look around to see if there's anybody else she might be looking at, but nobody's paying much attention.

"You crazy scarfaced bitch!" says Jacob.

"I said I was sorry," she said, walking away, giving Jacob's books a good, hard kick down the hall.

I'm not sure what that was all about but now's not the time to ponder the possibilities. Jacob's getting up so I make a quick escape to the busses.

PART II

PAUL

“OK, let’s call the meeting to order,” I say, raising my hand for silence.

I never would have thought there would be so many of us. In the meetings on campus of the Gay and Lesbian Student Union, there are only between four and six people in regular attendance, but here, at Toni Maddock’s house, we have twelve; twelve! That’s outstanding. Many come from one of the surrounding mountain communities, Arrow Rock, Spring Valley, and others, but, luckily, Toni lives about a mile from my house.

It was brought up in one of our on campus meetings that some people wanted to attend but were still afraid of being ridiculed, and for good reason. As good as the administrative staff has been about keeping it to a minimum, it still exists. It’s mostly off campus, the sneaky bastards. It’s certainly helped having Vicki Trask as part of our group.

Toni’s parents, though, are very supportive of her, and our group, and agreed to have private meetings at their house. Although they wanted to get parents’ permission from attendees, they realize that not everyone is out to their parents. So, as a compromise, they scheduled the meeting on a Saturday, so people have a better chance of sneaking over. We tried to make it in the afternoons but everyone’s extra curricular schedules made it difficult, so the evening time slot accommodates not only the schedules, but allows everyone to have dinner. Apparently they’ve already received some nasty phone calls from parents and, naturally, some religious groups, but the

Maddocks remain undaunted. They've even started a chapter of PFLAG and have meetings once a month.

I'm about to get started and Mr. and Mrs. Maddock come in with refreshments; a tub of soft drinks and some homemade cupcakes.

"I thought rainbow sprinkles would be appropriate," she says.

"Mahhm," says Toni, somewhat embarrassed. But she appreciates it; we all do. I think we're all still getting used to the idea ourselves, that we're gay, and feel a little uncomfortable when attention is called to it, even in a supportive environment.

I hear the front door fly open and Justin Grant comes in flushed and out of breath.

"Hey everyone. There was a car driving by in front of the driveway and some guys were screaming stuff like, well, stuff about us," he says.

"Let's check it out," says Vicki. Toni and two other girls stand up.

"Hold on everyone," says Mr. Maddocks. "I'll go check it out."

Mr. Maddocks leaves and Mrs. Maddocks finishes offering the refreshments, then goes to the living room, turning on the TV.

"So, the first order of business is our pledge of anonymity and confidentiality," I say. "Everybody please repeat after me: I solemnly swear to respect everyone's right to privacy and nothing said in this room will leave this room, including the identities of all in attendance." The rumbling mumble of pledges trails off into silence and I begin.

"Before we get started with general business and the shocking, sad, and hopefully heartwarming tales of coming out, has anybody seen or heard from Victor Marquez?"
Silence.

Victor Marquez. Probably the worst coming out story of us all. He came to a meeting at school the first day and got the strength to tell his parents. From what I heard, his dad beat him up pretty bad and threw him out of the house. Sally Gomez lives across the street and could hear his dad screaming obscenities and insults that are better left in Spanish. She said she saw Victor, literally, get thrown out of the house by his dad, limping away, crying; four additional votive candles, she noticed, burned in window that night. Nobody's seen Victor since. Principal Trask says he's working to locate him, but that's all I've heard. Unfortunately, that reaction is more common than it should be.

"Anyone talk to Sally?" I say.

"I have," says Alyssa Torquil. "She hasn't seen him either. She said that he probably ran to LA to his grandma's house. That's the only other family he has."

"Thanks Alyssa. I'm assuming Principal Trask knows about his grandma, but I'll let him know, just in case."

"Factoid for the group," I say. "I read online that upwards of a quarter of a million of us gay teens are kicked out into the street each year. Homeless."

"Yeah, probably by those good-hearted, pieces of Christian trash that..."

"Hey, Brad! Not cool," says Lisa Brandt.

"She's right Brad," I say. "The religious right certainly doesn't do us any favors, and I can't think of, well, anything nice to say about them, really, -but in here? Let's keep it respectful, or we're no better than they are. OK?" The OK is obviously rhetorical and mostly everybody is nodding.

I understand their exasperation, though. From staff to students to all the other clubs, none are less accepting and more wrathful than the religious groups. The only ones who really don't care, which I think is more apathy than acceptance, are the stoners. Whatever it is, I'll take the Summer of Love over the Lake of Fire any day.

Mr. Maddocks enters the room and announces to the group,

"I didn't see anything. I hung out at the end of the driveway. A couple of cars went by, but nothing out of the ordinary."

"Thanks for checking, Dad."

"Everybody? Let's thank the Maddockses, for hosting the meeting, and the homemade cupcakes," I say, answered by applause and whoops and hollers, and everyone turns towards the Maddockses. They're sitting in the adjacent living area watching TV, keeping a concerned, yet respectful, presence.

"You're the best, mom and dad," says Toni. Mr. Maddock smiles, Mrs. Maddock blushes, Coke cans, pop, and cupcakes disappear.

Toni told me that her parents already knew before she came out. I mean they knew, but they didn't *know*. They said that they suspected because the way Toni played and interacted with her friends was decidedly different from her straight sister, Naomi.

"I see some new faces. Anybody want to introduce themselves?"

With a group our size, the new ones are pretty obvious and everyone takes a silent inventory. We used to go around the room for introductions, but that freaked some people out.

“Uh, yeah. Hi. I’m Ryan.” He looks vaguely familiar. “A uh, friend of mine asked me to check it out for him.” Uncomfortable silence. “Uh, you know, to make sure it’s legit an’ all.” A couple of stifled guffaws and snickers sneak out and Ryan shifts uncomfortably.

I mean, he could be here for a friend, it’s entirely possible. Jenna McKee’s friend Candace, came here to check it out for her. They are girlfriends now, though, so I’m not sure if that’s a good example. I don’t buy it with Ryan, though. If he’d said that he was checking it out for a girl, sure, but for another guy friend? Questionable.

“Well. You’re a good friend Ryan. Welcome. Let us know if you have any questions.”

There are three others I don’t recognize but they keep to themselves. New faces blow through here quite a bit. Many make an appearance and we never see them again. At least at the meeting. We see them around school and toss them a glance or something to let them know we’re still here. Some do come back.

“Anybody newly out?” Some have turned to look at a short, dark-haired dude sitting away from the group, on the floor, back up against the wall. His eyes escape to the four corners of the room at the unwanted attention. I don’t know him. I’m guessing a freshman.

“Welcome,” I say. He’s staring at me while hushed pockets of conversation move throughout the crowd. “What’s your name?” He doesn’t say a word, finally looking away.

“Well. My silent, nameless friend, welcome to the group and if you...,”

“I’m gay,” he blurts out. He has a surprised look on his face. I don’t think he realizes he said it. He starts to say something then quickly closes his mouth, putting his head down between his legs.

“Congratulations. Admitting it is the first step to enjoying it,” I say, attempting a bright, disarming smile. I think that’s all we’re going to get out of him, though. He buries his head deeper into his knees.

It’s eight p.m. and the meeting’s officially over and people are starting to leave. Some drove, some are being picked up by their parents but I decide to walk, in spite of the offers of a ride home. We all say our goodbyes until our next bi-weekly house meeting and I bundle up and head out.

Spring is in full swing but the temperature drops about fifteen degrees when the sun goes down and continues its steady descent until morning. The moon is high in the sky providing enough silvery light to not need my flashlight. While most of the homes up here are relatively secluded by the forest, even on the busiest of streets, Toni’s house is set way back along a private road that’s about a quarter mile off one of the smaller, side roads; much like the road Nate lives on. And, apart from an occasional car in the distance, the only sounds are scratches and scurries of forest fauna scampering around in the darkness. It’s a beautiful night.

The silence is broken by an outcry of someone in distress, and a volley of angry banter slices through the forest.

“Did you come here to suck some dick, fagit?” comes a male voice not far ahead of me, followed by malevolent laughter and what sounds like the wind being knocked out of someone’s lungs.

“Pick him up and hold him. I’ll show you what happens when you fuckin’ fairies won’t keep quiet about your cocksucking,” says the voice again, followed by a loud thud and a cry of pain. More laughter.

I run towards toward the voices and quickly come upon two boys standing over a third who is on the ground in a fetal position. I can’t make out who they are, as they all have their backs to me. The taller one kicks the one on the ground, while the other one stands there laughing.

“Leave him alone!” I say, causing the two guys to turn to look at me. Ronnie Wade and, oh shit, Jake Feldstein. Well, I really didn’t want to die tonight, but it’s too late for that now.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the Fairy Queen herself. I suppose you want a piece of this too, like your little faggity friend,” he says, grabbing his crotch.

“Sorry. I don’t eat *pussy*,” I say, taking my stand.

“Get him,” says Jake, motioning to his friend.

Ronnie’s laughing like a mad man and rushes me. No form, no style, just a blind rush of angry meat running in my direction. I guess he thinks I’m going to run or cower or freeze with terror but, whatever he thinks I’m going to do, he doesn’t count on me actually standing my ground and fighting. As Nate taught me, rage is a poor man’s

strength, and if I can control my fear when an opponent is raging, it's the easiest fight I could ever have. He's right.

Ronnie's running at me like he's the first one in Disneyland, and I lay it on by affecting a look of sheer terror, which makes Ronnie even more crazy. When he's just about on top of me, I shift my weight to my left foot and lift my knee right up to his stomach. Ronnie sees the move but is unable to stop his forward momentum, crashing down hard, the wind leaving his body with a loud *humph!* He's not getting off that easy, though, as I'm sure I'll have to deal with Jake as well. When his body connects, I grab him by the shirt with both hands, holding him up, and knee him again in the stomach; and again, and again. He falls on the ground gasping for breath and I see him clawing at the ground to get away as I turn towards Jake.

"Not so good in a fair fight, are you asshole?" I say, planting myself, preparing for the onslaught.

"I've been waiting for this for a long time. I'll try to leave some of your face intact so your mom'll be able to identify the corpse," he says, taking a stand. The other kid is still curled up on the ground with his hands over his head; terrified, waiting for it to end. I know the feeling.

I take a quick look over my shoulder to see that Ronnie's still disabled and turn back to find Jake at arm's length; what a cheat. I quickly make an uppercut with my right hand but Jake grabs my fist with his left hand, stopping it short, then brings his left foot hard up into my groin. I hear myself squeal and fall to the ground.

"I guess you do have a set, huh? Fuckin' sissy," he says.

Now I'm all about a fair fight, but if prison rules are going to apply, I can be a sanctimonious moralist at best, especially with someone like Jake. Although the pain is excruciating, I managed to take control, yet remain on the ground whimpering until Jake comes in for the kill. I grab a handful of dirt and leaves and throw it up in his face, temporarily blinding him while I scramble to my feet.

"You lousy little cheat. I'd expect that from a fuckin' fairy."

"You're one to talk," I say, straightening myself amid the pain. "Whassamatter, Jake? Afraid this fag's gonna kick your ass?"

We're facing off now and I can see Jake rethink his strategy and I dance around to position myself to keep Ronnie in full view; looks like he's tapped out, though. Jake takes a swing at my face and I dodge. He takes another swing at my face and I dodge, and I can see by his body language that he's winding up for punch to the stomach. I let him.

One thing Nate and I worked on was learning how to take a punch as well as give one. He wanted to practice on my face, but I was unwilling to suffer through the trial period. I let him sock me once in the face but not only was it too painful but I really didn't want any permanent damage, not to mention having anything visible my mother would see. So I learned how to take punches in the abdominal area. It was tough. I'm guessing it's the physical equivalent of developing an immunity to poison. During our lessons, he'd sometimes surprise me with jabs to the gut, not very hard at first, but he kept increasing it until, eventually, I could take the full force of one of his swings. I saw

this one coming from Jake though, so that made it even easier. Jake does pack a much stronger punch than Nate but I take it like a champ.

The look on Jake's face is priceless as my abdominal muscles absorb almost the full force of his fist, only causing me to shuffle back a half a step. I take full advantage of his surprise with an uppercut to his chin, snapping back his head. While he's seeing stars, I knee him in the stomach then, when he doubles over, I right hook the side of his head, sending him to the ground. The adrenaline rush is intense and I fill with a primal bloodlust that electrifies my limbs, screaming at me to beat him to a bloody pulp. But that's the difference between Jake and I; I don't really enjoy this, nor do I want to.

I leap back away from Jake, to a safe distance, to see what he's going to do. He gets up slowly, spitting dirt and leaves from his mouth, a slow, thick, river of blood running down his right nostril.

"I'm going to kill you," he says. "I'm going to fucking kill you dead." I believe him. His voice is cold and calculated and he's looking at me with pure evil. For the first time, I'm scared, really scared and want to run but -I know he'd catch me and it's too late to back down now. He stands up ten feet tall and assesses me like prey. He takes slow, solid steps towards me, maintaining a strong center of gravity, -ready for anything I might throw at him.

I strike out with a right hook that smashes into his face but which is quickly absorbed. He smiles like the devil. I strike out again, but he grabs my hand and twists my arm around my back to the point I hear a small crack. I hear myself cry out in pain.

I'm immobilized in his powerful grip and I feel his breath hot and heavy in my ear.

"This is going to hurt. This is going to hurt a lot," he says, slowly pushing up my arm. I try to squirm or kick out but he's got me so that any movement I make only adds to my pain and discomfort.

The pain is overwhelming and I feel like I'm going to pass out. I listen to the cartilage in my shoulder pop as it slowly dislocates. I'm completely helpless.

Jake's grip suddenly relaxes and he emits a cry of pain. I spin around to see him stagger back clutching the back of his head. *What the fuck's going on* is stamped across his face and he brings his hand back around coated with blood. I know less about what's going on than he does, but my survival instinct is piqued and I waste no time in taking action.

I deliver Jacob Feldstein a roundhouse kick in the face. He spins around twice, like a cartoon character and falls prone in the dirt; his eyes are closed, but he's clearly breathing. He's not getting up any time soon.

I want to collapse in pain and exhaustion but instinctively look over and see that Ronnie had managed to get up and away. What a great friend.

I turn towards the kid on the ground and see him standing up, dropping the rocks he has in his hand. It's Frank Malezzo. His lip is cut, his nose may be broken, and his left eye is rapidly swelling shut. He starts crying.

"I'm sorry Paul. I'm so sorry. For everything," he says, sobbing uncontrollably.

I'm stunned and staring at Frankie, his sobs occasionally muffled by a passing car on the nearby side street. Jake is still on the ground, unconscious, and Frankie is crying so hard he's collapsed to his knees, still apologizing.

"Frankie, um, it's OK. It's OK," I say, helping him up. He allows me to slowly help him to his feet. "What happened?"

"Breathe. Breathe. Breathe," I say. Frankie takes a few deep breaths and gets himself under control. "We'd better get outta here. It's hard to keep pure evil down for long and I don't wanna be here when he comes to. And there's no no telling where Ronnie's run off to."

Frankie nods limply and I put my arm around his shoulder, walking us back to Toni's house.

"What're you doing out here, Frankie?"

"I...I was coming to one of your meetings, but I kept... I kept chickening out, walking up and down the road. Jake and Ronnie jumped me. I think they were waiting to ambush anyone they could coming from the meeting. I just got lucky, I guess," says Frankie.

"You were coming to a meeting?" I say. I can be a little slow on the uptake.

Frankie looks at me with a fearful, bloodshot eye, not saying a word. As new as I am to all this coming out stuff, I've already seen this look a thousand times. It's the slave standing before a lion in the Colosseum. It's the look of a man in a glass coffin watching himself being buried alive. I stop to face him,

"Can you say it Frankie?"

The intensity of his look increases, and he shakes his head, crying.

“It’s OK. You don’t have to. You’re among friends,” I say, adding “Toni’s house is right up here and we’ll get you some help. Her parents are really cool. And, her dad’s kinda cute – for an older guy.”

Frankie chokes out a laugh between the sobs and I put my arm around him. He relaxes a little into my shoulder and we continue on to Toni’s in silence.