

Adolescent Faculties, a Novella

By Matt Baganz

Prologue

The members of the New Covenant of Lost Benefactors convened at an undisclosed location somewhere in the heart of the everglades. There were seven of them, each an individual representation of a different subculture of modern society so foreign to one another that they hardly spoke the same language. They furbished themselves distinctively, called the same shapes and colors by adverse names, and supported contradicting theories of life's origins and the apocalypse. Left alone in the natural cycles of life they would have had no rationale, no fervor to congregate together, but a systematic force beyond their control threatened to flush each one of their individual destinies down a common drain of total destruction; they came en masse to fight the Abuse of Yearning Pawns. None alone could clog the chasm into the social abyss, but their individual building blocks of a master plan could be strong enough to save them all, so long as they stuck together.

With strategies in motion, they came together to iron out logistics and discuss the rules of the pact. The former was straight forward in all their languages: anything goes as long as there was no hard evidence of illegal tampering. The latter was more foreboding, for it brought to life the true nature of the undertaking, and its respective repercussions materialized in the imaginations of each member into images of prison, poverty, a flaming inferno. They had to lay on the line their very livelihoods in the endeavor to save them.

Everyone was in accordance with the first rule: if authorities catch wind of anything, deny everything. It was self-explanatory and somehow cast a shade of safety, suggesting that they were all still in it together. But it was decided by the group that if anyone was caught, it was due to his or her own incompetence, and therefore he or she was to mention no names and nobly go down alone for the whole scandal. This notion set a couple of the members on edge, a lonely ledge that seemed somehow prejudiced and their lips pursed with a bitter taste of protest, but they said nothing. Finally, if the operation was successful and after it was all over, even years and years later, no one was to breathe a word of it to anyone, ever.

The seven members stood up and eyed one another carefully, earnestly. No one trusted anybody, but they exchanged oaths and shook hands. Twenty-one official confirmations of discreet allegiance, and then each sat back down in his or her chair with an air of misgiving.

Now there was no going back.

With the pact sealed, the meeting adjourned, and the members sat uneasy in their company. One of them finally stood up and disappeared into another room. He returned with a bottle of spirits, promptly cracked it open and drank heavily from it. The others watched curiously. Another member laughed and struck a match, and he reclined with a line of white smoke trailing from his hand. The bottle was passed to another, and she drank from it too, then smiled and passed it down the line. Notes of reggae music suddenly came from inside, a tiki torch burst into flame, and so began the fluctuation of an unplanned party....

Monday Morning, Before School

The high school still slept when the first pair of headlights pulled into her parking lot, in the last black hour before the sun would begin breathing color into the dead sky again. Even in the dark she was an attractive edifice, a one-story sixteenth-cousin of the Coliseum, with one thick windowed wall enclosing in a perfect circle a concrete courtyard peppered with palms. She was imagined, designed and partly constructed over twenty years earlier by a hopeful team of Roman-minded East coast architects, who promptly deserted her half-way through construction when the very foundation for the auditorium sank into the mud and left a globe of dreams sloppy and leaning to the left. Two months later a retired local Florida cracker, grandfather to seventeen grandchildren that he knew of and who owned half the sugar plantations in the area, took over the project with small change in a bank account that had slipped his mind, finished the erection and named the school after himself.

Donny Hagler “Sugar Baron” High opened to the public a year later, collected a poor sample of a student body, both in size and social class, and spent the next two decades resisting the elements of the environment with the parapets of poverty. The first fire burned only a corner of the cafeteria in the school’s first year running, but in the process of putting it out, a main underground waterline broke and was repaired with duct tape by the school’s custodian; the next fire in the school’s eighth year had free range of the entire cafeteria and a mouthful of the Social Studies hall. Only major support beams were replaced, and walls painted over. The cafeteria smelled like a bonfire party even during the empty summer months. Eleven hurricanes knocked down every single palm tree that had stood in the concrete courtyard and around the school premises, none of which were replaced. The math hallways flooded and still smelled like old cottage years later. Storage closets were armed with spring-loaded mouse traps and powdered with boric acid to fend the mice and cockroaches, whose carcasses piled up over the weeks and were only tossed over the property line when parent visits were scheduled. The ruins of termites were plastered with caulk, and the perpetually pullulating legions of mold on the walls and ceilings bled through the fresh paint like coffee on Kleenex and continued to caffeinate the air.

One sunny Florida day in May, Tallahassee received word from the Classroom Teachers Association of several cases of mycotoxicosis and a court subpoena from a young math teacher who was nearly killed by a rabid reticulated python who ambushed her bottom up from inside a toilet. That summer the state school investigators and health department eventually made their

way into the swamps and deemed the school unfit for operation, and Donny Hagler “Sugar Baron” High was shut down. For a year the establishment underwent critical surgery to eradicate the parasites and received a total makeover in the arenas of real concrete, non lead-based paint, hurricane-proof roofing, and state-certified staff. Sealing the deal was the declaration of the institution as a Title I school, awarding it money enough to thrive so long as the school changed its name. By the following academic year, the new Gumbo Limbo High School was a picture of a pedagogical paradise.

But as her closest neighbor was the largest swamp in the world, which shared property lines with her on all sides, the natural residents there still objected to the breach of their borders and trespassed into the schoolyard in a charming sort of manner. The chain-link fence around the school became the foundation for a giant grass skirt that surrounded the school. Near the entrance a team of ocean blue morning glory and spurred butterfly pea splattered petals of indigo and violet across the perimeter. Golden pathos and devil’s potato surrounded the football field, the white trumpet flowers glistening upon the green leaves the size of dinner plates. Lavender leis of climbing aster skittered up the lampposts and hung around the necks of the lights. Saw greenbrier took position at the outside corners of the school like swamp thing soldiers. Shawls of lacy Spanish moss hung like curtains from the roof, the trees, the lampposts and fencing.

As the vegetation took back its domain, the green parakeets considered it safe enough to build their nests and take permanent residence on the school grounds, feeding off the garbage that piled up across the courtyard every day after the lunch period. Tree frogs slipped in between the panes of the windows and sang well into the second period of every school day. Cuban knight anoles moved into the royal palms in the courtyard and bit the fingers of any molesting teenager. At least twice a month a scream emanated from the tennis courts when a snake slithered beneath the net. Once a juvenile alligator, six feet long, meandered onto the football field, but a trapper was called before school even started, and the wrong turn cost the reptile its life. Never again did an alligator venture onto the school grounds. At an Adequate Yearly Progress meeting two years later, a teacher huffed in memory of the incident and cracked that even *dinosaurs* could retain a lesson... why not teenagers?

Gumbo Limbo High wore her perennial garb and animate ornaments like the Queen of the Amazon in all her colors and energy, but she was tired and inwardly defeated. The academic gem of the Glades glistened in the sun on the surface of her stones. Inside a seed of failure had sprouted, and had immediately begun to decay.

Mr. Kraft parked his silver Toyota Tacoma in the front parking spot labeled *Principal* and stared at the front pillars illuminated by his headlights. The pillars were twined with bamboo vine, but they were strong and would last for decades, long after he was gone. He stroked his grey mustache and thought backward five and a half years, when he had accepted the position to run a failing school and bring it up out of the ground. He'd had visions of the splendid results of his solid leadership. Teachers would bend over backward and take on extra duties for him without having to be asked. Donations from parents would be coming in by wire, email, snail mail, Florida wood stork. Students would salute him in the hallway and sacrifice their weekends to impress their number one role model with dioramas that would win state prizes and illicit more donations. The football team would go to state every year, the drama department would send stars to Hollywood, and even the chess club would be world renown. It would be a maximum of two years before the school board would recognize his aptitude and hand over to him the position as superintendent for Hendry County school district....

After the failing results from the first two years' standardized test scores, Mr. Kraft's dream cloud popped and seemed to funnel its rain down on his head only. Parents were in an uproar and threatened to cut off their donation lines. The current superintendent threatened reconstruction of administration. Kraft immediately called for a whole school meeting to find a target for his eager pointer finger. Every staff member shrugged his and her shoulders, and the failing school grade was dismissed as a fluke.

The third year's inadequate results incited accusations from the school board of the administration being too soft. The administration charged the teachers with not sticking to the curriculum. The teachers alleged that the students were just a band of inbred, lazy brats. The students accused the teachers of not teaching. The teachers complained that the administration was not supportive. And the administration threw up its arms and demanded that the sunshine state standards be written on the blackboards every morning of the following academic year.

The fourth year passed by indifferently, like the mild misbehavior of the forgotten middle child which falls no where in particularly important on the scale of anything worth regarding. The failure came too late for surprise and too early for implemented action.

Mr. Kraft made a fatal mistake the fifth failing year after firing the two teachers whose classes scored lowest on the standardized tests. Beside the fact that the staff found the move an act of intimidation and got the union involved was the matter of how Kraft found out which teachers' scores were lowest. At an Adequate Yearly Progress meeting the year before, Kraft

had declared that information confidential, even from him. Those were matters for the state up in Tallahassee. A nebula of deceit and distrust rose from the tiles at the end of that year, hung like the ghost of an ancient ocean over the summer, and continued to linger into the following autumn.

Now the school faced her sixth and final chance to prove to the state that students were learning at least a thing or two behind the thick white walls of Gumbo Limbo High. If the school didn't meet what the state considered adequate yearly progress, the state was bound to take action, and in fact forced to, by law. Mr. Kraft knew that the most effective and satisfying action would be against the administration, which was not part of the teachers union. Kraft would be looking for a new job, which was the least of his concerns, considering the damage that would be done to his reputation in the communities of Hendry County.

A spot upon the eastern horizon began to glow a low red, and the black sky phased into a lighter charcoal as the principal walked up to the school. He realized he was the only one there, on the most important day the school had faced in six years. The early bird catches the worm, he thought. Where were all the other birds? The smell of worms was too strong. The smell that something was awry or dying. It was already hot in the dark morning, and Mr. Kraft began to sweat beneath his grey suit as he hurried to his office. He only briefly went inside to set down his briefcase and went back outside to unplug his charging golf cart. He drove the perimeter of the courtyard, concluded all was so far in order, and then parked beneath a palm tree and waited.

The silence that snuggled the courtyard like a soft swarthy blanket was abruptly torn away by the screaming hinges of the front gate. There stood for a moment an indiscernible silhouette sharing shape with dark and shadow, but when it advanced with mechanical flux into the embryonic glow of the courtyard, there emerged a most menacing figure. Its upper torso was the sculpture of polished boulders bound together with the thin fibers of an old T-shirt, which threatened to burst at any moment and send the giant stones tumbling to the earth. The great arms were deliberately raised forty degrees from the torso, as if a pillow had been jammed into each armpit; they swung methodically along with the crashing footsteps like opposing pendulums locked in an epic battle of keeping time. The legs which supported all that power and weight, however, were short and emaciated from years of neglect in the weight room. The brute relied on his top-heavy intimidation to ward off all opposition, for he would otherwise fall quickly and heavily at the slightest daring attack.

Mr. Kraft swung his golf cart in that direction and drove toward the figure. As he drew nearer, the figure lost its Cimmerian shade and came into color. It was human after all, his short hair downy white and coiling back into the scalp like cowardly curling feathers. He wore navy blue basketball shorts and a dirty white T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. His complexion was nearly as pale as his hair, with a faint pinkish-orange hue which began to turn red at the approach of unwanted company.

“Good morning, Craig!” the principal called cheerfully.

Craig stopped impatiently, flushing at the thought of lost minutes in the school weight room. He swallowed the urge to spit profanity at the principal and maybe topple over the golf cart, and managed to force a painful smile upon his face. Cordial words could only escape his lips with a seasoning of sarcasm.

“Well good morning Mr. Kraft! And how are we this fine Monday morn!?”

“Not bad, Craig,” Mr. Kraft began, “but been better.”

“What’s the-“

“I received another call yesterday.” Mr. Kraft waited for a reaction. Craig only looked at him with incredible innocence. “Seems the foul-mouthing in class has started up again.”

Craig couldn’t recall anything out of the ordinary. He didn’t think he’d said *fuck* too many times. It depended on which class period Mr. Kraft was referring to.

Craig wondered who had told on him and clenched his fists. “Foul-mouthing, sir?”

Mr. Kraft sighed. If not for Craig’s athletic skills, he would have removed the prick from school premises years ago. But the school thrived on sports in the absence of its academic achievements, and it needed him.

“I don’t want to take action, Craig, but this is the last time I’m gonna warn you to watch the mouth. It’s offending too many people.”

Craig nodded the nod he nodded after every one of these conversations.

“Enough with the temper tantrums. You need to control the aggression.”

Craig slightly lowered his head. “Yes sir,” he replied through gritting teeth.

As the dark lifted and the red glow from the east turned a brighter shade of orange, more students and staff members began to arrive on campus. The first bus pulled into the loop and regurgitated from its gills a sleepwalking sliver of the future of the nation. Among them a flag of golden blond hair caught the corner of Mr. Kraft’s eye, and he immediately began to drive away from Craig without a salute goodbye.

It seemed the sun waited to begin its official ascent from behind the horizon until Monika

was on campus, as if it, too, were in love with her. Her natural hair, long and yellow, proved she was a sunchild and born to do things of Apollo's magnitude. The sun god had kissed every part of her body, leaving behind a glowing bronze that made the mouths of men water. It went against nature in the most delectable manners of rebellion, how her banana hair contrasted her chocolate skin when it cascaded down her shoulders. She wore a long, satin dress with an African pattern of abstract blue and yellow butterfly wings, which framed modestly the sinful body of the exotic angel. And yet all the lights were on and burning bright upstairs, too. Her beauty did not parch her thirst to learn. A truly mythical creature, who carried her one blemish, a dark brown birthmark the shape and size of a maple leaf on the side of her neck, with pride and confidence. She never asked to be perfect, and cherished the spot of proof that she wasn't. But every wiser knew the better. She was Mr. Kraft's greatest hope.

"Good morning Monika!"

Monika jumped. She normally wasn't on edge, but today....

"Good morning Mr. Kraft-"

"Are we prepared for all the big tests today?" Kraft said, forcing his eyes to remain on Monika's.

Monika swallowed hard. What did he know? Why was he asking so many questions.

"Yes sir!"

Mr. Kraft smiled and fought against unprofessional fantasies that penetrated his mind.

"Glad to hear it. This is the big one, you know."

How could she not know? He'd said it to everyone a thousand times. "You don't need to worry, Mr. Kraft. Our scores will blow through the roof this year."

Monika gazed beyond Mr. Kraft's relieved grin and caught the distant cast of amber eyes glowing as golden and intoxicating as Jamaican rum. The love of her life stood across the courtyard in jeans and a half-buttoned khaki shirt. Long dreadlocks, clean and the color of Dominican sand framed Todd's unshaven jaw and rested on his defined collar. He brushed a blond lock from out of his eyes, fidgeted with one of his earrings and nodded cautiously to her. He was a stunning mirage. She wanted to nod back, to smile and wave, to run over and press her lips against his, but now they may have been soiled with a filth he could never wash off. Still Monika had to wrench her yearning away to sever the connection. It stung to do so, like a fresh wound doused in alcohol. She focused her eyes back on Mr. Kraft, though she could still see Todd as he stepped slowly away into the Social Studies building.

Kraft was rolling back toward the front office when he spotted Rachel and quickly veered into the opposite direction. She was hard to miss from the opposite side of the courtyard. Her friends would say she had a pretty face, which told every boy that she was fat. Her mother said that she had the sweetest, most beautiful brown eyes which her dark chocolate hair brought out so much you could taste them, which told every boy that she was fat. She carried her weight well, though, often clad in blooming muumuus that the boys snickered she must have taken from a circus somewhere, leaving the elephants to shiver under the stars without their protective tent. But it was her overbearing joviality that repelled so many from her, most of all Mr. Kraft, since it was his ass she relentlessly aimed to kiss with those nightcrawler lips she painted way too red. Everything he said to her was funny, and her laughter would roll like a machine gun the size of a canon. Kraft appreciated and probably expected a degree of brownnosing from everyone, but it had to be tactful and tasteful. Otherwise he was put in the awkward position to put a stop to it, which would seem like he viewed himself on the same plane as other human beings, which he did not. He was the lord of the manor, after all.

Not far behind Rachel was Bonnie, another good reason for Kraft to avoid the direction. The girl had her hair cut in a short bob that she never seemed to wash or brush. From not so close of a look one could see yellow dust on her shoulders which had broken off from the larger, crunchy flakes that patched the cells on her scalp together like platelets upon the earth. It was her odd tendency to suddenly shake her head violently to the left, one, two, three, four violent terms in a row, which broke apart the sheets of puss and dandruff and sent the snotty snow down her torso. She wore the same red sweatpants and an orange button down shirt that clung tight to her husky shoulders every day. From a distance she was often mistaken for a boy. Bonnie was the only one in the school who didn't know she was a lesbian, and she also embarrassed Kraft to no end with her pseudo flirtation. First of all, it was inappropriate given the relationship between Mr. Kraft and Bonnie. Secondly, he was convinced she was gay, which made no sense of the playful, one-sided courtship. And thirdly, even if she had been straight, it would have been insulting to acknowledge that a girl who looked so much like a boy and had such insane quirks would think she'd have a shot at mutual flirtation with him.

A thunderous rumble suddenly broke the air, and Mr. Kraft nearly dove down for cover. There was a storm of evil in Rachel's laugh that morning. It carried across the courtyard, penetrating the trunks of the palm trees and sinking deep into the concrete walls. It startled nearly everyone on the campus, which was rapidly becoming denser with students as more buses pulled into the circle and the sun crept higher into the orange sky.

Of all the people who jumped out of their skin, Leslie jumped the highest. She landed wrong on one of her stiletto high heels and twisted her ankle. She scanned through the sea of students and spotted Rachel at the other end of the courtyard. Not far behind Rachel was Bonnie, and Leslie gasped. She immediately broke into a wobbly sprint toward the girls, but Mr. Kraft intercepted her.

“Just the person I wanted to see!” Mr. Kraft called to her.

Seeing was believing that evil came in pretty packages. She was a twig of a girl with long, fake-tanned legs and a bellybutton ring exposed between her short skirt and spaghetti strap top. Her breasts had to be fake, and Mr. Kraft wondered how old a girl has to be to legally get the operation, since Leslie was still so young. She wore golden bracelets on both her wrists, golden rings on seven of her fingers, and three thin gold chains around her neck. Golden seashells dangled heavily from her ears. One expected golden teeth when she smiled, but they were pearly white and full of lies.

“Oh, hello Mr. Kraft,” Leslie said, breathing hard.

“How are you feeling about the big tests today?”

Leslie didn't care about the stupid tests. She had her plan for that and it would work smoothly and effortlessly. “Great, great! I'm smelling an A this year!”

Mr. Kraft nodded and smiled. He gave her a quick look up and down and considered sending her home to change, as her outfit was completely inappropriate for school. But there wouldn't be enough time for that before the testing began. And now there wouldn't be time to confront Rachel, Leslie thought. As Mr. Kraft drove away on his cart, Leslie hissed and spat on the concrete he left behind.

A figure in a black trench coat snuck through the back doors of the biology building and entered the school unnoticed. He stalked silently down an empty hallway, the only rustling coming from his ponytail that swept back and forth against his back with every frantic step, and he slipped like a shadow into an empty room. Safe in the darkness, Marvin sat down at a desk, took off his glasses and rubbed the condensation away on his sleeve. He dug into his pockets and pulled out a roll of tape and a Smith and Wesson double-action revolver, and tucked them safely away in a bottom drawer.

First Period: Physical Education

The gymnasium at Gumbo Limbo High was small in comparison to other schools in the district, but the athletic department received more money than all the other departments put together, and it spent its dividends wisely on shiny wooden bleachers, a polished wooden floor, six platinum basketball nets and a coach's office fully furnished with leather sofas, two refrigerators and its own snack machine. The ceilings were high and the fluorescent lights beamed down like blessings from Heaven on the sparkling courts. At any time during the school day the vast empty air was filled with the shouts of sporting athletes, the cries of losers' sorrows, the heckling boasts of proud winners, but before the games began, before any bell rang, the voices of five dozen teenagers emanating immature images of love and hate, from the trivial to the spiritual, blended into one distorted recipe and echoed like the clambering of a junkyard waterfall.

The voice of the school secretary came over the P.A. system almost immediately after the first bell had rung. Mrs. Miller was punctual and took her job very seriously. She was, after all, the liaison between the chief principal and all his staff and students. Therefore she spoke with authority and an air of pride, for she was the one who knew certain things sometimes even days before anyone else in the school did.

"Good morning students and staff."

The commotion of voices continued to bounce off the walls of the gym. Coach Trottel couldn't have cared less about what Mrs. Miller had to say, but it was the growing headache that brought him to his feet.

"All right now shut up everybody and listen to the announcements!"

The sound waves of the words beat upon the students like closed fists, and the gym went quiet.

"...is the day for the standardized testing, and so before we begin, Mr. Kraft wants to remind everyone that cell phones are not allowed and should have been left at home. If you have one in your purse or your pocket, please take it out now, shut it off and give it to your teacher to hold until the end of the day. Teachers, please limit your passes to emergencies only. There are to be no students roaming the hallways during testing."

Craig sat in the middle of the bleachers, his feet kicked up, his shoulders rolled back to exemplify his pectoral mountains. He heckled at Mrs. Miller's threatening tone. When others heard him laugh, they joined in.

A scuffle came over the P.A. system next, and then Mr. Kraft spoke.

“Good morning everyone. Well, like Mrs. Miller said, today is the big day. I hope everyone had a good night’s rest and a wholesome, balanced breakfast. I wish everyone luck and ask only that you try your very best. Let’s show them what Gumbo Limbo High is really made of. Go panthers!”

Some more scuffling, and then Mrs. Miller came back on.

“Teachers, you may begin administering the test now.”

Coach Trottell blew a whistle and raised his arms as if someone had just kicked a field goal.

“All right everybody! Only track and the weight room allowed today to keep the noise down! That means *no* basketball!”

Students trickled lazily down from the bleachers and scattered across the basketball court. Many walked across the gym and went through the doors to the track outside. Several football players funneled through the door that led to the weight room. A cocky junior, Adam Kent, grabbed a basketball and shot it from half court.

“Kent!” Coach Trottell shouted, his voice a thunderbolt that echoed throughout the gym, shuddering the high rafters. “Four laps around the track and then you sit your ass on the bleachers for the rest of the period!”

Adam put up his arms like he hadn’t done anything. “What!?”

“Now it’s five laps!” Coach Trottell boomed. “Your feet aren’t on the track in fifteen seconds and you’re not playing Friday’s game! You think we really need you!?”

Adam immediately retrieved the basketball, returned it to the rack, and ran outside onto the track. As a coach and a gym teacher, Coach Trottell held a lot of collateral against punk athletes with attitudes. He’d taken star players out of important games just to establish credibility. He only had to do it once. Since then, he had the biggest, baddest jocks of the school like putty in the palms of his hands.

Craig walked down from the bleachers and went outside to find a bench near the track. He was pissed off, still searching for a concrete reason, and a lot of answers. All he knew was that he hadn’t talked to his girlfriend since the get-together Saturday night, since she disappeared long before the party was over. He only hosted the stupid thing because Leslie had begged him to. He wasn’t even involved in the stupid plan. But what troubled him most was that he didn’t remember seeing Todd after that time either. Visions born Saturday night as vague curiosities had by Monday morning evolved into graphic and pornographic images of Todd’s

hands on Leslie's tits, on her tongue in Todd's mouth, down his neck, her French nails unzipping his pants.... Craig snapped his head back and shivered angrily.

"You!" he shouted at the first freshman he saw, who was sitting in the grass plucking three-leaf clovers. The girl was overweight and would die a virgin, Craig was sure. "You the one they call Fatfignuten? Take a lap around the track!"

The tubby little freshman looked confused and more than mildly offended, but she nevertheless got up and headed for the track.

It satisfied Craig like a smoker a cigarette, this power he had over people. Growing up behind two big step brothers who punished him every day for being the product of their father's adultery, it was Craig's comprehension of social interaction. Respect is gained through intimidation. The strong are the players, the weak the tools of entertainment, of establishment and reinforcement of social position. Friends are ordered rather than earned. And the only goal in life is to win.

Craig checked to make sure the freshman was still running, and he shuddered at the sight of the way her flesh moved in motion. He thought it a sin that there were no standardized tests in gym class. It was a crime against humanity and human sexuality. If they took physical education more seriously there would be fewer obese eye sores and more slender eye candy. It was a waste of a girl who ate beyond her weight, and he couldn't comprehend the mentality of a human being who put food over sex and dieted in such a manner that negatively affected the latter. That was what Craig called insanity, and he resented those who indulged in it. Had he his way, he'd have shot any girl whose love handles bulged a centimeter past her panty line and made Hawaiian tanning oil of her blubber.

Craig had to look away lest he vomit, and his eyes landed on Samantha White, a senior who led her volleyball team through the state finals to win the championship all four years she went to Gumbo Limbo High. She was jogging toward him along the track, and her gym uniform left little to the imagination. She had the body of an Amazonian top model, legs muscular but slender, an ass hard as rock and breasts that went against nature's normal proportions, though at her age, they had to be real.

"You're gonna be on the cover of Maxim someday, Sam!" Craig called after her.

Samantha ran past and smiled crookedly, giving little effort to hide her disgust by his comment. Craig didn't notice. There was only one meaning behind any sort of smile, a conclusion coming from a guy who believed that girls really meant yes when they said no. They had smaller brains after all, were the less intellectual of the genders and often didn't even know

what they really wanted or needed. Thank god there were real men like Craig to lead them in the right directions.

Mr. Kraft entered the gymnasium silently and promptly disappeared into the coach's office. He came out several minutes later with a Gatorade in hand and scanned the court for Coach Trottell. Through the door to the outside the principal could see the back of the coach, his eyes facing the track. He didn't know Mr. Kraft was there, and so the principal returned the Gatorade decoy to the refrigerator and left unnoticed.

Passing Period: 8:21-8:28 a.m.

Rachel had been on the verge of bursting when the bell finally put an end to first period. She plunged into the hallway, breathing heavily as she meandered in between teenagers like a locomotive, pummeling those who didn't get out of her way. Her face lit up like a traffic light, and it did indeed stop many who noticed in their tracks. When Rachel was excited, she could change the weather outside. The emotion bled through her skin and gathered in streams of sweat that skidded down her face, rolled over her bubbling necks and disappeared into a dark no man's land of quivering cleavage. Two dark circles formed on the front and back of her blouse, two more beneath her armpits. When she saw Bonnie down the hallway, she raised both arms and whooped.

"Bonnie!" Rachel gasped as she closed in on her friend. "Oh my god, Bonnie! Where were you this morning!? I was looking all over for you!"

"What!? What is it?" Bonnie ran toward Rachel. One of the pencils behind her ears dropped on the floor, and as she bent to pick it up, a teenager bumped her with his backpack and nearly knocked her over. "Excuse you, sir!"

Rachel leaned against the lockers, put her hand over her heart and gasped for air. "You're never gonna believe it!"

"Well what already!? Talk to me!"

"Ok," Rachel began, fanning herself. "After you left the little get-together thing on Saturday night, right?"

"Yeah-"

"I stayed about an hour later talking with Monika for a while. Well then she left and so I was just chillin, but then I got bored so I was gonna leave, right?"

"Yeah-"

"So get this! So as I'm leaving Asshole's house, I'm walking down the driveway to the street." Rachel paused dramatically. "And I hear these noises-"

"What noises?"

Rachel tilted her head sideways and backward, raised her eyebrows, closed her eyes, and opened her mouth. As moaning and grunting sounds escaped her lips in *ooohs* and *ahhhs* and *uh-uh-uhs*, her body convulsed with every pulse.

Bonnie slapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh my god! Who was it!?"

"So get this! So I look around to see where it was coming from, and not ten feet away

from me I see two bare asses in the ditch!”

“Who was it!?” Bonnie shouted. Some kids in the hallway gave her funny looks, and Bonnie stared them down until they walked away.

Rachel put both hands over her mouth. She could have tied her giant grin in a bow behind her head. Her eyes were fishbowls. “Who other than the slut of all sluts-“

“Leslie?” Bonnie shrugged her shoulders after Rachel nodded. “Well she and Craig are disgusting like that.”

Rachel shook her head violently behind the weaving of fat fingers, and then she lowered her hands. “When I left the house I saw Craig sitting on his kitchen counter, playing with his cell phone.”

Bonnie’s eyes then competed with the magnitude of Rachel’s. “Oh my *god!* Who was she with?”

“Are you ready for this?” Rachel paused a moment....

Bonnie raised her eyebrows in yearning.

“Todd!”

From over Bonnie’s shoulder Rachel spotted a blond dorsal fin cutting a line in the river of hairy heads. Leslie weaved through the hallway against the current of students, straight toward Rachel and Bonnie like a shark honing in on a drop of fresh blood.

“Oh, and speak of the devilslut-“

“Rachel!” Leslie called before she was in the proximity of using an inside voice. “We have to talk!”

Rachel looked away from Bonnie, twisted her face and held up a hand. “As you can see, I’m in the middle of a conversation, Leslie.”

Bonnie laughed.

Rachel turned back to Bonnie, cheerful as a sparkling lemonade on the first day of summer break. “So after we got cleaned up from the beach, we went to Sawgrass Mills and spent the rest of the day shopping. Annie bought five pairs of shoes for less than thirty bucks, all on sale at Payless.”

“Thirty dollars!?” Bonnie exclaimed. “How long is their sale going on?”

“I think through Saturday.”

Leslie’s eyes darkened and then flared. “Rachel, please.”

Rachel turned and threw up her arms. “What do you *want*, Leslie?”

Leslie tried to calm herself. Rachel did have the upper hand, at least in front of any

witnesses. "Can we please talk a second?"

"Take a second," Rachel hissed, and then after a second, "Well go ahead and talk then!"

Leslie looked at Bonnie, who stared back at her.

"Alone, please."

"Anything you have to say you can say in front of Bonnie."

Rachel's round cheeks folded over her cunning smile. Bonnie folded her arms and stood straight, daring the little Leslie, who was half Bonnie's size and only a third Rachel's, to make a move.

As much as Rachel looked like a giant piggy bank, Leslie thought, it was impossible to deposit any sense into her. She considered blackmail.

"I don't want to have to go to Mr. Kraft about our little scandal—"

Bonnie's eyes saucered, but Rachel exploded with laughter. "And cut off your pretty little nose to spite your pretty little face?!" Rachel shook her head and bared a toothy smile. "No, you won't do that. You care too much about your reputation, and that would be shooting yourself in the foot. Or didn't that occur to you, Precious?"

Leslie wiped her mouth lest she was foaming. Her eyes burned with fury. She clenched her teeth, wanted to sink them into Rachel's face and rip out an eye.

"Just mind your own damn business, Rachel. I don't butt into your life, so I'm asking you to keep your fat fucking face the hell out of mine."

The blond shark swam away as swiftly as she had come, the guffaws of a gregarious duet fading into white noise behind her.

Marvin hugged the wall of grey lockers as he bee-lined down the hall toward his class. He scrunched his shoulders inward to avoid exchanging any germs or infectious DNA strands with the filthy teenagers around him. His focus was locked on the floor and he avoided any eye contact. Over the years he had learned how to be a ghost in a crowd.

"Marvin! Marvin!"

The calling voice was sweet, and too close to ignore. Marvin stopped and turned around. "Good morning Monika."

"Marvin," Monika said, stopping just before she entered his personal space. "Hey, I just wanted to say that I heard about the way Craig treated you Saturday night. It was totally uncalled for. If I had still been there I would have...." Monika couldn't curse if she tried. Couldn't

lie, steal, or be mean to anyone. "You had every right to be there; we need you in this, too. If anything, Craig shouldn't have been there. It's not like he's putting anything on the line here."

Marvin looked at his feet, touched by Monika's stance but embarrassed by the thought of needing a girl to stand up for him. He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm used to it."

Monika shook her head and put her hand on Marvin's shoulder. He flinched, but she didn't remove her hand. "Marvin, listen to me. Craig's a jerk. A scared little bully with a big mouth, and one of these days he's gonna get what's coming to him if he's not careful."

One of these days... Marvin thought. "You're a good person, Monika. You deserve better than all this."

Monika smiled, though she wasn't quite certain what Marvin meant. "Are you still with us, then?"

Marvin nodded nearly offensively. "Of course I'm still with you." Then he smiled. "Otherwise it's my butt as much as it is anyone else's."

Monika gave a warm hug. "Thanks Marv."

"Ok," Marvin said and turned around to leave.

"Say Marvin," Monika quickly added. "Mr. Kraft didn't come into your first period class, did he?"

Marvin looked at her quizzically. "No, why? Did he come into yours?"

Monika nodded nervously and bit lightly at her thumbnail.

"Did he say anything?"

Monika shook her head. "He just looked around the room while we were taking our tests."

Marvin shrugged his shoulders. "Probably just checking up on things. He makes his rounds like that sometimes."

"Yeah, but to open the door and interrupt standardized testing? I don't think he'd do that unless he was looking for something, don't you?"

Marvin thought for a moment, and then shook his head. "You're just paranoid, Monika. Don't worry about it."

Monika bit at her thumbnail again.

Marvin laughed and put a hand on her shoulder. It had been the first time he'd touched anyone intentionally in years. "Relax! There's nothing to worry about! Besides, you're the *last* person Mr. Kraft would suspect."

Monika smiled and put her hand on Marvin's. "Thanks Marv."

Todd stood in the hallway like a stone in the river of teens sweeping around him. Usually Monika walked past that way every day on her way to the bathroom. She should have passed by now, and it made him paranoid that she hadn't shown. Todd nearly jumped when the bell rang.

Second Period: History

Mr. Mogel was often late to his own class. Students found it “real” that a teacher would so often be late, let alone ever, and they found it even “realer” that he didn’t pull a hypocritical power play and reprimand them, then, when they were late too. There were in fact a lot of things that the students found real about Mr. Mogel. He was the poster man for the sexy surfer model. He had thick sandy hair that flopped messily down his rugged jaw line. The canvas of his body was a permanently fresh tan colored and seasoned by the sun and the sea and shaped by years of hardcore surfing and battles with rip currents. If he wasn’t dressed in board shorts, sandals and a Hawaiian shirt, which he somehow got away with although Mr. Kraft had reprimanded him on countless occasions for dressing unprofessionally, he cleaned up well with a shave, an unironed pair of slacks and a white button-down shirt. Every girl that passed through his class, freshman through senior, spent the semester in a daydream of an older version of herself with her History teacher on a picnic on the beach, surrounded by flowers, plates of strawberries in crème anglaise, a tiki torch burning at each corner of the Mexican blanket they lay side by side upon. And that didn’t make the girls’ male counterparts jealous or loathing; the boys rather admired the man his class and character, and wanted to learn from him whose style seemed to swoon all walks of women, no matter class or age, clique or stage. Mr. Mogel had been voted hands down by the student body “coolest teacher” in all five of Gumbo Limbo High’s yearbooks.

His classroom won a page in the yearbook all five years as well for the nomination of the “most effective” and, dubbed by the students, “most extreme” learning environment in the school. It was a further extension of the teacher’s charisma. The walls were papered with surfing posters, photos of surreal tropical islands, and pictures of the coastlines of South Africa. Dozens of maps filled any holes in the walls and represented all 195 countries of the world; Mr. Mogel liked to refer to them and make up stories about a crazy adventure he had had in this country or that city when he was about his students’ age. A timeline of significant American history bordered the ceiling of the room and covered events from the first permanent settlement of Jamestown in 1607 to the first African American elected as president in 2008. Around the door were snapshots of the stages of the evolution of man, beginning with a drawing of a fuzzy monkey and ending with a photograph of a business tycoon in a three-piece suit. Real live palm trees grew in adobe vases in each corner of the room and were draped in rainbow Christmas lights that Mr. Mogel turned on every time he showed a movie about the civil war or a

president's famous speech. A longboard hung from the ceiling next to the windows. Above the door, the bleached jaws of a full grown tiger shark smiled down at the class, a red Hawaiian Leigh dangling from a front tooth. Mr. Mogel claimed he caught the fish while skin diving with nothing but a spear gun off the coast of one of the smaller Hawaiian islands after it swallowed a three-year-old girl whole. Since she was full blood Kanaka Maoli her family offered the shark up as a sacrifice to Kanaloa and kept the carcass burning for three days. On the morning of the third day, the grieving mother, who had been declared infertile after the complications of her firstborn and thus celibate, was pregnant again and nine months later gave birth to a healthy baby girl bearing the birthmark of a great fish on her back. They named her Manō Kaikua hine, *shark sister*, and to this day she can call to the sharks and they come to her, swim with her and disappear back out to sea at the wave of her hand. She's a good friend to have on the beach with you when you're surfing in the shark-infested waters of Hawaii, Mr. Mogel claimed.

Mr. Mogel was greeted with respectful nods and batting eyes when he ran into his classroom after the bell had already rung.

"Sorry guys!" he shouted and went straight to passing out the scantrons. "If anyone needs that extra minute after class ends let me know, though I don't think the test'll be too bad."

Carly Price, a little blond cheerleader, raised her hand and spoke before being called on. "I'll stay after class with you any day, Mr. Mogel!"

The teacher pointed a finger at her and half smiled. "Shame on you, young lady!" Mr. Mogel never knew how to deal with the flirtations of his students, which were at the same time flattering and appreciated, yet awkward and dangerously illegal.

As Mr. Mogel walked between the rows of students, he pushed books, notebooks, purses and other paraphernalia off of the desks. They toppled onto the tile; bottles of soda rolled across the floor. Guys laughed; girls gasped and retorted a flirtatious *heyyy!* in objection to the mistreatment of their precious purses.

"Nothing on the desks but your pencils, people."

Mr. Mogel placed a stapled packet of paper face down on each desk and told the students not to turn them over until he gave the go. When he was finished handing everything out, he stood at the front of the class and checked the clock. "All right peeps, we got forty-seven minutes starting... three, two, one – go!"

The flock of state assessments flapped their paper wings into flight and landed again on the desks face up. There lasted a minute of coughs, yawns, stretches and groans as the students struggled to get into their testing modes, but eventually a concentrated silence crept

over the class. Mr. Mogel wrote the numbers 8:31 – 9:18 in red letters on the white board and then walked over to his desk and fell down in his chair. He took out a pile of papers that needed correcting, stacked them neatly, and rubbed his eyes.

Todd had told himself time and again not to get stoned before school. For one thing he couldn't concentrate. The little black letters on white pages lost their meaning and he quickly grew bored with trying to formulate the images they represented in his mind. That was too much work. It was so much easier and more entertaining to look around at the colors and designs on the walls and let them do all the work of shaping his imagination. The fronds of palm trees took on their own personalities and were actually a lot more flighty than people probably thought. The amoebic borderlines of the countries on the maps took on deeper shapes: Chad was a large-nosed man with an under-bite, wearing a beret; Laos was indeed a palm tree sitting on the island of Cambodia; Chile was a chili and that was somehow terrifying; and was Somalia trying to eat Ethiopia, or were they engaged in sexual intercourse? Todd didn't even try to note down the truths that fired upon him from all angles as he experienced the epiphanies, that Abraham Lincoln had really big earlobes, that time was a longggg thing, and fiberglass was *amazing*, probably the best invention ever. The Christmas lights danced when Todd squinted his eyes and tilted his head from shoulder to shoulder, and it was when a butterfly awoke in his stomach that he knew he had fallen head over heels in love with the color blue.

Todd shook his head and tried to concentrate. He looked at the clock. 8:34. Did all that really happen in three minutes? That was another reason why Todd kicked himself for smoking in the morning. It made an individual school day drag like a week. The shortest measured period of time is the attosecond, but Todd could go further and count the quadrillion yoctoseconds within one second if he wanted to. In the eighty milliseconds it took to blink his eye Todd was well on the way to constructing an abstract theory on the relationship between average human height and paint textures. That was the problem, the awareness of the concentration on too many minute details that made time seem to take so long. At that rate he'd be white and whacked by Friday. Todd shook his head again and peered around the room.

Michelle Freeman was staring at him. Todd quickly looked away, and the three more times he looked back at her, she was still staring at him. He couldn't read her face. What was she thinking? If he weren't stoned he'd know, or he wouldn't care. The weed made him paranoid, convinced him that everyone in the school knew he was stoned and would call the cops at any moment. Some of his peers accused him of it regularly, laughing about it like it wasn't a big deal, but he of course denied it. He wasn't one of those stoners who advertised his

hobby by wearing a hat with a big green marijuana leaf on it or buying one of those bumper stickers that said *Got Weed?* That kind of attention was the last thing he needed, and the protocol of posers, anyway.

When Todd was finally freed of Michelle's scrutiny, his eyes wandered again about the room and landed on a pair of maracas made from real coconuts dangling from the American flag. They reminded him of Leslie. Hers were about the same size, not as hairy, thank Christ, but probably just as hard. He wondered how old she was when she got her implants. They were the first fake breasts Todd had ever handled, and they were not nearly as bad as he'd heard. But they definitely weren't so spectacular as to warrant the loss of the chance to spend quality time with Monika's. It was only a matter of time, probably by lunchtime, Todd figured, that the shit will have hit the fan and splattered all over everyone's ears. Craig would know and would intend to kick his ass, or try kicking his ass. That wasn't much of a concern to Todd compared to the reaction of Monika. If he had been making any progress with her all he achieved was about to shrivel up like a Lays bag in a microwave. What a waste. Monika was something special to him, someone with whom he would have wanted something to last longer than a fleeting ditch orgy muffled by the sweaty palms of one another's hands. He'd had romantic plans of taking Monika to his favorite beaches, teaching her how to ride more waves than one. After lunch, though, Todd was certain she'd never go surfing with him. The thoughts burned an aching hole in his chest that he'd never felt before. He coughed in a futile attempt to get the pain out, but it didn't waver. Todd put his hands on his cheeks and tried to concentrate on the papers in front of him.

Test, test, test, Todd thought. He looked around at the busy students in the room and saw some of them looking up at the timeline along the wall, snickering as they changed answers on their scantrons. His original plan had been to carve the answers to the test into the sides of every number two pencil, but that flopped for two reasons. First, it would have taken too much time. Todd had carved a prototype to show everyone at the meeting, but that pencil alone had taken him a good half hour. Multiply that by thirty and you're wasting good surfing hours. And secondly, everyone at the meeting hated the idea that there would be tangible evidence that could link them to cheating on the tests. They all agreed that there would be no cheat sheets. Cheating on a standardized test with equations or maps was once thing; stealing the tests themselves and carving the answers in stone evidence was taking it to a whole new level that everyone at the meeting agreed wasn't worth the risk. There was no point in saving sustenance only to spend it in jail.

The door creaked open. All the students looked up at Mr. Kraft standing in the doorway. Some of them flashed a look of concern at Mr. Mogel. Mr. Kraft circled the room with his eyes like a pair of eagles searching for prey. They swooped down on the desks, beneath the tables and chairs, and along the shelves by the windows. They rested for a second too long for comfort on the timeline pinned on the wall, and then they locked on Todd. Todd nodded, holding both eye contact and his breath, trying to read the principal's face. When Mr. Kraft finally nodded back, Todd breathed again, and watched the authority back out of the frame and close the door quietly.

Todd wouldn't let his heart race; he blamed the funny feeling on the paranoia. He was still a little stoned, but that would fade fast, and he kicked himself for smoking his last joint before school. He decided that by the end of the day he will have earned himself a fat spliff as soon as he got home from school.

Passing Period: 9:18-9:25 a.m.

Todd took his post and waited for Monika to pass. Perhaps her bodily functions were only thrown off schedule because of the testing. He knew how his bowels changed patterns when on vacation, for example, and he sometimes wouldn't take a shit for a week. Perhaps it was nothing. But the waiting.... Waiting waiting waiting. Wondering what she knew, if she suspected anything. Heard anything. It was the not knowing that was killing him, killing his buzz. Now he knew it wasn't the stoned paranoia that was bothering him. He had a genuinely bad feeling.

"Monika!" Rachel shouted, waving a hand. "What are you doing on this wing?"

Rachel was the last person Monika wanted to deal with. "Just running to the bathroom-"
Rachel's face showed her question.

"The one on my wing is broken."

Rachel flattened her lips and nodded exaggeratedly. "Hey, have you seen Marvin?"

Monika nodded.

"Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah-"

"Is he still on board?"

Monika nodded again. "Yeah. He's mature enough to sieve through the stinkiness and decide what's important. I mean, he still needs it as much as anyone else, you know?"

"I can't believe Craig told him to leave like that."

"And belch in his face?" Monika added. "How is a mature person supposed to react to something like that?"

"Right!? I don't know what I'd do.... Spit in his face, maybe?"

"But my goodness, we're not little kids-"

"Right!?" Rachel shook her head, her arms folded beneath the mountains on her chest.

Around the corner came Bonnie. Rachel threw her arm up and waved vigorously.

"What's up girl!?"

"Hello," Bonnie said as cautiously as she approached. She looked hard at Rachel, and then curiously at Monika. "What you guys talking about so seriously?"

"Marvin," Rachel answered quickly.

Bonnie nodded slowly. "And?"

"He's still in," Rachel said.

Bonnie looked at Monika.

"I talked to him earlier," Monika added. "He's all right—"

"Even if Craig is an asshole." Bonnie smiled crookedly. The others laughed. "Well I gotta run to the ladies room. See you two later."

Rachel and Monika watched Bonnie round the corner. Rachel was shaking her head and smiled when she saw the look on Monika's face.

"What's the matter?" Rachel asked.

"Nothing!"

Rachel cocked her head, smiling bigger. "What is it? Bonnie rub you the wrong way?"

"No! Of course not!" Monika was embarrassed. "I think she's really nice."

Rachel watched an apple roll past her feet and shook her head. She looked back up at Monika and raised her eyebrows.

Monika sighed. "I just, you know. She looks at me funny sometimes."

Rachel leaned in toward Monika's ear. "She probably has a crush on you, that's why."

Monika gasped. "What?"

Rachel nodded.

"No!"

"She finally came out of the closet," Rachel whispered. "Admitted it to me Saturday night—"

"No!"

Rachel's cheeks folded over her smile. "Told me about experimenting with some chick at some club in Fort Lauderdale the other week."

Monika's mouth hung open.

"She said it was the most exhilarating experience she's ever had. She said it was *relieving*, you know, like getting laid for the first time after a ten month dry spell."

Monika gasped and lightly slapped Rachel's shoulder.

Rachel patted her back. "Of course you wouldn't know about that, you gorgeous thang—"

"Oh, shoosh!" Monika blushed.

The two giggled uncontrollably. Then Rachel put her hand on Monika's shoulder. "Don't say anything, of course!"

"Oh!" Monika swiped her hand through the air. "Of course not!" She nodded insightfully.

“But it all makes sense now.”

“To everyone,” Rachel giggled. “I think Bonnie was the last one to find out.”

They laughed so hard that Monika forgot to go to the bathroom.

Craig cut a corner in the hall, and the seas of students parted for him. Someone’s biology book lay at the edge of his path, and he kicked it into the corner. A trash can fell over. Students looked but said nothing, and Craig considered picking up the trash until he saw Leslie and hurried over to her.

“Where the hell have you been?” Craig shouted.

Leslie turned around. “Baby, there you are!”

“There / am?” Craig shouted. “I’ve been calling you and texting you since Saturday night! What the fuck’s up?”

Leslie took a deep breath.

“You’re not still pissed about the Marvin thing, are you?”

Thank god, Leslie thought, he didn’t know anything. “That was pretty messed up what you did to him, Babe.”

Craig grunted and swiped his hand through the air. “Marvin’s a fag. I don’t want that fruitcake at my party-“

“It was a meeting!” Leslie snapped. So it had turned into a party, per se, but that hadn’t been on the agenda.

“*Meeting!* Don’t make it sound so professional-“

“Marvin needed to be there, and you humiliating him like that and then throwing him out was-“

“Was what?”

Leslie glared. “Immature. God, sometimes you act like you’re ten years old! And what if Marvin decides not to go along with it now?”

“Oh, give me a break!” Craig laughed. “I was just fuckin with the guy anyway. If he can’t handle a little fun, how is he gonna find the balls to cheat-“

“*Shhh!*” Leslie hissed through a finger over her lips. “You’re not even part of it anyway! I don’t know why you insisted on throwing the little ‘party’ at your place in the first place.”

“Because there’s no such thing as a party without me-“

“It wasn’t a damn party!”

Leslie was taken aback by her own tone. Craig narrowed his eyes and licked his lips. For a moment the whole hallway seemed to go quiet.

“So where did you go, anyway?”

“What? When?”

“I didn’t see you after like ten o’ clock. And come to think of it, I didn’t see Todd after that either.”

“Oh for god’s sake, Craig-“

“What?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous? If it’s so ridiculous then why don’t you just answer the damn question?”

“I went home!”

“Why?”

“Cause you were being an asshole!”

“To Marvin? That was like three hours earlier! Why didn’t you leave then if you were so pissed off about that?”

Leslie couldn’t think quickly enough and rubbed her temples with her fingers. “God Craig, what’s wrong with you!”

“I wanna know what the hell happened Saturday night! I wanna know why you didn’t call at all Sunday or answer any of my texts!”

The warning bell rang through the hallway. In a minute, another session of testing would begin.

Leslie rolled her eyes. “I gotta go.”

“We gotta talk!” Craig called after his girlfriend as she walked away.

“Later!” And she disappeared around the corner.

Third Period: Reading

The Reading Room was actually only a corner of the library where Ms. Kunst worked with remedial students on their phonetics, decoding, and fluency. Her job was the staple of the school, Mr. Kraft had told her somewhere within his apology for not giving her a real classroom. (She only had a handful of students at a time, after all.) Without her reinforcing the students' ability to read, they wouldn't be able to succeed in any of their other core subjects. Ms. Kunst had thanked him very much and flipped the principal off as he walked away. She got back at him through the exploitation of her second and third period planning periods by leaving campus and shopping at the nearby flea market or sitting with a coffee at the one table at the Shell gas station café. If anyone looking for her during that time had failed to find her in her "room," she could easily have said that too much traffic went through the library for her to focus on her planning, and that she had settled in another room somewhere else in the school. In five and a half years, Ms. Kunst was never caught.

The hallways were empty, just as Mrs. Miller had ordered. Leslie walked barefoot so her clacking high heels wouldn't turn any heads, and she silently approached the door to the library. She spied through the small window and watched Mrs. Gifford stamp books at the front counter. Leslie waited until the librarian left her desk, and then she snuck across the library and into the Reading Room in the far corner. There on the teacher's chair was a stack of students' scantrons. She snatched them up and sat down on the floor behind the desk. Anyone looking from the front of the library would see an empty corner. Leslie nestled up comfortably against the wall and went to work comparing the scantrons to an answer key.

Leslie erased fiercely the wrong answers on the first scantron, imagining the false marks were pieces of Rachel's face. How that dumb fat bitch could have any self-respect after her vicarious living, Leslie thought, was the most pathetic story she'd ever heard. The cow was probably a virgin and would have to settle with muff diving between Bonnie's hairy legs to get her cheap thrills and attention. Either that or star in one of those donkey shows they hold in Tijuana – anything to give her a sliver of her own life and mind her own damn business. If that piece of shit cunt breathed one word about Saturday night to anybody, Leslie vowed to herself that she would find a way to frame Rachel for the whole scandal and get her fat ass kicked out of the school.

Leslie copied the correct answers onto the smudged scantron and wondered what to do next. She wished it had been Craig who had cheated on her. That would have been just the

ticket she needed, the perfect excuse to end it with him. They had been together for so long that she couldn't just break up with him without a legitimate reason. That was all right after a couple of months with someone, but after over three years, the dumpee deserved some sort of explanation. Time tacked rules onto things like that. Time did a lot of stupid things. Time sprinkled dust on the flame between Craig and Leslie. In the beginning it was fire and passion, raw desire that made Leslie feel like the goddess she knew she was. Craig had treated her like a sex idol. The physical act was after all the only definition she understood of love; her father had taught her that when she was very young. And then it happened overnight, it seemed. One morning Leslie noticed Craig's carelessness, his impatience and selfish wham bam, thank you ma'am, roll over and snore routine. Now he took her for granted. He didn't even hold her hand anymore, seemed to have forgotten how to get her fire started or just didn't care. He didn't even know how to kiss.

Todd, on the other hand, did. Leslie closed her eyes and tasted again those soft lips. He had kissed her so gently, so smoothly as he glided his lips across hers, pecked softly at her cheeks, down her neck. His hands were strong, yet he knew how to touch a girl just right, firm enough to reveal his yearning sexual thirst, but without groping, squeezing or yanking, as boys so often tended to do. He maintained perfect control of his libido, taking his time toward the inevitable crescendo, exploring every newly exposed piece of flesh as he removed the article of clothing that concealed it. He had taken his time on her neck, down her shoulders, back up again, his soft hot breath in her ear. Leslie's pelvis thrust slightly at the thought of Todd's hands gripping her waist, his lips tasting her flat stomach, coming around her obliques, back up her chest where he caressed with such finesse. How fluidly he unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down and off her legs, taking time to explore the contours of her feet, calves and thighs before returning to her and kissing her deeply, the fire of passion on his breath. Goosebumps flared up and down Leslie's inner thighs as she relived the invitation she passed to Todd, how he had taken it slow, the perfect amount of teasing before he entered –

The principal's voice suddenly penetrated Leslie's... ears, and her daydream popped. She poked her head around the corner of a filing cabinet and saw him standing at the front desk, talking to Mrs. Gifford.

"No, I haven't seen her since she administered the test to all her kids first period," the librarian said. "She usually leaves during her planning periods, you know."

"I know," Mr. Kraft sighed.

As he turned around, Leslie quickly backed into the corner and curled up into a little ball.

Mr. Kraft looked over into the corner, and he suddenly took a few steps toward the Reading Room. Beneath the desk he saw Leslie's bare foot, hot pink toenails and all.

Mr. Kraft raised his voice. "Well when you see Ms. Kunst, Mrs. Gifford, let her know that I'm looking for her. There's something very urgent I need to discuss with her."

"Will do, Mr. Kraft!"

Leslie's heart beat louder as the sounds of the principal's footsteps faded away.

Passing Period: 10:15-10:22 a.m.

Bonnie was well aware of the microscopic size of Rachel's bladder, and so as soon as the bell rang she rushed toward bathroom. She spotted her target moving through a crowd of cheerleaders. "Rachel!"

Rachel turned and waved with both hands. Bonnie came so close upon her that Rachel leaned against the wall of lockers.

"You didn't tell Monika anything, did you?" Bonnie said it more like an accusation than a question.

"About what?"

Bonnie lost any patience she might have had immediately. "About what we talked about Saturday night? About *me*?"

"Oh, god no!"

Bonnie eyed Rachel.

"Bonnie, your secret's safe with me. Come on! We're friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah, that's why I felt safe telling you."

Rachel put her hands on Bonnie's shoulders. "Ok then. Quit your worrying." Rachel flashed a fat smile and went into the bathroom.

Bonnie stood where she was, a sudden chill crawling over her arms and the back of her neck.

Todd couldn't take it anymore. He had to find Monika, find out what the deal was, why she wasn't peeing all day. He snaked down the south corridor, weaving in between the teenagers as smooth as riding a foaming swell. He hugged the wall of lockers as he neared the corner.

On the other side Craig huffed and puffed as he pushed his way through the crowded hallway. *Later*, she had said. *Later!* No one tells Craig *when* to anything! A low growl rolled from deep in his chest as he rounded a sharp corner, and he smacked head on into Todd.

Craig shook the stars away. "Jesus, ya little shit, why don't you watch the hell where you're going!?"

Todd pushed the hair out of his eyes. "Right back at ya, Dick!"

For seconds that passed like seasons, the two squared off and stared at one another,

the one waiting for the other's next move.

Todd lifted his arms out to the sides. "Well are you going somewhere, or what?"

"Yeah, and you're in my way, ya little pipsqueak."

Todd was a head smaller than Craig, but looked up into his eyes without intimidation.

"Then go around, Quasimodo."

Craig blew hot air through his nostrils. Todd fanned the rancid air from his face.

"My god, man. The hell do you eat?"

"Shut the fuck up, Todd. I got a bone to pick with you, and you best have some damn good answers."

"So..." Todd scratched his head. "Did you want me to shut the fuck up or have some damn good answers? Can't do both genius, unless you know sign language."

Todd waved his hands in front of Craig's face. Craig slapped them away. Several students in the hallway stopped and looked.

Todd repressed a rabid pounce. He spoke softly and with a smile, and the students, disappointed that the fight was extinguished, continued on their ways. "You wanna play physical man, I'll be more than happy to meet you where it's appropriate."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, faggot?"

Todd rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Oh god. It's like talking to a rock underwater. How the hell Leslie puts up with-"

"Where the fuck were you Saturday night?" Craig's face flushed. Sweat beaded down his back.

Todd raised an eyebrow. "At your dump, remember? You weren't that wasted -"

"Later!"

"Later?"

"Later! Around ten o' clock? Ring a bell?"

Todd laughed. "The hell, you keeping tabs on me, clocking my every move, man? Do you know what time I take a shit?"

Craig clenched his fist. He could have ripped the shirt off Todd's little chest and fed it back to him through his ears.

"Talk about faggots-"

Craig lowered his head and brought his face less than an inch from Todd's. His brows snarled inward, his teeth white and gleaming. "I'm gonna ask you one more time, Todd -"

Todd's fiery eyes transformed into those of something mythical, dragon-like. He spoke

slowly and lethally. “Back off, motherfucker....”

The hoots and cat calls from a group of sophomore cheerleaders broke the tension. Both Craig and Todd smiled and waved, gave one last glance at one another, and went their separate ways.

Monika raced toward the nearest bathroom; she couldn't hold it anymore. As she passed the spot where she usually met Todd, it struck her odd that he wasn't standing there, waiting for her. For the moment it was probably a good thing. Monika ran into the bathroom and released a big sigh of relief. She came back out into the hallway and walked much more peacefully the way she came. Around the corner she saw Leslie standing where Todd should have been.

“Hey Leslie,” Monika said curiously.

Leslie jumped.

“What are you doing in these parts?”

“Monika!” Leslie pressed her fingers against her face and bit at the inside of her cheek.

“Hey!”

“Hi.” Monika waited. “Are you looking for Todd?”

“No!” Leslie snapped. At the surprise in Monika's eyes, Leslie knew she'd spoken too defensively. “Well, I wanted to ask him... and I wanted to ask you, too, actually.”

Monika maintained her straight face. “What's up?”

“Kraft came into the library last period.”

Monika felt a shiver coming on. “During the testing?”

“Well, there wasn't testing going on at the time,” Leslie said. “But he seemed pretty suspicious.”

“He came into my first period class-“

“What!?”

Monika nodded.

“What'd he do? Did he say anything?”

Monika shook her head. “He just looked around the room and then left.”

“Did he... see anything?”

Again Monika shook her head.

Leslie sighed relief. “That's weird though –”

“I thought so too.”

“He never does that.”

“I know. That’s why it freaked me out.”

“Do you think he knows anything?”

Monika shrugged her shoulders. “I’d assume he’d say something right away, don’t you think?”

Leslie wasn’t so sure about that. “God, I just want this whole thing to be over with.”

“Me too, believe me.” Monika turned to walk to class. “Let me know if you hear anything, ok?”

“No doubt. You too, ok?”

Monika nodded and began to walk away. Leslie walked in the opposite direction.

“Hey,” Leslie called back. Monika turned. “If you see Todd, can you tell him I need to talk to him?”

Monika nodded. A seed of sadness sprouted somewhere deep inside her. “Sure.”

Fourth Period: Special Needs

The special needs classroom was located in the corner of the hallway farthest the front doors to the school, which made absolutely no sense to Ms. Armon, the only special needs teacher on campus. She was often seen cursing under her breath as she speed-walked across the scorching courtyard to pick up one of her students who arrived late to school. Every day one would miss the bus, have a doctor's appointment, or need to attend one of a thousand different special therapy sessions. They were not allowed to roam the courtyard or the hallways unattended, and Principal Kraft had assigned Ms. Armon sole responsibility for the caretaking of the special needs students. It kept Ms. Armon strong in the legs, but also much more agitated and moist.

The far corner was also the most isolated, so the special needs students could make all the noise they wanted without disturbing other classes. Rarely did any other teachers or administration make it to the room. Even on days with a fire drill or a lock down, the classroom left behind was often overlooked. One reason may have been because Ms. Armon had a hard time keeping it fire safety friendly. Often the company erupted in chaos, flinging Legos or pieces of cake across the room and leaving the Sponge Bob carpeting a mess of rainbow plastic and chocolate chunks. The breach of fire code was easier to ignore than fix and actually maintain. Only when the superintendent of Hendry County made his way around Gumbo Limbo High's part of the swamp did a couple of administrators help clean up the mess, which was once in five years.

Bonnie sat in between Jacob Mason, a twenty-two year old with cerebral palsy who was too old to be in high school, but whose parents used the school as a free babysitter, and Nancy Flitter, a red head with a flaming case of turret's syndrome. She shouldn't have been there. She didn't go to school to end up in the face of such company, but it was where they placed her, and she hadn't much choice. A couple of little ticks and they throw you in the nuthouse. At least the others in her class were too crazy or retarded to realize she was a lesbian, and anyway, they were too happy of a bunch to have the heart to torment her. The thought occurred to Bonnie that she may not have been able to survive socially in a regular classroom, and that was just another notch to add to her bedpost of complexes.

It was a funny thing, the teenaged reception of homosexuality. Among boys it was entirely taboo, and yet the most homophobic of them all, the likes of football players and wrestlers, the "manliest" of boys who regularly accused the people they didn't like of being

“faggots” and “queers” and dubbing “gay” all the activities not on their own to-do lists, were the very individuals who demonstrated the most signs of homosexuality, reference the butt cheek slapping after a touchdown or the writhing together of two minimally-clothed boys into a sweaty knot on a gym mat. For girls it was a trendy thing, at least at Gumbo Limbo High. It was accepted by the whole of the male population for girls to kiss and have sex so long as they both were beautiful. Among the other girls it was either cool or tantalizingly forbidden, a delectable taboo that they all secretly wanted to experiment. But that was as far as it went. One day a cool girl could kiss her best friend, and the next she could be hooking up with the captain of the football team. It was the real lesbian, the not-so-beautiful girl who may be confused for a boy from the back due to her clothing style and haircut who was the menace of homosexuality. She made it somehow grotesque, dirty and sinful to the others. She was hated for it.

The students sat in a tight circle. There were only six of them. It wasn't hard for Bonnie to reach over to Jacob's test unnoticed by anyone else and point at the letter B for the first question. At least he'd get that one right. When no one was looking, Bonnie marked Tracy's test, putting a dash next to letter C for the second question. And so the pattern continued, without anyone even noticing what was going on, or at least no one questioned it. At the rate Bonnie went, everyone in her class would get enough answers right to pass the test, but with such random right answers that cheating wouldn't be considered.

When the test was over the rest of the students took out the toys and began to play. Bonnie sat at a desk and pined over what she'd told Rachel. It must have been the margaritas that loosened her tongue and made it seem appropriate and necessary to reveal her alternative sexuality. She had to tell someone. She'd been aching to say it out loud, and Rachel had always been so nice to her. Maybe it was more than that. Maybe she was feeling Rachel out. Maybe there was a chance between them. Rachel always was awfully nice.

For the first time all school year the door to the classroom opened by someone other than one of those who lived there. Mr. Kraft stood within the door frame, his arms wide open, one hand on the door knob and one on the frame. He scanned the classroom curiously, and his eyes landed on Bonnie.

“Hello Mr. Kraft,” Bonnie said cheerfully, stifling the surprise in her voice.

“Hello Bonnie. Test done already?” he asked to no one in particular, still scanning the room.

Bonnie smiled warmly. “Yep.”

The one syllable from Bonnie seemed to satisfy the man. He hadn't really wanted to find

what he'd come looking for anyway. "Everything go all right?"

Jacob looked up from his Lego's. "Hi! Hi Mr. Kwap!"

"Hi there, Jacob!" Mr. Kraft said, waving.

"Hi!" Jacob shouted.

Nancy slammed her doll's face into the wall. Every time Raggedy Ann's face hit the concrete, Nancy spit out a string of profanity. "Bitchbutt!" she shouted.

"Everything ok there, Nancy?" Mr. Kraft asked.

The doll flew and smacked against the floor. "Sss-shh-shit-shitnuts!"

Mr. Kraft stared. He'd heard of Nancy's tantrums, but this was the first time he actually witnessed one of them.

"Hi Mr. Kwap!" Jacob shouted. "Hi!"

"Hello Jacob!" Mr. Kraft answered.

"Hi!"

"Shit! Nuts! Shit! Nuts!" Raggedy Ann's head was ripping off at the neck. Nancy stared straight into Mr. Kraft's eyes as she pronounced each profane syllable perfectly. "Shit! Nuts!"

Mr. Kraft stared, frozen and horrorstruck.

Ms. Armon went over to Nancy and took the doll away from her. "Ok, Nancy. That's enough now."

"Ssscrew the balls!"

Ms. Armon looked at Mr. Kraft, playfully rolled her eyes and gave him a warm smile. Mr. Kraft smiled back and began to back out into the hallway. "All right then. I'll let you guys get back to what you were doing."

The principal disappeared within a chorus of *shitnuts!* and *sssscrew the balls!* as abruptly as he'd come. Bonnie laughed on her way over to Nancy and patted her on the shoulder. "Got that right, Nance. The balls are overrated anyway."

Lunch

The feeding grounds opened at the south end of the courtyard when the sun shined its mightiest over the Concrete Sahara. Wafts of delivery pizza and second-rate burger meat hung in the hot haze that bent air and light, drawing a great migration of teenagers lightly peppered with teachers into the rectangular oasis. The teenage animals filled the small cafeteria and lined up along the walls with trays in their hands, barking, hooting, shrilling and howling while they waited for their meals. Once served they took to their respective islands within the sea of fold-up tables arranged in two rows of twenty, where they masticated with members of their own specie and communicated in their own individual languages with mouths full.

There was a natural order of accommodation which ran parallel to the hierarchy of the food chain. The best seats in the cafeteria were farthest from the feeding lines at the only end of the alcove with windows. There feasted the top predators, bullies and athletes, clans of football and rugby players, embowered by brute strength and large numbers. Across from and parallel to them dined the keener species, the quivers of skaters, pods of wakeboarders and posses of soccer players, who could hold their own by nimble tooth or able claw. Their stunning mates congregated close by, a multicultural dissimulation of cheerleaders, volleyball girls and gymnasts, who occasionally intermingled with their neighbors in the name of courtship and mating ritual.

In the center of the plain were herds of performers which entertained in their different ways the likes of all other species, troops of thespians, cart loads of chorus kids and barrels of poetry slammers. Companies of peacemakers were left well enough alone in these parts so long as they left well enough alone, murders of gothics, charms of color guard girls, and the sault of the student council. Amalgamated between the edges of the brighter hues were shoals of bland nobodies who blended into a grey backdrop for the enhancement of the more chromatic of the crowd.

Nearest the feeding lines sat the steams of awkward prey, the socially weak and sick, labeled by their stronger counterparts as nerds and retards, the losers in the games of adolescence. They aimed to avoid confrontation by feeding quietly and keeping their heads down. During this hour they lived in a state of fear and oppression from which there was little protection.

Perched at the four corners of the oasis was a convocation of administrative eagles, who most often circled overhead but occasionally sailed down among the species and charged a

threatening fly-by to maintain order. Though their numbers were few and their literal power limited, their mere presence kept most wars and illegal game hunting at bay. The congregation of cliques was such a fragile endeavor, however, that not a day passed without mishap.

In this environment rumors spread like cultures of bacteria among the various species, infecting every animal family with a prospect of disease that could never be officially diagnosed, though everyone was a self-proclaimed doctor. Still the animals reacted accordingly, soiling themselves and one another with the rhetoric bile and blaming the wrong animals for the wrong symptoms. At the end of the day everybody involved was sick and guilty in some way, and many lived with the scars for the rest of their lives.

An airborne banana flung from within the den of a wrestling wolf pack soared over the crowds and splattered into a bed of chess club clams. Mr. Barschwitz, a golden eagle standing over six feet tall, with black hair and a bushy black mustache, swooped down and retrieved the banana, doubled back toward the window and locked his talons into the shoulders of Tony Ziti. He carried the offender away like a dying rat to the front office and returned promptly to his perch with a blank expression on his face, as if nothing had happened.

Craig watched the whole thing and burst out heckling from the safety of his cackle of hyenas. The others immediately joined in the contemptuous chorus to reinforce their bonds and showcase their strength. They slapped each other's palms, mimicked the facial expression of the victim at the moment of attack and hackled and hackled some more. The dogs were easily entertained and their attention fully captivated by such trivial episodes for extended periods of time, replaying the affair over and over again with their additional improvisations of creative interpretive.

Todd sat within his shiver of surfing sharks and pointed out the ridiculous immaturity of their malicious neighbors to his own guys and the allied dazzle of soccer zebras who fed with them. They bleated loudly and bucked their knees against the undersides of the tables in their own disparagement, eyeing the neighboring clan whom they mocked, daring the wild dogs to make a move. But their numbers and characters were too strong to spurn the intimidation of the scavengers' lot, and only Craig held his head high and shot a look like a laser into Todd's direction. Todd stared right back and smiled.

Leslie noticed the rising tension and quickly squawked from within her pandemonium of parrots. The trance between the male rivals snapped, and all attention turned toward the girls.

Leslie's motley, sensuous friends ruffled their painted feathers, flashing glares from their unnatural rainbows against the fluorescent lights beating from above. Their shapes were slender and curved smoothly in all the appropriate places. They giggled and chattered among one another and flashed their glittering eyes into the directions of the most attractive boys in the bunches, who instantly forgot their aggressions and watered at the mouth.

Monika paid no attention to the adolescent mating rituals and tossed gingerly her fruit salad amid her kaleidoscope of butterfly hippies. Her kind whispered bluegrass songs of the powers of patchouli, the maintenance of exotic indoor orchids, and which combinations of herbs hailed the most magical and romantic midnight snacks. They combed their fingers peacefully through their pigtail wings, long blond and brown and black locks fluttering to their own happy music that only they heard and appreciated.

A bloat of hippopotami grunted and belched nearby, laughing at the symphony of its own gases without delineating from its grazing. Rachel lurched at the head of the table and captivated her audience with a tale of two titties which must have cost five thousand dollars each. She wouldn't mention any names, of course, but only the fact that the surgery made the prom queen look more like the star of a freak show than a cat walk. The crash of rhinoceroses who shared the table with the water horses bellowed in sniggering unison, having the courage to suggest their farce but daring not to look into the direction of their derision.

A lonely bear sat without a sleuth at the edge of the oasis, near the border of the bed of chess club clams that was peaceful enough, neither welcoming nor shunning. Marvin picked at his brown rice with a growing grin on his face, too excited to eat. For the first time in his life he took his eyes off his tray and looked around the cafeteria. The action and energy enthralled him, and he couldn't wait to become a part of the commotion.

The rhapsody of the combined notes of mastication, merriment, slander, idolatry and malevolence continued in its usual harmony until the front door to the cafeteria flung open with a great and deliberate force. The great bald eagle suddenly soared onto the oasis and perched at the front end of the cafeteria. With a single screech the other eagles flew to him, and Mr. Kraft spoke in a suspicious tongue that only the immediately surrounding administration could comprehend. In seconds the congregation broke up again and spread back out to their respective perches. The whole of the oasis could feel that the wind had changed, and that the eagles were interested in something, itching to attack. Their black, beady eyes sifted through the various species and lingered on certain companies for significant amounts of time.

The seven red dots under radar became well aware of their scrutiny, and they cautiously

exchanged questioning glances, which were reflected back and forth with eyes of anxiety and a newborn fear. Feeling the pressure of danger, those individuals of various species all wanted to immediately band together and secure their safety within a new number, but they were left powerless and placated to only gaze upon their secret comrades of other conglomerates, none daring to break the rules of social conduct. To breach the borders of one's family meant betrayal and treachery with repercussions that one would never live down. The protocol maintained each to its own – that was the law of the oasis.

Fifth Period: Biology

Everyone knew that Mr. Geist spent his fifth period planning in the swampy field behind the school, searching for new plants, insects or amphibians to add to his collections that thrived in glass-encased ecosystems along the shelves in his classroom. He had probably managed to package half the species in the everglades and keep them fresh and flourishing, separated sometimes by specie when a particular variety didn't play well with others, like the Brazilian satintail, which was a noxious weed illegal in the state of Florida to possess, transport, collect or cultivate. Usually the specimens were sequenced in a labeled order, class or phylum. And the biology teacher was quite proud of his little cubes of ecosystems. He was a great lecturer, and explained directions so well it took only one day to clarify before the students were set to their independent tasks and labs that they managed on their own for sometimes weeks at a time. That left Mr. Geist plenty of time to stoop over his aquariums and terrariums and lose himself in their little worlds. Students were convinced he became one with the frogs or the lime grass. They would often tap on his shoulder after they couldn't hold their raised hands anymore to ask him a question. Tap tap tap, but the biology teacher wouldn't turn around, wouldn't acknowledge that anyone else was even in the classroom. Among the students it gave Mr. Geist this extra slice of perceived insanity that didn't fit his otherwise professorial reputation, and it kept the punks at bay. Whether Mr. Geist realized how much his daydreams assisted his classroom management and thus intentionally exaggerated them, no one really knew or dared to ask.

Marvin snuck into the classroom and immediately felt at home. He admired the organization of ecosystems, the skeletons of giant African frogs and vampire bats on the walls, the diagrams and dioramas that cluttered the classroom. Breathing was always easier here, which he gave credit to the plants that lined the shelf along the windows, the head dog Ficus, the mini palms, the family of Bonsai trees, specifically the Japanese Kingsville Boxwood, the Flowering Crabapple Malus Sargentii, and the Bougainvillea, just a few of his favorites. The smells of life at peace were intoxicating, and Marvin nearly forgot what he came to do.

All at once he quickly went to work taking down posters he had tacked over other ones the night before. He took a chair and peeled down the poster of the water cycle, which had covered a list of shark species. Marvin removed the illustrations of plant and animal cell diagrams and cycles, which lay over a geographical map of Florida. The third and last piece of evidence that he removed was a handwritten list of different animals according to their species, genus, family, order, class, phylum, kingdom, and domain. Beneath that was his favorite poster,

which few of the teenagers recognized as being the symbol of one of the greatest bands of all time, but merely another educational diagram of how a crystal pyramid can separate white light into all the colors of the rainbow. Marvin tore the three posters into pieces and stuffed the incriminating evidence into his backpack like bedding for the revolver that lay at the bottom of the bag.

Marvin sat back in a chair in a dark corner of the classroom and reflected for a moment the upcoming events of his day. His whole life had been a chain link of humiliations and embarrassments that fenced him into a permanent state of insufficient confidence and self-loathing. It was as if he put out an aura or an odor that bullies and plain assholes could smell out from the gym at the opposite side of the school. They hunted him specifically, even though he had never done or said an offensive thing to any of them in all his years. He was a person of peace who only wished to be left alone, yet they sought him out anyway, just to torment him, just to ruin his day by insult.

Saturday night played over and over again in his mind. Marvin had had every right to be at that get-together, and even more so than Craig. Marvin was in fact one of the main staples to the plan, and even Craig needed his assistance. So ironic, Marvin thought. So inevitable. A magnet his mother had given him hung on his refrigerator at home and said that one day nerds would inherit the earth. He was still waiting for that day, but the subject of the meeting Saturday night was a promising step forward. During the order of business Marvin could feel the heat emanating from Craig's pores, could literally feel the bully's unreasoned hatred for him. And as the meeting came to a close, the fire in Craig's eyes burned brighter and brighter, and Marvin expected what came next.

No sooner than Craig chugged his first beer did he attack. *What the fuck is the faggot doing at my house?* he had said to no one in particular. And no one in particular responded at the time. Once the bully had declared the get-together a party, the 'pact' that had been made between so many cliques seemed arbitrary to the only one who didn't have to do any work, the jock bully who spent his life admiring and complimenting himself at the expense of others' humiliation that he spewed upon them with his ridicule. It seemed to Marvin that it was those who did not earn the attributes that placed them higher on a superficial social totem pole who exploited them the most. Craig was only born with the genes hailing later his muscular body, his chiseled jaw and sky blue dreamy eyes. Nothing of his that made his life more pleasant than those of others did he earn for himself, yet he took on the air of righteousness as if he'd worked his whole life to achieve it.

Craig had chugged two more bottles of liquid courage before he got physical. Marvin was already making his way out the door when Craig came behind him and pulled down his sweatpants. *Tighty whities!* Craig heckled. *What fuckin fag wears those!?* After years of anything else, one grows accustomed and develops a degree of toleration for any sort of treatment or environment. But Marvin couldn't stop the welling in his eyes, and before Rachel or Leslie could notice, which in retrospect Marvin figured they had, he pulled his pants up and ran out the door.

For years Marvin tried to only understand that kind of conduct and then forgive it, or at least forget about it. They were ignorant, he'd told himself over and over again. His mother had told him that they were jealous, which was nice, and which he actually believed in his younger years. Perhaps there was some truth in it, though Marvin couldn't fathom that jocks paid any respect toward intellectual matters or merit. They were too dumb to know they were dumb and to respect any alternatives or intellectual superiors. They lived in the moment, and Marvin's only hope that kept him hanging on was the turn of tables. But that never happened, and he was sick of waiting. A body at rest stays at rest. Nothing would change unless he initiated it.

Marvin slid his hand into his backpack and traced his finger around the revolver. The two obstacles Marvin still faced that afternoon were entering the gym without being seen by anyone and then leading the chief horse to water, where Marvin knew he would drink; during testing earlier in the day a brilliant plan had popped into his head that would kill the two birds with one stone. Now he smiled, his hand petting the gun, as he realized that he was really going to do this. By the end of the day, true justice would be served, and all his troubles would be over.

Passing Period: 1:11-1:18 p.m.

Monika was washing her hands in the bathroom when Bonnie came in and stood close beside her. They were alone in the lavatory, and it reminded Monika of the feeling of walking down a dark alley alone at night.

“Hey Monika,” Bonnie said suspiciously.

“Hey.” Monika concentrated on drying her hands.

“Everything all right?” Bonnie stared at Monika and wondered why she didn’t look back. “You seem nervous.”

Monika tried to take a subtle step away from Bonnie. “It’s just the whole thing today, you know?”

Bonnie nodded slowly, trying to read Monika’s mind. “Yeah, and that thing with Todd and Leslie probably doesn’t help either, does it?”

Monika snapped her head toward Bonnie. “What thing?”

“The party Saturday night?” Bonnie began.

Monika’s silence and facial expression reluctantly asked for more.

“Leslie and Todd... in the ditch... screwing their brains out?”

Monika’s stomach turned. “Oh that. Hey, whatever, you know?” She forced a smile on her face.

Bonnie nodded and spoke gingerly. “All guys suck, Monika.” She put her hand on Monika’s shoulder, and when Monika pulled abruptly out from underneath it, her voice went frigid. “But I guess everyone gets what’s coming to them, right?”

“Unavoidable,” Monika said, and left the bathroom.

Craig caught Leslie around her waist as she rounded a corner in a hurry.

“Where are you going so urgently, my *love*?”

“Craig!” Leslie pushed her bangs out of her eyes. She felt like shit, mostly because she was sure she looked like shit. “Uh, just running to the bathroom quick and then I gotta pick up my paper from-“

“Well look who it is,” Craig said, his eyes over and beyond Leslie. He watched Marvin walk toward them down the hall, something very odd about his gait, as if he had an air of confidence about him. How dare he, Craig thought.

Leslie turned around, saw Marvin, and quickly turned to Craig. "Don't say anything to him, Baby. Just leave him alone."

Craig kept his eyes on Marvin, who dared make eye contact with him. Something else, again, completely out of the ordinary.

"Something's up with that motherfucker. I saw him at lunch today, looking over at me and *smiling*, the fuckin fag. I woulda kicked his fuckin ass right there if Mr. Kraft wasn't standing next to him."

Leslie put her hands on Craig's chest as Marvin neared. "Babe—"

As Marvin passed, he locked eyes with Craig, and then he smiled. It was as if he'd spit in Craig's face.

"What the fuck are you smilin at, ya fuckin pussy?"

"Craig!" Leslie hissed, looking around. "Lower your voice!"

Marvin held his smile and nodded. "Hello Leslie."

"Hey Marvin," Leslie said, her voice weak and quivering.

Craig snapped his head down at Leslie, his eyes irate. He looked back up just in time to see Marvin's smile as he passed the couple, strolling on down the hallway as confident as captain of the seas.

Craig was confused. "What the hell was that?"

"What was what?"

"What the hell just happened there?"

"He just said hi, Craig —"

"He just said hi to *you*, and he gave *me* that fuckin faggot smile." Craig looked back, utterly mystified. "Was I just dissed by that little bitch?"

"Oh Craig, knock it off already." Leslie let go and began to walk away in the opposite direction of Marvin.

"Where do you think you're going!?" Craig shouted back at her.

Leslie didn't turn around. "You never listen, Craig! Never have! *Think* about it! *Where* could I *possibly* be going!?"

Craig stood dumbfounded, unsure which direction to take. By the time he decided to follow Leslie, leaving Marvin's business unfinished but definitely only temporarily, Leslie had disappeared in the sea of students.

Bonnie honed in on Rachel full gallop and nearly ran her down. Rachel put her arms out and backed into the lockers, her eyes and mouth wide with shock.

“How *could* you!?” Bonnie screamed, fighting an urge to slap Rachel across the face.

“What!?”

“You *told* Monika!”

“What?” Rachel automatically replied, and then realized what Bonnie was referring to. “No I didn’t!”

“Yes, you *did*! I can tell by the way she’s acting around me!”

Rachel grunted. “What are you talking about? What did she do?”

Bonnie knew that Rachel knew that she knew. She wanted to crack Rachel in the teeth, scream and cry, and then go bury herself in a hole.

“Some friend you are, Rachel! You know, it was hard enough for me as it was, and I thought I could talk to you as a friend for support and understanding, and what do you do? Next second you’re off flapping your fat lips to everyone in the school-“

Rachel was stung. “You got no right callin anyone else fat –”

“Fuck you, Rachel. Really, fuck you.” Bonnie breathed deeply and swallowed hard, getting angrier that the tears were coming. “Maybe Leslie was right about you –”

“Oh, the hell with this,” Rachel said and walked around Bonnie. “You act like you’ve never talked shit behind *my* back –”

“I never have!”

“Like *hell* you haven’t! What about the time I told you I thought Mr. Kraft was kinda cute, and by the end of the day the whole school thought I was *pregnant*? Like the fat girl’s never heard *that* one before! But with Mr. Kraft’s kid? That’s fucked up, Bonnie. That’s just sick!”

“Whatever Rachel, you know I didn’t do that. You’re just trying to turn the tables cause you know how messed up it was what you did! You can’t admit that you’re *wrong*!”

Rachel threw up her arms and stormed away down the hallway, leaving behind a seething Bonnie.

Craig sat on a bench outside the gymnasium in deep thought. A half-eaten Snickers bar melted in the sunlight in his hand, the chocolate oozing over his fingers. He didn’t notice. He was lost in a zone of anger and suspicion, and he didn’t know how to go about wrapping his head around it.

“Craig!”

The voice startled him. Craig snapped into reality and only became angrier that he had showed a sign of weakness. When he looked up and saw Bonnie coming toward him, he grunted in disgust.

“What the hell do you want?”

Bonnie smiled hideously. “Talk to your *girlfriend* lately?”

Craig twisted his mouth, his brow narrowed. “What the fuck do you care?”

“Well I was just surprised that you two would still be together –”

“The fuck are you talking about?”

“After she and Todd... you know....” Bonnie let the news soak in before she dropped the big bomb. “*Rachel* hooked them up.” Bonnie anticipated the massive beast before her to head immediately into Rachel’s direction.

Craig stared at Bonnie with an expression of disgust and disrespect. “Why are you talking to me, Bonnie?”

Bonnie’s head snapped backward. “Just thought you should know that you’re playing the fool. You’re *welcome!*”

Craig held his composure well. He wasn’t about to give Bonnie the satisfaction of getting a rise out of him. “Why don’t you get a life of your own, you fuckin butch dike, and go fuck a female goat or whatever it is you weirdoes do.”

Bonnie threw her arms up and turned to leave. “Oh, fuck you Craig. No wonder everybody hates you.”

Craig forced himself to laugh hard as Bonnie walked away. “At least I don’t have to switch teams just to get laid!”

Bonnie raised two middle fingers without looking back at Craig, who was still forcing himself to laugh loud enough for her to hear.

Sixth Period: Algebra

Taped snug inside the cover of every state-authorized calculator was a photocopy of a page from the math book, shrunken down four hundred percent to the size of a credit card. Xerox machines could do wonders. The equations were nearly microscopic, but even those with outdated glasses could still make out the $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ of the Pythagoras Theorem and the $y = mx + b$ to find the slope of a line. Every student in the class noticed, of course, but they only snickered and then kept their mouths shut. Every now and then they would look up at Miss Grossing to judge whether she had a clue, but the math teacher sat seemingly oblivious at her desk, scribbling on a sheet of paper. Looks were exchanged among the students, questioning who was responsible and thus who to thank for the brilliant idea, but most shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads.

Rachel kept her eyes on her own paper. Sixth period was the worst part of her day every day, apart from fifth, both of which were the freshest moments after lunch. Eating was a social ritual of human beings, the only animals who ate more often to socialize than to fill their stomachs. It was practiced and accepted by all walks of people, as long as they weren't overweight. For the husky it was a necessary act and as enjoyable to them as anyone else, as long as there wasn't an audience. The thin looked at them like junkies on the corner gorging their veins with heroin or guzzling cheap booze they bought after a day of begging. If they weren't disgusted they were tickled, ridiculing the obese like freaks without feelings. Many of Rachel's friends happened to be overweight as well, and the group of them attracted special attention no matter what, but especially while they were eating. At lunch she would try to ignore comments like *My God, I hope there's some left for us!* or *Herds of a heifer feed together!*

Rachel couldn't decide which was worse: to be noticed and ridiculed, or not to be noticed at all. She had never had a boyfriend. Boys looked right through her like she was a faint cloud in the skies of angels. Many nights she cried herself to sleep and often found solace only in cake and ice cream, and after consuming them she would feel even worse, and then eat more. It was an addiction as any other, and in all reality a vice was a vice. Unfortunately hers showed on the outside and thus gave it a harsher stigma, unlike the unseen black cancerous lungs of a smoker, the atrophied liver of an alcoholic, or the mushed brain of a drug addict. No one laughed at a guy with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, or wanted to vomit at the sight of a woman holding her third cosmopolitan.

Why couldn't anyone see that the human body was only a vessel that transported the

soul along the earthly journey, that inside the shell of every woman, no matter how slender, fat, busty or flat, was a beautiful princess, an exotic gypsy belly dancer, a smiling face on a dreary afternoon, an ear eager to listen to troubles, sweet lips willing to kiss sorrows away? She had a great capacity for love and had no avenue through which to channel it. Rachel knew she was beautiful on the inside. She had the kindest of hearts, she figured, but since no one wanted to take the effort to uncover it, she was forced to live vicariously through the lives of others if she wanted to participate or experience the dynamics of a relationship.

Was it wrong to involve herself in the affairs of others? Most of the time she believed she was helping people, mending their relationships, serving as liaison for those who had communicative issues. If anything they should thank her for her services. So often they were the ones who came to her in the first place anyway, like Bonnie had. And why should slutbitches like Leslie get away with whoring around and destroying the relationships of others? The ungrateful slut should be happy with what she had, even if Craig was an asshole. Rachel was a social vigil ante seeking justice for those offended, like she'd been her entire life.

Mr. Kraft suddenly opened the door. Rachel jumped in her seat. The principal looked directly at her, and then scanned the rest of the class. All but the student closest to Mr. Kraft had subtly covered their calculators, and the principal looked down at the desk of John Rikus as if they were in cahoots. John was already done with his test and was quietly reading a book. He didn't even look up when Mr. Kraft took the calculator off his desk. Rachel speculated John a snitch, and glared at the boy until she felt the principal's eyes on her again. They exchanged looks briefly, and then Mr. Kraft left the room quietly, calculator in hand.

Passing Period: 2:06-2:15 p.m.

Craig stood up from his desk two minutes before the end of class and burst through the door. He charged out of the hall and out into the courtyard like a locomotive heading straight toward the library. He came to the second window to the right of the entrance and slapped his hands against the glass. Leslie jumped in her seat and looked up; Craig waved furiously for her to come out. Without a word to anyone in the room, she left her seat and went outside.

Leslie found Craig leaning with both hands against a palm tree. "Baby, what are you doing?"

"You fucked him!" Craig howled.

"Shh!" Leslie's natural tendency to press her forefinger against pursed lips at the sound of loud noise took over. "What!?"

"You *fucked* him!"

"Craig!" Leslie hissed and looked around. "Would you lower your voice!" She ran over to him. "Come here!"

Craig pushed Leslie's arms away. "Don't you touch me, bitch! Not after those hands have been down that fucker's pants!"

"*Craig!*"

Craig grabbed his crotch. "What, this not enough dick for ya!? Can't go without a dick for five fuckin minutes, you fuckin slut!?"

Leslie swung hard and cracked Craig open-palmed across the face. He held his cheek, shocked, his eyes bloodshot. It was the closest Leslie had seen him come to tears in nearly three years. Did it mean that he really cared so much about her after all?

"Craig," Leslie began in a soothing voice, "listen to me. We gotta—"

"Listen to *you!*?" Craig's voice cracked. "Oh, you got a lotta nerve, Les!" He backed away four steps and stared at the ground, shaking his head back and forth.

Silence slowed the seconds to centuries, and with the age came no wisdom for words that Leslie could say. She wanted to hold him, but she was afraid to approach him. Craig breathed deliberately, his iron chest rising and falling like the eyelids of a sleeping Frankenstein first awakening. Colonies of sweat dollops on his shirt bled together before the eye into great globules that soon stained all the white fabric into a foul grey. His arms were cocked forty degrees from his sides, ready to destroy something. A low rumbling came from somewhere inside Craig's thick neck, and Leslie stepped backward, half-expecting a bomb to explode.

The bell put an end to sixth period, and students spilled out of the confining classrooms and into the breathing space and courting grounds of the hallways. As the students came out of the library doors, Craig's heart beat faster and he finally snapped.

"I'm gonna *kill* him!" Craig shouted abruptly, and he spun around and sped away from Leslie.

By an extrasensory perception Craig looked up directly into the onlooking eyes of the principal. He stood twenty yards away next to a soda machine, his arms crossed, and he slowly shook his head. Craig looked away and tore across the courtyard toward the gymnasium before he could see the principal mouth the words *That's it!* and cut a flat hand across his neck.

Todd perched on a bench in the courtyard and searched through the crowds of students for a blue and yellow dress. Having not seen Monika all day, he knew that she must have found out what had happened Saturday night. She wouldn't have avoided him like this otherwise. He had to talk to her, had to tell her how he really felt about her, and with every passing minute that she believed otherwise, his stomach twisted tighter and tighter into an excruciating knot only she could untie. Across the courtyard near the English halls he spotted the dress, the canary locks flowing behind it like angel's breath. Todd leapt off the bench and flew over.

"Monika!"

She looked over her shoulder at him without halting her gait and continued down the walk along the building.

"Monika!"

Todd was right behind her, too near for her to ignore. Monika slowed and kept her eyes on the ground, wondering what to say, what he might have to say.

"Monika, can we talk?" Todd put a gentle hand on her shoulder, and Monika finally stopped moving away from him. "I haven't seen you all day. Where have you been?"

She turned around in a swirl of captivating vanilla. "What is there to talk about, Todd?" she said quietly.

Todd wanted to apologize, wanted to explain, but he still wasn't exactly sure what she knew. The last thing he wanted to do was shoot himself in the foot. "I've missed you in the hallways today."

Monika knew what he was doing, and she wasn't going to make it any easier for him. She wanted to hear it from him. "It's been a busy day, Todd."

She refused to make any significant eye contact with him. Todd felt its absence like a beach without a board.

“I take it you heard about Saturday night-“

“Great party, huh?” She managed a smile.

“Monika.” Todd put his hands on her shoulders. Monika took a step backward, and his hands fell to his sides. “It was nothing, you know? I was drunk, I was stupid, and she just came onto me –”

Monika waved the words away. “It doesn’t matter, Todd. It’s really no big deal.”

“Monika –”

“No really, you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not like we were in any official relationship or anything –”

“But what –”

“You’re allowed to do whatever you want with whomever you want, Todd. Really, it’s ok.”

“No, it’s not ok, Monika! What I did Saturday night was totally out of character, and it made no sense to do it. It totally misrepresents how I feel –”

“We had a couple laughs, had some good times, and now we just move on, Todd. I’m actually glad this happened now instead of later –”

“It *wouldn’t* have happened later, Monika. Please, listen to me. That was a stupid ass move and I’m really sorry. Really. I don’t want this to ruin what we had going between us.”

Monika shook her head, angry more at herself because she felt the tears coming on that at Todd. “It was nothing, Todd. It was just a little childplay flirtation –”

“How can you say that, Monika!?”

“It’s over, and it doesn’t matter –” Monika made to walk away.

Todd pulled her back. “It *does* matter, Monika!”

Monika’s eyebrows narrowed and she threw her arms up. “Why!?”

“Because I think I’m in love with you!”

For a brief moment the world stopped. Everything fell silent upon Monika except those words that she so longed to hear. Todd couldn’t believe he’d said them, not because he didn’t mean them, but because he did. They stared into one another’s eyes and both felt the silence, an electric current, and then a growing energy, subtle at first but barreling down on them with great mass and velocity. Monika saw it first, and Todd followed her eyes, looked over his shoulder, and saw Rachel heading toward them at her top speed. Monika and Todd took a step backward in unison.

“He’s onto us!” Rachel cried.

“What?” Todd said.

“Who?” Monika asked.

“We’re all going down! We’re screwed! He’ll probably charge us and send us to jail!”

“We’re not going to jail!” Todd piped. “Would you calm down!?”

“I will *not* calm down, Todd! How can I calm down when my whole life is ruined and now I’ll never get the chance to get married and have kids and get a real –”

“Shh, shh, Rachel, Rachel,” Monika said and put her hands on Rachel’s shoulders.

“What happened? Just tell us what happened.”

Rachel gulped swallows of air and fanned her flushing face. Tears streamed from both eyes down her cheeks, over her chins and down her neck. Her tone went in and out of shades of reds and purples. Todd seemed ready to catch Rachel if she fell, and Monika didn’t know whether to worry about Rachel’s head if she fainted or Todd’s back for the same reason.

“Fifth period,” Rachel said, and then sucked in air in short, rapid inhales. “We were taking the test, right?”

Todd rolled his hand in circles to urge Rachel onward.

“Mr. Kraft came in and looked right at me, and then John Rikus practically *gave* him one of the calculators!”

Todd looked at Monika and mouthed *Who’s John Rikus?*

Now Monika felt a little faint herself. “Was it one that had...?”

“Yes!” Rachel screamed. “They all had an equation key inside!”

“And he took it with him?” Todd tried to clarify. “Out of the classroom?”

“Yes!” Rachel buried her face in her hands and sobbed. “Oh my god, I’m gonna just *die!*”

Todd tried to lock eye contact with Monika to see if she was thinking the same thing he was thinking, that Rachel better stick to the agreement and take all the blame if all Mr. Kraft had was evidence against her. But Monika kept her eyes on poor Rachel. She didn’t want to find a reason to bond with Todd in any sort of way. She wrapped her arms around Rachel’s shoulders and gave her a hug.

“Ok, Rachel, first thing’s first. You gotta calm down or you’re gonna have a heart attack, and then Mr. Kraft is really gonna be suspicious of something.”

Rachel continued to sob. “What are we gonna do!?”

That *we* word stung Todd like a jellyfish.

“God, what were we thinking!?”

Todd was stung again. He couldn't take it anymore. "Would you chill out, Rachel! Nothing's happened yet. Just stick to the plan. Remember what we said at the meeting Saturday night?"

Rachel peeked out from behind her forearm, her eyes red, glassy, horror-struck.

Todd realized she caught what he wanted to be a subtle reminder that she was on her own like the corner of a surfboard to the nose. She broke the code, after all. It had been agreed that there would be no hard evidence of any kind, and Rachel created a piece and multiplied it by thirty anyway. Monika flashed him a hateful glance; the emotion didn't fit on her at all, and at that moment all Todd wanted was that foreign look off Monika's face.

"If he asks, just deny everything, remember?" Todd said.

Rachel squeezed her eyes shut, and saltwater rained over her arms. She buried her face into Monika's shoulder and continued to sob. From over Rachel's head and through her hair Monika saw the principal.

"Speak of the devil...."

Todd looked over and saw Mr. Kraft searching through the crowds of students. "Quick," he said, putting a hand on each of the girls' shoulders. "Let's go inside."

The three slipped through the doors into the English building and lay very low among the shoals of students until the bell rang.

Seventh Period: English

Monika sat in class brokenhearted and petrified. Her head pounded. Her stomach twisted in an acidic knot. The right side of her brain pined over her burning desire to hate Todd, though she found it a lot easier to hate herself. He wasn't her boyfriend, after all. He had every right to do whatever he wanted to do with whomever he wanted to. But she'd thought he was different. She thought they'd had something, were in the process of developing something special together. Now it was all ruined by one night, or probably ten minutes, rather.

But he didn't do anything officially wrong, she thought again. Maybe it was her fault. Maybe he got tired of waiting for her. Those couple of times that they went out, she hadn't *put* out, and with Leslie he'd only had to talk to her for five minutes before she gave it to him all the way. Maybe that was the way it worked with all boys, even the good ones. Maybe there really were no good ones.

Monika shook her head and tried to put her concerns into a responsible hierarchy. Todd should be at the bottom of the list. The left side of her brain warned her that the stack of scantrons on the teacher's desk should be at the top. Monika had promised the rest of them, but she'd found it a lot more difficult to actually do it than she'd thought. She had never cheated in her life. Never had to. The predicament was all too ironic. She had to do it to save herself, even though it had nothing to do with her intellectual capabilities. She hadn't even been able to come up with a plan for such mayhem by herself. She didn't know how to be bad. It had been Todd's great idea to pre-fill a bunch of blank scantrons with random right answers and hope the students would catch on; because it was his idea, she hadn't wanted to go through with it.

But now it was too late. The work had been done, and it had been one of the longest days in Monika's life. The whole cheating scandal was alone enough to drive her crazy, poisoning her with paranoia, an entirely new emotion to her. Add the drama with Leslie and Todd and Rachel and Bonnie and Craig and Marvin and Mr. Kraft, and it was too much for her. Monika fought the tears. She couldn't shed them in front of everyone, but she promised herself a good cry as soon as the day was over. Only a minute left....

All eyes in the classroom followed the second hand on the clock as it made its last minute tour around the numbered face. Forty-five seconds, and Monika eyed the pack of scantrons on the teacher's desk like a murder weapon that had her fingerprints on it. Thirty seconds, and the last zips of the zippers sealed the backpacks for the day. Fifteen seconds, and students began to get out of their seats and make their way toward the door. Ten, nine, eight –

The piercing cry of the fire alarm startled everyone in the classroom. A wave of confusion splashed over the students, and they looked at Ms. Lombardi as the second hand on the clock passed twelve, signifying the end of the school day, though the final bell could not be heard over the fire alarm. They asked with teary, Disney eyes whether they had to follow the fire escape plan even though the school day was officially over. Ms. Lombardi was just as irritated and sympathized with them, but shook her head and pointed left.

“Everyone take a right out the door and go down the stairs toward the bus loop!” the teacher announced.

“Can’t we just go home!?” Johanna Roberts cried.

“No!” Ms. Lombardi said, shuffling the students out the door.

“But school’s over!” David Rosenberg protested.

“You’re still here, so we gotta follow the fire escape plan! Fires don’t just automatically go out after the final bell rings!”

The hallways filled with faces of confusion, bodies of reluctance and the voices of irritation, but the currents soon came to order and trickled out their respective exits and onto the lawns and parking lots surrounding the school.

Monday Afternoon, After School

The high school was wide awake when the last cries of the fire alarm ceased, and her pretty concrete faces baked under the piercing eye of the afternoon sun in a smokeless sky. Teenagers littered the lawns like seals on a small beach; teachers and custodians took post between the crowds of children and the property lines where the safety of the manicured grasses began to blend with the first rugged stubbles of the everglades, keeping watch that no kids wandered into the wild territory. The adolescent shouting, screaming, laughing and whining was more unbearable than was the screeching of the fire alarm. Office staff sweating from migraines pleaded with them to keep quiet, but it was the sirens of the approaching fire trucks that finally calmed them down. Two twin red engines pulled up to the front doors of the school, and three men in heavy yellow suits walked onto the courtyard.

Mr. Kraft walked the empty halls, his footsteps echoing metallicly against the aluminum lockers. What timing for a false fire alarm. As soon as the school cleared out, Mr. Kraft thought, he would review the security cameras to see if they caught in the act the hoodlum who had no taste in pranking, and then he would write up an immediate report of expulsion. Next year he might invest in those fire alarms that spray ink on the hand of the puller; that is, if he was still around.

After the principal cleared the science hallway, he headed to the gymnasium. He entered the boys' locker room freely, and after clearing the showers he knocked on the neighboring door to the girls' locker room. All clear. The basketball court was empty, and no one was hiding behind the bleachers, smoking cigarettes. The football field and tennis courts were also clear. Mr. Kraft was about to announce total clearance of his jurisdiction over the radio to the other administrators, but then he remember there was one more place to check.

Inside Coach Trottell's office, Mr. Kraft half expected to find another couple of teens making out under the desk like he had during the last fire drill. He opened the door with a violent swing to startle anyone who may have been hiding in there, and when he found the office empty he began to shut the door. Then something black and polished glistened in the fluorescent light. Mr. Kraft stared at the coach's desk, waiting for his eyes to admit a difficult truth. But they focused honestly, and Mr. Kraft cursed out loud before he picked the gun up off the desk and hurried out.

The herds of students and staff waited impatiently on the green lawns of the school grounds. Some of those teenagers who regularly walked home managed to escape the chaos unnoticed and left the premises. Many waited right outside their buses, which were lined along the loop like a yellow snake breathing out hot and heavy fumes of exhaust. Others stood around the fire trucks parked near the front doors to the school. Young single teachers flirted with the firemen. The afternoon sun was hot and repelled even the mosquitoes from the neighboring swamps. Only the giant dragonflies hovered overhead, supervising the commotion.

Finally static came over the speaker system. Mrs. Miller cleared her throat.

“Attention all students and staff: the buildings have all been cleared and you are now safe to re-enter the premises. The fire alarm was a false alarm and may jeopardize the stance of the standardized testing. Let’s hope it does not count against us. So enjoy your day off tomorrow, students, and we’ll see you again on Wednesday.”

Bitter clamor backwashed onto the courtyard, trickled briefly into the inside hallways while students stashed their books and folders into their lockers, and then a tidal wave of upheaval drained out the front gates and into the parking lots. A congestion of student traffic, beat-up station wagons, four-wheelers, Fords and motorbikes amid the buses bickering with their horns, clogged the only lane leading out onto the public road. It took twenty minutes to clear, and as the last of the vehicles drove into the wavering haze of the sweltering afternoon, a reserved quietude sank onto the school like a malignant fog. Shortly after the final bus carted the last of the students away, an abrupt noise came over the loudspeakers across the school yard.

“Attention all staff,” Mrs. Miller announced, her tone poisonous. “Will the following teachers please report *immediately* to Mr. Kraft’s office: Craig Trottell, Marvin Geist, Rachel Grossing, Todd Mogel, Bonnie Armon, Leslie Kunst, and Monika Lombardi. Thank you.”

Epilogue

The Concrete Sahara roasted golden under the afternoon sun, the silence blaring with heat. From random and opposite corners of the surrounding walls, mirages emerged apprehensively, however absolutely, and in uniform. Six defeated players sulked toward the main office building, heads down except to ensure that the whole of the pack was accepting responsibility. One by one the realization of the missing link came over them, and the temperature rose along with the pitch of the screaming hinges of the front gate.

One of the school police officers stood with arms crossed, holding the gate open and staring in the direction of the gymnasium. Across the courtyard another door burst open, and two police officers unfamiliar to the teachers escorted Craig out into the sun. He was handcuffed and hollering profanities and alibis, and only when he saw his colleagues coming to the doors to the main offices did he begin with the accusations.

“What the fuck did you tell them guys!?” Craig spat. “The fuck’s up Todd, you fuckin cocksucker! Think you’re gonna get away with this!? Throw it all on me asshole? Leslie!? You two got some big fuckin plan now, huh!?”

Despite her tears, Rachel couldn’t prevent a smirk.

“That’s right, you fuckin laugh you fat cow fuck! You’re coming with me, I’ll make damn sure of that! That goes for all you all! Fuck you! Fuck all you all!”

All six stood as a stationary school of fish as they watched the officers put a thrashing Craig into the back of a squad car and take him away. After the police car disappeared around the bend, the last remaining took a collective breath and entered the reception office.

Mrs. Miller was typing at her desk at ninety miles an hour. She looked up briefly above her glasses without ceasing to type.

“He’s waiting for you in his office,” she said, and looked back down at her screen.

Down the hall Mr. Kraft stood within the doorframe to his office, holding the thick oak door open for all to pass. Marvin took the seat immediately opposite Kraft’s desk. Rachel and Bonnie stood clinging together arm in arm in the corner. Monika sat down on the couch in the opposite corner, and Todd took the chance to sit down next to her. She took a deep breath, and rested her hand on Todd’s knee. Leslie was the last to enter, and she stopped short within the office, unsure of where to position herself. Mr. Kraft gestured toward the open chair next to Marvin at his desk, and after a brief glance toward Monika and Todd, she headed toward her seat.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Kraft said, letting out a long breath as he closed the door behind him, “we need to talk.”

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