

Michael Varley

Dylan's Claim

"Vince had a good day today."

"Congratulations," the man with the New York Post replies. He lets the paper sag from his face in a show of courteous attention.

"Yea, man. Vince had a *really* good day. *Thirty* jeeps sold at the dealership today. Three dimes. Not all me, but, I own the dealership, so it might as well be me, right?"

"Yea." The Post man re-raises his tabloid shield, but the beach winds are growing to distraction. He pretends to read.

"I mean, I feel fucking good man. I feel like I just banged some random chick from the bar, you know what I mean? Like this day was some tasty piece of ass and I just bent it over the bed and fucked it submissive. You know what I'm talkin' 'bout, right?"

"Vince, c'mon, there's –"

"What, the kid?"

And then there's Dylan Roberts at the end of the pavilion, drawing shurikens and trying to look small.

"What is he, thirteen? He's old enough. Nothing he hasn't seen on MTV."

Dylan is fifteen, and the misappraisal stings. He pretends not to hear and carves stars into his notebook.

The Post man allows the sound of mid range thunder to serve as response. Vince paces about the pavilion shared with his two storm companions. "I'll tell ya, though. It was pretty close for comfort there for a bit – the new house, the boat."

"Oh yea?"

"Yea, it was a little tight. But no big D. But finally everything came through, like it always –."

A bolt of lightning illuminates the sky over Connecticut, throwing the distant bay lighthouse into view.

"Whoa. Did you see that one?" Vince says, pointing out to the water with his beer hand.

"Yea, that was pretty good," Post man replies. He folds up his paper and tucks it under his arm.

"Hey, how 'bout we turn these lights off? I bet it'd be even better in the dark."

"Well, you know Vince, I'm kinda on beach watch tonight. And part of it is they like to keep the lights on. You know: graffiti, vandalism."

"Aw, c'mon man. What are we living here for if not for nights like this? We're the one's paying for local police; they're not gonna do anything but tell us to turn them back on if they come by."

"I'd just prefer that we didn't, all the same. I'm not even sure where the power box is."

"Well what if I looked around for the power box?"

Post man clutches at the brim of his Mets hat.

"All the same, Vince, I'd prefer to keep the lights on."

"What do you think, kid? You want to see the light show, right?"

Suddenly, Dylan is caught in the headlights of Vince's expectant face and slightly expecting belly, ill-prepared for the high-pressure sales stare. Under the orange, buzzing light of the pavilion, Vince's golf shirt has a dull, gold quality that reminds Dylan of the Byzantine art he had seen in his history textbook.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks, Vince. The lights aren't going on."

Dylan looks at the Post man. The pair share a glance but nothing more. Vince turns from them and walks to the edge of the concrete pavilion, the sand grains underfoot accentuating his soft-shoed protest. After a period of silence accented by thunder, Post offers an olive branch.

"So you mentioned the house. It's all done, right?"

Maybe it's yesterday's Biology Regents on the brain, but something in Vince's head movements strikes Dylan as very "classically conditioned."

"Yes, yes it is. A year and a half it took. A year and a fucking half. You want to know how much it cost?"

"Ah, well..."
 "C'mon, ask me."
 "I really wouldn't feel..."
 "Just ask me."
 "All right. How much?"
 "Three million dollars."
 "Wow."

"Yea. Leveled the old house to the foundation and started from scratch. Pricey, but it's a hell of a view, man. I mean right on the water, up high on a hill. Best view on Long Island as far as I'm concerned. The actual beachfront property isn't all that great, but I prefer coming down here to socialize, anyway. I'm a people person, you know? I can't help it, I love people."

"Right."

"But I'm tellin' ya, it's got everything. You should stop by some time. Heated tiles, Italian marble sinks, sit down showers. I got this widow's walk, right? And I said to myself..."

Dylan goes back to his sketchbook:

June, 20th 2006

*Things to do tomorrow in World of Demons(approximate time):

1. Get Ash to level 50 (1.5 hours)
2. Help power level GandalfGal and DekardCain (2 hours)
3. Guild meeting (45 minutes)
4. Guild raid (3-4 hours)

A couple in their late thirties enter the pavilion from the street, dressed in L.L. Bean rain gear.

"Hey, Vince!" the husband says, "Good to see you again. Remember us, Phil and Lucy from the Opening Day mixer?"

"Yea, of course. What's going on?"

"Just coming down to check out the storm. How about you?"

"Vince had a *good* day today."

"Hey, that's great to hear."

"Yea, a *really* good day. *Thirty jeeps* at the dealership."

"Wow, congratulations," Lucy says. "Hey, you should bring the family over for dinner at our house this weekend. Phil and I were just talking on the drive down here about having a get-together to Christen the new backyard set."

"That sounds great. But how about we do it at my house first and then your house next time? I want you both to get a chance to be the first people to check out the new house on the block."

"Uh, okay," Phil picks up from his faltering wife. "How about your house Saturday and ours Sunday."

"Perfect. So what do you guys want, surf or turf?"

"I don't eat red meat," Lucy says, "so probably surf."

"Great, lobsters it is."

Dylan finds the conversation repulsive for several basic reasons, but sorting it out is like using your teeth to unhook tangled paper clips. He diverts his attention to Post, who has gone back to reading but is close to conceding to the wind. Dylan picks a meek lightning bolt to time and only gets to one and a half Mississippi before it booms with startling ferocity.

"Oh my gosh, look at that," Lucy points. "You can see the storm coming between bolts."

It takes a second, but a prolonged flash reveals that from 40 feet offshore and on, the bay looks like a swarm of baitfish making for the beach.

"It's gonna be here—" Vince is interrupted by what sounds like a water tower being emptied onto the pavilion. Without gutters, water flows off the roof in flumes so powerful and constant it looks like a plastic tarp is enclosing the area.

Dylan looks out at the street. It's high tide, and the road is quickly filling up with water. He can either run through a

waterfall now or wade through a river later, and Dylan hates to get his feet wet.

He gives a polite smile and a head bob to the Post man, who returns the gesture. He leaves Vince and his friends to their talking.

"Here I go," Dylan says to Post as he flips up the hood on his sweatshirt.

"What's the matter?" Vince yells to Dylan, halfway down the ramp and already soaked through. "Too windy to draw anymore?"

"Q 104.3, New York's only classic rock station. This is Tom Roslyn and that was David Bowie's *Space Oddity*. Hope you're enjoying your commute on the first workday after 4th of July weekend...though I can't imagine anyone who would be. Does anyone think when they write these spots? Anyone that had to go back to work today is hating their lives right now, including whoever had to write this card. We're just hear to dull the pain, people. Friday's comin,' I promise.

"After the break we've got Billy Joel, Bruce Springstein and Grand Funk Railroad on the Q."

"You know, Grand Funk Railroad played at my prom" Mrs. Janssen says over the oil change commercial.

"Really?" Dylan says, slightly intrigued. Her son Geoff continues to stare out the window of the Explorer.

"Yea they did. That was before *We're an American Band*, of course."

"How were they?"

"I don't really remember. They stopped by the after party, though. Now that was a good time."

"Mom! No one wants to hear your tales of debauchery," Geoff snaps from the passenger seat, revealing a carefully obscured lisp.

"Oh, I would" Dylan says genuinely.

"Well, I appreciate that, Dylan, but maybe when you're a bit older," Mrs. Janssen says, addressing Dylan through the rear view mirror.

Geoff turns around in his seat to face Dylan. His fine, mouth length black hair is mostly tucked behind his ear, though there are some stray strands in front of his eyes. The only trace of coloration on his skin are the sites of past, present and future breakouts.

"You don't have to entertain her, you know." Dylan doesn't reply.

The pair were good friends half of freshman year. The first half. They were both bright kids that had seen the Lord of the Rings series multiple times and liked the Simpson's a little too much. Naturally, they were ostracized. The tipping point came in freshman bio, when a trio of sophomores who had been digging into Dylan and Geoff from day one finally made Geoff crack.

He cried. A red in the face, hide your head in your hands, take measured breaths so you don't draw attention to yourself kind of cry.

Dylan didn't dare say anything. It wasn't that he was afraid he would be tormented as well; he had nothing to lose in that department. But to a boy, crying in high school is like dishonoring your family in feudal Japan. You have brought incalculable shame upon yourself, and suddenly ritualistic suicide doesn't seem so bad. Dylan reasoned that any intervention would only make it harder for Geoff to suppress the whole incident, because intervention was an acknowledgement of a problem. Geoff did such a good job of crying that only those sitting around him realized what was going on. The teacher's lecture continued unabated for the rest of the class.

Soon after, Geoff hit puberty full throttle and started distancing himself from the science fiction and fantasy crowd. He grew his hair long, found some Christian Death and Bauhaus records in his older brother's room, and opened up a Hot Topic charge account. He started hanging out with kids that had anarchy symbols in Wite-Out on their backpacks and referred to

themselves as followers of the Anti-Anti-Christ – not pro Christ, but con Anti-Christ. By the end of the school year, Dylan and Geoff didn't even make eye contact in the hallways. The only things that kept the relationship alive now were parental friendship and neighborhood proximity.

"Okay boys, have a good time at class," Mrs. Janssen says, pulling up to the curb in front of Huntington high school. "Dylan's mom will pick you up later."

"Mom, why are you making me do this?"

"Honey, we talked about this. This is an excellent opportunity; you should be thankful. Besides, you have Dylan with you." Geoff sighs.

"Bye Mrs. Janssen. Have a good day."

"You too, sweetie."

Geoff pops in Ipod earbuds as soon as his feet touch the pavement. He puts on a leather bracelet with inch long steel spikes and fills up several piercings, including a lip ring. "I'm going to the courtyard, I'll see you in class," he says, leaving Dylan at the curb. Dylan walks to the front entrance breezeway, where kids are waiting for the doors to be unlocked. It's not until Dylan is at the door that he sees Josh Roland. Josh is jokingly freestyle rapping about sex and pot while a friend beatboxes for him. It was too late for Dylan to turn around; by that point they had already made eye contact.

Roland and Roberts were numbers 416 and 417 on the Huntington High freshman class list. The first day of high school, Josh and Dylan were waiting in the gym with the rest of their homeroom for ID photos. Dylan wasn't dumb – he knew the importance of making a good first impression on his classmates, and he knew being able to write their names in Elvish wouldn't cut it. He tried the best he could, doing topical humor for the 14-year old set, telling funny stories from 8th grade. He even faced the intimidation of interacting with unknown teen girls head on.

The wheels fell off when Dylan referred to the old, Italian cameraman decked out in gold chains and ruby pinky rings as "opulence incarnate." Into the silence and furrowed brows swooped

Josh, and what ensued was a grisly example of survival of the fittest, high school style.

There was a moment of clarity in those 90 seconds or so of white-hot humiliation where Dylan saw two courses of action: tease back or pretend it didn't bother him. He could feel in his stomach right then he didn't have the lack of compassion necessary for good teasing, so he chose to laugh along with it. Unfortunately for Dylan, when a group of teens are in a strange and unfamiliar environment, the easiest way to unite them is to give them an object of common humiliation. It's a self-preservation reflex. The end result was the nickname "Urquel," citing Dylan's intelligence and high-pitched voice.

"Urquel! My man! How's my locker buddy today?"

"Hey, Roland, how are you?"

"Brad, have you ever met my friend Urquel? Man, he's just the coolest guy you could meet." The one saving grace of the whole affair was that the nickname hadn't really caught on outside of homeroom and Josh's immediate friends.

"No, I haven't. Nice to meet you."

"Hi."

"Urquel, do the thing, man."

"What?" Dylan knows exactly what he means.

"The thing, you know, say the thing."

"No, I don't really want to."

"C'mon, do it man."

"No, not today."

"Urquel! This isn't the time to play games! You're embarrassing me in front of my friend. Just say it."

"I don't want to, man. Just forget about it." Dylan says softly.

"Now, Urquel, don't make me cause a scene." There is a frightening twinkle in his eye. "And you know I will."

It's a game of Chicken, and Josh looks primed to go off the cliff. He takes a sharp intake of breath through his mouth as though to yell and Dylan blurts out:

"Did I do that?"

Josh is in hysterics, and Brad is laughing too, though it's mostly to appease Josh.

"Isn't that hilarious? He does it every time."

Dylan has gotten very good at emotionally Novicaning himself. The state prevents him from feeling all but a minimal amount of humiliation, sadness, or happiness.

"What are you doing here anyway, Roberts? Picking up your straight-A report card?"

"Class."

Josh's face flickers confusion. "You're in summer school?"

Dylan hears an opportunity in Josh's voice. "Yea."

"For what?"

"History."

"Guess maybe you're not so smart after all, eh?" Josh says with a tone that suggests comradely.

"I never claimed I was a genius. You're the one who made up the nickname."

"That's true. That is true, Roberts."

The first bell rings and Serge the janitor opens the glass double doors.

"Alright, I'll see you later, bud," Josh says, clapping Dylan on the shoulder.

Dylan goes to his locker to drop off his backpack. He spins the padlock four times to the left, and then enters the locker combo. The inside part of the locker is decorated with pen and loose-leaf drawings of his personal World of Demons characters. There's the gallant Paladin Ash, the lovely Sorceress Aerowyn and the savage Barbarian Ralph Wiggum. He carefully takes down an unfinished battle scene involving all three characters and slips it into his class notebook.

Dylan gets to class early only to find it already filled with kids. Everyone seems to have had the same idea except for the teacher, whom Dylan has never heard of. He considers asking Geoff if he knows anything about him/her, but he's across the room and listening to his iPod loud enough for Dylan to hear. It sounds angry.

Right before the bell, a man in his late twenties with a hard-shelled briefcase walks in. He's wearing a blue-striped, long-sleeve dress shirt with leather elbow patches and a red tie. He sits down at the desk and collects himself while the class continues chattering. As soon as the bell rings, he stands up and goes in front of the blackboard.

"All right, class." The room falls silent. "Welcome to 'The Forefather's Forefather's,' an unfortunately named class but fascinating nonetheless. My name is Dr. Strangelove." Dylan looks at the smiling teacher with puzzlement. The room is still silent. "But you guys can just call me Ben. Or, if the idea of calling an adult by their first name is weird to you, I guess Dr. Ben. Just not Mr. Ben, please. The rice people will sue us copyright infringement."

Several of the fifteen or so kids present laugh, including Dylan.

"Oh, thank God" Ben says flatly, putting a hand on creased forehead. "C'mon, you kids are the accelerated class. Don't scare me like that. Being the witty teacher is the only thing that gets me up in the morning."

"So I am Ben, and this is 'the FF's.'" Ben goes to the chalkboard, picks up a piece of chalk and quickly swings around to face the class, "Quick, I'll give 5 bonus points to anyone who can say the full course title, five times fast."

After a second, three hands shoot up at once.

"You, girl." Ben squints at the girl. "Mmm...Jackie."

"No."

"Really? Well, you looked like a Jackie. What's your name?"

"Jennifer McLaine."

"I knew it was a 'Juh' sound. All right, go Miss McLaine."

"The Forefather's Forefather's. The Forefather's Forefather's, The Forefather's Forefather's, The Furfurters Farfuder's..."

This time, the whole class is laughing.

"Okay, Good try, good try. That was brave of you, just diving in there and doing it. I never actually said bonus points *to your grade*, so I don't what I would have given you had you got it. Maybe a piece of paper with a '5' on it. Black beans in a jar. But I admire your courage, thank you."

"So does anybody know what "the FF's" is all about?"

All eyes in the room start looking at anything that isn't Ben.

"Okay, while there may be no bonus points yet, participation points are still very much in play." The same three hands shoot up to answer the question.

"Umm, you. Boy. Russell."

"James Butterfield."

"Way off. Go ahead, Mr. Butterfield."

"It's a class on the books the forefather's read, right?"

"Correct, correct. Can you give me an example of one?"

"R...Rousseau?"

"Yes, anyone else." Two hands.

"You, name. Wait. Ty?"

"Steven Weissenger."

"Ok, whaddy a got?"

"John Milton?"

"Good. I thought that was the hard one. One more. Someone not named Jennifer."

The room is again placid. Finally Dylan raises his hand out of pity.

"Okay, Okay. Umm...Bob?"

"Dylan."

Most of the class laughs. "No way," Ben says. "You're lying."

"No, it's true."

"Well, good. Who ya got for me?"

"Locke."

"Yes, very good. John Locke, the first author we'll be dealing with in class. That is, after we complete the required American History 101 part of the class. Which, I might add, you

should all know by now if you're in here so I won't spend more than today and Wednesday on it. And yes, we're doing *actual* work on the first day of class; don't look so shocked. Any questions so far?"

Now the room is deathly quiet. Answering questions is one thing, but formulating questions is quite another, especially on the first day of class. Such a high potential for embarrassing yourself, even in the accelerated group. But there's something about Dr. Ben that Dylan finds very relatable. Even likeable.

"Yes, Dylan?"

"It's seems pretty unlikely that Dr. Strangelove is both your last name and the name of a movie."

Ben slaps his hands together. "Yes! Thank you, Dylan. Thank you."

The message sat at the top of his inbox:

Dear Users,

Early this morning, Tuesday July 7th at 4:13:07 AM EST, hackers attacked the World of Demons game servers. Extensive rollbacks will be necessary to preserve all character data. The process is time consuming and may take up to two weeks. We will post updates as we get them, and sincerely apologize for the inconvenience.

Tsunami Studios

Dylan stares at the computer screen in disbelief. The bird clock above the desktop strikes Carolina Finch. For a brief moment, it seems almost as if the birdcall is the universe expressing its amusement at Dylan's situation. Dylan stares up at it with a sneer and mumbles a threat under his breath. He Alt-F4's out of the game, interested to see what the forums have to say about this.

"Dylan, I'm home." Dylan's mother says from the dining room above Dylan's head.

"Alright," Dylan yells back, disinterested.
World of Demons Forum:

SUBJECT: WTF TSUNAMI!!!!!!

PK-Krusher writes: this is fucking ridiculous! Tsunami is the biggest piece of shit company in the business. I can't wait for fucking City of Legends to come out Christmas. It's gonna be the fucking shit.

Oh well...all that leaves me is my other hobbies...smokin herb and fucking bitches on the weekends. See you in two weeks, niggas. Peace.

Sig: "Wars come and go, but my soldiers stay eternal" - Tupac

Dylan's mother comes halfway down the basement stairs and sits on a step. She's still dressed in her nursing scrubs.

"How was your day?"

"Fine," Dylan says, scrolling down the thread.

RE: WTF TSUNAMI!!!!!!

Gwenivere9779 writes: OMFG NOOOOO!!! This is so not fair!!! Tonight was my night on the raid to get Cloudsong. It's the last piece I need of the set. Omg, I'm seriously going to cry..... =(=(

Sig: [Click Here to check out Gwenivere9779's gear! Thottbot.com](#)

"Did you do anything with your day off?"

Dylan had gotten up at twelve. He took a shower, ate cereal standing up in the kitchen, then watched a Twilight Zone marathon for seven hours while getting up every half hour to check the server status.

"Not too much."

"Have you been in front of this computer all day?"

Dylan can honestly say no.

"Dylan...you know, I worry about you. It's just not good for you to be in here all day sitting in front of either the television or the computer. It can't be healthy for you."

"Yep."

RE: RE: WTF TSUNAMI!!!!!!

The_Great_Corialis writes: People, we have to look at this rationally. It's not Tsunami's fault that this happened. Hackers are hackers and they're going to find their way into the system if they want it bad enough. This game is the biggest MMORPG in the world. People take shots at them just to make names for themselves. I trust they'll get service back online as soon as humanly possible.

And **Gwen**, I'm so sorry you missed your raid =(((. Just give it some time and you'll be over it soon enough. Two weeks isn't that bad, and there's still the whole summer ahead =)).

Sig: "Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding" - Einstein

"Dylan, could you get off the computer, please?"

He looks over at his mother for the first time. "What?"

"Could you please get off the computer? I want you to come here."

"Okay, one second. I just want to finish reading this quick."

"Dylan, sweetheart..."

"No, wait just one second, please. I have to read one more post, it'll be quick."

RE: RE: RE: WTF TSUNAMI!!!!!!

[3RB_5/10]3R:

At 7:46:08, EST **The_Great_Corialis** wrote: "People, we have to look at this rationally. It's not Tsunami's fault that this happened. Hackers are hackers and they're going to find their way into the system if they want it bad enough."

U FUCKIN PEICE OF SHIT!!! WAT THA FUCK RU, SUM TSUNAMI
CSR?? THIS COMPANY IS A FUCKIN LOAD OF CRAP. MAYB IF
U GOT UR AZZ OUT OF UR "ANUS" YOUD SEE DAT
AND OOOOMMMMMFFFFFGGGG!!!! U FUCKIN HITTIN ON
GWEN OR SUMTHIN???? MAYB U 2 COULD CYBER ON AIM 4
THA 2 WEEKS, IF U CAN FIND UR DICK U FAT PEICE OF SHIT!!!
LLLOOOOOLLLLLZZZ

Sig: IMA RAPE U

"Okay, I'm done, see?" Dylan can see the concerned look on his mother's face even before he gets to the base of the stairs.

"Dylan, I'm past yelling about this. I'm worried about you. It seems like for the past year all you do is stare into the computer. We don't even do simple things like watch television together anymore." She stops and looks at Dylan with misted eyes. He doesn't look her in the face.

"Honey, is everything okay with you? You've gotten so brooding...you remind me of your Dad sometimes. It's not a way to live, Dylan."

"God, I'm fine, Mom!" Dylan huffs. "I don't need to be worried about. I just play video games in my spare time. It's *fun*. It's not like my grades are suffering or anything."

"Dylan, your defense of those games...I wasn't even talking about you playing the game right then."

"Well that was the implication!"

His mother grabs the step railing to her right and groans as she gets to her feet. Dylan hears a joint crack somewhere on her body.

"I have to make dinner. Please get off the computer and go outside for a while. They're having some sort of event down at the beach; maybe Geoff will be there."

"Fine." Dylan hugs his mother mechanically when she stretches out her arms and doesn't look back.

Out on the front yard, several lightning bugs are tuning their instruments. The heat of the day has passed, and a pleasant summer evening remains. Dylan can hear the party sounds wafting

up from the pavilion down the hill. He cuts through several yards to save himself thirty seconds, carefully navigating through the construction war zone that was once Mrs. Kafka's house. The new owners leveled the modest Ranch to its foundation with the intent of putting a state of the art McMansion in its place.

On reaching the beach parking lot, Dylan senses something is off with his surroundings. He walks the length of the crowded gravel lot, the sound of small talk wafting from the pavilion, trying to figure out what is different. When he gets to the end, he realizes the lot has been expanded, spilling into an adjacent field the local kids play on.

Dylan is incensed. Only a year ago this field was his life. All the elementary school kids would convene every day after school, playing whatever sport the season dictated. The games were never scheduled, the teams were always the same, and nobody remembered the results of Monday's game come Wednesday. To Dylan, it was like cutting a twenty-yard wedge out of Lambeau Field to accommodate the portopoty needs of tailgaters.

He wades into the pavilion full of adults at the Wine and Cheese reception, looking to knife his way through to the beach. There's a break in the crowd and Dylan follows its jagged path to a dead end of people circled around one person.

"Yea, that was a good day for Vince...hey, where ya off to?"

"Oh, I'm going to get more cheese," says a young woman Dylan has never seen before.

"Well when you come back, can you bring me some?"

The woman suddenly looks defeated "O...Okay."

"Great, thanks." A silence falls on the circle. Vince swigs his wine.

"Well I think I'm going to get going."

"What? C'mon, Phil. You gotta stay for the sunset at least."

"I can't. I have to get ready for work tomorrow and it's a ten minute walk up to the house."

"Oh, no problem, I'll drive you. It's only a half hour till sunset."

"I appreciate it, but I should probably go."

"Don't be stupid, you're on the way for me anyway. Just stick around. I mean, you'd just be awake at your house until eleven or so anyway, right?"

"Yea."

"Well good, then stick around."

"Alright, fine...so long as it's not a problem, I guess I'll stick around."

Vince reassures Phil it's not a problem and starts talking about how the sunsets at the pavilion compare to seeing them at his house. An opening to the beach shows itself to Dylan and he passes from the conversation unnoticed.

There are at least thirty grade school kids on the beach, and every one of them is wearing a bathing suit. Some play diving games out on the far float; others are playing Spud with a Koosh Vortex football. Still others are hard at work on the current public works project, the "Hole to China." Dylan can tell it's just about at its normal stopping point from the clay colored sand being passed up in pails by unseen children.

The only other teen on the beach is the one up on the lifeguard chair, John Hassett. John is two years older than Dylan and was auto-QB back during neighborhood football. Once high school rolled around, John switched to private school and extracurriculars claimed yet another neighborhood playmate.

John hops off the chair to greet Dylan.

"Rockin' Roberts!"

"Hasset-hoff!"

The two quickly slip into casual conversation. There's a confidence in the interaction that even Dylan can recognize. Unburdened by concerns about the pitch of his voice or the sophistication of his speech, the two reminisce about old times and catch up on recent events. Any inquiries into Dylan's enjoyment of high school are met with lies, as a matter of course.

"Hey, did you see what they did to the field?" John asks. Dylan had completely forgotten about his earlier anger.

"Yea, I did! What the hell is that all about?"

"I know, right? It's terrible. I mean they're destroying our childhood."

"When did they do it? I didn't even see a construction crew."

"Last week I think. It only took them like two days to finish."

"God, what a joke. How lazy can people be that they don't want to walk the quarter mile to and from the beach? There must be forty cars out there."

"I'm not sure about laziness," John says. "People just can't live without their *stuff*. I see it everyday: the parents pack the car so full of beach toys and beach chairs and coolers that they practically need a car just to transport stuff from the parking lot. It's complete excess; they never even use a tenth of what they bring down. Whatever happened to bringing down a football and a dollar for the ice cream man?"

Dylan nods his head in agreement like a seasoned curmudgeon. He hadn't realized how out of synch he was with the neighborhood pulse.

"S -- P -- U -- D -- SPELLS -- SPUD!!"

The Koosh Vortex connects with Dylan's left temple, knocking his glasses to the sand. There's a blurry figure fifteen feet to his left, arms raised in triumph. Raising the glasses reveals a boy of twelve or thirteen and a group of similarly aged playmates, most of whom Dylan has never seen before.

"What the hell did you do that for?"

"'Cause you're a nerd," the boy shoots back, as though hitting nerds with foam footballs is simply how he rolls.

"Well don't do it again."

"Or what? I'll do what I want, nerd." Most of the kids have wandered off, but several supporters remain to laugh.

Dylan doesn't know what to say. He turns to John for support, then immediately regrets John even being there.

"Just ignore them, dude. I have to deal with those kids everyday."

"I bet you haven't even kissed a girl before."

"All right," John says with lifeguard authority as he picks up the football. "See this? This is mine now. Go find something else to do before bedtime, kids."

There are some disappointed groans and mumbled curses under breath, but the kids walk off and the incident is over just as quickly as it began.

The conversation quickly moves on to other matters, but before long John is blowing his whistle and waving the kids in from the far float.

"Well, I gotta start closing up shop before it gets too dark. But I'll see you around down here, right?"

Dylan's spirits fall a little. "Yea, I'll be around. I was going to go walk down the beach anyway. I'll see you later."

Dylan regrets the statement as soon as he makes it. Now that there's no one to talk to, all he wants to do is go back and read the forums.

He starts eastward along the beach, the sun behind him like a cubicle worker dying to punch out. A few hundred feet down the shore and Dylan is on town beach property. It's deserted now except for an old man with a metal detector. He sweeps the area where the sunbathers usually lay, looking to capitalize on metallic misfortune. A glance over the shoulder reveals John raking the tide line, and the fear of looking strange forces Dylan on.

He walks through beachfront backyards and over the occasional rocky outcropping, the bay lapping against the shore in rolling, six-inch waves that seem tailor made for some flea circus surf movie. He makes sure his feet are a safe distance from the water.

After a few minutes, he begins finding it harder to resent his walk. He sees the beach up ahead takes a sharp turn to the right, ducking behind a "reimagined" Cape Cod and coming back into view several miles later as a peninsula. Dylan can't recall knowing what's around that bend. With each sand-labored step

forward, he can feel the sense of adventure growing in him. He's about to wrest from Long Island it's final, dearest secret – the last unspoiled natural resource of the Gold Coast era.

More of the distant peninsula reveals itself as Dylan nears the Cape. The tree line suggests it's more than just a spat of land. Then, gradually, habitation! A home amongst the trees, the wall facing the water made entirely of glass. Dylan watches with declining enthusiasm as new houses appear every forty or so steps, many in the style of those he passes on his right.

About fifty feet away from the turn they make their presence known. First one, then two and three and finally four two hundred feet tall red and white smokestacks. They dominate the surrounding skyline even from fifteen miles away in Port Jefferson. Dylan had seen them many times before, though not from this angle. He can't deny their size is impressive, but his romantic dream seems dashed.

Turning the Cape's corner, Dylan is shocked at what he finds. Before him lies a crescent-shaped cove, the houses set back from the water much farther than anything he's used to. Wild reeds eight feet tall hide the houses from view along the quarter-mile stretch. Up ahead, two terns are fighting over a floundering baitfish. Underfoot, little tidewater estuaries harbor scores of tiny, black-shelled snails and skittish hermit crabs. Horseshoe crab husks litter the sand and Dylan can't take a step without crushing a different type of shell: mussel, oyster, whelk, periwinkle, slipper shell, scallop, and clam. The sun hasn't gone down yet, but the cicada buzz coming from the reeds is practically deafening.

At the end of the cove, just before the terrain bends again out of sight, there's a seawall canopied by a cluster of salt-stunted trees. Dylan walks with renewed purpose, shells cracking at every step. Getting closer shows the wall is actually two pieces: the wall itself, which is about six feet tall with only the top foot visible, and the supporting structure, a ramp-like slab of concrete that hits the wall at the five foot mark and comes out at a forty-five degree

angle, taking all the punishment from the water. This allows the sea wall to do what it was born to do: prevent hillside erosion.

Since the tide is only just coming up, there's a good fifteen feet of beach between the water and the wall. Dylan easily scales the wall by scrambling up the support structure. Sitting comfortably under the tree cover, he takes the time to survey the alien landscape. To his left, the beachfront seems untouched by human labor. Even the Cape on the corner is obscured by reeds. Out over the water, the sun strums its fingers as it lights up the final leg of the Tuesday night Regatta's. In front of him, Huntington Bay joins with the Long Island Sound to stretch across to Connecticut, which at this time of day is little more than a slash of diluted green paint applied with a palette knife. The hillside to his right hides everything the distant peninsula has to offer, save the towering smokestacks. Big chunks of the wall's support ramp have collapsed further down the way, revealing sea-rotted wooden support beams. There's a set of decrepit concrete stairs that start at the wall and disappear somewhere into the trees, but aside from that the wall seems completely uninhabited, as though the last company it had entertained was the construction crew that bore it untold years ago.

Dylan's romantic stirrings are back again in full force. He wishes he had a flag to plant or a buck knife to carve the exploits of his expedition into a nearby tree. He searches the pockets of his cargo shorts, finding only a pen with a chewed up cap and a pack of Big Red gum. He sticks the last two pieces in his mouth and chews impatiently, waiting for the flavor to die down. After about five minutes, he feels pretty satisfied he's gotten the best the gum has to offer. He jumps off the wall and steps back from it, looking for a prominent section. Finding a spot to his satisfaction, he takes out the wad of gum and presses it to the wall with his right thumb, like a signet ring to a pool of wax.

Dylan licks his thumb and finds his seat again. He watches the sun as it dissolves into the water, the sailboats making their way to shore. His claim has been staked.

"So quick review time. Who can tell me the two major documents we dealt with at the end of class on Wednesday? Steven?"

"The Federalist Papers and—"

"Wait," Ben interjects. "First, what did the Federalist Papers do?"

"Uh...well. They...argued for the Constitution?"

"Is that a question or an answer?"

"An answer."

"Yes, that's exactly what they did. Eighty-five separate articles printed in New York City newspapers arguing for ratification of the Constitution. What was the document they opposed? Mary."

"The Articles of Confederation?" Mary garbles from behind her new retainer.

"Good. Now, who did the book say were the primary writers of the Federalist Papers? Dylan."

"Alexander Hamilton and James Madison."

"Correct." Ben writes their names on the board and then grabs a Poland Spring bottle off his desk. Today he's wearing a pastel striped dress shirt and khakis. "So that's two famous forefather's right there. We'll get back to them in a minute." Ben primes the water bottle to his lips. "What was the other section we read?" He points at Jennifer as he drinks.

"The Declaration of Independence?"

"Yea," Ben confirms, the word mixed in with an appreciative sigh for the sip of water. "Good. Which, you should all know, declared our independence from Great Britain on July 4th, 1776. And who drafted it? Geoff" he says, ignoring those with their hands up.

"Jefferson," Geoff says, with just the right amount of contempt to not be called on it. Attention diverted from him, he goes back to his secret, succubus-inspired poetry.

Ben writes Jefferson's name alongside the others.

"Excellent. So we've got here three very influential people, all very famous in their own right. Two Presidents and the first

Secretary of Treasury. The nickel, the ten-dollar bill, and the man whose wife made ice cream famous. Keeping the objective of this class in mind, what do you suppose is the common link between these three men? James."

"They were all inspired by an Enlightenment thinkers?"

"Right, but specifically which one?"

"Uhh..." James starts rifling through his notes in an attempt to find his highlighted savior.

"It's probably not in there. I mentioned it briefly on Monday before we went into review. Yes, Dylan."

"John Locke?"

"Correct." Ben writes Locke's name at the top of the board and draws lines down to the other thinkers, forming pyramid-like shape.

"John Locke: social contract, natural law, *Tabula Rasa*." Ben uses the water bottle to tap off each point on his fingers. "We're talking about a man whose ideas were such an affront to those in power that he had to publish them anonymously. A man—"

DING DING DING.....DING DING DING....

"A man whose contributions we will discuss in greater detail after the fire drill. Everybody out, talking to a minimum, last person close the door and turn out the lights."

Dylan finds himself the last person out, the thick wooden door slamming home behind him. He trails the rest of the class, running his finger along the light teal lockers and touching any combination locks that still remain after the school year exodus. All at once three classrooms pour out into the hallway, shambling and chittering, shushing and giggling. The teachers don't seem too concerned one way or the other.

"Hey, Urquel, got any cheese?" Dylan takes his finger off the lockers.

"Hi Josh."

"Roberts, new friends for you! This is Brian and Tommy."

"Hi guys."

The pair give Dylan condescending smiles. They're both a good six inches taller than him. Dylan's knuckle grazes a lock.

"So, how are you liking summer school?" Tommy asks innocently enough.

"It's alright, I guess." Dylan reconsiders. "Sucks being here though, right?"

"You got that right, Urq. Man, just think." Josh slings his arm around Dylan's neck. Dylan touches another lock. "You and me could be at the mall right now, picking up *all* the ladies. All you'd have to do is that thing. You know, with the pants up high and the snorting? I'd just bring the car around and you'd lead 'em out like the nerd Pied Piper. Hey guys, don't laugh, don't laugh; you've never seen my man operate. He's the fucking *pussy professor*."

"Yea, that's me." Josh armlocks Dylan and tussles his hair, causing Dylan to miss a lock. Dylan gets three steps before he removes himself from Josh's grip to go back and touch it.

"What the fuck was that?"

"I thought I dropped something."

"You're so fucking weird, Roberts."

"Man, just fuck off, alright?"

Josh looks just about as surprised as Dylan as the four boys enter the stairwell.

"What?"

"Man, you heard me. Just leave me alone."

By this point, the boys are bringing up the rear of the procession. Josh brings his hand up to his chest and bites his lower lip.

"Urquel, why are you doing this to me? I thought we were friends?"

"And enough this Urquel crap, too. You need to stop watching so much ABC Family."

Even Brian and Tommy snicker at this comment. Dylan's victory lasts about as long as the pause in the fire bell before reality sets in.

"Alright Roberts. No more Urquel. How 'bout this time I let *you* pick what I make fun of you for? Let's see, there's your your sexy Pillsbury Doughboy physique, your gay little voice, your precision side part, those Payless sneakers with the crew socks, the

faggy drawings you keep on your locker wall...oh, your videogame inspired wardrobe, the scotch tape keeping the earpiece on your glasses..."

Josh is unstoppable, remorselessly ripping into Dylan. Brian and Tommy provide the appropriate sound effects: gasping, groaning, and brays of laughter so hard, noise can't escape.

Dylan wears the abuse on his face, red and puffy with tears glazing his eyes. He grips the hand railing as he descends the stairs, lead paint collecting under his fingernails. He's too afraid to do anything else for fear of losing control. Any comeback – if he could think of one – would come with tears, defeating the purpose. The urge to hit Josh, not uncommon to Dylan, is quickly suppressed with a terrifying vision of Josh sprawled out on the stairs, a bloody heap with a six-inch concave in his skull, bone and brain matter compressed like grime into the stair treads. It doesn't matter that this is impossible.

In his mind, he's at the shoreline, squeezing a ratty tennis ball in his left hand. He throws it with all his might into the Sound, the ball landing out far in the water like grapeshot. It joins the innumerable other tennis balls gently bobbing in the water, the tide ceaselessly returning them to the shoreline for Dylan to deal with.

On reaching the final landing before the ground floor, the boys find Ben staring up at them from the base of the stairs, tapping a finger on the banister.

"Gentleman, this isn't social hour, it's a fire drill. Whose class do you belong to?" he asks, pointing at Josh.

"Mrs. Daugherty's."

"Well I suggest you go find her, she's out by the tennis courts. Dylan, come with me."

The boys disappear out a side entrance, but not before Josh winks and blows a kiss to Dylan. He follows Ben down another hallway, the rest of the class visible through the glass doors at the end. Dylan had never walked alone with one of his teachers before. Normally this would have been a very awkward situation for him, but he's still too focused on the incident to think of much

else. As his fear of losing control recedes, in rushes self-loathing to take its place.

"Stick with the class next time, okay?" Ben says over his shoulder. "Talk with your friends after school."

"Okay."

"Hey," Ben stops and turns to face Dylan. "Is everything okay? You're not getting detention or anything."

"Okay, Dr. Ben." Dylan says, looking at Ben's shoes. Square-toed loafers.

"Were those kids giving you a hard time? You can tell me. I won't go fighting your battles for you if you don't want me to."

"No, Dr. Ben."

"All right, Come on then. We have to take attendance."

They join the rest of the class, who are standing in the parking lot a safe distance away from the school. Between sports camps, summer school, minibuses and driver's ed cars, the lot is packed even at this time of year. The fire bell is broadcast over the outside PA, but the poor quality distorts it into something similar to the nose buzzer from the board game Operation.

"Hello, I'm Jennifer."

Dylan looks up from the blacktop. He knows who Jennifer is. More appropriately, he knows who Jennifer, Steven and James are. They are The Study Group. Grade worshippers. Three of the five highest GPA's in the freshman class, and don't think for a second they don't know who's higher than whom. Jennifer took AP English her first year. James is taking intro level science classes at Suffolk Community College next year. And Dylan heard Steven is so accelerated in the school's math program that they're going to have to invent a new class for him by junior year.

Dylan has also heard something else about these three: they cheat. Maria Rodriguez had told him she had it on good authority that they had Xeroxed tiny crib sheets for their honors Social Studies midterm and had taped them to the insides of their shirt sleeves. As far as Huntington High gossip went, Maria was the school's People magazine: she was never on the cutting edge of rumors, but she never prints a story she's unsure of and always does

her fact checking. Also, Dylan's noticed it takes a lot for any gossip to trickle down to his level, so if he's heard it, he knows it's big news.

"Hi, I'm Dylan."

"Have you met Steven or James before?"

"No. Hey guys." Civilities are exchanged.

"So is history your strong suit?" Jennifer asks.

"Yea, I guess. I mean, I do pretty good in English and Art, too."

"Well." Dylan waits a second before realizing Jennifer's done talking.

"What?" he asks.

"You do pretty 'well' in English."

"Oh. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I ask because the three of us are looking to for a new member of our study group. While we all earned A's in Social Studies this year, collectively it's our weakest subject and there's always room for improvement. We were hoping to find someone that could compliment our considerable abilities. Any thoughts on the subject?"

Something about the way Jennifer presents the idea makes it sound like this isn't exactly a potato chip and kitchen table type of study group. Still, Dylan can't deny the allure of companionship.

"How 'bout we until we get into new material to decide? After all, it might not be the type of stuff that's made easier by a study group."

Jennifer laughs the laugh of a world-weary cosmopolitan. "Don't be silly. Study groups make *everything* easier. But it's your decision. Here." Jennifer takes out a monogrammed notepad and quickly jots down a message. "That's my email address for school related activities. Let me know if you're interested."

"Cool, thanks." Dylan pats down his shorts looking for a pocket to place the stationary in, only to realize he's wearing mesh shorts today. He nods to his company, who've gone back to talking amongst themselves, and goes over to stand near another group of

kids from his class. He holds the note in both hands and stares at his shoes, waiting for the fire drill to end. He hates his Mom for making him pick the cheapest shoes.

"All right class, everybody in."

As Dylan is navigating his way between the endless rows of cars, someone taps him on his shoulder. There's a sharp sensation of dread on Dylan's part, followed by a feeling of relief upon finding Geoff and not Josh, followed by a feeling of confusion upon finding Geoff and not Josh.

"What? Isn't your Mom picking you up for a doctor's appointment today and I'm taking the late bus?"

"Yea. I wanted you to see this pinky ring I got at the street fair yesterday. Isn't it fucking badass? I think it's my new favorite piece."

Geoff takes off the ring and hands it to Dylan. It's all silver, except the face of the ring, which is a blood red marble. On top of that, in 1/8th raised silver, is a six-pointed star.

"Isn't it fucking awesome?"

Dylan doesn't know what to say at first. He just knows he wants to say it delicately.

"This...this isn't a pentagram, man. This is a Star of David."

"What?"

"You know, the Star of David? The Jewish symbol?"

"I know what a fucking Star of David is," Geoff lisps, snatching the ring from Dylan's hand and stuffing it in his pocket.

"So why were you wearing it then?" Geoff has no response. He steps in front of Dylan and goes to catch up with the rest of the class.

It starts as a chuckle and a shake of the head. It progresses to a suppressed giggle. By the time Geoff turns around to curse out Dylan, he's leaning on the hood of a Volvo laughing his lungs out.

"What? What? Okay, fuck you, man."

Dylan composes himself, knowing all too well the emotions Geoff is feeling right now. He trots up to Geoff and pats him on the back.

"I'm sorry, man, I'm sorry. It's just that..." Dylan laughs a helplessly feminine laugh, "It's just you are so, so, *sooo* lucky I saw this before anyone else. You would have been..." Dylan can no longer help himself, laughing at each new thought, " *'The Jewish Goth Kid'*."

Geoff isn't amused, but he doesn't seem threatened, either.

"Yea, yea. Laugh it up, jerk. At least they don't call me Urquel."

Dylan is too lost in the possibilities for Geoff's comment to phase him.

"Hey, how do you say 'A festering pit of unbearable sorrow' in Yiddish?"

"Shut up, you dick," Geoff says, forcing back a smile.

"Maybe I should come home with you to check your room. You know, just to make sure that none of your candelabra's are really menorah's."

"Knock it off."

"Hey, you know what would be a great song to put on your Poe-themed Myspace? Hava Nagilah."

Now Geoff is chuckling too, though not at Dylan's pace..

"Yea. When they raised me up on the chair at my Bar Mitzvah, it was to *Lovesong* by the Cure"

Dylan doesn't understand fully understand the reference, but the fact that Geoff is getting in on the act is enough to make him practically die with laughter. After a minute or so, they wipe the tears off their face and start collecting themselves.

"By the way, if you tell this to anyone, you know I'll kill you."

"It's alright, I'm not going to tell anybody. Everyone gets it sooner or later." The pair make their way through the now deserted parking lot. "Tell ya what, I'll make it up to you. After school lets out we'll go downtown; I'll buy you a blintz and some eyeliner."

Dylan kicks off his dress shoes onto the back door mat and immediately goes to the basement. Mass had been intolerably long

today, made worse by his mother's refusal to leave the church coffee hour until the only people left were her, Dylan and Jesus.

He logs onto the Tsunami website to check the server status, harboring secret hope that the prayer he said before receiving communion had somehow come through. Instead, all that greets him is the same "server down" message he's seen multiple times a day for the past six days.

"Dylan, your father left a message for you on the machine, he wants you to call him back. And put your shoes back in your closet when you come up."

"Okay," Dylan shouts back, already invested in a forum thread. He comes up from the basement twenty minutes later and immediately takes his Sunday clothes off, throwing the cuffed khakis and forest green golf shirt into the laundry room.

"Are those dirty?" His mother asks absently as he passes. She's seated at the kitchen table, balancing her checkbook and paying bills.

"Yes," Dylan replies innocently enough. Having never done laundry, his understanding of "dirty" is limited to whether or not the clothes have been worn yet. He collects his shoes from the back door and jogs up the stairs, baby fat jiggling. His tropical fish boxers were a Christmas present from his mother.

He returns the shoes to the closet, lining up the toes with the other five pairs of shoes precisely, and goes about looking for something to wear. The room's dimensions are somewhat reminiscent of the green, plastic houses from Monopoly: a perfect 10'x10' Square with a triangle top for a ceiling. When Dylan was nine, his mother surprised him for his birthday with the opportunity to decorate his room. They went to the wallpaper store together and looked through samples with a sales associate. He settled on a Southwestern motif, recalling a rug in his father's apartment that he had always admired. Faux Hopi pottery and turquoise figurines decorate the windowsill. There's a dreamcatcher hanging from one of his wooden shutters, but if Dylan had his way it wouldn't be there. It had been a gift from his

mother upon completion of the room, and he didn't have the heart to tell her that he thought dreamcatchers were tacky.

He picks out a Halo II tee-shirt he got for preordering World of Demons and a pair of teal Charlotte Hornets sweat shorts that were hand-me-downs from the neighbor up the street. He takes the cordless phone from his mother's room and dials Tennessee.

"Hello?"

"Hi Dad, it's Dylan."

"Thanks for calling. What's doin'?"

They start in on the same conversation they've had once a week, every week since Dylan was old enough to carry out a phone conversation. School is fine, the Mets look good, the flight for the annual summer visit has not been booked yet and new glasses are not as yet required (though they were). Business is doing poorly, the dog is a lunatic, the house is a mess and the stepmother is well. There's no good or bad to any of it for Dylan. It simply *is* – a ritual as automatic and emotionless as emptying the dishwasher. When Dylan quit playing soccer in eighth grade, it shaved two minutes off the phone call.

"Okay, I'll let you go. But talk to you later, okay?"

"Okay Dad, bye."

"Bye."

He goes downstairs and gives the phone to his mother, who's still working on the bills. He tries to open the door to the basement and finds it locked.

"Is the basement door locked?" Dylan asks.

"Yes," his mother replies, not looking up from her books.

"Why?"

"Because I know you haven't done your school work yet."

"I'll do it before I go to bed!" Dylan can not believe this is happening.

His mother looks up from the books with a face so calm and self-assured it's intimidating. "Waiting until the last minute is not the way to get anything out of a class. And since this is an

advanced class, I want you to get the most out of it. The game can wait for one day."

He isn't about to tell her the game hadn't been up for nearly a week. "Mom, this is completely unfair."

"Probably, yea."

Dylan is furious. He storms out of the kitchen and goes upstairs, practically stomping a hole through each step. He grabs his sketchpad, a pen, and John Locke's Second Treatise of Government from his room. He stomps back downstairs.

"I'm going to the beach."

"Okay, have fun reading. And don't stomp on the stairs next time please."

"God, I wasn't stomping! I was just using the stairs!"

"Don't use God's name like that," she says firmly.

Dylan knows when he's crossed the line. The best he can do is muster a hate-filled glare as he slinks out the kitchen's side door.

He stews all the way down to the beach. What's so wrong with reading the forums for a couple of hours? He's not a child; he's budgeted his own schoolwork time since he was eight. Dylan didn't even know that door could lock.

He can tell from the parking lot something is wrong. There are way too many kids walking around the pavilion with towels on for this time of day; they should still be in the water. It's not until he hits the brick ramp way that he hears the unmistakable sound of suffering children.

The pavilion looks like a field hospital. Kids are lying on beach towels, clutching at legs and arms, crying for their parents. Most are present, but a few unlucky souls have no one to comfort them. The lifeguards do the best they can to soothe these children, but there's not enough hands and too much pain to deal with them exclusively.

They rush to and fro, making treatment decisions on the fly. If a child had been waiting too long for medicine, there's no point in wasting precious pain relief. Amidst the chaos, Dylan spots John

treating a girl on a Dora the Explorer beach towel. She has no parents to care for her.

"Jellyfish?" Dylan asks matter-of-factly.

"Yea, Red Tide rolled in."

"That sucks."

"Yea." John applies some brown powder to a piece of gauze and gives it to the girl to hold over her sting. "Say, you got any meat tenderizer at your house? We're running kind of low down here."

"I don't really know. I mean, probably."

John stands up and looks around the pavilion. "You know what? We're probably set. Thanks though."

"You're welcome."

"Hey, the water's going to be closed for awhile after this. Want to play Risk?"

Risk is Dylan's favorite board game, hands down. It's a Bay Hills rainy day staple. The lifeguards shoot the breeze while they play, waiting around for either the weather to clear or the call to go home. Normally he'd be ready to fortify Australia in a heartbeat, but he knows dinner is only a few hours away and going home without getting any work done would be disastrous.

"Thanks, but I have some reading to do."

"Alright. I gotta get back to doing this. I'll see you later."

Dylan leaves the main pavilion area, walking on the concrete pathway that connects it to an auxiliary pavilion. On his left, storage lockers block the view of the street and vice versa. Dylan flicks all twenty-two padlocks as he passes.

Picnic tables fill the smaller, square-shaped pavilion. They are in varying degrees of disrepair, some permanently glitter dusted from arts and crafts at the day camp, others paint chipped down to beach eras past, wearing their age like the walls of a canyon. Dylan takes a seat and opens up Locke. Ben said at the end of class not to "freak out" if the reading was intimidating at first. "I have faith you're all capable of understanding this. Just give it your best shot."

He skips past the "suggested" introduction and gets right into the assigned section:

Chapter V: Of Property

Whether we consider natural reason, which tells us, that men, being once born, have a right to their preservation, and consequently to meat and drink, and such other things as nature affords for their subsistence: or revelation, which gives us an account of those grants God made of the world to Adam, and to Noah, and his sons, it is very clear, that God, as king David says, Psal. cxv. 16. has given the earth to the children of men; given it to mankind in common.

What the hell did I just read? He reads it again. Nothing. He goes a third time, certain *something* will stick, but finds himself staring at "mankind in common" with no recollection of how he got there.

Dylan's flustered. He's never not understood a book before. Sure, there are times where his mind slacks off and he has to pull it together to get through a tough textbook passage. But he just brought his "A" game to that sentence and came back with nothing.

He looks up from the book. In the sand near the outdoor showers, groundbreaking is underway on a massive sandcastle project, seemingly involving all the children not harmed in the jellyfish attacks. They use gallon-sized sand pails, each sand brick about a foot tall. Dylan finds it easy to be seduced by the spectacle of it all – twenty kids working on what appears to be some type of massive sand pyramid. They are already halfway through the twenty-five bucket foundation...

No, you can do this! Pull it together. He takes out his pen and begins annotating:

Chapter V: Of Property

Whether we consider natural reason, which tells us, that men, being once born, have a right to their preservation [to live], and consequently to meat and drink, and such other things as nature affords for their subsistence: or revelation, which gives us an account of those grants God made of the world to Adam, and to Noah, and his sons [revelation means the Bible], it is very clear,

that God, as king David says, Psal. cxv. 16, has given the earth to the children of men; given it to mankind in common.

[Summary: Earth belongs to all of us equally. Reason and the Bible tells us so.]

Now we're getting somewhere, he thinks to himself. In the time it had taken Dylan to piece together the sentence, the sand pyramid had grown to four feet tall and was close to completion. It's a little discouraging to Dylan, considering the kids have only four buckets.

"Alright," Dylan whispers, "lets get it down the first time through this time, no matter how long it takes. It's all downhill from here."

But this being supposed, it seems to some a very great difficulty, how any one should ever come to have a property in any thing: I will not content myself to answer, that if it be difficult to make out property, upon a supposition that God gave the world to Adam, and his posterity in common, it is impossible that any man, but one universal monarch, should have any property upon a supposition, that God gave the world to Adam, and his heirs in succession, exclusive of all the rest of his posterity.

Crap. This time he makes it to the colon before the wheels fall off. Dylan's eyes stray back to the sandcastle. The kids have recruited John to put the top brick on the five-foot structure, no one being tall enough to lean over the pyramid to put it on. When it's set, they cheer and congratulate themselves, calling their parents over to see their work.

"BOOONZAI!!!"

Out from unseen corners rushes the Koosh Vortex kid, flying across the pavilion towards the pyramid. As he long jumps off the concrete, time slows down for everyone watching. He thrusts his chest forward and arms back, assuming swan dive position. It's the sound that makes the biggest impact for Dylan, not the destruction. The still wet sand contours rather than crumbles, accepting the boy-projectile like a drum of softened ice cream might accept a dropped bowling ball. THHUP!

For the first few seconds, the only sounds to be heard come from Koosh Vortex, who's making swimming motions with his arms and laughing to his heart's content. Then, all at once, the world catches up to speed. Kids start flipping out: crying, running to their parents, yelling at Koosh Vortex. One small boy is running in circles and grabbing at his hair, screaming; unequipped to deal with what just happened.

The surrounding parents seem tentative. These days, you don't know what you're getting yourself into when you discipline someone else's child. A ball whistle blows and everyone turns to see who it belongs to. It's John.

"All right, Zach, that's it! You are BEACHED! I don't want to see you back here till Tuesday at the earliest."

Zach gets up from the sand mound grinning. He runs over to meet his friends watching from the pavilion and the three run out into the road, laughing it up.

Some parents go up to John and commend him on a job well done. The mothers praise his bravery, saying it's been a long time coming. The fathers clap him on the back or shake his hand, saying little more than "Good job." The goodwill is palpable.

"Let's make a *bigger* one," one small girl shouts. The call to arms is answered resoundingly. Parents and lifeguards join the effort, with talks of a seven-foot memorial pyramid and several sister pyramids already in the works. Sons and daughters watch with glee as their parents take over, caught up in the spirit. Several fathers watch from the sidelines, drinks in hand, armchair quarterbacking the construction efforts and debating the merits of a triangle versus a square base. Mother's run to tote bags for digital cameras, sensing memories in the making. Dylan looks back to Locke, which seems even more uninteresting than before. A change of scenery is needed.

He sets out down the beach, leaving the event behind him. The walk to the wall seems shorter this time now that he knows his destination. It's high tide, and the supporting ramps Dylan climbed up last time are half submerged in water. He pulls himself up onto a section of the wall that lies on higher ground,

underdeveloped arms shaking with effort. Once up, he walks the foot-wide wall top until he reaches his spot under the trees.

Dylan takes a moment to rest and cool off. A welcome breeze kicks up and he closes his eyes to embrace it. The reeds rustle off to his left, causing several jittery birds to shoot out from the brush in false alarm. Waves bounce off the support ramp rather than break, producing a decidedly bath time sound. He opens his eyes and takes up Locke with fresh resolve, determined to master it.

But this being supposed, it seems to some a very great difficulty, how [can] any one should ever come to have a property in any thing: I will not content myself to answer, that if it be difficult to make out property, upon a supposition that God gave the world to Adam, and his posterity in common, it is impossible that any man, but one universal monarch, should have any property upon a supposition, that God gave the world to Adam, and his heirs in succession, exclusive of all the rest of his posterity. [Summary: The world is for everyone, not just Adam's family]

Only ten more sections to go, he thinks to himself, flipping ahead to the last section and dog-earing the page.

Dylan reads over the journal on his lap:

Monday, 7/13/06

Things to do today:

1. Read Locke until the late bus comes
2. See if John's at the beach
3. TV dinner
4. Read more Locke until Sundae Night at the beach
5. Check WoD server status.

"That was Led Zeppelin with *Friends* on the Q. Tom Roslyn here, rockin' your Monday commute. Before that we heard the Doors, Janis Joplin and Pink Floyd. And speaking of Pink Floyd, I'll be giving out tickets all week to their already sold out show at

Jones Beach. Just clear your calendars for July 27th and be the thirteenth caller when you hear back-to-back Pink Floyd tunes. So keep it tuned to New York's home for free concert giveaways, Q 104.3."

"Did Geoff tell you I've been trying to win those tickets, Dylan?"

"No, he didn't."

"I listened all day at work last week, but I kept getting a busy signal."

"That's unfortunate."

"Mom, Pink Floyd is music for stoners," Geoff complains.

"Well, I'd rather listen to that than music to kill yourself to."

Dylan chuckles. Geoff rolls his eyes and goes back to looking out the window.

"Dylan, did you have trouble with the reading last night? Geoff was working on it for hours at the kitchen table."

"Mom!"

"Yes, Mrs. Janssen, it was a very difficult reading. It took me several hours as well."

Geoff turns around sharply in his seat. "Difficult? It was impossible! No one should have to read that stuff."

"I don't know. After awhile it started coming faster. It's just a matter of breaking the sentences down, really. I ended up crossing out 90% of the words."

"Well, its crap is what it is. I 'gave it my best effort' like he said and I still didn't understand half of it."

"He's a pretty good teacher. I'm sure he'll make it clearer."

"Yea." All of a sudden, Geoff brightens up. "Oh, man. I really hope those three grade whores couldn't make sense of it, either. God, I hate those kids."

"Geoff, don't say things like that."

"What, Mom? They can't even go to the bathroom without having a study group session. They probably make flashcards of all different stool samples so they know what to expect."

"Geoffrey!" Mrs. Janssen yells, trying to maintain her serious face. The mental image of Jennifer, Steven and James quizzing each other with pictures of poop both disturbs and tickles Dylan all at once. The laughs feel so wrong, but he can't stop.

"Well, it's not nice to say you hate anyone, even if they're not the greatest people in the world."

"Yea, whatever."

They drive the rest of the trip in relative silence, letting the Q fill the void for them. Dylan watches through the car window as Monday morning suburbia stumbles about its routine, bleary-eyed and caffeine deprived. In short order they're in the school parking lot.

"Have a good day kids. Remember, late bus for both of you this afternoon, so get some work done."

"Goodbye, Mrs. Janssen. Good luck with the contest."

"Oh, thank you sweetie. Bye."

Dylan pops out of the car and finds Geoff waiting for him, shaking his head with a disappointed look on his face. They talk as they walk towards the breezeway.

"What?"

"Why do you do that? You suck up to every adult you talk to."

"I'm not sucking up. I'm just being friendly."

"Well you don't act like that around kids. Seems like sucking up to me."

"I don't act like that around kids because of dicks like you that tell me I'm sucking up when I'm being nice."

The conversation is in good humor, so Geoff lets the subject drop. Through the glass windows of the breezeway, Dylan can see Josh. His stomach tightens. There's still a good five minutes until first bell. Josh spots him and smiles wide, waving by opening and closing his hand like a three-year old. Dylan grips the door handle and prepares for the worst.

"Wait, hold up. I think this is for us," Geoff says, reading over a green print out taped to the door. Dylan hadn't even noticed it.

Dr. Gai's 9-11 AM class, "Our Forefather's Forefather's," will now meet in room 19A. Please walk around the school and enter through the front breezeway. Thank you.

"Dr. Gai? Ben's last name is gay? Hah, what a tool. Ben Gay."

"You know, people in glass synagogues shouldn't throw stones."

"Shut up, dick."

Dylan smiles and returns Josh's wave before turning around and walking the other way.

They walk around to the front of the school, following green signs to the cafeteria wing. Normally, the cafeteria is closed to summer students until the morning session ends.

"Hey, aren't there no classrooms in this section?" Dylan asks Geoff.

"Yea, you're right. Where the hell are we being led?"

A sign taped to the cafeteria door tells them to enter. They walk about the eight hundred seat cafeteria, searching corners they know are empty for hidden doorways.

"Wait," Geoff says. "There's only one other room in this place."

He jogs to the other end of the cafeteria, an awkward display of limbs and spikes. He disappears into the hallway leading to an exit and calls Dylan over.

Teachers Lounge 19A

"Should we go in?" Dylan asks.

"Well, it's the room on the sign."

"But it's the teacher's lounge."

"Don't be such a pussy," Geoff replies, making no motion towards the door. After a couple seconds of uncertainty, Dylan grabs the knob and turns.

It's a room. A rectangle with windows, air conditioning, and outdated, seventies furniture. But to Dylan, it's as though *Willy Wonka's "Pure Imagination"* is playing over the PA. Every coffee stain on the couch cushions is the result of a heated intellectual debate. Each comic strip on the corkboard a dazzling display of wit and cultural relevance. That table, over there – how many countless essays had been graded right at that table. If walls had pores instead of coffee maker instructions or inspirational posters talking about "TEAMWORK" and "PERSEVERENCE," this room would ooze adulthood.

"Hey guys," Ben says from the computer. "Take a seat while we wait for everyone else."

Geoff grabs a couch spot while Dylan takes a seat at the faux wood, ellipse-shaped boardroom table clearly stolen from The Brady Bunch prop room. Kids begin filtering in two and three at a time, most of them wearing expressions that mimic Dylan's.

"All right, class. I'm sure I know the first question on everyone's mind, and the answer is no, we are all out of frozen yogurt. I'm terribly sorry.

"I also know the second question on all your minds: Why are we in the teachers lounge? There are a couple of reasons. First, you kids are taking an advanced class – *during the summer*. And that's something I find really admirable, regardless of whether or not your parents are forcing you to be here. Now that we're moving into the discussion driven portion of the class, you shouldn't have to sit in uncomfortable desks or sweat in rooms with no air conditioning. Memorization and regurgitation are for children; debate and comprehension are for scholars. And that's what you all should be treated as – scholars.

"Second: as scholars, more is expected of you. No distractions from the kids in other classes." Dylan's not sure if Ben looked at him when he said this or if it just felt that way. "The twenty minutes you usually have before class to loiter at the lockers is now class time. Be sure to come in through the front breezeway because there's no other way to get to get here.

"All right. So, let's begin. First a general reaction: what did everyone think of the assignment?"

About two-thirds of the class raises their hand.

"Ooh, opinionated today, are we? Jennifer."

"Dr. Ben, Steven, James and I all agreed it was unreasonable for you to expect us to understand the text. Even with our best efforts, the antiquated prose and dense nature of the subject matter prevented us from understanding even half of Locke's intentions." Jennifer slips the index card she was reading from into her notebook.

"Okay, well articulated, Jennifer, thank you. Who else feels the same way?"

Nearly everyone's hand is raised. Dylan notes with curiosity that Geoff, along with Dylan and Mary, has chosen to group himself with the dissenters.

If this be mutiny, Ben seems unphased by it. "Interesting. Let's hear from the minority. Dylan, tell me why this is not a dense and antiquated text."

Dylan stalls. His mouth is open for several seconds before it produces its first sound. "Uuhht...I don't know."

There's a smattering of giggles. "So would you like to count yourself with the majority then," Ben asks.

"No, I don't agree with Jennifer."

"Okay, why?"

"I mean, I don't totally disagree with her. The book is dense and Locke's writing style is definitely outdated, but I don't think the assignment was unreasonable."

Jennifer raises her hand sharply, leaning forward on the couch as though an invisible rope is pulling her at the wrist.

"Yes, Jennifer."

"May I ask Dylan a question?"

"Go right ahead."

"Just out of curiosity, Dylan, how much of the assignment did you understand?"

Part of Dylan is tempted to say "all of it" just to make Jennifer look bad but he knows not even Ben would believe him.

"Probably about half of it. As for the rest, I have ideas for what it means."

"And you spent how long on the assignment?"

"Maybe three hours or so."

"So you wouldn't call spending three hours on something and only understanding half of it unreasonable?"

"Okay," Ben interrupts, "Now we're arguing semantics and, frankly, that's not going to get us anywhere interesting. Jennifer thinks it's unreasonable, Dylan doesn't. Let's hear a new voice. Mary."

"I agree with Dylan," Mary says from the end Brady Bunch table closer to the door. "I mean, it was *really* hard, but I think we should expect that. If it were easy enough to learn on our own, what would be the point of teaching it in an advanced class? We would have already learned it in basic Social Studies if it was both important and easy."

"Very well put, Mary. So now we have a reason why it wasn't unreasonable: because this is an advanced class. But since this discussion is bound to run in circles I'm going to change the focus a bit. Now I know you all had trouble, but how many of you would say you have at least a vague idea of what Locke was trying to say?"

Everyone raises their hand.

"Oh, That's fantastic! That means we have sixteen unique perspectives into Locke's writings right here in this room. You know how exciting that is?" It's unclear to Dylan whether or not Ben's enthusiasm is genuine, if only because it seems to him a strange thing to be excited about. He paces about the end of the room with one hand in his pocket and the other accentuating words. The outfit *du jour* is a brown, pinstriped three piece with a brown and burgundy striped tie, white shirt and the suit jacket slung over the computer chair.

"That's sixteen minds working together on one goal: understanding Locke. And we're not talking lazy minds, either. You're among the best students going at this school. I have no doubt

you're capable of putting together a portrait of John Locke that rivals any scholarly article.

"But," Ben holds his right index finger in the air, "there's one catch, and I know it's not going to be an easy one to swallow. You have to let your ego's go in this class. I know you're all used to having everything come easy in your other classes, but that's not going to happen here. How many of you have written a research paper before?"

Most of the class raises their hand. Dylan's essay sense tingles. "Okay, good. You know why you research for papers? It's not because the teacher wants to torture you or because that's simply the way scholarly papers are done. The idea behind researching is to use the thoughts of others to refine your own ideas. I want you to think of this class in the same way. That means no hoarding of information for a later paper and no being afraid of looking stupid. If you have a question or a contribution, it's your *responsibility* to share it with the class. So while I agree with you, Jennifer, that it's an unreasonable book, it's only unreasonable outside the classroom.

"Before we move on to the material, are there any questions or comments? Yes, Geoff."

Geoff looks across the room at the Study Group couch as he talks. "In the spirit of complete disclosure, I'd just like to say I didn't find the reading unreasonable, either, and assumed everything would be explained in class."

"That's very candid of you, Geoff. Thank you."

"You bet."

"Well, we've got ten sections to cover and plenty of time to do it. So instead of going in order, let's hear what sections you guys were curious about. Dylan."

"I have a question about the natural state."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"I think, if I'm reading right, that Locke says anyone can claim anything that's in the natural state just by putting their labor into it. But what makes land natural? Is it just undeveloped area? I mean, can neglected property become natural again? And

what about areas claimed by people that are simply left in their natural state?"

"All right, all good questions. Let's deal with them one at a time. First, what does land have to be to be in its natural state? Thoughts anyone? Derek."

The Indian boy with the chewed up pencil attempts to answer the question. "Well, Locke talks about eating acorns and stuff so I think it just means woodlands."

The class laughs a little. "All right, good. So what would you say is the defining characteristic of woodlands?"

"Acorns?"

This time, the laughter is much louder. "Okay, now you're just playing dumb. Seriously, what is it about woodlands that's different from, say, a logging camp?"

"It's untouched?"

"Right, it's untouched. 'Unspoiled' is the word Locke likes to use. Look at section..." Ben picks up a yellow legal pad off the computer desk and flits through the pages "section thirty-one and tell me why 'unspoiled' is a better word choice. When someone thinks they have an idea, raise their hand."

Regina DiMarco, a small, freckly thing half hidden behind a coat rack, is the first to get a hand up. "I think the section says, like, anything...like you can't just take whatever you want. Like, you can take as much as you need and can enjoy, but any more than that is, like, a waste. Spoiled."

"Good. Do you think you could answer Dylan's second question?"

"I don't remember what it was."

"About neglected property becoming natural again."

"Oh. Well, like...yea, yea I think it does. 'Cause, like, if it's neglected, that means it's not that important to the person. So that means it's extra. And it says here, 'Whatever is beyond this, is more than his share, and belongs to others.' So yea, I think it does become natural again."

"Look at Regina, coming through with the textual support! Very nice, Regina, very nice."

The class giggles. Regina blushes and positions her head behind a long abandoned coat rack trench coat.

"Now for your third question, Dylan, Locke talks more about that particular situation somewhere around section forty-two or so. It doesn't take much to guess where he stands on uncultivated property, though. Who else? Yes, James."

James taps his pen on his knee as he searches his notes. Jennifer gives him a look that could fry ants. "Locke says a lot about giving everything to each man equally. But if everything belonged to mankind in common, how could anyone use anything? Because doesn't property mean you have the right to say what something can and can't be used for? So if everybody had that ability, wouldn't nothing get done because you'd always need unanimous consent?"

"Okay, good question. Locke deals with that briefly in one of the earlier sections - I think it's twenty-eight."

"The tricky thing is, it's not quite like you described it. Nature belongs to everyone in common, but it's no one's property. Think of the ocean, right? Everyone has a right to use the ocean, but no one *owns* it. Property and ownership come into play once someone puts effort into harvesting the ocean: say catching a fish or filling up your aquarium. It's the effort that makes property. So since nature's no one's property, consent isn't an issue. Make sense?"

"Yea."

"You sure that's not an 'I'm gonna say yea because I don't want to look stupid' kind of yea?"

"Yes."

"Okay, good. Oh, I'm feelin' it now, this is great. Who's next? Yes, Martin?"

"Can I go get my notebook out of my locker?"

Ben slumps.

"Who needs to get books from their locker?" About half the class raises their hands. "Okay. Go get them now and bring them home with you at the end of the day so this isn't a regular thing. Andale, andale."

Dylan and Geoff leave the room along with six other scholars and begin the trek back around the school. The chatter begins almost immediately.

"When he says discussion based" Derek starts, "do you think he means no tests?"

"I hope so. I'd rather write an essay than cram for a test," replies Mary, a heavyset girl whom Dylan has noticed is pretty on the ball in class. From the sound of her "S's," she seems to be getting accustomed to her new retainer.

"All I know," Geoff says, "is one more lame joke I'm gonna kill myself."

"Ooh, that's a bold statement for a Goth kid," Dylan jibes. The group laughs nervously at first, unsure of how to take the dig. Once Geoff punches Dylan in the shoulder, the tension's relieved.

Somewhere halfway through the walk, Dylan realizes he's enjoying high school for the first time all year. The critiquing of Ben's teaching methods, the common frustration at the workload, the shared wonder of having a class in the teacher's lounge. For the first time, Dylan has friends at school that don't make him feel like a minnow in a school of baitfish.

The group disperses at the back of the breezeway to go to their respective lockers. Dylan whistles a tune from *World of Demons* as he walks down the front office hallway. He turns the corner to his locker and finds Josh, idly spinning the wheel of a combination lock with his thumb.

"Roberts, there you are. The five minute bell already rang, I was getting worried something happened to you."

"Move, please, I need to open my locker."

"See, but that's why I waited for you. Remember the other day when I bent you over and verbally raped you?" Josh waits for a response he knows isn't coming.

"Of course you do. And remember, just a little bit before that, when you made that pitiful attempt to fight back? You said you didn't want to be called Urquel anymore?"

"Now me, I thought we had a pretty good thing going. I mean, not everyone knew you as Urquel, but we were well on our way towards that goal."

"Look, what will it take to get you to move? You want to keep on calling me Urquel? Fine." The irritation in Dylan's voice is clear.

Josh's face hardens. He holds his finger several inches from Dylan's nose. Despite his best efforts, Dylan averts his eyes. "Don't you *ever* rush me, little boy. Ever."

Josh begins again with irritation, as though this had turned from fun to a chore. "As I was saying, I thought Urquel was good. But this isn't about me; it's about you. You're the one who's going to have to live with the humiliation, so it might as well be something you picked, right? I'll have veto power, of course, but ultimately it'll be your decision."

"Now I figured you'd drag your feet a little on the whole 'picking a new name' thing, so I hope you don't mind if I force the issue a little. As soon as you tell me a name I find suitable, I'll move and you can get your books." The nine o'clock bell rings. "And make it something witty, too. Names like 'nerd' and 'geek' are just going to leave us standing here longer."

Dylan has had enough. He may have been proven a spineless nothing, but he isn't about to manufacture his own humiliation. With class in the teacher's lounge, he can avoid this jerk for the rest of the summer. He'll just have to go buy a new notebook tomorrow. Dylan turns from Josh and starts back down the hall, already beating himself up.

"Okay, Roberts. I'll catch you Wednesday. Or Friday. Or how's your September looking? Sometime after Labor Day maybe? We could have all summer to look forward to it. Anyway we do it, I always win and you always lose."

By the last line, Josh is practically shouting down the hall to Dylan. Dylan takes a corner quickly and nearly runs into Geoff.

"What's the matter?" Geoff asks, noting Dylan's face.

"Nothing."

Geoff looks around the corner. Josh is getting his books together for class.

Geoff smiles – a sadistic, evil smile.

“He did this to you, right?” Dylan doesn’t respond.

“Okay. C’mon.” He pushes Dylan back into Josh’s view. Josh’s face lights up.

“Back so soon? Did your friend here help you think up a nickname?”

“We’re even after this” Geoff says quietly to a bewildered and panicking Dylan. “Hey, I want you to leave my friend alone from now on, okay?”

Josh grunts. “It took you a year to find someone to fight your battles for you and this is who you get, Roberts? The kid that cried in Biology?”

“Listen, kid, I don’t even know you except by reputation, but if you’re any friend of his, you’re probably as big a loser as he is. And you know what? I—”

“Shut up. You’re a stocky, motherfucking blowhard whose head looks like a gumdrop, but that’s not why I’m here. Are you going to stop fucking with him or what?”

Dylan’s chest fills with glorious sensation. One look at Josh reins it all in.

“What did you just say to me?”

“I’m not here for this tough guy bullshit, Roland. You heard what I said. Since I’m guessing your answer is a no, what does the name Landon Macgregor mean to you?”

It’s almost imperceptible, but Dylan catches the alarm on Josh’s face before it’s covered up. It was little more than a twitch at the corners of his mouth.

“Fuck if I know. Sounds like a pretty faggy name to me.”

“Faggy. Right. How about Pam Dower’s New Year’s Eve party and a fifth of vodka?”

“What the fuck are you talking about? That kid is a lying queer.”

“That’s funny, I never said he was gay. Or that he told me anything at all. And I thought you didn’t know him? I didn’t hear wrong, right Dylan?”

“No, you heard just fine.”

Even in concession, Josh maintains a confident front. It had worked for him too many times to suddenly experiment with meekness.

“So what? You’re just some Goth loser. Who are you gonna tell outside your nobody friends?”

Geoff stares blankly at Josh for a few seconds. “Crap. Fuck, Dylan, he’s right. No one’s going to believe us – no one that matters anyway. Fuck. FUCK.”

Geoff buries his head in his hands, leaving Dylan and Josh to stare at each other. Josh starts to laugh lightly, a laugh of relief. He wags his finger back and forth slowly with a smug smile on his face. In a moment of intense and certain vision, Dylan realizes he’ll never have hope for anything ever again.

“But then again,” Geoff looks up from his hands, sure as shit, “I do know that Maria Rodriguez will gladly spread any rumor, given enough evidence. Let’s see, we’ve got Dylan and myself to testify your reaction to the story, Landon’s blog – which is terrifically happy for that first week in January, by the way – Landon’s cell phone phonebook, and, most importantly, Landon’s testimony. And since he’s okay with being gay, I don’t think getting that will be a problem.”

“I’m not gay!” Josh snarls.

“I don’t care if you fuck leprechauns, so long as you never bother my friend again.”

Josh’s confidence lies shattered on the floor, unable to survive being dropped so quickly and from such heights. All that remains is an obstinate child out of options.

“Fine,” Josh concedes bitterly.

“And apologize.”

“Get fucked.”

“You don’t get it, do you? Maria’s on our bus. I have her screen name. In one instant message I could destroy your entire life.

Come Wednesday you'd be the biggest closet queen in school, and considering what a dickhead you are, I bet most of your friends are homophobes. You'd be worse off than Dylan.

"I own you. Actually, Dylan owns you. Is there anything you want him to do, Dylan?"

"The apology is just fine."

Josh can't look Dylan in the eye.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles.

"It's all right. Everyone gets it sooner or later." Dylan puts his hand on Josh's shoulder, which Josh reflexively shrugs off. He stands in the hallway for a few seconds before slowly, silently, walking away.

Dylan goes to open his locker, his hands trembling at the lock. It's over. A year's worth of near constant harassment wiped clean and vindicated in less than five minutes. Never in Dylan's wildest revenge fantasies had Josh ever been so thoroughly nailed. He closes the locker and jogs to catch up with an already walking Geoff, involuntarily hopping in joy every few steps.

"That was the greatest thing in the history of ever," Dylan exclaims, fighting back the urge to bear hug Geoff.

"It wasn't that big a deal. You could have done the same thing if you had access to the information."

"Yea, how did you even know that stuff?"

"Landon and I workshop each others poetry. And let's just say he's not very good at changing names to protect the innocent." Geoff brings up a fist to his mouth and pushes his tongue against the inside of his cheek. He moves his fist and tongue in tandem, making it look as though he's jamming an invisible microphone into his mouth.

After Dylan stops laughing, the pair share a silence. Outside, summer is just getting to the point where even early mornings are uncomfortable. The soccer camp runs past them doing laps, their plastic cleats making synthetic noises on the parking lot blacktop. Dylan has something to say to Geoff, but it takes him the whole trip around the school to gather up the courage.

"Hey."

"What?"

Dylan watches his finger run along the cafeteria tables.

"That was...that was real cool of you to do that. Thanks."

"Oh, don't go all gay on me too, man. I told you, it wasn't that big a deal. Landon's a good guy and Josh really fucked with his head. The fact that I could pay you back and really nail his ass at the same time was win-win."

"Pay me back?"

"You know, for the ring. We're even now."

"Oh."

"By the way, you know that part where I made it seem like we were fucked?"

"Yea?" Dylan says, opening the door to the teacher's lounge.

"That was for making fun of me for being goth on the walk over. Don't ever do that in public again."

Dylan is mildly surprised to find Geoff sitting on the pavilion bench, listening to his Ipod and staring out at the Sound. Even though Geoff has lived in the neighborhood all his life, Dylan had only seen him down at the beach a handful of times. And of those times, most involved big neighborhood events like the Forth of July fishing tournament or the end of summer beach campout – events he was obviously dragged to by his parents.

"Whatcha doin' down here?" Dylan asks as soon as he steps onto the pavilion. It takes Geoff a second to register that the voice he's hearing in the background is directed at him.

"What?" he says, popping out his ear buds. The sound of tinny organ music fills the immediate area.

"I said what are you doing down here? I never see you around here."

Geoff sighs. *"You know how my Mom was talking about winning those Pink Floyd tickets?"*

"Yea."

"Well Tuesday's her office is closed so she spent all morning listening to the radio and she actually fucking won."

"Really? Holy crap."

"Yea, she was going fucking nuts: jumping around the house, blasting *Dark Side of the Moon*. I had to get the fuck out of there."

"Hey, whaddaya carrying around a backpack for?"

Dylan idly thumbs at the backpack's shoulder straps as though they were suspenders. "Just for stuff."

"Like what?"

"You know, just...stuff."

"Yea, like what?"

"What does it fucking matter? Just stuff. There aren't any driedels in here if that's what you're getting at."

"You're walking on thin ice with that shit, man."

"No I'm not," Dylan says confidently.

Geoff tries to make his expression more intense but fails, caving to a laugh and a smile. "Yea, you're right. You're not at all."

Dylan takes his backpack off and sits down next to Geoff. Within no time, they're talking about everything: Locke, Josh, Dr. Ben, the Study Group. It's as though six months of growing apart had suddenly been edited out of existence, leaving the glaring continuity errors of a now Goth Geoff and conversations which contain not one Gimli the dwarf reference.

They're in the middle of discussing the viability of an acorn-based diet when they overhear some heated words coming from the lifeguard pavilion.

"I didn't know anyone else was here," Geoff says.

"Yea, Tuesday's are slow. Just the lifeguards, mostly. Let's check it out."

Turning the corner created by the storage lockers, they see three people on the lifeguard pavilion, all modeling different poses of frustration. The first is John, standing shirtless with feet shoulder-width apart, holding opposing ends of his lifeguard whistle lanyard in each fist. His face shows sign of restraint, but his emotions are easily betrayed by the slack-*taut*-slack-*taut* of the lanyard being pulled beyond reason. The second person Dylan recognizes as Dwight Fulton, the Bay Hills board member in charge

of Lifeguard Affairs. During his many years of hanging around the lifeguard pavilion, the only name Dylan had heard spoken of more disdainfully than "Fulton" by the lifeguards was "Bush." Mr. Fulton stands in the middle of the three, his meaty, coarsely-haired arms crossed over his chest. Dylan's never seen the third person before, an attractive thirtysomething mother whose manner of dress and general upkeep suggest she takes pride in the knowledge that "thirtysomething" is the closest you'll ever get to her real age. She stands with hands on hips, tapping a dress-sandaled foot. The boys decide to keep their distance.

"I've checked the charter, Dwight, and nowhere in there does it say anything about 'beaching' or giving lifeguards the power to ban people."

"I—"

"Mr. Fulton, beaching's been around since before *you* even moved here. I wouldn't have done it if there wasn't just cause. Her son is out of control."

"Jo—"

"Zachary is *not* out of control. He is a model student and a natural leader."

"Zachary cannonballed a sandcastle then flailed his arms around to make sure he knocked it all down. And that was just what he did that day. Trust me, Mr. Fulton, this has been a long time coming. Ask anyone."

"Oka—"

"Zachary told me he was playing with the other children and I certainly believe him before I believe you."

"With all due respect, Mrs. Avery, maybe if you came down to the beach one time when Zach didn't expect you, you'd see why the camp councilors keep sending those notes home with him."

Mrs. Avery's eyes widen. She's rendered speechless, though not from lack of trying. Each failed attempt at a comeback broadens the patronizing smile on John's face. Mr. Fulton takes advantage of the conversation's first silence.

"Okay, Mrs. Avery, so how can we make this better?"

Mrs. Avery purses her lips and narrows her eyes. The interruption by Mr. Fulton signals a clear point for John, and even from a distance Dylan can tell she's not happy about it. It doesn't take long, however, for a snide smile to creep across her face.

"I want him to apologize. To me *and* to Zachary for abusing his powers as a lifeguard."

"Mr. Fulton, this is ridiculous. I am not apologizing to her and I'm *certainly* not apologizing to her son."

"Dwight, may I remind you Zachary missed camp yesterday because of this. He said he was afraid to go down to the beach because of what 'John the lifeguard' might do to him. That's a hundred and twenty five dollars, Dwight, and considering the camp's no refund policy, it looks like my husband and I will be taking the Association to claims court. I don't think using scare tactics to keep children out of camp will look good for the program, do you?"

"Claims court? Now, Mrs. Avery, exceptions can be made." Sensing the advantage, Mrs. Avery's voice turns cold and steely. "I don't want exceptions, Dwight. I want an apology."

Mr. Fulton motions with his head to John and the two walk a distance away from Mrs. Avery.

"So what do you think is going to happen?" Geoff says quietly to Dylan.

"I don't know, but John's not apologizing anytime soon."

"Well he's fucked then."

"Are you kidding? He's in the right. Zachary's a spoiled brat."

"Since when does being in the right mean anything?"

The conversation between Mr. Fulton and John is getting animated. While the content is inaudible, the look on John's face makes words superfluous. Painted there is a picture of adolescent outrage and helplessness, brought to life on a bronzed, stubbly canvas.

When words do reach the main pavilion, they crackle and falter with unchecked emotion. "I am not 'swallowing my pride,' Mr. Fulton. I am not apologizing to that woman."

Mr. Fulton raises his voice in turn, but only loud enough for Dylan to hear the sharper syllables. Whatever it is sends John over the edge.

"Easy for you? How 'bout I make it a real easy decision and just quit."

"Now John—"

John walks away from the conversation. He collects his personal effects – a red and white Rubbermaid thermos, a plain tee-shirt and a copy of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* – from the lifeguard picnic table, refusing to look at Mrs. Avery. Dylan can see her face displays amusement more than anything. John makes for the exit.

"John, you're making a mistake," Mr. Fulton calls out as John disappears from view. He's left to entertain Mrs. Avery by himself.

"I hope you're satisfied, Mrs. Avery."

"I would have liked an apology, but at least Zachary can come back to the beach now. Thank you, Dwight."

They stand together in silence for a few seconds, neither interested in conversation but unsure of how to end the interaction.

"Well, I have to go call for a replacement. Have a good day."

He walks a couple of steps before looking up, only to stop again when he sees Geoff and Dylan. Mrs. Avery turns to see what he's looking at, and for a frozen moment, all the hidden crimes are laid out on the table. After what seems like an age, Dylan breaks the paralysis by taking off at a sprint after John.

"John!" he cries, spotting John's shirtless figure walking across the disfigured field. John walks on without so much as flinching. Dylan tosses his backpack onto the sun-baked grass and turns on the speed, catching up with John in the corner of their end zone.

Dylan puts his hands on hips as he gulps in air. John looks straight ahead as he steps onto the road, face flush and distant. Now, taking in labored breaths and John's side profile, Dylan realizes there's no step two to this plan.

"Are you okay?" he finally manages, instinctively falling back on what television has taught him about comfort and consolation.

"No."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"It might help if you talk about it."

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No!" John explodes, "I don't want to talk about it, okay? I'm fucked! *Fucked!* Who's gonna hire a high school kid halfway through summer? Huh?" John stops for a moment. Dylan doesn't see the tears in his eyes because he's too busy trying to hide his own. When he starts up again, his voice is deliberate. "I can't get a car, I can't go on the senior trip. I'm fucked."

"Well...Maybe your parents can help you pay."

"Dylan, no offence, but you need to grow up and learn how the world works."

He wants to say he's more mature than John will ever be. He wants to say he's dealt with heavier shit in his life than John could possibly handle. He wants to say that just because he's a kid physically doesn't mean he's any less world wizened than John is. Instead, all that comes out is "You're a real prick, John," because Dylan isn't any more mature, and he hasn't with dealt heavier shit, and he's still a kid and completely naïve, just like John.

Dylan stares him down for a couple of seconds before walking away. John makes no effort to stop him and starts up the road. Dylan watches his shoes and avoids the dead patches of grass. He looks up when he hits a large stretch of green and sees Geoff on the field, holding his jettisoned backpack.

"Plastic bags and surgical gloves?" Geoff says when Dylan gets close enough. Dylan climbs out from inside himself to answer the question. First flickers mild irritation, but then a much needed smile graces his plump face. He's remembered why he came down here in the first place.

"I didn't say you could look through there," Dylan says halfheartedly.

"Yea, well what's it for?"

"Come on, I'll show you."

"Hey, what happened with –"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Something in Dylan's voice cues Geoff that this isn't a time to play around, so the two walk in silence across the street and through the pavilion. It's not until they're entering the public beachfront that Geoff speaks up again.

"Where the hell are you taking me?"

"You'll see."

"Hey." Geoff stops walking. "Surgical gloves and hefty bags? What the fuck is going on?"

"Ohhh," Dylan says, suddenly aware of what Geoff is getting at. "Yea. See how the beach juts out over there? We're going to go around that corner and I'm going to kill you."

"Dylan, what the hell are you talking about?" Geoff asks, voice wavering slightly.

"I'm just killing, I'm not going to kid you. Wait." Geoff starts to backpedal. "I meant I'm not going to kill you, I'm just kidding. Come on, what am I going to kill you with? You already looked in my bag, did you find a knife?"

Geoff takes an uncertain first step forward, then falls in rank with Dylan. He pushes him playfully and Dylan loses his balance, his feet barely avoiding an oncoming wave.

"What the hell was that for?"

"Dude...I was just fucking around."

"Well, don't 'just fuck around,' all right?"

"Ah...Okay. So where are we going?"

"To a seawall."

"Why?"

"Because it's cool."

"What's so cool about a seawall?"

"See that turn I was just talking about," Dylan says, pointing at the Cape's backyard.

"Yea."

"Imagine what you think it looks like around that turn. When we get there, tell me how it's different from what you expected."

"Okay, whatever."

They walk in silence again, drawing closer to the turn. About five hundred feet away, the distant peninsula pops its head out from behind the Cape.

"So it's a cove or something?"

"You'll see."

The glass house appears without any comment from Geoff. Then, the first smokestack comes into view.

"That? I've seen the smokestacks before."

"Does it look like we're at the turn yet?"

Geoff doesn't respond. As the other smokestacks present themselves, Geoff seems to be losing interest in the game.

All that changes when they turn the corner. "Holy crap! Where'd this all come from?"

"Crazy, right? I found it a couple of weeks ago."

"I can't believe this still exists around here."

They continue on towards the wall over the crack, crunch, clatter of seashell shatter. The tide is rising, but still low enough to run up the wall's angled support structure without a problem. Dylan and Geoff take seats under the tree canopy.

"Alright, so this is a pretty cool place. But what are the bags and gloves for?"

Dylan's eyes brighten. "I'm going to take the wall out of the state of nature."

"What?"

"I'm going to put labor into cultivating the area and claim it as my own. You can help if you want."

Geoff arches an eyebrow. "Dylan, you can't just claim beach front property for your own."

"Why not?"

"Because, you just can't. Someone owns it already."

Dylan scurries down the wall's incline and addresses Geoff from the sand. "Look at this place, Geoff. No one's touched this wall in probably twenty years. There're weeds growing out of the cracks in the cement. This wall could be gone in a few years if no one does anything. I mean, this is the definition of 'spoiled property'."

"But that doesn't mean you can take it over."

"Yea, somewhere there's a piece of paper that says I can't do this because it belongs to someone else. But I don't care. I mean, did it ever occur to you that that idea is bullshit? Why should someone be allowed to own something – no, *destroy* something – they're never going to use? That's the crime, not fixing up a wall and putting some paint on it."

"Paint?" Geoff says, his voice rising in pitch.

"Yea, I was thinking of painting it."

"What color?"

"I don't know yet. Any suggestions?"

"Black might be cool."

Dylan scrambles back up the wall and unzips his backpack. He holds out a garbage bag and a fistful of gloves. "If you help me, you can pick the color."

Geoff looks at the items and back at Dylan. "Why the surgical gloves?"

"My Mom's a nurse. We didn't have any garden gloves."

Geoff takes a bag and some gloves from Dylan and Dylan gets some out for himself. They start by collecting the scant garbage the tide had brought to this section of the beach over the years. After filling half a bag, they move on to cleaning up the seawall and the above hill. They talk excitedly about the wall's future as they weed: potential color schemes, crack patching, bench construction. Geoff remembers some seed packets his Mom bought off some charity organization in front of the supermarket that would never be used otherwise. They pay no mind to the tree shade that prevents anything but weeds from sprouting here, or the trees themselves, gnarled and stunted from a lifetime of sea salt exposure. And why should they? They're caught up in the ecstasy of childhood enthusiasm, where possibility blots out reality like

an eclipse and imagination is the only limit to what can – and unquestionably will – happen. It's not even up for debate. Dylan says the seeds are a great idea and he'll till the soil tomorrow.

After the first hour of idea sharing, the two grow quiet and resolute in their tasks. Geoff puts his ears buds back in and starts weeding further down the wall by the dilapidated stairs. Left to his own devices, Dylan focuses on the work of his latex-covered hands. He's surprised by how much he enjoys the labor, and not just because he's claiming something. The job itself feels like its own end. He brings his shirt up to his face and presses evenly, hoping to create a sweaty carbon copy of his features. His exposed belly speaks to the idea that the weather is not the only reason he's sweating. When he removes his shirt, the experiment is proved a failure, producing only slight patches of indistinct dampness. A pleasant side effect is the smell. Olfactories reset by breathing into his shirt, Dylan catches a wonderful whiff of sea air. The salt and brine combination, ethereal even by fragrance standards, is deeply satisfying. The remainder of his time weeding is periodically interrupted by several deep sniffs of his shirtsleeve to get another hit of the smell.

It takes about three hours for the boys to reach a point of satisfaction. For twenty-five feet or so, right up to the disrepaired stairs, the wall and the first two feet of the hill it retains are completely weed free. Geoff had even busted out the scissor attachment from his key chain Swiss army knife to cut back any vines spilling into the no weed zone. Now, resting under their canopy, they watch the waves nip at the base of the ramp.

"Hey, look down there," Geoff says, motioning toward a group of three boys coming from the direction of the Cape. Dylan groans.

"What?" Geoff asks.

"That's that kid Zachary and his friends"

"You mean 'Zachary' Zachary?"

"Yea."

"God, what a prick."

"Yea. Real annoying, too. He hit me in the head with a football the other day."

Geoff turns his head back to Dylan. "And what'd you do?"

"I told him not to do it again."

Geoff sighs. "And how old is he?"

"I don't know, like twelve."

"Man, you gotta stop this shit! Stand up for yourself. You're a smart guy, you can outwit anyone, just grow a spine."

"I can never think up something good to say until the fight is over," Dylan says softly.

"It doesn't matter if every line is gold, just fucking let it all come out. Eventually you'll hit on something good. Just don't let anything hold you back. So what, you're chubby and you haven't hit puberty yet and you play video games all day. Sucks to be you. That doesn't mean other people aren't pathetic, too. All that matters is who talks the better shit."

Dylan looks down the beach to see the boys more than halfway to the wall, obviously aware of Dylan and Geoff's presence and reigning in their game of catch to talk to each other privately.

"I'm just not that kind of person."

"What, somebody who doesn't stand up for themselves? I'm not tellin' you to pick a fight or hit somebody, just to stand up for yourself. Look, it's even easier with me here. I can laugh at all your jokes and make them seem funnier."

"I don't know."

"This isn't an option. If you don't try to fight back I'm telling Josh we had a fight and he can do whatever he wants to you."

Now that is motivation. The group of boys are now close enough to reveal Zachary smiling. The pair stand up on the wall and await their company. Dylan's mind draws a blank and he begins to panic.

"What do I say?"

"Just go with the flow," Geoff says, barely above a whisper. "If all else fails, call his mother a slut."

"Hey, *nerd*, what are you up to?"
"Are you kidding me?" Geoff says to Dylan. Dylan ignores him.

"Hey Zachary, you ever get your other football back?"
"'Zachary'? What are you, my Mom?" Zach's cronies laugh.

"No, I'm not a bitch that always needs to get her way. And I'm not a slut, either."

"OOHH. He just called your Mom a slut!" Geoff shouts, suddenly Dylan's hype man.

"Who are you, *nerd*'s friend?"

"Is that the only word you know? Don't pick a fight with me, 'Zach.' I'd wreck you so hard your Mom would come to yell at me."

Dylan laughs at this. Zach's friends look more confused than anything, but it's clear from the look on his face that Zach gets the dig. He redirects his attention to Dylan.

"What are you laughing at? You're in high school and I bet you don't even have pubes yet." Zach's friends snigger.

"Yep, you're right."

"Oh my God, did you hear that? He's in high school and he doesn't even have pubes yet!" The three boys are whooping and hollering.

"I didn't say to be honest," Geoff whispers so Dylan can hear. Dylan continues, fighting through the laughter like a rowboat in sea swells.

"I'd rather be that than the kid whose Mom fights his battles for him. Who gets her to get the lifeguard fired because he's too 'scared' to go down to the beach, you pussy. Or the kid who only has two friends because no one else likes him. I bet *they* don't even like you – they probably just hang out with you because your house has good snack food. Or the kid who's so unbelievably stupid 'nerd' is the only insult he can come up with. Hey, it's okay, when I'm talking to you through the plastic burger in ten years, telling you my order, I'll be sure to go slow."

"HOLY SHIT! You just got *fucked* in the ass, Zach!"

"I wasn't scared of John," Zach retorts weakly. His friends are mute.

"Okay, sure, whatever you want. I think that still leaves you an idiot who nobody likes that can't fight for himself. I'm sure I'll hit puberty soon enough, Zach. I hate to break it to you, but there ain't a puberty for stupid."

Geoff doesn't have enough time to hype anything before the football Zach's holding is on a path for Dylan's head. Dylan bobs to the side and the ball hits harmlessly against the hill, stuck in the undergrowth. Acting purely on instinct, he runs up and retrieves the ball, takes a running start down the hill's slope and punts it thirty yards into the Sound.

"Oh, shit." Geoff says.

"That's how I roll."

He gets back up on his spot on the wall and stares down at Zach. His two friends look out into the Sound as astonished as Geoff. Zach charges. There's a reason the term "uphill battle" exists. Running up the ramp with Dylan standing on top of the wall, Zach's head is right at Dylan's arm height. Acting on the same instincts that sent the football out to sea, Dylan puts his hand on Zach's forehead like a Bishop performing Confirmation and pushes. Dylan watches the anger on Zach's face turn to distress as he stumbles backwards down the ramp, arms making a backstroke motion in a desperate attempt to maintain balance. He makes a good show of it, but finally biffs on the sand, pride hurt more than anything.

Or so it would seem. Zach starts crying immediately, not unlike a baby that's just taken a painless hit to the head and is uncertain of how to react. Seeing Zach lying there, broken and sobbing, awkwardly displayed for friends and enemies, Dylan instantly feels regret. To make someone stop harassing you is one thing, but to totally debase someone is quite another. The feeling is made no better by Geoff's hysterical peels of laughter coming from his right. He turns his back on the scene and sits down under the canopy, believing in Zach's right to private disgrace. He makes no

effort to stop Geoff, though, who laughs and catcalls Zach and his friends all the way down the beach until they're out of earshot.

"Man, that was fantastic! Way to go. I thought you were making a real tactical blunder with the whole puberty thing but you really spun quite a dis from that confession. Well done."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Nerd. Who even uses 'nerd' anymore?"

"I guess Zach."

"Hah, yea. And the push off the wall, oh and the football kick! It was classic man, just classic. No one could possibly believe that was your first time doing that. It was fantastic."

"Seeing him cry, I felt kind of bad about it, honestly."

Suddenly, Geoff turns serious. "Don't. Don't ever feel bad about it. Remember, if he'd done the same to you, he'd laugh at you ten times harder than I just did at him. Survival of the fittest, man."

The wall has once again returned to its placid state. Geoff starts taking off his jewelry.

"Well, I'm going to go swim a little bit right here. No floats like Bay Hills, but it's ours. Hey, maybe we can make our own float for out here with plywood and 2'x4''s. Want to come?"

"No thanks, I think I'll work on our reading for tomorrow. I'm pretty close to finishing. Have you started it yet?"

"No, I'll do it tonight," Geoff says, tee shirt over his head.

"That's a lot to get through in one night."

"Yea, well it's not like he doesn't go over it all in class anyway. But whatever, have fun reading."

Dylan reaches into his backpack and takes out Locke and his sketchpad for notes. He starts where he left off earlier in the day, nearly finished at section 47:

And thus came in the use of money, some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling, and that by mutual consent men would take in exchange for the truly useful, but perishable supports of life.

"Alright, what section are we again?"

"Forty-two," Mary replies to Dylan.

"Right, forty-two, thanks."

Ben has divided the class for group work, with four groups of four spread out about the room. Dylan, Mary, and Derek share the orange pleather couch underneath the corkboard. Geoff sits across from them in a pea green, molded plastic chair borrowed from the Brady table. The Study Group sits in the corner as though conspiring, complete with their latest addition, Barry – an oily boy who's been known to mutter prime numbers under his breath.

The classroom is silent. Everyone is reading to themselves, uncertain of how to start and unwilling to be the one person the whole class hears talking.

"Come on," Ben shouts, "I want to hear ideas, not silence! Some shouting, some slamming of fists on tables, someone storming out of the room in indignation."

"What about fist fights?" Derek asks.

"Sure. Just take it outside. If we get blood in the teacher's lounge they won't let us use it anymore."

"Sweet."

"So, let's get started."

Chatter starts up immediately among the groups.

"Okay," Mary says, "what did everybody get from the passage?"

"What's there to get?" Dylan says, "Labor makes things valuable and unused land is a waste. Look, right here, 'Land left wholly to nature,' da da da da da, 'is called, as indeed it is, waste.' Same stuff as before."

"Yea," Mary replies, "That's true. But this time he mentions government."

"Yea, I guess. But how does government make labor less valuable or unused land less wasteful?"

"Did you do all the reading?" Mary asks.

"Yes, of course I did," he replies. And he had, too. Sure he had been a little distracted by his plans for the sea wall, but he had caught the gist of everything pretty well. And like Geoff said,

Ben will go through it all anyway, so why kill himself translating?

"Well I don't know," Mary says, "What do you guys think?"

"Don't ask me," Derek says, "I never understand Locke until Ben translates it for us. Half of what's said is just him repeating what he just said....yea."

"Geoff?" Mary asks.

"I don't care." Geoff says. Mary rolls her eyes.

"Hey, have you guys seen the new Shakira video?" Derek asks, leaning forward in his seat.

"Ohh, God, yes." Geoff says. Mary scoffs.

"I think so," says Dylan.

"If you 'think so,' you haven't seen the video," Derek says. I don't know. I just don't think she's that hot."

"Are you kidding me?" Derek says.

"Yea, Dylan. I mean, I turn the sound off, but I sure as hell don't change the channel."

"That is disgusting," Mary says. Geoff looks at her and shrugs.

"I lost interest in her after that video where she's covered in oil."

"I...I can't believe what I'm hearing," Derek says, staring off eyes wide like he's been struck blind.

"Yea, man, just stop talking. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Since when is motor oil sexy? It looks like someone drove her off into a ditch. And the dancing thing; it was sexy at first, sure, but—"

"How are we doing on section 42?" Ben asks, coming alongside the couch to tamp Dylan on the shoulder. Today it's a white linen blazer with gray linen slacks and a gray and white plaid shirt.

"W...aa..."

"We're getting there, thanks," Mary replies.

"Good. We're going to start up again in a couple of minutes, so finish up."

"Okay." Dylan starts again when Ben's a safe distance away. "Look, she dances like she has jumper cables attached to her breasts, that's all I'm saying."

Geoff's eyes widen. "You mean like with the clamps attached to—"

"Oh my God, we *so* need to move on right now," Mary freaks. "Section 42, does anyone else have anything to say?"

"No."

"Nope."

"No."

"So what are we going to say when we're asked what the section was about?"

"Like I said before, same thing as every time."

"Fine," Mary says, "We'll see what Dr. Ben has to say."

"Sounds good to me," Dylan says. He slouches a little in the couch and looks over at Geoff. He looks...Lighter to Dylan in some way. And not in a skin tone sort of way, because that'd be near impossible. It doesn't take long to hit him.

"Where's all your...you know, jewelry?"

Geoff's stripped down to two small earrings in each ear and that's it. No studs, no spikes, no leather.

"I didn't feel like wearing them, what's it matter?"

"Nothing. Just can't remember the last time I saw you without them."

"Get fucked."

"All right, time's up. Move your seats so everybody can see everybody. Okay? So let's talk about these sections. First up, section 42. Whatcha got for us?"

The group looks back and forth at each other to see who's willing to cave and speak for the group. Dylan is quick to take up the responsibility.

"Well, basically we decided it's just like the other sections, really. Labor makes things valuable and unused land is a waste."

Ben presses a finger to his lips in thought.

"Okay, anything else?"
 "Well, we did notice he mentions government," Mary adds.
 "All right, interesting. In what context?"
 "Umm..."
 "That is, the quote."
 "Oh," Mary says, "that the increase of lands, and the right
 employing of them, is the great art of government."
 "Good, good. I think there's a little bit more before that.
 Can you read it for us?"
 "'This...shews how?'"
 "Yea, that's it. Shows is fine."
 Mary carefully traces the line with her finger. "This
 shows how much numbers of men are to be preferred to largeness of
 dominions."
 "Okay, great. So what does this sentence say about labor
 value and unused land?"
 Some hands go up in the Study Group.
 "We're not opening it up to the class just yet; I want this
 group to answer. Yes, Dylan."
 "Well, 'numbers of men are preferred to largeness of
 dominion' probably means labor is more valuable than land."
 "Very good, continue."
 "But I don't see how government changes anything. It
 doesn't make unused land suddenly useful or something."
 Dylan throws his arm over the couches back, pleased with
 his off the cuff response. Ben seems less convinced.
 "Interesting. Mary, Geoff, Derek: thoughts?"
 "Well," Mary says, "I think he's saying that government is
 designed to claim land and make it useful, and that's all we've been
 talking about so far. But this time it's more than just one person."
 "Excellent, Mary. So we're starting to hit complexities
 now, moving beyond the individual level. Do you agree with Mary,
 Derek?"
 "Yes."
 "Well, after I hyped it up, you probably couldn't disagree,
 could you?"

"No."
 "All right. How about you, Geoff? Contributions?"
 "No."
 "Okay, then. Let's move to—"

"Wait," Dylan says, raising a hand.
 "Oh. Yes, Dylan?"
 "But why would he talk about government as a tool for
 claiming and using land if all you need is your own labor to claim
 something? Isn't that redundant?"
 "Excellent question, Dylan. I think this next section is going
 to clear that up for you.
 "Jennifer, you've been chomping at the bit the entire time.
 Are you ready to talk about section 45?"
 "Yes, Dr. Ben."
 "Go right ahead."
 "Locke starts by saying labor alone was originally the only
 requirement for claiming land as there was so much common land to
 begin with. People were content with this until populations grew
 and land became scarcer. At that point, communities got together
 and settled territory boundaries, or as Locke says, 'settled the
 property which labor and industry began.' By doing so, they have
 'by common consent, given up their pretences to their natural
 common right.'
 "Locke concludes the passage by saying there are still
 'great tracts of ground to be found' among the less civilized people
 in the world. The group agreed it was a fairly appalling rationale
 for European colonialism."
 "Wow!" Ben says, starting up a small clap as he talks.
 "Fantastic job, you guys. And the part with the colonialism; really
 going above and beyond there. I guess you're catching on to Locke's
 language, huh?"
 "Barry's been a big asset to our group." Jennifer says,
 smiling. Barry shakes his head while muttering something
 indecipherable.
 "Well okay, great. Does that answer your question
 Dylan?"

"No."

"Really? What don't you understand then?"

"I understand, I just don't agree."

"Ah...Okay. Well, what do you disagree with then?"

"Why should common right go away just because some kings agreed to get rid of it? That doesn't sound common to me."

"Let's keep going and see if your question isn't answered, okay? You guys, great just on 45. Let's hear about section 50. Okay, Regina."

"So, this passage talks a lot about money and how, like...well, the words that jumped out at us were... 'disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth.' So by, like, agreeing to the idea of money, Locke says the world agrees to inequality."

"Good, we're halfway there. Now he talks about decay in this section. Remember we talked about that the other day, too."

"Oh, yea. Well, like, we *thought* the decay part meant that...like...well, decay comes from 'hoarding' stuff that can decay. But gold doesn't decay, so if you say a gold coin equals a loaf of bread, then it's like hoarding a loaf of bread without wasting it?"

"Yes. Perfect analogy, Regina."

"And that's crucial. Once value is assigned to non-perishable items, labor and effort aren't just about self-preservation anymore. They can be stockpiled in the form of money and exchanged for goods and services that go beyond simple survival. But by agreeing to this system of creature comforts, people agree to inequality. Your successful potato farmer sells off his surplus for gold. He gets more land because he can expand without being wasteful, and uses that land to make more sellable surplus. Eventually, so many people are dependant on his potatoes and the gold he offers to harvest those potatoes that he becomes a king by default. Government is formed."

"It takes money to justify surplus. Money makes kings, kings mean government, and government makes laws, defining property and eliminating common right. Make sense? Yes, Dylan."

"How is it fair that someone can be disadvantaged from birth by a system they didn't even agree to?"

"Well—"

"Why should people be allowed to take up acres of land if they're not going to use it in any positive way?"

"Dylan—"

"Why should people have more power in our society just because they have a big lawn they don't even cut themselves!"

"Dylan," Ben shouts, "Enough! The forefather's didn't idolize Locke because he made a strong case for common right. They liked him because he built a logical argument in favor of money and the state. I'll agree it's far from a perfect system, but you have to recognize it's the system that allows us to be here at all and not back at home tilling the fields."

"Now, I appreciate your enthusiasm for the topic, but we need to move on. Let's hear about section 46."

Dylan clenches his spiral notebook in his left hand, cover folded over. The book is warped with tension. He stares down at the words pretending to read as the class carries on discussion. The script on the page decontextualizes to a string of points and loops, and he takes the book with both hands when it starts to tremor.

Ben was wrong; Dylan knows it. The law is wrong. Any system that allows such wanton wastefulness while insuring permanent disadvantage is no system to live under.

Dylan looks up from the book when Ben starts writing on the board. Geoff must have been watching him the whole time, because he catches Dylan's eye as soon as he looks up. It's a look of apology and sympathy, and Dylan ignores it. Geoff is wrong, too. Geoff's wrong and Ben's wrong and John's wrong and Locke's wrong and it's all wrong and no one's going to show him different.

If the system is fucked, then fuck the system.

Dylan trots down the basement stairs and turns on the computer. He stands over the keyboard impatiently, backpack slung over one shoulder, moving the mouse back and forth with his left hand as though shaking a Polaroid. His right hand holds

three packets of Geranium seeds, acquired from Geoff yesterday on the ride to school.

A flourish of keystrokes and Dylan has the information he wanted: Mostly cloudy, 50% chance of rain. He decides to check his email on a whim, even though all he ever gets is spam and forwarded messages of patriotism from his uncle.

Sender:	Message:
Alex Haber	FW: fw: FW Soldiers Funeral, Texas
Style (turn on sound)]	
Marylou Meade	Re.Finance with us g
Alex Haber	{FWD: even terrorists get the blues]
MySpace Friend Request	Trista would like to be added as one of your friends!
Tsunami Studios	Come, rejoin the battle for the fate of Azernoth!

His pulse skips a note as he catches site of the last email.

Dear Users,

After spending nearly two weeks working round the clock to preserve the over twelve million characters stored on our databases, we are ready to proclaim World of Demons once again is ready for warfare!

Please understand that with rollbacks, a small amount of character data is lost. Any items or experience accrued within six (6) hours of the server attacks have been lost permanently. We deeply regret the inconvenience.

If your character has experienced any instance of anomalous data wipe (excessive decrease in level, disappearance of long

possessed items, etc.), contact technical support at technicalsupport@tsunami.com

Let loose the hounds of war!

Tsunami Studios

Six hours? The night before rollback he had raided the Crypts of Sargon with his guild and had finally gotten the Staff of the Golden Phoenix. The Staff of the Golden Phoenix, after six months of waiting!

“Whatever, I’ve got seeds to plant,” he mumbles, turning off the monitor.

It’s humid as anything outside. The sky is the color of a q-tip run the length of a dirty car – gray and white and somehow satisfying. It’s only a matter of time until the rain comes, but Dylan’s confident he can get everything planted in time.

As he passes the houses en route to the wall, he thinks about yesterday’s anger. There had been time for reflection later that day, while tilling the soil for today’s planting, and with that reflection came clarity. He realized he isn’t mad at people, or at least these people, his neighbors. They’re good people, by and large. They’re just well trained players in a game so engrained and seemingly natural you’d swear money really did grow on trees.

And he isn’t mad at the system either, though he believes this is where the anger should lie. Being angry at the system, he realized, is about as useful as being angry at a mountain. Far better to exploit the cracks and crevasses than to bemoan the monolith.

A monolith indeed, Dylan thinks to himself as the first of the massive smokestacks appears on the distant peninsula. Somewhere along the way, inequality had gone from a by-product of the monetary system to the *purpose* of the monetary system. Somewhere along the way, property went from a way to accumulate wealth to a way to display wealth. These houses, these pillars of wealth, are little more than precursors to graveyard obelisks. Both pervert their natural tasks by aggrandizing far beyond necessity.

But cracks present themselves in places like the seawall, which Dylan now approaches. The wet-towel humidity and dense greenery of the crescent cove, made greener still by the muted skylight, gives the Long Island oasis a Costa Rican feel. The waves swell a little higher in anticipation of the storm. He touches the signet of cinnamon gum before scaling the wall, the mark all plasticity and formed to his thumb.

Dylan takes off his backpack and sits overlooking the bay. The reeds are conspicuously quiet, the animals sensing the weather. He takes out his notebook and works some on his new drawing project: a pastel depiction of the looming smokestacks. He likes rubbing the colors together and the slick satisfaction under his fingers. Why he had never thought to use Aunt Grace's Christmas present before is beyond him..

Clouds from the west slide home like bank security steel, catching Dylan off guard. A bit anxiously now he gets to his task, taking out a trowel and surgical gloves and scanning the seed instructions. His actions go on autopilot as he indulges his new favorite pastime: thinking.

Beachfront property: his own little crack in the system. In a culture where status symbols are accumulated joylessly, for the sake of accumulation, little parcels of land like this must exist all around the world. Neglected back pastures and saggy boathouses; disinherited mountain trails and long forgotten weeping willows. These things will never be seen by dinner guests or important clients. Maintenance is pointless.

That's where Dylan comes in. He doesn't want the rights to the property or any form of compensation. He just wants a spot that's his. Not because a piece of paper says so, but because *common sense* says so. A place to work, to take pride in, to see potential in. A spot that's his in all the ways that matter.

He's through with all the holes fairly quickly: two rows of thirty, three inches deep and three inches apart. As he plants the seeds and slides back the earth, his thoughts take him to World of Demons. He sees more clearly now why it's such an addictive game. Escapism and accumulation come together in unprecedented ways,

with each gold piece, experience point and magic item increasing your in-game status just a little more. And while it's the exotic fantasy world that starts you playing, it's the status symbols that keep you playing, long after you've accomplished all the game has to offer. You sit around the capital city in your badass suit of armor so newbies will message you to tell you how cool you look. You compete in player vs. player warfare five hours a night, even though you don't want to play all that much, just to sustain your in-game title of "High Warlord." You go to the forums to openly mock the newbs and dazzle others with your knowledge of the game.

And all this energy devoted to a game – an accumulation of status symbols that mean even less than their real life counterparts. What could be accomplished if even a quarter of the time devoted to World of Demons was instead devoted to a good cause? 40 hours a week, which if averaged out—

"Hey! Who the hell are you? What are you doing on my property?"

Dylan lurches backwards and loses his balance, nearly tripping over the wall and into the water. He catches himself on the wall's ledge and the trowel escapes his hand, skipping down the concrete ramp and into the rising waters. He looks to the stairs – the old, disrepaired stairs leading up to somewhere unknown. There stand his accusers: One is Zach, one hand on a rickety banister and one pointing at Dylan, the smug satisfaction of a snitch on his face. The other a few steps behind, dressed in a look of wide-eyed fury and a golf shirt that once reminded Dylan of Byzantine art.

It starts to rain.

"Well? What are you still here for? This isn't your property, get off!"

Dylan doesn't know what to do. Everything that makes him who he is is telling him to obey: to obey an adult, to obey the law, to obey the shrill pounding in his chest. But Dylan doesn't move.

Vince's breath becomes audible from twenty feet away. He lumbers past his son and makes for Dylan like a manager charging the home plate umpire. He crouches down to get in Dylan's face.

"I'm going to say this one more time. Get off my property NOW!"

Dylan turns his head from Vince and looks down at the water.

"This isn't your property."

Vince leans forward over the wall to look at Dylan's face. "What?"

Dylan takes a shuddering breath. He turns to look Vince in the eye. A shuddering breath. Without moving his eyes, he puts one foot on the top of the wall, then the other, and stands up to full height. On the wall, he's taller.

"All the beach. Up to the tidelines. Is public property. That includes the seawalls. I am on public property."

The rain starts to pick up, matching the pace of a light jog. Vince scratches the back of his head in a short burst. Against his short shorn scalp, it sounds like a doctor signing off on a release form.

"You're really asking for it, kid."

Vince's stature is too imposing for Dylan to stand toe to toe against. He turns his back to him and walks the top of the wall down to his backpack. Crouching down, he fiddles with the pockets as though looking for something.

"It sounds like you don't know your own property lines."

"Okay, smart guy, fine." Vince takes out his cell phone. "Hello. Is this the police? Yes. I need an officer to come to my house; there's someone trespassing on my property that refuses to leave."

Vince manages to turn even the street address into a threat with his tone. Zach comes up alongside his father, the same self-satisfied look on his face. Dylan's clothing is starting to soak.

"Yes. And have him come through the house to the back. There's a set of stairs that lead to the water. Thank you." Vince flips the phone closed.

"Well, you're in for it now. We could have done this the easy way. Now you're looking at trespassing, destruction of property, harassment. You could be going to court."

"You're gonna look real stupid when you're wrong." What was he even saying anymore? Dylan knows he's lying. He had heard something once about tidelines being public domain, but who knows if it was true, and why would it possibly apply so seawalls? He's past the point of control now, in too deep to do anything but claw and scratch. His innocence pairs with his imagination to create impossible, half-formed scenarios of punishment, embarrassment and shame – each one concluding with a heart breaking look of disappointment from his mother. He's never been more afraid in his life. But he refuses to back down.

The rain steps up to a run, dispelling the remaining humidity and turning the bay air chilly. Zach and his father cover themselves under the canopy of the hill a few feet to Dylan's left. Dylan remains exposed on the wall, trying not to look cold. Father and son look most alike when they're smiling.

"So," Vince says, "did you really think you could push around someone smaller than you and get away with it?"

Dylan wouldn't have thought comedy was possible in a situation like this, but there it was. "Man, he really has you and your wife played, doesn't he? Your *son* charged *me*; I was defending myself."

Vince looks at Zach. "I charged him because he was making fun of me," he pouts.

"Your son introduced himself by throwing a football at my head."

"You just missed catching it."

"That's not even a good lie. You really are retarded."

"Hey!" Vince shouts, getting back in Dylan's face. "Don't you dare call my son names, ever. Especially not on my property. I'd believe ten of his 'lies' before I'd believe one of your 'truths.'"

Vince is a foot away from Dylan, pointing up at him with his index finger in a furious pose. There are so many things Dylan is terrified of right now, but suddenly Vince isn't one of them. Ten lies

before one truth? That doesn't even make sense. And all this barking, barking. All he's good at is yelling loud. Not even yelling things that make sense. It's unnerving, but it doesn't lead to anything but more yelling. He's just a big, loud idiot.

It had taken him over two and a half years, but Dylan is finally a teenager.

"Yea, his Mom believes his lies, too. That's the problem."

"Don't you dare bring my wife into this you little brat."

"Hey Dad, look," Zach says, holding up the discarded seed packet. "He was planting flowers. What a fag."

"What?" Vince walks over to his son and examines the packet. "Heh heh. Geraniums, huh? What, were they out of Pansies?"

Dylan says nothing as the two laugh at his expense. Vince squints at Dylan.

"And...are you wearing *surgical gloves* to plant flowers? Seriously, do you have a mental disorder? It seems like you're the retarded one, kid, not Zach. Planting flowers on someone else's property without them knowing? You realize that's crazy, right?"

Dylan unzips his bag and throws the dirty gloves inside. His hair is sopping wet. "You have all this beautiful property and you don't give a shit about it. You just let it go to crap because all you care about is impressing people with your view over expensive dinners. If it can't impress someone, it's not worth it, right? You don't want friends, you want jealous worshippers."

Dylan readies himself for the barking. What comes instead is a smile.

"Let me tell you something, kid – a little free advice before the cops come. *Money is everything*. It is the *only* thing. You think it's all about impressing people? I don't give a fuck if they're impressed or not, so long as they know I'm *better* than they are.

"It's about power. You think you're unique? You think you understand the truth? I don't give a fuck what you think the truth is. People like me *make* the truth. People like me *own* people like *you*. And one day, when you grow up, people like *Zach* will own people like you. *That's* the truth. Deal with it."

The wind is whipping now; no one is safe from the rain.

"You're wrong."

Vince laughs. "About what?"

"You're just a shallow, hollow person."

"Oh, here it is, yea. You see, Zach, poor people like to tell themselves that rich people are really unhappy. It makes them feel better about being poor. I know you live around here somewhere, so you can't even be that poor. You're just a loser.

"Trust me, I'm happier than you'll ever be. I've done more things than you'll *ever* do, I've *seen* more than you'll ever *see*, I've got more friends than you'll ever have, and fucking surprise, I have friends. I have more money than you'll ever have, I've slept with more women than you will ever sleep with—"

"Dad, he's never even kissed a girl!"

"Oh, I know. He's a loser, son. If we're not unhappy or stupid or friendless, he has nothing to live for."

Dylan looks out over the water. He's been looking out over the water for some time now. A shuddering breath. "I'm not leaving the wall."

"Hah. Oh yea? That's it? Fine, what do I care; get more wet. The cops will be here soon."

Dylan doesn't reply. The gusts off the water are starting to taper. Dylan's water-logged tee-shirt is suctioned to the pudge of his belly. Vince surveys the land behind the wall, Zach trailing behind.

"You know...I don't think the realtor brought me down here when I bought the plot. You're right, kid, this is a beautiful spot, even in the rain. All wild and natural. You know what? Maybe we'll fix this place up. Fix the steps, cut down the trees, knock this wall down, put up a deck. It'd be a nice place to eat dinner in the summers. Yea. I like it."

"I like it too, Dad."

"Good."

Dylan grits his teeth. Fear is a distant emotion now, far eclipsed by a shivering rage of his own. Something is different from all the other times: He wants to hurt Vince. Badly. He wants

to kill him, to smash his skull against a jutting piece of the wall and see his brain spill out like runny eggs. He wants it badly. He counts the rings on the smokestacks, twelve of them, over and over and over again, over and over again.

The sound of footsteps brings all the fear right back. The officer wears a police-issue rain shell with the crest on the right breast. It's tucked into his pants to allow for easy access to his belt. A government-issued pistol is holstered at his side.

"Okay, what's the problem here?"

"Thank you for coming, officer. This boy here won't get off my property. I need you to escort him off."

"Officer, isn't all the beach up to the tidelines public property?"

"Yes, that's right," he says, hands on hips.

"So shouldn't the seawall be public property too?"

"They are public property."

"Really?"

"What?"

The officer holds up his hands. "Wait, hold on. The way it works is the walls are public property but it's trespassing to be on them."

"What?"

"Okay. Thank you, officer."

"But...but how can it be public property if the public can't use it?"

"Son, I don't know the particulars. I just know the law."

"But...that's garbage! It doesn't make any sense!"

"Son, you're gonna have to leave now," the cop says firmly, somehow gently.

Dylan looks back over the water again. It's hard to see anything through fog and welled tears. The rain is dying down. He slides on his backpack and slowly walks the wall's top, always looking straight ahead. Zach and Vince are in his periphery, arms folded, silent. As he passes by he can feel the superiority radiating off of them.

The storm-swelled waters claim all the beachfront for themselves, right up to the reeds. He steps off the wall a few feet from where the waves break, the sand malleable like putty. A wave comes by to submerge his shoes.

"How about I give you a ride home, son?"

Dylan turns to look at the officer. His gold-rimmed glasses are speckled with water droplets. His face lacks any definition, the relevant contours all stored away in baby fat. The part of his black hair has been washed away, leaving pointed tufts splayed left and right. His smooth lips, pale from the cold, conceal naturally perfect teeth. His eyes are the eerie blue of Argentine glaciers, whites charged red with emotion. His eyebrows thin to a clean point. His nose is straight and runny. There's a freckle on his right ear people often mistake for an earring.

"No, thank you." The officer calls after him but Dylan keeps going, walking a strip of half dry sand edging the reeds. He hears Vince shouting as though it were still pouring.

"Thanks for coming out officer, can I offer you a drink?"

The officers reply is too soft to hear.

"Oh, no. I insist. Come on, let me show you my rec room."

Dylan walks with his head down, arms folded. Each breath convulses with suppressed emotion. For some reason, through the rage and tears, he thinks of his father. About something he said, or rather did, a long time ago. It happened at the Howard Johnson's where he and his father used to stay on weekends. Dylan had stubbed his toe in the bathroom and was hopping around the room crying. Soon the pain subsided and all that was left was an angry child. Dylan's father took Dylan into the bathroom.

"Bad bathtub!" He said, slapping the tub on it's ledge.

"Bad, bad bathtub!"

Dylan joined in, yelling "bad bathtub, bad bathtub" and slapping the tub until his tiny hands were pink. When he was through, Dylan's father gave him a hug.

"You let Dad know if the bathtub hurts you again, okay?"

But this isn't a bathtub, and he isn't three. And fathers don't save the day, and truth doesn't mean anything. Bad people win, good people lose, and everyone else tries not to notice. So lies the shade of his day.

But...this is life, and that burning throat is high octane vitriol. This is real, and that stooped posture is fate's buoy tug. This is Dylan, patron saint of sagging walls.

His road to salvation sinks softly.