

THE SUMMER OF THE METS



a novel

by levi asher

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Levi Asher

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One

It was only the first inning, and Chris's parents were already getting on his nerves.

He was fifteen years old, too old to be sitting in Shea Stadium with his parents and little sister. Other kids his age went to games with friends. They drank beer and smoked cigarettes and yelled obnoxious things at the other team. Chris sat with his family, dreading the thought that someone from school might be there to see him.

Lenny Dykstra hit a single, Wally Backman sent him to second, and the crowd began doing the Wave. Chris sat while his parents and sister leapt to their feet. The hot dog man came by and Chris ordered two, and it infuriated him when his parents found this the ultimate in hilarity.

"Both for you?" his mother asked, leaning over with that stupid cheerful smile he was so sick of. His father leaned over to see Chris with a hot dog in each hand and grinned idiotically. Missy started tittering too.

"What's the matter?" Chris yelled. "Is it really so funny for somebody to eat two hot dogs?"

He hated to even dignify their stupidity with a response, but he couldn't hold it in. "Is it really that funny?"

"Dear, relax," his mother said. "I think you have to learn what 'good-natured laughter' means."

Chris was so mad his words sputtered. "I don't care. I don't mind good-natured laughter, I just can't stand people who laugh when there's nothing to laugh about. I'm having two hot dogs, I just want to know, do you really think that's the most hilarious thing you've seen all year. Is it? Is it really that funny?"

A Darryl Strawberry line drive shot out between two lunging St. Louis Cardinal infielders, bringing Lenny Dykstra home. The crowd burst into giddy applause. "No, I suppose it isn't," his mother said, her lips pursed.

"Then don't act like it is," Chris hissed.

A day later, he was still yelling about it to his friend Brian. "I can't stand them, they're constantly laughing about stupid things," he said. "They don't know how to do anything except laugh. I'm fifteen years old, do you really think it's so incredibly humorous for someone my age to eat two hot dogs? Do you think that's up there with the best of John Belushi or Steve Martin?"

They were hanging out in Brian's driveway. Brian's father had just driven home with a brand new Audi, so Brian wasn't too interested in Chris's problems. "Will you shut up about that already, and look at this car?" Brian yelled at Chris, gazing

in at the dashboard through the open driver's seat window.

Chris followed behind as Brian paced around the new car. Brian wasn't even pretending to listen, and it was obvious he didn't understand what Chris was talking about. Chris didn't even know himself why he felt so bugged about it. It was just the memory of her stupid, cheerful smile, when she leaned over to make fun of him. "I gotta make sure my parents never go to a picnic, cause if they ever saw somebody eat two hot dogs and a hamburger they'd probably go into convulsions and die."

Brian continued to ignore Chris. He stepped back to examine the car from a distance, and stood with his arms folded, shaking his head with appreciation. "A fucking Audi, I can't believe it, right here in my own driveway," he said. "I'm gonna get my learner's permit in an Audi. Do you know how many people wish they had an Audi?"

Chris didn't care much about cars, and before today had never even heard of an 'Audi'. He stood with Brian and pretended politely to be interested. A piece of paper was stuck to one of the side windows. "What's this for?" he asked.

"That tells people it's a new car," Brian said. "And for like six months after you buy it, when you park in a parking lot you park diagonally in two spaces, so nobody scratches it."

"Uh-huh." Chris was bored.

Brian's father was in the front seat, trying to get the tape deck to work. "Are your clothes

clean?" Brian asked, checking Chris out. "Okay, you can sit inside."

They climbed into the back seat. Brian's father grinned at Chris, as if Chris was supposed to be overcome with pleasure at this moment. "What do you think?" Brian's father asked.

"I don't know," Chris said.

Brian turned and glared at him. "Don't be a retard," he whispered, and then said to his father, "Excuse him, he's just in shock at being in a good car for a change."

Chris always thought Brian's father looked weird. He was about the same age as Chris's own father, and had lines in his face and old-looking skin, but he had a blow-dried haircut like kids in high school and wore tinted glasses all the time. He'd never paid much attention to Chris, but now he asked, "What does your father drive?"

Chris realized he didn't know. "I forget," he said.

Brian looked at Chris like he was pitiful. "He drives a fucking '81 Buick Skyhawk!" he yelled gleefully to his father. Brian's father laughed, and Chris realized for the first time that his own father didn't drive a good car.

Out of boredom, Chris and Brian had planned to spend the day riding their bikes to the Brooktown Mall. The Brooktown Mall was the biggest mall on Long Island and had the best stores, but it was several towns away from Paukatuck, and nobody Chris knew had ever made the journey by bike. Chris and Brian often rode

their bikes to the local shopping center in Paukatuck, but the Mall was about fifteen miles each way, and Chris and Brian had been planning for a long time to attempt this journey. They lived several miles from each other, so they'd originally planned to meet at a halfway point between them and go to the mall from there, until this morning when Brian called and told Chris there was something at his house he had to see. Chris rode his bike to Brian's house, and the thing he'd had to see turned out to be the Audi. Now Chris had already ridden six miles to get to Brian's house, and he was worried that the trek to the Mall might turn out to be too much, that they'd end up conking out and calling one of the parents to pick them up. But he was still willing to try, and he was bored staring at the Audi, so he nagged Brian until Brian agreed to get going.

Once on the road, Chris asked him, "Your father lets you say 'fuck'?"

"Sure, I can say whatever I want," Brian said. As they continued to ride, Brian started singing it like a song, "Fuck fuck fuck fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck, fuck fuck, fuck fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck."

They rode without talking much, except that Brian occasionally returned to the song. "Come on, sing along," he told Chris. Chris didn't respond.

They got to the mall without too much problem, but then once they were inside the mall Brian started singing the song again, not so loudly

that Chris thought they'd get in trouble, but loudly enough that people stared as they walked. Brian was always embarrassing Chris in public. He was starting to regret being there with him. Brian sang as they walked right past an old lady with a little girl, and Chris jabbed him. "Cut it out!"

"Fuck off!" Brian yelled loudly. Brian never cared if people thought he was an asshole, which they usually did. Chris didn't care if people thought Brian was an asshole, which he figured was the truth anyway, but he did mind that people knew Brian was his best friend. A lot of times he pretended they weren't especially friends, that they were just people who happened to talk to each other sometimes. This is how Chris made it bearable to eat lunch with Brian at school, where Brian was always getting made fun of and beaten up for acting like an idiot. The main reason Chris and Brian were friends was that neither had anybody else to sit with at lunch.

The most important thing they had to do at the Mall was get videos, so they went to the video store first. There were only a few video stores on Long Island that Brian could go to, because the VCR in his house was the better kind, the QuadMax format that was so expensive most people didn't have it yet, and hardly any stores had started carrying QuadMax tapes yet. It got an incredibly good picture, though, better than VHS ever could, for reasons Brian had tried to explain that Chris didn't really listen to. Of course, Chris's parents still had a regular old VHS format VCR,

and Brian refused to even watch that kind, because the quality was so much worse. So Chris always used to watch movies at Brian's house, but Brian never let Chris rent the movies he wanted to watch. Chris was so sick of watching the stupid science-fiction and action movies that Brian always got that lately when he and Brian went to the mall together he'd just been renting his own videos with his Dad's card, and watching them alone at his own house. Today Brian got "Star Trek III" and "Missing in Action," both of which he'd seen already, and Chris got "The Breakfast Club", which he'd seen already, and the AC/DC movie, "Let There Be Rock", which Brian made fun of the whole time they stood at the counter.

They passed a poster store with a big Dwight Gooden poster in it's window, and that started Brian making fun of the Mets. Most people on Long Island were Mets fans, not Yankee fans, and Chris's brother and father and uncles and cousins were all fanatical about the team. Brian and his father were both Yankees fans, which was unusual on Long Island. But since the Yankees were a better team, this meant that Brian had the satisfaction of making fun of everybody else.

This year the Mets were surprising everybody, and a few people were even talking about the possibility of a Mets World Series. This hadn't happened in many years, and it was hard for anyone to imagine. But Mets fever was in the air, which was why Brian had lately been tearing into them even more than he usually did. "Dwight

Bad-en," he said as they passed the poster in the window, apparently thinking himself very witty. "They're gonna die so bad. They're gonna choke."

Sometimes Chris wasn't even sure how much of a Mets fan he was himself. It was something he associated with his parents, and their whole conventional, boring world. Chris's had been taking the family to Shea Stadium every summer of their lives, and Chris sometimes got really sick of the whole routine. But whenever Brian started insulting the Mets it made Chris feel strangely mad and defensive, and then he'd find himself really caring whether they made it to the World Series or not. The Yankees had made it a couple of times in recent years, but the idea of a Mets World Series seemed so incongruous that it held an odd fascination. What would Brian say if they actually went all the way? Brian wasn't very worried. "Everybody thinks they're gonna keep winning, I can't wait till they choke," he said. "I can't wait to laugh."

Sometimes Chris tried to argue with Brian about baseball, but Brian out-argued him every time. Every time Chris said a word, Brian would just start yelling out statistics and batting averages and names of Yankees like Mattingly and Winfield who everybody knew were better than any of the Mets. Chris didn't actually know anything about baseball at all. He just went to games with his father and ate hot dogs. And just like Brian knew more about cars than Chris did, he also knew more about baseball, and also about how VCR's worked

and why QuadMax was better than VHS, and pretty much everything else too.

Brian continued to yell about the Mets as they walked down the corridors of the mall, still embarrassing Chris with his jerky mannerisms as he called attention to himself with his loud yelping voice. "The Mets are going to the World Series, did you know that?" Brian shouted. "The Mets are going to the World Series, they really are." Chris knew what was coming, since this was one of Brian's favorite lines. "They got good seats, too, right over the Yankees dugout."

Brian wanted to look at a book about Audis, so they went to the bookstore, then they stopped for some food, and then they stopped in at the local head-shop/sex-items shop to look at the lingerie and weird sexual devices that Chris doubted anybody used. The store also had cool tie-dyed t-shirts and music bumper stickers and drug equipment that Chris liked to look at. The coke spoons made him think of the Mets' first baseman, Keith Hernandez. The Mets were his father's world, but at least Keith Hernandez had gotten in trouble once for doing coke. Chris wished he could do coke, or anything, but of course he didn't know anybody who could get it. If he asked Brian about it, he was sure Brian would do something like give him talcum powder and tell him it was coke, or something typically stupid like that.

The next store they passed was the record store, and Chris didn't want to go in with Brian because he knew Brian would start making

remarks about the bands Chris liked. Chris didn't care about what Brian said, except that he was so sick of hearing it. Brian owned only one record, William Shatner singing country music, which he insisted was better than all the stupid bands everybody else listened to. Music was the only thing Chris knew more about than Brian, but he couldn't laugh at Brian for how little he knew like Brian always did to him about everything, because Brian didn't care at all about music. Anytime Chris tried to start making fun of him about it Brian would somehow turn it around and make Chris feel like there was something wrong with him because he was into music.

They walked by the record store without going in, but Chris spotted Sean Lamana standing alone looking through a stack of records. Sean Lamana and his group of friends were, to Chris, the coolest people in the high school, the ones Chris yearned to be friends with. Sean was the lead singer and guitarist in a band that sometimes played in the cafeteria at school, doing cover versions of Aerosmith, Van Halen, Pink Floyd, U2. Sean's best friend was Adam Meltzer, and everybody in the school knew Adam because he was always the star of all the school plays, and he sang beautifully and people said he was definitely going to be famous someday. He also had the longest hair of any guy in the school, way down his back, and always wore weird stuff like tie-dyed t-shirts with leather pants.

Adam's girlfriend was Eileen Hewitt, and Sean's was Patty Zipper. Chris had been in love with both girls for years. They were the artists of the school. They painted and sculpted and drew, often coming up with weird, funny stuff that got displayed in the hallways and won awards. It had always impressed Chris how the four of them were so popular with the teachers in the school, since they were always cutting classes and getting into trouble and smoking joints with the burnout crowd out in the football field during lunch. They were sort of the creative derelicts of the high school, and Chris had been watching them since junior high. One day Eileen and Patty had come to school both dressed as kittens, in black leotards and tights with ears and whiskers and tails, and Chris was just knocked out, and even cut a class so he could sit in the cafeteria and look at the incredible sight of Eileen's enticing medium-sized breasts inside her tight black leotard, and Patty's incredible curvy ass with her taped-on tail sticking in the air. Brian, of course, said they looked like a bunch of idiots, and didn't even look twice. But Chris never forgot the image. And a lot of people had made fun of Patty and Eileen that day, but since they didn't tell anybody why they did it, nobody could really make fun of them effectively, because really everybody was wondering why they were doing it, and that's why Chris thought it was so cool. More than anything else in the world, he wanted to be a part of their secret society.

Whenever he was in a class with Patty or Eileen, he would stare at them the whole class long, because they were so beautiful to him. He always tried to sit a couple of rows behind them and off to the side, and then he could just look at their breasts for the whole period. Since they were both art students, Chris had started taking art classes as his electives, even though he couldn't just sit and look at them in the art classes, because they were all workshop classes where everybody just worked on their own things in different parts of the room. But the funny thing that happened, though, was that he turned out to have a talent for drawing. Mr. Brill, the teacher who ran the art workshop, took an interest in Chris, and after a while told him that he believed if Chris wanted to he could be a professional artist if he was willing to work hard at it. He had Chris enter a competition to get into a summer arts program for talented high school students that went on for a month at an upstate college campus every summer. Students from all over the state submitted portfolios, and seventy-five were accepted for the program, and the portfolio that Mr. Brill helped Chris put together was one of the winners. Now Chris was supposed to be going to the program in about a month. Mr. Brill thought Chris should be very excited about it, but Chris was more uneasy about it than anything else, because he had no idea what to expect. But the day he'd gotten accepted Mr. Brill had announced it to the art class, and then Eileen had come up to him and said, "Oh, god,

you're so lucky." Then she whisked away without waiting for Chris to say anything, which was good because he would have been tongue-tied anyway.

The other thing that happened in art class was that for a final project Chris did a big painting of Van Halen in concert, three feet by three feet, and he started spending his lunch hour working on it in the workshop, and it came out so good even he was surprised. He got their faces just right, with David Lee Roth sneering into the microphone and Eddie Van Halen sort of leaning into him holding his guitar in the air, the drummer far behind the two of them, and a bright orange background in the center that swirled into a deep, dark purple around the edges. The background was the thing that really made it work. It looked like a violent explosion coming out of Eddie's guitar. Chris hadn't even known what he was doing when he created this intense background, and he sometimes stood staring at in admiration, wondering himself how he'd come up with such a cool thing. Other times, Patty and Eileen would be on their side of the room working on their paintings, and Sean Lamana and Adam Meltzer would come around and hang out with them while they worked. One of these times Sean noticed Chris's painting, and started coming over to talk to Chris while he worked and tell him how much he liked it. This filled Chris with happiness even though it made him very nervous, because he could never believe Sean Lamana was actually talking to him. Chris tried to seem casual about it

when Sean would wander over to see how it was going, and once, when he started work on the Eddie's guitar and Sean was standing over him watching, Chris asked him, "Do you know anybody who plays guitar?" as if he didn't know that Sean did, even though practically everybody in the school knew about Sean's band. For some reason it made him feel better to pretend he didn't know who Sean was. "Yeah, I do," Sean said, and then Chris asked him for advice on what kind of guitar Eddie played, since he was working from a photograph that just had Eddie's face. Sean said he had a really good photo at home that showed the guitar in close-up, and that he'd bring it to school the next day. Chris didn't even imagine that Sean would actually remember to bring it, but the next day Sean handed him a copy of Guitar Player magazine with Van Halen on the cover. He had even folded over the corners of the pages inside that had good pictures Chris could use.

Now Sean was in the record store, and Chris felt an urge to walk past him, to let Sean see him looking through records or something. He walked by the store with Brian, not showing any interest in going in, and then when Brian found a store he wanted to go into Chris said, "Okay, you go in, I'll be right back," and rushed off before Brian could ask where he was going. He went back to the record store and went in, and then he walked right by Sean, not looking at him, as if he hadn't noticed him standing there. As he walked past, his eyes fixed straight ahead, he had a weird sensation that

Sean was looking at him and waiting for him to turn and say hi, even though Chris figured there was a good chance that Sean wouldn't remember who he was anymore, since school had been out for over a month, and he didn't see why Sean would remember him. Still, he fixed his gaze steadily forward, and then, just on the chance that Sean might be looking at him, quickly started looking at the stacks of records, trying to find some band that Sean would like whose records he could look through. Van Halen was too obvious, and Chris had all their albums already anyway, but he remembered Sean wearing a U2 concert t-shirt to school one day, and so he started looking through the U2 records, holding them up and considering them profoundly so Sean could see him lost in his thoughts. He studied several album covers. Then he walked briskly out of the store and found Brian standing in the middle of the walkway wondering where he'd gone.

When Brian and Chris left the mall their legs were tired from the long ride there and from walking through the mall, and they both dreaded the ride back. But it was a challenge, something they could be proud of having done once it was finished. Brian invited Chris to come over and watch his videos, but with all the riding Chris had done today he didn't want to ride any more than he had to. It was about twelve miles to the intersection where they would separate, and then about three or four miles more for each of them. At least, Chris thought, today they'd done

something they'd never done before, something they could be proud of. His legs ached, but he wanted to see if they could go the whole way without stopping to rest. As they rode silently, keeping up a good speed and not talking, he realized that sometimes, usually when there weren't other people around, in a way he really liked being friends with Brian. As long as they were concentrating on their riding and not talking to each other, being with Brian wasn't so much worse than being with anybody else, and he even felt a new respect for Brian that he, like Chris, had been able to complete this long bicycle trek.

After a few miles, Brian stopped Chris and said he knew a good shortcut down some side roads, and Chris followed him, and as the sun started to set and they rode silently, Chris was feeling strangely happy. They rode through miles and miles of unfamiliar streets, the sky getting darker and darker. All of a sudden they stopped in front of a familiar house, and Chris realized what Brian had done. They were right in Brian's driveway.

"Ha ha, you just escorted me to my house," Brian said. Chris couldn't believe he'd been so stupid. It was almost completely dark, and it was getting cold and his legs were really killing him, and now after riding thirty miles in a day he would have to ride six more to get home. "Now that you're here, chump, why don't you watch these movies with me," Brian said.

Chris just stared at him, unable to think of anything to say. He was so mad he couldn't talk, because if Brian knew how mad he was he would just laugh harder. "No," Chris said, furious at not having anything meaner to say.

"Okay, see you later," Brian said, a big nasty grin on his face, and he started opening his garage to put his bike away. Chris began the long ride home.

Chris's summer so far had consisted of wandering around the house with nothing to do, listening to records that he'd heard too many times, sitting in the kitchen eating between meals just because he was bored, occasionally doing something with Brian, sometimes playing games or doing something else with Missy the brat and, more than anything else, watching TV. He watched TV in the morning, the afternoon, and the night, usually feeling so bitter he often had the sensation that he was never more than a minute away from crying, even though he hadn't actually cried once all summer. It was by far the worst summer of his life, mostly because until this summer he'd always had his older brother and sister around. They were twins, and last year when Chris had started tenth grade they'd both gone away to college. David went to Buffalo State, and Susan to Oneonta. All year Chris looked forward to them coming home for the summer, but then all of a sudden David decided to get a summer job in

Buffalo and Susan made plans to go to Europe with a friend. And now even Missy, who was three years younger than Chris, had more friends than Chris did and didn't spend much time around the house.

Watching TV all day really scared Chris. The days went by with no shape or significance, every day the same, the weekdays no different from the weekends except that different shows were on, and every night when Chris climbed into his bed and turned his light out, he felt afraid that the day had gone by without him even being alive during it, that his days were just consisting of time slipping by, without him having any grip on it at all. He watched movies and comedies and police shows and talk shows so much he sometimes felt he was becoming a person who didn't have a self at all, and that made him scared that he was going to go insane, that whatever person was inside of him was transforming into somebody he didn't even know, who could do something violent or crazy without him even having any control over himself anymore. He prayed every night, and said the same thing, "Hi God, it's me again. Please don't let me go insane. Bless everybody. Goodnight." He didn't say more because he thought it might be a presumption to take up too much of God's time, and he also was careful to always be lying straight in bed facing up when he prayed, because he'd developed a superstition that if he faced down, towards Hell, that the devil might intercept the prayers intended for God. He feared the devil and

Hell more than was normal, he knew. It would especially surprise his parents, if they knew about his praying, since they weren't even sure what religion they were and had pretty much raised him without any one particular religion. His fear of the devil had started when he saw "The Exorcist" on TV at Brian's house. It had been on regular TV, not video, and since Brian and his father had already seen it on video they spent the whole movie complaining about how they'd taken all the scary parts out for TV. But the scary parts they'd left in were enough to put Chris out of commission for a month. For that month he was afraid to even take the garbage out at night, because he had a feeling that, for some reason, he would be exactly the kind of person the devil would decide to victimize, if he wanted to victimize someone. It was around that time that he'd started praying. The moments he spent praying were probably the only moments of his day that seemed meaningful at all to him. His days weren't completely shapeless, just almost completely.

Even though he would be going to this art program in July, Chris didn't do much artwork at home. He did a little, but he'd never been as interested in art as everybody thought he was. He just liked the types of people who took art classes, and yet he seemed to have talent that surprised everybody else. He liked music much more than art, but with his allowance he could only afford about one new album a month, and he'd already listened to the albums he had so much he'd

memorized every one of them, and sometimes couldn't even stand to hear them anymore.

Friday and Saturday nights were the worst nights of the week for him, because there were no good shows on TV, and because Chris knew that these were the nights when everybody else his age was out hanging out in parking lots or going to concerts or sneaking into bars. The night after his bike ride to the mall with Brian, he saved his AC/DC video until his parents went up to their room, and then snuck into their liquor cabinet and made himself a rum and coke. He'd never drunk before except for one beer his brother had given him, and he had only gotten the idea for this drink because he'd seen somebody ask for a rum and coke on a TV show, and he hoped, since he had no way of really knowing, that a rum and coke was made by mixing rum with coke. He didn't know how much of each to use, so he decided half and half would be safe, and then turned off the living room lights and got comfortable in the couch and started up the video, but then just as he was afraid of, the worst thing that could happen happened. His father decided to come down and see how Chris was doing. "Whatcha watching?" his dad asked cheerfully, and Chris could see that his father was in his feeling-sorry-for-Chris mode, which Chris hated completely. Chris managed to crawl all the way to the other side of the couch so his father couldn't tell what he was drinking, but then his father decided to watch the movie with his son. Chris couldn't believe this was happening.

Watching an AC/DC movie with your father, he thought, is about as much fun as going to the prom with your mother.

Then his father said, "Chris, you know, I know you may sometimes feel as if you don't have as many friends as you wish you had, but . . . well, this might sound a little corny to you, but I'd like to think that you can think of me as a friend, if you want to." More than anything else, it shocked Chris to realize that his father had so little understanding of human nature that he would think it made anything better for him to say that. Of course it made everything worse. The best thing his father could do, if he wanted to do something, was pretend not to notice that Chris had no really good friends.

Luckily, there was no way his father could have tolerated more than two songs by AC/DC, so after ten minutes passed with nothing but stony silence from his son, he started to yawn and said he'd thought he'd turn in for the night. Having him leave was a great relief. Chris returned to his rum and coke and it was delicious, but his father had ruined the illusion. Before he'd been feeling almost good, but now he couldn't enjoy it anymore, and he seemed incredibly pathetic to himself. He was so pathetic, thinking that by drinking alone and watching a cool concert movie he could be like the people who were out somewhere drinking with their friends at that moment, or like the happy, rowdy crowd at the concert on the video. Chris wasn't even in their world, he wasn't even

close, and he never would be. He was a loner, not by choice, but by default. Only by pretending he wanted to be a loner could he make it bearable that he was alone.

Sean and Patty and Eileen and Adam were hanging out in Elaine's bedroom getting stoned and watching MTV. "Hey, you know who I saw in the mall yesterday?" Sean said, as they passed a joint around. "That kid in your art class, the one who did the Van Halen painting."

"Yeah, Chris whatever-his-name-is," Patty said. "He got into the art program at Agora."

"That art thing you guys tried to get into? Well, that's good, he should. His painting, shit, that was a masterpiece. I couldn't believe how he really captured their expressions, like he really just captured them, it was amazing."

"It was all right," Eileen said. "It was just representational art, you know, I wouldn't say it was that great."

"That painting of Van Halen?" Adam said. "I saw that, I thought it was pretty fucking talented."

"Oh, Eileen's just pissed off cause she wanted to go to that thing," Patty said. "We know the painting was good."

"Well, it's such a waste for that stupid kid to get to go there instead of us," Eileen said. "You know, it's supposed to be like such a great scene there, the people who went last year raved about it,

like they got high constantly and they said even the teachers were really cool and you had a lot of freedom and it was just like the coolest scene there, with the coolest people. And this stupid guy won't even enjoy it, you know I still never heard him say a word to anybody in school."

"Well, so he's a serious artist," Sean said. "I like that, he's a loner, he's into his work. You gotta admit, that painting was amazing. You know what I was thinking of, though. If I see him again, I want to ask him if he'd sell it to me."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I wanted to ask you guys, you know, like I have no idea what kind of price to offer, you know, I don't know anything about buying art, I thought you could tell me what you think a fair price would be."

"Well, why do you wanna buy it?" Patty asked.

"I dunno, to put on my wall or something. How much should I offer him?"

"I don't know, people don't sell paintings they do in art class in high school," Eileen scoffed, annoyed at this stranger getting so much attention from her friend. "I really don't think it's like the New York art scene, you know, like I really don't think there's an established price range."

"What were you thinking of offering?" Patty asked.

"I don't know -- fifty bucks?" Sean said.

"Fifty bucks!" Patty and Eileen both screeched. "Sean, I'm gonna kill you!" Patty

yelled. "I give you so much of my work, you hardly even ever say you like it."

"I'm so pissed off," Eileen pouted. "That stupid kid, he's probably gonna end up a rich artist living in the city, he gets everything, I get nothing. Mr. Brill thinks he's the best artist in our grade, you know. He doesn't say it, but he thinks it. And he gets to go live on a college campus for a month, and he won't even fucking enjoy it!"

"Well, Eileen, you know at least he'll probably get some serious artwork done there," Adam said. "I'm sure you would just party out the whole month."

"Partying is an art," Eileen said. Then a good video came on MTV, and their attention was diverted.

Two

Mr. Blomberg hadn't wanted to buy a computer. He'd bought it for his kids, because they'd said all the other kids had computers in their homes. He hadn't wanted to deprive them of the latest technology. So he bought a Macintosh Plus with a printer and an external disk drive for more than two thousand dollars.

But something went wrong when he brought it home. Missy took a look at the boxy beige machine and became scared. Chris had begged for a computer just the day before, but he reacted as if his father, by actually buying one, was now pressuring him to use it. When Mr. Blomberg turned it on for the first time Chris was too busy to join in, and Missy watched for about two minutes before getting a phone call from one of her twelve-year-old girlfriends and losing interest.

Mr. Blomberg hadn't even wanted to use a computer himself, but he was the only one willing to touch it, and so he spent two weeks trying to figure it out. He understood very little of what he

was doing, and called many friends for help. Finally, way past midnight after a long day, while everyone else in the house slept, Mr. Blomberg made an amazing breakthrough and created a drawing with the MacPaint program which he saved to disk and printed on the computer without a single disaster.

Now that he had beaten the thing, he wanted to share the pleasure with someone else in the family. But he didn't want to push himself on the kids. He hinted about the next day it at dinner, talking about the fun he was having, but the kids stared at him like he was insane. That night after dinner he finally gave his first lesson, not to his kids but to his wife.

Judy was not very enthusiastic either. She sat obediently and watched as he set everything up, but there was a certain tenseness about her face. "Okay," he said, after explaining that they were going to draw a picture on the computer screen. "You just move the mouse until the little arrow is in the box with the paintbrush, and then you click once. It's easy, really, don't be afraid."

She moved the arrow on the computer screen, positioning it exactly inside the paintbrush box with exaggerated effort, and then looked at him. "And?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Click the button once."

She seemed distracted. From Chris's bedroom upstairs, they heard a blast of loud music. They'd spoken to him about playing his music too

loud, but he seemed to have to be reminded again every day. "Oh no," Judy said when the noise started. "Not this again. Why won't he use his headphones?"

"Because he thinks the noise will drown him out when he sings along. Do you want me to go talk to him?"

"No," she said. "Forget it, I'll only get more aggravated. Let's just do this."

"Okay," he said. "Now you have the paintbrush, so all you have to do is move it over to the big white area, and then you can start painting."

She moved the mouse, but nothing showed on the screen. "No, hold the button down while you do it," he said. She clicked the button, but now she was in the wrong box and had lost her paintbrush. "No . . . ," he said. "I'm sorry, that was my fault." He apologized for explaining it badly and confusing her. "Now you have to go back and get the paintbrush again, so you . . . ". When he saw the look on her face, he decided to take the mouse and do it himself instead.

It was difficult to relax with the loud music blaring through the house. Mr. Blomberg wanted this to be a pleasant training session, but the screeching music with its booming percussive beat was ruining the mood.

Judy was drawing thick black lines on the screen now. "That's good, see, now you know how to do it," he said. "So, play around with it, have fun with it, you know, you can do artwork with it."

She just looked at the screen. "Maybe I've learned enough for tonight," she said.

"I was so happy last night when I figured out how to do this," he said.

"Oh, I know," she said. "I'm sorry. Maybe after dinner isn't the best time to do this, I'm sorry, I'm just tired. I'm just not in the right mood. I'm not having fun."

"You're not?"

"I do want to learn, I just . . . I'm not in the right frame of mind."

"Okay," he said.

"It's the music, too. I'm going to go tell him to lower it. Will you be coming upstairs soon?"

"Yeah. I guess I'll just work a little more."

"Okay," she said. She smiled. "Thanks for not forcing me to take my lesson." She kissed him and went upstairs.

She wasn't the one he'd bought it for anyway, he thought. He stared at the screen with its unearthly blue glow and thought about Chris. He'd selected this particular kind of computer with Chris in mind, because of Chris's surprising sudden ability with visual art. But Chris hadn't even looked at the paint program yet. What, Mr. Blomberg wondered, had he done wrong? The kids had detected how much he'd wanted them to enjoy it, and that had been the mistake. He was guilty of hoping for scenes of family togetherness, of imagining they would work on it together, that he would sit in front of it with Chris on one knee and Missy on the other, and that Judy would be

leaning over his shoulder holding some sort of casserole dish in her hands and looking happily at whatever was happening on the screen. That was why they hated it.

Mr. Blomberg sat on the couch and listened to the sounds coming from Chris's bedroom. The music was familiar, because Chris tended to play the same one album side over and over for weeks, and then switch to a different one. Chris had been very closed off to the rest of the family lately.

When he talked to anyone it was usually to complain about something, and other than that his voice was not often heard around the house at all. The music that emanated from his room served as a surrogate voice. Coming from a kid as thoughtful and nice and often lonely as Chris, this surrogate voice was a strangely hostile one. And the lyrics were something else.

The noise that was now playing segued into a familiar song that Mr. Blomberg had come to know as the Masturbation Song. He didn't know the real title or who the singer was, but the words began, "I knew a girl named Nicky, I guess you could say she was a sex fiend. I met her in a hotel lobby masturbating with a magazine." Mr. Blomberg almost fell off his chair the first time he heard that one.

He put his feet up on the coffee table and listened, gazing into the Mac's warm glow. He hoped that whatever Chris was going through in this phase of his life wasn't too bad. It had been rough on him when David and Susan went away to

college. Missy missed David and Susan too, of course, but Chris was closer to their age and the three older siblings had formed a tight, intimate unit. All year long Chris had looked forward to them coming home from college for the summer, but then only weeks before the end of the school David decided to work through the summer in Buffalo, and then Susan announced that she was joining her roommate's family on a trip to Europe. Now summer had come and the house was still too empty for Chris.

Mr. Blomberg felt a responsibility, as the father of four sensitive and bright children, to try to make sure their rites of passage didn't turn out to be too hard. At the same time, each of the four kids had made it clear that their parents were not to be let into their inner lives. Missy had not made actually made it clear yet, but she was just twelve and probably would soon. Susan and David had gone through it before Chris. For many years, Susan had been the one he and Judy worried about most. She, not Chris, had been the shy one, the one who seemed unable to break past her self-consciousness and connect with her. In elementary school she used to come home crying and play sick to avoid going back the next morning, and her early teenage years were one hurtful crisis after another. David, her twin, had had problems too. In his pre-teen years, right after the family moved to Paukatuck and the kids switched schools, David suddenly developed a bunch of enemies, kids his age who picked on him for no apparent reason

other than that they outnumbered him. Mr. and Mrs. Blomberg had tried to figure out what David was doing to make this happen, and took him to a child psychologist after an episode in which he'd gotten beat up on the school bus. But they finally concluded that he was doing nothing wrong, that he had been singled out simply because he was the new kid in school and an easy victim, and that the problems would pass.

In the middle of their high school years, things began to go right with both of them. Susan fell in with a new group of friends, the patched jeans and long-hair segment of Paukatuck High, and Mr. Blomberg and his wife had quite a few private laughs as they observed their daughter learning to be a hippie princess, swearing off meat and digging into political activism, taking on a new vocabulary and attempting to make it seem like her own, as if she'd known about the Grateful Dead and Violent Femmes and Suzanne Vega all along. She was suddenly talkative and popular, and breezed through her final years of high school with good grades and a great. David went a different route from Susan, joining the high school wrestling team and finding his identity in sports car magazines and heavy metal bands like AC/DC and Twisted Sister. Like Susan, he'd seemed to have solved his problems on his own.

So it wasn't until David and Susan went away to college that Mr. Blomberg and his wife started to notice that Chris was shy too. Around the house he'd always been lively and extroverted,

and he did well in school. But when they observed him in social situations they began noticing that he didn't try to mix with other kids. When David and Susan weren't playing with him he'd go to his room and read a book and listen to records. Once David and Susan went to college, it suddenly became painfully clear that he had no real social connections outside the house. He had one friend who sometimes called, a puzzling and difficult-to-like kid named Brian, and Chris himself seemed to simmer with anger at Brian after every phone call or visit.

Chris often took his anger out on little Missy, who continued to emulate her older brother and follow him around regardless of his moods. If Chris had been interested in the new computer, Mr. Blomberg knew, Missy would have too, and when he rejected it there was no chance of her taking an interest either. The two younger siblings fought constantly, and the last time the family went out together, a Sunday outing to Shea Stadium where the Mets were playing the Pittsburgh Pirates, it had been such an unpleasant experience that Judy had suggested ending the tradition for a while. Any other year Mr. Blomberg would have agreed, but he could not stand to have that happen this year, when the Mets were finally in first place. The family had gone to games together every summer since David and Susan had been born, even during the many last-place years when the stadium was so empty Mr. Blomberg would park the car right next

to the entrance gate. This was not the year to end the tradition, even if nobody was having fun.

At least Chris wouldn't be moping around the house the entire summer, Mr. Blomberg thought. He had gotten accepted into a four-week summer arts program for talented students at Agora, an upstate college campus. It seemed likely that this would be a good experience for the boy.

Chris's album ended, and then began again at the first song on the side. Mr. Blomberg wished he were permitted to ask his son what the names of these musicians were, and what meaning they held for him. But Chris didn't like to talk about his music. It was apparently a world where parents were not allowed. Chris didn't know that his father had actually been something of a music buff himself as a teenager, and that he had no difficulty understanding Chris's identification with music. Being a folk enthusiast and listening to the Kingston Trio and the Weavers had actually been viewed as serious non-conformity back when Mr. Blomberg was in high school and college, in the years just before the Beatles and Bob Dylan arrived on the scene. He probably deserved some credit from his son, he thought, for that. But he was smart enough to see that the effect would be unintentionally comic if he tried to tell Chris about this.

The Masturbation Song, though, was beyond Mr. Blomberg's comprehension. He didn't think the song was evil or corruptive, though, as other

parents might. Masturbation had served him well when he was Chris's age, he figured, and he saw no reason why it should not serve Chris well too. He did not even feel especially bothered that Missy could hear the lyrics as clearly as he did. That was an issue for other parents to worry about, not himself. What bothered him was the embarrassment of it. It was uncomfortable to have such naked orgasmic displays of emotion broadcast through the entire house. Didn't Chris know that when he sang along -- and he sang loudly -- that everybody in the house heard it? Even though it was obvious that everyone could hear it, Mr. Blomberg was sure that Chris somehow believed that they could not. He would not sing like that if he thought anybody could hear. It went against his nature, because he never let his family see him showing any deep feelings. So it was an example of an interesting kind of psychological lapse, one that Mr. Blomberg had occasionally observed in other people, in which a person ignores an obvious fact not because it is realistic to do so but because it is necessary. Screaming along with his records apparently provided some kind of release for Chris that he needed, and since there was no other house to do it in he was forced to do it in this house, and so he had managed to convince himself that when he closed his door he was not only invisible to the rest of his family but also inaudible. He played the records as loud as he could, thinking he was drowning himself out. But his voice was usually

shrill and badly off-key, and it seemed to clash with the rest of the music and bounce off audibly. He was rarely on pitch, but he could certainly emote. When the song called for ferocious growling or violent screaming or sobbing declarations of true love, Chris would hold nothing back. He would attempt to play drums sometimes too. But didn't he know that when he pounded on the floor or on his furniture, pounding so hard it sometimes seemed he had to be throwing his whole body to the ground rhythmically, to produce such loud sounds, that his thrashing into the aural equivalent of massive psycho-sexual frenzy was being witnessed by everybody in the house? Chris didn't even care if there was company over, although then of course he or Judy would go to his room and make him turn it off.

Chris was playing a different album now, and Mr. Blomberg recognized the beginning of what he knew as the "Fast Machine" song, which began, "She was a fast machine, she kept her motor clean, she was the best damn woman that I ever seen." Later in the song, Mr. Blomberg knew, would come the classic line, "She told me to come, but I was already there." It was all so funny, really. All of this coming from the room of a fifteen-year-old boy who'd never been on a date, who'd never talked to a girl on the phone, and who, for all his father knew, probably never once in his life had said as much as 'hello' to an available member of the opposite sex.

Tonight Chris was not singing along. Halfway through the album side, the noise suddenly stopped, and then Chris came downstairs and turned on the TV in the living room and then went into the kitchen. Mr. Blomberg went into the kitchen himself to get a glass of water. Chris was scooping some chocolate ice cream into a dish. "Chris, you know, I really think you'd like this paint program, if you ever want me to show it to you," his father said.

"Yeah, okay," Chris said, glancing up quickly. "Soon."

"Sure," Mr. Blomberg said. "Just let me know whenever you're ready."

"Okay, I will," Chris said. He put the ice cream back into the freezer and took the bowl with him into the living room.

Mr. Blomberg put his glass of water in the sink and went back into the den. He looked at his computer, which seemed to smile back at him with a strange cheerfulness. He didn't feel like doing any more work tonight. He shut it off and went upstairs for the night.

Early Saturday afternoon, as Chris sat around the house with nothing to do, Brian showed up at the door. "What're you doing?" he asked Chris.

"Nothing," Chris said. Brian came in and they sat down in the den. "What do you wanna do?" Chris asked.

"I don't know. You have any ideas?"

"Not really." Chris had been getting some stuff together for his trip to Agora. He wasn't leaving for another month, but his mother had made him a list of everything she thought he should pack, since he'd never really packed for anything by himself before. She'd told him how many pants and shirts and pairs of socks and underwear and stuff like that he should take, and said he should look through his room to see if he had enough of everything so he could buy some more if he didn't. He'd been counting socks when Brian came over. "Did you read the sports section in Newsday yet?" Brian asked.

"No, why?"

"There's a really good article about how everybody thinks the Mets are gonna stay in first place, but really they're gonna blow it and the Yankees have the better chance of going to the World Series. You didn't read it?"

"No."

"Is your Newsday here yet?"

"I don't know."

Brian ran into the kitchen and came back into the den with the paper. On the back cover, though, was a big color picture of Gary Carter jumping into Roger McDowell's arms on the pitcher's mound after the latest Mets victory, and the headline "SWEEP IN MONTREAL". Brian turned to a page inside and tried to hand it to Chris. "Here, read it."

"I don't want to."

"It says the Mets suck."

"That's very nice."

Brian took it back and studied it. "It says the Mets are peaking too early and that with all the hype about how they're gonna make it this year they're gonna get lazy and blow it all. And this guy is usually right, too. Listen, he says, 'Ignore all the talk. If any New York team is still alive come October, I wouldn't bet on it being this New York team.' He means it'll be the Yankees, in case you didn't get that."

Again, he tried to make Chris take the paper. "Why should I look at it?" Chris said. "You just finished reading it to me."

"Cause you don't believe me that it says that. Look, it really does, it says exactly that."

"I believe it says that. I don't care. The Mets are in first place, and the Yankees aren't."

"Yeah, but look at the numbers. Do you ever look at the stats, or do you just stare at the standings, like all the stupid people do? Look at the Yankees stats, shit, it's amazing, Mattingly, batting .328. Willie Randolph, Dave Winfield, they're great. Look at this, look at these numbers. That's why every year we always hear all season long about how the Mets are gonna make it, and the Yankees always end up doing it."

"We're in first place, and you're not," Chris said again.

"It means nothing to be in first place in June. It's a long season, you know, a season is a hundred

and sixty-two games. That's why the better team will end up winning."

"Well, then there's no reason to argue about it now, we'll see in October," Chris said. He figured Brian would turn out to be right. Why did he care so much? How did Brian always get him riled up?

They sat staring at the walls for a while. "What do you wanna do?" Brian asked.

"I don't know, what do you wanna do?"

"Well, I don't feel like just sitting around. Come on, let's do something."

Chris had been perfectly happy counting socks before Brian showed up. "I don't know, you wanna play racquetball?" he asked.

"Nah," Brian said. They both thought for a minute. "I'll go get a candy bar, though, if you want."

"Okay." The health club both their fathers belonged to had a candy machine, and Chris and Brian could get into the club on the family membership because they were still under sixteen. They rode their bikes there, and sat in the lobby after they got their candy bars, hoping to see some girls in their workout tights. The club ran aerobics classes, and girls were always running around the place, and sometimes the door to the exercise room was left open and could walk past and peek in the door. But today when they walked past the room the door was shut. They passed by three guys who Chris recognized from the high school, three jocks who Chris figured were probably juniors or seniors

who were coming out of the weight room. Somehow, they knew Brian. "Hey," Brian said as they brushed past, and one of them mumbled, "What's up." Chris wanted to ask Brian how he knew them, but he didn't, because half the time when he asked Brian something Brian would make up elaborate stories and then make him beg for the real answer. He didn't ask, but he wondered about it. Brian seemed to know everybody. A lot of people didn't like him, but still the whole high school knew who he was. Nobody knew Chris, and the ones who did know him knew him only as the kid who never said a word in class. It had been that way since Chris's family had moved to Paukatuck, when Chris was in sixth grade.

Chris did not know why he didn't have normal friends. Other kids moved to new towns and made friends right away. For Chris, it was as if something just didn't catch. His first day in the new school, in sixth grade, he didn't know anybody, and then it pretty much just stayed that way. He did make a couple of friends, like Paul Gallagher, who lived a block away, and Ken Izzo, who moved to Paukatuck when Chris was in seventh grade. But the friendships always sort of fizzled out quickly. He'd been quiet where he'd lived before they moved to Paukatuck, too, but he didn't know why things went so badly once they moved. It just seemed to him that he was an exception to the rule parents always told their kids, that if you move to a new town and a new school you'll eventually find new friends. And there was

no reason he could think of why this had happened to him and not to somebody else.

Ken Izzo and Paul Gallagher had both been really nice guys, Chris remembered. He didn't even remember why he'd stopped being friends with them. He just hadn't been such good friends with them in the first place, and then it fizzled out completely. They were nice to him, but he'd never felt relaxed with them and always wondered why they would want to be friends with him when they had so many other friends, and so he never made much effort to continue to talk to them. He was in seventh grade when he met Brian. A bunch of kids had been picking on Brian during recess, calling him names and threatening to beat him up, and afterwards Chris approached him and they started talking. For some reason, Brian's friendship wasn't threatening like Ken Izzo's or Paul Lorenz's, probably because since Brian was so disliked in the school Chris wasn't intimidated by him. But Brian was Chris's opposite. Chris was ignored because he was quiet, and Brian was picked on because he was a conceited loudmouth. Still, Chris allowed his friendships with Ken and Paul and a couple of other guys to wither away, and soon Brian was his only friend. Now, three years later, when he saw Ken or Paul in the halls he didn't even acknowledge them or say hello, and they didn't either.

As Chris and Brian walked across the health club parking lot, they passed a group of businessmen talking loud about the Mets' latest

victory. Chris looked at Brian for a reaction, pleased that Brian wouldn't have the nerve to mouth off to a group of athletic men. Brian started whistling loudly, trying to drown them out. Chris wished he could remember what the men were saying, because he could never think of what to say when Brian told him how bad the Mets were. Why, Chris wondered, did he even care whether the Mets were good or not? Somehow, though, he cared. It was probably because Brian insulted them so much that Chris liked the Mets. The way Brian described them, they were such a crew of hapless losers Chris couldn't do anything but love them.

As far back as Chris could remember, the Mets had been an embarrassment. It was difficult for Chris to even imagine them in a position of power. The Yankees looked serious in their dark blue pinstripes, whereas the Mets looked weak and juvenile in bright blue and orange. Even the name 'Mets' was too cute. And they played in Queens -- how were they supposed to impress anyone with an image like that? The cards were stacked against them, and Chris related to that.

But strange things had been happening in recent years. Keith Hernandez had arrived from St. Louis, with his black mustache and calm sneer. Gary Carter, an All-American clean-cut catcher, arrived from the Montreal Expos, and even Brian was dumbfounded when he heard the Mets had traded for Carter. Darryl Strawberry won Rookie of the Year next year. But Chris didn't fully

understand that the Mets were changing until he was gazing idly at the TV screen one day and saw a moon-faced man in the blue-and-orange cap go ballistic on a third-baseman from the Cincinnati Reds who had looked at him the wrong way. Both teams poured out of the dugouts to join in the fight, and Chris stared in wonder with his father and brother. "Who was that guy?" Chris asked.

"That's Ray Knight," David said. "He's awesome."

Chris liked it when baseball players fought. He saw Strawberry get hit by a pitch and charge the mound one day, and he liked Strawberry after that. The fights were the only parts of the game Chris fully understood. He could never figure out how to calculate ERA's or what the difference was between a sacrifice and a pop out.

After Chris and Brian left the health club they rode their bikes around for a while. The health club was located in a large industrial park that was always deserted on weekends, so the streets were good for racing or skidding or doing wheelies. But they got bored and went back home, and then tried to find something to do again. Brian wanted Chris to come over to his house and watch movies. "I'll watch movies here, if you want," Chris said. He knew Brian wouldn't want to, because he didn't have QuadMax.

"Come on, you know I don't watch movies here."

"Well, I don't feel like riding anymore."

"We have 'First Blood'."

"I already saw it," Chris said. "We have 'The Deer Hunter', and my father has to return it tomorrow."

"Well, it's a good movie, but you ruin it by using the stupid VHS. It's so grainy, you can't even enjoy the movie."

"A movie is a movie. You don't watch the grains, you watch the movie."

"Why don't you just tell your father to upgrade, like my father did? I keep telling you, all the tapes you have are gonna be obsolete in like three years, and you know it. You're gonna be like the last family to still use VHS. And then you're just gonna have to throw all your tapes out, so you might as well do it now. My father can even tell your father where to get a good price."

"So talk to my father, I don't care," Chris said.

"Are you coming to my house, or not?"

"Not."

"Why not?"

"Cause I don't want to."

"Well, what are you gonna do?"

"I don't know." He wanted to get back to his packing. For some strange reason, Chris had never told Brian that he was going to the summer arts program in Agora. Chris had meant to tell him as soon as he found out about it, but when Chris saw Brian in the lunchroom that day Brian started right in blabbing about some great thing that had happened to him, or some new expensive device his father had just bought, and Chris never got a

chance to talk. Brian never seemed to consider that Chris might have anything of his own to say, and after several days went by Chris started to wonder if he would ever find a way to tell Brian. By the time school ended he had still not done so, and now Chris was supposed to leave for Agora in a couple of weeks and Brian had no idea he'd be gone.

He could tell Brian right now, Chris thought, since Brian had just asked him what he was going to do, and what he was going to do was pack. "I just have some stuff to get together," Chris said.

"Get together for what?" Brian said.

Chris realized he didn't want to talk about it now after all. Brian would want to know why he hadn't told him before, and Chris didn't feel like going into it. "I dunno, nothing," he said.

After a while, Chris and Brian realized that they weren't coming up with any ideas, and Brian left to watch the movies at his own house. Delving back into his pile of socks, Chris wondered about what he would find at Agora. What would it be like living on a college campus? Last year he'd visited his sister at Oneonta State, and that had been pretty cool. All Susan's friends fussed over him and called him cute, which Chris loved even though he knew they just meant he was a cute little kid. Still, he got to hang out with them and listen to their records, and even smoked his first joint. It was pretty amazing, even though Chris wasn't sure he felt anything. It was wild, though, just to have done it.

But at Agora there would be no big sister to look after him and tell her friends to pay attention to him. This was scary. What would he do there? Thinking about it made him so nervous, he could only think about it for a few minutes at a time.

Sean Lamana and two of his friends were onstage at Diamond Lil's, the only bar near Paukatuck that would let them play. There was no audience, as usual, except for a couple of old guys drinking at the bar and one table where Patty Zipper was sitting with the drummer's girlfriend, Sue Ann, and telling her about how she saw Meryl Streep in the city. "Did you ever hear of Pearl Paint?" she said. "It's like this big art store in Soho, near Chinatown?"

"I don't think so," Sue Ann said.

"Well, it has like five floors, and I was just looking around in it, and then I walk up to the third floor and there she is with her little son, buying a set of paints. I guess it was her son, anyway. And she was goofing around with the kid, like singing funny songs to him and stuff."

"Did you talk to her?"

"No. I'm sure she's sick of being recognized. I don't know, I did smile at her, but I don't think she saw me."

"How do you know it was her, then, if you didn't talk to her?"

"Oh, there was just no doubt, it was her. Her face, you know, I mean, she is so unique

looking, you know, like I really think she must be the single most beautiful woman in the world."

"Oh, I know," Sue Ann said. "Her and Debra Winger."

"Yeah, but her even more than Debra Winger," Patty said. "I mean, she just has this aura, like this inner depth, I just love her, God, I could look at her forever."

On stage, Sean was struggling with the guitar part to a Rush song. "Everybody's pissed at me, too," Patty said. "Eileen wants to kill me, cause, you know, I was in the city with her and my mother that day. The whole reason we went in was cause they wanted to go to South Street Seaport, but then I couldn't take the crowds so I tried to get Eileen to come to Pearl Paint with me, but she was too into looking at clothes with my mother, so I went alone. Then when I came back and told her she practically killed me."

"Wow. Yeah, I know, South Street Seaport is always too crowded."

"And Sean's pissed at me too, cause he's sick of hearing me tell the story, cause he's heard it like fifty times. He doesn't even think Meryl Streep is beautiful."

"Guys don't know what beauty is," Sue Ann said.

The band brought the Rush song to an ending and then began the second-to-last song of their set, an original that Sean had written for Patty. After this they would close the set with 'Anarchy in the UK', and then Sue Ann would drop

them off at Lincoln Park and they would get a ride home from there. Getting the band to and from their gigs was turning into a real pain, and the guys were starting to get into fights about it. The problem was that Sean and Phil were both fifteen and Chuck was sixteen and none of them could drive yet. The only one who could drive was Sue Ann, who was seventeen, but Chuck and Sue Ann were from a different town that was in an opposite direction from where Sean and Phil lived, and she didn't like having to drag everybody's instruments home every time they played, so now she just dropped them off at Lincoln Park, where a lot of people from Paukatuck High School were usually hanging out, and then Sean and Phil would have to get somebody there to take them home.

The whole situation with Sean's band was getting pretty bad lately. The other problem besides driving was that the legal drinking age was 21, so none of the good bars around town would let them play because they were afraid of losing their liquor licenses. Even if they were a really tight, really well-rehearsed band, which they weren't anyway, they wouldn't be able to play anywhere good, and the only reason they could play in Diamond Lil's every Wednesday night was that the bartender was a friend of Phil's older brother. The bar was always so dead Wednesday night that there was no chance of the police checking them out. The first night they played here they invited all their friends and packed the place, and Phil's brother's friend freaked out about

all the high school kids and pulled the plug on the band, and now the rule was no friends allowed, except for girlfriends. Phil didn't have a girlfriend, and so the regular crowd usually consisted of just Patty, Sue Ann, and a couple of guys who sometimes came in to play pool or sit at the bar and watch TV and didn't even listen to the music.

So it was all starting to seem pointless, and tonight Sean wasn't even trying to play well. He left out most of the long guitar solo that was the best part of the love song he'd written for Patty, and Chuck and Phil were also too discouraged to get most of their changes right. Usually this song sounded good, and then 'Anarchy in the UK' was always their best song, because the chord changes were so simple. But tonight was a real low point, because in the middle of the last verse of the love song Phil suddenly stopped playing bass and squinted at something across the bar. Sean didn't notice at first that the bass was missing, but Chuck stopped playing drums, and then Sean halted in mid-line. "What the fuck?" Chuck said.

"Oh," Phil said. "Sorry." He pointed to the TV behind the bar. "I think I just saw Timmy Tuefel hit a grand slam."

Patty stood up. "Phil, you stopped in the middle of a song because of a baseball game?" Sue Ann was laughing, but Sean and Chuck looked disgusted.

"I'm sorry," Phil said. "I didn't mean . . . you guys could have kept going."

"Do you mean to tell me," Sean said, "that all the time we're playing you're standing here watching the fucking TV?"

"No, no, not at all," Phil said. "I'm concentrating, I didn't miss any of the other changes, did I?"

They stared at him.

"I just usually look at the scores when they flash them at the end of the innings," Phil went on. "I wasn't even watching this time, I just happened to glance over, and then I saw Timmy Tuefel take this amazing swing. I can't believe he hit a grand slam."

'Oh, fuck it," Sean said. He pulled his patch cord from his guitar. "Let's pack it in."

"We're not gonna do 'Anarchy'?" Chuck said.

"Why bother," Sean said. "Let's just call it a fucking night."

They packed their instruments into Sue Ann's car and she dropped Phil and Sean and Patty off in the parking lot of Lincoln Park. Lincoln Park was a big park, but everybody usually just stayed around the parking lot, near the entrance, so they could listen to music from inside their cars. Tonight, Eileen Hewitt and Adam Meltzer were already hanging out, along with Sheryl Gold and Jeff Touro and a couple of other people from the high school. "You know what this jerk did?" Patty said to Eileen and Adam. She told them how Phil had ruined Sean's love song.

"Oh, Phil, you bad boy," Eileen said. "I say we fire you."

"Go ahead," Phil said cheerfully. "Good luck finding a replacement." Everybody knew Phil was the only competent bass player in Paukatuck.

"How are you getting your stuff home?" Adam asked Sean.

"Scott Nitto said he'd take us," Sean said. Scott Nitto had a Toyota pickup truck, and since he lived just down the street from Lincoln Park they didn't have to worry about him forgetting to come by.

"Uh-huh," Adam said. "Do you have any weed?"

"No," Sean said.

"Oh no, you don't?" Eileen said. "Fuck, why doesn't anybody have any?"

"I know, how come nobody has any lately?" Patty said.

"I don't know, nobody ever has any, we need better connections," Sean said.

"It sucks, God, I would love to get stoned right now," Eileen said.

"Well, I guess it's a beer night," Adam said. Sheryl and Jeff had brought two cases of Budweiser. Adam handed bottles to Sean and Patty and Phil, and they relaxed on a concrete divider next to Sheryl's car. "I didn't even know you liked baseball," Patty said to Phil.

"I don't, really," Phil said. "I dunno, I've just been following the Mets a bit this season, you know, they're doing really good."

"My father keeps talking about the Mets," Eileen said.

"I know, my father and my brothers, too," Patty said. "What is this, all of a sudden?"

"It's just cause they're in first place," Phil said. "You know, it doesn't happen that often, so when it does it's like a big deal."

"Well, I'm glad you're not a Mets fan," Eileen said to Adam.

"I've been following them a bit too," Adam said. "Phil, how many games ahead are they now, anyway?"

"Ten, right?" Sean said.

"Oh, no," Eileen and Patty both said together, as the inevitable conversation began..

"Twelve, as of tonight," Phil said. "It's really incredible, when you consider that the season's not even half over. It's like I'd say it would take a major disaster at this point for them to not win the division."

"Like if Carter or Gooden got injured," Adam said.

"How do you know those names?" Eileen said.

"Well, we don't want to lose either of those guys," Phil said. "But really it's like this year is such a team effort, that's why the chemistry is so good, like, you know, I wouldn't want to lose any of our lineup, really, it's like this well-oiled machine, Dykstra and Backman get on base, Hernandez advances them, then Carter and Foster and Strawberry and Knight knock them in."

"Yeah, man, Ray Knight, I love that guy," Sean said.

Patty and Eileen were both staring. "Sean, how the fuck do you know these names?" Patty said.

Nobody was listening to either of them. "Gooden is the key, though", Phil said. "He's just so fucking good. Man, when he pitches you know the other team is scared."

"Dykstra and Backman are the most important on the team, though," Adam said.

"Well, I don't know about that," Sean said.

"Okay, well, maybe not the most important, but they are important," Adam said.

"I don't believe you guys," Patty said. "Sean, I spend all day with you, I never saw you watch a baseball game. How do you know this stuff?"

"I don't watch, usually," Sean said, looking as if he was trying to conceal a proud smile. "It's just common knowledge, you know."

"What common knowledge?" Eileen said. "How come we don't have this common knowledge?"

"How does this work?" Patty said. "How can two people be together, and both be not watching baseball, and one of them come out knowing all the names and all the scores and stuff and the other not? Is it, like, some secret capacity men have?"

"It's like these secret antennas they have, that transmits baseball scores to them while they're pretending to be listening to us talk," Eileen said.

"I think it's just hormones," Patty said. "The baseball hormone."

"Yeah, we learned about that in biology," Eileen said.

"I know girls who like baseball," Phil said. "My mother is practically a bigger Mets fan than my father. You know, you should follow it, like, you're from Long Island, you know, they're your team."

"They're not my team," Patty said. "I can't believe you guys even take this stuff seriously, I mean, come on, why should I care about whether a bunch of guys who I don't even know win or lose? If I was playing, then I would care, but I'm not, so why should I give a fuck?"

"Yeah, it's not like they're gonna share the money they make with us," Eileen said.

"Why are you so hostile to baseball?" Adam asked.

"I don't know," Patty said. "It's just too . . . too . . ."

"Too American," Eileen said.

Jeff interrupted the conversation. "We're taking off," he said. "You guys got a ride home?"

"Yeah, thanks," Sean said. Sheryl drove a Camaro, so it would be a pain to fit everything into her car. Sheryl and Jeff and the other people with them left, leaving Sean and Patty and Eileen and

Adam and Phil with about a quarter of a case of beer.

By the time they finished the rest of the beers, Scott Nitto still hadn't shown up, and nobody else was coming by either. There were always some people hanging out at Lincoln Park during summer nights, but some nights were better than others. There were about five different places people hung out during the summer, so tonight everybody was probably somewhere else. Lincoln Park was where Sean and Patty and Eileen and Adam spent most of their time, though. It was Eileen and Adam's special place, because their relationship had begun there last summer, on a night when an unexpected thunderstorm suddenly hit, and everybody ran for cover but Adam, for some reason, started running around in the pouring rain and throwing his clothes off, and then, even though nobody could believe he was doing it, he stripped completely and started doing some kind of crazy rain dance, out in the middle of the parking lot, while everybody watched from their cars, laughing and applauding. He just danced around, jumping on people's cars and rolling in the mud and yelling for everybody to join him. Nobody did, but then later in the night when the thunderstorm had slowed to a drizzle and people started to go home, Adam was still hanging out with nothing but a wet shirt tied around his waist, and Eileen stayed with him after everybody else left, and they just sat around talking for a while, and then, even though up till then they'd just been

casual friends who knew each other basically because Sean and Adam were friends and Patty and Eileen were friends and Sean and Patty were going out, they ended up making love right there in the park, on the wet grass under the drizzling rain. It was the night Eileen lost her virginity. Afterwards they didn't become a couple right away, because Adam had a different sort-of-girlfriend, but gradually they did, and by the time school started that year they were a couple, and had been ever since.

Then there had been other great nights, like the time last fall when Bill Rath had to hide out from the police. He'd gotten into big trouble at school for hitting one of the principals, and the police came looking for him, and all night long the police cars waited outside Bill's house for him to come home, and all the time he was hanging out at Lincoln Park. Scott Nitto brought a tent and set it up in the woods deep inside the park for Bill to sleep in. Then Bill stayed there for the next three days, with the police still looking for him, and his friends brought him food and beers and the girls all cooed over him like he was some kind of underground war hero. Finally, Bill got bored and showed up in school one morning, and he was quickly taken to the police. They released him with just a warning anyway, and a few weeks later Bill dropped out of school and joined the Air Force.

So every once in a while something great happened at Lincoln Park, but more often everybody just hung around drinking and smoking

and talking and listening to tapes, and tonight was one of those nights. At one in the morning Scott Nitto finally showed up in his monster-wheel Toyota pickup to take them all home.

Chris's brother was back for the weekend. Their father had paid for him to fly home from Buffalo so he could take Chris and David to a Mets game, just the three of them, which Chris thought was a pretty strange thing for his father to do. But it was good to have his brother back for a couple of days. Their father said it would be a 'guys-only' day, and that they would barbecue hamburgers in the parking lot. It was just another of the weird things Chris's father occasionally did.

Anyway, they were all in a good mood as they drove to Shea Stadium that Saturday. By now the Mets had extended their lead to twelve games over the second place team in the division, and the three of them talked about it the whole way in. "I can't tell you how happy I am that the two of you are going to experience a Mets World Series," Chris's father said. "The last one, in 1973, Chris, you were one-and-a-half years old. And the one they won, in 1969, you weren't even born."

"Dad, you're getting overly confident," David said. "It's still so early, and even if they win the division, they could lose the playoffs."

"They're going to win the division, win the playoffs, and win the World Series. I feel it. I know it."

"Dad, did you go to any of the post-season games last time they won?" David asked. "In '69 or '73?"

"No," his father said. "This year, assuming they make it, we'll see what I can do. But I'd have to go to a scalper, and I'm sure the prices would go through the roof."

"Do you think the Yankees might win the American League?" Chris asked from the back seat.

"It's possible, or the Red Sox are looking good," his father said.

"But if it was the Yankees against the Mets in the World Series, the Yankees would probably win, though, right?" Chris piped up. "I mean, besides what you wish would happen."

"Huh?" His father seemed surprised to hear this.

"I mean, I know the Mets are good, but there still not as good as the Yankees, I mean, if they had to play each other ... right? I mean, isn't that what everyone thinks?" His father and brother were both looking at him strangely, and Chris felt momentarily confused.

"I certainly don't think that's what everybody thinks," his father said.

"But still, I mean, the Yankees are, like ... the Yankees ..." Chris suddenly realized he didn't know why he was so sure the Yankees were the superior team, except that Brian had stated this fact so many times.

"Yeah?" David said. "And the Mets are the Mets. What about it?"

"I don't know," Chris said weakly. "I just thought ... I hear people talking about it at school ..."

"Is that what they say?" his father said. "Well, maybe I just don't read enough about the American League. It doesn't seem to me that the Yankees are standing out this year."

Chris tried to think of some of the statistics and names Brian always threw around. "Well, they do have Mattingly and Winfield," he said, realizing as he spoke that he had no idea who Mattingly and Winfield were.

"Yeah? And we have Hernandez and Strawberry," David said. "And we have pitching. I mean, come on, who on the Yankees compares to Dwight Gooden? Gooden is the number one best pitcher in baseball this year, isn't that true, Dad? Dwight Gooden would be the ace pitcher on any team, especially the Yankees, right?"

"I'd say so," their father said. "All our pitchers are good. I think any team would trade their pitching staff for ours."

"And what about catching?" David said. "I don't even know who the Yankees catcher is."

"On the other hand, Chris, of course it is a fact that historically the Yankees have been a better team than the Mets," their father said.

"Maybe that's what you're thinking of. Historically, that goes without saying. Back in the fifties, and before and after, the Yankees

dominated baseball like no team ever will again. I have no idea how many World Series they've won in their history, maybe twenty-five, thirty, even more. And the Mets have won exactly one World Series, and lost one as well. However, every year is a new year, and this year I would have to say that the Mets are the better team. We're both good hitting teams, but we have good pitching, and that's the margin of difference. In fact, on the basis of pitching I would even predict that Boston will take the division over the Yankees. They're in first place in that division right now, aren't they?"

"I guess so. But it's still early in the season," Chris said, again quoting Brian.

The three of them were silent for a while. "Why do some people like the Mets and some people like the Yankees?" Chris asked his father.

His father started to answer, but David got in first. "Because people who like the Mets live closer to Shea Stadium and Yankee fans live closer to Yankee Stadium."

"But Brian is from here, and he likes the Yankees," Chris said.

"Yeah, well, there's exceptions," David said. "But basically, you know, it's true. That's why usually when somebody is a Mets fan he's also a Jets fan and an Islanders fan, cause the Jets used to play at Shea and the Islanders play in Nassau, you know, and a Yankees fan is usually a Giants fan and a Rangers fan. And the Knicks can go either way, cause there's only one New York team. But anyway, there's always exceptions, but that's the

way it mostly is. Even though the Jets and Giants both play in Jersey now anyway, still it's true."

"It's partly true," their father said. "But for myself, I happen to believe, although most people don't believe me when I say this, I think that, even if I'd grown up and spent my whole life in the Bronx, in the shadow of Yankee Stadium, I would still be a Mets fan. Maybe I'm fooling myself, I don't know, but I honestly believe it."

"But why?" Chris asked. "Why? How can you know for sure?"

"Did I ever tell you my story about the summer of 1969?"

"Oh boy, I've heard this one," David groaned.

"Okay, but Chris, I've never told you. It's kind of a personal story, but I think you're old enough to hear it now. Would you like to?"

"Yeah," Chris said.

"In nineteen-sixty-nine, I was, oh, I guess, I was about twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, and I had been married to your mother for a year and we'd just had David and Susan, and your mother left me, because at the time I guess I was really still too immature to be married, and I wasn't a good husband to her -- I wasn't a terrible husband either, of course, but I guess I hadn't really yet made the personal, emotional commitment to marriage that I was later able to make -- anyway, she left me, and took David and Susan with her, and I spent the most miserable few months of my life, and I started hanging around with people who

were going nowhere, and doing things that were a little self-destructive, and just basically all around I'd have to say that during the time immediately after she left me I wasn't a person who could be proud of who I was. My problems were manifesting themselves in a dependency on alcohol, which was getting worse and worse, and so on top of everything else that helped to get me fired from my job, and I was in such bad shape I couldn't get hired anywhere else, and by the time I told your mother I was sorry and asked her to take me back, even I couldn't think of any reason why she should have, and she didn't."

"Uh-huh," Chris said.

"Come the end of the summer of nineteen-sixty-nine," he went on, "I was on the brink of really throwing my life away, and something convinced me that I had to pull myself together, and I did a lot of hard thinking around that time, about the responsibility I had to myself and to others, and about what I was doing with my life, and I decided to finally grow up, and I quit drinking and doing all the other things that were weighing my life down, and I decided to change careers and try to make something of myself, and the hardest week for me happened to be the week that the New York Mets -- now up to this time I'd have to say I was probably more of a Brooklyn Dodgers fan than anything else, as many people who grew up when I grew up were -- but of course the Brooklyn Dodgers were the Los Angeles Dodgers by this time, and the week that I made

these decisions in my life happened to be the week that the Mets were in the National League playoffs -- this happened to be the first year of divisional playoffs, by the way, though that's not really relevant to anything. The Mets were in the playoffs against Atlanta for the National League pennant, and as I watched the games on TV, I made a sort of personal deal with myself that if the Mets could win this against all odds -- you have to understand that the Mets were of course always the underdogs, were so bad when they were created in 1962 that they were the laughing-stock of baseball -- I made a deal with myself that if the Mets could pull off a miracle, then I would be a success in my new career, and your mother would take me back. It was sort of like making a wish on them, like making a wish on a star. And of course the Mets beat the Atlanta Braves, and then went to the World Series and beat the Baltimore Orioles -- incidentally, Davey Johnson was then the starting second baseman for the Orioles -- and New York went crazy. It was the summer of the Impossible Dream. David, do you remember it at all?"

"Dad, I was one year old."

"Well, anyway, your mother did take me back, and the worst period in my life was over, and, Chris, one year later we had you, and then in 1974 we had Missy. And that's how I became a Mets fan."

"Uh-huh" Chris said.

"Well, Chris, I'm not going to make a wish this season, so why don't you? Give it a try." His

father looked at him significantly in the rear view mirror. The story had been interesting, Chris thought, and it was strange to think that there had been a time when his father didn't know what he was looking for in life, but now all of a sudden his father was starting to look at him with those big watery eyes again, feeling sorry for him and trying to help him. It figured that after telling a halfway interesting story he would say something yucky and ruin the whole thing. Chris scowled and didn't answer.

Three

Chris and Brian were eating in a Kentucky Fried Chicken when a mentally retarded guy walked in. He ordered something at the counter, talking much too loudly and excitedly. He turned around and stared at everybody with his mouth dropped open. "Shit," Brian said. "Being retarded, can you imagine? Think what life would be like."

They watched him until he rested his gaze on them, and then they looked away quickly. "It's weird, it's like he doesn't even know he's different," Chris said. "I wonder if he does know."

"If I was retarded, I would just kill myself," Brian said.

"But you wouldn't be you," Chris said. "If you were retarded, you wouldn't be the same person. How can you be you if your mind is different? Right?"

"I'd kill myself," Brian said.

They ate quietly for a little while. "You know what," Chris said. "My brother David, he once had twelve cavities in one year. So we all told him he was dentally retarded."

"Dentally retarded?" Brian shook his head, smiling. "Man, Chris, you are a sick dude."

They ate some more, and then Brian said, "You know, we're retarded too, in a way. We're socially retarded. You know what I mean?"

"No."

"We just are. Socially retarded is what we are. Kids our age are supposed to spend their time hanging out and getting laid. We sit in our houses playing with ourselves. We're socially retarded."

"I don't know," Chris said. He certainly agreed that Brian was socially retarded. He hoped his own problem was less congenital

The arts program in Agora was supposed to start in two weeks. Chris still hadn't told Brian about it, and now that he'd waited so long he was starting to wonder if he would just leave for Agora without telling Brian at all. He would just disappear, and Brian would eventually call, and Chris's parents would explain. Brian would be confused as hell, but Chris just couldn't work up the enthusiasm to explain the whole thing now.

Sitting in the Kentucky Fried Chicken, Chris considered just blurting out the whole thing right there. He contemplated this, looking down and staring at the straw in his drink. Brian started yapping about something, and Chris knew the chance was blown.

It was getting dark out as they left Kentucky Fried Chicken. They got on their bikes and rode to the Paukatuck Multiplex, where they waited on line to see 'Police Academy III'. The theater was

packed, as always. The Multiplex had opened only about a year earlier, and now nobody ever went to any other theater in Paukatuck, except for adults who went to little one- or two-movie theaters because they didn't want to be surrounded by kids. There were almost no empty seats in the theater, and Chris and Brian found seats right next to two teenage girls. The girls looked a year or two older, but Brian started talking to them anyway. "Hey, what kind of candy are you gonna share with us?" he asked, as Chris watched incredulously. The girls giggled and looked away, inviting more. It always shocked Chris how easily Brian would talk to girls. Brian had never dated a girl, of course, but he wasn't in awe of them the way Chris was. The girl sitting next to Brian was carrying a bag, and Brian continued. "No, really, what's in the bag? Peanut M&M's? Strawberry Twizzlers? I'll let you stick your hand in my popcorn if you let me lick your strawberry twizzler."

Chris couldn't believe it. As much as Brian was usually a jerk, sometimes he could be slick. "Uh, sorry, I'm not sticking my hand in your anything," one girl said. She was trying to look offended and stared straight ahead, ignoring Brian, but she was also laughing, and it was obvious both girls wanted him to go on.

It was too dark to see them well, but Chris could tell that the girls looked pretty hot. Brian could be amazing sometimes. He really just didn't care at all what people thought of him. These were girls Chris could fall in love with, in fact he had

already fallen in love with them, and there was no way he would ever have had the nerve to talk to them. Not even to ask the time.

"Hey, you two didn't scratch my Porsche when you drove in, did you?" Brian asked them. "That was my Porsche, you know, parked out front."

"Yeah, right!" both girls snorted. "Sure it was yours!" Chris just leaned forward and watched. Of course Brian's claim made no sense anyway, because there were about a thousand cars 'parked out front', but only Chris seemed aware of this. He wished he could say something, to join in.

"No, really!" Brian said. "You wanna go for a ride after this shitty movie?"

"Yeah, sure, we'll go for a ride, but not with you," the one next to Brian said.

"Yeah, we want someone old enough to have a license," the other one said.

"I have a license," Brian said.

"For what, a tricycle?" the girl in the far seat said, and both girls went into hysterics laughing.

Suddenly Brian threw his arm around Chris and pulled him forward. "My friend has a license!" he said. "You have a license, right? Don't you?"

Brian was holding Chris forward, and both girls were staring at Chris now, waiting for him to say something witty. "Yeah!" was all Chris could think of, trying to look relaxed and not too nervous.

Brian went on. "No, really, what's in that bag?" he asked them. "You're holding it like you're hiding something, what is it?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"Oh, it's something you're embarrassed about! Oh boy, what could it be? Come on, tell me, what's in it, birth control pills? Maxi-Pads?"

The girls looked at each other, shocked, and just laughed. "I know what should be in a bag, your face!" one of them said, and they both went into hysterics again over that one.

They all quieted down when the lights went down and the first preview came on. It was for a boring-looking film none of them were interested in. Brian turned to the girls again, and Chris turned to watch. "Hey, you know what?" Brian whispered to them. "I can throw popcorn in my friend's face." He suddenly grabbed a fistful of popcorn and flung it into Chris's face.

Chris didn't expect it. "Hey!" he said. "You asshole!" But his voice came out weak.

The girls just stared. "I can do it again, too," Brian said, and threw another handful into Chris's face. "Cut it out!" Chris whispered fiercely, trying to block the popcorn with his arm.

"I can do it all I want," Brian said, this time throwing just a single piece of popcorn in Chris's direction. "He likes it. What do you think of that?"

"I think you got some kind of serious problem," one girl said to Brian, not smiling anymore. They both stared at Chris like he was

really weird. Chris tried to think of something to do or say to turn it into a joke, to have this not be happening. But he was so embarrassed he could not speak or move.

"One more," Brian said. The girls weren't even looking anymore, and ignored him. It wasn't funny for anybody now. Brian threw another handful, and then shifted positions in his seat and seemed to forget about the whole thing.

The preview ended and a message came on welcoming the patrons to the Paukatuck Multiplex. Chris sat stunned. He had no idea what to do. There were kernels in his hair, crumbs on his shoulders and oily spots on his face from where the popcorn had hit. Brian sat placidly gazing up at the screen. The two girls had shifted to the other sides of their seats, as far away from Brian and Chris as they could get. Chris sat, lost, as 'Police Academy III' started. The movie went on for a couple of minutes and Chris didn't hear a word of it. He said to Brian, "I'm going to the bathroom." He got up and walked up the aisle and into the lobby and into the men's room. He brushed the popcorn from his hair and off his shoulders and wiped the grease off his face with a paper towel, and then he looked at himself in the mirror for a minute and was surprised how truly mad he looked. He stood for a moment trying to decide what to do, whether he should go back into the movie or not, and then he walked uncertainly towards the outside door and took a step past the ropes, which meant he could not go back in. He

walked through the cool night air to the bike racks behind the building, unlocked his bike and looked at Brian's bike next to it, his expensive new twelve-speed that was so much better than Chris's crummy old five-speed. Even Brian's lock was the most expensive kind, and if Chris knew the combination, he thought, he would take the bike and throw it into a garbage dump. It was dark out and nobody was nearby. Chris stood for a moment thinking. He positioned Brian's bike inside the bike rack so that the front wheel was halfway between two poles, and then pushed on the front half of the wheel, forcing it tightly against the metal pole of the bike rack. He pushed as hard as he could until he finally felt the thin metal frame of the wheel give. He bent it fully around, twisting the wheel into a sharp V. It felt good. He looked at what else was on Brian's bike, and spotted the two white plastic brake cables that connected the rear wheel brakes to the handlebar controls. He grabbed both cables and pulled, but couldn't pull them out together and had to do it one at a time. He left one cable dangling from the rear wheel and wrapped the other around the handlebar. He stood for a moment looking at what he'd done, and then he climbed onto his bike and listened to make sure nobody was nearby. He got himself into position to ride away fast and kicked the glass front of Brian's headlight, breaking it with his heel. Then he took off on his own bike, pedaling as hard as he'd ever pedaled in his life, as if he were being pursued. He rode like that half the way home, still

expecting somehow to see somebody coming after him, feeling amazingly great, singing AC/DC and Van Halen songs out loud to himself as he rode.

Early the next morning the phone rang and Chris's mother called him to the phone. Chris told her to say he wasn't home. Since nobody ever called him but Brian, he knew who it was. His mother yelled back, "Chris, come get your call, he doesn't believe you."

"I'm not home," Chris yelled, and he heard his mother hang up.

Brian continued to call Chris's house the next few days, and Chris continued to evade the calls. Once the phone rang and Chris forgot not to pick it up. When he heard Brian's voice he panicked and hung up very gently. The phone rang again and Chris ignored it. It kept ringing on and off for the next forty-five minutes, again, and then it stopped. After a few days Brian stopped calling.

Later that day Chris thought about a scary fact: if he didn't make up with Brian then he had zero friends. School would start in two months, and Chris would have absolutely nobody to sit with at lunch. It was like knowing that winter was coming and not having a house. Brian had never been much of a friend, but he was security. Having Brian there meant that if there was a field trip and everybody was supposed to pair off to do

something, Chris wouldn't have to raise his hand in front of everyone and say he didn't have anybody.

Not having Brian to do things with only made Chris's boring summer more boring. He spent as much time as he could packing for his trip to Agora. He'd promised his mother he'd clean his room before he left, and he found himself so bored that he even began to enjoy doing this. It took about three days. Chris always let his room get really messy and waited until his mother nagged him before he cleaned it. He liked his room messy, with loose papers and magazines and games and other junk all over the place. He liked to be able to sit anywhere on the floor and find something interesting within arm's reach.

He always listened to music while he was in his room, but lately he couldn't even listen to his records anymore, because he'd heard them all so many times. He had twelve albums now, which was pretty impressive, but he wanted to get a big stack of albums like his brother and sister both had. David and Susan both had so many albums they didn't even know which ones belonged to them anymore, and which belonged to each other or to their friends. Chris used to listen to their albums more than his own, but last year when they went to college they both took all their records with them.

Since Chris's allowance was only three dollars a week, he had to wait about three weeks to save up enough to buy a new album, and so most of the time he listened to WBAB, his favorite radio

station. Everybody in school listened to WBAB, which broadcast right from Long Island instead of from New York City. WBAB always had announcements about dance clubs and live bands on the Island, and during the summer they presented hourly beach reports, which made Chris feel like he had some connection to the beach even though he never went. They also played really good music, and it was probably from listening to this station that Chris had gotten to know as much about music as he did. They sometimes had big contests that everybody in school would talk about, in which the grand prize would be something like a trip for two to the Bahamas, or ten tickets to some concert. The prizes were always designed for people with a ton of friends, so Chris couldn't enter, even though usually all a person had to do to be eligible for the drawing was phone in the answer to some rock trivia question which Chris almost always knew the answer to. He had a secret fear that he would somehow win one of these contests by mistake, and would have to admit on the air that he had no friends to enjoy his prize with.

When he was sick of sitting in his room, Chris would ride his bike, but he couldn't go to any of the main shopping centers or video stores because he was afraid of running into Brian. He went to the mall with his mother and Missy once, after saving up enough money for his thirteenth album, and bought a new Joan Jett album he'd seen on MTV. Mostly, though, he spent his time doing

nothing. He didn't miss Brian, but he hadn't realized how little else he had to do with his time now that Brian wasn't around. Nobody in the house seemed to have noticed that Brian didn't come by anymore. They just thought Chris liked to sit around the house with nothing to do all the time.

Sometimes he'd go to the kitchen and eat out of pure boredom. He'd been going through a cheese ravioli phase lately. The only brand he liked right now was Waldbaum's, and he microwaved it longer than the instructions said to, until the edges of the raviolis became hard and stringy and white. He didn't know why he liked it this way, but he did. Sometimes he had two cans in one day, on days when his mother didn't cook.

Sometimes Chris would get so bored and so sick of wandering around the house looking for anything to perk him up that he would go to his mother and say "I have nothing to do," even though he knew she wouldn't think of anything good. She never understood that when he said "I have nothing to do," he didn't mean he wanted her to think of things he had in his room or places he could ride to on his bike or anything like that. If all he wanted was to remember what he had in his room, he'd have been able to look himself. And he also didn't mean he wanted her to think of exciting new things to do, because if he was in an exciting mood than he'd have been able to think of things to do by himself. When he said he had nothing to do,

he just meant he was sick of everything and couldn't stand it anymore.

"Missy just said the same thing to me, why don't you play with her?" his mother said to him one day when he asked her what to do. "Do you want me to drive you to the beach?"

"I don't wanna go just with her," Chris said.

"Well, if you want to stay in the house, you'll just have to find some way to entertain yourself." She was sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine, and he was sitting at the other side of the table holding his head in his hands.

"How about a trip to the library?"

"I didn't even finish the books I took out last time," Chris said.

"Well, why don't you read them now?"

"I'm sick of reading."

"Well, I'm not surprised you're sick of it, the way you read the same books over and over," his mother said. His parents had both been telling him lately that he should start reading more grown-up books, but he liked to read books that he was already familiar with. He'd been rereading the same books since he was in grade school: "The Pushcart War", 'Henry and Beezus', 'Harriet the Spy'. He knew these books were too young for him but he still enjoyed them.

"I took some older books out this time," Chris said.

"Yeah, like what?"

"'Arthur'."

"Arthur? What, the movie? The Dudley Moore movie? They made a book out of that?"

"Yeah."

"That's not even a book, that's just a novelization of a movie. Really, Chris, that's not what I'd call quality reading material. You have such a bright mind, I really wish you would ask me or your father to make you a list of good books to try."

"I will," Chris said. He hadn't even been able to finish 'Arthur', anyway. Every time he tried to read an adult book he would get bored and confused by the end of the first chapter, and would give up. He had been getting further and further into books before giving up, though, lately. "But what do I do till then?"

"I don't know," his mother said. "Actually, while we're on the subject of reading, I've been thinking of asking you -- when you're reading in your room, do you ever try it with the music off? Because I find, especially when I'm reading, it's much easier to concentrate with some quiet."

"I can concentrate with music on," Chris said.

"Well, you know, I remember when I was in college I used to think that, and I would always study with a record on, but then I discovered how much easier it was to think when it's quiet. You might want to just try it."

"No, I've tried it. I concentrate better with music on."

"Okay," she said.

His mother never came up with good ideas. After he left the kitchen he was so bored he let Missy talk him into playing a game of cards. Missy was usually available for Chris to do things with, but it wasn't thrilling for Chris to spend the summer hanging around with his twelve-year-old sister. He let her talk him into a game of gin rummy, but he won easily. She started begging him to play another. "Come on, just one more, please," she said.

"No, why should I? You never win, it's no fun," he said.

"Then play me something else, let's play spit, or double solitaire."

"I'm sick of card games. I don't like games for two people."

"Well, then that means you'll never play games with me, because we have nobody else to play with."

"Okay," Chris said.

"Mom says you take it out on me because you're mad that David and Susan left," Missy said.

"Well, that's stupid," Chris said.

"Then play something with me."

"I don't want to."

He ended up watching TV with her. A rerun of 'The Jeffersons' was on, and then 'Wheel of Fortune'. Then since it was Thursday night the best shows of the week were on, 'The Cosby Show' first, then 'Family Ties', and then 'Cheers'. Chris was in love with two different girls on these shows, first Lisa Bonet from 'The Cosby Show',

and then Mallory from 'Family Ties'. Sometimes when he dreamed of girls he could marry, he pictured himself with Lisa Bonet. She seemed like the kind of girl he'd really be able to connect with, if he could someday meet her. Sometimes she or Justine Bateman showed up in their shows wearing really skimpy clothes, bikinis or mini-skirts.

It figured, Chris thought as he watched, that his mother would tell Missy something stupid like that the reason he didn't want to play with her all day was that he was mad about David and Susan being gone. It was true, but that didn't give them a right to say it. And what else did they say about him when he wasn't there?

Years ago, he and Missy and Susan and David used to always do things together. They used to play long, complicated games that they made up out of other games, like Kamikaze Stratego, a speedy variation of Stratego that he and David invented, or Running Spit, a version of the card game where you throw down the spit deck in one room but keep your own card pile in the other, so you have to run through the house to play until everybody is totally out of breath. They used to put on plays for their parents, and create family newspapers. And Chris had always had certain things that he would do alone with each of them, like the fantasy game he used to play for hours and hours every day with Susan, in which they were two people named Chris and Susan who would get into all kinds of adventures, like being kidnapped or becoming movie stars. Then with David he had

a complicated, ongoing cops-and-robbers game that they'd played regularly for about two years, in which they were the good guys chasing down bad guys all over Long Island. Susan and David both started to lose interest in these games though, and then for a short time Chris did stuff like that with Missy instead, usually using the swing set in the backyard, which they would turn into a rocketship, or a submarine, or a jail. Then Chris started to lose interest in it, and he hadn't done things like that now for a couple of years. Really, it hadn't been Susan and David's going to college that had changed the way things were, because by the time they left they'd both been spending all their time with their new high school friends anyway. Once they got their driver's licenses and started going on dates, Chris had to be left out.

There was no Mets game on tonight, so Chris's father wasn't in the living room. The main thing Chris usually did with his father was watch Mets games when they were on TV. Chris's mother didn't watch, and Missy usually just pretended to watch and then left the room. It was the best time Chris spent alone with his father, because they only talked about the Mets, which meant Chris's father couldn't get on his nerves. Sometimes when a Mets game was on and he and his father sat down to watch together, Chris felt surprised at how glad he was to have the company.

In this boring summer, Chris realized, the Mets being in first place was pretty much the only exciting thing that was happening to him. The St.

Louis Cardinals, last year's division winners, were in fourth place. The Mets were so far ahead in first that people were saying they might set some all-time records, like most victories in a season by any team, if they kept it up. Was it really possible, Chris wondered, that the Mets might not screw everything up, that they might actually go to the World Series? If this happened, Brian would be proven wrong and Chris would be proven right. This had never happened before. It was almost a rule of nature, Chris thought, that Brian would always be right and he would always be wrong.

Because of all the excitement about the Mets, Chris was learning more about baseball than ever before. His father had tried to explain it all before, like about the infield fly rule and what a balk was, but this summer was the first time Chris found himself caring enough to half-listen. One day Chris discovered he could name all the players on the team, just by thinking of the lineup: Mookie Wilson or Lenny Dykstra batting first, Wally Backman second, then Keith Hernandez, Gary Carter, Darryl Strawberry, George Foster, Ray Knight, Rafael Santana and the pitcher, with Timmy Teufel and Howard Johnson sometimes playing in place of Backman or Knight. Danny Heep and Kevin Mitchell were the pinch-hitters, and Ed Hearn was the backup catcher who never got to play, since Gary Carter never missed an inning. Chris could also name the five starting pitchers: Dwight Gooden, Ron Darling, Sid Fernandez, Bobby Ojeda and Rick Aguilera, and

the six relief pitchers: Doug Sisk, Roger McDowell, Jesse Orosco, Rick Anderson, Bruce Berenyi and Randy Neimann. He was pretty impressed with himself for knowing all this.

Sometimes Chris even got worried that he was thinking about the Mets too much. One night, a week before he was supposed to leave for Agora, he was half-asleep but couldn't fall all the way asleep, and he kept seeing the starting lineup taking their turns at bat in front of his closed eyes, each of the nine standing silently at an ethereal home-plate against a dark backdrop, not even looking like themselves but rather like weird cartoons of themselves, like the distorted, heavy-chested baseball-player figures he'd seen in some Bugs Bunny cartoon about baseball, and they didn't look like any of the Mets, except that Chris knew which one had which name, and they stood at the plate not even swinging their bats but just standing there, taking turns stepping up and looking off into empty space and then moving off for the next one to come on. They kept coming, over and over, and finally Chris had to get out of bed and go into the kitchen to shake it off, and he microwaved a can of cheese ravioli and sat at the table eating it and reading the comics in that day's newspaper even though he'd read them already, just to divert himself. He decided to skip watching baseball for a couple of days after this, even though he had nothing better to do than pack for his trip.

Sean Lamana was looking around the local guitar store one day when he found Chris Blomberg standing in front of the sheet music rack reading a music book. "Hey," Sean said. "What's up?"

Chris looked up. "Oh, hi," Chris said.

"Whatcha doing?" Sean said. He looked at the book Chris was reading, an R.E.M. songbook. "You play?"

"Oh, no," Chris said. "I'm just, you know, looking. You play, right?"

"Not too well, but yeah," Sean said. "Hey, you know, I'm glad I ran into you. I wanted to ask you something."

"Uh-huh?"

"That painting you did, in class last year. I was wondering, would it possibly be for sale?"

"For sale?" Sean thought Chris looked upset at the idea, or at something.

"Well, you know, like only if you felt like it," Sean said.

"Well -- who . . . who would buy it?"

"Me," Sean said. "You know, if you wanted to. Otherwise, I understand."

"Oh," Chris said, looking really confused. "Oh, well, you know what . . . I probably can't. See, I'm going to this thing this summer, this, like, well, it's like this thing . . ."

"You mean the Agora thing, yeah, I know about it."

"You know about it?"

"Yeah, my girlfriend is gonna try to get in next year, she talks about it sometimes. You know Patty Zipper, right?"

Chris squinted his eyes and tilted his head, as if he was confused. "Um, no, I don't think so," he said.

"Well, anyway, what about this thing, then?"

"Oh," Chris said. "Well, see, the problem is, I had to make up this portfolio to get in, and one of the things in the portfolio was that painting, well, really it was like a slide of that painting, but still . . . I dunno if I'd be allowed to sell it till the thing was over, cause, you know, they might -- expect me to have it or something."

"Oh," Sean said. "Okay, well, that's cool. Maybe after you get back."

"Yeah, then I could probably do it," he said.

"Okay. Well, see you round -- have fun at the program."

"Okay," Chris said.

That night while Sean was out with Patty and a bunch of other people, he told Patty that he'd seen Chris again. "Is that guy really shy, or is he just, like, in his own world?" he asked Patty.

"I don't know, that's a good question," Patty said. "I think he's just so into his art that he's oblivious to other people. You know, like in Mr. Brill's class, he never makes any effort to talk to anybody."

"He must have just moved here, since he doesn't seem to know anyone," Eileen said.

"I don't think so," Adam said. "He's always been around, he's just one of those people you never notice."

Sean said, "Well, he doesn't hang out with anybody we know, right?"

"Not that I know of."

"We should do something like invite him out with us sometime," Sean said. "Like the next time we have a big party. You know, he seems like he might be really cool. He should hang out with us."

"He wouldn't come," Patty said. "I can tell. Anyway, I don't know, he probably has some other friends who he hangs out with."

"Yeah, maybe in the school he was in before," Sean said.

"Yeah, probably. So, you know, you could try, but it probably wouldn't work."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Sean said.

On the morning of July 29, Chris's parents drove him to the bus station. He said goodbye to them and got on the bus that would take him to a station near the town of Agora, from which he would take a cab to the State College campus. His parents had offered to drive him up, because his father was worried that Chris would get lost, but Chris insisted on taking the bus, and the trip turned out to be easy.

He got off at the Agora station that night, carrying the duffel bag that was nearly as big as he was. He found a cab and after about a twenty-

minute drive he saw a sign that said "AGORA STATE COLLEGE, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK." He told the driver to drop him off there. "Don't you want to go to the bus circle?" the driver asked, but Chris figured he was close enough. Unfortunately, he quickly realized that he was wrong. He'd had no idea how large a college campus could be. He lugged his duffel bag for half an hour, trying to follow signs with arrows across the dark fields and silent parking lots, not even sure what he was looking for.

Finally in the distance across the great grassy campus lawn he began to spot some weird looking buildings. The tallest was about twenty stories high and shaped like a giant concrete ski jump, with several short walls at different angles and one long, curving wall with flat windows built into the curve sloping right into the next building, which was horseshoe-shaped and also huge and had a slanting roof, so that one end of the horseshoe was lower than the other. Then there was a big, bulky box-shaped building about seven stories high, made of the same gray concrete as the other two. The three buildings stuck up in the air like the twisted remains of a city that had been bombed. All the other buildings were small and normal looking, made of bricks, without slants or curves.

Chris headed for the three buildings and finally found a sign with an arrow saying NYSSAP, which stood for NEW YORK STATE SUMMER ARTS PROGRAM. He tried to follow

the arrow and got lost. Finally he remembered that he'd received a map of the campus in the mail, and he opened his duffel bag on the lawn and found the map and figured out that he was on the wrong side of the ski-jump building. He walked across a long concrete path with box-shaped metal benches and huge geometrical sculptures made of plate-metal painted in bright colors but half covered with rust. He saw another sign with another arrow and turned a corner and found a big crowd of kids and adults milling around in front of a building. He walked towards it and saw a lot of people his age, some with parents, some without, some carrying luggage or big leather portfolios or large blank or half-finished canvases. Most of them were dressed really cool, girls with leather pants or punk mini-skirts or flowers in their hair, guys with concert t-shirts with names of bands like Judas Priest and the Talking Heads and Pink Floyd and U2, and off to one side, as Chris walked towards the building, a circle of kids with no parents around were trying to have a sing-along, with about five of them holding acoustic guitars and trying to find a song they all knew. One girl with a pink punked-out haircut was carrying a big portable cassette player while two normal-looking parents carried her luggage, and they were walking towards a table in front of the building that said, "SUMMER ARTS PROGRAM -- SIGN IN HERE". Chris walked slowly through it all, looking at everything on all sides of him, and then went to the table in front of the building to sign in.

Four

Chris found his room on the third floor of Alumni Hall. Another kid about his age was also moving his luggage in. "Hi," Chris said.

"Hi," the kid said. He was trying to lug a trunk through the door, and Chris helped him get it in. The kid wiped his hands and held one out for Chris to shake. "I'm Jerry," he said.

"I'm Chris." They stood in the center of the room looking at each other.

"Do you care which bed you get?" Jerry asked. There were two bare mattresses on metal box springs, sheets and pillowcases folded on top.

"No, I don't care," Chris said.

They both stood there. "I don't care either," Jerry said. He didn't look too excited about being where he was. Finally Chris threw his duffel bag on top of the bed to his left, and Jerry took the other. They unpacked silently for a little while.

"So, you're into art?" Chris asked Jerry.

"I dunno, not really," Jerry said. "I guess I'm pretty good at it."

"Yeah, me too," Chris said. "I don't even really know anything about art."

"Where're you from?"

"Paukatuck."

Jerry looked at him like he was crazy.

"What?"

"Paukatuck. It's on Long Island."

"Oh."

"What about you?"

"Poughkeepsie." Chris had heard of it. On an episode of 'Bewitched', he remembered, Samantha's next door neighbor was supposed to be going there or something, and she couldn't pronounce it right and kept calling it 'Kapoopsie'. Chris didn't mention that to Jerry, though. "Uh-huh," he said.

In the hall outside their room, Chris could hear guys carrying luggage around and yelling to each other as they moved in. A lot of people seemed to have arrived with their parents. Chris was really glad he hadn't -- that would have been terrible. There was a knock on their door and a guy who looked a few years older stuck his head in. "Guys, dorm meeting downstairs in the first floor lounge," he said.

Chris and Jerry went down to the lounge, along with all the others in the dorm. The older guy who'd stuck his head into Chris and Jerry's room turned out to be one of the two Resident Assistants for the boy's dorm. His name was Burt, and the other R.A. was Tom. The guy in charge of the whole dorm was an even older guy named

Nick, and Nick stood up on a table and read the rules: eleven o'clock curfew every night, no girls in the boy's dorm and vice versa, no alcohol or illegal drugs. There were two three-hour art classes every weekday, and there would be several field trips. Attendance was mandatory for everybody at everything. Anybody who broke the rules would be immediately sent home. "Other than that," Nick said, "have fun. And anybody who hasn't yet signed up for your classes please go to the Arts building and do so immediately."

Chris and Jerry hadn't signed up yet. "Hey, you know where the Art Building is?" Jerry asked the kid who was sitting next to them.

"Yeah, I think I know," the kid said. "I gotta go too, I'll go with you." The three of them walked out to the main campus and introduced themselves while they walked. The kid's name was Duane and he had the room right across the hall from Chris and Jerry's. "What grade are you guys in?" Chris asked both of them as they walked.

"Just finished tenth, going into eleventh," Duane said.

"Yeah, me too," Jerry said.

"Me too," Chris said. "I guess they assign the rooms by age."

"Yeah, probably," Duane said. They were walking towards the huge box-shaped building, one of the three big buildings on the campus, which Duane thought was the Arts building. They reached the building and discovered it was the library. "Oh well," Duane said. They turned and

stood looking at the other structures, trying to guess which one looked like an Arts building. Another group of people walked up to the library, three or four parents and a couple of girls about Chris's age. They seemed to be lost as well. "Do you know where Thorndike Hall is?" one of the girls asked Chris and Jerry and Duane.

Thorndike Hall was the girl's dorm, and Chris had passed it earlier and knew it was near the guy's dorm. But now he couldn't remember where either dorm was. "Yeah, I think it's somewhere down there," he said. "Do you know where the Arts building is?"

"The Arts building?" the girl said, thinking. She was tall and wore dark sunglasses, jeans and a bright yellow halter, the elastic kind that had no straps anywhere, but just wrapped around from above her bellybutton to just over her chest. Chris had always thought it was incredible that girls would wear those things in public, and that he was allowed to look, but now since he was talking to her he couldn't look anyway. "No, I don't know, well, I have this stupid map," she said.

She took her map out of her pocket and she and the other girl studied it while their parents looked off distractedly. Chris moved in to read the map too, and peeked at the girl's chest while he looked. Since her shoulders were completely bare and her stomach was too, the way the elastic clung to her body it was like he was peeking at her naked body. Girls' breasts always looked awkward and misshapen in elastic halters anyway, since they

provided no support. Chris had had a lot of experience looking at girls breasts, mostly in class at school. This girl's breasts were small to medium sized, and since she was tall and pretty skinny he didn't think she looked particularly good in the halter, but that never stopped him from wanting to look. The other things besides halters that he could never stop gaping at were bikinis. The fact that girls wore bikinis, Chris figured, was just one of those lucky things in life that there was really no explanation for. Any girls his age would scream and run if she found herself in her underwear in public, but when a girl was wearing a bikini it was just like she was in her underwear, and Chris could go to the beach in the summer with Brian and just sit there and look at all the girls around him and imagine that they were all running around in their underwear.

The girl was talking to him, pointing out where the Arts building was on the map. It turned out the Ski-jump building was the Arts building. Chris and Jerry and Duane said thanks and went off to the building, which turned out to be called the Albert E. Rockefeller Arts Center. Inside there were a few tables with grownups buzzing around. They were asked to choose two courses of study from five choices: Drawing, Painting, Sculpture, Printmaking and Ceramics. Jerry signed up for Printmaking in the morning and Sculpture in the afternoon, Duane took Drawing in the morning and Sculpture in the afternoon, and Chris decided to

take Painting in the morning and Drawing in the afternoon.

By the time they finished it was dinner time, and in the cafeteria Chris and Jerry followed Duane to a table where Duane's roommate and a bunch of other guys from their section of the dorm were sitting. Chris was glad that his first worry was over: he had found people to eat with. The conversation at the table wasn't great, though. Most of the guys didn't talk much, and the ones who did blabbed on, telling stories about their friends from home and talking about movies they'd seen recently, and then by the end of the dinner they were throwing rolled-up napkins and showing each other their food while they chewed it. Jerry perked up and talked more than when Chris had met him earlier, and Chris wondered what it would be like sharing a room with this stranger for an entire month. He didn't talk much himself, but was glad that nobody seemed to notice him being quiet. The dinner was normal cafeteria food, roast beef, mashed potatoes, string beans, and little, dry, square brownies for dessert.

That night there was an orientation in front of the Horseshoe building, which was actually called the Student Union. The building itself was dark and padlocked for the summer, as were many other buildings around the campus. A picnic table with a strawberry punch bowl had been set up, and the kids were supposed to hang around and drink punch and get to know each other. Everybody seemed to be mingling and talking to

strangers, but Chris and Jerry stood near the punch bowl not talking to anybody. "Figures, no alcohol," Jerry said after he tried the punch.

"Yeah," Chris said, trying to look disgusted like Jerry did. A girl came up to them from behind. "Hi, why aren't you socializing?" she said, but she said it too loudly, too impersonally, for Chris to take it as friendly. "You two look so sullen," she said. Chris wished he could come up with some kind of amusing answer, but couldn't think of anything and just mumbled. "Where are you guys from?" she asked.

"Poughkeepsie," Jerry said.

"Paukatuck, what about you?" Chris said.

"New Rochelle," she said. Chris already disliked her -- she wasn't really interested in getting to know them, she was just like the school-spirit types back in high school who always insisted on everybody being peppy and smiley. People like that made Chris too intimidated to talk, and he didn't want to talk to them anyway. The conversation seemed to have died after she'd said she was from New Rochelle, so after a moment she said, "Well, you're not very talkative, are you?"

Chris wished he could make some kind of joke out of it, but couldn't think of anything. "No, we're talkative," he said weakly.

She shrugged. "Okay, well, nice meeting you!" she said, and she went off to meet some other people. Now Chris was mad at himself, because even though he didn't like people like her, still, he'd only been here half a day and already he

was starting to stand out as shy. He was sick of it. How did this always happen? Why couldn't he have thought of something to say to her? What could anybody have said to her? But other people would have come up with something with no problem. He didn't want this to end up like high school. And Jerry, standing next to him, was a total dud.

Chris wanted to talk to somebody. He looked around, and saw that the tall girl in the yellow halter and the other girl who they'd run into earlier had just gotten punch and were walking by. The girl in the halter had changed and was now wearing a navy blue blouse. Chris, in a burst of courage, made eye contact with her. "So did you ever find that place?" he asked.

Both girls stopped walking, and apparently they hadn't been heading anywhere else. "Yeah, did you ever find the arts building?" the halter girl asked.

"Yeah, well, there it is," Chris said, since the ski-jump was looming right over them.

"Oh, yeah, right," the girl said.

"So, where are you from?" Chris asked, following the lead of the school-spirit girl who'd just asked him the same question.

"Fredville," the other girl said. "We know, you never heard of it, we've been through this already."

"Fredville?" Chris said.

"Yeah, it's like near Jamestown," the halter girl said.

"They named the town after a guy named Fred?" Chris said, pleased with himself that he'd come up with a subject to talk about, even if it amounted to insulting their hometown.

Both girls laughed. "Well, actually, believe it or not, it is," the other girl said. "Good old William and Rebecca Fred, there's a statue of them on the road, if you ever drive in."

"Actually, I really doubt I'll ever drive in," Chris said.

"Oh, you're mean," the halter girl said. "So where are you guys from?"

"Paukatuck," Chris said.

"Poughkeepsie," Jerry said.

"Oh, and you make fun of our town?" she said. "Hey, I'm trying to find a cigarette, do either of you smoke?"

Neither Chris nor Jerry smoked, so the girl interrupted a conversation going on behind her to get a cigarette, but then turned back to Chris and Jerry. "So what's your names?" she asked.

"I'm Chris, this is Jerry. What's your names?"

"I'm Lianne, and this is Dawn" the yellow-halter girl said.

"Well, nice to meet you," Chris said, impressed with the way his voice sounded casual and comfortable. Just then the doors opened, and everybody started to shuffle in to the auditorium. It occurred to Chris that he and Jerry should sit with these two girls, if they could. Lianne was the one he liked. Something about her seemed really

cool. She had a scrawny build and messy brown hair. She wasn't ravishing but she was okay looking, and she had a certain way of standing that expressed an attitude, a confidence that she was a bit more cool than everybody else around her. Her friend, Dawn, seemed more typical. She had short blonde hair and a face that looked too normal for Chris. Jerry could have Dawn, he decided. But when they sat down it worked out badly, because Chris ended up sitting next to Dawn, with Jerry on his other side and Lianne next to Jerry.

The orientation was just a slide show of pictures taken during previous summers. When the slides finished, the five teachers who would be conducting the five classes were introduced, and each spoke for a few minutes. When orientation was over it was 9:30 and there was nothing else scheduled for the night, and during the walk back to the dorms Chris and Jerry lost Lianne and Dawn somewhere. Back in the dorm, some of the guys they'd eaten dinner with were hanging out in the room of one guy who'd brought a stereo, listening to Motley Crue and Twisted Sister albums. Chris and Jerry hung out for a little while, and then went back to their room. They got their beds ready and got settled in, not talking much, and then Jerry asked Chris, "You have a girlfriend at home?"

"No," Chris said. "Do you?"

"Yeah," Jerry said. He took a picture out of his wallet and handed it to Chris. Chris always wondered why people did this. What was he supposed to say? She looked like a girl. He

handed it back, nodding. There wasn't much else to say, and they turned the lights out and went to sleep without further conversation.

Chris overslept the next morning, missing breakfast. He went straight to class. He thought of Lianne as he walked to the art building, and hoped she'd be in his class. The main thing he remembered from yesterday was that conversation they had had, and that he hadn't gotten nervous or said anything stupid during it. Lianne wasn't in his painting class, but he realized as he thought about it that all you had to do was act confident, and just say whatever came to your mind, not worrying about how stupid it was, and that was all there was to not being shy. You just had to talk. Instead of thinking whether or not to say something, you just say it.

The teacher assigned each student to an easel, talked for several minutes about the work they'd doing, and then asked the students to spend the day deciding what they'd like to paint, Chris began a conversation with the girl to his left. Her name was Sharon Drinkwine, a really beautiful name, Chris thought, and she had a really sweet personality and they talked for about five minutes, just about where they were from and how much painting they'd done before. Then Chris started a conversation with the girl on his right, whose name was Nancy Jaffe, and he realized happily as they made small talk that he was actually being chatty and friendly. Everybody in the class was talking to each other, and Chris was talking just as much as

anybody else. They were supposed to be sketching ideas, but some people started walking around talking to other people, and Chris ended up talking to a guy named Phil and another guy named Tom, both of them older and a bit more knowledgeable about art than him, and he was doing really well, the conversation flowing with no problem, feeling fine. He really didn't care so much about talking with guys, but it was practice for talking to girls. It was like he had a brand new toy that he wanted to just keep playing with.

At one point he looked across the room and saw that there were about twenty people there, all his age and all interested in art, and not a single one of them had met him before today. He didn't have to be shy, and nobody there knew that he had ever been shy, and all of a sudden he wasn't shy anymore, not at all.

Before lunch he went back to his room and got Jerry, and when they had their food and stood with their trays looking for a table to sit at, Chris noticed Lianne and Dawn and a couple of other people sitting at a table on a far side of the cafeteria, and just on a whim, feeling strangely calm, he motioned for Jerry to follow him. "Mind if we join you?" he said when they got there.

"Oh, hi!" Lianne said. She introduced them to Janice, Sam and Mary. Janice had a sort of cheerleader face but seemed nice enough, and Sam seemed to be older, with a full beard. Mary was a sort of stick figure with long black hair and glasses. They all talked about artists and painting

techniques over lunch, with the older guy Sam doing a lot of the talking. Chris broke into the conversation everywhere he could. He was sitting opposite Lianne, and at one point when nobody was saying anything he said to her, "Boy, this food really sucks."

She made a face and smiled. "Yeah, I know, just like my high school." The food wasn't really even so bad, Chris thought to himself. It just seemed like the right thing to say.

On the way to drawing class, Chris found a bulletin board in front of the classrooms that listed who was in what class, and he looked for a Lianne. Her name was Lianne Fahey, he discovered, and she wasn't in his drawing class, and neither was Sharon Drinkwine or Nancy Jaffe. But when he got there he found that Mary, who he'd just met at lunch, was, and he sat down next to her and started talking. He must have asked different people "Where are you from?" twenty times that day, he realized, but it was a way to start. Mary was from near Rochester.

While on the line to get into dinner after class, Chris spotted Lianne and Dawn and Mary ahead of them on the line, and Lianne waved to him. But when they took their trays out to the dining room and Chris started walking in the direction of their table, Jerry suddenly said, "You sit with them, I'm going over here," and went to where Duane and the other guys from the dorm were sitting. Chris had to go to Lianne's table by himself.

There was an exhibit on campus of works by the five artists who were teaching the classes, and they were all supposed to go that night after dinner. Chris and Lianne and Dawn and Sam and Janice and Mary went directly from the cafeteria. They walked around the exhibit as a group, discussing the paintings and sculptures as they walked. By this time Chris was worn out from being talkative all day. When he went to sleep that night his thoughts were a blur of the faces of all the girls he'd met that day.

The next day Chris overslept and missed breakfast again. He arrived in Painting class five minutes late, and was disappointed that everybody was busy on their work, too busy to talk. The painting teacher was named Patrice, and she flitted from easel to easel occasionally bursting forth into a spontaneous speech about the meaning of art, which she'd deliver with her arms whirling slowly around her body in some kind of expressive ballet. Chris had trouble following what she was saying, and didn't know what to choose for his first work. They'd been asked to come in with photographs or magazine pictures or sketches today, but Chris had forgotten. Patrice was heading his way, and he quickly pulled from his pocket the photo ID card he'd received yesterday. "I'm going to do a self-portrait from this," he said.

Patrice looked at him funny for a moment. Then she said "Good! A miniature!" and flitted on

to the next easel. After she approved all the ideas, the class spent the rest of the session stretching and preparing their canvases.

Even though it was quieter today, Chris couldn't believe how different the atmosphere here was from Paukatuck. Everybody was so friendly, and every single person seemed cool. Well, he thought, not really every person, because Jerry reminded him of the kind of guys there were a lot of in Paukatuck, who didn't seem to be really different or unusual in any way. There were other people like Jerry, too, but most people there were really different. They wore the weirdest clothes, tie-dye and batik and indian stuff, and also concert t-shirts, but not like in Paukatuck where the bands were always Judas Priest or Motley Crue. Here everyone seemed to be into unusual bands, including some Chris had never even heard of. There were two girls who seemed to have arrived together from the same high school who had Grateful Dead bumper stickers and buttons all over their clothes and sketchbooks and paintboxes, and then there was another girl with Janis Joplin hair who wore batik indian shirts and John Lennon glasses, and Chris smiled at her the first time he saw her while he was walking to the cafeteria, and she grinned back and reached out and tweaked his stomach as she passed by. Chris had never known it was possible for there to be a place where people who didn't know each other were so friendly.

At lunch he sat with Lianne and her friends again. Lianne asked him, "How come you never show up for breakfast?"

"I dunno, why, do you?"

"Yeah," she said. "Come tomorrow."

"Okay," Chris said. During this lunch, while Sam and everybody else talked about art, he and Lianne held their own conversation. "You know they have a gym here that we're allowed to use," she said. "They have like racquetball courts and everything, somebody told me."

"Oh, you play racquetball?" Chris said.

"No. Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I wanna learn how to, would you teach me?"

"Sure," Chris said. "You want to tonight, after class?"

"Yeah, definitely."

Things were quieter in drawing class the second day. Leonard was the drawing teacher, and he put a potted plant in the center of the room and had everybody spend the afternoon sketching it. It was boring, and Leonard told Chris his sketches were too stiff and mechanical. But Chris was too busy thinking about other things to care.

Chris met Lianne and the others for dinner. Then he and Lianne said they'd go back to their rooms to pack their stuff for racquetball and would meet on the lawn between the boy's and girl's lounge in five minutes. Lianne ended up taking close to a half hour. When she finally came out

she had changed into overalls, and under the overalls she had put on the same halter she'd worn the first time they'd met. It occurred to Chris that practically every time he saw her she was wearing something different. "You change your clothes a lot, don't you?" he asked her.

"Yeah," she said. They started walking towards the gym, carrying their backpacks. "I changed my eye color, too," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"My contacts. They're tinted brown."

Chris stopped her and looked at her eyes. "You're kidding," he said. "You changed them just now?"

"No, I mean like a year ago."

Chris looked at her eyes, and they looked like regular brown eyes to him. "What color are they really?" he asked.

"Green."

"So why did you want to change from green to brown?"

"I don't know, my eye doctor just told me I could get tinted if I wanted, so I did."

"Can you take them out?"

"Yeah, I take them out every night."

"I mean now."

"No, I'd need my drops. Besides, I like it better this way."

"But why?"

"I don't know."

They walked some more. "I probably wouldn't even notice the difference," Chris said. "I'm color blind."

This time she stopped. "You're kidding."

"No." He kept walking, and she started again.

"You mean you can't see any colors?"

"No, I see colors, I just can't tell which is which. Some colors I can tell apart, I just can't tell green from brown sometimes, or blue from purple."

"But you're an artist!"

"I know. It's no big deal."

"It's no big deal? How can you be an artist if you can't tell colors!"

"I don't know. I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yeah, but . . . do you mostly work in black and white, then?"

"No," Chris said. He was starting to get annoyed, because he went through this every time he told someone he was color blind. "No, I don't work in black and white. I can see colors, I just mix them up sometimes."

"Then how can you use them? Why don't you just work in black and white?"

"Look," Chris said. "When you buy a thing of paint, it says what color it is, right? So you just read the fucking thing and then you know what color it is."

Lianne stopped walking again, and opened her backpack and pulled a t-shirt out. "What color is this?" she asked him.

"I don't wanna do this," Chris said.

"Oh, come on."

"No," Chris said.

"Oh, please, please, come on -- just once, please, just answer me, what color is my shirt."

Chris glanced at it quickly. "Green," he said.

"It's tan."

"Well, I thought it might be tan, but half the time when I think something looks tan it turns out it's green, so I said green."

"But . . . how can you not tell?"

"I don't know," Chris said, irritated.

"Well, don't worry, I think it's cool."

"I'm not worried. I just wish -- you know, I'm just sick of talking about it, like, everybody thinks it's so funny that I'm an artist and I'm color-blind, I'm just like sick of it, I just don't think it's so funny, I don't think it's such a big deal."

"Okay, I'm sorry," Lianne said.

As they walked, the sun was setting in front of them. "Ooh, what a nice sunset," Lianne said. Suddenly she caught herself. "Oh, I'm sorry -- I didn't mean . . . if you can't see it."

Chris realized that now Lianne was really worried about annoying him. "Oh, you don't have to worry, I don't want you to have to not mention colors around me or anything," he said. It suddenly occurred to him how sweet it was of her to be so concerned. "I didn't even mind what you said before, you can say whatever you want, it was

just that other people talk about it too much. I'm sorry if I get irritable sometimes."

She smiled. "Yeah, I get irritable too a lot."

They reached the gym and had to climb a long staircase to get to the entrance. There was a nice breeze and the sky was turning dark, and something about the breeze or the time of night or just about being with Lianne felt really good to Chris, and made him feel really relaxed, not at all nervous or shy. "So you never played racquetball before?" he asked her.

"No. I played tennis some. Are you really good?"

"No, I'm alright, my father is like an A minus player, though. You know in racquetball you get a grade, like school grades, to tell you what level to play at."

"Really? What grade are you?"

"I don't have one, I don't play enough. I will I guess when I get older. My older brother is like a B, and my father I'm pretty sure is an A minus."

"I'll probably be an F."

"No, don't worry."

"I hope I don't bore you too much."

"No, don't worry about it. I don't care, I'm out of practice anyway." Then when they found the courts they discovered that they couldn't play anyway, because they didn't have University ID cards and their art program ID cards didn't count. "Oh well, I guess we should have checked first," Lianne said.

They stood in the gym looking around them. "Well, what do you wanna do?" Chris asked.

"I dunno, we could just go for a walk," Lianne said.

"Okay." The gym was on the perimeter of the campus, right across the street from a residential neighborhood. They headed in that direction. "Look at all these houses, why are they so small?" Chris said.

"They're not so small, they're like normal-sized," Lianne said.

"These houses? They're not normal, they look like toy houses," Chris said.

"Boy, where do you live? Are you rich?"

"No, not at all," Chris said. "All the houses on Long Island are bigger than these, I dunno, I guess they just build them bigger there."

They walked down the street, and then sat down on a curb and looked around them. The town seemed to Chris to have a really strange feeling to it, just the fact that it was so far away from home and the realization that he didn't know anybody for a hundred miles in any direction. "Yeah, this town looks exactly like Fredville," Lianne said.

"Fredville, I'm sorry, that is just such a stupid name," Chris said, laughing.

"I know, it's true. I guess we don't even notice how stupid it is anymore there, cause everyone we hang out with is from Fredville too."

"Are you and Dawn really good friends back home?" Chris asked.

"Dawn?" She seemed offended by the question. "No. What, are you kidding? We're like hardly even friends at all at home."

Chris was surprised. "You're kidding."

"No, what, you thought we were really good friends? No way, I can barely even stand her. We just know each other from art class, and then we decided to be roommates when we found out we were both coming here. And, you know, she really pissed me off just before, when I was getting changed, she -- do you like these overalls?" She held the fabric up at one of her knees to show Chris.

"Yeah, I guess," Chris said.

"They're volcanic-stone-washed, you know. Well, I like them. I think overalls are really comfortable to wear."

Lianne did look comfortable, Chris thought. But she always looked comfortable, he realized. She was just a really comfortable person, deep down inside, and maybe that was why every time he talked to her he felt so relaxed. It occurred to him that this would be a good cue to give her a suave compliment, like 'You look absolutely gorgeous in them', or something like that. "They look good on you," he said.

"Thanks. Well, before when I was putting them on, Dawn sees me looking at myself in the mirror, and she yells, 'Oh, what are those ghastly things?'. And then she tells me I look like a farmer. Right, like farmers spend fifty bucks on stone-washed jeans."

Chris laughed. "Well, somebody from Fredville has no right to call anybody else a farmer, even somebody else from Fredville"

She pushed him. "Oh, shut up. We don't have farms there. And don't put me in any category with Dawn, just cause we live in the same town. Really, we're nothing alike. I don't even like being mentioned in the same sentence as her."

"Well, why did you ask to room with her, if you knew you didn't like her?"

"I don't know why. I was stupid. I was worried I'd get someone worse. You know who I wish I was rooming with, Mary? She's so nice. Or Janice. Either of them is a lot better than Dawn. And there's no way I would be friends with her back home. Oh god, I wish you could meet my real friends. You'd love them, they would like you too. Betsy, and Denise, and Marie, oh god, I wish they were here, we would have such a blast here."

"That's funny, and I thought you and Dawn were such good friends."

"Yuck," Lianne said.

They decided to start walking again, and came to a shopping center that consisted of only about three small stores with wooden signs and a gas station. Everything was closed for the night and dark. "You know, like, this shopping center, on Long Island, this would be nothing," Chris said. "I mean, this shopping center would be a total joke on Long Island."

"I know," Lianne said. "And here it's like the center of the town, probably. I know, this town is exactly like Fredville, exactly."

"How can you stand it?" Chris asked. But he knew as he asked that he didn't mean it. She had all her great friends, and with friends any place would be bearable. The real question was, how could he stand living where he lived?

"I know, it totally sucks," Lianne said.

"I hate my town too," Chris said.

"Probably not as much as I hate Fredville."

"I bet I do."

"No, I mean I really hate it," Lianne said. "I mean, I don't even show it, you can't tell from talking to me how much I hate it, like, I've learned to just be cheerful and not like dwell on it, and so you can't even tell how much I mean it. I really mean it."

"Why do you hate it so much?"

"Just everything, I just hate everything there. I'm getting out as soon as I can."

"I hate Paukatuck too, and I'm getting out too," Chris said.

They looked in the darkened windows of the stores as they walked, reading the signs in the windows and looking for anything interesting to see. "How far is Fredville from here?" he asked.

"Like five hours."

The town of Agora was three and a half hours away from the city, Chris calculated, and Paukatuck was about an hour from the city, so Fredville was nine and a half hours from

Paukatuck. He would probably never see Lianne again after this program ended. But why should he be worrying about that, when he'd only met her two days ago and really hardly even knew her?"

They walked to the gas station and sat down facing each other on a painted cement divider.

"Have you . . . you never tried to kill yourself, did you?" Lianne asked.

"No," Chris said. "You didn't, did you?"

"No," Lianne said. She thought for a moment. "Well, really, though, sort of, I did . . . Once, I was really pissed off at my mother -- my mother, I mean, my mother is like . . . well, forget it, you know -- anyway, we got in this really big fight, and I got grounded, and then my mother went to the supermarket or something, and I was alone in the house, and I took a razor, and like cut my wrists, and then I went into the kitchen and smeared the blood all over the refrigerator and everything, like I just wrote "Fuck you", and stuff like that."

"Holy shit," Chris said, looking at her with wide eyes.

"And then, I don't know, I just went upstairs to my room and went to sleep, and then when I woke up the next morning my mother had cleaned the whole thing up, and she never said a word about it, and we've still never mentioned it since then."

"You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Can I see your wrists?"

"You can hardly see anything." She held them out, and under the light of a street lamp she pointed the lines out to Chris, just a thin, hardly noticeable line of raised, whiter skin against the tan skin of each wrist. "I did it the wrong way, later I met this guy who showed me how I should have done it, like, I cut in the wrong direction. But, I dunno, I don't think I really meant to die anyway, even if I did do it right I didn't cut deep enough."

"Still, I can't believe you did that," Chris said.

"Yeah . . . and then, do you know this Kinks album, it's like from about ten years ago I'm pretty sure, called 'Sleepwalker'?"

"No. I know the Kinks, though."

"Yeah, nobody knows this album, it's really good, though. There's this song on it called 'Life Goes On', about this guy who, you know, everything is going wrong, and then he tries to kill himself and he can't even do that right. It's like funny, you know. Let me think, it goes : 'My bank went broke and my well ran dry, it was almost enough to contemplate suicide. I turned on the gas but then I soon realized, I hadn't settled my bill so they'd cut off my supply. No matter how I try it seems I'm too young to die, life goes on and on and on'."

"Hmm," Chris said.

"So, you know," Lianne said. "Ever since I heard that, that's always been like my special song."

"Wow," Chris said. "It sounds really cool."

"Yeah. The Kinks are good. Not too many people know their old stuff."

"You know what," Chris said. "I have an older brother and sister, so I have like lots of albums that nobody knows about, you know, stuff that is really amazing. They're not my albums, you know, but I can listen to them. Like early Pink Floyd, like 'Wish You Were Here'."

"Oh, I know that album. It's like one of my favorites. I know, I love old albums, they're the best."

"And like stuff like Led Zeppelin, you know, like I really think the best music was definitely in the 70's, you know, like I was born ten years too late. Even, you know, stuff that's good today, like AC/DC and Van Halen and people like that, you know, if you read interviews with them you find out they even think that the best stuff was done like in the 70's. They all say Led Zeppelin was better than any band today"

"Oh, I know. You know what, I saw Jimmy Page with the Firm. He did the 'Dazed and Confused' solo, too. Oh man, it was so good."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Lianne said. "Have you been to any concerts?"

"No."

"Oh, you should. They're amazing."

"I know. I want to go to one."

"Definitely, you have to." They sat there thinking for a minute, and Lianne started doing

stretching exercises against the cement block they were sitting on. "What are you doing?" Chris asked.

"Stretching. Don't you ever stretch?"

"No."

"It's good, come on, try it."

"No thanks," he said.

"Don't make fun of me," she said. She finished her exercises, and then she said her contacts were starting to irritate her eyes and she wanted to take them out. They decided to start to head back so she could do it, and then they'd see what time it was and decide what to do from there.

Lianne led the way back, because Chris had forgotten to notice where they were going and didn't know which way the campus was. They walked back in through the main entrance, with the sign that said 'AGORA STATE COLLEGE' that Chris had seen when the cab had first driven him into the campus. They walked across the long field, and as they approached the main campus, the Ski-jump building and the Horseshoe building seemed to glow eerily in the dark sky. "Those are such weird looking buildings," Chris said.

"I know," Lianne said. "The Horseshoe building, you know every time I see that I think of Niagara Falls. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"Oh, it's amazing. You gotta see it. It's only like two hours away from me, I've been there like five times. It's like the only good place my parents have ever taken me. One of the falls there, the big

one, is called the Horseshoe falls, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"It's so beautiful. And you can get right up there, right to the edge over where the water is falling off, and you can watch it just like fall right over under you, and there is so much water falling every second, it's so beautiful, you really gotta go sometime."

They walked to the dorms, and agreed that Chris would wait for Lianne in the girls' dorm lounge and then they'd do something else. But as soon as they walked in the door of the girls' dorm Janice ran up to them. "There you are, we've been looking all over for you!" she said to Lianne. "We're gonna have a pajama party in Mary's room."

"A pajama party?" Lianne said.

"Yeah!" Janice didn't even notice Chris standing there, but Lianne looked at him, and then back at Janice. "What do you mean, a pajama party?"

"I dunno, a pajama party!" Janice said. "Everybody's been trying to find you!"

Lianne looked at Chris. "I guess I'm being dragged off to this," she said to him, looking not at all enthusiastic.

"Yeah, okay," Chris said, feeling a little stunned at having the night end so suddenly.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow, why don't you come to breakfast?" she said.

"Okay, I will," Chris said. The next thing he knew, Janice had whisked Lianne away, and he was standing there alone.

The next morning Chris made it to breakfast for the first time, but Lianne didn't. Mary was there, though. "How was the pajama party?" Chris asked her.

"Oh, it was a riot," Mary said. "We got into trouble for making too much noise, around midnight they broke us up." For some reason, Chris found himself hoping Lianne hadn't had too good a time, because he didn't want her to forget about their walk and all the things they'd talked about and laughed about and talked seriously about. He realized he felt incredibly jealous of Mary and Janice and Dawn for stealing Lianne away from him last night.

While he was walking with Mary to the Arts building for the morning class, he heard his name called and turned back and found Lianne running up to catch up with them. She'd called his name, not Mary's, and that made Chris feel better. "I'm gonna kill you," he said, laughing. "I woke up early just to go to breakfast, and you didn't even make it."

"Oh, no, you went?" Lianne said. "Oh, shit, I'm so sorry. Well, we'll meet for lunch -- hey, meet me in front of my class when it's over, we'll walk back together."

"Okay," Chris said. Now he felt completely better. All during painting class, he was flying high from her having said that. Meeting a girl outside of her class to walk together -- it was just like a scene in a movie. He felt so great, he was chattering to everybody in painting class, talking happily to Sharon and Nancy and anybody else who crossed his path. It was so funny, anybody who met him here would think he was an extremely cheerful, talkative person. Nancy even said to him, "You know you have a nice smile?"

"Really?" Chris said.

"Yeah, it's good -- and you smile a lot too, you know." It was so hilariously opposite the way he was at home. He talked for a while to Sharon about the painting she was working on, a jungle scene, and realized as he looked at her that even though the first day he'd talked to her he'd been interested in her, now, even though she was in some ways even better looking than Lianne, he felt nothing for her, and could look her in the eyes while he talked to her and not even care, because he was meeting Lianne after class.

After he and Lianne met, he realized that he wasn't even nervous walking back to the dorms with her. He was never nervous around her, it was just impossible to be nervous around Lianne, because she was so warm and accepting and sweet. I'm in love, he realized to himself. Now the only thing he had to do was make a move. One thing that was happening lately was that his groin was starting to ache from the tension of being so

physically close to Lianne for such long periods of time. The hard-on he was concealing in his pants, as he walked along the path with Lianne, had been there so constantly since he'd become friends with Lianne, he hardly even noticed it anymore. But he was too happy to mind how physically frustrated he was. What did making love feel like, he wondered? The problem was that he couldn't even imagine it. The mechanics of what it would be like had always confused him. He could dream about it, but he didn't know if what he was dreaming about was ever right. In bed at night, he usually closed his eyes and pictured some kind of primal, indescribable, angelic scene, as he pushed his hard-on against his mattress.

There weren't enough seats at the lunch table today, and Chris and Lianne had to take seats on opposite ends of the table. Chris ended up getting into a conversation with Sam. Sam was a nice guy, but he seemed to think Chris knew a lot more about art than he did. He told Chris about his plans to go to Cooper Union in the city, and about how he felt Cezanne was his biggest inspiration as an artist and that he still wasn't sure what he wanted to accomplish as an artist but that he knew it was going to be something great. Chris just did a lot of nodding and agreeing. Once, Lianne smiled ruefully at him from across the table, to show she also wished they could be talking alone to each other.

In drawing class in the afternoon, Leonard took the class on a walk out to one of the fields and

they sat in a circle and did an exercise where they had to go around the circle, each naming one thing he or she heard, coming from anywhere around them, that nobody else in the circle had mentioned before. Nobody thought they could go around the circle even once, but they ended up going around one and a half times, hearing things like footsteps and cars on the road and leaves rustling on trees. Then the teacher told them all to draw something they saw from where they were sitting, and the exercise really worked for Chris, because having paid so much attention to sound really did seem to make him more aware of his surroundings, more attuned even to the way things looked. He did a sketch of one of the trees, and Leonard complimented his sketch for the first time, telling him he was starting to get the idea.

At dinner when they were all deciding what to do that night, Chris was hoping he and Lianne would do something alone together, but Sam and Janice wanted to see "Platoon," which was playing in a movie theater not far from the campus. They walked to the theater, and Chris would have preferred to have just been with Lianne, but they fell behind walking anyway so they could talk together. Sam and Janice walked together, and Chris wondered if they were interested in each other. Mary and Dawn were stuck together, too, but occasionally Dawn would stop and look significantly back at Lianne and Chris, as if making fun of the two of them for wanting to walk alone. "Don't look at me, bitch," Lianne muttered

very softly to Chris, one time when Dawn did it, and Chris laughed, and then Dawn looked back and gave them a dirty look as if she knew it was her they were laughing about.

Sam and Janice were the ones who'd really wanted to see the movie, and Sam said he'd heard it was the best Vietnam movie yet made, but Chris and Lianne didn't even find out whether it was a good movie or not, because as soon as it started they both got a case of the giggles, and Chris started whispering, "Ow!" every time anybody in the movie got shot. Then Lianne started doing it too, and they both kept it really quiet at first, but soon they were laughing so hard people around them were getting mad, and once when Chris looked over at Sam he saw that Sam didn't look at all amused either. Then there was a scene where an American guy bashed a Vietnamese guy's head in with a rifle, and then Chris and Lianne were giggling so hard they didn't even have to say anything, because they were just laughing so hard at the anticipation of what the other was about to say, and trying to stifle it, because the theater was otherwise silent. Finally, Chris whispered, "Ow, that one really hurt!", and Lianne said, "I have such a headache," and then they were cracking up so much they had to run out to the lobby until they stopped laughing. Sam looked pretty mad. Nobody else talked to them during the whole walk back to campus.

Five

Dawn and Mary and Janice went to bed after the movie, and Chris and Lianne stayed out a half hour past curfew. They sat on the stoop of Chris's dorm building, just talking about things, and at one point Lianne asked Chris, "When we're back home, will you write to me?" He couldn't believe it. "Yeah, if you'll write to me," he said. After they said goodnight, he lay in bed running through the whole conversation and the whole day in his head. He stared at the ceiling, as Jerry slept in the other bed, and he felt so happy, so incredibly good, his body was actually humming with pleasure, and he stretched out his toes as far as he could, hugging his pillow and imagining it was Lianne, and he felt the happiness fill him up so much he didn't even want any more.

Things had been so good, so perfect, that all Chris could do was lie there and think about it, over and over. When Jerry's clock said it was 12:30, Chris wondered if he would fall asleep at all that night. The next day, Friday, they would be going on a field trip into New York City to see

some museums, and Chris felt so awake it seemed he might not sleep at all before then, and then he'd have to go on the trip falling asleep on the bus. He didn't even care. But he had told Lianne he would meet her for breakfast, and that he did care about. How could he fall asleep, when in just a few hours he would be starting a whole new day with Lianne? He propped himself up with his arms under his pillow and looked out the window of his dorm room. The room was so small the head of Chris's bed was practically on top of the windowsill, and he liked this because it meant he could look out the window while still in bed and under the blankets. Outside the sky was an impenetrable black, the kind that seemed to enforce a hushed silence over everything, and Chris tried to make out the gray outlines of the buildings on the campus through the night air. He could hear the quiet sound of the wind gently shaking the leaves in the trees, and when he listened hard he noticed the sound of footsteps, a couple of people walking out there somewhere, and then as the people walked closer he was able to make out their voices, a girl's and a guy's, muted and echoing. He squirmed back into a different position in the bed, and then a different one, and then the next time he looked at the clock it was two-thirty in the morning, and Chris didn't even know for sure if he had just been asleep or not. The image of Lianne was on his mind, dominating his thoughts, and he drifted in and out of his dreams. Soon he looked at the sky and it was still

dark all around but turning an orangy, magenta gray in the center, swirled with dust and fog, and now Chris could see the outlines of everything in the room through the gray haze, and he looked at Jerry's clock and saw that it was five in the morning. The next time he opened his eyes the sky outside was bright, clear blue, with fluffy white clouds, and there were loud voices yelling and laughing outside, and Jerry wasn't even in his bed. It was nine o'clock, and Chris had slept through breakfast.

When he got to the bus he found Lianne already on it, one of the first ones there. She waved to him as he climbed on, and he waved back and took the seat next to her. "Hi," she said. "Why weren't you at breakfast?"

"Oh, I slept through it. Sorry."

"One of these days we'll have breakfast together," she said.

"Where's Dawn and Mary and everybody?"

"I don't know, I guess they're coming. So, we're going to the city today? I'm so excited."

"Why?" Chris said. "You've never been there before?"

"Nope. I've been to other cities. I've been to Buffalo, and Cleveland."

"My brother goes to school in Buffalo," Chris said.

"Really? It's like an hour and a half from me."

"What do you do there?"

"Oh, concerts and junk. They have museums there, too, you know, but nothing really good. I dunno, a lot of times I just go in with my friends to like shop and stuff. What do you do in the city?"

"Nothing much," Chris said. "I don't really go in a lot."

"Who do you go with, when you go?"

"Oh, you know, just my parents and stuff," he said. Then he decided to change that. "And, you know, other people, whatever." There hadn't even been any other people, he realized.

Lianne was looking out the window. "Oh, there's my beloved roommate," she said.

Out the window of the bus, they watched Mary and Dawn and Janice and Sam walk toward the bus along with a few other students. "Are Sam and Janice going out, or anything?" Chris asked. Was it okay to ask that, he wondered? He hadn't really thought about it before he'd said it.

Lianne was laughing. "That's funny, we were all talking about that last night too. Why, do you think they are?"

"I don't know, they look like they might be."

"Uh-huh," Lianne said. "Janice is really confused about it, cause, like they want to be, you know, but she has this really serious boyfriend at home. And she claims they haven't done anything yet, but I'm pretty sure she's lying. Anyway, they're definitely an item."

Their friends were too close now for Chris and Lianne to continue discussing them. Mary and Dawn said hello and took the seat behind Chris and Lianne, and Janice and Sam sat behind Mary and Dawn. The girls had all been talking about guys last night, Chris thought, and he wondered if Lianne had said anything about him. Something about the way Mary had smiled knowingly at Lianne when she'd said hello just now made him think that Lianne had, that he and Lianne were an item too. Just the possibility of it seemed pretty amazing.

By eight-fifteen the whole group was loaded onto the two buses and they took off. A couple of people in the back seat started singing "A Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall", just as a joke, but luckily it faded out between 94 and 93. After about an hour they could see Manhattan's skyscrapers in the distance. "I don't think I ever went to any of these museums we're going to, though," Chris said. "You know, I don't even know what museums we're going to today," he said.

"Yeah, I don't either," Lianne said. Chris found the schedule in his pocket and looked at it. We're going to the Museum of Modern Art, then box lunch in the garden, then the Guggenheim. Oh yeah, the Guggenheim, Paulina was telling us about that in class yesterday. She said to look at the building, she said the building was the best artwork in the whole museum."

"She said that? You're kidding -- Robert said the same exact thing to my class, like the same exact words. Boy, this building must be really amazing."

"I guess, yeah." Chris had a feeling the greatness of the building would elude him, just as the greatness of a lot of the artworks they'd discussed in class so far in this program had eluded him. He didn't care, because art was nothing next to Lianne. Suddenly out of nowhere they had arrived in midtown Manhattan, and as the bus pulled up in front of the first museum, Lianne whispered to Chris, "You know, Dawn and Mary and all of them are gonna want us to all go around together the whole day. Maybe we should try to lose them?"

"Okay," Chris said. "How?"

"I don't know, we'll think of something." The buses let everybody out and the teachers gathered the group together inside the museum in front of the garden and instructed them to meet there again at twelve o'clock sharp. Then they were let loose. As Lianne had predicted, Chris, Lianne, Dawn, Mary, Sam and Janice all started walking around together, but Chris and Lianne stopped at the first painting they came to in order to study it closely, and then when the other four started to move on, they kept looking at the painting, and after the other four had already looked at all the other paintings in the room and come back to where Chris and Lianne were standing, the two of them pretended to be

oblivious. "Ooh, look at the way he uses lines," Lianne said, making fun of the things all the teachers in the program were always saying. "Look at the use of negative space."

Chris couldn't do it with a straight face, like Lianne could, and felt about to choke with stifled giggles. "Oh, and the technique of composition," he said, trying hard to keep his face from breaking into a big smile. The others were tapping their toes behind them, but the two of them kept gazing at the painting, pretending to be so engrossed in it they didn't notice the others standing there, except that by now they were both smiling guiltily, holding back from cracking up laughing. But they were amusing only themselves, because Dawn said, bitchily, "Okay, guys, we can take a hint, we'll be moving on now."

Chris and Lianne pretended not to hear, and soon they were alone. "Oh, that was so mean of us," Chris said.

"I don't even care," Lianne said. They started walking around together, looking briefly at the paintings. Sometimes they said one or another was nice, or was too weird, but mostly they just wandered from work to work. "Why is it my legs start to ache the minute I walk into a museum," Lianne said.

"Yeah, I know, I'm the same way" Chris said. They sat down on a bench and rested, even though it had only been about ten minutes. They watched the people walk by, almost all of them other students in the program, and soon they

spotted Sam and Janice, and saw that the two of them had broken away from Dawn and Mary too. Chris watched Sam across the room. Now that both pairs were known 'items', he felt a real affinity with Sam, as if they had something in common that they both knew about but couldn't talk about. Sam was the kind of person Chris really liked the idea of having something in common with. And the thing they had in common was the best thing in the world -- they both had another person to walk around with, a person to be in love with. There was nothing as amazing, Chris thought, as being part of a pair. Everybody else in the room was unlucky. Only a few of the other students in the program were always walking around in couples the way Chris and Lianne and Sam and Janice had, and Chris realized suddenly that probably everybody else in the room right then was lonely for somebody. Most of the others traveled in packs of four or five or six, or with one or two others of the same sex, and a couple of the more intense artist types traveled alone with sketchbooks, and Chris couldn't help thinking that every one of them was jealous of him and Lianne, and of Sam and Janice. When Sam and Janice passed by Chris and Lianne on the bench and they all smiled hello, Chris had the sensation that they were sharing a secret, that they were almost on a secret double date. He'd never felt so special in his entire life.

At twelve o'clock they met up with Dawn and Mary again, and sat with everybody else to eat

box lunches from styrofoam containers in the museum garden. Then the group was packed back into the two buses and taken to the Guggenheim. Lianne and Chris sat together again. "You better brace yourself for this building," Lianne told him. "I hear it's so amazing looking, most people just faint right on the street from joy when they get their first glimpse of it."

"Yeah, I know," Chris said. "I hear most people in New York are afraid to even walk in front of the building, cause when they see it they get overtaken with such incredible rapture they just start screaming and dancing in the street, and throw their clothes off and run around the city making weird noises and doing crazy things till the police catch them."

"You heard that? Yeah, I heard the same exact thing. Boy, I'm scared."

"Me too."

They laughed about it the whole way, but once they round concrete building built of concentric white circles, even they had to admit that it looked pretty cool. "Okay, it isn't so bad," Chris said, as they walked in with the rest of the group. They stood in the center of the circular bright white building looking up at the with the long ramp spiraling down from the top to the bottom.

"It's . . . different," Lianne said.

"It's nice."

"It is. It's all right."

They pivoted on their feet in the center of the ground floor, looking up at the winding ramp. "But," Chris realized, "you know, if this is the best artwork in the whole museum, why should we bother looking at all the other stuff?"

Lianne turned to him and smiled. "Yeah, you wanna leave?"

"Yeah. And do what?"

"I don't know. Go to the Statue of Liberty?"

"Or we could climb the Empire State Building."

"Yeah! Let's do that. Do you know where it is?"

"No. Do you?"

"No."

They found it very easy to sneak out of the museum -- they just walked right out the door. People were walking in off the street as they left the building. "Wow, what a great museum!" Chris said loudly as they walked past the people.

"Yeah, that was . . . incomparable!" Lianne said.

They stood in the middle of the sidewalk. "Where are we?" Chris asked.

All they saw in front of them was a lot of trees. "What is this big park doing here?" Lianne said.

"I think it's like Central Park or something," Chris said. He wasn't sure. Neither of them had a clue which way to go, so they walked until they found a subway. They checked how much money they had, and found that Chris had nothing and

Lianne had a twenty and a ten. They bought two tokens and asked the guy in the booth how to get to the Empire State Building. He seemed to think it was an incredibly stupid question, but pointed to a train and told them to get off at 34th Street. "My first subway ride," Lianne said as they got on the train. "God, it's so loud." Several stops later, before they reached 34th Street, the conductor announced that the next stop was 42nd Street. "Wait, he doesn't mean the 42nd Street, does he?" Lianne asked Chris.

"I don't know, does he?"

"I don't know." The train came to a stop. "Should we get out and look?"

"Okay."

They got out, and the subway signs announced that they were at Times Square. "Oh, this is it!" Lianne screeched happily. She grabbed Chris's arm and pulled him. "Come on, which way do we get out?" They ran up the stairs and found themselves in the middle of a huge, wide-open, loud traffic intersection, with a nondescript triangular white building right in the middle of the street. "This is it!" Lianne said. "That building, that's where they drop the apple on New Years Eve! I recognize it! Oh, I can't believe we're here!"

They stood and looked around them. "Wow! It was so easy to get to," Lianne said. "It's like, I knew it was called 42nd Street, but I didn't know it was just a real street, like all the other streets, like, look, there's 41st Street, and there's

43rd Street, and here it's 42nd Street! It's so easy! Oh, I want to steal that sign! You know, we did '42nd Street', the play, in my high school. I helped with the scenery, and my girlfriend Denise was the star, the one who tap dances. I never knew it was just a regular street that you could just go, to you know? I always thought it was -- just, I don't know." She realized Chris was laughing at her. "What?" she said.

"Well, you know, it is 42nd Street, you know," Chris said. "Where did you expect it to be, between 56th and 57th?"

"Oh, I don't know. Okay, I'm stupid, you live closer to New York than me. I'm not used to it."

They looked around them. "But," Lianne said, "don't you sometimes, you know, like just say, you know, like . . . wow, I'm here! I don't mean just here here, but just in life, you know? Do you know what I mean?"

"No," Chris said, teasing. Actually, he thought, he did know.

They stood at the corner looking at everything. "So, now what?" Chris asked.

"You know, there's supposed to be a whole street of just sex shops and porno stuff, right around here. My friend Orana was here once, she told me about it. . I wonder which way it is?"

"Well, I dare you to ask someone," Chris said. "Just go up to some stranger and ask where all the sex shops are."

"You dare me?" Lianne asked.

"Yeah."

"If I do it, then you'll come with me and go inside one of the places?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." She walked calmly over and stopped a woman dressed in business clothes who was walking the other way, and they said a few words, and the woman pointed in a direction. Lianne walked back to Chris. "Okay, come on," she said.

The street was just the next block over. It turned out to be mostly movie theaters, with titles of movies Chris had never heard of, like 'Venus in Leather' and 'Hot Samurai' and 'Little Boy Blue'. "Wow, this is pretty sleazy," Chris said.

"Yeah, it is," Lianne agreed, but neither of them suggested turning back. Along with the movie theaters were smaller places, offering nude revues that you couldn't peek into because the entrances were blocked off. "How do we get into one of these places, you just pay?" Chris asked Lianne.

"I don't know, well, that place says five dollars, this time I dare you to go pay the guy."

"You dare me?" Chris said.

"Yeah." She handed him her twenty. He took it and walked up to the guy in the booth, as calmly as he could, and paid admission for two. Inside was just a bar, with disco music playing and one woman, not even attractive, dancing on a stage in black leather panties and a skimpy black lace bra. She looked closer in age to Chris's mother

than to Chris. "Don't they take all their clothes off?" he asked Lianne.

"I don't know, I thought so."

They stood and watched. Chris was surprised that the lady didn't even seem distressed or degraded by doing what she was doing, like he'd always imagined they would in a place like this. She seemed bored. "Should we sit down?" Lianne asked Chris.

"I don't know," Chris said. They stood, transfixed by the sight of the lady alone on the stage. They stared silently as she danced to the music and eventually reached back behind her and unhooked her bra and peeled it off, revealing two large, melon-like breasts with nipples that seemed impossibly wide to Chris. She shook her breasts triumphantly in time to the music. "You can put your tongue back in your mouth now, you jerk," Lianne said to Chris. She looked down at her own chest, through the top of her overalls. "Well, I don't have anything like that," she said.

"Oh, don't say that!" Chris said. He couldn't believe he was standing there talking to her about this. The subject seemed immensely, embarrassingly personal, but he couldn't stand Lianne thinking there was anything wrong with her. She was flat, it was true, but to Chris she was the single most beautiful girl in the world. He wouldn't ever even look at anybody else, and he couldn't imagine how anybody could not think Lianne was beautiful, even though he remembered the first time he met her only a few days ago he

hadn't even thought she was the prettiest girl he'd seen that day. But now she was. "Well, it's the truth," Lianne said.

Chris was too flustered by the subject to know what to say. He'd certainly thought about breasts enough, but he'd never discussed them with a girl, and he'd especially never discussed with a girl the subject of her own breasts. It occurred to Chris that he should just grab Lianne and start kissing her, right there. He didn't.

When they got back onto the street they didn't know which way to go, and as they stood at the corner a dirty-looking old lady seemed to pick them out of the crowd and came towards them, looking at Chris. "I am hungry, I would like to eat," she demanded. Her gray hair was matted and sticking up in the air, and she was wearing a torn, soiled housedress. "Holy shit," Chris whispered, as she came towards them. "What do I do?"

"Give her money," Lianne said, frightened.

"I am extremely hungry," the old lady said, stopping right in front of the two of them and scowling. Chris dug into his pockets, but couldn't find the change from the twenty dollar bill Lianne had given him. He searched desperately, but could only find papers and keys and gum wrappers and junk. "Where is it?" Lianne said.

"Errr," the lady grunted, and she moved on. "Wait!" Chris yelled after her, finally pulling a crumpled wad of money out of his back pocket. She kept walking.

"That was so weird," Lianne said, calming down.

"Yeah, I can't believe it. Can you believe what it must be like, living here with no money?"

"I can't even think about it."

"What happens in the winter? She'll freeze."

They stood there, thinking. Half the people walking around them, Chris realized, looked poor or in bad shape, and they were walking side by side with the people who looked rich and important. "This city is a weird place," Chris said. As they stood there, he became aware of an amplified voice speaking something in the background, a voice that he'd been hearing in the back of his head since they'd left the nude bar. A guy on the next street over was standing with a big crowd of people around him, yelling into a megaphone something about God. "You are all in the hands of God," the guy yelled, as his chorus shouted in agreement. "Sinners and saints, all here who believe they control their own lives are living an illusion."

"Hey," Chris nudged Lianne, turning in the direction of the speaker. "Let's go see this." They sauntered over and stayed near the back of the crowd. "You don't control your own life," the guy yelled. "You think you do. You writhe this way, and you writhe that way, thinking you can live your life according to your own determination, but all the while, you are like a spider hanging from a thread. You are like a spider hanging from a thread over a raging fireplace, and the only thing

that keeps you from falling into the raging fire is the mercy of God." The crowd, all dressed in black suits like the guy talking, yelled things like "Yeah!" and "Amen!".

"God holds you above the fire, because he loves you! But you must know how treacherous is the situation you are in. Do you know that God holds you in his hand? Do you know?"

"I don't know," Lianne whispered to Chris.

"I don't know," Chris answered back, giggling. But when they stopped at a nearby fast-food stand and ordered two hot dogs, they talked about it. "Do you believe in God?" Lianne asked Chris as they ate.

"I don't know," Chris said. "I'm not sure, but I know I hate organized religion."

"Oh, me too."

"I mean, I really hate it, like I think it's the stupidest thing in the world, it's like incredible that people can actually fight wars for Christianity, I mean, it's just, like, I can't . . . I just don't . . ."

"My parents wanted me to go for confirmation, and I wouldn't," Lianne said. "I refused. They had a dress for me and everything, I was like twelve years old, I said to them 'I can't, because I don't believe in God'."

"You don't?" Chris asked, surprised to discover that he felt a little disappointed to hear it.

"Well, later I took that back, to myself, but I definitely don't believe in Christianity, or any religion that now exists. Maybe some religion that hasn't started yet, maybe."

"Let's start our own religion," Chris said.

"Okay, you wanna?"

"Yeah, what should it be?"

"I don't know."

"How about, our main church could be the Guggenheim." Chris suggested.

"Yeah! Oh, that would be amazing. And instead of stupid organ music, we could have a good band, like a really amazing band, like maybe we could put together a super-group, from all the bands that exist."

"Bono would join the religion, I bet, so he could be lead singer. And we could get Eddie Van Halen to play guitar."

"How about Tina Weymouth playing bass."

"Yeah! And . . . not Phil Collins. I'm sick of him being in everything. Who should the drummer be?"

"How about the guy from Def Leppard, the guy who has only one arm?"

"Yeah! That's perfect!" Chris couldn't believe how smart everything Lianne thought of was. "How do we start a religion?"

"I thought you knew."

When they went back out on the street and saw the time, they discovered they had less than a half hour to get back to the Guggenheim. "The Empire State Building is only eight blocks away, right?" Chris said.

"Yeah, do you think we can make it in time?"

"I dunno." They thought about it. "Yeah, if we go fast, if they let us go right up," he decided. They started to walk, but they hit red lights at every street, and soon they had wasted ten minutes and weren't even there yet. "Shit, you know, we're not gonna make it," Lianne said.

They stopped walking. "Maybe we can. You wanna turn back?"

By now they could see the building, but time was running out. "Oh, I wanna go up!" Lianne said. "What do you think?"

"What time is it now?"

They spotted a clock on a building, and saw they had only fifteen minutes to get back to the Guggenheim. "Fuck," Chris said. "I don't even know if we'll make it back if we don't go to the Empire State Building."

"Shit, you're right," Lianne said. Once they thought about it, they realized they were screwed. They ran as fast as they could back to the subway station on Times Square, bought two tokens, and jumped on the first train they saw. Breathless from the running, they slumped down in their seats. "Are we gonna get there in time?" Lianne asked Chris.

"I don't know," he said. After several minutes, they realized that none of the stops the conductor was announcing were sounding familiar. When he announced "Borough Hall, Brooklyn", Chris knew enough about the city to know that something was wrong. "Oh, no," he said. "Did we even look which train we got on?"

"I thought you looked," Lianne said.

"Oh, shit." They asked a few people on the train for advice, and were told to just get off at the next stop, run around to the other side of the track and get on the train going the other way. They did it, but by that time they were already forty-five minutes late. The train took forever going back, and when it finally got to their stop they ran out of the station and towards the museum until they could see the buses in the distance, parked in front of the museum, and by then they were both in pain from running so hard. They ran as well as they could the rest of the way, and found Paulina and Thomas and Robert and the other teachers standing with a group of policemen and a few other people in suits waiting for them. They looked at Chris and Lianne very sternly as they ran up to the bus. "We're sorry," Lianne said, breathless.

Thomas's eyes were wide and his lips quivered with fury. He pointed a finger at them. "You two are in very deep shit."

When they climbed on the bus nearest to them, they got a big round of applause. "Hey, nice of you to drop by!" one guy yelled. Everybody was laughing and trying to shake their hands as they walked down the aisle trying to find empty seats. There were no double seats empty, so Chris and Lianne had to sit a few rows apart, looking fearfully at each other as the bus started to move. They were too far apart to talk, but Lianne made a face, as they both wondered what was in store for them. Soon the excitement died down, but Chris

still thought about it. I'm famous, he said to himself, as they rode back to the campus. This was the first time he had ever gotten into real trouble, and it was great. They were the famous rebels, the two heroes of the bus, even if Paulina was sitting in the front seat right that minute staring back and pursing her lips at them. Chris knew he could only pretend he wasn't loving every minute of it.

Chris and Lianne were sent right to their rooms after the buses returned to Agora, and had to wait there until the administrators decided what to do with them. Chris was worried they'd be sent home, but it turned out they were hardly even punished. He had to miss dinner, and then a couple of the administrators came to his room and yelled at him. The program for that night was a speech by some local artist that Chris had never even heard of, and the punishment was that he would have to miss the speech and stay in his room all night. Tomorrow the group was scheduled to go on another field trip, to the Botanical Gardens in Brooklyn, and he and Lianne would be allowed to go but were not to leave the grounds under any circumstances, and that was the whole punishment.

Sitting around the dorm while everybody else was at dinner, Chris got into a really weird mood. Locked away from Lianne, he had nothing to do for the rest of the night, and since he'd arrived in Agora, he realized, he'd hardly been

alone for more than an hour even once. He'd managed being alone his whole life, but now suddenly he couldn't stand it. He paced around his room, listening to the radio and doing a little drawing in his sketchbook, but he needed to talk to someone. He needed to tell somebody about Lianne. He went to the pay phone and tried to place a collect call to his brother in Buffalo, but his brother wasn't there, and since his older sister was in Europe he couldn't call her either. Sitting in the phone booth in the empty dorm building, he suddenly couldn't bear to go another minute without talking to somebody. He had to tell someone what had been happening to him, to help him make sense of it all for himself. He tried his brother again. Then he remembered that he'd promised his mother he would call home, so even though he wasn't going to tell his parents about Lianne he decided to call them. He talked to his mother, and hinted about Lianne by telling her that he was having a really good time and that he'd met some people he really liked. That was the closest he got to mentioning Lianne. His mother got sentimental and asked him if he was homesick yet, and he laughed and said no, and thought about it and realized how true that was. He wasn't homesick at all.

After the phone call he walked through all the halls of the dorm, and then he stopped in the lounge to buy some candy and a soda. Standing at the soda machine, he thought about how Lianne and Dawn both called it 'pop' instead of 'soda',

because that was what people called it in Fredville. It was all so funny, so unreal. He needed someone he could tell it all to.

He went back to his room and sat and waited for Jerry to come back for the night. Jerry showed up just before curfew, and Chris wanted to talk to him, but Jerry just went about his business, going to brush his teeth and changing into his pajamas. Chris realized that since he'd started hanging out with Lianne he'd completely forgotten about talking to Jerry, and now Jerry had his own group of friends, the guys who lived on their floor who Chris had hung out with a little his first day there, but now Chris was out of touch with all of them. "How was the speech?" he asked Jerry.

"Oh, not bad," Jerry said. "It was boring. We left early."

Jerry was folding his clothes for the night. "So you heard me and Lianne got grounded for the night," Chris said. It felt wonderful to speak her name out loud. Lianne, Lianne, he thought. It hit him with new force, the enormity of the fact that he had made this amazing new friend.

"Yeah," Jerry said. "Sucks. Man, I'm tired."

Jerry wasn't too talkative, Chris realized. He wondered if Jerry was mad at him for hanging around with Lianne instead of him. He needed an excuse to say her name again. "Yeah, I wonder if Lianne got into more trouble than me over there. I don't even know what they said to her."

Jerry seemed to be absorbed thinking about something else, and Chris thought he wasn't even

going to respond. Then finally Jerry said, with a slight smirk, "So you two looked pretty chummy today."

Thank God he brought it up, Chris thought. "Yeah, but I haven't even made a move yet," he said. He wanted to tell Jerry everything. "I don't know what to do, I'm just like -- what do I do?" He couldn't believe he was blurting this all out to someone he hardly knew, but he had to talk.

"What, you didn't do anything yet?"

Chris shook his head.

"Nothing?"

"I don't know what to do," Chris said. "Tell me, how do I do it?"

"Shit," Jerry said. "The way you two hang around together, I was sure you were in the sack already."

"I want to be," Chris said.

"I know she likes you," Jerry said. "Just today, Duane said something about it, somebody told him, one of those girls I guess, that Lianne said something like that."

"Something like what?"

"I don't know," Jerry said. "Just, you know, that Lianne was saying that she liked you."

"To who?" Chris demanded, incredulous that Jerry might have kept this from him. "What did she say?"

"I don't know, I have no idea."

Chris put his head in his hands. "Shit, I'm so confused," he said.

"Hey, don't get all strung out," Jerry said.
""Look, it's easy, you just do it. You can't make a big deal of it, you just wait for the right moment, then you go for it. You put your arms around her and kiss her."

"But when? Like, on the bus? Or in the museum? When?"

Jerry was laughing. "Oh, man, you are too hyper about it all. What you do is, you don't think about it like that. And no, you don't do it on the bus or in the museum, you just wait for the right moment, whenever it comes along. You know, you give signals. You look into each other's eyes, you take her hand or something, you know, you don't just lunge for her, you set the mood. Then you lean over and kiss her."

"That's all?"

"Yeah. Then you're on first base, and you don't rush it to second base, you just keep cool, you know, and make the move to second base when the time is right, then you truck on over to third base, and then finally you go for home. And that's it. And you take it easy, don't rush it, cause she'll slap you in the face if you go too fast. And don't do anything stupid that's gonna get her pregnant or anything either, you know, you just take your time, and do it right."

"Okay," Chris said.

"I gotta sleep," Jerry said.

He turned the light off. Chris lay in the dark and looked at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep. He wished Jerry would stay up and talk to him. He

said into the dark, "You really think Lianne likes me?"

"Yeah," Jerry mumbled.

They lay silently for a minute. "You know, I don't even know if Lianne has a boyfriend at home or anything."

"Uh-huh," Jerry grunted.

Chris decided to shut up. He closed his eyes and wondered how long he'd lie there thinking before he'd be able to fall asleep. If only Jerry would stay awake, he thought, he could say Lianne's name all night long.

That afternoon in Paukatuck, Mr. Blomberg asked his youngest daughter, "Want to go on an adventure?"

"What adventure?" Missy said.

"I'll tell you in the car," he said. "Hurry." She grabbed her shoes and jumped into the car with him, and as he backed out of the driveway, he told her, "One reason I wanted you to come with me was that I didn't want you to feel left out, because what this is about is a big surprise for Chris, and it's something he and I are going to do, just the two of us. Okay? And you'll have to keep this a big secret."

"What is it?" Missy said.

"I'm going to buy tickets to one of the playoff games," Mr. Blomberg said. "Now, I know you love the Mets as much as anyone else in this family, so I want you to understand that your

mother and I also plan to do something special with you, and we're discussing what. But this is something we wanted to do for Chris, because we think he's been kind of sad this summer."

"What's a playoff game?" Missy said.

"What is a playoff game?" Mr. Blomberg was constantly surprised to discover how many other people did not share his knowledge of baseball. "A playoff game is when, well, see, there are two leagues in baseball, the American League and the National League, and each league has an Eastern division and a Western division. The Mets are in the Eastern Division of the National League. When the regular season ends, the team that wins each division plays the other division winner in its league, and then the winner of the National League playoffs plays the winner of the American League playoffs in the World Series."

"But I thought the Mets still had to win like ten more games."

So Missy had some idea what was going on, Mr. Blomberg thought. "Yes, that's right, that's very good," he said, even though by now the number of games the Mets had to win was down to six. "Playoff and World Series tickets usually go on sale before a team clinches. Then if the team doesn't clinch, or doesn't make it to the World Series, you get a refund. Now the reason this is an adventure is -- do you know what a scalper is?"

"I don't think so," Missy said.

"It's somebody who obtains tickets to an event, and then sells them to people like me at exorbitant, outrageous prices."

"Really? Like how much?"

"How much? Let's just say you could buy yourself quite a few Cabbage Patch Kids with the money I'm about to hand over to this fellow. Now, what I'm about to do is also illegal -- not that I'd get into much trouble if I was caught. But even so, I thought you would enjoy seeing your father break the law."

"Well, you always drive above the speed limit, that's illegal."

"That's right. You see, your father is a regular criminal. I'm just kidding, of course. Actually, what I'm about to do is a misdemeanor at the very worst, and probably not even that. In fact, I know selling tickets is illegal, but I'm not selling, I'm buying, so it may be that I'm not breaking the law at all, although I'm at least an accomplice. Anyway . . . " He got off the Long Island Expressway at the Deer Park Avenue exit. "We're also heading for an area that I've been reading about in the newspaper, where kids have been getting into trouble for drag racing at night. Luckily, it won't be dark for a few hours, so I'm sure we're in no danger. Have you been around here before?"

"Maybe, I don't know."

"I don't even know if I've ever been down this way myself," he said. After driving a few miles he spotted an Arby's on his left, just where

the person he'd spoken to on the phone said it would be. "That's it," he told Missy.

"It looks like any other Arby's," she said.

"Do they have good food here?"

"Not as good as Wendy's."

He parked and looked at his watch. "Well, we have about fifteen minutes. Want to eat?"

Missy got a bacon and cheese potato, and Mr. Blomberg got a bowl of chili and a cheeseburger. "Do you miss Chris?" he asked her, after they sat down at a plastic table and started eating.

"I don't know."

"It must be tough being the youngest child."

"I'm used to it," Missy said.

"Chris hasn't been treating you very well."

"They all ignore me," Missy said. "They're prejudiced against me because of my age."

Mr. Blomberg thought about it. "You know, though, in a way, you have many more friends than any of them did at your age. You have Kim, and Belinda, and Jennifer, and Amanda. It's interesting that you're the only one in the family who doesn't seem to have a shyness problem. You remember how Susan used to cry all the time and be afraid to leave the house."

"Yeah."

"And David, with the way the other kids would pick on him. You're really very lucky to have the ability to make friends as easily as you do."

"Really, though, I have more fun with Chris and Susan and David, when they're here, than with any of my friends," Missy said.

"I know you do," Mr. Blomberg said.

They both looked down at their food as they finished eating. "You know, this is very greasy," Mr. Blomberg said. "Are all fast food places like this?"

"Pretty much. Why -- is grease bad for you?"

"It certainly is." He looked at his watch. "Shall we sit on my car? We have to be on the lookout for a red Camaro IROC Z. Do you know what a Camaro IROC Z is?"

"No."

They sat on the hood of his Buick. "Now of course you won't mention this to Chris if he calls," Mr. Blomberg said. "I think I'll tell him when he comes home. I want this to be a big surprise." As he spoke, he spotted a red Camaro at a distant light, and watched the car as it pulled into the parking lot next to him. Mr. Blomberg walked to the driver's side of the Camaro. "What's up?" the driver said. "Wanna get in?"

The scalper looked about twenty-five years old, and Mr. Blomberg saw nothing unusual or threatening about his appearance. Enjoying having his daughter watch, he walked around the car and got into the passenger side. Once inside, he was pleased by the lush black interior, but was disappointed to find the tape deck playing nothing

more shocking than the latest Paul Simon. "Mind if I look at the tickets?" he asked.

"Sure," the scalper said. He handed them over in an envelope. Mr. Blomberg inspected them closely, checking for any irregularities.

"They're not counterfeit," the guy said.

"Mm-hmm," Mr. Blomberg said. He pulled out his wallet and took out eight twenties. He handed them to the scalper, who counted them. Was that it? He was already holding the tickets.

"Well, okay, then," the guy said.

"Okay, thanks," Mr. Blomberg said. For some reason, he wished it would take longer. He extended his hand, and the guy shook it. Missy was waiting eagerly inside the Buick to hear about it. "Was it fun?" she asked.

"It was fine," he said. As he pulled out onto Deer Park Avenue, he noticed that the scalper had left the Camaro and was going into Arby's for something to eat.

Later that night, while he watched the Mets game, Chris happened to call. Missy answered, and Mr. Blomberg looked at her sternly to remind her to say nothing. "You talk, let me stay off the phone," he told his wife. "He'll ask me about the Mets, and my voice might give it away."

Later, after his wife hung up, she said, "He seems to be doing really well there."

"Really?"

"Yeah, actually, I'm surprised. I haven't heard him so talkative in a while."

"Oh, what did he say about the Mets?" Mr. Blomberg asked.

"The Mets?" she said. "Hmm, I don't think he mentioned it."

"He didn't mention it? Missy, did he say anything to you about the Mets?"

"No, nothing," Missy said.

Mr. Blomberg frowned. "That's not possible. They're six games away from clinching. He has to know this. Are you sure he didn't mention it to either of you?"

"No," Mrs. Blomberg said. "I guess he just forgot."

Six

The next day's field trip was to a nature preserve in Rockland County. On the bus, Janice whispered to Lianne and Chris that Sam was carrying a quarter-ounce of pot in his pocket. They were going to try to sneak away from the crowd and smoke it as soon as they got off the bus.

They were supposed to spend the day sketching plants. The teachers laid out the ground rules, glaring hard at Chris and Lianne when they said "and be back on time." As soon as they were let loose, Sam, Janice, Lianne, Chris, Dawn and Mary found a quiet path, walked for several minutes, and then walked into the underbrush to hide behind a big rock.

Sam lit a joint and the six of them huddled close together, listening for footsteps or voices. "You know, it would like almost be funny if me and you got in trouble again," Lianne said, passing the joint to Chris.

"Yeah," Mary said. "I wonder what Paulina and Tom would do to you guys."

"Maybe they would just kill us," Chris said.

"I think Paulina would just like cry," Lianne said.

Dawn and Mary didn't like to smoke pot, but had come along for the company. Mary took one hit the first time the joint came to her, and then handed it along with no expression on her face. Chris took big, long hits, because the two times he'd smoked pot before it had hardly even worked. "Do you smoke a lot back home?" Lianne asked him.

"No, I only did it a few times," Chris said. That sounded better than "two times", and he didn't want to mention that both times had been in the same place with the same people -- his sister and her college friends at Oneonta. He also didn't mention to Lianne that he'd barely felt an effect either time. "Me and Denise used to do it constantly," Lianne said. "We knew this guy who always had it, he was a real waste case. Every single time you saw him he was stoned, and then he ended up getting arrested and now hardly anybody has pot in Fredville."

"Wow, that sucks," Chris said. He wondered if Lianne ever noticed that she was always telling fun stories about her rowdy friends back home and that he never had any fun stories to tell.

"Every time I smell pot, I think of my first concert," Lianne was saying. "God, it was great, it was Journey, in Buffalo. The whole stadium smelled like pot. I love that smell."

"Oh, I know!" Janice said. "The smoke just hangs in the air, you can get stoned just from breathing."

"I have to go to more concerts," Mary said. "Last one I saw was Tom Petty, that was really good."

"I love concerts," Lianne said. "Oh, now I'm in the mood to go to one. I wish there was something we could see today."

"Yeah, definitely," Janice said. "You know, I saw Peter Gabriel like two weeks before I came here."

"You saw him?" Mary said. "Oh, wow, I heard every concert he falls into the audience and lets them catch him."

Janice's eyes widened. "Yeah! Oh man, it was the most amazing thing, during 'Come Lay Your Hands On Me', he was just like standing there at the edge of the stage, and then he just fell, I couldn't believe it, and they caught him, and like carried him over their heads, with their hands, and then he went back on stage."

Lianne looked pained. "Oh, I wanna go to a concert so bad. We don't even know if anything's playing near Agora. Something might be. But Paulina would never let me out now anyway. Fuck."

Chris had no concert stories to tell. He could lie, he thought. He didn't even know what a concert was like, so he couldn't make it up. He felt totally inferior to Lianne in just about every way, but he wasn't going to let it show. Actually,

though, he felt inferior to a lot of people, but with Lianne for some reason he didn't worry about it showing. With her, somehow, he felt like he could be more like the way he always wished he was, and it came naturally. His personality had changed a lot since he'd met her. And it had happened so easily and so quickly, he didn't think Lianne would believe it if he told her that he didn't have a single friend in Paukatuck right then. Watching himself the way he was today, casually hanging out with these people, he probably wouldn't even have believed it himself a month ago, because he was such a different person now. As he stood in the cool fresh air looking at all the plants and flowers around him, standing with all these people he'd only known a week, he started to feel a pleasurable weirdness from the pot. Paukatuck was starting to seem very far away.

Sam finished rolling a second joint and lit it and passed it around. "So what do you think?" he asked.

"It's good," Chris said, as if he were an expert.

All six of them were carrying sketchbooks and paintboxes, and were supposed to be hard at work. The assignment was to do a detailed study of a single flower or plant. Tomorrow they would review the results in the morning classes. Sam stubbed out the second joint and the group split up into pairs, Sam with Janice, Chris with Lianne and Mary with Dawn, . As soon as Lianne and Chris

were alone, she said to him, "Oh, I got a secret to tell you."

"What?" Chris said.

"I've been dying to tell you all morning, but everybody's always around. You know Jennifer? She's got the long red hair, she's always carrying her guitar around?"

"Yeah." She was the girl with the John Lennon glasses, who had tweaked Chris's stomach when he'd smiled at her.

"She's a lesbian," Lianne said.

Chris's eyes opened wide. "Really?"

"Uh-huh. You know, Charlotte is her roommate, and she told Charlotte straight out. Charlotte is cool about it, you know, but Dawn was like being an asshole last night, typically. She was going, like, 'Oh, I better be careful when I walk around in a towel', and then laughing like that was really funny or something. Like anybody could ever be attracted to Dawn anyway."

"Is Jennifer, like, going out with anybody, do you know? Anybody here, or at home?"

"I think she has a lover back home, I'm not sure."

"I never met a lesbian before," Chris said.

"Really? I have. I've met lots of them, lots of gay people too. It doesn't bother me at all."

"If all the girls know, how come it's a secret?" Chris asked her.

"Oh," Lianne said. She thought about it. "I don't know. I guess it's not really a secret, I just

wanted to tell you about it without everybody else around."

"Oh, okay," Chris said. It was nice, he thought, that she felt that way. They walked on, glancing at the tame shrubs and bushes on both sides of the path.. "I don't really feel into doing art today," Lianne said.

"I know," Chris said. He felt the same way. He was getting the feeling of everything around him, though. The pot was definitely working, at least a little. The first time he'd smoked, his sister had fed him bong hit after bong hit all night long, with virtually no results. Today, it was definitely doing something.. The colors around him were suddenly really interesting. They walked for a while, and then sat down under a tree. "Do you think they'd let us out for a night if there was a concert near Agora or something?" Lianne asked.

"Not us, no way," Chris said. "Not after yesterday. We could sneak away."

"There's probably nothing around there anyway. But the thing is, we don't even know, there might be something great. You know, I haven't even seen a paper since I came here. You know, it's like they keep us sheltered there."

"I know." Chris got a strange urge to admit something he hadn't wanted her to know. "I especially want to go to a concert, cause I've never even been to one."

"Really?"

"Yeah, nothing good ever comes around where I live." He knew that wasn't true, since he

lived an hour away from New York City by train. Everybody in school was always talking about the great concerts they'd gone to. After every big concert, the next day in school there would be about ten people wearing the same brand new black t-shirts with the name of the band and a picture silk-screened on it in all different colors. It always seemed to Chris like some secret club he didn't know how to enter. "I really wanna go to one, though."

"Well, you know what," Lianne said. "After we go home, I know we live like twenty hours away, but we could meet in the middle somewhere, if something good was going on."

Chris held back how happy he was that she'd said this, and responded calmly. "Yeah, what city is halfway between us, anyway?"

"Shit, I don't even know. Syracuse? I have no idea."

"I wish you were closer," Chris said, not even planning to say anything like this.

"So do I," Lianne said.

Chris couldn't believe he'd said what he'd just said, and that she'd so casually agreed. "We'll find something," he said.

"Definitely," she said. "And remember, you promised, you'll write."

"Yeah," Chris said. "And you'll write back."

"Mm-hmm." They sat under the tree and looked at the plant life around them. Chris was feeling his body pulsate strangely, pleasurably, and everything in the world definitely seemed like it

had taken on a new dimension of coolness to him. "I am totally not into drawing today," Lianne complained. "You know, this stupid program, they're getting me so sick of art I probably won't feel like doing any work again for a year after I go home. It's so wrong to force people to draw like this."

"I know," Chris said.

"What are we gonna do? I don't like being told that I have to draw a flower on any particular day. What if I feel like drawing a face today, and a flower tomorrow? But no, they have to have every little thing organized, so Paulina can have her thrills."

"We can just rush it, do something bad," Chris said. "Did I tell you, yesterday Paulina said my self-portrait was lifeless? Then she talked to me about Matisse for a half-hour."

"It figures," Lianne said. "She's gonna hate whatever I do. I don't care, I'll do it later. Right now I'm feeling too good."

"I know," Chris said. They relaxed and sat quietly watching as some people from the group strolled by.

"What a lazy, hazy day," Lianne said.

"Mmm, yeah," Chris said, his head spinning a little. "You know, this spot is really cool. Look how bright the grass is. It's so nice. We should just stay here."

"Yeah, let's," Lianne said.

A few minutes later, Chris finally felt like moving. He stood up, and found himself reeling a

bit. He wasn't wasted, just high, but he was suddenly aware of the difficulty of standing upright, suddenly feeling that he was breaking some law of gravity or something. He took a deep breath and stretched his arms out, still feeling a little dizzy, but it was a cool dizziness, a dizziness that felt great. He noticed how good the breeze felt, and how clean and clear the air was around him. He felt incredibly relaxed, as if he were outside himself just looking casually and happily in. "You wanna go?" he asked Lianne.

"Mm, eventually," she said.

"Why are you so tired, cause you're stoned?"

"Yeah," she said. "I'll get up, just wait a sec. No, help me up." She held an arm up to him.

He took her hand and pulled her up and as he did it he had an idea to see what would happen if after he pulled her up he didn't let go of her hand. He didn't let go, and she didn't let go either, and they started walking, and it suddenly hit Chris, like a tidal wave pounding into him through his dreamy haze, that he and Lianne were holding hands.

At that exact moment, when it came to him what he had just done, it was to Chris as if the world had suddenly jumped off its axis, or the winds shifted direction, or all the trees and flowers around them changed into different colors, because for a second, as he and Lianne walked silently along the path, he was so knocked out he didn't know where he was at all. He had just taken Lianne's hand. They were holding hands. He

could not believe it. Another wave of realization hit him, and then another. They were walking silently, not acknowledging anything, but he had just made a move. He had just done what Jerry had told him to do, and now the first step was taken and they were walking along the path holding hands. It was so absolutely incredible to him, as they continued along the path they were on, that he thought he might fall down, and he felt as if his knees would just buckle if he let them, and his eyes needed to close and he needed to lie down, because this was too amazing, and he was so stunned by it, it was a miracle he was still walking. He couldn't even feel himself, and he felt as if he were outside of himself, seeing himself from a distance as if through a telescope. He walked numbly, blindly, putting one foot in front of the other, and Lianne was next to him, her hand and his interlocked, and it felt so good, the nicest thing he had ever felt in his life, and as they followed the path Chris was not even seeing anything on either side of him, but the flowers might as well have been talking to him right then, for all the strangeness he felt at that moment.

She was a girl, he thought, an actual, living, real girl, a girl he liked and probably even loved, and they were holding hands. Their arms brushed against each other as they walked, the fabric of her soft lavender blouse rubbing snugly against the sleeve of his green shirt, and just even their clothes touching like that seemed to Chris like an incredible, overwhelming amount of sexual

intimacy. Holding his hand in hers felt so good, it was like putting on a glove on a freezing day. His head was completely spinning, and his mind was just not working. He could never have believed that just a touch of a hand could send his nerves tingling like this. It was too much, it was everything, the meaning of life. He knew instantly, without a doubt, that this was the most incredible thing that had ever happened to him in his life.

"Mmm, these flowers are so nice," Lianne said.

"Yeah," Chris said, not seeing them at all or caring about them. He was still trying to assimilate what he had just done. He had just calmly, casually taken her hand, and she'd let him. They both looked straight ahead as they walked, as if nothing was any different from before, but it was. Chris tried to get his thoughts together, to figure out what to do next, and what this all meant. At school, when a guy and a girl were seen holding hands or with their arms around each other, it was basically an official announcement that they were a couple. I have a girlfriend, Chris thought. It was too much, it had happened too fast. He should have been happy, but he was suddenly overcome with a terrible sensation that he was a turtle outside of his shell, totally vulnerable to everything in the world. He tried to absorb where he was, what he was doing, but he couldn't think straight, and he hoped Lianne wouldn't say anything, because he

didn't feel he was capable of even talking right then.

"Are you stoned?" Lianne asked him.

"I think," he managed to say. He wasn't even sure if he was or not. At this moment, he would be freaking out whether he was stoned or not. They were actually holding hands, he realized yet again, and still another wave of shock went through him. He didn't know if he was stoned, but he knew he had a big hard-on sticking up inside his pants, making it difficult to walk. He struggled to communicate. "Are you?"

"A little," she said.

They walked for a while. "Let's sit down," Lianne said, when they came to a grassy area. They let go of their hands and sat down, and she sat close to him, but he didn't make a further move. There was no way he'd even think about doing anything like kissing her now, because he was too freaked out already, much more than he wanted to be. He didn't feel right. Everything had been happening too fast. It was much too much. He suddenly felt about to panic. "What's the matter?" Lianne asked him.

"What?" he said, seeing himself and Lianne as if from far away.

"You look upset."

"No," he said, his voice too dry. What the hell was the matter? he asked himself. Something was wrong. He did not feel right. He needed time to think, and it occurred to him that, incredibly, he wished he could be alone just for a little while.

Things were going really well, too well. His whole life was changing, but he just needed some time alone to collect his thoughts, to get some perspective. He needed to talk to his brother or his sister. He needed to lie in bed, to just be by himself to gather his thoughts, because things just seemed too strange to him, and it wasn't a pleasant strangeness anymore. What the fuck is wrong with me? he asked himself. What was wrong, he realized, was that he didn't feel like himself at this moment, and the feeling was spooky. He was unfamiliar to himself. Everything that had been happening since he'd met Lianne had been too amazing, too perfect, and nothing in all of it connected to anything he knew. He suddenly had a vision that he was tumbling into a deep hole, that he was losing a grip on something. As he sat on the grass staring into space, he felt himself levitating, and his stomach was churning and his heart was pounding, and he couldn't relax like this, and he really needed to relax, more than anything else.

He suddenly had a sensation that his forehead was burning, that he had a fever and needed his mother to wipe the sweat off with a cool, damp towel. He felt his forehead and there was no sweat.

"You know, it's gonna be lunchtime soon," Chris said, struggling to sound coherent. "We're probably gonna miss it."

"Yeah, okay, let's go," Lianne said. They stood up, and Chris suddenly found himself taller

and older than he remembered being. Things were too weird, much too weird. He knew it was a good weirdness, that later on he would relive this day over and over, dreaming about it the way he'd spent the last few nights dreaming about the nice things Lianne had said to him. Even though it was all too much, for some reason, when they stood up and Lianne brushed against him, he took her hand again. This time it was her left hand and his right, and they held their sketchbooks in their other hands. Calm down, Chris said to himself. He couldn't believe how sweet and wonderful it felt to just walk like this. It had to be the greatest thing he'd ever felt in his life. They walked to the picnic area where everybody from the program was already in the middle of lunch, and neither of them let go of their hands, and Chris realized that they were making their public debut as a couple. It was amazing, incredible, too good to believe. Mary and Dawn and Sam and Janice all turned their heads when Chris and Lianne walked by, and the two of them walked with their heads high, ignoring the statement they were making, pretended nothing unusual was going on, exactly the way Chris had seen so many other new couples do back in high school. People were definitely noticing them. Thomas and Paulina were standing behind one of the tables, and out of the corner of his eye Chris was sure he saw Thomas with a frown on his face, nudging Paulina and telling her to notice him and Lianne. It was just so funny, so strange. They casually strolled over to where the lunches were

being handed out and got theirs, saying thank you with smiles that they hoped were only slightly stoned, and then they went over to sit with their friends. Inside the flat white styrofoam box was the standard Summer School of the Arts lunch : a mushy sandwich, this time ham on white bread with butter, some carrot and celery sticks, a little container of kool-aid and a brownie inside a wrapper. There was no way Chris could eat any of it. He nibbled on a celery stick, just to keep busy, and unwrapped his brownie and took a bite and couldn't have any more. He took one small sip of the kool-aid, and then put that away too.

None of them talked much while they ate, except when Dawn asked everybody what they'd been working on. Chris and Lianne hadn't even started drawing anything yet. "Oh fuck, when are we leaving here?" Chris asked.

"You only have an hour," Dawn said. Chris looked over at Lianne and was about to say they should get going, but suddenly he fixed his gaze on her and she looked like a stranger. It was too weird. He looked at her and was so mixed up he couldn't assimilate who she was in his life, how much of what he was remembering was true and how much he'd imagined. Did he even know this girl at all? Had they actually just been walking and holding hands? Whoever she was, how could he have so much confidence to think he could just assume she wanted to walk with him now? As he stared dumbly, she said "Wanna get going?" and he stood up, and they went. They found a patch of

flowers along a path and they each picked out a flower to sit in front of and draw. Chris picked a few colored pencils out of his flower and started to work, but he was unable to concentrate on his flower. He realized as he worked on it that the picture was coming out really bad, that it was probably the worst thing he'd drawn since he'd come to the program. It was maybe even the worst thing he'd ever drawn in his life. The flower was lumpy and lifeless, just as Paulina had said about his painting yesterday, but this was even worse, the composition was terrible, and the colors didn't go well together, because he wasn't able to even try to think about what he was doing. Tom had told the class to 'get inside' their flowers, but Chris couldn't even try, not today. He didn't want to experience a flower. He'd already experienced much too much for one day today. He forced himself to finish the drawing, knowing it would be criticized in class tomorrow. On the bus back to Agora, he sat with Lianne and looked out the window, trying to gather his thoughts. It would be around 4 o'clock when they got back to the campus, and there was something they were all scheduled to do that night, but he couldn't remember what it was. "What are we supposed to do tonight?" he asked Lianne.

"Oh, there's that stupid play we're supposed to see, in the Performing Arts Building, I think."

"Oh yeah, I remember now." Normally he would hang out with Lianne and maybe the others until dinner, but he decided to think of an excuse to spend some time alone. The first thing he

would do was call his brother, and then he would just lie down and think, and maybe talk to Jerry if Jerry came by the room. Chris remembered Jerry's advice last night, and realized that at this moment, for the first time, he didn't even feel any attraction to the idea of making love with Lianne, or with anybody. His hard-on had persisted so long now his upper legs were starting to ache, but he didn't want to have sex. He only wanted to be alone and jerk off, because that was familiar.

The bus got stuck in traffic approaching the Tappan Zee Bridge. "You know what, I think I'm getting a fever," Chris told Lianne.

"You're kidding," she said.

"No, I'm think I'm gonna go lie down in my room when we get back."

She felt his forehead, to see if it was hot. The touch of her hand on his forehead felt wonderfully good and soft and full of love, so much so it sent a tingly rush of excitement from his head down to his toes. "You're not hot," she said.

"Yeah, it's probably nothing," Chris said.

"Well, I guess I'll see you at dinner, or after."

"Yeah." He already knew he would skip dinner, because he couldn't handle any food. "Just in case I don't come to dinner, I'll meet you at the play," he said.

"Okay," she said. When the bus dropped them off at the campus, they parted casually, as if nothing different had happened all day.

By the time Chris got back to his room, he already felt a little better, and was even a little puzzled at why he'd felt such a need to be alone earlier in the day. He'd wanted to call his brother, but now it occurred to him that nothing he'd have to say to his brother would make any sense anyway, since all he'd done, really, was hold hands with a girl for a little while. It was a very big deal to Chris, but it wouldn't seem like much to anybody else.

He got a better idea -- he would wait until after he lost his virginity, whether it would be today or some day soon, and then he'd call his brother and say something like, "Hi, Dave, guess what I did today." That would really knock David out. Chris climbed into bed and it felt really good to lie down. He stayed there for a while till he was sure the pot had completely worn off, and then he took a shower and brushed his teeth and sat around some more. At seven-fifteen he went to the Performing Arts building and met Lianne and the others. This time, again, Lianne seemed strange to him, but this time he thought it was something about the way she looked. "You know, you look different," Chris told her.

"Yeah, I don't usually wear this much makeup," she said. "I borrowed Dawn's stuff."

"How come you put on makeup?"

"I don't know, I felt like it."

Chris wasn't even able to figure out whether he liked the way it looked on her or not. She looked cool, but in some strange way it made him feel that she was separate from him, as if by putting it on she was hiding herself from him. "Hey, what is this play about, anyway?" he said. "I have no idea," Lianne said. They had some time to waste before the theater opened, and Dawn and Mary wanted to go sit on a bench on the lawn. They went, and Dawn and Mary and Lianne got into some involved conversation about some soap opera Chris had never heard of.

As he sat there listening to them, he had a strange thought. He wondered what would happen if things stopped being good between him and Lianne, if the magic just suddenly stopped. He wasn't sure why he wondered this, because there was really no way he could even imagine it happening. It was just a strange thought that he'd had for no reason. Now that they were standing there in front of the theater he couldn't especially think of anything for them to talk about, and she didn't seem to have anything to talk to him about either. But he knew it was all right, because there was so much closeness between them, he didn't even need to have her talk to him every minute for him to know she liked him. It was a really strange thing, he realized, for him to feel this confidence. But he did feel it. Still, it was also strange that suddenly he couldn't think of anything to talk to her about.

The play turned out to be boring and Chris had no idea what was happening in it, and then afterwards they only had twenty minutes before curfew. Dawn, Mary, Chris and Lianne walked back to the dorms together, and then like they always did Dawn and Mary went in first and Chris and Lianne stayed out till the last minute. But this time, when they were alone together, it was exactly like Chris had worried about, because they suddenly had nothing to talk about together. They were blank. This was probably the longest amount of time they'd spent together, he realized, without getting involved in some intense conversation or laughing about something together or something like that. Before, they could have made a conversation out of a blade of grass, but now they were suddenly straining to fill the silence.

Chris didn't know if Lianne felt the same thing he was feeling. He hoped she didn't. He was sure he wanted to try to kiss her, or make some kind of further move. And she seemed to want him to. But it all seemed confused, and it was five minutes to curfew, and the feeling just wasn't right, they just weren't looking into each other's eyes and knowing each other like they had every minute they'd spent together before.

He had to try something, even though it didn't feel right. As they walked silently across the darkened fields, he took her hand again, and she let him. Then he decided they'd done that enough already, and he let go of her hand and put his arm around her waist, very cautiously, not knowing if this was

the right move. She put her hand on his shoulder, and for a second it seemed like it was going well, but then she said, "Let's sit down" again. Why did she have to say that every time he started to make a move? Chris pulled his arm back, and they sat down. But they didn't even sit close to each other, and they had nothing to say and saw no point in having sat down, and so they got back up and said goodnight and each went back to their own dorms.

The next morning Chris showed up for breakfast hoping Lianne would too, but she didn't. He tried to run into her in the hallway on the way to class, but she wasn't in any of the places they'd usually run into each other before. They'd never gone this long without seeing each other since they'd met. At lunch, he sat with Lianne and her friends, but they didn't talk to each other the whole time. After lunch, when Chris and Lianne used to always walk back to class together, Lianne walked with Mary, chattering and laughing away about something the whole way, and Chris followed close behind, not knowing if he was even included in the conversation or not.

Lianne still seemed frosty to Chris at dinner. That night's activity was a Gilbert and Sullivan opera at a theater in town, and Lianne sat next to Mary instead of Chris on the bus. Chris sat alone while the two girls giggled and chattered the whole way there. When they got to the theater Dawn and Lianne and Mary sat down first with Lianne in the middle, so that Chris had to sit next to Mary, and Lianne didn't even look up when Chris sat down.

Then when they got back to campus and all said goodnight that night, Lianne hardly looked at Chris. He said a hasty goodnight and rushed back to his room.

Trying hard to stay calm, totally confused about what was going on, Chris spent the next day watching things get worse with Lianne. Suddenly they were acting like they were hardly friends at all. He couldn't bear to consider that this was anything more than a misunderstanding, but he didn't know how to fix it. He blurted the whole story out to Jerry that night. Jerry reassured him, and told him that since she'd obviously been interested in him the day they went to the nature preserve, there was no reason she wouldn't be interested in him now. He also told Chris that when Lianne had said "Let's sit down" that night after he'd put his arm around her, she'd probably wanted him to kiss her. That hadn't even occurred to Chris, even though he had wanted to kiss her very much. But then, he'd been so freaked out, nothing had occurred to him. "I guarantee you, she likes you," Jerry said. "She's just playing games with you, cause you took too long, and she's pissed. Just tell her how you feel, say 'I'd like you to be my girlfriend'. You know, let her know you like her. There's no way she's not interested in you."

But every time Chris saw Lianne, her chilly expression contradicted Jerry's advice. She had completely stopped talking to him, and now Mary

was Lianne's new best friend. Lianne did everything with Mary, and talked to her and whispered things to her and then laughed just like she used to with Chris. Chris still ate lunch and dinner with all of them, but he felt like he was eating with everybody but Lianne, who even usually sat at the far side of the table from him now.

The day after he talked to Jerry, the whole group was taken to a dairy farm in New Jersey to find interesting things to draw. Chris found Lianne sitting by herself drawing a cow in her sketchbook, and walked up to her, frightened but determined. "Hi, um, I wanted to ask you something," he said.

She looked at him with no emotion.
"Yeah?"

"I wanted to know . . . if you would be my girlfriend." Instantly as he said it he knew it was wrong. Jerry's advice had not been right.

Lianne looked at him, surprised at what he'd said, and her face softened at least a little, but not a lot. "Uh . . . what?" she said.

"Um . . ." Chris said.

Lianne said, "Well, I was kind of hoping we could just be friends."

They both knew they hadn't even been friends recently, but Chris didn't say anything about that. He had no idea what to say at all. He didn't even know what he'd expected her to say, or why he'd asked. "Uh . . . yeah?" he said, stunned by the reality that he'd just asked a girl to be his

girlfriend for the first time, and that she had said no.

"I don't -- it's kind of, I don't really feel that way about you, I guess," Lianne said, "I'm sorry, I like you as a friend, you know, that's it."

Chris was in such a state of shock he didn't stop himself from saying what he was thinking. "But then ... what about two days ago," he said. "I mean, it seemed like ... do you know what I mean?" Even as he said it, he realized that not much had actually happened that day.

"Well . . ." Lianne said. She looked down, and then looked up at him with a small smile. "You have to remember the condition we were in that day," she said.

"Yeah," Chris said. There wasn't much more to say. This was the worst moment he'd ever had in his life, he knew.

At least Lianne was talking to him, for the first time in two days, even though she was looking at him like she sort of felt sorry for him as she talked. "Can I ask you -- have you ever had a girlfriend?"

"No," Chris said.

"Uh-huh," Lianne said.

"Have you . . . ever had a boyfriend?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said.

"Oh," Chris said.

Somehow, the torturous conversation ended. On the bus ride back from the farm, Chris sat alone on the bus. Lianne sat with Mary, laughing and

talking the whole way, not looking at him at all. That night at dinner Chris sat alone, for the first time since he'd come to the program. Lianne and her friends sat on the other side of the cafeteria, and Chris watched them as he ate. When Dawn walked by the empty table where Chris was eating, she didn't even say hello. Lianne seemed to be carefully avoiding his side of the cafeteria, and when she had to pass near him to get to the soda machines, she looked straight ahead as if she didn't see him there.

Only Mary acknowledged Chris during that first meal alone. When she walked by his table on her way to the soda machines, he looked down uncomfortably, pretending not to see her, and then while he looked down he felt a tweak on his shoulder. "Hey, smile," she said, and gave him a sad, sort of apologetic smile. It seemed weird to Chris how much he appreciated her doing that.

Seven

Chris woke up at five in the morning the next day. The room glowed with an evil darkness as he quietly remembered what had happened with Lianne. He was glad he'd remembered it all the moment he awoke. He'd been afraid that he'd wake up not remembering, and that he'd have to realize it all over again.

It was too early to be awake but he knew he wouldn't fall back asleep. Last night he'd blurted the whole story to Jerry, how he'd asked Lianne to be his girlfriend like Jerry had told him to, and how it hadn't worked out like Jerry said it would. Jerry listened and thought for a moment. "Okay," he had said in a bored voice. "I'll talk to Lianne tomorrow and ask her what's up."

Chris sat up in bed and thought about how he would waste the hours till seven when the cafeteria would open for breakfast. If Lianne showed up at breakfast he didn't know whether or not he would have the nerve to sit with her. If she smiled at him or said hello then maybe he would. But he had a feeling she wouldn't be there. Or

she'd be there with the same look on her face she'd had the last few days. The thought of that cold, blank look chilled him.

At six o'clock he grabbed his shampoo and soap and took a shower. Back in the room he sat on his bed and thought about Lianne until it was time for breakfast. Lianne didn't show up, and none of her friends did either. He wasn't able to catch a glimpse of her before morning class. He kept looking at the door during class, hoping beyond hope to see her flit happily through the way she used to, finding some happy excuse to visit him during class. That had been so wonderful. It didn't happen.

He didn't feel capable of carrying on a conversation with anybody else, and didn't talk to Nancy or Sharon like he usually did.

Walking back to the dorms, he saw Lianne ahead of him in the distance, walking with Mary. She looked bored and normal.

That afternoon Chris asked Jerry if he'd talked to Lianne. "Yeah," he said. "She said she wanted to be just friends with you. She said she's not really looking for a boyfriend here, especially since we're only here for a month."

"That's all she said?"

"Basically. I said you were kind of hung up on her, and she said she was sorry if you had any ideas but she never felt that way about you."

"She never felt that way about me?" Chris repeated. "But --"

What about their long walks, their long talks, the way they'd held hands? He tried to think of a way to explain this to Jerry. In Jerry's expression he saw that the answer to all possible questions was a dull denial. There was nothing more to say. Chris wanted to die, to curl up into a ball like a dead spider and roll away.

He felt dizzy and sick. The walls in the room seemed to be caving in on him.

"I gotta go meet the guys," Jerry said. He left the room.

Chris stayed in the room through lunch hour. There was no way he could eat. He didn't feel the strength to walk to his afternoon class. It occurred to him that if he sat on his windowsill he'd be able to see Lianne walking to the Arts building, and he decided to do that instead of going to class. He waited for her and finally found her, sketchbook and paintbox in hand, strolling carelessly along the path with Mary and Dawn and Janice.

He felt like a peeping tom, and he imagined what she would think if she knew he was up there staring at her. She was beautiful and happy and innocent and wasn't even thinking about him. He was a ridiculous creature peeking at her from a window three flights up.

He watched until everybody in the program had walked by, and then he remained sitting on the windowsill for a while. He wasn't hungry, even though he'd only had half a piece of french toast and some grape juice for breakfast. He decided to go for a walk. He walked towards the Student

Union, suddenly feeling a strange, desperate inkling of happiness in the core of his despair. Things were so bad; something would have to get better. It was a warm, sunny summer day, and as he neared the Student Union building he saw the spot where he'd first talked to Lianne and Dawn. What a beautiful, blessed spot. He stood there for a moment, basking in the memory of that easy moment.

He tried to enter the building, but the doors were locked. He walked all the way around the building and was surprised to discover a huge courtyard and fountain on the other side. He had never walked around the building before, and had had no idea that the main entrance of the Student Union was on the farthest side.

A few college-age students were sitting around the fountain, and a couple of others were walking in or out of the building. Chris walked in, wondering if he was allowed to do so. The building was nearly empty, but there was a whole row of candy and soda and hot foods machines, all of them lit up and ready for quarters. He'd never known there was such a good selection of machines anywhere on campus.

He bought a bag of M&M's with some loose change in his pocket, but then realized he didn't feel like eating. He put the bag in his pocket for later. He walked through some halls and went up and down a few stairways. He found a darkened bowling alley with the door wide open, a closed door that said "The Rat" with a picture of a beer

mug painted on it, and an open cafeteria with about a hundred tables and five or six students eating quietly with books opened on their trays. He walked some more and found a cubicle with a sign that said "Food Co-op," which was open but empty. A hippie girl with long hair and political buttons all over her shirt sat alone behind the cash register, surrounded by white buckets of nuts, dried fruits and carob chips. He walked on and found a video game room. He got a quarter out but then realized he didn't feel like playing anything..

Next to the game room was a bookstore. Chris decided he needed something to read to divert his attention, and he suddenly felt enormously happy to have found a bookstore and a video game room and all these other places that none of the other art program students knew about. As far as he knew, he was the only one who had ever walked around the large building to discover this part of the campus.

Then he thought about how much fun it would be to explore all these places with Lianne, and his happiness deflated into a sharp, stinging sadness.

He wandered into the bookstore and walked through aisles of weird-looking textbooks and academic journals on metal racks. In another part of the store he found a music section and skimmed through books about Bruce Springsteen and Talking Heads and Culture Club and the Pet Shop Boys. There were a bunch of Agora State t-shirts and coffee mugs and keychains, but Chris wasn't

interested in that stuff and walked on to the newsstand where he picked up a copy of the New Yorker to read the cartoons. He always read the cartoons in his father's copies of the New Yorker at home, and suddenly Chris got an urge to buy this issue. His mother had said he should try to read older stuff, and maybe feeling the way he felt would make him suddenly able to read at a higher level. And it was something to do. He paid for the magazine, and the fact of doing so gave him a warm feeling, mainly because it reminded him of home.

He sat down on a couch in the main lounge and read all the cartoons in the magazine. He began reading one of the articles, but couldn't figure out why he was supposed to care about whatever it was about. He felt tired and stretched into a reclining position on the couch. He decided to close his eyes for a minute.

The next thing he knew he was waking from a deep sleep. His cheek was pressed against the rough fabric of the couch, which was wet from his dribbling. He jumped up in fear. Was everybody staring at him? He surveyed the quiet room through his drowsy eyes and ascertained that only two or three people were in sight, and that none of them seemed to care that he had been sleeping on a couch. But how long had he been sleeping? Was it day or night? Frightened, he wondered if it was morning already, if he'd slept through the whole night and missed curfew. He glanced out the window and saw that it was early evening. He

found a clock and was relieved to find that it was five-thirty. He'd slept about two hours.

He went into the men's room, and saw that his cheek was red and marked with a weird criss-cross pattern that looked like a raw wound or an ugly scar, the imprint from his face being pressed against the couch while he slept.

He felt lost and confused and had a horrible sense of something being wrong in the world. He yearned to go back somewhere familiar. He walked outside and began the long walk across the deserted campus.

Reaching the section of campus where he was supposed to be, he was relieved to see a few familiar faces milling around. He wondered where Lianne was, and wished he could talk to her. He sat down on a bench, still nervous and miserable and confused after his sleep. If he kept thinking about Lianne so much, would he go crazy? He felt hungry and took the bag of M&M's out of his pocket. The candies had melted and clumped into a single crunchy glob that he couldn't eat.

He tried reading the New Yorker he'd bought at the Student Union, but none of the articles were about Lianne. He flipped restlessly and settled on a book review about the memoirs of a 19th Century secretary of war from Great Britain. He stood up and threw the magazine into a trash can. He wandered sadly back to his room, where he sat at his windowsill waiting for a precious glimpse of Lianne walking by. He didn't find her.

There were practical things Chris had to worry about now, like who he would sit with in the cafeteria and walk around with on field trips. The next day, he tried sitting with Jerry and his friends at lunch. They seemed surprised to see him joining them, and none of them seemed happy about it. He tried again at dinner, desperately hoping they would at least let him be invisible with them so that Lianne wouldn't see him eating alone. But they made him feel completely unwanted and excluded, and he knew he wouldn't try again.

He couldn't get Lianne out of his mind. She was in his mind every waking moment from morning to night, and he dreamed of her too. He dreamed she was lying next to him, her arms wrapped around him, and cataclysmic moments of physical pleasure would take place out of his control.

After he'd been separated from Lianne for several days he decided he could not endure it anymore. He had to talk to her or he'd go insane. That night he went for a walk hoping to run into her. A lot of the students went to the Arts building at night to work on their projects, so Chris took his sketchbook and went, hoping to see her in one of the rooms. He didn't know if he would talk to her if he did see her, or what he would say. As soon as he walked into the Arts building he practically bumped into her as she strolled out with Mary and Dawn and Janice. It happened so fast that Chris

wasn't ready, and he just said a quick "Hi," and Lianne and Mary both said "Hi," and they rushed past and out the door without stopping. Chris stood inside watching them walk away.

The next night he asked Jerry one more time if he would talk to Lianne again. "There's nothing to say," Jerry said. "She's not interested. Like, deal with it."

"I just want to understand what happened," Chris said. "I just don't get it. I don't know why she changed like that."

Jerry thought for a moment, his head in his hands. "I take it you're a virgin," he said.

"Yeah," Chris said.

"Well, you know, I would seriously doubt that she is."

"That doesn't bother me," Chris said. But the notion that she was not a virgin hit him in a startling kind of way. For a moment an image flashed in his head of Lianne naked in another guy's arms, and he felt his neck muscles stiffen and his cheeks turn a hot red.

Jerry looked up at him and shook his head. "Well, maybe it bothers her."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, why would she want to go out with a guy who's less experienced than she is?"

But our relationship transcended superficial things like that, Chris thought. He was about to answer when Jerry's friends started banging on the door. They were all going to a movie, but none of them asked Chris to join them, and he spent the

night walking around the Arts building and the rest of the campus hoping to run into Lianne like he had the night before. Now he was pretty sure he wouldn't even try to say anything to her if he found her. There wasn't anything he could say. But he wanted to find her just because he wanted to see her, to know where she was and see what she was doing, and also just because there was the slight chance that something good could happen. But since that one time he'd bumped into her in the lobby of the Arts building and walked past without saying anything, he could never find her again.

A week passed and he still didn't get a chance to speak to her. Whenever he saw her anywhere on campus she looked right past him as if she didn't remember who he was.

He started trying to find ways to be in the same place she was in, just so he could look at her. When they went to lectures or plays he would sit a few rows behind and gaze at her instead of at the stage. The moments when he looked at her and knew where she was were better than the long hours he spent at night walking around campus wondering where she was.

At least she hadn't started walking around with any other guy. That would make him so upset he didn't know how he could handle it. She was always with Mary and Dawn and Janice and sometimes Sam. He'd see her happily talking with

Dawn, remembering how she'd told him of their mutual dislike.

Chris still talked to other girls in his classes, like Nancy and Sharon. He chatted brainlessly for over an hour one night with a ditzzy ninth-grade girl named Amy in front of the soda machine in the Arts building. If it hadn't been for Lianne, he would have been tremendously impressed by this, except that Amy was nowhere near as interesting as Lianne. Their conversation was silly and fun – they talked about their hometowns, their artistic ambitions, their favorite TV shows – but she had none of that crazy spark that made Lianne so mysterious and fascinating, and Chris didn't particularly feel that she found him interesting either. But he was glad to have made a new friend. He tried joining her at meals, but she sat with a group of equally silly ninth-graders who did not seem happy to have Chris join them, and he sat through these meals in uncomfortable silence.

Once he was walking to class talking to Amy when Lianne suddenly appeared alone walking the other way. Lianne showed no sign of recognition, but it pleased Chris to know that she had seen him talking to another girl. He hoped she cared.

An incredible thing happened one day in Leonard's drawing class. Before class began, Chris noticed a young college-aged woman talking to the teacher. As the students arrived Leonard instructed everyone to set up their charcoals and easels in a circle, and as Chris began arranging his

charcoals he detected a sudden dead silence in the room. He looked up and saw that the woman was standing in the middle of the circle with no clothes on.

She sat on a wood stool with no expression on her face, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to be doing. She stared into space, her hands on her pale, doughy thighs. She made no effort to conceal her broad womanly curves, her wide nipples or her dark brown pubic hair.

The entire class stared in stunned silence. “Okay, I think we’d better get started,” Leonard said calmly. They all began adjusting their easels to begin work.

They did a series of one-minute sketches in complete, unnatural. After the one-minute sketches they began doing two-minute and then five-minute sketches, and gradually the students began to get used to the nude model. By the end of the class everything was back to normal.

Chris was perplexed to find himself feeling neither attraction nor repulsion to this naked woman in his midst. Her body appeared mundane under the sharp, unromantic fluorescent lights. Her skin wasn't smooth like in Playboy photographs, and her large breasts seemed surprisingly fleshy, soft, and unattractively pale. Her pubic area struck Chris as somehow less disappointing to look at, but maybe this was because he could not clearly see everything there was to see, and some mystery remained.

Leonard walked around to look at each student's work, and Chris knew his own work, once again, was falling short. "I think you could try to go with the flow a little better," Leonard said, and Chris nodded.

Chris couldn't wait to talk to his brother. In one month, he'd seen two naked women -- a stripper in Times Square and a model in art class. But he hadn't seen the naked body of the person he'd fallen in love with.

It was the final week of the program, and Lianne and Chris still had not said a word to each other.

Chris chatted with Amy almost every day now, and he only wished their conversations were less dull and silly so that he could fall in love with her. But she could not compare to Lianne. On the final Friday night there was a dance, and Amy wanted Chris to dance with her. He told her he didn't know how to dance, which only made her urge him harder. Finally he let her drag him out, and he jerked around like an idiot for half of the Eagles "Heartache Tonight" before escaping back to the punch bowl.

Amy found the whole thing hilarious, and Chris had to admit to himself that he was glad to have her to hang around with. If only he hadn't met Lianne, he knew, he would probably be attracted to her. She was cute and small with short blonde hair and a little doll face. But there was no

magic between them when they talked. He idly considered trying to kiss her, and he guessed that she wouldn't mind. But it was hard to imagine a moment of passion between them. On a whim he asked, "Do you want to go for a walk or something?"

Amy chirped, "We're not allowed to leave the dance, Mrs. Hackman said." That was the end of that idea.

During the last days Chris also began talking to an older kid named Phil Goldstein who liked to sit on the lawn alone at night and play guitar. Phil was going into twelfth grade but had already developed the world-weariness of an adult drifter or a freight-train hobo. He had a bad case of acne and his clothes were perpetually covered with dust. But he could play blues guitar like nobody Chris had ever heard, and Chris would sit next to him and listen for hours. He showed Chris the chords to "You Shook Me All Night Long" and told Chris he had talent, even though Chris thought he sounded terrible. Chris ended up telling Phil all about Lianne one night as they sat on the lawn. He talked for over an hour, and when he was done all Phil did was shake his head and say "Bummer." Somehow Chris liked that. "Bummer" was as good a way as any to sum up how it all felt.

Chris also had a few long with Phil's hippie friend Jennifer, the girl with the John Lennon glasses who Lianne said was a lesbian. He told her all about Lianne too. They also talked about music a lot. Chris decided that he wanted friends like

Phil and Jennifer. He wanted to learn how to play guitar. He wanted to wear dusty, torn up funky clothes. His old style had to go.

One evening after dinner he saw a large crowd of excited people sitting outside the guy's dorm lobby. Chris walked over and saw that a bunch of girls were piercing the ears of any guy who wanted it. They had a bag of ice and a needle, and two guys were standing there laughing with new earrings in their ears while another waited to have his done. One of the girls knew Chris from drawing class, and called him over. "Come on, Chris, you're next!"

The other girls joined in: "Have a seat, Chris!"

"Come on Chris, don't be afraid!"

He liked it that they all called him by name. It made him feel popular, for one fleeting moment. "I can't, my parents would kill me!" he said.

"Oh, bullshit! Come on! Sit down!"

He didn't do it, but the episode made him feel incredibly happy.

He still often found himself with nobody to sit with in the cafeteria, and during the last week he started skipping meals. He would wander over to the Student Union in the main campus, which nobody else at the arts program ever seemed to have discovered, and eat a can of ravioli or beef stew from the hot foods machine.

Before he was ready for everything to end, feeling dizzily unsettled and confused that the days had gone so quickly, suddenly Chris was packing

to go home. The final day was a confused mass migration. Many parents had come to drive their kids home, and the dorm hallways were congested with clumps of unfamiliar people lugging trunks and suitcases.

Chris was taking the bus home and didn't have much luggage. He spent the entire day outside waiting for a last glimpse of Lianne. He positioned himself near the entrance to the girls dorm so he wouldn't miss her. He sat waiting, pretending to be casually reading a book.

Finally he saw her. She and Dawn were surrounded by their parents, and Chris realized that this was the same conglomeration of people he'd encountered when he'd first met Lianne and Dawn four weeks ago. So much had changed since then.

She looked right at him as she walked past. Their eyes met and for the first time since she'd frozen him out she did not quickly look away. Their eyes lingered for a moment and then she smiled sadly and mouthed the single word "Bye." She walked past, and that was it.

He watched from the distance as the happy pack loaded Lianne and Dawn's luggage into two cars and pulled out of the parking lot.

Chris's father and mother met him at the Paukatuck bus station, happy smiles on their faces. They hugged him and ruffled his hair and asked him to tell them everything that had happened. He asked "Are David and Susan at home?"

“Yes!” That was the happiest news he could have heard.

Immediately upon entering the house, he brought his older brother and sister into his room, closed the door, and began his story. He'd been waiting a month to tell it all, and he blabbed on for three hours, telling every detail, from the first day when he'd met this girl who was wearing a yellow halter who asked him if he knew which way Thorndike Hall was, to all the times they talked and the amazing conversations they had, to the day they'd held hands in the nature preserve, and then everything that went wrong after that. After a while, Chris's mother peeked her head in the room and said dinner was ready. "Oh, Susan, I guess you've been telling Chris all about your adventures in Europe," she said.

"No," Susan said, laughing, and only then did Chris realize that Susan had also just gotten back from a trip and might want to do some talking herself.

Home felt strange to Chris. He'd never been away for so long before, and everything felt different. When the family sat down for dinner, Chris's father told Chris that he had a big surprise for him, and handed him an envelope. Chris opened it and looked inside and saw two Mets tickets. But they weren't regular Mets tickets. They were bigger and were printed in bright orange and blue on shiny, laminated cardboard instead of just blue on plain cardboard like regular Mets tickets. They said, in thick black print,

'NATIONAL LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES, GAME 4'. "Playoff tickets," his father said, smiling proudly.

Chris looked up at him. "The Mets clinched?" he said.

"What?" his father screeched. "You didn't know?"

"We clinched?"

"Yes! Chris, where were you? It was two weeks ago, at home, against the Chicago Cubs! The fans tore up the stadium! Dwight Gooden got the victory!"

Chris felt completely lost. "I didn't even know ..."

"You didn't know? Are you serious?"

Chris felt completely dazed. "Who are we playing?"

"The Houston Astros!"

"What about the American League?"

"Oh my god, Chris! It's the Boston Red Sox vs. the California Angels!"

"We're going to the playoff game?" Chris said. He felt dizzy from how much he'd missed. His own house seemed foreign to him, and the Mets had won the division title without him knowing it. How could he not have heard?

Only then did Chris realize with a shock that he hadn't watched TV, or even thought once about watching TV, for an entire month.

Eight

Eileen Hewitt lay on a blue canopy bed staring at her large painting, “Zinnia,” which hung between her canopy top and headboard. She got tired of looking at “Zinnia” and kicked her white-spandexed legs in the air to study the black shadows of her feet. Finally the phone rang to save her from her boredom.

It was Cathy, her cousin from Plattsburgh. “Hey,” Cathy said. “Remember I told you my friend Jim’s guitar teacher’s brother Kyle went to that art thing you wanted to go to?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he’s back, and he’s here. He said it was outrageous.”

“Who’s there? Your friend Jim?”

“No, well he’s here too --”

“His guitar teacher?” Eileen said.

“Yes, and Kyle’s here too.”

“Well, let me talk to him,” Eileen said.

Eileen and Kyle introduced themselves. “So it was amazing?” she asked him.

“It was a good time,” Kyle said. “Good people were there. You should try to go next year.”

“I’m dying to go. One kid from our school went, this kid Chris Blomberg.”

“Chris, yeah, I think I knew him. Him and his girlfriend got into big trouble when we went to the Guggenheim. They ran off, and didn’t get back till an hour and a half late.” “Him and his girlfriend?” Eileen said. “No, this can’t be the same Chris.”

“What did he look like?” Kyle asked.

“I don’t know, dark hair, medium build, medium tall.”

“That sounds like him. I think there was only one Chris. It was a pretty small group.”

“And he had a girlfriend? How bizarre!”

“Well, I dunno -- they looked chummy, anyway. Hey, your friend is grabbing my arm, she says this is long distance.”

“Okay, put her back on.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

Eileen and Cathy talked a while more and then hung up. Eileen lay with the telephone on her lap and dreamed of a sprawling college campus, a lush green lawn with cool kids hanging out, creating great artworks and partying all night and falling in love. She looked at the painting over her bed, the “Zinnia” that Patty said was a third-rate Georgia O’Keefe imitation. She closed her eyes and silently beckoned the spirit of Georgia

O'Keefe to quickly enter her body. She rolled gently off the bed, sat on the floor and opened her paintbox.

Back in Paukatuck, Chris spent several days in a quiet, unearthly haze. The encounter with Lianne made everything in his house seem new, and when he picked up an object or looked at a wall or listened to a record it felt as if he were touching it or seeing it or hearing it for the first time.

He spent many hours sitting in his room with the door closed and just thinking about her, reliving the moments. Many times he clutched his own hand and pretended it was hers, so he could remember what it felt like.

One night he fell asleep with his clock radio on and woke up at 3:21 am to the pleasing sound of a hypnotic, mechanical rhythm that faded in and out from the tinny speaker, phasing up and down like a roller coaster, pulling Chris's half-asleep dreamland thoughts with it. The sound was so impossibly appealing that at first Chris assumed he was fabricating the music inside his dream. But he was gradually pulled into wakefulness by the words, and by the flat nasal tone of the singer who sounded as love-weary as Chris felt himself:

*"There's a club if you'd like to go
you could meet somebody who really loves you
so you go and you stand on your own*

*and you leave on your own
and you go home
and you cry and you want to die
You said it's gonna happen now
well, when exactly do you mean?
See, I've already waited too long
and all my hope is gone
You shut your mouth, how can you say
I go about things the wrong way?
I am human and I need to be loved
just like everybody else does"*

When the song ended Chris sat up in bed, wild thoughts running through his mind. He reached across to his desk and grabbed a pen and a stack of looseleaf paper. He filled three pages with scribbled, cramped words, ending: "No matter what you think, even if you rip this letter up or laugh at it, I know that you are a good person. I understand why things happened the way they did, and I am not angry at you. I just wanted you to know that I think you are beautiful in every way, inside and out, and that I will love you forever. Love, your friend, Chris."

He put the letter on the floor next to his bed and went back to sleep. In the morning he found his mother working on the computer in the den and asked her "If I mail a letter today, and if the person who gets it writes back right away, what's the soonest I could get the answer?"

"Well, if it takes two days for your letter to get there, and the person writes back in one day, I

guess you could receive the response i five days,” she said. “And there’s no mail on Sunday, so it would actually be six days.”

“Okay,” Chris said. He bicycled three miles to the Paukatuck post office, bought a stamp and mailed the letter. He returned home and went back to his room.

He spent the next few days there, listening to REM and Prince and AC/DC and Van Halen records, or to the strangely appropriate songs chosen by the DJ’s on the radio. He picked out a random grownup novel from his mother's bookcase, "Tender is the Night" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and tried to absorb himself in the plot. He traveled down to the kitchen every few hours to bake frozen tater tots in the oven or microwave ravioli from a can. He hung around David’s room and Susan’s room when they were home, but they were usually out with friends. They always asked him to join them when they went out for pizza or bowling or movies, but he knew he’d just sit there feeling like a dork while they talked about college life, so he always said no. He lay for hours on his bed, imagining Lianne in Fredville opening his letter and reading it

When he got bored, he’d ride his bike. He cruised Pinoak Lane and Sunflower Drive. He rode to the 7-11 on Wyandanch Blvd to play Ms. PacMan and Centipede, and once trekked twelve miles against heavy traffic on Vanderbilt Motor Parkway just to get away from his hometown, to see how far he could go.

Mostly he rode close to home. His bike got a flat, and he had to walk it to the repair shop on 25-A. He had to walk through strange neighborhoods where the houses on the street gave him a cold, scared feeling. He walked block after block and it felt like when he was a child, because the houses still looked to him as if they were alive and moving. He knew they were just made of bricks and wood and plasterboard and cement, that they were stationary on the ground, but they had never seemed stationary to him and they still didn't. They were alive and looked at him. They seemed to quiver invisibly on their foundations like jello, or incline slightly forward to surround him and stare at him, like the talking trees in "The Wizard of Oz".

Strange looking people often glared at him from the lawns or from inside the houses as he walked past, flitting around nervously on their porches or peering at him through windows. Sometimes there were men hosing down their driveways or soaping down their cars. Sometimes there were pretty girls suntanning on the front lawns, or boys playing ball, or sometimes there were mean dogs on chains barking at Chris like they would tear his throat out if they could.

Walking through one strange neighborhood where he did not know the way out or in, he turned a corner and saw a tiny figure riding towards him on a bicycle. A strange and irrational thought gripped him: this faraway figure was Brian The

figure loomed closer and Chris began to see that he was right. It was Brian.

It was too late for Chris to get away, and there was nothing he could do but keep walking. He didn't know what to expect. They hadn't spoken since Chris had mangled Brian's bike outside the movie theatre almost two months before. He imagined Brian would be furious and might try to run him over on his bike or kick him as he rode past. Instead, Brian pulled over very calmly and nodded hello. Chris was surprised by this. He glanced quickly to see if the bike had been repaired, and he could see that it had.

"What's up," Brian said solemnly.

"Hi," Chris said.

"Long time no see," Brian said.

Chris couldn't understand why Brian didn't want to kill him. Maybe he was trying to get Chris to let down his guard before he attacked. "Yeah," Chris said.

"So . . . how's your summer been?" Brian asked, his face stony and his voice flat.

"All right, I guess."

"Uh-huh." Brian nodded slowly, showing no signs of being angry at Chris. "So," he said. "You probably think your fucking Mets are going to the World Series."

"Yeah," Chris said. "I'm going to the fourth playoff game.

"You got tickets? How?"

"My Dad got them from a guy he knows." Chris couldn't believe they were talking so calmly.

He'd known this moment was inevitable, that he couldn't avoid seeing Brian forever, but he'd never expected that all they would do is talk politely, as if nothing had happened between them.

"Not bad," Brian said. "You should sell them, you could get a lot of money."

"Nah, I wanna go," Chris said.

Neither of them could think of anything else to say. "So, you'll be back in school this September?" Brian said.

"Mm-hmm," Chris said.

"Okay," Brian said. "Well," he shrugged. "Have a good rest of your summer." He kicked off and rode away. Chris stood there watching until Brian turned the corner and rode out of view. That had been incredibly weird. How could it have been so easy? Suddenly Chris was visited by a cold, unwelcome realization. It was possible – unlikely, but barely possible -- that if Chris wasn't careful he and Brian could slip back into being friends.

Wednesday was the day he'd calculated Lianne's letter would arrive if she wrote back right away. At ten in the morning he walked outside to stand by the mailbox. There was nothing better to do anyway. The sun was shining, and he liked sitting on his front lawn in his t-shirt and gym shorts so he could feel the cool soft wet grass on his bare legs.

He waited for the little white-red-and-blue mail truck to come around the corner at the end of

the street. He waited a long time, feeling an ecstatic excitement that he knew was unreasonable, because the letter might not come. But maybe it would. Finally the little mail truck came floating around the corner and Chris suddenly felt very scared.

What if the letter wasn't there?

The kindly gray-haired mailman placed a thick stack of envelopes in the mailbox, waving at Chris in a puzzled sort of way. Chris sat frozen. He knew, suddenly, that no letter for him was in that stack. The mailbox looked too mundane to hold anything as radiant as a letter from Lianne. He felt a sinking fear in his chest, something plummeting into blackness inside him.

But it wasn't until he took the stack of envelopes out of the mailbox and examined each one that he really understood that Lianne had not written back. He stood next to the mailbox on the cool windy summer day and realized the sun was not as warm on his body as he'd thought it had been.

David was taking Chris to his first concert that night. Since returning from Agora Chris had been begging David to find tickets to something, anything. Van Halen was playing Madison Square Garden, which would have been amazingly great except that David Lee Roth had just left the band and Sammy Hagar was the new lead singer. But it was better than nothing.

They got on a Long Island Railroad train at Brentwood and arrived at Penn Station at 6:30. They had an hour and a half to waste, so they went to the Burger King next to the Garden, which was packed with other kids headed for the concert. They ate burgers and fries, then walked around the block checking out the t-shirts and buttons and bumper stickers for sale on the street. Ticket scalpers were also looking for customers, and one guy was standing alone under a concrete statue of an eagle next to the front entrance saying "Smoke, sense, smoke, sense," to no one in particular. "What's sense?" Chris asked his brother.

"Sinsimellia," David said. "It's a kind of pot. Those dudes never really have sinsimellia, though. They just have regular pot."

At 7:30 they lined up in a thick mass of ticketholders and herded in through the gates. The crowd was packed tight and there was a sense of danger and excitement that Chris enjoyed. By the time he got to the ticket gate, he was squeezed so tight he could practically pick his feet up off the ground and remain standing.

A guy in front of them had a silver Van Halen lightning-bolt earring. Did I tell you, when I was in Agora I almost got my ear pierced?" Chris said to David.

"How do you 'almost' get your ear pierced?" David said.

"Well, these girls were piercing guys' ears, and they wanted to do mine, but I wasn't sure I

wanted to. Maybe I should have. Yeah, I probably should have."

"Oh, Mom and Dad would love that. Mom would probably cry."

Chris laughed. "Yeah, and Dad would say, 'Chris, are you sure you're not doing this because you're acting out some repressed feelings towards me and your mother?'"

Inside the Garden, the air was tinted brown from cigarette and pot smoke and dotted with yellow flames from cigarette lighters. The feeling of being there struck Chris as incredibly perfect and cool. This was where he belonged. The lights suddenly went out and the crowd erupted into a huge rowdy cheer. The band rushed onstage, and it was at that moment that Chris fully understood the greatness of the fact that he was now in the same room as Van Halen. Yeah, it was Sammy Hagar instead of David Lee Roth, but other than that: this was them. There they were.

Eddie Van Halen dominated the show with his excellent guitar solos. Michael Anthony was playing the same Jack Daniels bass guitar Chris had seen in photos. The best moment was when they broke into their new song, "Why Can't This Be Love?" It was the first Sammy Hagar/Van Halen single, and Chris had never liked it on the radio. But somehow in the huge expanse of Madison Square Garden the song hit Chris with an amazingly powerful force and he realized it was one of the best songs he'd ever heard in his life.

It was as if the song had been written just for Chris, to express how he felt about Lianne. The music pulled him in and the words rang true:

*"And I can't recall
any love at all
Oh baby, this blows them all away
It's got what it takes
Tell me, why can't this be love?"*

When the song ended the crowd responded with a huge blast of applause, and Chris knew that Sammy Hagar had somehow broken through to a lot of the David Lee Roth fans in the crowd. He wasn't that bad after all. Chris felt a strange sense that many in the huge audience were having the same surprising revelation he was having, and it was cool to be sharing this with experience with this boisterous crowd of strangers.

On the train ride home, alone with his brother in the empty, grimy train car in the middle of the night, Chris felt his ecstatic mood starting to plunge back down into despair. "I just wish I could understand why she changed her mind about me," Chris said, looking down at the slimy, dirty floor of the train car, streaked with beer and mud in shoeprint patterns.

"Can I tell you something I've learned?" David said. "Sometimes in a relationship, and in life, you never find out the reason why something happens. You probably never will find out the truth about why she changed her mind, if there is

any one reason, and basically you're just gonna have to accept that."

"It's too much," Chris said. "I can't accept it. I feel too much for her. I don't think I can ever fall in love with anybody else, I really mean that. I know it, I totally know it, I'm never gonna feel for another girl what I feel for Lianne. Anybody else will be second best."

"Chris, you're fifteen. Do you really believe what you're saying?"

"Yes."

"Do you really think you're being rational?"

"I want to marry her," Chris said.

David seemed to be trying not to smile, but couldn't help it. "You don't think maybe you'd like to wait a little before you make this momentous decision? Maybe you'd like to go out with a few other women first, before you make a major commitment like this?"

"Well, it looks like I'll have no choice," Chris said seriously, not willing to get the joke.

It was the first day of school at Paukatuck High. Chris was in eleventh grade.

He got off the bus and followed the dull march of book-carrying kids towards the gates of the tan-brick building. Only two more years in this dump, he told himself. Just survive, and don't think about it. In two years, he would leave Paukatuck on the day before graduation. Maybe he'd head for the city and scrounge around for

something to do. Or maybe he'd go to art school. He didn't care. As long as he was gone.

Chris navigated through the hallway crowds with nowhere to go, self-conscious about the black Van Halen concert t-shirt he was wearing. He'd bought it so he could finally be like the other kids who wore black concert t-shirts to school, but now it seemed everybody was wearing the Mets logo. Never before had Chris seen so many Mets caps and Mets t-shirts and Mets backpacks and Mets belt buckles in one place.

He spotted Brian in the hallway talking to a couple of the nerdy jerks who often followed Brian around. They were ninth-grade -- no, now they were tenth-grade -- computer nerds, model-airplane builders and movie-projector operators, the kind of unself-consciously immature boys who didn't mind being seen with Brian because they never aspired to be more than what Brian already was. Brian thought I would be one of his followers, Chris thought. He wanted me to be part of his pack of nerds.

Activity swirled around Chris in every class that day. Friends greeted friends, warmly hugging each other, raving about all the stuff they'd done all summer. Chris was told to please lean out of the way several times by kids who wanted to talk to each other from their separate desks. I'm a human obstruction, he thought. I'm as useful as a pillar.

He sat alone in the remotest corner of the cafeteria during lunch, feeling as if everybody was staring at him. All students except for twelfth-

graders had to stay in the cafeteria for the first fifteen minutes of lunch period, and then those who had passes could spend the rest of the time in the library or the gym or outside or wherever else they wanted. Chris would be able to go to Mr. Brill's art room to work, which was a nice escape, except that he would have to endure the first fifteen minutes every day.

Everyone around him looked happy. Not one other person was sitting alone. Chris thought he spotted one girl sitting by herself a few tables away, which made him feel better. She was sort of gawky looking with stringy blonde hair and a bad case of acne, and Chris wondered if he could possibly befriend her. Then three other friends happily sat down with her. They'd just been on slower food lines.

When he was in seventh grade, Chris had had some problems getting picked on by some guys in gym class, who became his enemies because he was the only quiet boy in gym class, and Chris had been taken to see a guidance counselor. The guidance counselor had been a big, happy, bear-like man named Mr. Whitson, and when Chris told Mr. Whitson that he had trouble making friends Mr. Whitson had given him a pamphlet, "How To Make New Friends," which said, basically, to just go over to somebody and say, "Hi, my name is ____!". It still pissed Chris off to think about it. He looked at the bunch of noisy guys at the table next to him. What would happen if he walked over to them and said, "Hi,

my name is Chris!"? Probably they would stop what they were doing and stare at him for about half a second, and then either burst out laughing or start dumping food over his head. It was also pathetic that the pamphlet was meant for students who'd just moved to a new town, because Chris had already been living in Paukatuck for several years by the time Mr. Whitson gave it to him.

During seventh period Chris got a bathroom pass from his Math teacher and went into the boys room to get away for a while. The boys room was quiet and empty. Chris leaned against the cold white porcelain sink and rested, and stared at himself in the mirror. He tried to cry, but he couldn't. He went back to Math class, where nobody noticed him walk in just as nobody had noticed him walk out.

Eighth period, Mr. Brill's art class, was a little better. Mr. Brill said hello to him and asked him about Agora. Patty Zipper and Elaine Hewitt both jumped in at that moment and kissed Mr. Brill on the cheek to say hello, and then they waited to hear about Agora. Chris, stunned to suddenly be in a conversation after a day of silence, found himself unable to think of what to say other than "Yeah, it was good!" and "I learned interesting stuff". At least he had used his voice.

Elaine's boyfriend Adam Meltzer was waiting for Eileen after class, and he stopped Chris and pointed at his t-shirt. "Hey, you went to the concert?" he asked.

"Huh?" Chris said. "Oh, yeah -- did you?"

"Nah," Adam said. "We decided to skip it, we figured it would suck. Was it good, though?"

"Well, I liked it pretty much," Chris said. "You know, Sammy Hagar wasn't really that bad, I mean, it sucked when he did the old songs, but some of the new stuff was pretty good."

"Oh yeah, really?" Elaine and Patty were both listening now, the second time today that Chris found himself talking to them.

"When did we see them, the last time must have been like two years ago, right?" Patty said.

"Yeah," Adam said. "I just can't see Sammy Hagar David Lee Roth's place. I just can't picture it. I don't wanna picture it. My friend had tickets, but we blew it off."

"Well," Chris said, managing to talk despite his nervousness. "the thing is, it was my first concert." He had no idea why he wanted to confess this to them.

"Oh yeah?" Adam said. "That's cool. Well, nice shirt, anyway. Take it easy." He and the two girls left

It was stupid to admit that he had only been to one concert, but at least he was going to a playoff game. Later that day Chris saw Sean Lamana walking down the hall with Patty Zipper, and Sean was wearing a Mets t-shirt.

"Letter for you!" Chris's mother yelled. It was Saturday afternoon and Chris was in his room

working in his sketchbook. He jumped up, dropping his pastels all around him, and threw the door open. He ran down the stairs, his heart pounding. He took the letter from his mother, breathing so hard he thought he would have a heart attack.

It was from Brian.

Upstairs in his room, his heart still pounding so hard it hurt, Chris slammed the door behind him and kicked his box of pastels across the room. He ripped open the envelope with disgust. It was a dumb Gary Larson "Far Side" friendship card. The message read: "Dear Chris, we've been friends too long to stay mad about one fight. Give me a call if you feel like it. Your friend, Brian."

"Fuck you," Chris said, crumpling the card into a round wad and winging it at a wall. So Brian hadn't been able to find anyone new to victimize.

David had gone up to Buffalo on Thursday, and Susan was leaving on Monday. Chris was dreading her departure. The whole family was going to Shea Stadium for her last day home, and this was also the last game of the Mets regular season.

The game meant nothing, of course, since both divisions in both leagues had already been decided. But Shea Stadium had sold out and the crowd was in a loud and crazy mood as the Mets rolled over the last-place Pittsburgh Pirates. Gary Carter hit a three-run home run in the first inning, then Ray Knight hit a two-run home run, and then in the fifth inning Chris watched Darryl

Strawberry hit an incredible grand slam that seemed to hang in the air as it sailed majestically along its arc. Chris had always thought it was stupid that every time sportswriters or TV sportscasters described a Darryl Strawberry home run they always called it 'a towering home run', but now that he'd seen one in person he understood what this meant. That was the only way to describe it..

Chris loved the Mets so much at this point, he couldn't even joke about them anymore. At one point during the game, Keith Hernandez got hit in the face by a pitch, and a guy two rows up jumped out of his seat and yelled, "No! Not the nose! He needs the nose!" Chris didn't even think it was right to say something like that, because Keith didn't like people to bring up the cocaine thing, but it was true that earlier in the season, before it all had come to mean so much, he would have thought it was funny. Somehow, Chris realized, the whole thing had become extremely serious.

The best part of all was that, for the first time ever, Chris could laugh in Brian's face. He wasn't planning on laughing in his face, but they both knew that he could. The Yankees were going to watch the World Series on TV. And Chris knew that Brian knew that Chris was going to a playoff game. Someday he'd be able to tell his grandchildren about it. And Brian had never been to a postseason Yankees game. The fact that Chris

had actually won this one seemed too incredibly good to be true – but it was true.

At the end of the game the whole team came back out onto the field to take bows before the screaming crowd. Davey Johnson had removed Gary Carter early in the game, so Carter had already showered by this time, and he came out to take his bow wearing regular clothes and an argyle sweater. Chris felt as if he were personally saying goodbye to a bunch of close friends who were about to embark on a long adventure. The Mets were his friends, and his friends were on their way to Houston. He gazed happily at the faraway figures in their bright white and blue and orange uniforms out on the field. I went on my trip this summer, he thought, and now you guys are going on yours. He would be back to see them next week, and then the whole country would be watching.

Back home that evening, Chris sat with Susan in her room while she packed for college. He told her about Lianne one more time, because even though she'd heard every detail already he somehow seemed unable to stop talking about it. "I'm still in love with her," he told Susan. "It's not going away. Every day on the bus home from school all I do is think about whether or not her letter will have come today. I don't think it's ever going to stop, every time I close my eyes I see her, every morning when I wake up I'm thinking about her."

"I know," Susan said.

"Nobody else will ever be as beautiful to me, it would be impossible."

"I know you think that," Susan said.

"Believe me, I thought that myself, many times, I really did. And in some way maybe it's even true. But it happens, and you just have to deal with it. It happens to everybody."

"Not the way it happened to me," Chris said.

"I know."

"I deserved to have something good happen to me," Chris said, realizing as he said it how true it was. "I think I've suffered enough in my life already, I really don't think I needed to go through this, on top of everything else."

"Oh, you're so right," Susan said. "I know, you're right. But this is what happens. This is what love is all about."

"I'll never fall in love again," Chris said.

"Yes you will," Susan said. "Believe me, you will. You can take my word for it, because I said I never would about three times so far, and I always did."

She'd always told Chris about her boy problems, so he knew the stories. She'd been in love with a guy named Chuck, and then there'd been a guy named Larry, and then there was that whole ordeal when she couldn't choose between Andy and John and ended up losing them both. Chris had seen Susan cry about twenty times, so he knew she was telling the truth.

He watched her as she sorted out piles of papers on her floor. "Maybe I should have gotten my ear pierced when I was in Agora," he said.

"Why?" she said.

"I don't know," Chris said.

"Well, you want me to call Michelle up?" Susan said. "She knows how to do it."

"Sure, go ahead," Chris said, joking.

"Okay," Susan said, suddenly reaching for her phone.

"No!" Chris yelled, realizing that she meant to do it. "Stop!" he yelled. She was dialing with a big smile on her face, ignoring him. "No!" he said, hanging up by putting his finger on the receiver button.

"Cut it out!" Susan said. "Sit down, let me take care of it!"

"No!"

"Why not? I think you should get it done, I think it would look really good on you."

"No, come on, I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I mean, I can, I just have to think about it. I'm not sure yet that I want to."

His finger was still on the receiver button, and she tried to pull the phone away from him. "Oh, just sit down, and let me call, okay? Listen, I mean it, some guys look stupid with earrings, but I think you have the right face for it, like I think it would look really good on you. I mean it."

"Okay, I'll do it some time, then," Chris said. "How about when you come home for Thanksgiving."

"No way," Susan said. "Either do it now, or I'm never asking Michelle, and you'll have to get someone else."

"Come on," Chris pleaded.

"Just sit down and let me call. I don't even know if she's home."

An hour later, Chris sat on the floor leaning back on the bed, with Michelle sitting over him applying ice to his left earlobe. He was sandwiched between her two legs, and he studied the fabric of her bright magenta workout tights while she pressed the cold wet cube to his ear. He couldn't believe he was doing this. "Tell me the truth, this is gonna hurt, right?" he said. He didn't even really care, because he was so dazzled by the idea of doing this.

"No, it's just a little pinch, stop worrying," Michelle said. "So, what were you in the middle of telling me?" Somehow Chris had started Michelle telling her the story of Lianne.

"Well, okay," Chris said, as she fidgeted with his ear and water from the ice dripped down his neck. "So when I came back here I wrote her a three-page letter, you know, just telling her everything I just told you, basically. And I got her address from a phone book and mailed it, and in the letter I said please write back, you know, that I would definitely be waiting for a reply, so, you know, it's not that she just didn't get around to

writing back yet, like, if she was gonna I'm sure she already would have."

"She just didn't write anything back?"

Michelle said. "Well, that sucks, I mean, even if I'm brushing a guy off I'll usually at least let him know straight out, you know, I would have at least written back."

"It's just that I don't know what went wrong," Chris said. "If I could just know, if she could just tell me anything."

"Well, you don't know what her story is, maybe she had a boyfriend at home or something."

"Yeah," Chris said. It was weird to be spilling the whole story to Michelle, a girl he hardly knew, and who was pretty cute herself. "I know this is gonna really hurt," Chris said.

"Oh, don't be silly now," Michelle said.

Susan was sitting opposite Chris, watching what Michelle was doing. "Now hold still, don't move," Michelle said, bracing him tightly between her legs.

"Ugh," Chris said, preparing for pain.

"Oh, by the way, Chris, " Michelle said.

"Did I tell you, I'm having your brother's baby?"

"You're what?" Chris screamed. Then suddenly Susan and Michelle were laughing about something, and Michelle loosened her hold on him. "What," Chris said.

Michelle took his hand. "Here," she said, bringing it up to his ear. He felt a small, cold metal contraption on his earlobe.

"It's in?" he said.

"Uh-huh," Michelle said. "And don't ever tell David I said that -- he'll think I want to."

"I have to see this," Chris said. He tried to get up, but Michelle held him down. "Wait, I just gotta get the clasp in," she said. She fooled around with his ear some more. "Okay, there we go. You got your earring."

He jumped up and looked in the mirror. It was a small round gold stud in the center of his earlobe. "Just leave this one in for a few days, and then you can change it if you want," Michelle said. "Susie, how's it look?"

Susan joined Chris at the mirror and studied it. "It looks great."

"You're gorgeous," Michelle said. "You really are. That Lianne girl is really stupid, and I mean that. You're gonna be a treasure for whatever girl finally grabs you."

"Thanks," Chris said, not taking his eyes off his reflection in the mirror. The three of them examined it for a while. Then Chris said, "How do I keep Mom and Dad from noticing it?"

They decided to tell his parents right away to get it over with, and it didn't go as badly as it could have, because Susan prepared them for it by saying "I have something really bad to tell you." This got them really nervous and upset, so when they found out it was just Chris's earring they were relieved, even though they looked shocked and suspicious and said they'd discuss it later.

Monday morning before school they didn't mention it except to look at him strangely and

shake their heads a few times at the breakfast table. Missy said it looked really good.

Going to school that morning was kind of a crisis, though. Up to the last minute, he wasn't sure if he'd have the nerve to show up with it on. The problem was, was he the kind of person who could wear an earring? Not really, but he wanted to be. But, he figured, nobody in the school knew him anyway, so they had no way of knowing whether or not he was the kind of person who would wear an earring.

Nobody seemed to notice it on the school bus, and all day in school nobody said anything about it to him anyway. He thought he noticed a couple of people looking at him, but nobody said a word. Since he didn't talk to anybody there, anyway, this was not surprising.

On the first day of school Eileen had walked proudly to the bus stop in a brand new red bowler hat she'd bought at a flea market specifically for her debut as an eleventh grader. Approaching the corner where ten ninth-to-twelfth graders stood under the street sign waiting for the yellow bus, she spotted an unknown face, a cute brunette wearing an almost identical red hat. The two girls stared at each other. Eileen stepped up to her, not sure whether to be angry or upset. The unknown girl looked frightened. Finally Eileen broke the silence. "I guess it's the new style or something?"

The girl giggled and said "I guess so!"

Her name was Debbie and her family had moved to Paukatuck from Iowa two weeks before. She was also in eleventh grade. They began trading stories, and when Eileen found out that the new girl was also an artist and a Georgia O'Keefe fan she knew she'd found a new friend. Debbie hadn't chosen her elective courses yet, so Eileen insisted on accompanying her to the guidance office to make sure she selected all the right courses with Mr. Brill.

Within a few days, Debbie had become the new member of Patty and Eileen's social circle. She joined Patty, Eileen, Sean and Adam in the cafeteria at lunch every day, where they ate as quickly as possible so they could spend the rest of lunch period in their established hangout, Mr. Brill's art room. Sean and Adam kept two guitars in the room, and they worked out songs while Patty and Eileen worked at easels.

One day Debbie called for Patty and Eileen to come close so she could whisper something about Chris Blomberg, who also usually spent lunch period working at an easel in Mr. Brill's room but never said a word to anybody else. "Am I crazy?" Debbie whispered to Patty and Eileen. "Or does that boy have an earring?"

"No way," Patty said. They could not clearly discern what it was that seemed to be gleaming from the quiet boy's earlobe. "That would be too bizarre."

"Who is he, anyway?" Debbie said. "You know he's kinda cute."

"I have no idea what his story is except that Mr. Brill thinks he's more talented than we are," Eileen pouted. "He got to go to that summer program and I am still pissed off about that."

"He does work hard," Patty said. "But ... I cannot believe he is wearing an earring."

They discussed it with Sean and Adam that afternoon after school, as they passed a joint around the back parking lot. "Debbie thinks that Chris guy is cute," Patty told the guys. "All cause he got his ear pierced."

"Who got his ear pierced?" Adam said. "That kid who did the Van Halen painting?"

"Yeah," Eileen said.

"That's pretty weird," Adam said. "He didn't seem like the pierced ear type."

"I'm glad you like him," Sean said to Debbie. "He's a nice guy. You should get to know him."

"Well, I don't know if I like him," Debbie said, embarrassed. "I have no idea who he is. I just think the earring looks cool on him. I have never said a word to him in my life."

"I've talked to him," Sean said. "He's cool. He's just the quiet type."

"Maybe I should get my ear pierced," Adam thought out loud.

"Me too," Sean said. "Does it hurt?"

"I totally cannot figure that guy out," Patty said. "I always thought he was a nerd."

"I know," Eileen said. "But, like, I was talking to my friend Cathy's brother's friend, who

also went to that art thing at Agora this summer. He said he had a girlfriend up there, and they were both really rowdy and constantly getting into trouble and stuff."

"He has a girlfriend?" Debbie screeched.

They all stared at her. "You really like him that much?"

"I have no idea who the hell he is!" she said.

"Yeah, who the fuck is he?" Eileen demanded. "How come he doesn't hang out with anybody? Does he have a secret life or something?"

"I never even knew he existed till like a year ago," Patty said.

"I think he just moved here last year," Sean said.

"No way," Adam said. "He was in one of my classes in like fourth grade."

"Really? He's been here that long?" Patty said. "How is that possible?"

"You know," Debbie said. "Maybe the earring is a clue, maybe he's, like, a member of some religion or something."

"I don't think so," Adam said. "If he was in some religion he probably wouldn't be allowed to do art."

"I don't think there's an earring religion," Sean said.

"Where does he sit at lunch?" Eileen demanded. "I want the facts!"

"Maybe he doesn't eat," Adam said. "Maybe it's part of that religion he's in."

The first playoff game was Thursday night at 8:30. Even Missy and Chris's mother, who usually both avoided Mets games on TV, had gathered round to watch it. Dwight Gooden was pitching against Mike Scott, and both pitchers were in excellent form. It was not a hitter's game. Scott struck out Carter and Hernandez three times each and Strawberry twice, and gave up only five singles.

By the ninth inning it was 1-0 Astros. Strawberry reached second base with one out, and Mookie Wilson hit a line drive that definitely looked like a single, and Chris and his Dad both jumped up from the couch in joy because they thought it would be a game-tying hit. But the Astros first baseman made an amazing catch and then there were two out with Strawberry on third. Ray Knight was up and he needed only to get a single to tie the game. Chris's father said to the TV, "Whatever you do, just don't strike out." Ray Knight struck out and the game was over.

This was a special disappointment to Chris and his father, who were hoping for a four-game sweep. That would mean they'd be in the stadium for the final playoff game. Now this was impossible. For a moment Chris even entertained the thought that the Astros might sweep the first four and that he and his dad might be in the stadium to witness that utter disaster. He shut the horrible thought out of his mind. Chris's father

said, "I hope we don't get discouraged. Gooden pitched a one-run game, nothing to be ashamed of. We'll win tomorrow."

Bob Ojeda faced Nolan Ryan for Game Two, and the Mets were in much better shape. Backman, Hernandez, Carter, Strawberry and even Rafael Santana all got key hits and the Mets won easily with a final score of 5-1.

There was an off day the next day while the Mets and Astros traveled to New York for the next three games. Chris watched the Boston Red Sox lose to the California Angels in the American League playoff that night. For the first time, Chris started to wonder how he would occupy his time once this great baseball season was over.

The pathetic fact had occurred to Chris that he had only two good things going on in his life. He had an earring and the Mets were in the playoffs. That was it, there was nothing else. The new earring was still exciting, but Chris knew it was pathetic how much he thought about it. And as for the Mets, even if they made it to the World Series it would all be over in a week and a half, and then what would he do?

Lianne still hadn't written back. And Chris still ate lunch alone in school every day, rushing through it so he could escape to the more private loneliness of Mr. Brill's room.

He would watch Brian sitting with his other nerdy jerk-friends during lunch. One day while

Chris wasn't looking, Brian walked over to him. "Mets! Mets! Mets! Get me the fuck out of here!" he yelled.

Chris just looked at him, and said "Hi," in a noncommittal way.

"So, you must be happier than a pig in shit," Brian said.

Chris shrugged. "Well, let's see if they win first." He could have rubbed it in and mentioned all the times Brian had said the Mets could never get even this far, but he didn't.

"Holy shit!" Brian said suddenly. "What the hell did you do to yourself?"

Chris remembered the earring. "Oh," he said. It bothered him that Brian was the first person in the school to mention it. He would have preferred Brian not to have seen it at all.

"What did you do, mutilate yourself?" Brian said. "Did you go crazy?"

"No," Chris said. Somehow he felt that Brian was violating his privacy simply by looking at it. The part of himself that had an earring, Chris thought, had nothing to do with any part of him that Brian had ever known. But even though Chris had no interest in hearing Brian talk, he was glad Brian had come over to talk to him. Anybody was better than nobody.

"Well, whatever," Brian said. "I came here to ask you, why don't you come sit with us?"

"I don't know," Chris said. "Why do you want me to?"

"Why do I want you to. That's a pretty stupid question."

"I guess," Chris mumbled, realizing he wasn't sounding very coherent.

"I want you to because those guys bore me," Brian said. "They talk about floppy disks all the time. I don't think they've gone through puberty yet. Come on, at least you used to be interesting to talk to."

Chris was pleased to hear this despite his better judgement. "That's okay, I think I'll stay here," he said weakly.

"Okay," Brian said cheerfully. "Your choice." He walked away.

Ron Darling started Game Three. Chris had always liked Ron Darling, if nothing else because he had an interesting face and a last name from "Peter Pan." But the charismatic pitcher gave up two runs in the first inning and two more in the second.

Daryll Strawberry tied the score with a home run in the sixth, but the Astros came back again in the seventh. The Mets just weren't putting it together. Chris had heard the expression "they didn't show up for the game", and that was how this game felt. Where was that magic that had carried them all season? It looked hopeless by the ninth inning, but then Wally Backman got on base and suddenly, totally out of nowhere, Lenny

Dykstra smacked a ball and it flew out of the stadium for a game-winning home run.

“What happened?” Chris said. Dykstra was a singles hitter, not a home run hitter. The Astros looked extremely displeased. The Mets were up two games to one.

The morning of Game Four finally arrived. Chris and his father left the house four hours early to make sure they didn’t get stuck in traffic. They listened to the fifth game of the American League playoffs on the radio as they drove in. Boston had to win to keep from being eliminated, and they were trailing in the ninth inning until Dave Henderson saved them with a home run, just as Lenny had for the Mets the day before. The game went into extra innings, and Boston ended up with the win.

Pulling into the Shea Stadium parking lot felt like stepping into a familiar room that had been turned into a grand ballroom.

The stadium had been a dull blue-gray for as long as Chris could remember, but now it had been repainted an intense, solid deep blue. Satellite dishes and network news vans formed a ring around the outside perimeter, and there were more shiny white and black stretch limousines than Chris had ever seen in one place before. At the age of fifteen, he realized, he was getting to do something that some baseball fans never got to do in their whole lives. Even if it was just the

playoffs and not the World Series, it was the hottest ticket in town and it was extremely cool to be there.

They strolled around the stadium and took their time getting up to their seats, which were way up in the highest level above right field. Chris didn't mind the crummy seats. He was there. He looked around and wondered if anybody noticed his earring.

He imagined Brian watching the game on TV, rooting for the Astros, burning with jealousy because he knew Chris was there. Chris had only mentioned the tickets once to Brian, in passing, but there was no doubt that Brian remembered.

They ate hot dogs and pretzels and read every article in the special playoff program as the stands slowly filled. They talked a bit, and Chris's father managed to mention Chris's earring twice, asking if Chris's teachers had said anything about it and then asking if it hurt his ear.

Later he said, "So, I don't think I've seen your friend Brian around the house much lately."

It was incredible that his father was just now realizing this. "Dad, I haven't been friends with Brian like half the summer," Chris said, disgusted.

"You haven't?"

"No."

"But -- why? I thought you two got along so well."

"We didn't."

"Why not?"

"I dunno. I was sick of him bragging all the time and always feeling superior to me, so I ended the friendship."

"Why did he feel superior to you?"

"I don't know, just because everything I have he has something better, you know, like his father has a better car than you. Basically, he thinks he's better than me because his father makes more money than you."

Chris's father's eyes opened wide, and Chris suddenly realized he'd said the wrong thing. "I don't mean it matters to me or anything, it really doesn't," Chris said. "I really couldn't care less, it's just that this is the kind of stuff Brian always talked about, and I got sick of hearing him talk about it all the time."

His father looked angry and hurt. Chris wished he could take it back. "Really, I don't even care at all," he said.

"Uh-huh."

"Brian's just an idiot, that's really the main thing."

"Fine," his father said.

They didn't talk for a few minutes after that. Chris was worried that he'd ruined the day his father had looked forward to for so long, and he resolved to be extra nice for the rest of the night.

After about an hour of drum and fife bands and color guards marching across the field, Tug McGraw and Jerry Koosman from the 1969 Mets walked out to the pitcher's mound to throw out the

first ball. Chris thought he saw small tears in his father's eyes, but he wasn't sure and didn't ask.

Sid Fernandez was on the mound against Mike Scott, who had killed the Mets in Game One. Alan Ashby hit a two-run home run off Sid in the second inning, and a terrible quiet fell over the crowd. Chris wouldn't have believed that such a noisy crowd could shut up so quickly.

From that point on, a great, imposing tension seemed to hang over the crowd. The Mets could not get on base against Mike Scott. Dickie Thon hit a home run for the Astros in the fifth, and Sid was taken sadly out of the game.

Mookie Wilson scored in the eighth inning to make the score 3-1, and in the ninth inning Wally Backman got on base. Gary Carter stepped up to the plate, representing the tying run. The crowd cheered him on like crazy, but he popped up into the shallow outfield. The outfielder caught it and the game was over.

Chris thought of last week, when the Mets had come back out onto the field to wave goodbye after the final game of the season, and how Carter had been grinning and waving to the crowd in his argyle sweater, so confident and happy. Now Carter had been put on the spot, and he'd blown it.

As Chris and his father shuffled out of the stadium with the silent, unsettled crowd, Chris contemplated the possibility of the season ending on a similar off night. They weren't invincible. They could lose, even though the idea seemed so

wrong as to be inconceivable. And then Brian would laugh. Brian would be right once again.

While Chris and his father got into their car, a guy getting into the next car over shouted at the stadium, "You guys played like a goddamn girl's field hockey team!". Chris and his father both laughed. "We just can't get psyched out," Chris's father said. "We're not as bad as we looked today."

For the first time, Chris realized baseball was not fun. There was too much at stake, and losing was too hard. "We'll turn it around again," Chris said. He didn't even know what he would do if they didn't.

Game Five went to twelve innings. Gary Carter finally batted Wally Backman home to win the game 2-1. Carter had been having a rough postseason for the first few games, and had made the last out in that terrible game Sunday night, so Chris was happy to see him bat in the winning run.

The Mets were now ahead three games to two and only had to win one more. But Mike Scott was supposed to pitch Game Seven, and nobody wanted to face Mike Scott again. Game Six was the big chance, and it worried Chris tremendously to think that they could blow it.

Chris was also worried about how he'd keep himself occupied once the season was over. There was nothing else but baseball to divert him from thinking about Lianne all day long. He already

daydreamed about Lianne so much he was sure it wasn't mentally healthy. He had no new material to daydream about, so he just ran the same scenes through his head over and over and over again, until the memories started to take on the overplayed feeling of the movies he'd watched so many times he couldn't stand them anymore, like "Diner", which he'd watched about six times in one month just because they kept replaying it on cable for some reason, or "Purple Rain", which he'd seen five times on either cable or video. He didn't know how much longer he could go on reliving that one incredible moment under the tree when he'd suddenly realized he was holding her hand. But he couldn't stop reliving it.

There was a new girl in school named Debbie, who sat at a table with Patty and Eileen in art class and also sat in the chair behind Chris in science. One day while science was letting out she suddenly asked him, "How come you never take notes?"

The question jarred Chris out of his world of private thoughts, and he was too stunned to think of a good answer. "I don't know," he finally said. "I guess, because I don't care about whatever the stuff he's talking about is."

She smiled. "Yeah, but what about tests?"

"I don't know," Chris said. "I guess, well, even if I took notes I'd never look at them anyway, so why bother."

The girl laughed in a friendly way, and Chris smiled. "Well, you got nerve," she said.

"Yeah, I dunno," Chris said, and that was the end of the conversation. That night he went to sleep reliving that moment instead of thinking about Lianne. Every once in a while some small nice thing happened, just enough to keep Chris from totally giving up on his life. She was a part of the "art crowd", along with Patty and Eileen. They always dropped their books and jackets and lunches off in Mr. Brill's room before first period every day and then picked their stuff up there before going home. Chris wasn't a part of this crowd, but he had started leaving his stuff there this year too, and so he ran into Debbie a lot. He tried saying "Hi" to her the next day when they both entered the art room at the same time, and she smiled and said "Hi" back.

The next day he purposely went to science class without a pen or pencil and, after searching conspicuously through his pockets, turned around and asked her, "Do you have a pencil I could borrow?" But at that exact moment somebody else called Debbie's name from the back of the room. She had also heard Chris, so it was a sort of embarrassing moment for everybody as she tried to figure out who to answer first. She finally thrust a pencil at Chris, who was trying to pretend he'd never asked in the first place.

He decided he didn't care. She wasn't Lianne anyway. Sometimes it seemed that his devotion to Lianne had become so deep it wasn't even sexual anymore. His feelings for her had come to feel more like religion. She was the

meaning of his life, the one person in the world who he knew he was meant to be with in some predetermined way, the one person who seemed to him to be proof that there was an afterlife, because he knew that if he could have her that their love would have to last forever in an eternal realm of some kind or another.

But when he lay in bed at night grinding his groin rhythmically into his mattress and hugging his pillow to his face pretending it was a girl he was kissing, the girl was just as likely to be some face he'd noticed in a class that day as Lianne. Lianne had entered some otherworldly realm in his mind. She was an angel, a holy figure, too good and too perfect to ever be touched. But would some other guy ever touch her? That thought filled Chris with rage.

The sixth playoff game started at three in the afternoon on Wednesday, and everybody in school was itching to get out and run home to watch it. An announcement went out over the PA during eighth period that Houston had scored three runs against Bob Ojeda, and a huge audible groan shuddered through the entire school.

Chris ran home and joined his father in front of the TV during the fourth inning, when the score was still 3-0 Astros. It was still 3-0 by the ninth inning, and then the game started getting weird. The Mets scored three runs to tie the game in the ninth inning. Chris and his father set the TV up in

the kitchen so they could watch during dinner, and they watched all through dinner as neither team managed to score. They moved the TV back into the living room for the fourteenth inning when Darryl Strawberry got on base and Wally Backman batted him home.

Chris and his father were on the edge of the couch ready to start jumping for joy when Billy Hatcher of the Astros hit a solo home run off Jesse Orosco. The game was tied again. The fifteenth inning passed with no score, and then finally the Mets scored three runs in the sixteenth. Now all they had to do to win was keep the Astros from scoring three to end the game. The Astros scored two runs, and then finally Jesse Orosco struck out the last batter. Orosco threw his glove into the air and the Mets all jumped out from the dugout and piled on top of him. The Mets had won the playoffs in six games. They were heading to the World Series.

Later that night, Boston beat California in the seventh game of the American League playoffs. The World Series was finally set: the Boston Red Sox against the New York Mets. This was exactly what Chris's father had predicted months before.

A few of the kids in school had tickets to World Series games, and they walked around like celebrities, the envy of all. Chris wished that he could tell someone that he'd been to a postseason game too, even if it had just been a playoff. But who could he tell? Nobody cared about him.

Nobody even knew his name. The only person in the whole school who knew about it was Brian.

Every lunch period, Chris watched Brian eat with his jerky friends on the other side of the cafeteria. Ever since the day Brian had talked to Chris in the lunchroom, Chris had been thinking hard about the possibility of making up with him. Having no friends was torture. Each day it got worse. But how could he go back to Brian? It would feel like regression, like a terrible, degrading step backwards.

But having no friends in school was like a cut that never turned into a scab and disappeared, but instead got reopened and re-wounded day after day. Friday afternoons were a relief, but by Sunday he'd be dreading it again. This was no way to live. The only alternative he could think of, besides being friends with Brian again, was suicide. Brian was a jerk and an asshole, but he might be preferable to death.

Nine

Resting his head in his hands in science class, Chris felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Debbie, the girl he'd borrowed a pencil from several days before. "Hey," she said. "I really like your earring."

"Oh, thanks," Chris said.

"Who did it for you?"

"Just a friend," he said. This sounded better than "My sister's friend."

"Well, it looks good," she said.

He reached up and touched his earlobe. "I'm thinking of getting a different one," he said. "I'm not sure what kind."

"Hmm," she said. "Hey, you know what, I could give you some. I have so many earrings at home that I lost one of."

"Really?"

"Yeah! I always save them. Oh, I have such nice ones too. I'll have to look through my box."

"Yeah, that would be great -- what kind do you have?"

"I have, like, butterflies . . . ". She looked at him. "No, I guess, you wouldn't want a butterfly." He laughed, and she laughed.

"Maybe a cool-looking butterfly," he said.

She thought about it. "No, the one I have's a pretty dippy-looking butterfly."

The bell rang and Mr. Slatzky started taking attendance. Chris had to turn back around in his chair and face forward.

He had trouble concentrating on science for the rest of the period. This was the longest conversation he'd had with a girl – or, in fact, with anyone – since the beginning of eleventh grade. Who was she? He liked her style.

She was also in his art class, and a few days later he passed by the sink while she was washing her brushes. "Hey," he said. "If you ever get a chance, I would like to check out those extra earrings you have."

"Oh!" she said. "Yeah, actually I looked a little just last night. But my room is such of a mess. Lemme look some more tonight."

"Sure, whenever you have time," he said.

"Half my stuff is still in boxes," she said. "You know, we just moved here."

"Oh, I didn't know that," Chris said. He'd actually already guessed that she was new in town, but didn't want her to know he'd given the subject so much thought. "Where'd you used to live?"

"Up in Rockland County," Debbie said. "It was pretty boring."

"That's like near Westchester, right?" Chris said. "I was up near there this summer, at this art program at Agora College."

"Yeah, I know," she said. "You're a good artist."

"Thanks," he said. "Everybody tells me that, I don't even know if I like art."

"Really? You're not, like, planning on being the next great artist in the world?"

"Well, I might want to, I don't know. I can't decide. You're an artist too, right?"

"Well, I try. I mean, I don't think I'm as good as Patty or Eileen. You know them, right?"

"Yeah."

"They're both so talented. I know they're both gonna be successful. You know what -- Patty was in an art store once in the city, and she saw Meryl Streep there."

"Really? Wow."

"Yeah."

Chris couldn't think fast enough to figure out where to take the conversation from there, and Debbie had already finished washing her brushes. But their second conversation had been even longer than their first. It wasn't anything like the breathless conversations he'd had this summer with Lianne, of course. But he hadn't choked up or said anything really stupid, and this was enough to make him feel good about it.

That night his parents went out to eat and Missy slept over a friend's house. Chris watched 'The Cosby Show', 'Family Ties' and 'Cheers',

thinking about Lianne the whole time, and then he started thinking about Debbie. He started to get depressed because his whole situation was so completely bleak. He was so impressed with himself for saying a few words to this new girl in town, but it was just a big nothing that he was blowing up into something big. It was just going to lead to another letdown.

That Saturday night the World Series finally began. Everybody in the house was excited, and Susan and David both phoned home with their best wishes. There were about three hours of glory-packed pre-game shows on TV. Then the Mets started losing.

It wasn't even a close game. Mookie Wilson was the first batter for the Mets, and he struck out in three pitches. Len Dykstra struck out too. The Mets seemed still exhausted from their incredible playoff battle, and the Red Sox seemed focused and determined to win.

By now the Blomberg family had whipped themselves into such a devotional frenzy over the Mets that Chris could not imagine the possibility that they could lose. It seemed predestined that they would win. He wondered if there might be a 15-year-old Red Sox fan in Boston with a similar sense that the Red Sox were predestined to win. But that, Chris figured, was the Boston kid's problem.

Dwight Gooden started Game Two for the Mets, but the ace pitcher was not in good form. Boston started beating up on him in the third inning and ended up winning the game 9-3. Two games down! To Chris it almost seemed as if the World Series had never begun. What were these horrible games he was watching? It was like a nightmare version of what should be happening. After the game Chris watched his father sadly washing dishes in the kitchen, not saying a word because he was so upset.

Monday at school, everybody was depressed and confused. It didn't make sense, and nobody knew what to say. The next two games would be played at Fenway Park, which meant the Mets could lose the whole thing without even returning to Shea Stadium. If they couldn't win at home, how could they win in Boston? Were the Red Sox really the better team?

Chris pictured the big smirk Brian would have on his face if the Mets lost, and he became furious and decided there was no choice about it. The Mets would have to win.

That Monday was Chris's 16th birthday. In the morning his parents gave him the guitar he'd been wanting since the night in Agora when Phil had shown him how to play "You Shook Me All Night Long."

Brian came over to him in the cafeteria that day during lunch, and Chris figured that Brian had

remembered his birthday. But Brian had just come over to talk. "Hey," he said. "So did you go to that playoff game? It was the fourth game, right?" He asked it nonchalantly, as if he talked to Chris every day.

It was surprisingly generous of Brian to admit that he'd remembered this. It had to have burned him up that Chris had gone to a playoff game. Chris wondered if Brian had somehow developed a nice streak since their fight.

"Yeah, I was there," Chris said, trying to appear calm and casual. "It was pretty cool. It would have been better if they won that one."

"Yeah, well ..." Brian said. He smiled like he was about to make some obnoxious remark about the Mets, but instead he changed the subject. "Hey, you know, I was trying to find someone to see 'Beverly Hills Cop II' with, do you by any chance feel like going?"

"'Beverly Hills Cop II'?" Chris said, as if it made any difference what movie it was.

"Yeah."

"Nah, I don't feel like it."

"You saw it already?"

"No, I just don't feel like going," Chris said, although he did.

"Oh," Brian said. He shrugged. "Okay, well, talk to you later." He went back to his friends at the other table. Chris watched him as he walked away, unable not to wish that Brian would stay and protect him from having to sit there alone.

There was no game on the night of Chris's birthday, because the teams were travelling to Boston. Chris sat in the living room trying to play his new guitar, played a few board games with Missy and talked to David and Susan on the phone. Then he went to bed and thought about Lianne until he fell asleep.

Game Three in Boston began with a leadoff home run by Dykstra. The Mets were back.

They dominated the entire game, frustrating the Red Sox pitcher Oil Can Boyd. The final score was seven to one. Everybody was confident again at school on Wednesday. Chris felt good, and when Brian cornered him at his locker and asked again about the movie on Friday, Chris said he'd think about it.

"Really?" Brian said, smiling excitedly.

"Well, I'm not sure yet, I'll have to tell you tomorrow or the next day," Chris said.

"Oh, that's great," Brian said. "You know what, I'll even pay for you. We'll have a really good time."

"Okay. I'm not sure yet, though."

"Yeah, well, think about. Anyway, I gotta get to class. I'll catch you tomorrow." He slapped Chris on the shoulder and walked off.

Something astounding happened in science class. He asked Debbie if she'd remembered the earrings, and she said, "Oh, no, I forgot to look for

them again. You know, you could call me at home to remind me, if you want."

Chris couldn't believe it. Of course he wouldn't have the nerve to call. He'd never called a girl in his life. And she didn't give him his phone number -- or was he supposed to have asked?

He contemplated it the rest of the day. What if he just did it? What if he stopped worrying and dreaming and planning, and just picked up the phone and called her? He could call information and get her number. Why the fuck not? What did he have to lose?

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that he had no excuse not to. By the time he got off the school bus that afternoon he was a wreck. He was going to do it. He hoped he'd find out her number was unlisted, because then he'd have an excuse to wait until tomorrow and ask her in person.

He called information and they quickly found the number. Now Chris was so tense he could hardly sit through dinner. He tried to convince himself not to worry. If it went badly, so what? He didn't even know her. She wasn't Lianne. It was all just a whim, a quick phone call to a girl who didn't mean that much to him. He wasn't going to let his feelings run away with him this time. He wasn't going to be crushed if it didn't work out. He was ready this time. After dinner he paced around the kitchen for a long time. At seven-fifty-five he ate two chocolate-fudge pop-tarts without even tasting them. Finally he walked

into the den and dialed the number with numb fingers. A voice that sounded like Debbie's father answered. "Hi, is Debbie there?" Chris said.

"Yeah," the gruff voice said. Chris pictured a guy with a beer belly and dirty undershirt, puffing on a cigar. He heard the phone being picked up again, and Debbie said, "Hello?" She sounded inquisitive, cutely nervous, as if she weren't used to getting phone calls.

"Hi, Debbie?" Chris said. "This is Chris, from school."

"Oh!" she said. "Hi, Chris! How're you doing?"

"Oh, good," he said. He'd hoped his voice wouldn't be shaky, but it was, and his lungs felt tight. He was about to say "The reason I called was ...", but she spoke first. "I was just watching this movie on TV, 'The Return of Flight 617'?" she said. "Did you ever see it?"

"I don't think so," Chris said. "Oh, did you -" He wasn't sure if she meant she wanted to get back to the movie and couldn't talk, or if she was just telling him about it. He started to ask, but then stopped and rephrased it. "Is it a good movie?"

"Oh, no, it's stupid . . ." she said. "Well, you know, I mean, it's okay."

"Uh-huh," he said. What was he supposed to say? "So what else is going on over there?" he said.

"Oh, nothing much," she said. "Just, you know ... hanging around."

He remembered his line. "Well, the reason I called is, I wanted to remind you to bring in the earring tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, okay," she said. There was a pause. "Oh, yeah, that's right, you're the one with the earring."

What? he thought. Hadn't he said his name was Chris? And hadn't she told him to call today? "Yeah," he said. "Didn't you know who I was?"

"Oh, yeah, no, I knew," she said. "I didn't mean that, I was just, you know, thinking out loud ... "

The conversation wasn't going very well so far. "You know who I am now, though, right?" he said.

"Yeah, yeah, no, I did know . . . I know who you are," she said.

"Well, that's good, cause I know who you are," he said. He didn't know why he'd said that. He probably meant to be funny, but it came out like nothing, just a bizarre sentence that made no sense.

"What?" she said. "Are you making fun of me?" She was laughing, but he had no idea what about.

"Oh, no, no," he said. "I just meant ... "

There was a horrible moment of silence. "This conversation is getting too weird for me," Debbie said. She laughed weirdly as she talked, not natural laughter but something that sounded like nervous laughter, and Chris didn't know what to do.

"You're very quiet over there," she said.

"Well, just -- I wanted to remind you to bring in the earrings," he said.

"Earrings. Right," she said. "I shall bring in a ton of earrings for you."

Why was she talking like that? "Okay," he said.

"Okay, well . . ." she said.

"Okay, well, I guess, then, I'll see you," Chris said.

"Okay," Debbie said. "Bye."

"Bye."

"Toodle-oo," she said, and then she hung up.

So that was it. It was over. Chris held onto his receiver for a moment, staring into space, and then hung it up. It had been a disaster, a total disaster. He'd known that there was the chance that it could turn out horribly, and he'd been ready for this to happen, and now it had happened. But he could barely believe it.

He stood in a daze. His life was so bad, it seemed almost comical. "Okay, whatever, so that SUCKED too," he whispered to himself. He collapsed into a chair and stared at his father's computer. What had gone wrong? Why had she been such a weirdo? Was he destined to spend his life never knowing why it turned into a disaster every time he tried to get to know a girl?

He felt dizzy. It had happened too fast. He stood up and staggered into the living room and plopped down again in a chair to watch the fourth game, which was about to begin. Missy and his

father were excited, but Chris couldn't think about baseball. He stared silently at the TV screen, rerunning the nightmarish phone conversation over and over again in his head.

He tried to forget his troubles and watch the game. Gary Carter hit two home runs. Strawberry and Ray Knight got hits too, and the final score was 6-2. This was good -- the Mets had been down two games to none, and now it was tied at two games apiece. But Chris's head was still spinning from the phone call.

Chris's father tried a few times to talk to Chris about the game. Chris was barely able to respond. He figured his father would just think his earring was on too tight or something. He went to sleep right after the game, and lay in bed staring at the ceiling praying to God to please help him somehow, before it was too late and he started to lose his mind completely.

Debbie called Eileen first. Eileen wasn't home, so she called Patty. "Patty?" she said.

"Help me."

"Debbie?" Patty said.

"He just called me," Debbie said.

"Who?"

"Chris." Debbie said.

"No!" Patty said. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," Debbie said. "I told him to call me, but I didn't think he would, and then he did. And I completely fucked it up."

"Hold on a second, Debbie," Patty said. Debbie heard Eileen's voice in the background, and Patty told Eileen to grab the other phone. "Eileen's here too," Patty said. "You sound like you're crying."

"Not yet," Debbie said. "I probably will be soon."

Eileen picked up the other extension. "Debbie? What's going on."

"Hi, Eileen," Debbie said, laughing a little at herself through the tears that were starting to come.

"Okay, now," Patty said. "Start at the beginning."

"Okay." Debbie sniffled, and grabbed a tissue to wipe her eyes. "He called me, and I was so surprised I didn't know what to say, and at first the conversation was just really stupid ..."

"I'm surprised he called you," Eileen said. "He seemed so oblivious to people."

"Yeah, I wonder what inspired this burst of socialness in him?" Patty said.

"Well, I did say in science that he should call me, but then he didn't even ask for my number, so I figured it was hopeless."

"Well, so what else happened," Eileen said. "The conversation was stupid, and then?"

"Then I started getting paranoid, I guess," Debbie said. "Well, the first really dumb thing I did was, I kind of pretended I didn't remember who he was. I don't know why, I guess just to have something to say, you know . . . and then he was

really confused, and I felt like I hurt his feelings and everything, so I tried to take it back, but he must have just thought I was a total idiot. Then I started getting paranoid and, like, saying nasty things, like I went, 'This conversation is too weird for me,' even though I knew it was me who was being weird, not him. And then the conversation just continued to make no sense, and then we said goodbye. And that was it."

"Oh, shit," Eileen said.

"Are you sure he noticed?" Patty asked.

"Maybe, you know, he was probably nervous too, maybe he didn't notice that you were acting funny."

"He couldn't have not noticed. Oh yeah, and then another stupid thing, when we said goodbye, I said 'Toodle-oo'. Oh my god, I can't believe I said that. I've never said 'Toodle-oo' before in my life. I don't even think I ever heard anyone else ever say it."

"So you had a stupid attack," Patty said.

"It's okay. It happens."

"Call him right now, and start over," Eileen said. "It's no big deal."

"No way," Debbie said. "I'm too bad on the phone. I get too nervous, when I can't see the person's face. Oh shit, what am I gonna do?"

"Okay, just take a deep breath and relax a sec," Patty said. "I'm sure he won't even remember tomorrow. Hey, at least he called you," Patty said. "Really, that's a good sign."

"Maybe we should all start getting to know him," Eileen said. "Let's invite him to hang out one night or something."

"That'd be good," Debbie said. "What are you guys doing Friday night? Maybe we could all get together and you could invite him over or something ... I don't know ... maybe that would work."

"We'll figure it out. We'll make it happen."

"Okay," Debbie said. "Thanks."

It was time, Chris decided, to just give up on Paukatuck. Fuck this place, he thought, as he sat alone in the cafeteria on Thursday, staring at the stupid sports murals on the wall. Fuck all the popular people, and fuck trying. He'd done his best to fit in, and now it was time to give up. In two years he would go to art school. He just had to get through the next two years. And if anybody wanted to be friends with him during these two years, they were going to have to come get him, because he was done trying.

The only person who wanted to be friends with him was Brian, who approached him at his locker before homeroom Thursday morning. "So, did you think about the movie?"

"Yeah," Chris said. "I can go."

"Really?" Brian looked thrilled to hear it. Why did Brian care so much, Chris wondered? "That's great, I already asked my Dad and he can drive."

"Okay," Chris said. "I gotta get to homeroom, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Okay, great," Brian said. "I'm really glad. See you later."

So he was going to be friends with Brian again. He felt disgusted with himself, but also relieved. No more eating alone. No more worrying who to sit with in assemblies. It would be a friendship of convenience, an association of mutual benefit. As an absolute rule, Chris would never trust Brian. They would be pretend-friends, and that was as far as it would go. Really, Chris realized, that was all it had ever been.

It amused him that he'd never told Brian about Agora. Brian didn't even know Chris had been away this summer. Their friendship was a joke. But it was better than being alone.

In science that day, Chris said a brief, impersonal hello to Debbie as he sat down, and then didn't turn around again. If she had anything to say she would have to tap him on the shoulder. She didn't, and after class he left quickly without looking at her. Maybe next week or next month he'd try to talk to her again. He was done making himself vulnerable.

Something strange happened in art class that day. Chris had his back to the rest of the room and was working on a painting, a sunset that wasn't coming out very well. All of a sudden Patty Zipper and Eileen Hewitt appeared next to him. "Hey, that's coming out pretty good," Patty said. "The mountains are sort of fucked-up, though."

"Thanks," Chris said, startled, and then he realized it had been a stupid thing to say, since she'd just called his mountains fucked-up.

"Mountains don't really stick up like that," Eileen agreed. "They're more kind of ... flat and cascading, sort of." When had the two of them become the Siskel and Ebert of the art class?

"You're making them too even – they look like upside-down ice cream cones."

"Are you working from a photograph, or just memory?" Patty asked.

"Just memory," Chris said. Actually, he realized, he wasn't even working from memory, since he'd never actually seen mountains. Maybe that was why the painting was coming out so bad.

"Well, you might want to try working from a photo," Patty said. "I think you'd be surprised how different real mountains look."

"Anyway," Eileen said. "We wanted to tell you, we're having a couple of people over my house tomorrow night, if you felt like dropping by."

"What?" Chris said. Was it possible that this had something to do with Debbie? Could it be that she'd told them that he'd called her? He glanced in Debbie's direction, but Debbie was busy concentrating on her painting and didn't look up.

Maybe Patty and Eileen just thought he was someone else? Tomorrow night was Friday night, a weekend night. If Chris's easel hadn't been against the wall, he would have checked to see if

anybody was standing behind it. They could not have been talking to him.

"Just casual, you know, we're just gonna hang out and talk and stuff," Patty said.

"We'll give you directions tomorrow, if you want to come," Eileen said.

"Okay, good," Chris said. He was expecting one of them to suddenly say "Oh, wait, you're not - -! Sorry, I don't know what's the matter with me!"

Eileen and Patty went back to their side of the room. Debbie didn't look up when they sat down, and didn't seem to have had anything to do with the invitation. Chris turned back to his painting, trying not to let it show how surprised he was. What the fuck had just happened?

So the fight with Brian was over, after only three months. It was a step backwards, Chris knew. But he had never expected Brian to attempt to win him back, and he hadn't been able to resist.

He wondered why Brian seemed so much calmer and more considerate than he'd been last year. Could it be that Brian had his own summer story to tell? Maybe he had fallen in love too, and it had improved his personality? Chris found this hard to imagine. Maybe Brian was being considerate to Chris because he now realized Chris was capable of getting along without him.

No matter what, Chris thought, he felt stronger and more in control. He almost felt strong enough to blow Brian off completely and accept

Eileen's invitation for Friday night, except that he couldn't figure out what the hell that invitation meant. Why would they just invite him over, out of nowhere? He wished he could go, but it was out of the question. Eileen and her friends were the major leagues of Paukatuck High, and he wasn't ready. He'd already pushed his luck once by calling Debbie, and it had been a disaster. He could only take so much "trying things".

And if he did go, what would he say when he got there? Everybody else there would know each other, and he wouldn't know any of them. His worst nightmare was that he would decide to go, and he'd put on his coolest clothes and have his mother drive him and drop him off a block away. And he'd walk confidently into Eileen's living room, and Eileen and Patty and Sean and Adam and Debbie and a bunch of other people would be sitting there, and they would all look up at him like he was crazy, and Eileen would say, "What are you doing here? I didn't invite you!"

That was what stopped him from going. He didn't believe he was really invited. And he wasn't going to find out the hard way whether he was or not.

Sitting in front of the TV with his family as Game Five began, Chris began to feel strangely overwhelmed by the unreality around him. Things were swirling around too fast. And the Mets were in the World Series. Was this all really real? Shouldn't there be parades in the streets, and

banners and decorations in the living room? It was already Game Five. Everything was happening so fast, it was as if nothing had even yet begun.

Dwight Gooden was the starting pitcher. But just as in his last game, Gooden didn't have his best stuff. He gave up two runs in the first three innings, and the Mets couldn't get any good hits off the Red Sox pitcher, Bruce Hurst. It was a dreary, uninspiring game. In the eighth inning Timmy Teufel hit a home run, the first Mets score of the day. But the Red Sox were still ahead four to one. Mookie Wilson scored another run in the ninth inning, and then Rafael Santana got on base, but there were two outs, so a sacrifice fly was impossible. A home run was needed, and the tension was strong as Len Dykstra stepped out to the plate. But it all deflated when he struck out, ending the game.

Now Boston was ahead three games to two. They had to win only one more to take the whole thing. This didn't seem right. The Mets weren't supposed to be cutting it this close.

Chris went to bed feeling anxious and unsettled, unable to sleep. If the Mets lost, the whole great season would turn into a minor affair. Chris wanted to someday tell his children and grandchildren that he'd been to Game Four of the playoffs in 1986. But if the Mets lost, would his children and grandchildren even care about 1986? Chris felt angry at the team for their insipid performance. Why were they cutting it so close?

Didn't they care? He had a lot riding on these guys, and they were letting him down.

The worst idea of all, though, was that Brian would laugh if the Mets lost. It would mean Brian was right. It would mean Brian was always right, and always would be right, forever.

There were two games left. The Mets had to win.

Eileen wandered over to Chris during Friday's art class. "So, what do you think about tonight, can you make it?" she asked.

Chris hadn't even prepared an answer. "Oh, um, I'm not sure yet," he said.

"Okay, well, do you know where Aberdeen Lane is, off Townline Road on the corner with the Carvel? I'm 61 Aberdeen Lane. Come anytime, we'll be just hanging out." He mumbled a response and she was off.

As she walked away, he peeked to see if Debbie was paying attention. She was painting, not even aware that Eileen had been talking to him.

So why the hell was Eileen inviting him over? It made no sense. And he wouldn't go, of course. He didn't know how to "just hang out" and was not in the mood to try anything new. He would go to the stupid movie with Brian, and he would suffer through his remaining two years at Paukatuck. Then he'd go to art college and start over.

That night he nonchalantly told his parents that he was seeing a movie with Brian. He didn't want them to gush about how happy they were that he was doing something with a friend. They were polite enough not to gush, but he knew that they were happy to see him getting together with friends, which annoyed him incredibly.

At eight o'clock Brian's father pulled his Audi into Chris's driveway and beeped. Chris got into the car and said hi to Brian and his father. Now the friendship was official. Brian's father didn't even seem to have noticed that Chris hadn't been around lately. It felt strange and wrong for Chris to be back in the car again. It was like a nightmare *deja vu*.

Brian started gabbing to his father about some dumb thing as they drove, leaving Chris ignored in the back seat, just as he'd always done. Had anything changed? Staring at the back of Brian's head and Brian's father's head, as they talked and ignored him, he could imagine it was tenth grade all over again.

Brian's father dropped them off and they took their places in the long line to buy tickets. It felt to Chris like he was throwing away a year of maturity by standing there.

They bought their tickets and wasted time playing pinball, watching girls and combing their hair in the men's room. Then they got on line to get seats. "Oh, I forgot to tell you, guess what I got," Brian said.

"What?" Chris asked.

Brian had on one of his crooked smiles, a smile that reminded Chris how annoying Brian could be when he tried. Whatever it was Brian was talking about, Chris knew, he was going to be a pain and take forever to tell. "Come on, just try to guess," Brian said. "What is it everybody really wants?"

"I'm not gonna guess, if you wanna tell me then tell me, otherwise I don't care," Chris said

"Okay, I won't tell you then."

Chris shrugged. They stood in line some more.

"Okay, I'll tell you," Brian said. "I got World Series tickets."

Chris froze. "What?"

"Game Seven," Brian said.

Chris stared at him. "Oh, you're full of shit," he said.

"Oh, yeah?" Brian said. He unzipped a pocket in the inner lining of his jacket and took a ticket out and held it in the air. It was a laminated cardboard ticket, just like the precious Game Four playoff ticket Chris had had, and it said WORLD SERIES GAME 7. "My father has the other one," Brian said. "They're not bad seats, either. He paid a hundred-fifty each for them."

Chris just stared, his mouth open, his face flushed. "But ... you hate the Mets," Chris said.

"Nah, we're Mets fans now," Brian said.

At that moment the guy holding the purple rope in front of the theater began letting people in, and Chris dumbly let himself be carried in along

with the crowd, following Brian as he chose a seat. He sat stunned, staring straight ahead, not knowing what to do. How could he not have guessed that Brian would do this? Now, it was so obvious. Chris had underestimated Brian's deviousness, had underestimated it terribly. Of course Brian would never let him win anything, never. Brian was talking now, blabbing on about some stupid thing, but Chris just stared into the darkness in front of him, not even pretending to listen. Brian had actually done it again. He'd actually turned it around on Chris. He was going to the World Series, and Chris had only gone to a playoff game in 1986. Suddenly Chris realized that his grandchildren wouldn't even care, even if the Mets did win, when he told them that he'd been to a playoff game. Five minutes ago it had seemed so big, so important and unbelievably wonderful, but now Brian was going to a World Series game.

A week ago Chris had watched Sid Fernandez get beaten up by the Houston Astros from the worst seats way up behind right field, and he'd thought it was the greatest thing in the world. Now it was reduced to nothing. Chris sat still, trying to absorb what was happening. Brian was still talking, and Chris didn't hear a word or bother to respond when Brian asked him a question. The incredible thing, he realized, wasn't that Brian had done this. The incredible thing was that Chris hadn't realized Brian would do it.

The lights went out and the previews started. Had anything changed at all, Chris wondered, after

the whole summer? He looked around him, amazed, and realized that this was the same theater they had been in the last time, when Brian had thrown popcorn in his face. It was the same goddamn theater.

The crowd quieted down while the movie started. "I'm going to the men's room," Chris whispered to Brian.

"We just went," Brian whispered back.

"Well, I'm going again," Chris said. He got up and walked out, and went back through the ropes he'd come in through before, and walked straight out the door of the Multiplex, and into the chilly, windy night air.

At first he started heading for home, but then he instantly decided to go to Eileen's house instead. Why the hell not. He was in an insane mood anyway. He began walking towards Townline Road. He remembered that Eileen had said something about Aberdeen Lane and a Carvel, and he didn't remember her address but didn't let this slow him down since he had no idea why he was going anyway. He would look for her last name on a mailbox, or something. He didn't care; this was the least of his problems.

So Brian was just a complete, total asshole. So Brian had gotten his father to cough up three hundred dollars to see a team they were both only pretending to like, simply because Brian could not stand to let Chris come out on top about anything, not ever. So the so-called renewed friendship was over before it had even begun, and now Chris had

no idea what he was going to do next. Casually dropping by Eileen's house seemed as good an idea as any other. Now all he had to do was find her house.

But Townline Road was far away. Chris walked past the high school, past several shopping centers, through the industrial park. He finally reached the intersection, but once there he realized that Townline Road ran for miles from the north side of town to the south, and he had no idea whether to go north or south to reach Aberdeen Lane.

He walked north for a few minutes and then asked two young people getting into a car for help. They told him to try the other direction. He turned back and walked and walked and found no Carvel, no Aberdeen Lane, nothing that looked familiar, until he began to suspect he wasn't even in Paukatuck anymore, and started to worry that he would never get back home if he kept looking. He reversed direction and walked back again, checking every street sign to make sure he didn't miss it in the dark.

Chris's Friday night ended on a curb somewhere on the north end of Townline Road. He sat and felt his legs humming with pain. He had miles more to walk just to get home. He finally lifted himself up and began the final trek. By the time he reached his own house and walked in the door it was two-thirty in the morning. His mother was at the upstairs railing with cold cream on her face and his father was in the kitchen in his

baggy pajama bottoms, talking to the police on the phone.

It took fifteen minutes of them jumping up and down and waving their arms around and Chris saying that he hadn't been anywhere and that everything was all right and that he was really tired before they finally let him go to his room and close the door.

Ten

Patty, Debbie, Eileen, Sean and Phil all piled into Adam's living room on Saturday night to watch Game Six.

Phil had spent the early part of the day working at the Wiz in Brooktown Mall. "Hey, something hilarious happened in the video department," he said. "You know that annoying kid Brian Podle? He came to the store with his father trying to get a QuadMax recorder fixed. I had to tell him that QuadMax was out of business. They didn't know. His father threw a fit. He was yelling that he spent a thousand dollars on it just six months ago and we should give him a refund. He started screaming for the manager, so my boss, Carl, just starts giving him the standard line, 'write to the manufacturer.' And this guy starts yelling 'But the manufacturer is out of business.' I woulda just popped him one for yelling in the store, but Carl always keeps his cool. This old dude is screaming 'What the fuck am I supposed to do with all the QuadMax movies we bought' and Carl goes 'Maybe you can put an advertisement in the

newspaper and start a QuadMax users trading group'. Ha ... it was classic."

"I heard that ass-wipe Brian kid bragging in Math class today, cause he's going to Game Seven tomorrow night," Sean said.

"Yeah, he was saying that at the store," Phil said. "He was yelling that he needed the machine fixed so they could tape the game and watch themselves later. What a father-son loser combination."

"How the fuck did he get tickets to Game Seven, though?" Adam asked. "That pisses me off."

"That's the one good thing if the Mets lose tonight," Sean said. "Then we don't have to hear that ass-wipe kid bragging on Monday about it."

"Hey," Adam said. "You know that guy Chris that Debbie keeps talking about, I think he's best friends with that Brian kid."

"No, that can't be," Eileen said. "You're thinking of someone else."

"Hey, wasn't Chris supposed to come to Eileen's last night?" Sean asked.

"Yeah, I guess he didn't want to."

"I wrote him a letter today," Debbie suddenly piped up.

"You did?" Patty and Eileen both said.

"Yeah. What the heck. I just did it. I threw a couple of earrings in an envelope and wrote him a stupid letter. I didn't even think about it I just did it. I looked up his address, and threw it in the mailbox on the way over."

"What did you write?" Patty asked.

"Just something like 'Since I'm having no luck remembering to bring this to school, here it is.' And I wrote 'Call me again sometime'. Oh yeah, and one of the earrings I gave him was a topaz heart. Can I be any more obvious?"

"Good move!" Eileen said. They all agreed.

They settled down to watch as the pre-game show began.

As the Blomberg family sat down to dinner on the night of Game Six, the front door of the house suddenly flew open and a familiar voice shouted out "LET'S GO METS". David had flown home for the weekend!

Mr. Blomberg had secretly arranged, wanting David to be with his family to celebrate the historic final games. Chris and Missy ran up to hug their brother, and they all went into the kitchen to eat and talk about the batting order and the starting pitchers..

"If we lose tonight, will you stay tomorrow night anyway?" Missy asked.

"We're not losing tonight," David said.

David took Chris aside for a private conversation after dinner. "Listen," David said. "The other reason Dad paid for me to fly home is that he's worried about you. He says you're doing some weird shit."

Chris thought about it. "I guess you heard about last night."

"Yeah."

Chris told him the whole story, how he'd almost regressed back to being friends with Brian again, and how he'd walked out of the movie theatre and wandered all over town looking for the address of a girl named Eileen who he hardly knew, just so he could talk to a girl named Debbie who he also hardly knew.

The brothers talked for a while. Later, just before the game began, David took his father aside and assured him that Chris was all right. "He actually sounds like he's getting it together," David said. "I'm glad he's gotten rid of that Brian Podle kid. He hasn't really found his new friends yet, but I think he will soon."

"Hey, speaking of Brian," Mr. Blomberg said. "What does his father do for a living?"

"I'm not sure. I think he's a sales guy for one of those aerospace companies, I don't remember which one. Something like that."

"Is he very rich?"

"Brian's father? I don't know, I think he's just one of these people who flaunts it all the time. Why?"

"Oh, when I took Chris to the playoffs, to Game Four, he said something strange. He said that Brian feels superior to him because Mr. Podle makes more money than I do. And then he got all flustered and I think he thought he had hurt my feelings. Does Chris think we're having money problems?"

David laughed. "I have no idea."

"It just took me by surprise," Mr. Blomberg said. "You know, I never made a big deal about what I do, because I didn't want you kids walking around school saying 'my Dad is a big shot publishing executive.' I just don't like that whole image. But maybe I downplay myself too much. I didn't know Chris thought I was a pauper!"

"I never knew he thought that either," David said. "That's pretty strange."

"And is he aware that your mother does pretty well for herself, too? I don't know how much aerospace salesmen make, but clinical psychologists do pretty well too ... I mean, we haven't been making you kids suffer, have we? The house is large enough, isn't it? And we have enough to eat. And the TV *is* in color."

David laughed. "You know, I wouldn't even worry about it. I just think Chris is going through a kind of internal phase right now. I don't think he's noticing much of anything in the outside world these days. It'll be okay. I'm pretty sure of it."

They both thought for a minute. "I never cared much for Brian," Mr. Blomberg said. "I think Chris'll be much happier once he gets rid of him."

David agreed. "I think Brian is pretty much gone already."

The hysterical Shea Stadium crowd fell into an excited hush as the National Anthem began.

One thought, one sinister and twisted thought, ran uncontrolled through Chris's mind: if the Mets win, Brian will go to Game Seven. If the Mets lose, there will be no Game Seven.

Chris had never in his life felt so completely unsure what he wished for. He simply could not endure the idea of Brian going to Game Seven. So he secretly wanted the Mets to lose. He slunk down in his chair, feeling guiltily unworthy of the Mets pullover he had put on for good luck. He could not believe it, but he wanted his own team to lose.

He hated himself for even thinking it. And of course he could not reveal his guilty secret to his family. He would root for the Mets. But if the World Series ended tonight, he would privately rejoice.

How much worse could life get? Lianne was a distant memory. He had no friends, and Monday morning he'd be back to eating alone in the cafeteria, back to the whole incredible embarrassment and agony of being in Paukatuck High with zero friends.

What was next for him, he wondered, a padded room? Therapeutic drugs, slit wrists, sitting in a bed wearing a white gown, staring into space all day and all night? How much worse could it get?

Wade Boggs stepped up to the plate to open the game for Boston and got a hit off Bob Ojeda's second pitch. The next two Red Sox batters failed

to get hits, then Rice walked and Darrell Evans hit a double, bringing Boggs in for the first run.

So the score was already 0-1 when the Mets came up to bat, and they went down one-two-three. It was a bad first inning, and suddenly Chris couldn't imagine how a few minutes earlier he'd been wanting the Mets to lose. How could he not root for these guys? They needed all the support they could get. He loved them, and he could not let their great season end like this.

Missy brought a huge bowl of popcorn into the living room, and just as the family began digging in they noticed a strange apparition on the screen. A man on a parachute was wafting gently downwards into the infield, landing right next to Wally Backman at second base. The players on both teams stared in puzzlement. A "GO METS" banner was attached to the parachute.

Angry security guards quickly surrounded the intruder and ushered him off the field to great applause from the crowd. They brought him out through the Mets dugout, and Ron Darling, laughing, reached out and shook his hand before he was taken away.

"Well, that guy got in without a ticket," David said. Chris laughed, until the mention of the word 'ticket' made him think of Brian again, ruining the good mood he'd momentarily been in.

Recovering from the hilarity of a Mets fan dropping from the sky, Boston beat up more on Ojeda in the second inning, scoring a second run with several hits. Then the Mets tried to get

something started, but couldn't. Strawberry reached first base on a walk, but Carter got thrown out at first and Knight and Wilson struck out.

The Red Sox retained their two run lead through the fifth inning. The Mets looked strangely weak and uncertain to Chris, who sat on the couch rocking back and forth, wishing he knew which kind of agony he was in for tonight. Would it be the agony of seeing the team he loved lose, or the agony of seeing his former best friend go to a World Series final game? The situation felt jarringly unreal, and Chris didn't know how he could stand the tension much longer.

In the fifth inning the Mets suddenly came to life. Darryl Strawberry walked, Ray Knight singled him home, and Mookie Wilson advanced Knight to third. Danny Heep, pinch hitting for Santana, produced a grounder that sent Knight home, tying the game at 2-2. David and Mr. Blomberg both jumped up and yelled with joy as Knight crossed the plate, but Chris felt a sudden, twisted burst of anger at the idea that Brian, watching in his own home, was also jumping up and down and cheering at this moment.

Neither team scored in the sixth inning. The Red Sox scored again in the seventh. Chris hadn't expected this. It was now 2-3, and Chris was suddenly struck with the impossible realization that the Mets were three innings away from losing it all.

The camera showed the players in the dugout looking queasy and uncertain. Gary

Carter's expression was defiant but strangely sad. Dwight Gooden looked guilty and mournful, as if he blamed himself for losing Game Five. Chris wished he could tell Dwight it wasn't his fault.

The Mets broke through with another run in the eighth inning, tying the game again at 3-3. By now the tension in the Blomberg household was so great that nobody could cheer. Only David's tense, whispered "Yesssss" could express how they all felt. They all stared silently at the screen, fidgeting and squirming. Even Chris's mother intensely watched every move.

Nobody scored in the ninth inning. How many extra innings would it go on for? How long could the tension last? In the tenth inning, horribly and suddenly, Dave Henderson of the Red Sox hit a home run. Riding on the giddy momentum, Boston produced another run to bring the score to 3-5 before the inning ended.

The suddenness of this disastrous change was shocking. Now the Mets had only one more chance, only three more outs, to produce two runs. If they couldn't pull it off, it was all over.

The commercials ran by quickly, too quickly for Chris, who somehow felt the Mets could pull it together if they only had more time to concentrate and breathe. Wally Backman stepped up to the plate. "He looks worried," Mr. Blomberg said softly, as if this were a bad portent. Chris wasn't used to Backman looking worried. Backman fouled off the first pitch, and then hit the second.

But the ball just popped up into shallow left field for an easy out.

"Wally, Wally," Chris's father intoned, staring at the screen with his head in his hands. The cameras showed a glimpse of Davey Johnson in the dugout, repeatedly trying to sit down but then jumping up again as if the bench were on fire, too upset to sit down. But there was nowhere to go, nothing he could do but watch. Chris felt his heart breaking for the manager he'd known so long. There was one out, two to go. Keith Hernandez stood uncertainly at the plate. "Can't they slow the game down?" Chris said. "Why is it going so fast?"

"It just seems that way," his father said sadly.

Keith popped out, just as Wally had a minute earlier. Chris couldn't believe it. After the whole great summer, he was sitting here and the Mets were going to lose the World Series in the next two minutes. How, how, how could he have wished for this? How could he have even thought about wishing for it? Who the hell cared about Brian and his stupid ticket?

Now there were two out. Gary Carter strode slowly up to the plate.

The cameras showed the Red Sox players grinning with anticipation as they waited in their dugout, poised to jump out and begin celebrating at the next out. A picture of second baseman Marty Barrett flashed on the screen with an announcement that he'd been selected Miller Lite

Player of the Game. "Oh, shit, that's not fair!" David said.

"They can't do that before the end of the game!" Chris yelled. "Are they allowed to do that?"

"I think it is the end of the game," his father said.

Never before this season had Chris heard his father suggest that the Mets didn't have everything under control. Gary Carter stood at the plate, lonesome as a mythical hero about to lose a war. "I just don't want Gary to make the final out," his father said.

Chris had been thinking the same exact thing. Gary Carter would take it too hard. He wouldn't forgive himself. Let Carter get a hit, Chris thought to himself. Let somebody else make the final out.

Carter missed a pitch, and then another. One more strike would end the game. The Red Sox players perched excitedly at the edge of their dugout, waiting to start yelling and hugging and spraying champagne. Carter swung at a pitch, and hit the ball tentatively into the middle outfield, just barely a clean enough hit to get him safely to first base. Kevin Mitchell was up next. "Poor guy, rookie gets to make the last out," their father said.

"I'm glad it wasn't Carter," Chris said. Suddenly Mitchell popped a modest single into the middle outfield. "Wait a second," Mr. Blomberg said, perking up. "Why are they starting to hit now?"

"They want to torture us," David said.

Carter was now on second and Mitchell was on first, with Ray Knight at the plate. "Ray can get a hit," their father said. "He can do it. We're not completely dead yet."

"Dad, they already announced the Miller Lite Player of the Game," David said.

The Mets were still down by two runs. There were still two out. Chris felt too strung out and nervous to allow himself to truly hope, but then after two strikes Ray suddenly hit a beautiful line drive and Carter raced home, scoring a run. "Do you believe it?" David said. "We might tie it up! We have a chance!"

"If the Mets get out of this, I believe it'll go down in history as the most amazing World Series comeback of all time," their father said.

"But it's possible," Chris said.

The Red Sox yanked their pitcher, a commercial break flew by, and now Mookie Wilson was standing at the plate. Mookie's expression seemed oddly calm and bemused, as if he did not feel, or perhaps could not stand to think about, the enormity of his responsibility as he stood there waiting for the pitch. The first pitch came, and Mookie swung and fouled. He then swung for a strike, then hit another foul tip, then another, then another strike, and then another foul tip. The pressure was terrible, and Mookie was making it worse by foul tipping one ball after another. One more strike would end the game, and one more hit would tie it, and every time Mookie

hit another foul tip Chris and David and their father flinched in anticipation and pain. "Don't hit another foul tip," David said. Mookie hit another foul tip. It was too much.

"I wonder how many heart attacks there'll be in New York tonight," their father said.

Then a pitch went wild, almost hitting Mookie in the foot, and Mookie made a great leap to get out of the way. The ball was lost behind home plate while the catcher ran for it, and Kevin Mitchell ran home, Mookie waving wildly for him to come in, and then the game was tied and Ray Knight was on third. It was too much, it was unbelievable. "What?" David said, and they all just stared open-mouthed at the screen. Then suddenly Mookie was standing at the plate again, the count still three and two, and he hit the next pitch to Bill Buckner at first base. Buckner leaned down to scoop it up but the ball seemed to slide right under Buckner's glove, rolling behind him. Suddenly Ray Knight was leaping home, actually leaping, jumping for joy, and he jumped up and landed with both feet on home plate and bounced into the arms of Davey Johnson and Gary Carter and Timmy Lincecum and HoJo and everybody else, and the whole Mets dugout had emptied out onto the field to jump all over Ray, and the game was over, and the Mets had won.

The announcers were absolutely silent, not saying a word, as the cameras scanned the wild crowd and the crazed pile of baseball players hugging each other at home plate. Chris looked at

his father and saw that there were tears welled up in his eyes. David was just sitting there staring, blinking, his mouth wide open.

The Mets had won. Chris leaned back in his chair and allowed himself to slide off it onto the floor where he lay in a state of post-shock daze. They had pulled it out. The Miller Lite Player of the Game had already been announced but the Mets had pulled it out. Gary Carter had stood at the plate with two out and nobody on base, so forlorn Chris couldn't stand to look at his face, and now they had won.

Finally the announcers began speaking again, and Ray Knight and Mookie Wilson stood surrounded by reveling teammates in the middle of the field, covered with sweat and grinning widely, answering questions for the reporters.

There would be a seventh game. At Brian's house, Chris thought, Brian and his father would be whooping and screaming right now, jumping up and down in joy.

It was 12:30 in the morning. Since the game had gone into extra innings and cut into regular programming, the post-game show only lasted two minutes and suddenly the evening news was on. The lead story was, "Mets stage an amazing comeback, stay tuned for coverage."

Chris, David, Missy and their mother and father all stared silently at the TV a few moments more, exhausted and beyond conversation. It suddenly occurred to Chris that he badly, badly needed to sleep. He said goodnight to his family

and walked upstairs to his bedroom. He crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling.

The Mets had won. There had been two outs and two strikes and nobody on base, and then Gary Carter had hit a single, and Kevin Mitchell had hit a single, and Ray Knight had hit a single, and ... what the hell had Mookie even done? It was all a blur. They had won, and there would be a seventh game. And Brian would get to go to a World Series game and brag about it for the rest of his life. Chris squirmed into a more comfortable position under his blanket and tried to clear the contradictory thoughts from his head. What was Chris going to do now? He had no idea. He pulled his pillow close and hugged it to his body, feeling the spirit of Lianne locking him in a rapturous embrace. He looked up at the gray ceiling and asked God to help him, to give him advice, to save his life.

What was he going to do? The Mets had won. Had that really happened? Was he dreaming everything, was anything in his life for real? He suddenly had an image of the street preacher he and Lianne had listened to on 42nd Street, the religious fanatic who'd yelled that every soul was a spider hanging from a thread over a raging fireplace. Chris had forgotten about that, but now suddenly he felt like that spider, just clinging on with the little strength he had left. As he lay flat in his bed, Chris could feel himself swinging through the air, as if on a pendulum.

What was he going to do? He was so tired, he wasn't even sure if he was awake or not anymore. He hugged the pillow tight to his body and thought about going to school on Monday, about all the problems he would have to face. He was too exhausted to even worry about it anymore. Images of the baseball game floated freely through his head, as if without his permission. It had been a strange, confusing game, and a strange, confusing day. And it had been a long, strange and very confusing summer, and now the only thing in the whole world left for Chris to do was to just close his eyes and try not to think about it all, and go to sleep.

T H E S U M M E R O F T H E M E T S

THE END