

Selby Keith Wost and Dagger Yew Horny Present:
The BRB Boys in:

THE PRISONER OF ASSHOLIA



Part 3 of the **Chronicles** of a Small Town
An Epic 12 Part Trilogy

The Prisoner of Asskajam:

The Chronicles of a Small Town Part 3

Selby Keith Wost and Dagger Yew Horny

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The Prisoner of Asskajam

By

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Preface

The first thing you might say when reading these stories is, “Wow, this guy must really hate teachers.” And you, my friend, would be correct. I do despise teachers, and showing people how batshit crazy they’ve become has been the driving force behind creating this series. While it might seem that I have a special hatred for middle school teachers, I do not. Most of my middle school teachers were tolerable, and some were quite nice. The majority were really far left, but even back then, I knew that was par for the course. I got into various political and religious arguments with them during my middle and high school years, but nothing too serious. Even back in 1995, when my seventh grade English teacher told me that “Most books are written by straight white Christian men, and therefore we will not be reading anything written by straight white Christian men,” I didn’t harbor any ill will towards her. I did find the statement confusing and enraging (much like the main characters would in this series), but I didn’t stand up and make a huge scene during class. And I certainly did not, by any means, view myself as some sort of heroic fighter against the dark forces of oppression like so many people do today. Not at all. Instead, I was what they refer to as, in the medical community, a total fucking spaz. I was the type of kid who was perpetually hopped up on Starbursts and Mountain Dew, snorting huge lines of Pixie Stix dust behind the school dumpster. Then I’d hop on my bike and usually wind up plowing it straight into a parked car, my long black hair flying as I smashed my face into a taillight.

No, my genuine disdain for the education system came at the university level while I was studying English to eventually become a (you guessed it) teacher. My college experience was extended for a very long period of time, with my studies (indoctrination) being interrupted on several occasions over the years: once due to deployment, once again a year and a half later after my unit received a warning order that we would be deployed again, and another time due to a combination of financial reasons and an overall rejection of the course material. Every time I returned to that communist cesspool, it seemed like the curriculum had gone further and further off the rails.

For example, earning a degree in English at my school did not require students to take a single course in literary history, grammar usage and mechanics, or composition. Yes, much of that boring crap was addressed in high school, but it seemed to me that if English was your major, there would be plenty to study in those fields at the college level. But apparently, those things weren’t important to my professors. We were told not to feel constrained by things like grammar and composition, as they weren’t really all that relevant outside of scientific research papers. Instead, the main focus was on different theories of interpretation. We started with Russian Formalism (according to my professor, there was “never really a formal theory of literary criticism before 1910”), then touched on the New Critics. We skipped over Northrop Frye and moved almost immediately to Derrida and deconstruction. After that, the vast majority of the class was spent on Reader Response Theory and Marxist Literary Theory and all of its derivatives. These theories blended seamlessly with the Nietzschean belief that “there are no facts, only interpretations.” We discussed the intentional fallacy at length but never the deterministic fallacy. The professors’ deliberately imposed tunnel vision gave the illusion that

espousing Marxism and all Marxist subcategories was the only correct, logical, and noble course for a student to take in life. Anyone who disagreed was pure evil.

This made the things that I had encountered in previous courses so much clearer. In my American Literature class, we would be given a piece of classic writing to analyze. When we were finished, the professor would hand us a couple pieces of scholarly criticism, with one writer stating that the original piece was racist and the other claiming that it was either sexist or homophobic. When writing our own interpretations, we had to decide which scholar we sided with, or if we sided with both. They called it “being a part of the conversation.” What I found odd was that there was never an option to interpret the piece in the way the author intended or to offer our reflections on the author’s actual message. In hindsight, we never discussed the author’s message at all. It was like they were deliberately instructing us to ignore what other people had to say, and instead insert our own meaning that was as negative and pathos-filled as possible. It seemed awfully strange that my professors were strongly suggesting that this manipulative and divisive behavior was the only acceptable way to interpret writing and, by extension, all information. That’s when I realized that by controlling how their students interpreted information (through a solely Marxist lens) the professors could control how their students think...and act. And by making such strong appeals to their pathos, the professors had made any form of dissent appear to be driven by hatred and prejudice. To be fair, you could make an attempt to break their iron grip, choose not to side with any of the scholars they had selected for you, and hazard to think for yourself, but that was a lot of tuition money to gamble on. You would also immediately be transformed into a pariah amongst your peers.

I could go on and on about my grievances, and I intend to at a later date. There are many points I would like to make, which is why I’m putting my stories out anonymously. It’s not because I’m afraid of any backlash or of standing up for myself; it’s because I’d like to say everything I have to say before fielding any questions or receiving any (chuckle) death threats. That’s also one of the many reasons I stay away from social media. I don’t want to be sucked into any childish recrimination with Facebook trolls or find myself involved in a Twitter war.

I understand that this opens me up to all sorts of speculation and criticism, especially since my writing comes across as quite conservative, but I really don’t care. Teachers need to be called out on their bullshit. I’m sure people will say I’m an election denier, a QAnon enthusiast, or an anti-vaxxer. This would be completely bogus because the horns on my Viking helmet are twice as long as the ones used in the January 6th riots, and I’m usually thrice as drunk. I also recently stole a case of Moderna from a nursing home (I needed it more than they did) and give myself a booster shot at least once a day. Conversely, people on the right are probably going to call my work satanic and wonder how the protagonists, who are supposedly Christian, could listen to heavy metal as teenagers. My response is that Satan-worshipping death metal is far less offensive than current love songs and pop songs, both to me and to God. If you disbelieve me, I defy you to listen to Dua Lipa without repeatedly bashing your face into a wall. It can’t be done.

A wise man — whose name I can’t remember and who I’m probably just making up — once told me that a good compromise leaves everyone mad. I suppose the same could be said about the approach I’m taking, though it should be obvious where most (but not all) of my sympathies lie. I stand by my message. Thus, in an effort to focus on the task at hand, my plan is to avoid promoting my work or myself on any personal social media account for as long as I can. I know

it's here to stay and that people have become (even more) addicted to short bursts of gratification like thirty-second TikTok videos and thirty-character tweets. This is why I've decided to put my writing out in a serialized, short-story format. A 400,000-word tome would piss everyone off.

So, here's the third story. If you come from a small town or if you've been to school in the last twenty years, a lot of these adventures should seem relatable. If you haven't, then you may find these tales educational, but probably not. Either way, I intend to keep putting them out until the locals form a mob and try to publicly hang me.

About the Author

Selby Keith Wost is a proud college dropout from one of New England's most liberal universities. During his time in school, he watched in disbelief as his bobble-headed classmates gleefully partook in courses so laden with propaganda that they became even worse versions of their already insufferable selves. A few of the general requirements included classes such as Competitive Fake Suffering, Aggressive Attention Seeking, Expert Word Manipulation, Convenient Definition Changing, Specious Argumentation, and Anachronistic and Self-Serving Interpretations of Literature: How to Make Everything About Your Own Personal Victimhood All the Time. Selby was eventually hospitalized after hearing the word "narrative" 2,547 times in a single 50-minute period.

During his long road to recovery, Selby vowed to tell the world about the horrors taking place in the education system and the disastrous consequences sure to follow. The road was dark and treacherous, with commie spies around every corner. Now, after years of hiding in the shadows, Selby is ready to share his stories.

Introduction

Who Are the BRB Boys?

They are the scum of the earth, the worst of the worst, a blemish on all mankind. Every single problem on the planet can be traced back to them. They should be ashamed of themselves and spend the rest of their lives groveling on the ground, begging the world for forgiveness. At least this is what their hippie teachers have been telling the four friends since they transferred from Catholic school to public school two years ago.

Their names are Roman (Rome) Duchovney, a mischievous ragamuffin whose hijinks are constantly landing him in trouble; Dakota (Kota) O'Brian, an animal-loving vegetarian with a free spirit who may be half-hippie himself; Richard (Richie) Boucher, a chubby but loyal friend with a heart of gold, a pokable belly, and a punchable face; and Donald (Donny) West, an arrogant tool who sucks ass but makes up for it with a sweet house, a father who's never around, and a mother who's too drunk to care.

Together, they form the Back Road Burnouts, a group of middle schoolers forced into the outskirts of town for refusing to drink the commie Kool-Aid that their teachers lay out before them. They go by many aliases — the Ball Rubbing Bandits, the Belligerently Raging Boners, the Butt Ramming Bigots — but the acronym always remains the same. They have one mission and one mission only: to make everyone's lives as miserable as they've made theirs.

Synopsis

Part 1: Attack of the Wookies

The BRB Boys are enjoying a weekend of smoking weed in the woods in their hometown of Worcester, New Hampshire. Things are going splendidly until they run out of pot and their lighter dies. They bike to Dakota's house to get more weed when Richie smashes into a lemonade stand run by some smarmy little twerps who kind of look like Goldilocks and Strawberry Shortcake. The lemonade stand gets completely destroyed, and the narc bitches who run the thing go tell on them. Goldilocks's mom is a militant lesbian who was hailed as a local hero for vandalizing a church several weeks ago. She chases the BRB Boys down the road, but they escape to Kota's house.

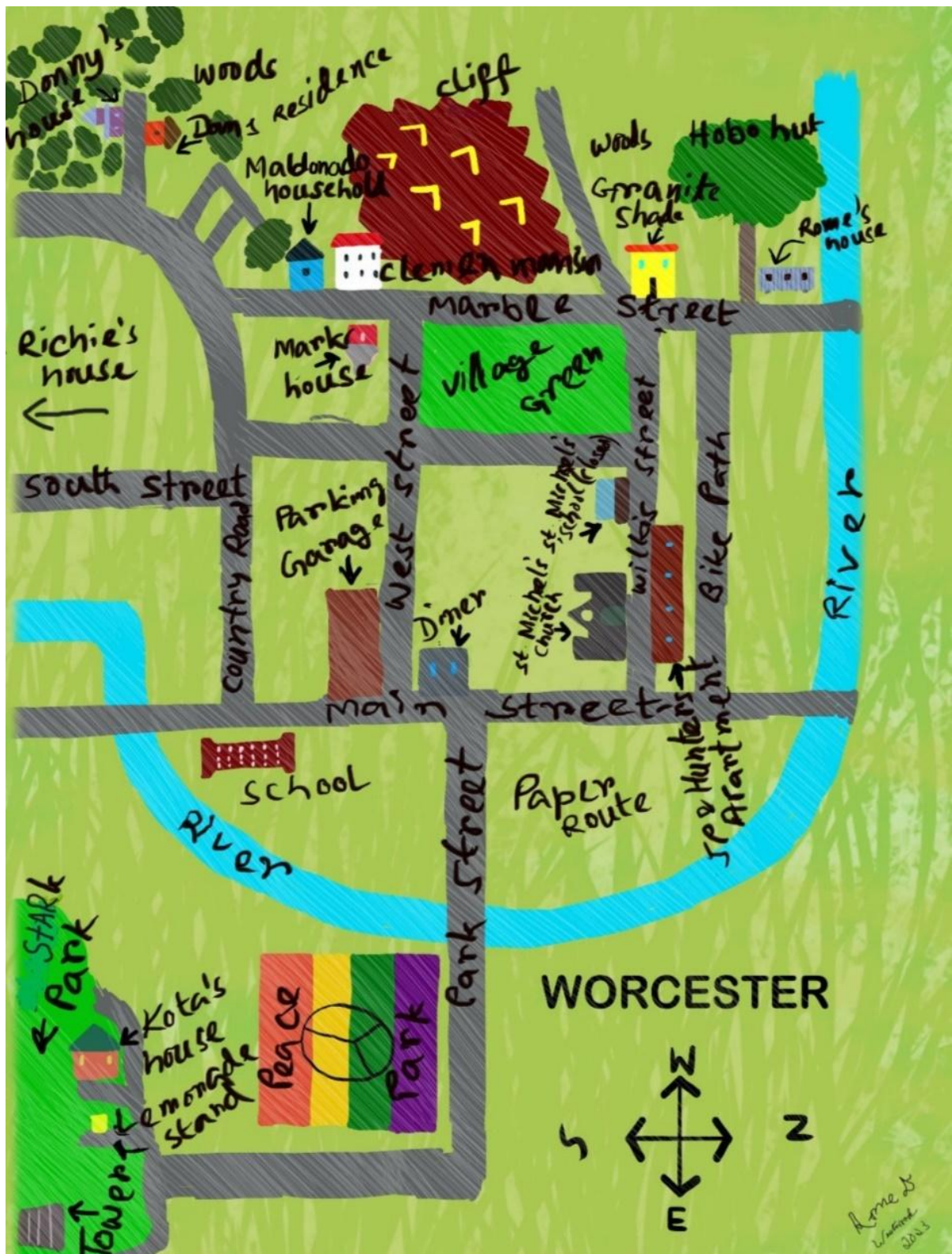
They are met on the front porch by Dakota's slutty older sister, Autumn, who tells them that they can't hang out and gives them five minutes to leave. The four miscreants run in and steal some weed Kota's mom keeps "hidden" in the freezer before they decide to go to Donny's house at the opposite end of town. During their journey, they are nearly overrun by the naked bike ride, an annual event in which a bunch of naked wookies ride their bikes around to protest fossil fuels. A wookie is a disgusting subsection of hippie who is typically over the age of twenty-five, never bathes, has matted hair, and has never matured beyond their college years. Once again, the BRB Boys are forced to flee. In the process, they meet two of their old friends from St. Michael's Elementary School — Carlos Maldonado and Mark Deluzio — and two of their newer public school friends — Hunter Booth and JP Clark. While all four of their buddies are repulsed by the townsfolk's disgusting and childish acts of "protest," none of them fear for their buttholes enough to flee the area. The BRB Boys leave them behind, and Rome leads the way toward a fort they built in a section of woods near his house known as the Hobo Hut. There, they reflect on what a gross hellscape their hometown has become while taking shots of rum and smoking cigarettes. It is here that Donny coins the term "the BRB Boys," which stands for "the Back Road Burnouts." While the other three friends think the name totally sucks ass and come up with their own variations of the name, including "the Butt Ramming Bandits," the acronym sticks.

Part 2: The Forest of Mystery

The BRB Boys journey up to Donny's house, running into Donny's girlfriend Amy Dang and her twin brother Jason along the way. Neither sibling is very impressed with Donny's tale of heroic struggle against the wookies, but they do agree that the naked bike ride is gross and inappropriate. Amy says she'll talk to Donny later, so the BRB Boys leave and head up to his place to smoke weed and drink his mother's vodka in the attic. Out of the window, they see a cloud of fog or mist coming from the woods in the backyard. Confused and scared, they consult their bong to find out what the mist might be. The bong, whom they have named Lord Bongmopolis and worship as a king and god, will answer any question they ask as long as they place fancy reading glasses on his face and smoke one to the dome. Lord Bongmopolis, speaking through Rome (who is high priest that day), declares that the fog is a condensed form of COVID and that the four friends must rush into the fog and destroy it with their fists.

The four boys charge into the woods and find a small shed where they assume the mist is coming from. They begin smashing the shit out of it with a baseball bat and other tools they found in Donny's garage, when they hear a voice screaming in the woods. It turns out that the shed and the fog have nothing to do with COVID. In reality, the mist is actually smoke coming from the shed's owner, who was burning leaves and other yard waste. The owner is pissed and chases the four of them through the woods with a rifle. Kota, Richie, and Rome escape, but Donny gets busted by the cops and taken downtown.

The third part begins in the school cafeteria a few days after the attack on the shed. Rome has forgotten to do his homework and winds up getting detention, yet again. While in the cafeteria, he devises a plan to get out of doing his assignment, but he'll need a little help from his friends.



Chapter 1: Another Failing Grade



“Jesus fucking Christ!” Rome yelled, slamming his tray onto the cafeteria table. “This is some grade-A bullshit! That feminist skank is always fucking me over!”

Everyone at the crowded table stopped what they were doing and looked over at Rome. His sad container of tater tots had spilled everywhere, tipped over in his anger. The rectangular, overly crowded lunchroom was filled with a hundred smelly teenagers whose rank BO had mixed with the stench of french fries and chicken patties. The occasional projectile arched through the air, rotating majestically underneath the hanging fluorescent lights. Loud conversations, screams of surprise, and other forms of dumb fuckery bounced off the brick walls, competing with the sounds of Rome’s fury. He sat in his chair with a huff, throwing his homemade peanut butter and jelly sandwich onto the tray — an equally sad accompaniment to his greasy tots.

Dakota, who was sitting directly across from him, scrolled through an email on his phone. He was so used to Rome’s drama queen ass that he didn’t acknowledge his hissy fit. Likewise, a few chairs down, Mark Deluzio smiled but did not engage. It was best to leave Rome alone when he was this worked up. As Rome tried to scoot toward his food, two girls passing behind him bumped into his chair.

“Would you fucking watch it? I’m trying to eat,” Rome said, turning around to see who had hit his seat.

To his dismay, it was his arch nemesis, Alex Clemens. She stood over him for a second, looking disdainfully down at his irritated face. Her secondhand sports coat, which she wore in a laughable attempt to make herself look like she didn’t come from money, brushed against his cheek. Underneath, an image of Che Guevara was displayed proudly on the front of her T-shirt. Rome’s eyes narrowed in pure malice as he looked at the shirt and then the hemp bag slung across her shoulder, both standard issue for all nonconformists. He knew her stupid satchel was probably filled with some sort of organic Asian moss, cage-free tempeh, and whatever the fuck else it was that made hippies smell like garlic-flavored patchouli queefs. Olivia Hutchins, her overall and bandana-wearing accomplice, had a similar bag.

“Sorry,” Alex scoffed, brushing a strand of her curly brown hair behind her ear. “I wouldn’t want to interrupt your PB and J on white bread.”

“It’s fucking delicious,” Rome shot back, “and I bought it all at Walmart.”

“I’m sure you did,” bandana bitch replied as they sidestepped on by.

Rome continued to glower at his nemeses as they disappeared into the pandemonium that was middle school lunch hour. He and Alex went back a long way, with her constantly making snide and passive aggressive comments at his expense. When his homeroom teacher made him stand and introduce himself to the other kids in class after switching over from St. Michael's Elementary, Alex was there in the front row, laughing and giggling at him, though he couldn't figure out why. Kota, who was sitting behind her at the time, overheard her whispering to her friends about the condition of his Pantera T-shirt, what hateful music it was, how cheap his shoes were, and how gross his hair looked. While she idealized the poor and what she perceived as their heroic struggles against the corporate overlords, she couldn't stand people who actually were poor.

The most infuriating thing was that if Rome ever told her to fuck off or called her a spoiled, snot-nosed bitch, she would tearfully run to the teachers and claim she was being bullied for being a girl. It was just like everything else she did: manipulative and fake. As Rome trembled with anger, Kota could feel the unusually elevated level of hatred festering from across the table.

"What's up your ass, ass pipe?" Kota asked, still not taking his eyes off his phone.

"Ms. Bennett is what's up my ass," Rome said, remembering why he was so ticked off in the first place. "She says she doesn't accept handwritten assignments and gave me detention for not finishing that paper on women's literature in the 1920s."

"So, what else is new?"

"What's new is that she's setting some sort of timeline for me to hand it in. She said she'd only take off five points if I got it done before 5:00. Ten if I got it in to her by tomorrow."

Kota should have known Ms. Bennett was the problem. She was their English teacher and yet another one of Rome's many enemies. The first thing she said on the first day of class was that most books were written by straight white Christian men. And that was because straight white Christian men were oppressive and controlling. Therefore, they weren't going to read anything written by straight white Christian men in her class. Furthermore, she seized every opportunity to editorialize and share her own views. During her lessons, she could always find a way to start chuckling to herself and mutter something like, "unless you're Christian and believe that the world is only 7,000 years old" or "except if you're Christian and you don't believe in evolution." Then, she wouldn't be satisfied until the rest of the class was laughing along with her. Rome was twelve years old when he first started going to public school, and the first thing they taught him was that he was personally responsible for all the world's problems.

The part he despised the most, though, was her disgusting need for attention. She always had to have people praise her for how brave and superior she was. She claimed to have suffered and victoriously endured every hardship that life had offered at the ripe old age of twenty-five. She was one of those stupid bitches whose picture was on the front page of the college newspaper, her arms crossed and her brow furrowed. She wanted to tell the world, "I may be young, but I'm tough...and smart...and hot...and I don't conform." Anytime anyone disagreed with her, she called them fascists and then embellished matters by saying she felt threatened. She would go to the police (even though she openly attended every rally to defund the police) "just to feel safe in today's cultural climate of hate." It was typical. She said she wanted to fight authority but ran to the authorities every opportunity she got because she was a coward.

Rome saw right through her from the beginning and accepted her challenge. If she wanted to hate him because he was a straight white Christian male, so be it. He had never done anything wrong to anyone until he had met people like her. He was going to dedicate his life to making hers a living hell. She could fail him, ridicule him, berate and antagonize him, and force him to work at McDonald's for the rest of his life, but he would never back down. It was a game of chicken where she was driving a semi, he had a go-kart, and the rest of the class watched in horror. While his friends understood and supported him during these confrontations, they sometimes wished he would take a timeout once in a while.

"She's probably doing you a favor," Kota said. "I saw you scribbling that crap out in the bathroom right before class."

"Oh, shut the hell up. You're just defending her because you want to put it in her unkempt bush."

"So what if I do? I personally choose to believe that magical things exist in wooded areas."

Mark, sitting a few chairs down, chuckled at the comment. He couldn't help but overhear their conversation from across the sticky table. He remembered running into them over the weekend and watching Donny get thrown into a cop car. Later that same day, he overheard two of Donny's neighbors discussing what had actually happened in the woods and the amount of damage they had done. He was surprised that all four of them hadn't ended up in juvie hall down in Westwood. Against his better judgment, he decided to engage them in conversation.

"Dude," Mark said. "Maybe you would have gotten your work done if you didn't spend all weekend getting high, talking to your bong, and vandalizing an innocent old man's property."

Rome slammed his sandwich down and looked over at Mark with baleful eyes. Mark sat there all smug, with his clean blond hair, cut all short and combed with a far-left part. What was this kid's deal? This traitor used to be one of them, taking part in all their adventures. He used to have long hair and blast Biohazard, do whipits and smash his head into stuff. Now, not only had he turned his back on his friends, but he openly derided their rebellious lifestyle. For Christ's sake, he was wearing a Burton Snowboards T-shirt with above-the-knee shorts. Who was he to question their decision making?

"He was a pedophile, and I was doing the town a service!" Rome said. "And you're only defending *him* because you're his gay protégé and fuck toy, you fucking catamite."

"Yeah," Kota interjected. "You never did explain what the hell you were doing in the woods. Where did he touch you? You can demonstrate on my bulge."

Kota got up and lifted his Hawaiian shirt, pointing to his junk. Richie, coming back from the register with three cheeseburgers and two chocolate milks, was just in time to see Kota thrusting his crotch in Mark's direction. Richie passed behind him, trying to avert his gaze. He found a place next to his friends, his flimsy blue plastic chair squealing as he sat down. Engineers had yet to design a school seat that could comfortably withstand the weight of his glorious ass. He scooted forward in his tortured seat, keeping his head low while he was next to Kota. Yet again, he was at eye level with his buddy's proudly displayed package. It seemed like this happened to him at least once a day.

"You know, it would be a nice change of pace to sit down for lunch without having your balls jammed in my face," Richie said.

"Get over it, you prude," Kota said, sitting back down.

"It's really not too much to ask for," Richie said, lifting his head with blinking eyes. He turned to Rome, remembering how he had been struggling with his homework earlier that day. "Did you ever hand in that paper, dude? I heard you writing it while I was taking a dump."

"Fucking gross. That was you?" Rome said, a nauseated frown stretching across his face. "And no, that stupid skank wouldn't take it, and now I got detention. I can't believe I spent ten minutes with you in that gas chamber for nothing."

"Quit being such a pussy; it wasn't that bad."

"No, dude. It really was. You know, if you gave up eating a pile of Sausage McMuffins and a pot of coffee for breakfast every morning, maybe you'd stop having heart palpitations and life-threatening diarrhea."

"Don't tell me how to live, homo. Besides, Donny and I got detention too, and you don't see us crying about it. The old hag up at the counter busted us for stealing Little Debbie snacks. She put her hands down my pants and everything."

"Really?" Rome asked, his curiosity piqued. "Did you chub up?"

"A little, but I'm sick of detention. I think I'm going to try to get work crew and get out at 4:00. I refuse to stay in that stupid room until 5:00."

Richie was referring to a disciplinary option that allowed students to reduce their detention time by half if they helped the custodial staff by cleaning the school. It was meant to demonstrate the power of "rehabilitation through community service" over "mass incarceration." Rome refused to act as their servant on principle and always took the full detention.

"Still, I think it's bullshit that they can stick their hands down our pants every time they catch us stealing something. We should claim it was an accident and sue," Rome said. "Hey, Mark, isn't your Jew dad a lawyer?"

"What the fuck, Rome? He's not a lawyer, and we're not Jewish. We went to Catholic school together."

"Allegedly," Rome said slowly.

As they spoke, a plan started gurgling in Rome's alcohol-damaged brain. Perhaps he wouldn't have to do this assignment, after all. Maybe he could get out of doing the work and give another middle finger to Ms. Bennett. Today was collection day at his paper route. That meant he'd be getting a little extra money, and money solved everything. Rome's eyes twitched as the frayed wires in his skull tried to put two and two together.

"You may have gone to Catholic school with us," Rome said, "but you're kind of smart, which makes you half Jewish. And that means you're pretty good at writing papers, especially for that whore Ms. Bennett. Dude, I'll give you ten bucks to write my paper tonight."

The table went silent as he extended the offer. Rome was legendary for his use of bribery and his history of bad decision making. Mark's hand went to his chin as he contemplated the proposal. Everyone stopped what they were doing to listen to the transaction. Richie even put off eating for a moment, his big blue eyes wide and curious from behind his cheeseburger.

"Fuck you and your ten dollars. I want forty," Mark replied, sending a steely gaze back at Rome.

"Forty my scaly ball sack. I'll pay you twenty, and I want a picture of your mom's ass crack," Rome scoffed.

"Why are your balls scaly? I want thirty dollars, no ass crack, final offer," Mark said, slapping his hand down on the table.

"Fine," Rome said reluctantly. "I'll get it to you once I'm done with my paper route."

"No way, fuck face. Money first. I don't trust your dumb ass," Mark replied, shaking his head.

"Dude, I swear to God. I'll swear to your Jew God that I'll have the money."

"Jews basically believe in the same...," Mark nearly shouted before remembering where he was and lowering his voice. "You know what? Fuck it. I'll do it. Do you swear you'll have the money?"

"I swear to God, on my mother's life, on the Bible, on Kota's nutsack —"

"It's a fine nutsack," Kota chimed in.

"Okay, but you better have my money."

Mark got up and walked away from the table, finished with his lunch. There was a bit of a smile on his face as he scooted between the crowded seats toward the trash cans, something that Rome noted with amusement. Mark thought he was getting away with highway robbery by charging thirty bucks, and he really was. But it was worth it if it meant sticking it to Ms. Bennett. Besides, he'd get back at Mark for overcharging him soon enough.

"They'll pay," Rome said, looking down at his peanut butter and jelly sandwich, his fifth one of the week. "Oh, they'll all pay."

Chapter 2: Always Go with Plan B



Rome walked up the hall resolutely, his wild, unwashed hair flowing behind him. His tattered Suicidal Tendencies T-shirt, flipped inside out, hung off his skinny shoulders. He had to wear it that way because the commie teachers didn't appreciate the illustration of slit wrists displayed on the front. The image was still somewhat visible, much to the authorities' chagrin, but it seemed like the whole world was going soft. Richie and Donny had his back though. They flanked him on either side — men on a mission — and the only friends he needed. Richie may have already been winded from climbing the stairs, but he was loyal to the core. And Donny may have been playing pocket tennis and checking himself out in every window they passed, but he was the perfect instigator. Together, they were going to thwart Ms. Bennett's efforts and get Rome out of doing his homework.

Rome halted the elite team with a raised fist and motioned them to duck down. He scoped out the surroundings, blocking nonexistent glare with a flat hand. Rows of dented lockers and sets of decaying wooden doors stood before them. The science wing was down the hall, a new edition that ran perpendicular to the rest of the school. A couple of students went down the main stairwell behind them, the last stragglers to escape the school's clutches on their own terms. A large set of windows above the steps lit the dingy beige floor under their feet. The midafternoon sun made the thick dust and crumbled pieces of plaster that had fallen from the ceiling all the more dismal. Though most students had fled from this collapsing shithole the moment the final bell rang, Rome still felt the need to keep his voice low while addressing the troops.

"Here's the plan. I'm going to ask the monitor for help rewriting an old assignment. Donny, you distract me during attendance and before I raise my hand for the teacher. That way, when I call her over, I can ask to go to the timeout room so I can study without you interrupting me. Richie, you draw work crew."

"I'm super strong," Richie said, flexing a bicep.

"And super gay. And super gay," Donny said.

"Exactly," Rome said. "Richie, you use your fat, gay ass to bust me out of the timeout room. Do you remember where the timeout room is, Richie?"

"C'mon, guys. I'm not that dumb. It's that door right there," he said in a mopey voice, pointing to the door behind him.

"That's right, buddy," Rome said, gently patting Richie's belly. "I'll do my paper route and collect the tips. Then I'll pay off Mark and get back just in time for the end of detention. Once we're free, we can head back to my house for *Call of Duty*, Hot Pockets, and bong rips."

"Awesome," Richie said.

The three entered the detention hall trying to look as badass (but coming off mostly as stupid) as possible. It was twice the size of most classrooms, with a thick atmosphere of apathy and despair settling upon all those inside. One of the fluorescent tube lights flickered spastically, a huge distraction to anyone who actually wanted to do some work. Rome kept his head down, avoiding eye contact with the detention monitor who sat at the front desk. He passed by a long table in the middle of the room occupied by several other students waiting for the three o'clock bell to ring. JP, Carl, and Skye all looked up and nodded at them as they passed through.

Another monitor, Mr. Carlson, was standing at the head of the table, staring at Rome and Donny as they walked by. The two conspirators didn't return the look or say hi; instead, they peeled to the right and kept their heads down. They instinctively went for the three open desks pressed up against the far corner while Richie went left and sat between Carl and Skye. Once Rome had taken his seat, he reached into his backpack for the necessary props. He pulled out an old assignment on which he had gotten a bad grade, as well as his binder and a pen.

Rome turned his head toward the front desk to see which detention monitor he had to outsmart. The stupid mop of blonde poodle hair and the obnoxiously colorful blouse told him it was Ms. Allister. She was a twenty-three-year-old college grad who had majored in English and was now enrolled in a fifth-year Masters of Education program. She was almost done with her internship as a teaching assistant, often for Ms. Bennett, and sat pompously in her office chair with her nasty bare feet tucked beneath her granola ass. There was a large window behind her overlooking the free world. The detention room was on the top floor of the school, from which the entire playground could be observed. It also offered an excellent view into the boy's bathroom from the protruding science wing, a design flaw no one ever really addressed. Large groups of kids with backpacks crossed the playground, yelling and fucking with each other as they headed home. Watching them from the detention room made it that much harder when the bell rang for attendance.

"Donald West?" a thin, metallic voice said, calling out student names in the order they were received.

The assistant principal, Mr. Carlson, was the head disciplinarian at the school and insisted on doing roll call himself. It was probably because he led work crew, where kids were more likely to run off and try to escape. He embraced the position wholeheartedly, standing in the middle of the room like a complete tool bag. His tall, lanky frame loomed above everyone else as he went down the list with his horn-rimmed glasses. Maybe it was just the natural place for him to stand, or maybe it was because he was a grade-A douche who wanted to look powerful. Either way, nearly every person who met him wanted to whip a stapler at his stupid, bowl-cut-wearing head. He looked like he had just crawled out of a dairy barn, wearing tight jeans and a plaid button-up shirt with no tie. The fact that he had made it through high school seemed highly dubious. No one believed he had ever spent a day in college.

"Richard Boucher?" he called out.

"Here," Richie said.

"Roman Duchovney?"

"Here."

Rome continued to scan the room. There were eight kids in total, and he knew all of them. Richie had already taken his position near Carl, Skye and JP at the long table closest to the door and was ready to go. They were going to get work detail, and Richie started chatting with Skye before attendance. Skye smiled and brushed her shoulder-length brown hair behind one of her heavily pierced ears while they talked. A perfect ally to have with the girls — she smoked up with them every so often, was in the solid C+ to A- grade range, and didn't suck up to the teachers.

"Alex Clemens."

"Here," a defiant female voice said.

A chill went down Rome's spine as he heard her voice. He looked over at Alex, whom he hadn't noticed at the other end of the room. She was still wearing her stupid blazer over her Che Guevara T-shirt and skintight jeans with Converse shoes. Despite her thrift shop outfit, it was well known that she was a rich skank who desperately tried to look like she was struggling. She loved getting detention. It gave her the added opportunity to draw attention to herself and her valiant fight against the oppressors. In her mind, a person's worth was tantamount to the suffering they had to endure, and getting detention was just another injustice heaped on her by a male-dominated world. She thought she was Mr. Carlson's worst nightmare. Carlson, on the other hand, barely knew she existed.

"This isn't fair. I shouldn't be here," she said in a smug voice, obviously trying to start another confrontation with "the establishment."

"Once again, I'm being punished because I can't afford reliable transportation. What are you trying to teach us by making us stay here? If I were out working instead of being forced into your archaic form of punishment, maybe I could help pay to fix my sister's car."

"Oh, shut the hell up, Alex. You live in a mansion two blocks away. Just walk," Rome said.

Alex was a poster child for Munchausen's syndrome and questioning her "struggles" in any way always led to a self-righteous rant. Everything she did was a triumph over adversity, and everyone needed to shower her with constant praise and admiration. Her parents were divorced, so she had to raise herself from day one (or so she claimed). She managed to persevere because she was super artistic and deep. Her mother didn't work, and she said her father never gave her anything, yet she had the biggest house in town. She compensated by riding in her sister's shitty car, getting her food locally, and rummaging through a hemp farmer's dumpster for her clothing.

"I'm running late because I have to get up early to work in Marshfield on the farm. I have to be there before dawn, after getting only three hours of sleep every night, because I have to do my homework and take care of my mom. Then my sister drives me here, where I get in trouble because my life doesn't fit into your schedule. Detention unfairly targets the poor and usually people of color. It's systemically racist, just like so many of our laws. Just look at prosecutions for marijuana. They do that to unfairly target African Americans," Alex said, looking at JP.

"What are you looking at me for?" JP said. "I'm here because I skipped PE. It was the *other* black kid who got busted with weed."

Alex stopped talking for a moment, a flame of red rushing to her cheeks. She tried to recover by telling herself that just because she was looking at JP didn't mean she meant him specifically. Her argument was still sound.

"The disciplinary system overwhelmingly favors the rich. And it works that way out of school, too," she added.

That last remark was almost too much for Rome to take. He could not believe the absurdity this bitch was spewing. She *was* rich! Two years ago, Rome's older brother Scott, Carl's older brother Pete, and Alex's older sister Emily all got busted for holding a considerable amount of pot and pills. Emily got off with a slap on the wrist because the Clemens family had a lawyer on retainer. Scott and Pete both got jail time because they had to settle for a public defender. That, and because they were dudes. Rome was going to lay into her some more, but Skye beat him to the punch.

"Do you know what would make your life way easier?" Skye said, unable to hold her venom in any longer. "If you stopped working at that stupid farm. Do they even pay you there? I remember going to that place as part of a young adult leadership camp, and all we did was mend his fences, mow his lawn, and work on his roof! *We* were paying *him* to fix *his* property. It's a scam!"

"You're only saying that because you couldn't handle the responsibility and quit the team," Alex shot back, getting the conflict she wanted and was so sickeningly addicted to. "I stuck around and passed the course. That's why I got hired part-time during the school year and full-time in the summer. I may be young, but I'm a great worker and a natural leader. Some people aren't."

Skye's eyes grew wide, and she pushed her chair back, ready to kick some ass. Richie, ever the peacemaker, grabbed her forearm with his meaty paws. He shook his head, as if to tell her, "She ain't worth it." Skye took a deep breath and regained control. She pushed her chair back in and smiled. Looking at Richie's puppy dog face was enough to avert disaster. She reached up and grabbed ahold of one of Richie's locks of hair, pulling it straight and boinging his curls.

Alex wasn't done though. She had started the argument she wanted and had gotten the reaction she was aiming for. Now she needed to tattle and get other people punished for the problems she had created in the first place. That's how she subdued all opposition: by antagonizing and provoking others, then claiming to be the victim and having other people fight her battles for her. Her finger went straight at Skye.

"Did you see that, Mr. Carlson? She threatened me! Are you going to let her do that? With all the violence that's happening in schools?"

"John Paul Clark," Mr. Carlson said, looking at JP and ignoring Alex's bullshit.

"Here," JP replied in a low tone, still looking at Alex.

Rome stared at his nemesis. The formulaic way that she went about harassing people she disagreed with and never suffering a single consequence was enraging. He fantasized about getting up with Skye and beating the shit out of Alex with her, but he knew that's what Alex wanted. He'd get suspended, and she'd come off as a martyr. She'd probably sue and push for him to get expelled because her family still had that lawyer on retainer. On the upside, maybe Skye would want to make out with him while they were serving their suspensions.

"Timothy McGee," Mr. Carlson said, still doing attendance.

Rome looked across the room for Tim McGee, otherwise known as Spasmoid McGee. It eased some of the hostility that had been building inside him over the last few minutes and warmed his heart to see Tim back in detention. The kid was perpetually in trouble because he never did his homework and was constantly flipping out in class. While Mr. Carlson took attendance, McGee rocked back and forth in his chair, biting his dirty fingernails. He talked to himself incessantly, getting louder as Carlson went down the list. One of Tim's grubbier buddies sat next to him, trying to calm him down a bit. Rome didn't know what the buddy's name was, but he couldn't have been comfortable in this heat wearing his DeWalt trucker hat, Carhartt pants, and steel-toed boots.

Rome could sympathize with those two. They were fellow members of the "PB and J" club who never did well in school, though for reasons far different from his own. Spasmoid McGee was definitely not getting the help he deserved, but damn it if he wasn't a great source of Ritalin. And the other kid, who the hell knew what his problem was? All Rome really knew about him was that he smelled like sour milk. The thing that worried Rome was that McGee might get sent to the timeout room first if he really upped the volume. Rome knew that he would have to make his move fast.

"All right, you four follow me," Carlson said, leading Richie, JP, Skye, and Carl to their custodial assignments. It seemed Carlson fancied himself some sort of warden in charge of a chain gang. Richie started singing a few lyrics to "Go Down Moses" as they walked, only getting a few words out before JP punched him in the back of the head. That left Rome, Donny, Spasmoid McGee, Trucker Hat, and Rich Skank under the vigilance of the detention monitor. Ms. Allister was as worthless of a chaperon as she was a teacher, but Rome needed her permission to get into the timeout room. In an exaggerated effort to look studious, Rome pulled his assignment out of his binder and tapped the papers on the desk a few times.

"Ms. Allister?" Rome asked, raising his hand.

"Yes?" Ms. Allister responded skeptically.

"I just have a question about this assignment."

"Okay," she said, getting out of her chair and walking over to Rome.

She stood over him while he showed her the paper, the scent of lavender, cannabis, and ever-so-mild chick BO making his eyes water. This assignment was from two weeks ago and had netted him another glorious D- in the gradebook. It was completely covered in red ink and criticism about his use of toilet humor and profanity — badges of honor as far as he was concerned. Ms. Bennett gave him the opportunity to revise his work and hand it back in for a better score, but there was no way in hell he was going to do that. That would require changing the entire content of his masterpiece to fit in with her bullshit agenda. Fuck that. He wasn't a sellout or her fucking pawn. Instead, he would give the impression of putting forth some effort in order to get the coveted spot in isolation. He came up with as lame a reason as any to ask for advice.

"I know I need to rewrite this, but I was just wondering what the passive voice is. Every time I start a paragraph, the computer highlights it and tells me that it's incorrect. Why is that?"

"Well," she said hesitantly. "I'm not really all that great with spelling and grammar, but I know it has to do with how you organize the words in your sentences. The computer is programmed to think that if certain words go before others, then the sentence is wrong. But

those rules are outdated, so it's really not that big of a deal. A lot of programs don't even point it out anymore."

"My buddy Mark said the passive voice has something to do with the placement of direct and indirect objects and can impact clarity and emphasis. Where should I put my indirect objects here?" Rome asked, pointing to a sentence in the middle of the paper.

"People don't talk like that or construct sentences that way anymore," Ms. Allister said, a perplexed look on her face as she analyzed Rome's writing. "You should really write from the heart, not from a textbook. Your writing should reflect how you feel. Those arbitrary structures have been artificially imposed upon us by a socially constructed hierarchy of the literary elite. You shouldn't feel confined by straight white Christian men. Think outside of the box."

"Okay," Rome said, nodding his head.

It was abundantly clear that she had no idea what a direct object was or what the fuck she was even talking about. Rome looked at his paper, confused as shit as how someone could complete a four-year degree in English and not be taught the basics of grammar. It was evident that she was more concerned about achieving personal validation by forming inane arguments and forcing her students to think exactly like her than she was about teaching kids how to read, write, or think for themselves.

Rome set his paper down in frustration, not because he didn't get any help; he was frustrated at what a bunch of worthless, conceited, attention-seeking shitbags his teachers were. Donny wasn't any help either. He had completely missed his cue to start pestering him during and after attendance and had just sat there looking at his phone. That meant Rome was going to have to take matters into his own hands and resort to Plan B: start a fistfight. It was his favorite plan, and honestly, he couldn't remember why it wasn't Plan A by default. He waited for Ms. Allister to go back to her desk before setting things in motion.

"Hey, man," Rome whispered, tapping Donny on the back.

"Yeah, what's up?" Donny said, turning around.

"Maybe we should go to your place after school. You got better food and a bigger TV," Rome suggested, knowing full well that this idea was going to get shot down.

"Yeah, but my mom's going to be there."

"So what?"

"So? She's still mad at us about last weekend."

"That's okay. I'll just turn on the old Roman Duchovney charm," Rome said, batting his ratty eyelashes.

"Bro, I swear to God, if you try to show my mom your fucking dick again, we're throwing down," Donny said, clenching his fists and creasing his eyebrows.

"Why?" Rome asked with feigned innocence. "She's got one of the perkiest racks I've ever seen, and it's not like your dad's ever around to fulfill her needs —"

WHAM!!!

A textbook to the side of Rome's head sent a blinding white flash of pain and light through his eyes. His face smashed off the top of his desk, bouncing off the surface like a jack-o-lantern. Fragmented thoughts rattled around in Rome's concussed dome as he tried to figure out what the hell had just happened. All he was able to discern was that his plan might have worked a little too well. Dazed and witless, Rome started pinwheeling his arms in a series of feeble slaps toward Donny. His vision pulsated like a strobe light as his enraged foe stood over him, ready to

beat his ass. A couple of his slaps landed ineffectively on Donny's arm. Donny raised the textbook for another blow.

"What was that?" the hippie detention monitor said, rising from her chair.

She stood up, trying to show her authority by taking a "stern" voice. Her hands were on her hips, and her flowing Indian print blouse was all ruffled. She took a couple of deliberate steps forward, her grimy feet stamping the floor. Donny immediately lowered the textbook. There was a brief moment of silence before Donny and Rome both burst out laughing at the assistant.

"It was nothing," Rome said, quickly regaining his bearings. "I just dropped my book."

"Yeah, I was trying to get my earbuds back, and his math stuff fell out of his backpack," Donny said, handing Rome the book he had just hit him with.

"Thanks, man," Rome said, grabbing it as if nothing had gone down.

"I'm sure that's what happened," Ms. Allister said, not buying their excuse at all. "Do I need to separate you two?"

"I just want my earbuds back," Donny said.

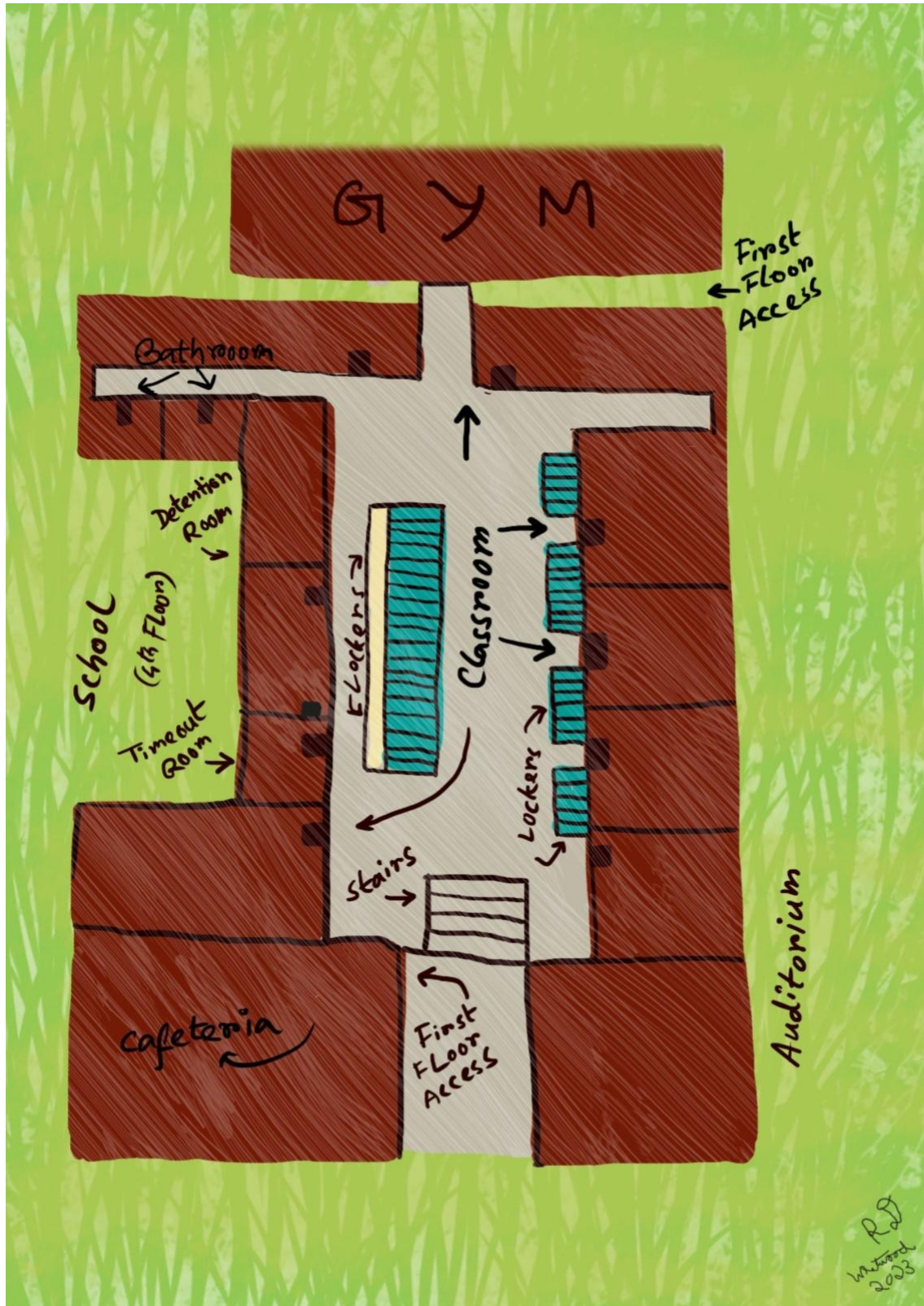
"Fine, here," Rome said, handing him his own earbuds. "But may I go to the timeout room, please? This tense and overwhelming environment is affecting my concentration and learning experience."

Her eyes went cold, and she huffed again. It looked like Rome had struck a chord. He could guess what was coming next. She probably knew a polyamorous, bi-genitalia turtle who had developed a drinking problem over an incident just like this and tried to commit suicide by taking a bunch of Advil. Now she was going to take it upon herself to spread awareness and lower the stigma that surrounds non-binary reptiles by making an example out of him.

"Do you think you're funny? Ridiculing people with genuine anxiety disorders? But if it keeps you quiet and from distracting other students, then fine. I don't want to hear from you for the rest of the afternoon."

"Kay," Rome said, his bag already packed and his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

He got up from his desk and walked toward the timeout room, his eyes fixed on the brown wooden door. He could feel Alex staring at him as he walked, no doubt watching for the slightest look or movement to deliberately misinterpret as a sign of aggression so she could start shit. He took a wide berth around the opposite end of the table, avoiding her like the plague. It felt as if people like her were scrutinizing him every second of his life, just waiting for him to do the smallest thing they didn't approve of in order to jump down his throat. He would never surrender to their intimidation tactics, and he would never fall for their blatant brainwashing techniques. He entered the timeout room where he would be free to initiate further subversion of the Marxist machine.



Chapter 3: The Escape



Rome was in the pleasant serenity of the timeout room, away from the rest of the rabble. It was a small room, about twelve by eight feet with a desk and a table, and it smelled of old drywall. The room had two doors, one leading to the detention center and the other (which was always locked from the outside) to the main hall. What the teachers never realized was that the door would open when the knob was turned from the hallway side. This was to be his means of escape, if Richie could remember what the hell he was supposed to do.

In the corner was an opened and mutilated copy of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the word “transphobe” scrawled across the ripped pages. He briefly considered leaving a retaliatory message in the book but knew it could easily be traced back to him and carry the risk of instant expulsion. Instead, he calmed his nerves by pulling out a bag of weed and a pack of cigarettes from his knapsack, deeply inhaling their rich goodness. He slid some old, cut-up pieces of construction paper that were lying on the desk to one side and set his cherished intoxicants in their place, teary-eyed from their splendor. In a few moments, if all went according to plan, he’d be free and taking part in these earthly delights. Rome leaned back in his chair, thinking himself a genius and master of the universe.

A slight rattle at the door woke him from his enjoyable delusion. The tarnished bronze knob to his right turned back and forth rapidly as Richie tried to bust him free. A glance at his desk showed that he still had his cigarettes and baggy of weed proudly displayed in front of him. Genius, indeed. He quickly stashed his shit back in his bag while his incompetent friend fucked with the knob. There were a few animal grunts, followed by a loud impact against the thin-panel frame. Richie bashed the side door open with his shoulder and stumbled inside.

“Richie, you fat fuck, what the hell?” Rome hissed, getting out of his chair and pushing his rotund friend back into the hallway.

“Sorry. It was stuck. It’s not my fault I’m super strong,” Richie puffed, sweat glistening off his brow.

“You’re super stupid, you fucking asshole. Get the hell out of here!”

“Geez, are you on your period? Because you’re acting like a pussy.”

“Fuck off, dude. You’re going to get us both busted,” Rome said, pushing Richie even harder, his hands sinking into his belly.

Rome stayed in the timeout room and closed the door partially behind Richie after shoving him back into the hall. Richie raised his head to look at Rome with sulking eyes.

“I’m really not that fat, you know,” Richie said with a sad voice.

Rome let out a bit of a sigh. Of course, Richie was going to pick this exact moment to make him feel bad.

"I know you're not, man; you're pleasantly plump. Now please get out of here. We'll talk later," Rome said, closing the door just enough so that it didn't latch completely shut.

The door was now unlocked, but he didn't want to make his escape just yet due to the high-volume disturbance his friend had created. Rome stopped for a moment in the middle of the timeout room and listened for the sound of footsteps coming from the detention area. His heart beat heavily in his chest, and the exposed hot water pipes hanging above his head clanged loudly. Luckily, he heard no teachers approaching. He stooped down and looked through the keyhole back into the detention room. Donny had his earbuds in and was bopping his head to some terrible garbage he called hip hop, and Spasmoid McGee was eating his pencil. Spoiled Bitch was writing what Rome was sure was some inspired and original poetry. Certainly, her words would be heralded as "powerful," "courageous," and "unique," assuredly nothing like the same homoerotic bullshit that had been shoved down students' throats for the last twenty-five years.

He continued to scan for the TA. She was at her desk, apparently in her own world. Her book lay on her lap as she gazed out the window toward the trees at the edge of town. No doubt she was daydreaming about being back in her commune. Rome guessed it was set on a hill, and in her fantasy, she was on the patio, lying naked on a massage table. The setting sun illuminated a gentle valley in the distance. A delicate brook babbled below her. She let out a moan of exquisite pleasure as the world's lamest white guy with dirty blond dreads caressed her shoulders. He began to massage her aching muscles, tense from a stressful day of embellishing previous life struggles and concocting false narratives that always left her the innocent but courageous victim. Vilifying the innocent, seeking compensation for wrongs she never actually suffered, and beating the living fuck out of dead horses can take quite a toll on a person. But now, her body quivered at the touch of his nasty ass dreads grazing against her delicate skin. Her braided and beaded butthole hair —

Rome fell back from the door, gasping for breath, his heart pounding. He blindly grasped at the air, looking for something, anything to grab hold of and pull himself out of the visions unfolding before him. He felt like he was sliding into an abyss: a pit filled with Sylvia Plath poems, entitled college kids, and female politicians with pantsuits. But it was too late! He could see the TA's hands squeeze the massage table in ecstasy. Rome tried to scream, but his cries were drowned out by Melissa Ethridge songs. For the love of Christ, now Ms. Allister was turning over to show him the goods!

"My eyes," a hoarse and tormented voice hissed from his throat. "Why were there beads?"



Rome only came to when he smacked his head against the far wall. In an effort to escape his repulsive yet plausible thoughts, he had backed across the room, reckless of his surroundings. As reality slowly returned, Rome briefly waved his hand in front of his face. He wanted to make sure that he was back in the land of the living, not the hellish nightscape that was the TA's personal life. He picked himself up off the floor, glad to be alive. A second look through the keyhole, this time without prophetic visions, showed that Ms. Allister was still preoccupied. There was precious little time to pull off what needed to be done, but if he did, he would be a legend amongst his peers. Rome got his stuff and slipped out the side door.

Chapter 4: Some Extra Help



Rome strode confidently down the street with the austere brick middle school at his back. The spring breeze felt amazing on his filthy fourteen-year-old body, finally free from the smelly confines of the detention room. The threat of getting an out-of-school suspension if he were caught made it all the more awesome. The sky seemed so much bluer, the sun so much happier when he was on a mission of this import. The songbirds rejoiced in the rustling green trees above him, guiding him toward downtown.

Main Street was laid out before him with quaint rows of four-story red brick ahead, their large glass windows sparkling. To his right, a pleasant-looking woman in her late twenties walked down the steps of a graphic design office, her brilliant blue dress and long brown hair flowing behind her. The handrail creaked ever so softly as she left the building, another large early twentieth-century wooden home that had been turned into a workplace. The grass was neatly mowed on both sides of the sidewalk, perfect for hippies to lay out on their blankets and do nothing. It was hard to believe that such an idyllic town could harbor such an inordinate amount of shitbags, but it did. As he passed a more modern office building and came close to the bank, Rome tried not to let his contemptuous thoughts distract him from his mission. Coming back late from this excursion was not an option, and he was so concerned with getting his paper route done on time that he barely noticed the screams of some concerned citizens standing across the street.

"Watch out!" a thirty-year-old beard-wearing douche yelled from a sidewalk bench.

"Oh my God!" the young woman behind him cried.

Rome looked up and saw a bright yellow Chevy Volt taking an extra wide left-hand turn at the four-way intersection in front of him. Through the windshield, Rome could see an older grandma-looking lady with thick glasses staring straight ahead as her car drifted past Park Street. She executed a slow, exaggerated U-turn in the middle of the intersection, her car listing lazily across the crosswalk and into the wrong lane. A man wearing jeans, a construction vest, and carrying a metal lunch pail hurried to the opposite side of the road to avoid getting hit. NPR blared from the open window as her late turn put her car across the sidewalk right in front of Rome's feet. The car kept going, hopping off the far curb before ending up on Park, the street she originally intended to drive down. The smell of marijuana lingered for a moment after the car was gone.

Such stupidity was a daily occurrence and yet another thing he deplored about this town. There was always some stoned grandma driving erratically or tweaked-out homeless dude in a

mental health crisis flipping out in the middle of the road. The worst part was all the distraught bystanders, wracked with “PTSD,” that they left in their wake. Even now, the woman in the dress and the man with the beard hurried to meet and console each other, probably in an effort to “unpack” the situation and figure out the best way to “process” it. Rome ignored the commotion and turned the corner, going down Park Street himself.

This was the same road that he had been chased through by all the gross naked bike riders last weekend. The street still seemed like it was dripping with grease, both from the deep-fried falafel and the nasty hippies who ate that crap. In the far distance, to the right, he could see the Peace Park and its purple gazebo — a rallying site for all the neo-Marxists that had invaded his hometown. He tried to never go that far down the road unless he was heading to Kota’s house. To his left, in one of the brick building storefronts, was Junior’s, his favorite pizza place. He liked it because it was always cool, dimly lit, and had billiards. There was also usually a dirtbag or two hanging around the joint who was willing to buy him cigarettes. He could see the stained-glass pool table lights through the floor-to-ceiling windows, beckoning him inside. The urge to pay a short visit and procrastinate was strong, but he knew he was on a strict timeline and needed to get going.



His paper route was located in one of the city blocks now coming into view. It was another red brick building built on top of a bridge that extended over the southern half of the river, rising two floors above the neighboring structures. Outdoor sporting goods, hippie jewelry, poser records, and vintage T-shirts could all be purchased at stores on the ground level. The upper floors contained the mixed-income apartments that his clients called home. Every time he did his paper route, he examined the building from top to bottom, wishing one day that the whole thing would fall into the water. That day never came. Instead, the building defied his wishes, the sun glittering off the top floor windows, laughing at him. Rome scoffed in disappointment and walked toward the main entrance, pushing his way through the crowd of idiot pedestrians shopping at the storefronts.

He was about to go inside when he noticed Kota standing across the street. He was looking over the stone railing at the river, giggling to himself and making quacking sounds. A brown bakery bag was in his hands, and he was tossing bits of bread down into the water. Kota had a knack for magically appearing in odd places when he got high, though he could never remember how he got there afterwards. Rome went over to see what his buddy was up to, hoping he might be able to get a hand delivering papers.

"What are you doing?" Rome asked, walking up from behind.

"Feeding Quigley Mcquackins!" Kota said, throwing bits of the crusty round loaf into the water. Rome knew that Kota had probably stolen it from Campagne, a French bakery a couple streets down. Kota wasn't much of a thief; he just had a bad habit of getting high and wandering off with shit without realizing it.

Rome looked over the rail and saw a group of brown and grey ducks swimming around like mad. There were ten of the little guys wiggling their butts and quacking at each other. Most were treading water near some shale rocks jutting out of the river, looking up at Kota with beady eyes. A few of the others swam in circles after being chased away from the bread by more aggressive duck bullies. Being a duck looked like the shit.

"Which one is he?" Rome asked.

"The one who's going like this," Kota said, closing his eyes and whipping his head around erratically.

Sure enough, one of the bigger ducks was swimming excitedly toward the bread, his tail moving especially violently. Rome looked back at Kota, whose eyes were still closed. With his puffed-out cheeks and head thrashing about, the resemblance was uncanny. Quigley looked up and quacked several times, demanding more food. It was impossible to say no to that fuzzy face. Kota tossed down another piece of bread, and the ducks battled each other for it.

"You see that? Look at his ass go!" Kota yelled.

"Let me try," Rome said.

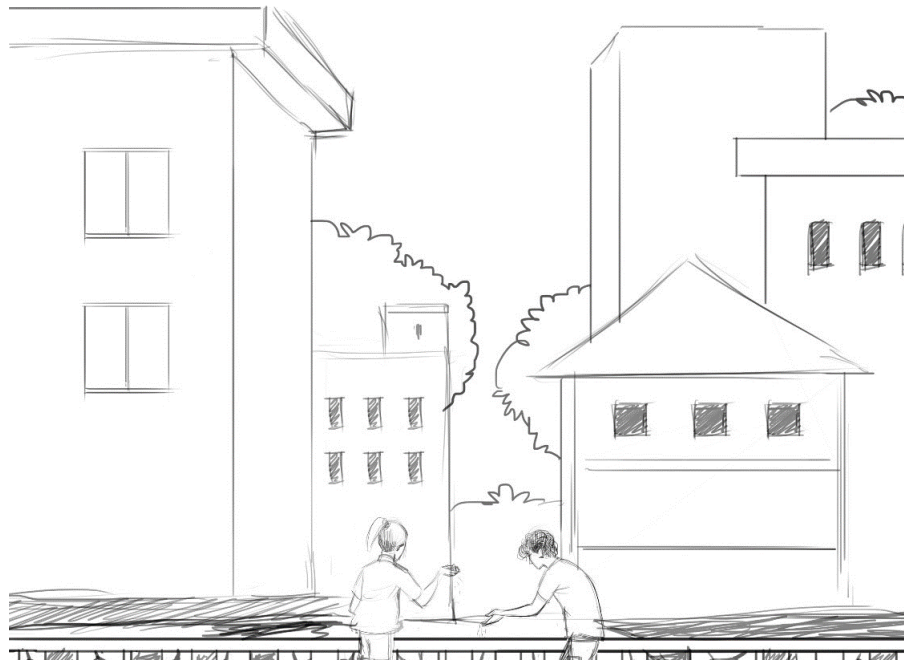
Rome set his knapsack down and unzipped it. There were a couple of textbooks inside that he had no intention of ever opening and the mangled remains of a brown bag lunch. He couldn't tell how long it had been in there, but it had become one with the bottom of the backpack. The paper bag itself was shredded, and the half of the PB and J sandwich it housed was flattened. Grape jelly soaked through the white bread in a valiant attempt to escape the confines of its Ziploc bag. Wadded-up homework and handouts were mashed in the void

spaces. Everything — the books, the assignments, the old sandwich — was coated in a layer of pulverized Goldfish crackers. Rome moved a couple of loose papers and found an unopened package of Ring Dings. He could hear Kota talking wistfully to himself as he searched through his pack.

“Bro, one day I’m going to take Quigles away from this rat race. We’ll get high and run away together. We’ll have so many adventures, living off of bread, robbing banks, and giving to the needy. And if we ever get into trouble, I’ll just grab onto his feet, and we’ll fly away. We’ll score so many chicks.”

“No doubt, man,” Rome said, taking a Ring Ding out of its wrapper. “Having an outlaw duck as a sidekick would make you irresistible to the ladies. Especially if you gave him an eyepatch and a cigarette.”

Rome threw the Ring Ding overhand down at the ducks below. There was a large splash from which the ducks initially fled. They formed a wide perimeter around the snack cake, distrustful of its shiny surface. A couple more quacks arose between the group as if they were discussing what an asshole Rome was. When a consensus was reached and they agreed Rome was terrible, they swam back toward the confectionary, highly unimpressed. Rome’s feelings were hurt. He stretched out his hands as if to ask them what else they could want.



“Don’t feed the ducks chocolate,” a loud, snotty voice said from behind them.

Rome turned around to see a girl looking at him with haughty and condescending eyes. It was Olivia, Alex Clemens’s friend. She was the same chick who had bumped into him in the cafeteria and made fun of his lunch. Her nose was crinkled in disgust, and her hands were on her expensive overalls. Her blonde hair was held back with a red bandana, and her blue eyes glared at Rome. She cocked her hips to one side in a textbook lecture stance and tilted her head to the other side, letting Rome know how stupid and insignificant he was compared to her perfection.

"You shouldn't be feeding the ducks snack cakes," she said. "People shouldn't even eat that junk."

Christ, here we go again. Another pompous, health-food-eating skank who seized upon every opportunity to vocalize how everything she did, down to the food she ate, made her a superior human being. One of those parrot-like girls who spewed the same crap their teachers taught them because they had no backbone or free will of their own. They'd take any chance to impose their views and lifestyles on others. Any infraction of their elitist rules was considered a violation of their civil liberties, and shaming and bullying would ensue. A second infraction was considered a hate crime and resulted in police notification and court action. You could tell she meant business by the way she stood, but her clothing said she was down to earth and one of the commoners. Rome considered showing her how tough she really was by pushing her ho ass straight into traffic.

"Oh, are you too good for Little Debbie?" Rome asked. "Don't be like that. Don't be like the ducks."

"Processed food makes me sick. That's why my mom and I go to the co-op."

"Bitch, I eat Chef Boyardee for dinner, straight out of the fucking can. So fuck you, fuck your whore mother, and fuck the co-op."

"Fuck you, Rome. I'm going to tell her you said that," she yelled, storming off.

Rome watched as she tramped down the street on the verge of tears. Typical chick bullshit. She could talk about her gourmet groceries, deride and harass those who couldn't afford them, but when you told her to shut her entitled mouth, she walked away like she was the victim. No doubt she would write a report about this in class and get an automatic A. It would be hailed as yet another brilliant piece exposing the misogynistic culture that we live in. It would reveal in lurid detail how horribly she and all women are treated. If a boy protested about how he couldn't even sit through one class without being belittled and vilified, they would be systematically shunned and shooed into the corner. Failing grades and the denial of an education would be the price paid for defending themselves. They could forget about college after that.

"That probably wasn't the best idea," Kota said.

"No, it probably wasn't," Rome said bitterly. "But I can't deal with that now. I only got a little time left before I need to get back to the timeout room. Do you think you could help me with my paper route? I'll smoke you out after."

Kota was still bent over, his arms resting on the railing. Strands of his long hair dangled over the bag containing the artisan loaf in his hands as he considered the proposition. He looked at the ducks in the water and then at the bread. He blinked a couple of times, an odd smile stretching across his face. Lazily, he turned around and cast a glance at the six-story building behind him, like he was weighing his options. His face became clouded with what could have been anxiety, as he probably didn't want to do anything he didn't absolutely have to do. He turned back for another glimpse at the ducks, and his kindhearted expression returned. He tore another piece of bread from the loaf before looking at Rome.

"What the fuck were we talking about again?" Kota asked, giggling.

Rome stared at Kota with wide, spiteful eyes as he threw more bread down to his fluffy friends. He briefly thought about explaining the situation once more, though he knew the effort would be futile. He poked Kota in the shoulder a few times, hoping it would discomfort him

enough to focus and maybe listen. Kota didn't respond, too enraptured with what was happening below. Not wanting to waste another minute, Rome grabbed his buddy by the shirtsleeve and pulled him across the street.

Chapter 5: Never Hammer Throw Indoors



A short time later, Kota found himself standing next to Rome in an elevator, confused as shit. He remembered talking to Rome just a second ago, but he had no idea how he got there or what was going on. His bloodshot eyes blinked as he tried to wrap his head around the situation. He noticed he had a green canvas *Daily Reporter* duffel bag around his shoulder with two bundles of newspapers inside. The cables creaked as the car went up, and the scent of cigarettes and rainwater embedded in the wood panel surface reminded him of the extended stay motel at the edge of town. Rome stood next to him with a list of all the subscribers who were supposed to be getting papers that day. Kota stared at the list, giggling. The last names of “Winker” and “Brown” had caught his eye and wouldn’t let go. He barely noticed Rome’s voice racing on and on as the floors ticked by.

“It’s that simple, man. You just shove the papers under the doors of these apartments, and we’ll be good,” Rome said, emphatically pointing at the list. “Most people pay online, but some pay by check. These five always pay by cash, so I’ll collect from them. Then we can give that shitbag Mark his money, smoke a jay, and run back to school.”

“Sweet,” Kota said as the elevator opened on the sixth floor. “I’ll see you in a few.”

“All you got to do is the top three floors. The people who pay in cash and check are all elderly and live on the bottom two floors, and I’ll deliver to them. Got it?” Rome said, patting the bundle of papers he had kept for himself.

Kota nodded his head and walked out of the elevator and onto the mezzanine. He was momentarily blinded by the sun coming from the large skylight above. Puffy white clouds and a bright blue sky looked down upon him. He had expected a standard apartment building with narrow hallways, a low ceiling, and tight corners, but this was much different. The building was completely open, with apartments surrounding an atrium on all four sides. High as shit, Kota walked slowly across the worn green carpet toward the banister. He looked over the rail into the wide open space below, wondering if he was just imagining all of this. Four of the lower floors were visible, with tenants walking between the oaken support beams. At the bottom were several chairs, tables, a handful of potted plants, and two small trees. A white paint chip fell from underneath Kota’s hand, and he watched in wonder as it fluttered to the ground.

Kota had lived in this town his whole life but had never known what was inside this building. He thought it was just a couple of storefronts and some abandoned storage space up top. Discovering that there were a bunch of people living here with trees growing inside was a total

mindfuck for him. He looked down the hall and saw the row of black steel doors and welcome mats. It kind of freaked him out, making him feel like he had stepped into another dimension.

Kota walked slowly along the outer perimeter of the mezzanine, his chipmunk-like attention span still fixated on the floors underneath. Every few steps, he mindlessly flung papers in front of whatever door he felt like. He had totally forgotten about the list of subscribers and doing the job correctly. It was too much to ask of him, especially when he was this blazed. Instead, he thought about how cool it would be to live in a tent with Quigley Mcquackins under one of those trees. There wouldn't be any rent, no random roommates to fight with, and he could grow his own food. He'd smoke weed all day and plant vegetables while Quigley took care of the bugs.

"This is some plausible shit," Kota said to himself, running his hand whimsically across the banister.

Kota pulled out his phone to look at the prices of tents and tomato seed, still throwing papers wherever. The first website his phone brought him to was Walmart's, making him snort loudly. Fucking Walmart. It was almost as if the phone knew he had been banned from there and was now taunting him with the promise of everyday low prices. Like his phone wanted to remind him of the horrific day he was asked never to return.

He remembered it clearly. He could hear the gruff bellows and shrill screams from the clientele. He could feel the warmth of their blubber as they crowded against him. He could hear the squeals coming from their electric scooter tires and feel their weight as they ran over his feet. He kept getting smacked in the head with canes. He could smell Kraft Macaroni and Cheese (it's the cheesiest™), BO, and pee. He could taste the sweat. Why were they all wearing Tweety Bird pajamas, and why were they hitting him? It wasn't his fault the display fell over. He needed something to climb on to get the last pint of Ben and Jerry's in the back. He loved ice cream, especially the flavor with all the chocolate fish.

"You almost done, dude?" Rome yelled from one of the floors below.

Kota blinked several times, unsure of what was going on. He looked at his iPhone and discovered he had wandered from the Walmart website and gone down a Google-fueled rabbit hole of ice cream flavors. Fifteen minutes had passed without him realizing it, and he had no clue which papers he had "delivered." He looked around to see how much of the route he had completed, and it was a grim spectacle. The ground behind him was strewn with papers, most not even close to the doors. Some had opened as he tossed them, littering the floor with fliers. He still had a full stack in his canvas duffel, and he had never made it off the top floor.

"Yeah, bro," he said, sliding the bag off his shoulder. "Almost done."

Kota spun twice and hammer threw the remaining stack of papers off the side of the banister, considering it a full day's work and a job well done. The bag sailed across the atrium and slammed into the opposing rail. Papers exploded out of the canvas bag and came cascading down to the ground below. The bag itself, with a few newspapers still inside, plummeted like a rock. Seconds later, there was a dull thud, followed by a feminine grunt of pain. Kota stopped dead in his tracks. His stomach sunk into his anus during the moment of silence that followed. He didn't dare look over the edge, but he could see that a few papers were still fluttering to the earth. Maybe he had imagined that voice. Or, if he had heard a voice, maybe it would all go away if he ignored it. He tiptoed toward the elevator door, as if moving slowly enough could

erase what he had just done. He only made it a few feet before the screaming and crying began.

Rome, down on the second floor, heard the screams and ran over to the banister to see what had happened. He looked over the side and saw Olivia, the wannabe farmer chick who had yelled at them earlier, face down on the ground with a bundle of newspapers scattered all around her. She raised herself onto her elbows and was looking at the floor, crying. Rome was stunned, not knowing how the hell she had gotten clobbered with his stack of papers. Was that idiot Kota so stoned that he had tried to play some sort of Battleship game with Olivia's face? And, more importantly, were they going to get busted? She hadn't spotted them yet, so he had time to jet. On the other hand, she could actually be hurt. Rome detested the chick, but he didn't want *that* to happen to her. He wasn't sure what to do. Should he help; should he bail?

Olivia slowly started to get up, a bunch of Home Depot fliers sliding off her back. She continued to scream during her struggles. In Rome's mind, the fact that she was able to stand and breathe meant that she was fine and that he was released from any moral obligation to render assistance. It was definitely time to bail. His head whipped to the left and saw the door leading to the stairs. Luckily the building was old as shit, and the emergency exit at the bottom wasn't tied to any alarm systems yet. It was his best bet for a safe getaway.

"Fire escape, dude!" was all he managed to blurt out over the sound of her screams.

He ran down the hall and flung open the steel door to the stairwell. The metal banged loudly when it slammed against the wall. As he started down the steps, he swore that he heard a tenant's door open behind him. Someone must have heard all the screaming. Someone must be following to catch him. Someone must be calling the cops. He had to keep going. He had to hurry.

He continued down the stairs, his feet running at such a frenzied pace that they barely touched the ground. The world around him moved in frames. He didn't see the descending staircase in front of him but only distorted diagonal lines coming at him from all directions. Though the rush of adrenaline obscured his vision and seemed to warp time, it still didn't feel like he was going fast enough.

He made it to the bottom landing without incident. No one yelled for him to stop; no one tackled him on the steps. He didn't dare believe it, but he might be home free. He burst out of the back exit, urgently looking for a place to hide. The sun blinded him momentarily, and he shielded his eyes with a shaking hand as he tried to figure out where the hell he was. The sound of rushing water told him that he was on the far side of the building. The river was on his left, a dumpster on his right, and a parking lot in front. The building complex extended behind him, separating him from Park Street. Past the dumpster were back entrances to an office supply store, a deli, and a pharmacy — all viable escape routes. Rome slowed his pace as he walked from the fire exit, doing his best to regain his composure and look casual.

Rather than appearing suspicious by scrambling about, trying to hide behind the dumpster or down by the riverbank, Rome walked toward the pharmacy with his head held high. Sweat dripped down his forehead, betraying the cool exterior he wanted so much to portray. He stopped for a couple of minutes to look at a few of the tabloids on a rack in front of the drugstore and pretended he was interested in a *People* magazine with some actor he didn't recognize on the cover. It was agony. The entire time it felt like his back was on fire, exposed to prying eyes looking to get him in trouble. Just as he was about to enter the pharmacy, Kota

came walking out of the same apartment fire exit that he had come from, acting as if nothing were wrong. Rome wondered how many people had spotted him as he loitered about the building over the last few minutes. How many potential witnesses were there because the stoned asshole just meandered around the mezzanine instead of going directly for the stairs. The stupid hippie couldn't even flee a crime scene correctly.

Rome went into the drugstore through the back door as calmly as possible. There were maybe a dozen shoppers inside, dispersed unevenly throughout the aisles running from the back of the store toward the register up front. A stationery and school supply section was set up on the shelves hanging off the back wall to his right. Rome walked slowly down the display, pretending to look at some different styles of notebooks. The tactic probably wasn't all that effective, as his agitated expression and flushed face made it obvious to anyone who saw him that something nefarious was afoot. Every breath was loud and labored, and sweat continued to bead on his forehead. He winced when his sneakers squeaked on the waxed tile floor, and the fluorescent lights burned his eyes. The cloying stench of fourteen-year-old boy rose to epic proportions around his body.

Kota followed his disoriented friend into the store, staying a little ways behind. They left the stationery section and passed by the highly populated vitamin and supplements aisle, hoping not to get noticed. A rather round mother of about forty with a v-cut lavender T-shirt and powder blue pants gave them a sideways glance. Her ten-year-old daughter did the same; even the little girl knew they were up to something stupid. Rome and Kota ignored the onlookers and walked to the furthest aisle containing chips and beer.

"Dude, what the fuck was that?" Rome asked once they were alone, trying not to freak out. "I'm going to get fucking fired. I'm going to get fucking sued. I'm going to get thrown into fucking juvie!"

"Relax, dude. She was just being melodramatic. There were only, like, three papers left in the bag. I helped her up, and she didn't hit her face or have a bloody nose, a bloody lip, or anything.

"She fucking saw you? What the fuck happened?"

"I told her I was the substitute paperboy. I set the papers up on the banister to check my list, and it slipped."

"Dude, she's never going to buy that. I don't even buy that, and I *want* to believe you. Who did you say you were subbing for? She probably knows I'm the paperboy here. She's going to tell, and I'm going to get butt fucked in jail. If the cops knock on my door, I'm taking you down with me, bro. I swear to God."

"Dude, chill. She didn't ask for any names, and I took full responsibility. I apologized for the papers, and I apologized for what you said to her on the bridge, only because you seriously pissed her off and I didn't want her to think I was a total jerk too. I just said that you're kind of an asshole, and we laughed about it. Let's just take the money, smoke some herb, and all this shit will blow over."

"Are you sure she's cool?"

"She's fine."

Rome nodded slowly. It dawned on him that this might not be the end of the road, after all. He stood on his tippy toes to look down the other aisles. Over the sheet metal shelving, he could see that there weren't any cops, and the other shoppers had all forgotten that he was

even in the store. If he played his cards right, he might still be able to avoid writing his paper and make it back to school without getting busted. He wiped his brow with his forearm.

"All right. Let's go take care of this Mark shit."

"Sounds good," Kota said, but then he lowered his voice even further and pulled Rome down behind the chips display. "But do you think we could stop by Hunter's first?"

"Fuck no!" Rome hissed. "That dipshit intern still thinks I'm in the timeout room. I can't go wandering all over town."

"C'mon, dude. He's got some killer shit, and I don't want him to sell it all before we have a chance to get some. It'll take two seconds."

"Dude, I said no. I already have a little bud on me, and we can smoke after the heat dies down."

"We could blaze at Hunter's house. C'mon, man. Don't fuck me over like this. Don't pull a Mark. You said you'd smoke me up, remember?"

Hunter was their dealer buddy who lived two blocks away in some of the apartments near the bike path. This was an additional block further from the school, and there was no guarantee that he would even be home. As an avid skateboarder whose wares were in demand all over town, he could be virtually anywhere. Rome got on his phone to send him a text, though Hunter was notoriously bad at getting back to people in a timely manner.

"Fine, I'll give it a shot, but if he's not home and I can't get ahold of him, we have to abort. I need to make it back to school by 4:50."

"That's the Rome I know. By the way, after I smoothed things over, I picked up the extra papers and threw them in the trash. You might get a couple of complaints tomorrow."

Rome stared at his friend with dead eyes, unable to compute what a horrible idea it was to ask him for help. Keeping his gaze fixed on Kota, he texted Hunter without looking, hoping his death stare would induce a little remorse on his buddy's part. It did not. He didn't even notice, and now he had his face pressed up against a glass soda cooler door, eyeing a bottle of Dr. Pepper. Rome stomped on the ground and let out a loud huff. It was 3:50, and he didn't have time for this shit. Whether he pulled this off or not, he and Kota were going to have a long talk when this was all over.

Chapter 6: An Ode to the Number Eight



Rome speed walked to Mark's house in a foul mood. The blue sky, bright sun, and green trees did not seem nearly as promising as when he had escaped the timeout room earlier in the day. It was 4:25, and he was running behind schedule. On top of that, all of his loot was gone. While talking with Hunter, they had rationalized (while high, of course) that pot was just as good as money and that Mark would probably take a couple of joints just as readily as cash. It seemed like a sound idea at the time, but as Mark's red Victorian house came into view — with its tall spire, wraparound porch, and white picket fence — his hopes started to crumble. Mark might not be as impressed with this exciting new opportunity as he had originally anticipated. Rome hopped up the front steps, bracing for the worst.

He grabbed the brass knocker and rapped on Mark's door, the sound dull and foreboding. He looked restlessly at his surroundings while he waited. The distressed wooden furniture, enormous gas grill, and ice blue lights adorning the eaves of the porch all told him that Mark would probably want the money. People didn't get nice shit like this by accepting late payments or taking anything other than cash. If the asshole ever answered, he hoped Mark would see things his way. The absence of cars in the driveway indicated that his parents weren't home, but he still didn't want to waste any time.

Mark finally opened the door a crack, deliberately blocking Rome's way into the foyer. Rome waved hello and immediately tried to push his way in, but Mark had his foot against the kickplate, causing Rome to bash his face into the knocker. He backed up a few feet and stared at Mark's snide face, the asshole on the verge of bursting into laughter. Rome could hear the ominous "tick-tock" from the chestnut grandfather clock at the bottom of the hallway stairs. He could smell the potpourri sitting on the black entryway table and hear the sound of video games coming from the living room on the right. Why the fuck wasn't this dickbag letting him in?

"What's up, man?" Rome asked with fake excitement in his voice.

"Not much. Are you here for your homework?"

"I sure am."

"You got the cash?"

"I got something even better, dude."

"Nope," Mark said, shutting the door on Rome.

Rome managed to stick his foot in the jam at the last second, biting back a yelp as his toes got crushed inside his smelly Nikes. Why the fuck was Mark such a tool? The douche nozzle

didn't know what he was going to offer him, and he still wasn't even willing to hear him out. And why the hell did he listen to that stupid fucking hippie Kota?

"Wait, dude, wait," Rome said, concocting a lie on the spot. "Give me a second. I wasn't able to get the money today, but I got some bud I stole from Kota. I can give you a couple of jays now if you want."

"How about no," Mark replied, putting more pressure on the door.

"C'mon, man. Don't Jew me on this."

The video games promptly went on pause, and there was a shifting of furniture as someone got up.

"What the fuck did you say?" an extremely angry voice yelled from around the corner.

Unbeknownst to Rome, both Brent and Ezra were in Mark's living room playing video games. Being the lone Jewish kids in their grade, neither of them was very appreciative of Rome's sense of humor. While they pretended to be deeply offended, they were actually kinda sorta friends with Rome and would engage with him in a little bit of lighthearted banter, giving him shit right back. It usually ended with Brent telling Rome to fuck off and nail himself to a piece of wood. Today, however, Rome had only fifteen minutes to get back to school, so he really wasn't up for it. The last thing he needed was another delay.

"My bad, guys. I didn't see you there because this asshole won't let me in," Rome said, turning his attention back to Mark. "This is some dank-ass grass. It's worth thirty bucks."

"I'll take both those joints now, and I want ten dollars tomorrow as interest."

"Two joints and ten fucking bucks? Fuck you, you weaselly...", Rome said before dropping his tone, defeated. "Fine. I'll give you ten tomorrow."

Mark held out the neatly typed paper to Rome, who eagerly reached for it. After all his hard work, it was nice to see the fruits of his labor within his grasp. Mark pulled it back at the last second, making Rome bash his fingers on the door jam. He clutched his hand for a second, pain shooting down his wrist.

"What the fuck, dude?" Rome said, injured and confused.

"I'm not going to have to do this again, am I?"

"What the fuck are you talking about? Just give me the paper. I need to get back to school!"

"For our final project in Ms. Bennett's class. Remember that stupid sock puppet play you're supposed to put on as the visual portion of our project? I'm not going to have to bail you out again at the last minute, am I?"

"No, dude. I told you at the diversity festival that I'm already working on it. I've actually finished the first two parts. It's so damn good I'm turning it into a trilogy."

"A sock puppet trilogy? How is that supposed to work?"

"Yes, a sock puppet fucking trilogy. Just give me the goddamn paper!"

Mark almost felt a little pity for the sad sack standing in his entryway and so decided not to punish him any longer. They made the exchange, and Mark slammed the door in Rome's face. Mark walked back over to his living room, chuckling. He set his joints on the mantle above the fireplace while he reached in his pocket for his cigarette pack to store them in. Brent and Ezra didn't acknowledge him, being in the midst of a fierce *Call of Duty* battle on the big-screen TV at the other end of the room. They swayed back and forth on the black leather couch, their feet moving up and down nervously on the hardwood floors as the fighting grew more intense.

Mark looked in the mirror above the mantle and smiled, happy that he had managed to score more weed by spending less than thirty minutes at the computer.

He sat down next to Brent and reached for the chips on the glass coffee table in front of him. Rome was such a jackass. That assignment would have taken an hour, at most, if he had done it right the first time. Instead, he had risked getting suspended, done an hour and a half worth of physical labor, and it cost him two joints and ten dollars. Mark raised the joints to his nose and inhaled the glorious scent of victory. Something was off.

"These are half fucking tobacco," Mark said, looking dubiously at the jays.

His friends didn't acknowledge him at first. The game was reaching its dizzying climax and required their full attention. Explosions and gunfire lit up Brent's scruffy face, his beard already coming in at fourteen. Ezra slid his feet in and out of his sandals anxiously as he moved in for the kill. The edges of his mouth twitched involuntarily. In a risky gambit, Ezra tried to engage Mark in conversation, hoping Brent might think he was letting his guard down and make a mistake of his own.

"Really?" Ezra said, lobbing a barrage of grenades at Brent.

"Yeah, really," Mark said.

Brent jumped on his feet as he deftly moved his character in and out of the flames. Ezra kept firing, dumbfounded that Brent was still alive. Brent opened up with a machine gun, and Ezra took one to the skull. Ezra let his controller fall as his character dropped dead and the screen went black. His hands trembled with anger. Ezra, not knowing what the hell had just happened, continued to stare at the blank screen in disbelief. Brent raised his arms up victoriously, turning to his friend.

"Do you see what you get?" Brent yelled, flexing his muscles at his vanquished foe. "Do you see what happens when you fuck with the IDF?"

Ezra picked up his controller as if to throw it at his buddy. He was sick of losing to that asshole, and his stupid celebrations only made it worse. If it were his house and his controller, Brent probably would have gotten it upside the head. Instead, he set it down on the armrest without causing an incident.

"Easy, tough guy. Your cousin is in the IDF, not you," Ezra said with a resentful look.

"Well, I will be," Brent said, pulling on his black soccer jersey in an obnoxious display of bravado. "Just give me four years."

Ezra got up and headed into the kitchen, not wanting to deal with that ass monger while he was in victory mode. Brent gave another tug on his jersey before turning to Mark, who was still looking at the joints with a half smirk on his face.

"I could have told you that he was going to fuck you over," Brent said. "The part I can't understand is why you wrote his paper."

"You think I actually wrote it?" Mark said. "The first and last pages are sort of legitimate, but the rest is a bunch of nonsensical ramblings about the number eight. I was tempted to write a full-on confession about the time he took a dump on Mrs. Abram's porch, but I figure I can do that the next time he tries to pull something."

"What if he actually gave you the money for real?"

"He'd never do that. His words are worthless, his soul is hot garbage juice, and his brain is floating in bong water. He can swear to his mother, God, Bongmopolis, or whatever. Deep

down, he's still a piece of shit with zero honor. He tries to get out of everything, and now it's finally catching up with him."

"Wow, I didn't realize you disliked the guy so much," Brent said.

"I don't actually dislike him. I'm just sick of the way he uses people. When we were kids, we used to ride bikes and play video games all the time, but after I stopped smoking weed every day, they wouldn't hang out with me at all. They didn't ask why. They didn't check if everything was okay. Nothing. They just ditched me. I remember when I told them my brother got booted from college back in the fifth grade, they didn't even care. A little while after that, when I told them he had joined the Army, they just nodded their heads and asked to borrow money from me. The next year, after he came home from Afghanistan and he joined the fire department, things really went downhill. He quit his job a few months in and almost died after a six-month bender, so I stopped getting fucked up with them as much as I used to. Do you know what they did? They thought it would be funny to start calling me a straight-edge bitch. They're good guys sometimes, but they can be so fucking clueless."

"I get why you don't like him, but you don't think this is going to backfire?" Brent said, taking a seat back down on the couch. "I mean, he is your partner for the final project."

"Maybe, but it doesn't really matter," Mark said, walking toward the window. "I don't plan on passing that project anyway. It's only worth twenty percent of our grade. I'm getting nearly a hundred in the class, so even if she gives me a zero, I'll still walk away with a C+."

"Why would you want to bomb the final project?" Brent asked, thinking that this was completely unlike his friend.

"As much as I detest Rome, Kota, Richie, and Donny, I agree that Ms. Bennett is one of the worst, most manipulative, and opportunistic people I've ever met. Everything she says and does is skewed for her own personal gain. That's why, for our written portion, I'm going to use that paper my brother wrote in college for his interpretations of literature class."

"You mean the one that got him kicked out of school in the first place?" Ezra said, walking back into the living room with a glass bottle of Pepsi.

"Oh, yeah. That's the one. I want to see how long I can read it out loud before Ms. Bennett has a coronary and shuts me down. But that's what they do: they censor you. If anyone speaks out against the academic status quo and its fatal and fundamental flaws, they fail you before you can get your point across. They deny you an education. My brother joined the uniformed services afterwards, of his own free will, of course — no one forced him to do it — and then the academic oligarchy labeled him part of the repressive state apparatus. They relentlessly hound anyone who doesn't conform and aren't satisfied until you espouse their beliefs and their beliefs alone."

"You got balls, dude. I just hope she's satisfied with failing you and doesn't try to get you expelled," Ezra said, using the bottom of his shirt to open the soda.

"I really don't give a shit," Mark said, moving the drapes and peering down the street. "There are online academies now, and there are private schools. I just can't take any more of their bullshit without saying something. Besides, I don't think Rome's sock puppet play will fare much better. I'm sure that's the least of his worries right now, though."

Mark was right. Rome didn't have time to think about the end-of-the-year project. He was too busy running the final sprint back to the detention room. He made it to the school with only five minutes to spare, dust flying from underneath his feet as he chugged up the main stairwell.

Mrs. Donnelly, the school custodian, was the only person he passed as he went up the drab brick stairwell. Even with his freedom on the line, Rome's pervert mind couldn't help but note how tight she was keeping it in her dark green jumpsuit at the age of fifty. Still, he'd have to wait to hit on her another day. The last few seconds were ticking down, and he didn't need another person to narc him out, anyway. Now at the top floor, he hustled to the timeout room, the door still open a crack. He slipped inside and closed it without a sound.

All seemed calm as he caught his breath. The *Harry Potter* book was still lying where it had been left, and the cut-up pieces of construction paper remained unmoved. Rome looked through the keyhole again to see if anyone had noticed him. Donny was still listening to music, Rich Skank was packing up her things, and Spasmoid Mcgee looked like he had finished off his pencil. Rome opened the door and walked back into the detention room, a wide smile on his face. Ms. Allister looked at him, her expression changing from relief that her day was over to one of annoyance. She must have forgotten he was even in there.

"Thank you for being so quiet," she said begrudgingly.

"Thanks for letting me get my work done," Rome replied with some sincerity.

The bell rang, and Rome proudly left the detention center. He had pulled off yet another impossible con job with impeccable genius and fortitude. He walked toward Ms. Bennett's room, his paper in hand. It was a lot of trouble, but knowing he was going to have the final laugh made it all worthwhile. He stopped for a moment outside Ms. Bennett's closed door, flipping past the first page. He began reading the words Mark had written for him, and just like that, his joy turned to despair.

When trying to quantify the importance of the feminist movement of the 1920s, it is important to remember that all women are made of matter and all matter is infinite. While there is no symbol for infinity on my calculator, the number 8 looks close enough. Thus, if you multiply the year 1920 by 8, you get the number 15,360. Therefore, we know that it takes 15,360 women to do the job of one man....

"Did you finally finish it?" Ms. Bennett said, suddenly in the hall in front of him.

Rome was so horrified reading his paper that he didn't notice that she had left her classroom and was locking the door behind her. Her white dress rustled coarsely as she worked the keys, the garment made from some sort of uncomfortable-looking hippie fabric. She walked over with her head tilted to the side, her long braid dangling nearly to her waist. That fake I'm-happy-to-see-you-but-more-importantly-I'm-really-just-trying-to-figure-out-who-you-are-and-what-makes-you-you expression was on her face. Rome was so aghast that he didn't even say anything as she stretched her hands out to receive the paper.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, that same artificial look of inquisitiveness still in her eyes.

"Yeah. I guess so," Rome replied, handing over the assignment and no longer able to find any excuses.



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