

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

ATTACK OF THE WOOKIEES



Part 1 of the **Chronicles** of a Small Town
An Epic 12 Part Trilogy

Attack of the Wookies:

The Chronicles of a Small Town Part 1

Selby Keith Wost and Dagger Yew Horny

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Attack of the Wookies

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 first 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.

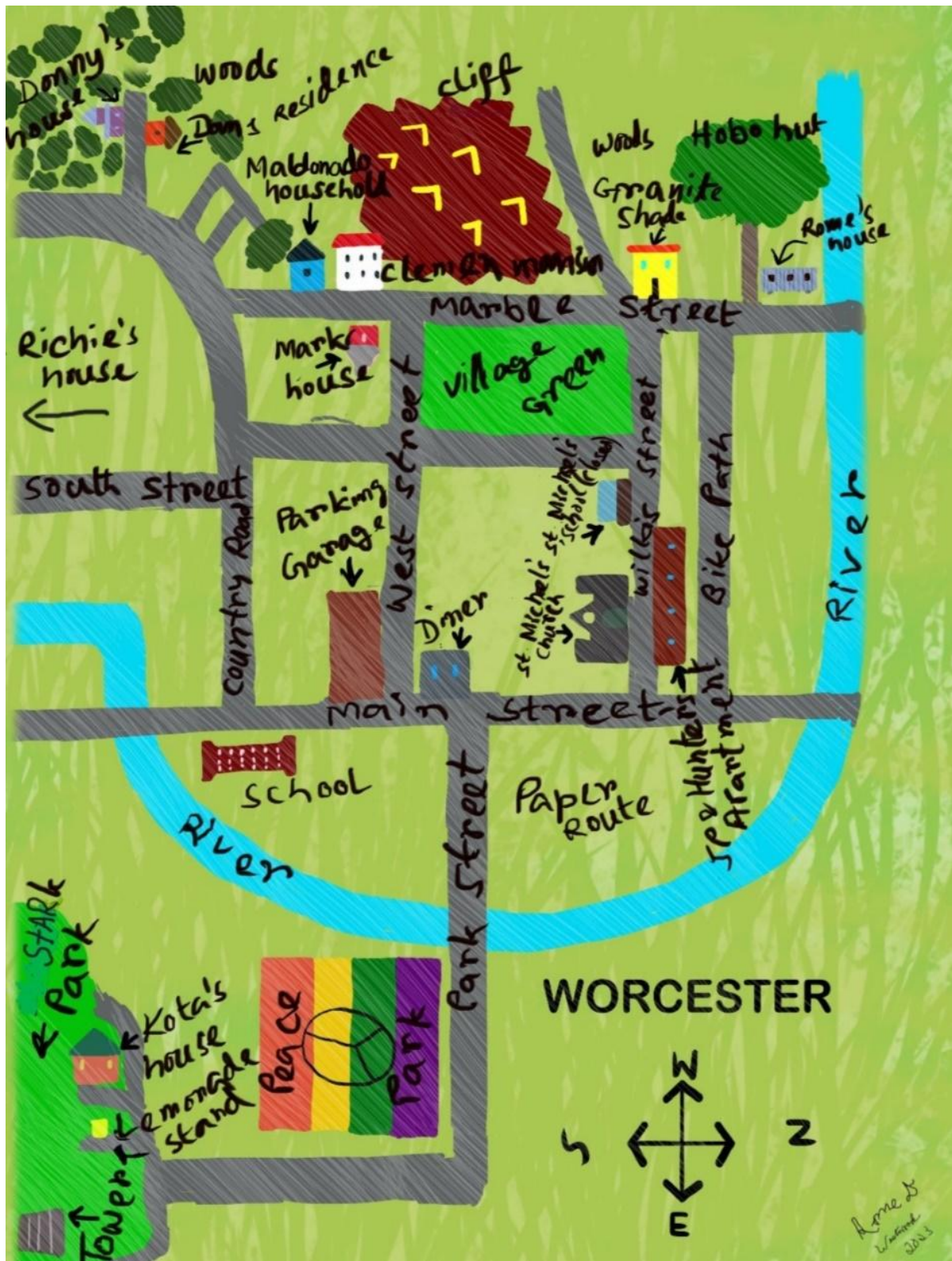
Introduction

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.



“A perfect judge will read each work of wit
With the same spirit that its author writ;
Survey the whole, nor seek slight faults to find
Where Nature moves, and rapture warms the mind.”

-Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*

Chapter 1: The Party at the Peace Park



The federated flute players’ union, peddlers of quack medicine, holy beggars, strippers, comics, and all that lot, were filled with sadness at the passing of Timber the singer. They were such a unique and progressive person.

To memorialize their life, the townsfolk of Worcester, New Hampshire, were holding a festival in the Peace Park to celebrate diversity. They could think of no better way to commemorate such an open-minded and enlightened individual than by honoring their tireless struggle for acceptance and justice. They fought for the decriminalization and eventual legalization of prostitution. They believed that misgendering a person was a violation of their civil rights and should be punishable by law. They were at the forefront of transgender participation in sports and were an advocate for surgical and hormonal treatment for minors, regardless of whether only one parent consented. They sought the legalization of all drugs in order to stop the atrocities of mass incarceration, and they started a petition to ban Christians from becoming healthcare professionals and foster parents.

Their friends, and they had a multitude, shed many a tear and many a laugh as they gathered by the Peace Park to prepare for the festival. A large mosaic of a dove made of brilliantly colored tiles and pebbles greeted everyone at the wrought iron gates, its wings open in a welcoming embrace. A ring of candles of different sizes and hues illuminated the various exotic stones set into the ground. The celebrants strung up hundreds of lights from the top of the purple gazebo at the center of the park to the sturdy oak trees lining the square. When night came, the grounds would be lit with every color of the rainbow, blanketing all in a full spectrum of love. And there would be music playing! Such music! Bursting forth from the heart of the town, filling the whole world with Timber’s courage and beauty. The main stage was assembled at the far end of the green, waiting for sound equipment to be offloaded from the trucks. It was going to be a party to remember, and the streets were filled with excitement.

Fourteen-year-old Roman Duchovney saw the bustling activity from atop one of the hills surrounding Worcester and was decidedly less enthusiastic. He peered over the abutment of a

fifty-foot stone observation tower built on top of the highest point in town, glowering with bloodshot eyes at everything he saw below. Stretching out in front of the tower were the woods and nature trails of Stark Park, the sounds of dog walkers and children's screams cutting through the rustling leaves. Further ahead, the trees gave way to a residential neighborhood, no doubt filled with trustafarian scum.

It seemed like every neighborhood was infested with their like, making ridiculous shenanigans like the diversity festival all too common. They always needed something to celebrate or protest — something to give them the positive reinforcement to which they had become so sickeningly addicted. Rome watched as people continued to hurry around the downtown area, a little ways beyond the houses before him. In the far distance, he could descry the White Mountains, timeless and blue in the cool spring air. Even though he had smoked a couple of bowls earlier, he still couldn't enjoy the view.

"God, I hate this fucking place," Rome said, shaking his head.

He had been biking around town and through the woods with his three buddies for almost an hour and was sweating profusely despite the brisk temperature. He wiped the perspiration off his forehead with his Slayer T-shirt and brushed his wavy black hair away from his eyes. His irritation only increased as he heard his friends banging their way up the thin metal staircase to meet him, not giving a fuck who might hear them. Their loud swears and louder footsteps reverberated through the hollow interior of the structure, letting Rome know that they were ready to get going. His friends were just as high as he was, and their attention spans were limited.

Dakota O'Brian stumbled to the top first, several strands of his long, dirty blond hair hanging in front of his eyes. He most often kept it in a ponytail, with some usually falling out of the tie throughout the course of the day. His hemp shirt hung loosely off his skinny body, swaying as he mounted the last step. Donald West came up next, a scowl on the preppy asshole's face. He was the most clean-cut of the four of them, with spotless khaki cargo shorts and an unadorned black T-shirt. He kept his dark hair cut short and used lots of gel like a homo. Richard Boucher, a heavier guy and a fellow thrash metal enthusiast, arrived last. His hair was the same length as Rome's but brown and curlier. It reached his upper lip when pulled straight down, but it normally stayed bunched up in front of his eyes. While Richie was a little husky, with a bit of a gut, he was not hugely fat by any means. That didn't matter to the other three friends, though. The way they ripped on him for his weight, he might as well have been the most morbidly obese person on the planet. On the plus side, he bathed at least twice a week, which was far superior to Rome's or Dakota's hygiene habits.

"I don't see what the big fucking deal is," Richie said, continuing a swearing match that had started in the stairwell. "If horses can shit in the streets while they're pulling those lame-ass Christmas carriages, I don't see why I can't shit on the trails when I'm biking through the woods."

"Because horses don't eat Hamburger Helper by the boxful, you fucking dickbag," Donny said, thoroughly revolted. "And you have the ability to take two steps over and shit in the bushes."

"I'm not getting poison ivy on my nutsack just because some stupid dog walker can't pay attention to where they're going," Richie shot back.

"He's right," Rome said, turning toward his friends and siding with Richie. "Nutsack poison ivy is no joke. I caught it in Kota's backyard once while looking through his sister's window."

Kota, gazing intently at the glass bowl they had smoked out of earlier, didn't hear Rome's provocation. The purple and blue piece had served them well through the years, and Kota was digging for some resin. He smacked the bowl into his hand a few times before letting out a depressed sigh.

"Looks like it's completely cashed," Kota said ruefully, "and my lighter's almost dead, too."

"Fuck," Richie said, panic written on his voluptuous face. "Got any weed, Rome?"

"No, man. You, Donny?"

"Nope," Donny replied without hesitation, not really giving a shit. He probably had some stashed away somewhere, but he would never tell anyone.

"No worries," Kota said. "I think my mom's got some at the house. If not, we can always head downtown."

The four of them looked over the side of the tower, not wanting to entertain the latter option. They could see an abnormal number of people congregating near the Peace Park, which was never a good sign. The liberal townsfolk constantly threw rallies and festivals there, usually with some underlying Marxist theme. A few food trucks were set up on both sides of Park Street, a sure indication that whatever was happening was going to last long into the night.

"What the fuck is that about?" Richie asked, walking up to the stone parapet to get a better look.

"It's probably some sort of hippie music festival with feminists singing about the power of their vaginas," Donny guessed.

"Probably," Rome said. "As if we don't hear about their gross snatches enough during school."

Dakota nodded his head slowly as if in agreement with Rome, his vacant eyes staring at the gathering but not truly seeing it.

"We should get going, just in case we have to cut through Main Street," Kota said.

"Everyone to their bikes!" Rome commanded, racing for the stairs.

The four friends jogged down the metal steps even more noisily than when they had climbed up. The air inside the tower was cool and damp, with water dripping from the handrails down to the concrete below. A woman of about fifty in a puffy silver Columbia vest waited at the bottom while the boys trampled on by. She gave a fake smile and brushed some of her grey-streaked blond hair behind her ear. The boys didn't pay any attention to her, another anonymous face vaguely flitting through their smoke-filled minds. When they were this fried, everyone and everything was inconsequential to their latest task, and that task usually involved procuring more weed.

They ran past the woman without so much as a wave and went outside through the stone archway, giggling to themselves all the while. Their mountain bikes were at the bottom of the multicolored slate steps, the entrance barely accessible due to the careless way they had thrown them. A two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew, a wad of Starburst wrappers, and some empty chips bags were tossed haphazardly in the middle of the cluttered heap, refuse from their latest bout of the munchies. They hastily circled around their gear, as it had been twenty whole minutes since their last burn, and they were starting to jones a little. Kota grabbed his bottle of Mountain Dew, and Rome jumped on his miniature purple bike, by far the coolest

possession he owned. The Gremlin, as it was called, always caught his fancy when he was stoned, probably because it came with rad streamers on the handgrips and an awesome caution flag on the back. While it was easily the most stylish ride in Worcester, it lacked speed. He tried to lead the way to Kota's house, but Richie swiftly overtook him as they plunged into the woods. The other three followed behind, pebbles crunching underneath their tires and the occasional branch slapping against their faces. Richie took an unexpected turn, blowing past the normal route to Kota's house. Per protocol, they were obligated to follow the Captain Navigator regardless of any objection. They just hoped to hell wherever Richie was leading them wasn't anywhere near that stupid party they had seen from the tower.

About a half mile away, the festival went on as planned, undisturbed by the four malcontents lurking in the woods. The pedestrians continued to walk giddily down the freshly swept sidewalks, chatting pleasantly underneath flower-laden lampposts and streetlights. Four-story brick buildings loomed above them, their windows joyfully reflecting the bright morning sun. The pristine storefronts displayed artisan groceries, local cheeses and produce, and craft beers and wines. Patrons could be seen eating and conversing at the town diner through clear bay windows. A local business owner carefully arranged handstitched summer dresses from hometown designers for all to admire. The aroma of coffee wafted from the cafés and bakeries, beckoning to any passersby. Subaru Outbacks, Toyota Priuses, and Volkswagen Bugs lined the well-kempt village streets.

The brick buildings in the city center gradually gave way to converted wooden duplexes housing various professionals. Doctors, lawyers, realtors, masseuses, contractors, and electricians all had their headquarters in these modified buildings. Shady trees and newly trimmed grass lined the walkways and gave the air a fresh and living scent. Clients passed in and out of the businesses' doors, walking back toward town to run errands or heading home once those errands were complete. A few white clouds looked down from above the church steeples with gladness and approval.

Church bells clanged from one of the spires, echoing through the vibrant town center to the surrounding forest. The metallic notes passed by the inns, bars, and taverns of downtown and reverberated into the surrounding residential neighborhoods. Whether they were in their short colonial-style houses, spiraling Victorian mansions, or boxy federal homes, the townspeople knew that it was 10:00 a.m. Everyone from the dog walkers waiting patiently at the stop signs to the joggers passing by the various corner stores wanted to head home and prepare. The festivities were about to begin.

The excitement could be felt all the way to the outskirts of Worcester, where long, winding side streets disappeared into the woods. Every so often, a door slammed shut or a car engine started as people slowly trickled toward the Peace Park. One of these outlying roads ended with a cul-de-sac, sleepy and still. A nature trail bisected the loop at the end of the street, running between the large neoclassical homes with their stately pillars, white picket fences, and grotto-inspired pools. The trail was frequently used in the spring and summer, especially on glorious weekend mornings like today.

Two cross-country runners sprinted down the cedar chip path, ending their 10K jog with a flourish. They passed in front of one of the wealthy white residences, the houses shining like pearls amongst the emerald green woods. Two young girls of about nine had set up a lemonade stand on the front lawn. One of the young lasses, whom we shall call Goldilocks, had blond hair

and was slightly taller than the other. She kept her hair back with a white headband, and hope filled her blue eyes. She wore a light summer dress, pastel blue with yellow daisies. Her friend, whom we shall call Strawberry Shortcake, had a peach dress with pink flowers. She played excitedly with her braided red hair as they organized their wares.

The thin plywood stand was sanded and stained white with images of fresh sliced lemons delicately painted on the front panel. A wooden awning and an overhead banner with colorfully designed cursive letters topped the counter, declaring "Lemonade for 50 Cents." As Goldilocks finished pouring the first pitcher into compostable cups, Shortcake set out a second pitcher on the table. The sun was getting higher, and a chill breeze blew in from the north. In the distance, the trees shuddered, and birds flew from their nests. Although all the clouds seemed to have passed, a storm was coming.

Chapter 2: The Battle of the Lemonade Stand



“Out of my fucking way!” an adolescent male cried, splitting the spring air with his cracking voice. “I can’t stop!”

Goldilocks and Shortcake raised their beady eyes and directed their gazes toward the forest. A fourteen-year-old boy on a mountain bike careened out of the shadowy trees, his eyes wide and bloodshot. Witless and extremely high, he streaked forward, unable or unwilling to stop. The wind swept his curly brown hair back and sent ripples across his chubby cheeks. His black Pantera shirt was plastered onto his glorious man boobs with the words “Fuck the World!” bouncing effortlessly off his ample titties.

Richie hurtled toward the lemonade stand, confused as shit. Goldilocks and Strawberry Shortcake’s eyes grew wide with the realization that he wasn’t going to stop. They ran screaming toward their house as loudly as their adorable voices would allow, the whole world seeming like it was coming to an end. They turned their heads as they scurried away, watching helplessly as the kid smashed head-on into their tiny little business venture. The side of the stand caved inwards, stopping the bike cold and sending Richie hurtling headfirst over the handlebars. Both of his sandals flew into the air, comingling with shreds of colorful construction paper and shards of wood. The overhead banner disintegrated upon impact with his Mountain Dew — and Nacho Cheese Dorito — engorged body. He smashed his face into the awning, his imbecilic skull cracking the wooden surface. Paper cups of lemonade were dashed to the wind, sending fountains of yellow liquid to the sky. His body, soggy and limp from lemonade, seemed to slow in midair. The words “Fuck this!” spewed from his rotund lips as he cartwheeled over the wreckage.



Ass to ground contact — Richie slammed buttock first into the steamy sidewalk, the flesh rippling up his flabby torso. A yelp escaped from his cheeks as he experienced a pain known only to those who have suffered true rectal trauma. His body tumbled across the concrete until he lay motionless on the ground. Now prone on the sidewalk, his bloodcurdling cries ceased, and a calming presence settled over his twitching carcass.

Behind the desolate pile of human garbage, lit gloriously by the midmorning sun, three more teenagers approached on their bikes. Rome was closest to the fray, and a miniature purple bicycle with pink streamers was his steed. His knees came nearly to his chin as he pedaled, and golden rays of light shone brilliantly on his locks of greasy black hair. His bright red eyes were half-opened, and he gasped when they landed upon his fallen companion. Beneath his pentagram-emblazoned T-shirt was a gentle heart. He pedaled harder to render aid, breaking away from the other two. The bright orange caution flag strapped to the back of his ride swayed as a beacon for the others to follow.

Rome reached the scene first, power sliding to Richie's side and sending up a plume of dust and pebbles. Goldilocks and Shortcake stood frozen as the cloud of sidewalk grit covered their dresses and clung to their hair. They watched helplessly as Rome dropped his tiny bike

carelessly to the ground and looked at his friend. Richie lay sprawled out upon the hot pavement, his limbs splayed every which way. His glistening paunch rolled out from underneath his shirt, and his chin trembled with fear and sadness. He raised a shaking hand.

"Fuck, Rome. They got me. Those motherfuckers got me in my asshole."

Rome collapsed at his side, overcome with emotion. The sight of Richie, cut down in the prime of his obese life, wounded Rome to the depths of his soul. He took his buddy's hand and held it in his own. He carefully brushed some of Richie's roguish curls out of his eyes. His dying friend looked beautiful in the sunlight.

"You're going to be okay, Richie. You're going to be just fine!" Rome said. He looked up, his lips quivering. "God, he's hit bad. Someone needs to look inside his asshole!"

At this pivotal moment, with life and death hanging in the balance, help arrived. Dakota and Donny came skidding onto the scene. A glass pipe stuck conspicuously out of Dakota's front pocket, and a two-liter bottle of Mountain Dew was in his hands. Kota recognized the gravity of the situation and went to assist his wounded buddy. He let his bike drop, the back tire spinning sullenly above a scattered anthill. His blond hair hung lank in front of his concerned face, his steely grey eyes set on Richie. The thin hemp overshirt he wore rippled in the breeze, revealing his flat and grimy stomach to the world. The bottle of Mountain Dew fell from his grasp, lifeless and numb. The carbonated spray soaked his long Aztec print shorts, purchased for \$1.99 at a local thrift shop. He couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

Donny stood next to him, but he was far less moved. To be honest, he couldn't give less of a fuck. He just looked at the destruction and laughed. His stupid hair, with its lame poof in the front, was so heavily gelled that it didn't move an inch as he threw his head back in mirth. His skintight black T-shirt, revealing lackluster musculature, may have also been cutting off the circulation to his brain. He reached down and scratched his nutsack through his khaki shorts in plain view of all. Donny was a dick.

They were all dicks as far as Goldilocks and Shortcake were concerned. The two girls backed up slowly toward their front porch, casting tearful glances at their broken stand. Their disposition rapidly changed from shock and disbelief to confusion and anger as what had happened set in. Madder than they had ever been in their young lives, their faces twitched with suppressed fury. Three pervert boys stood above the wreckage of their little business while the fourth continued to twitch on the ground. The intruders swayed back and forth, stinking of BO and what may or may not have been skunk.

"Am I dying?" Richie whimpered.

"No, Richie," Rome said, squeezing his hand tighter. "You're going to live! You're going to go on and grow old and have lots of babies even fatter than you!"

Rome lowered Richie's arm into his lap and looked about frantically. "Will someone please check his asshole?"

"I will," Dakota said, stepping forward with heroic resolve. "I will check his asshole."

Dakota knelt next to Rome at Richie's side. They were three friends, strengthened by the bonds of brotherhood and united by man's unending quest to look inside each other's rectums. While Kota wasn't actually going to do it, he did want to make Richie uncomfortable and freak him out. He slowly unbuckled Richie's belt, wondering when he would call his bluff and push him off. In this test of wills to determine who was the sleaziest dirtbag of them all, they were all losers.

Goldilocks was the first one to break. She let out an audible grunt of disgust as Dakota slid Richie's shorts down, and she stormed up the front porch steps. Shortcake was right behind her. They were going to tattle, their stupid floral dresses swaying about as they clomped up the freshly painted white stairs. The narc bitches.

"Bro, when was the last time you changed your underwear?" Kota asked as he looked upon Richie's dingy polka dot boxers.

"Fuck if I know," Richie replied. "They're so crusty I haven't been able to get them off in a week."

Ominous vibrations through the sidewalk made Kota quit what he was doing, interrupting the delicate process of exposing Richie's anus. Distant rumbles thrummed from the house on their left, like an angry mountain awakened from its slumber. The windows shook with fearsome tremors, and tiny stones shot up from the ground as if the very earth dreaded what was coming. Richie's stomach tightened at the noise. He knew the sound of pissed-off parent from a mile away. He had heard it a hundred times before. They all had, but he was the only one who seemed to realize what a precarious situation they were in.

That's because Richie knew this parent was particularly loathsome, and his crash may have been less "accidental" than it was meant to seem. The homeowner was a legend in this town for her political stances and was considered untouchable. She openly swore at the police, screamed during city council meetings, and was considered a courageous activist after she had vandalized a church. If she got hold of one of them now, she would once again be hailed as a hero for bringing the little "hatemongers" to "justice." Richie, having successfully struck back, now needed to make his getaway. His hands immediately went to his sides as he pulled his shorts up. There wasn't a moment to lose.

"Fuck! Go, bro, go!" he yelled, pushing Kota and Rome off him.

Richie sprang to his feet, moving his hands clumsily as he tightened his belt. He looked desperately for his sandals amidst the wreckage of the lemonade stand, tossing the shredded banner to the side. Underneath the debris, he found his footgear, covered in lemonade and dirt. Hopping alternately between his feet, he slipped his sandals on as he went for his bike. He looked back at the porch as he jumped on, worried they might not make it this time. The woman hadn't come out of the house yet, but he knew she was going to be infuriated when she did. Richie adjusted his pants once again before he took off, his heart racing in his throat. He couldn't believe those idiots had pulled down his shorts.

"Were you gay wads actually going to look inside my ass? What the fuck is wrong with you?" Richie yelled as he started to pedal away.

"It's called progress, you homophobic faggot," Kota said, running for his bike. "You got a problem with progress? It's a sexy new world out there, and we're all about to get spoooned on."

The door to the porch exploded outwards, nearly coming off its hinges. A vaguely familiar silhouette emerged from the opening, hulking and huge. The face was female — once, perhaps — but that was long ago. She kept her hair shorn close and brushed to one side, much like an English peasant's. Her ruffled green dress shirt, a distant cousin of the tunic, hung partially untucked. A brown belt hugged her stalwart waist like a length of roughhewn rope. Loose-fitting jeans girded her loins, coarse as burlap. Her brow, normally creased with confusion, was furrowed with anger. Her plain and oddly perplexed face had been awoken into a twisted sneer of rage.

Kota and Rome watched as the ghastly figure flew out of the door...and they were afraid. Rome was particularly stricken, pausing for a moment over his bike as he tried to remember where he had seen her before. Even as she lumbered forward to strangle him, he hesitated, wracking his marijuana-impaired brain for the memory. He analyzed the villain from her malicious face all the way down to her Birkenstock clad feet. And those feet! So huge, calloused, and cold. They were built not for walking but for the crushing of balls — horrible things brought into this world solely to cast fear into the hearts of men.

The sounds coming from her ravenous, gasping mouth wrested Rome from his stoned reverie. He picked up his miniature bicycle and began pedaling wildly. Looking forward, he could see Kota and Richie were a little way ahead, but the distance was growing. Donny was past the others and already halfway down the street, not giving a shit about his friends. A moment's hesitation would result in their tender pink nuts being squished like grapes, and no one wanted to fall behind. Unfortunately, Rome was left in the unenviable position of being last, alone and terrified. He looked toward the woman as he wheeled forward on his trusty purple stallion. She had already made it down the porch steps and was charging right at them — arms flexed, eyes wide, and shoulders down. She looked like a linebacker lowering the boom on an unsuspecting wide receiver on a slant route. Rome saw her gaping maw slowly bellow a few words, the horror of the moment making every second an eternity.

"Fee Fi Fo Fum," is all Rome heard, her voice deeper than the sea.

Rome's legs pedaled furiously, the bright orange caution flag swaying in the wind. His ass slipped to and fro on the vinyl seat as he tried to make his getaway, his shins scraping against the pedals whenever his feet slid off. He watched helplessly as the others sped away, with Donny still in the lead. He was always the first to leave the scene and never hesitated to ditch his friends the moment things went south. Donny was a dick.

Richie followed a little ways behind him, and he didn't seem to realize that Rome was on the verge of getting caught and throttled either. He had been quicker to his bike than Kota or Rome when the she-beast emerged, and once he got on, he never looked back. Even with his torn butthole, Richie was able to propel his sweaty body forward using his immense blubber for momentum. A disturbing grinding sound came from his gears as he fled. The derailleur was obviously fucked up from the crash, and the prospect of his chain falling off frightened him to his very core. Kota was the lone cyclist waiting for Rome, moving intentionally slower so his companion could catch up.

"Faster, man, faster!" Rome yelled, grabbing hold of Kota's seat.

Kota increased speed, his weed-filled lungs hacking and coughing as he dragged his buddy to safety. The woman chased them for a solid fifty yards down the street, windows rattling and sidewalk slabs shivering beneath the ferocity of her pursuit. Rome looked back with sheer terror. The incensed behemoth was keeping up with them as they zipped past parked cars and *Better Homes and Garden*-style houses and lawns. He knew that if he were caught, he would be on the receiving end of a tombstone piledriver.

Kota dropped his head, pushing himself harder than ever. The extra effort worked, and as they got further away, the woman finally realized she wasn't going to be able to catch them. She gave up her chase, returning to the wreckage of the lemonade stand. With slumped shoulders, she picked up the banner the girls had worked so hard on. Her heart boiled inside

her at the realization that her cause and her actions were more justified than ever. She would have her revenge.

And so ended the great Battle of the Lemonade Stand, brutal and grim. It was yet another preventable catastrophe caused when children, marijuana, Starbursts, and Mountain Dew are combined. When would the world learn that little boys need to be chained and beaten, both inside and outside of school?

Chapter 3: Kota's House



Donny took a sharp left toward Kota's house, the other three friends following behind him. The rush of air and adrenaline was loud in the boys' ears as they made their escape, and the cool shade underneath the broadleaf trees was a relief. The great Battle of the Lemonade Stand was over, and it was another victory for America. As they left the confusion and stress of combat behind them, the houses grew further apart, and the trees became denser. Still holding onto Kota's seat, Rome looked back frequently, making sure the ogre lady wasn't rumbling up from behind to finish them off. Normally when they were in this neighborhood, Rome would see this as an opportunity to detach from Kota's bike and smash kamikaze-style into one of the many trash cans and recycling bins lining the sidewalk. Given the current situation, however, he figured one suicide mission was enough for the day.

By the time they reached Kota's two-story cottage-style house, the four friends were winded, sweaty, and tired. Kota's home was one of their many sanctuaries around town and was always a sight for sore eyes. The friends were usually on the run from someone, and having safe zones like this was a constant necessity. The house was at the end of a long, cracked, and eroded driveway. It emerged shyly from the forest to greet them, its cedar shingle siding and green roof blending seamlessly into the surrounding trees. Kota watched with a smile as squirrels frolicked with uninhibited joy, jumping from the branches to the roof, and then scampering down to the porch. There was even a chipmunk standing atop one of the forgotten bags of woodchips left haphazardly on the lawn. Kota was so taken with his woodland friends that he didn't even notice the car sitting in his driveway ten feet away.

The four boys got off their bikes at the bottom of the drive and pushed them up the small hill toward the one-car garage. All any of them could think about at the moment was getting something to drink. They were in dire need of anything to cure them of their cotton mouth, and Kota had lost their precious bottle of Mountain Dew during the chaos of war. The cloying smell of wet mulch coming from the expansive flower garden to their left wasn't helping either. Richie swatted at the swarm of insects that accompanied the scent. Kota grunted scornfully as he finally noticed the blue Saab in front of him.

"What's wrong? Are these stupid mosquitos having their way with you, too?" Richie asked, scratching some bug bites.

"No, it's my sister's boyfriend, Matt," Kota said, pointing at the car. "I despise that piece of shit."

Richie, Donny, and Rome all knew the drama that usually came when Matt was around and braced themselves for the worst. They continued up the driveway, walking around the vehicle and half-expecting the asshole to confront them at any moment. Kota, not afraid of his sister's boyfriend at all, made sure to scrape the buttons on his shorts across the rear door as he sidled by. When they got past the car, they dropped their bikes unceremoniously next to the garage and walked along the stone path toward the front steps. Kota could see his older sister, Autumn, snuggling with Matt on a love seat on the porch. Her head rested on his chest, pressed against his blue polo. Although Autumn kept her eyes closed, Matt looked down at the four middle school kids with contempt. His outstretched legs, covered by above-the-knee pink shorts, rested on a wicker ottoman. He rocked his feet back and forth contentedly, the soles of his stupid loafers clicking together.

"You didn't leave your bike behind my car again, did you? Because I'll run it over this time," Matt said.

"I hope you do. Maybe it will fix that fucked-up muffler of yours," Kota replied.

"Fuck off, Kota," Autumn said, raising her head off Matt's chest and looking at the four miscreants as they walked up the steps. "And Mom's sick of your friends coming over all the time."

Kota ignored his sister and bounded up the stairs with Rome and Donny close behind. They went inside the house as Richie stumbled up last. He stopped for a moment on the porch and took a look at Autumn, still relaxing on the love seat to his left. It was hard not to think about how hot she'd be if she weren't a gross hippie. She placed her head back underneath Matt's chin, her long, strawberry blonde hair covering one of her bloodshot eyes. Her short shorts were unbuttoned, and her low-cut, ruffled blouse was showing serious top boob. Richie could tell that the two of them had been getting high and banging not too long before they arrived.

"What are you staring at?" Autumn snapped.

"I was just wondering why your eyes are so red?" Richie asked sarcastically.

"Why is your stomach so huge?" Matt shot back.

"From tossing your mom's salad," Richie stated matter-of-factly, flipping him off.

"You're so gross!" Autumn yelled. "I don't know why you're here, but you got five minutes before I kick you out."

Richie left the porch and went inside, looking for the others. He knew Matt was too big of a pussy to attack him. If he did, his friends would come to his aid, and the four of them would kick the shit out of his bitch ass. Still, it was best not to get into a fight if it could be avoided. He walked past the entryway desk and down the narrow hall toward the kitchen, trying to find his buddies. He looked left into the dining room and saw that the floral curtains were drawn, the windows shut, and the air stagnant. The table had four sets of silverware placed upon it, and the scant light that snuck through the drapes revealed a layer of dust on its wooden surface.

Richie looked to the right and into the living room, but there was no sign of the others there either. At least in the living room the shades were open, but the plants looked like they hadn't been watered in a long time. Their wilted leaves sagged dolefully in front of the glass as if they were trying to sneak under the sash and escape. Kibbles, the O'Brian family's ten-year-old Welsh corgi, slept peacefully on the blue upholstered sofa. On the end table was a picture of the four of them: Donny, Dakota, Rome, and himself dressed up in little ties. The photo had

been taken almost two years ago, right after they graduated from St. Michael's Catholic Elementary School.

Things were different then. At St. Mike's, they were considered the rebels, the class clowns of sorts. That all changed when they went to public school. Once word got out that they had come from a private school, bullseyes were instantly painted on their backs. Their classmates made all sorts of assumptions and were never short on snide comments. The public school kids assumed they were rich, even though Donny's family was the only one that had any actual money. They assumed the four of them believed in creationism and intelligent design, that they were against women's suffrage and were white supremacists, and all sorts of baseless bullshit. At public school, hating people for their faith was a central part of every subject. The four of them got sick of it very quickly and became determined to fight back. If their classmates wanted to make false allegations and resort to name-calling, they'd give it right back and ten times worse. If the public school pussies wanted to start an actual fight, then go for it. See what the fuck happens.

A loud bang revealed that his friends were straight ahead in the kitchen. He walked in to see them crowded by the refrigerator, obviously up to something sketchy. Kota had pulled the bottom freezer drawer out and was elbows deep in the compartment, rummaging around with an uneasy look on his face. Rome was giving Kota unwanted commentary behind him, ducking down between a sink full of dirty dishes and a small butcher's block in the middle of the room. A pitcher of red Kool-Aid was on the small wooden table set against the opposite wall, a couple of empty glasses next to it. Donny stood behind the butcher's block, drinking his beverage and being of no use to anyone. They continued whispering to each other after Richie entered, not wanting Matt or Autumn to overhear.

"Are you sure it's in there?" Rome asked nervously.

"Yeah," Kota said, moving a pile of organic TV dinners to one side. "She stashes it someplace stupid."

"There's no way she just keeps it in the open like that," Rome said.

Kota continued shuffling shit around, ignoring his naysaying friend.

"You better hurry. Autumn says she wants us out of here in five minutes," Richie said, heading toward the pitcher to grab a drink.

"Fuck that skank," Donny said, totally unconcerned. He looked down the hall as Kota shifted stuff in the back of the freezer, almost hoping she and Matt would come inside and say something.

Rome stood up, his back starting to ache from being in the stooped position. He turned left and right painfully, trying to crack his spine. In the process, he noticed a little Post-it note left on the refrigerator door. It was from Kota's mother and was covered in little hearts. Rome pulled it off and read it out loud in the hopes of embarrassing Kota.

"Sorry, I had to work again. There's leftover lasagna in the fridge and a little money on the table. Love, Mom," Rome said, a bit of a smile on his face. "Did you hear that, Kota? Your mom loves you."

"Fuck off," Kota said, becoming annoyed.

"Nobody loves Kota, and you know it," Donny said, turning his attention to the table at the far side of the room. "Now where's that money?"

"Autumn already took it, so shut up before she hears you," Kota replied.

"Well, at least she leaves you stuff when she has to work. How many freaking jobs does your mom have, anyway?" Rome asked.

"Got it!" Kota yelled victoriously, ignoring Rome's question and pulling out a large Ziplock bag of weed.

Kota raised the bag above his head for all to see. It must have been a half-ounce or more of nice kind bud. When he opened the bag, the rich aroma permeated the air. Everyone took a deep breath in and calmed down. Now that they knew they had more pot, the world didn't seem so bleak anymore. Donny, while grateful, was still confused by the hiding spot.

"Dude, your mom just leaves it right next to the ice cream?" Donny asked.

"So? Your mom leaves her vodka next to the ravioli," Kota said, brushing aside his buddy's remark. "I think she kind of stopped caring now that it's just the three of us. Either she doesn't notice or doesn't mind if I steal a nug or two. That's why I'm taking even more today."

Kota pinched three large nuggets and put them in his cigarette pack. The rest went back into the freezer. Kota stood up and stretched a little. He looked down the hall, making sure he was still in the clear. The screen door rattled in the wind, and the chimes rang gently. The absence of shadows on the hallway wall indicated that Matt and Autumn were still lying down. He motioned the others forward, wanting to get out of this pit and find a place where they wouldn't be harassed.

"We good?" Rome asked eagerly. "Because I need to use the bathroom."

"Almost," Kota said, his heart sinking. It seemed like every time they went on a mission, Rome had to go on a sidequest and fuck stuff up. "I just need to grab my lucky lighter upstairs. And don't take forever in the bathroom. We need to be gone in a couple minutes, or my sister will flip her shit."

"And go where? That lemonade woman is probably still trolling the streets looking for us. We got no place to go. Why'd you do it, Richie?" Rome asked with exaggerated emotion. "Why'd you have to smash the lemonade stand?"

It was a valid question. When Richie took the lead back at the tower, he could easily have taken a different path that led directly back to Kota's house. But that's not how Richie was. While normally of an affable and docile disposition, Richie had an ax to grind with the woman, and it was not a random attack. He had noticed the lemonade stand when they had passed by the woman's street on their first trip to Kota's house earlier that day.

"Remember that lady who broke the hands off the statue of the Blessed Mother outside our school?" Richie asked.

"Yeah?" Rome said. "Is that where I remember her from? Didn't she make the paper for that?"

"That's her. The fucking bitch commits a hate crime, and this liberal town hails her as a hero and defender of free speech and the right to protest. She does thousands of dollars' worth of damage and barely gets a slap on the wrist. Fuck her."

"Yeah, but that means it's not just one woman looking for us," Rome said, realizing that they may have stirred up the hornet's nest. "She's got a lot of friends and probably raised an entire posse of militant lesbians."

"Who cares? We'll just go to my place," Donny said.

"All the way across town?" Rome asked.

"Why the hell not? It's away from Autumn, and we wouldn't have to worry about a bunch of angry clam slammers chasing us down," Donny replied.

"I guess that will have to work," Kota said. "And, Rome, hurry the hell up."

Rome was sick of getting bossed around. Once Kota had his back turned, he grabbed his crotch and flipped him the bird. Kota, unaware that the anxiety he felt from being in his own home was spreading to his friends, walked out of the kitchen and past the living room. He rounded the banister and went up the staircase quietly, not wanting his sister to bitch at him for still being in the house.

Rome followed close behind, though he didn't actually have to piss. He had a secret mission in mind to sneak into Autumn's room once Kota went back downstairs. He had already entered into stealth mode, tiptoeing up the worn stairs, trying not to make the handrail creak any more than necessary. He slid across the matted green carpet, disturbing the dust bunnies that had amassed around the edges of the floor. A few streaks of sunlight found their way through the lone window at the front of the hall, imbuing a joyless glow upon the dull blue wallpaper.

Kota went into his room to look for his lucky lighter, leaving Rome by himself. To his left was the master bedroom, followed by the linen closet. To the right was Kota's room, followed by Autumn's. He snuck forward and went inside the bathroom at the end of the hall, gently closing the door. He pressed his ear next to the knob until he heard Kota exit his room.

"Let's go, Rome," Kota hissed, heading down the stairs.

"Don't rush me, dickbag, or I'll accidentally piss on your floor again," Rome whispered back.

He sat on the ivory-colored hamper, still listening. The tree branches rattled against the window as Kota's untamed backyard tried to reclaim territory. The scent of the wet earth outside mingled with the fading potpourri sitting dejectedly by the sink. Shadows danced across one of the towels lying on the floor. He waited until he heard the screen door slam before creeping out of the bathroom.

Autumn's room was on the left, and she usually left all sorts of nugs and paraphernalia out in the open, just begging for Rome to steal. Ganking some of her bud was the true nature of Rome's mission. While Kota always got mad at Rome for going into his sister's room, he usually forgave him once they ran out of weed, and Rome produced the secret stash he had taken from Autumn.

Rome turned the knob without a sound and stepped inside, the scent of patchouli oil and old pot smoke hitting him hard the moment he entered. He scanned the room from left to right, starting with her dresser set against the wall. A couple empty pill bottles were tipped over on top of the cherrywood chest, taunting him. Rome walked over and investigated, turning the bottles upside down and examining the labels. They used to contain Vicodin and Xanax but could often be used to hold a nug or two. He dropped them dejectedly back onto the dresser and continued his search.

Autumn's queen-sized bed was against the back wall, the lavender covers balled up in the middle of the mattress. There was a six-foot-long Dead & Company tapestry hanging above the headboard, showing a trippy beach scene complete with tentacles coming out of the water and fiery rays spiraling away from the sun. Large eyes amidst the wavy red orb stared at Rome from the artwork, questioning his presence in the room. Rome gave the stupid tapestry a fisting motion, then walked across the clothing-strewn ground toward the cluttered nightstand next to the bed. He found an empty weed baggy, some burned-up incense, and a purple thong on the

table's scratched surface. Rome picked up the underwear and found a glass piece underneath. He examined it and saw that there was no smokable weed within.

BANG!

A gust of wind blew a tree branch against the window near the dresser. Rome jumped and turned around toward the door, thinking he was busted. As he whirled around, he unconsciously jammed the thong into his shorts pocket. His heartbeat was hard in his tense throat. He thought for sure that Autumn and Matt were going to be standing in the entrance, looking to kick his ass. When he saw the door was only open a crack and heard the branch still scraping against the windowpane, he exhaled cautiously and decided to hurry the hell up.

He moved purposefully to her desk against the opposite wall. It was a standard writing desk with three drawers below and some cubby holes for pens on top. There weren't any stray baggies here, but her laptop was lying in the open. Rome, always nosy and with very little attention span, put rifling through her drawers on hold and took a moment to see what sort of crap she was reading instead. His eyes narrowed and his pulse elevated as he scrolled down the screen.

There were a couple windows open to some articles written in the weekly free newsletter known as *Tremors and Revolution*. The first tab was open to a picture of a large red barn, its roof painted light blue, light pink, and white. The text below was an invitation to a seminar being held at the Marshfield Communal Farm in a little over a month. It was entitled "Love is Love," with the key speaker being a traveling professor of gender studies from the University of Vermont. There would also be side discussions concerning religion and toxic masculinity. Rome dug his nails into the desk, trying not to scream. He clicked on the second tab she had above, just to get that other shit off the screen.

The second article that appeared was hardly better. It had a picture of some forty-five-year-old woman with muddy overalls, a green tank top, and long pit hair holding a pad of white-lined paper and a pen. The story was about how some of the residents at the Marshfield Communal Farm were starting a petition to have the word "father" removed from legal documentation and replace it with "secondary parent." The change was meant to be more inclusive for all.

Rome shouldn't have been surprised by what he saw — he knew how people like Autumn thought — but seeing his suspicions confirmed was still infuriating. He continued to read paragraph after paragraph, further confirming what he knew had been happening all along. The urge to smash his fist through the screen almost got the better of him when the open door creaked from behind, bringing him back to reality. That was his second scare of this adventure, and it was enough. He lowered his hand and hurried out of the room, so enraged that he forgot all about scoring more weed.



Chapter 4: The Naked Bike Ride



Outside — where it was only getting hotter — Kota, Richie, and Donny were waiting on Rome yet again. They had kicked their way through the untrimmed bushes and overgrown grass toward the back of the house in an effort to avoid Matt’s and Autumn’s snarky comments, and they now found themselves standing in Kota’s backyard amidst the decaying relics of his youth. Richie used a stick to poke at an old Big Wheels, bleached nearly white from exposure. The decrepit toy was stuck in a thicket of vines and prickles and looked as though it would stay that way until the end of time. A rusty jungle gym had suffered the same fate a few feet away. Kota shifted anxiously, not wanting to spend a second longer in this dump than he had to.

“Dude, hurry up,” Kota yelled toward the bathroom window.

The bushes next to the house shook in response. All eyes turned from the window to the corner next to the garage. Someone was coming, and Richie was especially startled. He let out a girlish cry and tried to hug Donny. A knee bunt to the stomach was all the sympathy Richie received. As the air whooshed out of his lungs and his heartbeat pulsed in his eyes, he saw it was only Rome coming around the corner. Rome brought his full-sized red mountain bike with him, having left it at Kota’s earlier that week. While the Purple Gremlin would always be his ride of choice, their newest adventure across town required him to go faster than the minibike allowed. He smacked the seat to show that he was ready to go.

“Geez, I’m right here. Chill the fuck out. And what the hell is wrong with him?” Rome asked, pointing at the doubled-over Richie.

“I’m okay,” Richie gasped. “I accidentally walked into Donny’s knee.”

“Yeah, you did,” Donny said with feigned aggression, “and if the cops ask any questions, that’s exactly what you tell ‘em.”

“You see, Rome?” Kota said, irritated over the amount of time they were wasting. “Do you see what happens when you fuck around? Richie becomes a victim of domestic violence, that’s what. How many times do I have to tell you? No beating off in my house.”

“I wasn’t beating off. I was taking a shit. I was taking a shit in your sink.”

“Good. Next time, take one in a Ziplock bag, and we’ll leave it in the freezer for my mom when she comes back from one of her dates,” Kota replied, making his way through the thickets.

“Yeah,” Rome chuckled. “It’ll be a cry for help.”

Rome followed Kota back to the driveway, hacking through the overgrowth with his legs. The four buddies got on their bikes and started down the narrow path between the grass and

the car. Kota made sure to scrape against the side of Matt's Saab once again on the way by. Autumn yelled something as they rode off, but all she got in response was Kota's middle finger. They didn't have to listen to that stoned wench with her false air of superiority. They had better places to be. All the way across town was their favorite spot to smoke, and they could be there in less than fifteen minutes. Donny's house had a pool, tons of food, and just about every video game console. More importantly, that's where they kept their giant bong, Lord Bongmopolis. He was a mighty and benevolent leader, and the inspiration behind so many of their great and valorous deeds. They could hear him calling now, even from a distance.

The four friends took a right and rode down the street toward one of the many trails in the woods, leaving Kota's slutty sister behind. They sped past several newly remodeled homes as they went, complete with obligatory electric vehicles, compost bins, and police divestment signs displayed dutifully for others to see and be inspired by. Rome looked at the ground. He couldn't get out of Kota's neighborhood soon enough, afraid that the sanctimonious atmosphere might turn them all into complete pussies.

The street came to a dead end at the wood line, but a thin dirt bike path continued into the maple trees. To the left, the last house on the road was undergoing hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of renovations, and long lengths of wooden girders and plywood were strewn across the lawn. The owners were adding a greenhouse where their land abutted the woods and hadn't yet erected a fence to clearly mark their property line. Some of the construction material was laid out close to the trail, so the homeowners placed a sawhorse barricade in front of the entrance. Although this was done under the pretense of ending foot traffic in front of their house during construction, they hoped people would eventually stop using the path altogether and absorb it as their own personal property. Rome stuck his foot out and knocked the barrier over without slowing down. The other three rode over the obstacle as they entered the shaded sanctuary of the woods.

The air was still and humid beneath the canopy of leaves, with several trails crisscrossing underneath. Through the trees to their right, Rome could see a man and a woman walking their purebred huskies down the path that led to the tower. To their left was the way they had taken to the lemonade stand earlier in the day. They went past that exit without slowing down, knowing full well that there might be a hill troll waiting to dismember them if they ever went back. Instead, they headed straight, rumbling over some tree roots and through a muddy puddle, looking for the next opening. Rome ducked his head low, trying not to get clotheslined by any rogue branches.

When they got out of the woods and rode back onto the paved roads, Rome remained in the lead. They were two streets down from Kota's and one down from the ogre lady's. The whole neighborhood overlooked downtown, and they could see the church steeples and the crowds in front of the Peace Park from their vantage point. As painful as it was, they knew they were going to have to cut through the middle of Worcester to get to Donny's house. It was a bit of a ride, but they were left with no other choice after the morning mayhem.

"Left!" Rome yelled, coming to a T intersection. "Right," he yelled directly after and quite unnecessarily.

The four stoners turned right onto a street that led them downhill and downtown. The wind whistled in their ears as they picked up speed. Doing their best to stay focused, they lowered their heads and looked dead ahead, knowing that hitting a patch of sand or a large pothole

could result in a wreck. The street wasn't in the worst shape, with the houses giving way to some well-maintained apartment buildings and small businesses, but there was always an element of risk. Runoff coming from the driveways was a constant hazard, and a hard fall would only mean another delay.

Rome turned his head and yelled something unintelligible to the others. He had assumed the role of Captain Navigator, and it was the Captain Navigator's job to shout directions to those in the rear. It was very difficult to hear him, but the boys refused to use hand and arm signals because hand and arm signals were fucking stupid. It was way more fun to fly witlessly at the four-way intersection below and see what the fuck happened after. The light could be red, but it made no difference. Playing chicken with moving vehicles is what turned boys into men. Besides, the risk of getting hit by cars without wearing a helmet was what made riding bikes fun. If someone did get hit by a bus, it would probably be Rome, and that would be okay. His parents were so mad at the world, they probably wouldn't notice his absence for at least two weeks.

But as he neared the intersection, what Rome found concerning was that there weren't any buses to hit him. As a matter of fact, there was no oncoming traffic whatsoever. Rome slowed down a little as he got to the bottom of the hill, unsure of what to make of the situation. Without any signal, verbal or otherwise, he came to a skidding halt at the traffic lights. The other three approached cautiously, noting his egregious violation of protocol. Rome planted one foot on the ground, though it barely seemed to support his weight. Something was wrong. He staggered and hopped a couple of times on one foot before regaining his balance, patting his right quad like he was trying to give the failing limb strength.

He turned and looked at his friends. The willow trees above him seemed to hang lower, even sadder than usual. Rome's eyes went wide with impending doom, his expression twisting like he was about to hurl. His butt cheeks clenched instinctively, and his wavy hair poofed up higher than ever before. He struggled to say something, but no words came out.

"Wuh...Wuh...Wuh..." Rome stammered.

The other three friends came to a slow stop next to their frozen compatriot. What was going on? What could make their friend so shell-shocked? He looked to be on the verge of tears he was so afraid. Rome's face trembled, and his shaking hand slowly raised a woeful finger down the road. He finally managed to open his faltering mouth.

"Wookies!" Rome screamed.

Donny, Richie, and Kota turned their horrified eyes to the right, the world around them moving sluggishly, like it had reservations exposing the young boys to the travesty that approached. Several blocks down the street, inching ever so slowly toward them, was a pasty mass of humanity. It was the largest group of wookies they had ever seen — a group of trustafarian hippies who had taken things to such a disgusting extreme that they could no longer even be classified as the same species. The friends watched in disbelief as the stinking pile of repulsive human flesh rolled forward on ten-speed bicycles, waving at pedestrians as they took up both lanes of the road. The dull roar of cheers and laughter preceded their noisome arrival, bouncing off the surrounding brick-and-glass office buildings. Flags advocating various idiotic and self-serving causes flew above the group. An unstoppable wave of old, oily bicyclists rode toward the boys, and they were all naked.

The four friends had accidentally ridden into the naked bike ride, an annual protest against fossil fuels espoused by the nastiest hippies on the planet. There were rolls of bleach-white cellulite as far as the eye could see. Grey pubes and old man balls sat atop innocent bicycle seats that would kill themselves if they could. A rainbow of horrible dye jobs streaked across greasy heads of grey. They pedaled forward at a snail's pace, laughing and giggling to themselves. Conceited smiles stretched across their smug faces, proud as shit that they were "sticking it to corporate America." The four friends did their best not to retch.

"Dude, we got to get the fuck out of here!" Rome yelled.

"Go, damn it, go!" Donny screamed, putting his feet back on his pedals.

They took a left onto Park Street and started to ride, to ride like the dickens, but the horde of glassy-eyed hippies kept following behind them. To make matters worse, a crowd of onlookers was closing in on both sides of the street. Their phones were out, ready to take as many close-up pics of dripping smegma as possible. The friends were trapped in a tunnel of perverts, and the scent of marijuana permeated the air. It was like the city had been overrun with toddlers who were still fascinated with their genitals and had never grown up. Sure, Rome, Richie, Donny, and Kota joked about their junk and buttholes all the time, but they never actually exposed themselves to each other or the public. What the fuck was wrong with these people? Had they become so high and delusional that they thought other people actually wanted to see their foul bodies? Was this their idea of freedom? Had they become so spoiled and privileged as a group that this was the only cause they could find? Rome had no time to contemplate such matters. It was every man for himself, and Richie was lagging behind.

"Don't leave me!" Richie yelled. "I'm too fat to die!"

"I'm sorry, Richie! We'll never forget you!" Rome screamed as he pedaled to the front of the pack.

The Peace Park was within sight, but they were far from safe. An even larger assembly of people had gathered in the gazebo and on the benches. Several food trucks served the hungry, horny pedestrians, stimulating their appetite for wrinkled shlong. This must have been the rallying site for the elderly orgy that was sure to take place after their ride. The scent of stale BO and slimy tuna wafted upon high and would linger for days. Once all was said and done, someone was going to have to burn the park down just to get rid of the residual herpes floating about the air. That is, of course, if anyone survived.

Amidst the havoc, Rome saw two familiar faces: Carlos Maldonado and Mark Deluzio. They were standing a few feet away from one of the roach coaches, oblivious to their peril. Some sort of fried hippie bullshit was in their hands, pulling them dangerously close to the dark side. Although the Duchovney, Deluzio, and Maldonado families had been close once, they had drifted apart for various reasons over the years. Be that as it may, Rome knew he couldn't let Carl or Mark get enveloped by the approaching monstrosity. It was obvious that they had no idea what was about to befall them, and they wouldn't stand a chance.

Carl looked like he had just gotten done with a jog in his black basketball shorts and white Nike T-shirt. Little did he know that his lungs, thirsting for air, would soon be smothered in sack. He and Rome used to hang out a lot until legal troubles drove them apart. Both of their older brothers had gotten busted with weed when they were eighteen and fresh out of high school. Carl blamed Rome's brother and, by extension, Rome himself. Carl's strict mother forbade him from hanging out with anyone from the Duchovney family after the incident.

Mark stood next to Carl, wearing khaki shorts, a short-sleeved shirt, and a backpack. A couple drops of sweat formed underneath his short blond hair. The poor fool had probably just gotten back from the library, only to come to the Peace Park for an education in fisting. Part of Rome thought he deserved it, since Mark had abruptly stopped hanging out with them almost a year ago. Granted, the Deluzio family had been going through some troubles, with Mark's older brother getting kicked out of college and then joining the Army and ending up in Afghanistan, but Mark shouldn't have ditched his friends like that. What made things especially awkward was that Rome and Mark were paired together for a final project in English class that was due in a few weeks.

Mark wiped the corner of his chin with a napkin as old man boners sprung up everywhere around him. Despite the danger, Rome looked at Carl and Mark with some heavy-hearted nostalgia. It seemed like yesterday that they had graduated from St. Michael's Elementary School, fleeing from the nuns in terror. If they had known that they would be running headlong into a crowd of naked, greasy old men, they probably wouldn't have been so eager to grow up. Rome let out a couple of yells to alert his friends, but they didn't hear. Instead, they turned their attention to the people wrapping streamers around the trees.

"Run, Mark! Run, Carl!" Rome yelled.

Mark and Carl raised their heads a little when they heard Rome screaming like his normal moronic self. Their spirits plummeted into their shoes at the sound of his voice, and they kept their backs turned, pretending not to notice him. They instinctively scanned the crowd, hoping no one they knew from class was nearby. Being associated with Rome was never good for one's reputation, and when he was this amped-up, bad shit inevitably followed. They just didn't want to be around when it happened. Mark considered hiding amidst the dense throng of jam band enthusiasts, but it was too late at this point. Rome, Kota, and Donny came to a skidding halt right next to him. They were going to have to talk.

"What the hell are you doing, man?" Rome asked urgently. "You got to get out of here."

"Eating gyros. What the hell does it look like?" Mark said with a riled voice. "We're not staying for the diversity festival, if that's what you're worried about."

"Diversity festival?" Rome almost shrieked.

Rome took a better look at his surroundings. Behind Mark was a group of super-artistic and talented white guys with beards, glasses, tank tops, and zero muscle tone unloading amps and drums from some of the trucks. Tie-dyed T-shirts were everywhere, and a sketch artist had posted up near the entrance to the park. Several little girls were on the other side of the gate, hula hooping and enjoying the festivities. Two proud, smiling transwomen wearing pigtails and skirts strutted past him, close enough to see the razor burn on their necks. Rome knew that they would need to make their move now if they wanted to live.

"Good Lord, this is even worse than the naked bike ride!" Rome cried.

"Oh, gross. It's the naked bike ride again?" Mark said, peering around Rome to look down the street. "Fucking lame, dude."

Why the hell wasn't Mark freaking out? Why wasn't he dropping his stupid food and running for the hills? They were beset by hungry middle-aged pedophiles looking for tender young flesh, and Mark was just standing there. Rome could almost feel the gross body heat emanating from the wookies down the road, and it was becoming too much for him to bear.

"We're running out of time!" Rome said, clutching one of Mark's shoulders.

"Get the fuck off of me," Mark said, smacking his hand away. "Shouldn't you be at home working on our final project?"

What the fuck? Why the hell was Mark bringing up schoolwork at a time like this? Granted, the assignment was a huge part of their overall grade, but they could deal with that later.

"I'm already on it, dude," Rome said breathlessly and not quite truthfully.

The project that Mark was so concerned with required everyone in the class to highlight the importance of different aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion. That was fine. Mark and Rome's task, however, was to shine a spotlight on the evils of masculinity and the heroic virtues of the sexual revolution. It was to consist of a written portion and a visual portion. Both Mark and Rome rejected their teacher's version of reality and saw the project for what it really was: a means for their teacher to force her views on her students and extend her own personal legacy. Nevertheless, Mark said he would take care of the written report while Rome was in charge of the visual presentation. Yet none of that would really matter if they all got butt fucked to death here on Park Street. Rome tried to placate his buddy's misgivings in the interest of speeding up their flight.

"I'm giving a puppet show like I always do," Rome said. "Now let's jet, bro."

"Christ, another puppet show?" Mark said, a little irked at the news.

"Yeah, another fucking puppet show," Rome said, not liking his buddy's tone. "I've been putting those on for visual presentations since the third grade, and they always kill, so you don't need to worry. What you do need to worry about are these goddamned wookies bearing down on us."

"We'll be fine," Mark said, wishing they would leave.

"You won't be fine," Rome said, looking down the street and getting more excited by the second. The naked bicyclists were getting dangerously close, their lascivious looks aimed directly at them. "Jesus, Mark! They're coming right for us!"

Mark remained unmoved, so Rome tried to reason with Carl.

"What about you, Carl? I know we've had our differences in the past, but you have to come with us. You can jump on my handlebars if you want."

"I'm not riding bitch on your handlebars," Carl said, pulling away from Rome. "As a matter of fact, I'm not doing anything with you because I don't want to end up in jail."

Rome let out an impatient scoff.

"Oh, give it a rest, dude. First off, your brother was just as guilty as mine. Second, it was that stupid skank Alex Clemens's older sister who ratted everyone out, and she didn't even get in trouble because she's a chick. And lastly, they'll be out in three months tops. Besides, has any of that stupid shit happened like our parents said it would? Have either of them gotten shanked? Has your brother been forced into MS-13? Did you have to join the Latin Kings?"

"No," Carl said.

"Exactly, you haven't. And I'm not a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, either."

"That's debatable," Carl replied, growing more than a little aggravated.

Things might have turned into an argument if Richie hadn't interrupted. He had finally caught up with the others, his body drenched in sweat. The other three were happy to see him, amazed that the crowd hadn't descended upon his luscious, supple person to have their way with his sweet ass. Breathless and distraught, he managed to gasp out a few words.

"They're here!" Richie yelled.

It was horrifying but true. The first of the naked bike riders had arrived, speeding up as they approached the finish line. Old man scrotums, caught by the wind, unfurled themselves like flying squirrels trying to parasail across the sky. The crowd erupted in cheers. One man sped ahead of the others. Shouts of joy and laughter escaped his bearded lips, and his matted ponytail trailed behind him. He jumped off his ten-speed and ran toward the park entrance, his reddish blond body hair flowing in the wind. One of the hula-hooping little girls suddenly stopped what she was doing. She dropped her hoop and backed up a couple of steps. The man, not giving a fuck how scared she was, wasted no time running over and grabbing the toy off the ground. He flung it around his waist and started thrusting his hips vigorously. To the amusement and cheers of all, he continued, wagging his dick directly in the nine-year-old's face.

Out of the ghoulish throng, two men emerged, pointing at the hula hooper and yelling. They were both in their early thirties, dressed for the summer with shorts and T-shirts, but unlike the others, these guys were livid. The one closest to the scene was wearing a backwards hat, while his friend had neatly trimmed facial stubble. The furious looks on their faces indicated that they were not part of this crowd and didn't know that the naked bike ride was taking place today. They forced themselves to the gate, still yelling at the hula hooper.

"Are you fucking kidding me? Get the fuck away from her, you freak! What's the matter with you?!" the man in the backwards hat yelled.

The sketch artist who had set up shop on a stool next to the gate, stood up and blocked the man with the backwards hat from getting any closer. The artist brushed some of his black hair behind one of his ears with a condescending eyeroll. He adjusted the beret on his head and pulled on the V-necked hipster vest covering his thin frame. His laughable attempt to look intimidating made it seem like he was used to getting into physical altercations for the sake of "justice." A couple of others from the crowd backed up the sketch artist. Rome could hear some of the comments they volleyed at the men who had tried to stop the naked hula hooper.

"What's your deal? It's just a human body," the sketch artist said.

"It's not like it's something she hasn't seen before," a female with long, dyed pink hair said from behind him.

"She's not scared of him; she's scared of your violence," a second female with a butch haircut said.

The man with the hula hoop finally let the toy drop to the ground. He was grinning, giggling, and staring directly at the two people who were coming after him. He put his hands up as if he had done nothing wrong, like he was confused by the whole ordeal. He hopped backwards — waving, smiling, and taunting. That was Rome's cue to get the fuck out of there.

"We have to go!" Rome yelled to his friends. "Keep your buttocks sealed, and God be with you!"

"Okay, Rome," Mark said. "We were leaving anyway."

"Pedophiles! Rapists!" Rome screamed, riding away from the Peace Park with wild eyes.

"Perverts! Child molesters!" Kota yelled, not far behind him.

No one was listening. They were too busy forcing their hard, throbbing views on sexuality to anyone walking by. Drugged-up liberals who jammed their dicks in your face was the new normal. Rome was so unnerved that he didn't even notice when an old red station wagon pulled out in front of him. He plowed directly into the vehicle, flying over his handlebars. His face smashed into the hood, leaving a greasy cheek stain. His limbs bounced every which way,

and his black hair flew in sticky clumps as he tumbled off the front of the car and landed headfirst on the ground. Not once, as his battered body sailed through the air, did he regret not wearing a helmet.

He lay in a heap, not exactly sure what had happened. Kota, Donny, and Richie came to his aid, dropping their bikes in the middle of the street. They laughed hysterically as they helped him off the ground, barely noticing the muffled sounds of the person crying in the station wagon behind them. Kota looked over to see what all the commotion was about. His smile was reduced to genuine remorse when he saw the driver. The poor woman in the vehicle thought she had seriously injured the jackass and was too upset to get out of her car. Her ghostly white hands clutched the steering wheel, and her long, black hair hung in her face. She stared at the four boys with tears in her eyes. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, though this accident must have taken ten years off her life. Her chest rose and fell rapidly under her pink blouse as she realized she had just struck a bicyclist. She was leaving the church parking lot at the end of Park Street when she had run into Rome. This was where the local food shelf was kept, and there were several bags of groceries in her back seat. Rome, finally on his feet, could see in her face that she was getting more upset by the second. A pang of guilt hit him hard, and he knew he had to say something.

"What were you thinking, lady?" Rome screamed, pointing back down the road. "You can't go that way! People are trying to have anonymous sex up there! That's all people really care about anymore! You have got to go the other way!"

For a moment, the woman stared at him in disbelief.

"There's no time to explain. Don't worry about me. I'm fine!"

She inched the car slowly forward, unsure what to do. She cast doubtful glances back at the four boys as she maneuvered around their bikes.

The surrounding crowd started to walk toward Rome and company, thinking someone might have actually gotten hurt. Kota looked to his left at the incoming townspeople, sweat dripping down his nose. The crowd's stares were glazed with intoxication, their faces confused. Kota's heart rate sped up, and his mouth went dry. The horde of pedophile zombies was closing in to have their way with them, and they were foul to look upon. Almost every single person had facial piercings and mesh tank tops, and the amount of exposed man nipples burned his eyes. Kota addressed the driver once more, though he thought his own escape may well now be impossible.

"Damn it, woman, you heard the man," Kota yelled. "Get out of here! It's too late for us, but you can save yourself! Just promise me you'll tell the world our story!"

Chapter 5: An Alternate Route



The sidewalks were still packed as Rome and the others rode away from the accident and toward the crossroads of Park and Main. This was the main strip of town, with a bank on the left-hand corner, a pizza place with apartments above it on the right-hand corner, and a diner and a parking garage at the other end of the road. The throng of people was still thick at the intersection, but there was much less traffic across the way where Park Street turned into West Street. West Street was their escape route and the best way to Donny's house if they could make it through the gross mass of humanity before them. There was little time to spare; the townsfolk were getting higher and more unruly by the second, and their ire was turning toward Rome and his friends.

Some of the more flamboyant members of the crowd swore and jeered at the guys as they made their getaway. The crowd's initial concern over the crash was eventually replaced with hostility as Rome's continued cries of "naked pedophiles!" elicited harsh responses. A heavily tattooed man with purple braids and a pink skirt threw a nearly full twenty-four-ounce can of Milwaukee's Best Ice at them (the city council had made open containers and public intoxication legal). The can whizzed by Rome's head without contact.

"Take back your hate!" the man screamed. Several other people cheered.

They crossed Main Street and started up West Street, where, thankfully, there were no naked bike riders or vegan food trucks. Sure, West Street was a little sketchier, especially at night, but getting stabbed in the chest with a knife was better than getting stabbed in the buttock with a dick. The street had a more blue-collar vibe, with a small lawn mower repair shop with red vinyl siding located just past the diner. The building seemed to actively repel hippies with its line of used equipment near the side entrance. A couple of older rednecks, wearing jeans and flannel shirts despite the rising midday heat, loitered near the machines. The next building housed an HVAC repair business, and a few rusty utility vans were parked in its driveway.

The friends didn't need air conditioning or lawn mower repair, so they drifted left toward the abandoned parking garage. This was where the awesome kids from school came to smoke and sell all sorts of illicit merchandise. At night, they would go to the top floor and throw bottles at drunk millennial shitbags walking home after getting hammered off of fifteen-dollar craft beer on tap. Currently, a group of four high school students were hanging out in front of the barricaded entrance, vaping and smoking cigs; others had skateboards and were grinding on the concrete steps and rails leading out of the building. A row of empty forties lined the wall

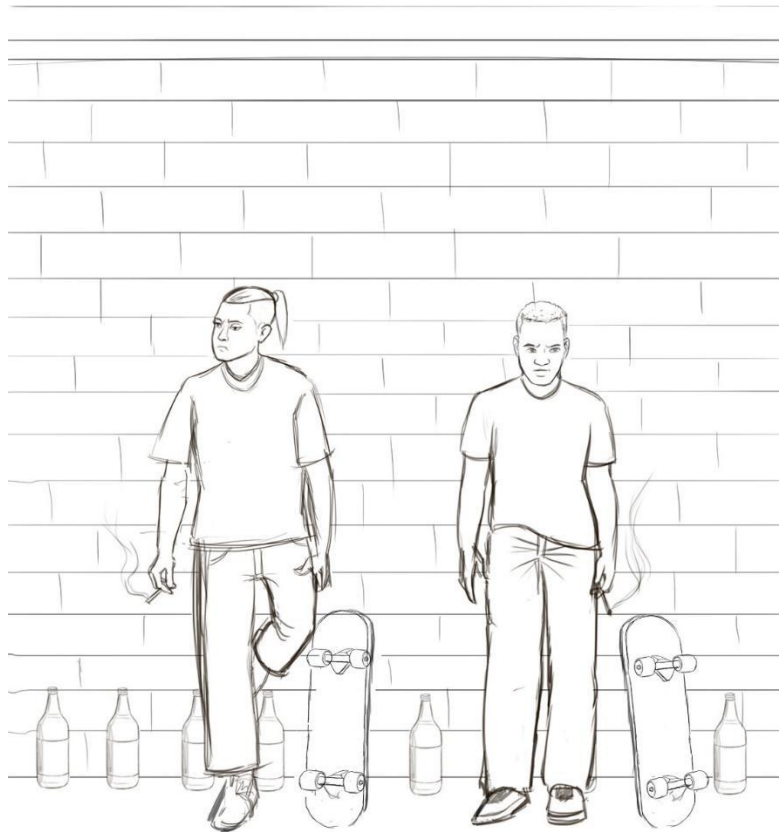
— the traditional method of showing respect for one of their fallen buddies. More than likely, someone had recently OD'd.

“Hey!” a voice yelled from the garage.

Kota looked over and saw Hunter and JP standing apart from the rest, leaning on the brown brick wall. Hunter was smoking a cigarette, his blond hair pulled into a ponytail at the top of his head and everything below the crown completely shaved. His eyes were icy as death amidst his sharp features, and he wore baggy jeans that nearly covered his shoes. JP stood next to him, a hint of a scowl on his face. He usually looked a little pissed, especially in class. A package of Backwoods was sticking out of his pocket, always at the ready. While JP and Hunter were in the same grade as Kota and the rest, they generally hung out with older kids outside of school. They were part of the skater crowd, who did a much larger assortment of tasty, tasty drugs. They had both done time in Westwood, the state juvenile detention facility.

“What are you up to?” Kota asked, veering off toward Hunter.

The other three followed suit, skidding to a halt next to the garage. They simultaneously dropped their giddy and childish screams and put on more serious and withdrawn personas. Their attempts to blend in weren't well received. The older kids smoking cigarettes near the entrance stared at them, as if waiting for an excuse to kick their asses. Their loose T-shirts and gold chains swayed from their skinny bodies, indicating that they were probably a little drunk. The sounds of skateboards rattling off the ground echoed from the cavernous depths behind them, and the scent of rainwater and urine wafted from the entrance. Richie started to feel a little intimidated under the weight of their eyes. Luckily, when Hunter and JP acknowledged their presence with a head tilt, the older kids turned their attention elsewhere. If Hunter was willing to talk to them, then they were okay.



"Chilling," Hunter said, before turning to Rome. "Did you just get hit by a fucking station wagon?"

"Kind of. I hope I didn't hurt her car too much. It wasn't my fault, though. It's the diversity rally and naked bike ride down there. We barely managed to escape. I've never seen so many gross, uncircumcised shlongs in my life."

JP laughed bitterly. He looked down the street and shook his head. As one of the few black kids in school, he could tell that everything about this town was fake. The welcoming he got when he first moved here was fake. Most of the kids who tried to be friends with him were fake. All the school walkouts for the marginalized were fake. The way everyone swarmed around him on his first day of class, like he was some sort of animal on loan from the zoo, was fake, patronizing, and insulting. No matter where he went, everyone and everything he saw was completely artificial.

"Diversity," JP scoffed. "What fucking diversity? This is the whitest motherfucking town on the planet. All I see down there are old, sagging white tits and cottage cheese stomachs."

"It's pretty fucking gross," Donny said, "but you should go check it out. They'll probably buy you a house."

"Fuck that. That's just how it starts. Next thing they'll be trying to drag me to their gay pride parades because they think I owe them something, like we're on the same team. Before you know it, I'll have dudes in assless chaps on my front porch doing splits. I'm good with that. Now, if a couple of hot lesbians wanted to stop by, that'd be all right."

"I think Ms. Bennett is a lesbian. She might be the kind of person who'd be into that. Plus, she seems like the type of stupid bitch who would try to teach you that poetry is really just rap. Really, *really* shitty rap."

JP smirked a little. He was quite famous in school for banging older chicks. Ms. Bennett was in her mid-twenties, so to him, this was a very real prospect. He took a long drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke disdainfully toward all the douchebags at the diversity festival.

"Is she one of those crazy bitches who fucks all her students?" Hunter asked.

Kota shuddered. Crazy was an understatement. He remembered all the times she had to stop class because she was overwhelmed with emotion. All the other females in the room would run to comfort her as she sat crying behind her desk. The worst incident, however, was when Rome crossed the line after one of her feminist rants. She went on and on about how much worse life was for women than men, and how horrible life was for sexual minorities. She was constantly looking over at Rome as she spoke, like he was personally responsible for all the injustice in the world. In reply, he ripped down all the LGBTQIA+ "facts" posters from the school hallways and replaced them with his own fliers, which claimed that "one hundred percent of these facts are either exaggerated or made up." He never got busted, but there was a school assembly over the incident. She used the opportunity to get on the auditorium stage and start screaming and crying about how furious she was. She declared, with typical sentimentalist outrage, that the culprit would be brought to "justice." Kota was a little disappointed at Rome for ripping down the posters, but he was more disappointed that Rome had fallen for such an easy trap. It was obvious that she was just antagonizing him to get a reaction. That reaction gave her the excuse to make a speech in front of the whole school, where everyone's eyes were on her once again. It was nauseatingly manipulative and egocentric behavior, and her attempts to be tough and intimidating were embarrassing to watch.

"She seems pretty unstable," Kota said as the memories slowly played out in his mind, "and she spends half of class yelling at Rome."

Richie interrupted Kota by elbowing him gently in the side. He pointed at the road ahead. Rome noticed the gesture and looked up as well, seeing a group of five women walking down the hill toward them. They looked way too similar to the lemonade stand lady for comfort. The two in front were wearing plaid shirts, shorts, and hiking boots. Most had short hair, some spiked, others slicked to one side, Bieber-style. Rome knew the type well. They told the world they meant business because they had tattoos and wore underwear with dick holes in them. They spoke with deep voices and drank beer. Bitter beer. Dark beer.

"Oh shit. The lemonade bitch *did* end up forming a posse. We need to go," Rome said.

"No, we don't, dude. For once in your life, please try to calm down," Kota hissed, grabbing Rome by the upper arm.

Rome wasn't listening. Adrenaline began to pump through his veins, and he rubbed his hands against his bike grips repeatedly. The women were getting closer. He felt trapped, like if he didn't make a move within the next thirty seconds, he was going to get a Stone Cold Steve Stunner to the face. He whipped his head around, looking for an escape route. The only other

way was back toward Main Street and the diversity festival. It was a catch-22, according to a book he had never read. He stepped on one of his pedals apprehensively, letting the others know that he wanted to go. His friends tried to remain cool in front of Hunter and JP, but he was making it impossible. Rome blinked repeatedly as if his brain were short circuiting. Kota, knowing Rome was about to have another meltdown, tried to calm his buddy.

"That's not her. She lives on the other end of town."

"She could have circled around and met with her friends. We should jet. They look pissed."

"They're fucking lesbians, dude," Donny said. "They always look pissed."

"You both need to chill out on that shit," Kota said. "I know you're just retaliating for all the bullshit Ms. Bennett and every other liberal has put us through at school, but nobody is going to see it that way. If someone hears you, they're going to charge you with harassment and hate crimes and whatever else they can dredge up. It's just the way it is. They are allowed to belittle, attack, and provoke you whenever they want. It's been part of the school curriculum for years, and now it's both accepted and encouraged public behavior, even by adults. You just need to hang on for four more years, and we'll be out of that school and hopefully out of this town. Just stay chill and keep your mouths shut as they pass by."

Rome's anxiety rose to new heights as he watched the lesbians walk toward them. He remembered the heinous look on the lady who chased them down the road earlier, the thirst for vengeance written on her twisted face. It would be difficult to evade them climbing up such a steep hill on their bikes. He turned his head back toward the four-way intersection and spotted a glimmer of hope. Although people were crowding down Park Street in such numbers that it was closed to vehicles, and while the right turn on Main Street was choked with gridlock and the sidewalk overtaken by falafel tents, the left-hand side was still navigable with their bikes. If they hopped on Main, they could sneak out between the diversity festival and the aggressive-looking chicks headed down the hill. Plus, there was the added bonus that it would bring them near his house and the Hobo Hut, a secret fort they had built in his backyard. To Rome, it was the only logical choice.

"No, dude. I have a bad feeling about this," Rome said. "We need to get the fuck out of here. New plan! We need to go to the Hobo Hut!"

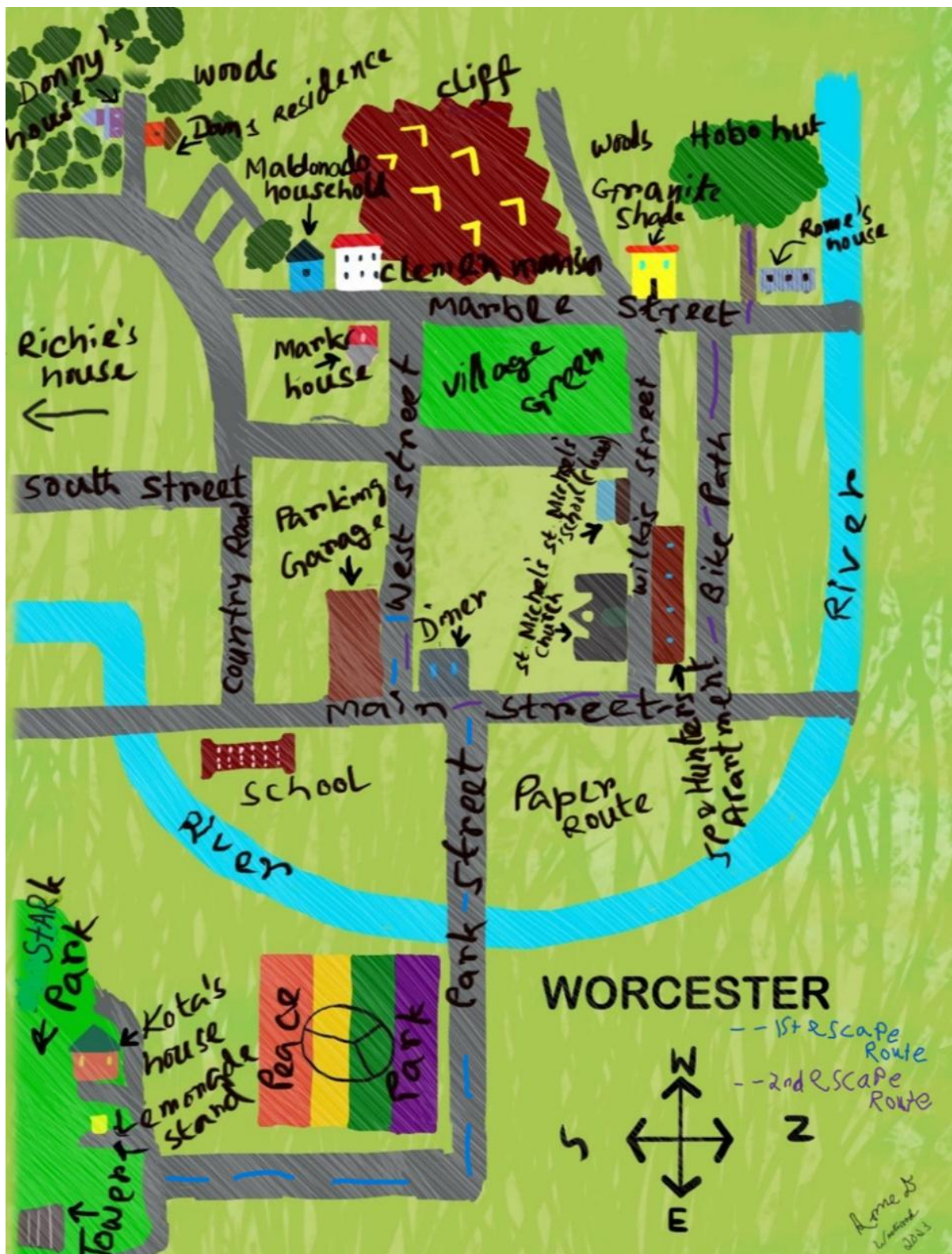
Kota inhaled sharply as his friend pedaled away, leaving puffs of dust behind him. No one was impressed. The sun was not getting any lower, and everyone was hot, sweaty, and tired. Richie kicked at some of the grass poking up between the curb and the sidewalk, openly pouting. Hunter and JP both had perplexed looks on their faces. They stared at Kota as if to say, "How the fuck do you put up with that idiot?"

Donny had had enough. "I say fuck 'em. We can go straight up the hill and be at my place in five minutes."

As Kota watched Rome pedal back toward town, frustration and exhaustion settled heavily on his shoulders. Having a complete tweaker for a best friend could be difficult. Still, Kota remembered the time Rome took the fall for him when he vandalized the school bathroom with wet gobs of toilet paper. Kota remembered the time Rome took the fall for Donny, Richie, and himself when they were ding-dong ditching, and he gave himself up to the cops so the rest of them could get away. Rome was good like that, despite his sporadic episodes of pure idiocy.

"No, we'll go after him. Lord knows he'll probably get his ass kicked by a mob or something," Kota replied.

Kota nodded at JP and Hunter before getting on his bike. JP gave a slight smile and blew some smoke out of his nose, respecting the man for his loyalty. Richie and Donny reluctantly followed as Kota made his way back toward Main Street. The thrum from the crowd was louder than ever, and a few butchered chords from an electric guitar emanated from the Peace Park. The music was going to begin at any moment, and people were about to get really rowdy and obnoxious. If the four friends wanted to make it to the Hobo Hut without getting molested, they would have to do it now.



Chapter 6: Sanctuary



The four friends pedaled down Main Street, weaving in and out of traffic. People continued to pour into the diversity festival, and it was a complete cluster fuck. There were only two small public parking lots in Worcester, and they filled up fast. Cars were backed up toward the edge of town, their horns blaring. The smell of gourmet curried chicken salad and garlic mixed with exhaust and springtime heat to create a headache-inducing stench. A group of four cookie-cutter nonconformists in their mid-twenties walked down the sidewalk to their right. They talked extremely loudly and strode three abreast so that no one else could get by. Surely, they were badass and tough, but they had hearts of gold and would fight endlessly for social justice. Their multiple facial piercings and full-sleeve tattoos showed that they wanted to be treated like everyone else and did not look the least bit desperate and pathetic. A few more warriors congregated in front of the coffee shop, sitting in pretentious wrought iron seats. No doubt they were discussing the local art and CBD products sold at the café.

The rest of the similarly attired crowd was becoming more intoxicated and brazen. The friends would need to get off the main road and onto a side street if they didn't want to be indoctrinated by the latest crap college campuses spewed throughout the country. To their left, Wilkes Street was hopelessly congested. Beyond Wilkes, however, past the throngs of vehicles and groups of clueless activists, they spotted a gateway of hope: two lampposts covered with ivy marked the beginning of a bike path that would take them to Rome's house.

They cut through the traffic jam, moving in single file. Vehicles honked at the four boys as they navigated through the mayhem. One of the cars they cut in front of was a brand-new Tesla with shining black paint, and the driver was not happy. The young motorist stuck her head out of the window, her brown hair dangling next to a tattoo of some sort of flowery bush on her shoulder. She swore at the four boys for not obeying the traffic laws, her menacing expression looking comical coming from someone wearing a thin green summer dress. Donny kicked her headlight and kept going. At this point, he was welcoming a fistfight. They all were, except for maybe Kota.

At the other end of the street, just past the lampposts, there was a newly opened green space — a community garden — for the townspeople. It was erected on what used to be the Duchovney Beverage Center, a small business Rome's parents had started in the nineties that specialized in selling micro and craft brews from all over the country. They had opened the store right as the microbrew craze was getting really big on the East Coast and also dealt in kegs and specially requested wines and liquor. The family made bank for well over a decade, but a

few years ago, the city used eminent domain to buy the property for a fraction of what it was worth. They got away with the low price because there was a new medical marijuana dispensary opening a few blocks away with a neighboring liquor store run by the same owners. The town noted that most major stores were selling craft brews these days, and that it was a fair price. Both of Rome's parents now worked at the supermarket, where his father had been demoted to cart pusher after a couple of "managerial disputes."

The community garden rapidly fell into disrepair. The plots and boxes filled with tomatoes, kale, and root vegetables had become overgrown with weeds, and random jackasses had planted pot plants sporadically throughout. The homeless had since taken up residence, and wet sleeping bags, shopping carts, syringes, and trash bags now littered the area.

As Rome passed the decaying site of his former family business, he was greeted by a bum with a spaghetti-sauce-splattered shirt. Sweat poured down his purple, unshaven face, and his bald head and forearms were sunburned to oblivion. He swayed back and forth, grasping at a green shrub at his side in an effort to stay upright. His vacant eyes stared at the crowds who walked by him as if he weren't even there, and blood trickled down from a track mark in the crook of his arm. A wet spot on his crotch grew bigger as the four friends passed. The stench of piss wafted into their nostrils.

"Dude, can you believe this shit?" Donny asked as they pedaled away from the bedlam of downtown.

Rome didn't even respond. All he could do was keep his eyes fixed forward and tell himself that they would be at the Hobo Hut in just a few minutes. The air grew quieter and then still as they continued down the bike path. Although the energy in the atmosphere grew less confrontational as they exited the city center, it was far from pleasant. To their left was a set of train tracks, and beyond that was a retainer wall that separated the bike path from Wilkes Street. To the right was a three-story-high office building with vinyl siding — the last holdout in a section of town that was nearly abandoned. No one really cared about this area, probably because it didn't have any farm-to-table restaurants in it. The smooth blacktop of the bike path and the well-manicured shrubs that lined the way were the only things in good repair.

Past the retainer wall and across from a condemned house on Wilkes Street, the high arches of their Gothic-Revival-style Catholic church towered above the other buildings in the downtrodden neighborhood. In attempts to repair some of the most recent vandalism, restoration experts had placed plastic bags over some of the statues in front of the church. Once again, their faith had been targeted, but the townspeople just brushed it aside as activism against an ancient and backwards aggressor. They would not be satisfied until all Christians were reprogrammed or had fled underground. The four friends understood the message but were not intimidated. Not in the least.

Under the church's shadows, the paint store, pet store, laundromat, and hardware store were located in a single complex that looked to be on the verge of shuttering its doors. Various tags from local dealers graffitied the brick walls, and old fast food cups and other trash had accumulated near the foundation. The shared parking lot was empty, save for a couple of picnic tables taken over by even more of the homeless. As the four boys biked to freedom, a man in a cotton beanie and red flannel took a shit behind the building's dumpster. They did their best to ignore him.

No matter how fast they pedaled, no matter how far they tried to run, they could not break free from the unrecognizable hellscape their childhood town had become. There was either someone naked, defecating, shooting up, or getting drunk. Worcester had turned into an experiment for the rich and clueless — a place with a low population where the wealthy from out of state could come in and force their will and their politics more easily. They had idiotic delusions that they could turn the world into a giant liberal arts campus, starting one small community at a time. Instead, they drove up housing prices, forcing the locals to move out into the country. And if the locals ever complained, they were called backwards, hate-filled nativist hicks who deserved to live in poverty. Worcester was now nothing more than a tourist destination for addicts and perverts.

They stopped for a moment at the four-way intersection at the end of the bike path to regain their bearings and catch their breath. This was Rome's neighborhood, and he looked around with a hint of sadness in his eyes. He used to live in a much better section of town, but his family had to move after they were forced to give up the store and property taxes skyrocketed. He hated everything about Worcester, and he hated living in this neighborhood, especially. The pretentious co-op was on the right, a recent and more modern addition meant to spruce up the neighborhood. The plan had failed horribly, and the area remained a shithole. Most people drove to the co-op because the bike path and sidewalks were filled with vagrants living near the train tracks. When the city planners saw that their idea wasn't improving anything, the town hired a Hispanic artist to put up professional graffiti around the alleyways, and they called the section revitalized. The city council was very current and relevant to the national conversation.

Directly ahead was the masonry shed and mill for crafting stone products. Giant slabs of marble and granite filled a large lot to the left of the buildings. Trains came at all hours of the night making deliveries. To the right of the shed was Rome's street, a dilapidated road with potholes and no sidewalks. Trailers were set between the pavement and the river, giving access to the water and making it a favorite spot for junkies. The street was in such disrepair that people risked totaling their cars every time they exited their driveways. It was a far cry from the Village Green neighborhood where he had grown up.



"Dude, why does your street suck so much?" Donny asked.

"Because the stupid fucking plow guys plow it four times a day in winter, even when it only snows half an inch. They try to pile on as much overtime as possible, so they just keep doing it over and over."

"If I were one of those guys, I'd plow your road down to the dirt just to collect extra bennies," Donny said. "Then I'd kick your door in and plow your sweet cheeks."

"Dude, what the fuck?" Kota asked, not wanting a brawl to erupt between his friends.

"What? We'd be at my house by now if it weren't for this asshole tweeking out over nothing. Why are we even here? Your house fucking sucks, dude. We've got better food, and the bong's back at my place."

"Because we're trying to avoid people, you fucking asshole. Just shut the fuck up for once. God, you're a fucking dick," Rome said, riding forward on the bike path toward the woods.

The four friends crossed Marble Street and headed down the cracked pavement past the sawmills. They biked by Rome's double-wide trailer, which had seen better days. As always, the sun-bleached drapes were closed to keep any assholes who wandered off the bike path from looking in. The skirting had multiple holes throughout, probably from Rome or his brother Scott losing their shit over something and kicking it. The white vinyl siding was stained green due to its close proximity to the river. Two broken-down 1930s-style hot rods sat to the right of the driveway, rusty and wheelless. These were "projects" that his dad worked on to relieve stress. Combined with the old camper he was working on, the Duchovney's front lawn looked more

like a sprawling field of debris than anything else. Rome didn't say a word as they rode by, splashing through a couple of muddy puddles and pissing off a swarm of mosquitos.

They plunged into the surrounding forest behind Rome's house. A well-worn dirt path led them through the trees. They had set up a fort about twenty yards into the woods, close to the banks of the river. Rome named it the Hobo Hut back when they were kids, not once considering the now very real prospect that they might one day be homeless. It consisted of a fallen tree that rested against another tree about eight feet off the ground, and they had used broken branches to construct an adequate shelter for the four of them to sleep in during the summer.



In front of the Hobo Hut were four lawn chairs for hanging out and listening to music. They had been using the chairs since they were ten, and it became one of their favorite places to rip butts and take shots at around age twelve. A small firepit covered with an old grate was dug out in their midst, set up specifically for cooking ramen and hamburgers. A plastic rake lay nearby for clearing out leaves and debris when they wanted to start a fire. Next to the ramen pit was

an old stump that had been pulled up and sawed off; it served as an excellent table. A green, daisy-shaped watering jug that Rome had stolen from an old lady's garden lay on its side near the cooking area. There was a spot for peeing and passing kidney stones off in the distance.

They dropped their bikes on the ground, and everyone except Donny fell to their knees. They were finally home, away from the grossness. Rome, Kota, and Richie bowed down and kissed the earth, resting their foreheads on the cool dirt. Donny went straight for his lawn chair, a little less dramatic than his friends. While he was glad to be in the safety of the woods, he would still much rather be at his house. He kicked some stones at his feet while the other three continued to grovel on their hands and knees outside of the fort. Eventually, Richie stood up and made his way inside the Hobo Hut, but not before rousing Kota and Rome from their prayers of thanksgiving. Rome looked around at the serenity of the forest with blinking eyes, still trying to come to terms with what had transpired over the last half hour or so.

"What the fuck happened to this town?" he said angrily as he got to his feet and walked over to one of the lawn chairs. "Every fucking day there's a march or rally or some shit. Why can't we just have a normal weekend? Are people that bored? Do they really have it so good that they have to invent causes and pretend like they are discriminated against just to have a reason to get up in the morning? Do they really need to invent enemies and create drama to feel like life is worth living?"

"Relax, dude," Kota said, patting him on the shoulder. "You don't want to turn into your dad."

"Fuck that. So what if I turn into him? I thought my dad was just pissed off and bitter because we had to move from Village Green to this shithole, but he's right, dude. All everyone in this town does is get high all day, have sex, and then demand people who have actual jobs to pay their bills."

"Kind of like us?" Kota quipped.

"No, nothing like us," Rome said, madder than ever. "We are nothing like them! They are fucking pussies! They go to college using their parents' credit for loans, have the times of their lives, and then blame people who can't afford to go to school for all their problems when they leave. They have it better than everyone else, yet it's still not good enough. They overcompensate for their spoiled upbringings by pretending that they are heroic survivors of prejudice and then act out for attention. They pretend like they are hardcore by smoking in public and going to rallies because they know there won't be any repercussions. Why won't there be any repercussions? Because if anyone, like the police, confronts them while they harass innocent people who are trying to walk to work, they can just flop like soccer players and claim police brutality. They are so sheltered and rich they can get a lawyer to make all their problems disappear. They're the types of little bitches at school who hit you, cry 'safety,' and then run behind the teacher and stick their tongues out at you. They're brats who have never learned how to take a beating, fucking posers in the worst way. At least when we get in trouble, we take our punishments like men instead of screaming and crying until someone else fights our battles for us. Those people down at the naked bike ride are all the sickening products of people like Ms. Bennett. They're sanctimonious, manipulative cowards. They're full-fledged adults who gang up on kids like us and try to erase who we are by shaming us, and then they pretend to be the victims when we fight back. There is no privilege like college privilege, and there is no entitlement like student entitlement. They think they're badass and tough because

they can walk around harassing people who think differently than they do and never suffer any consequences, and they think they're even more badass when they stick it to the 'corporations.' But I've got a fucking newsflash for them: Just because you dislike the one percent who make more money than you do, does not make you good people, and it certainly doesn't make you courageous advocates for the less fortunate. *Fuck off!*"

"They're filthy hippies, dude," Donny said. "They're scumbags! Did you see that piece of shit who stole the hula hoop? They think they can walk around, wagging their dicks at people, and nothing will ever happen to them. Eventually they'll wag it at the wrong person, and they'll get the shit stabbed out of them. The problem will solve itself," Donny said.

"I don't know if it will, bro. Think about it. If the cops arrested that guy, everyone would have lost their shit. They would have claimed some crap about the police being too aggressive and escalating the situation. Fuck that. I hope someone cuts his dick off and then beats his ass to death, but it still won't be enough. Every day there are teachers like Ms. Bennett, forcing their views on us and all their other students, failing us if we refuse to follow their lesson plan. They're creating an army of bobble-headed clones who never question how batshit crazy they are, because if they do, they'll be labeled as hatemongers and be completely ostracized. Do you know what I saw while I was going through Autumn's room today? She had an article on her laptop about how those brainwashed scumbags in Marshfield are starting a movement to eliminate the word 'father' from legal documents and replacing it with the term 'secondary parent.' I'm not kidding. Secondary parent? So men aren't even allowed to be fathers anymore? Fuck that. Their idea of progress is to turn guys into sperm donors who have no say in anything. It will all be one bisexual orgy, and those who refuse to participate will be forced to live in the woods. Thank God we have the Hobo Hut."

"You done?" Donny asked, a little tired of Rome's rant. "Why don't you take a seat and chill the fuck out. We'll rest for a second and then head back to my place and smoke up. Lord Bongmopolis is waiting."

"Yeah, just try to relax. Did you at least manage to steal any more weed when you were snooping around my house and in my sister's room, you fucking asshole?" Kota said, a little pissed at Rome for going on an unauthorized weed run in his home.

"No," Rome said, heading for the chairs and reaching for his smokes. "I got so mad I forgot what I was doing and left. But I think you're right: a couple of hits out of Lord Bongmopolis will set me straight. Does anybody else want a cigarette?"

"I do!" Richie said.

Richie had just returned with a mysterious brown paper bag he had dug up from the floor of their fort. He grabbed the smoke and sat in his lawn chair, an odd smile on his lips. Kota lit his cigarette, and Richie stared contentedly into the woods, as if he didn't have a care in the world. The other three, still worked up about the events downtown, were a little leery of his sunny disposition.

"What's your problem, dude?" Rome asked.

"Oh, nothing," Richie responded, taking another drag.

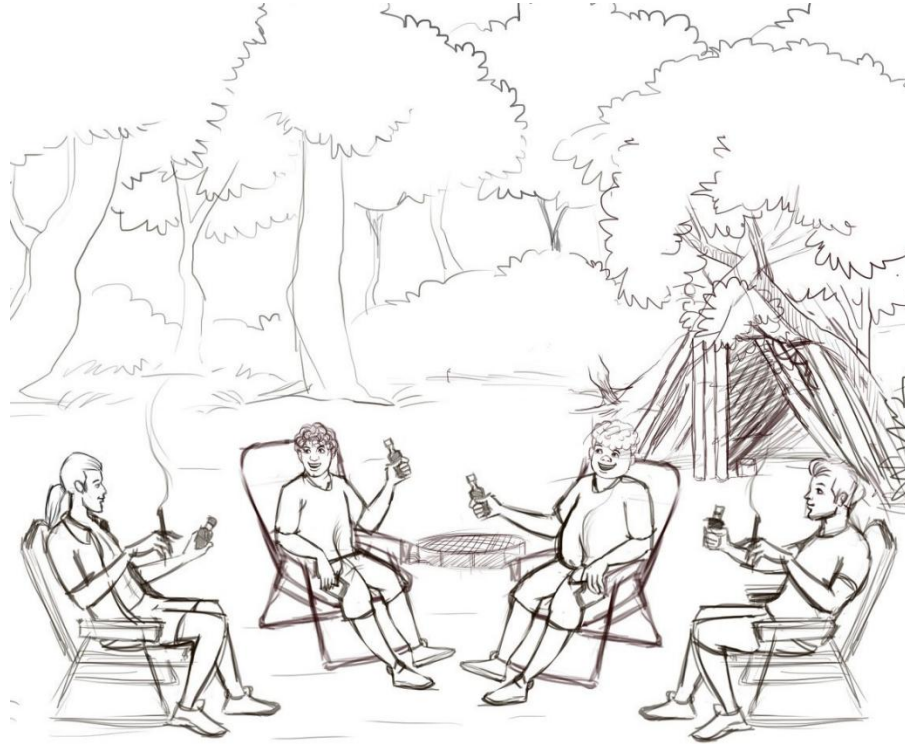
"Did you blast ass or something? Why are you smiling? It's creeping me out."

Richie reached into the paper bag and pulled out four very dirty airplane bottles of Captain Morgan and four grimy eight-ounce bottles of Pepsi. His buddies gasped simultaneously as he brushed the dirt off of them. Richie may have been fat as hell and smelled like perpetual

cheese, but he was always full of surprises. He felt like Santa as he distributed the gifts amongst his friends. The day was finally turning around.

"Whoa, where did you get these?" Rome asked, grabbing a shot.

"I buried them the last time we got high here. I'm glad I did because this seems like an emergency."



Once the precious elixir had been distributed, they held their nip bottles aloft and had a silent toast. They took their shots joyfully, something working out in their favor for once. They looked around as the burning liquor warmed their icy spirits, and they basked in the quiet. The silence made them realize that they may have been a little too loud and careless before. While the Hobo Hut was fairly secure, they could never be too careful, especially not with this many people out and about. Their teachers (and most of the townspeople) didn't believe in "property" and would often go for leisurely strolls through other people's backyards. If someone overheard what they were saying, they would be hounded out of school and antagonized more than they already were. Rome let out a forlorn sigh as he realized the gravity of the situation.

"Well, I guess I better get used to this place, because I'd rather be homeless and live in the woods than be turned into whatever the fuck that was."

"Fuck everyone at school, and fuck everyone in town! We don't need them," Donny proudly exclaimed. "We're the BRB Boys, and we just don't give a fuck!"

Kota let out a long, exaggerated breath and slowly brought his palm to his forehead. They were having an epiphany moment, and Donny was using it as an opportunity to try out one of his new lame-ass nicknames. They always sucked nads, but he shamelessly pushed them on the rest of the guys no matter how stupid they might be. Kota knew he would keep using it until someone asked what it meant.

"The BRB Boys? What does that stand for? The Ball Rubbing Bandits?" Kota said skeptically.

"The Butt Ramming Bigots?" Rome enquired.

"The Belligerently Raging Boners?" Richie guessed.

"No, you assholes. The Back Road Burnouts. We're the BRB Boys, baby."

There was a moment of silence as the stupidity of Donny's words fell like concrete on the forest floor.

"Donny, every time you say something, I want to punch myself in the nuts just to make my brain stop hurting," Kota said.

"Go to hell, Dakota. You always got to dump on everything I say. You heard Rome. These fucking liberals attack us wherever we go, forcing us into the backwoods and backroads. It's the perfect name for us."

"Well, Donny, I also think the nickname is dumb as fuck, but I at least agree with the spirit of what you're saying," Richie said. "They may have us backed into a corner, but we'll fight to the last man! They say resistance is futile but fuck the Borg!"

"Yeah, fuck the Borg! Now, let's go back to my place and smoke out of Lord Bongmopolis," Donny said, glad someone was finally taking his side.

The four of them grabbed their bikes and headed back toward town. The day was young, and there were still many misadventures to be had!

For more fun and adventures with The BRB Boys, please visit:

www.selbykeithwostpresents.com

Or, to purchase *Hits to the Dome*, the first full volume of *The Chronicles of a Small Town* visit:

www.amazon.com/dp/B0CYY63BYZ

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