

# The Yearbook

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Ryan spent an entire afternoon at the medical school searching for what his inventory sheet described as a “stereotaxic with dog-monkey adapters.” Secretaries and doctors kept referring him to second-floor laboratories, fifth-floor offices, subterranean corridors. At last, in the basement carpentry shop the carpenters told him that they had just built a platform for the device, which was on order. The sawdust on the shop floor reminded Ryan of gerbil cages. Although it was against department policy, he put his numbered sticker on the platform and bicycled home, clipboard balanced on the handlebars, inventory sheets waving in the wind.

This was a Tuesday in June, and here, along the New England coast, the air was taking on its usual damp summer feel. Unable to sublet his half of the apartment, he could not leave until summer’s end. He felt he knew precisely what he wanted to do next with his life: move to Chicago, spend weekends at blues clubs and the Art Institute, apply to chiropractic school. The spine had always struck him as the body’s

core, the tightrope along which happiness flickered, and he wanted to touch and free and ease the fragile filament of it.

When he unlocked his front door, he saw that a blue plastic milk crate, full of books and other items, had appeared on the floor of the empty second bedroom. On top lay a folded white dress shirt, one sleeve trailing over the side, the unbuttoned cuff resting on the dusty wooden floor. "Curtis?" he called, and then went into the living room to lie on the couch. His feet burned, remembering the day's long corridors. When he woke an hour later he knew he was still alone. Solitude always gave the air a certain texture.

No more boxes appeared the next day, or the next. Thursday evening, a woman called and asked for Curtis.

"He's not in," Ryan said.

She told him her name was Johnsia, which she had to spell for him twice.

"That's an unusual name," he said.

"There were dozens of Johnsias in my neighborhood growing up. We got confused with each other all the time." She spoke in such a somber tone that for a moment he nearly believed her. Her voice had the faintest hint of a speech impediment, which took the edge off consonants and made him think of butterscotch. "I've changed my mind," she said, "Don't let him know I called. When do you think he'll be in?"

"I have no idea," Ryan said. "He was supposed to move in last week. I don't know anything else about him. My previous roommate arranged the details."

There was a long pause. "You haven't even met him?"

Ryan felt himself blush. "It all happened at the last minute."

The apartment was on the second floor, on a busy intersection, just above a small breakfast eatery. Each morning Ryan woke hungry, the odor of frying sausage and eggs drifting up through the floorboards and insinuating itself into his bedclothes. Each morning he bicycled to the university inventory department, picked up his clipboard of numbered stickers and went from department to department tracking down

newly purchased equipment. Graduate students let him into biology labs so he could place stickers on weighing scales and blood plasma separators; secretaries took him through underground passages into windowless computer labs. He'd majored in humanities; he liked seeing a side of the university that he'd never encountered.

When Johnsia called again a few nights later, he asked her to describe Curtis.

"We weren't close for a long time," she said. "We were too close. Too close to get to know each other, does that make sense?" Although her words expressed doubt, she spoke without hesitation, as if she felt certain even about uncertainty. "I haven't spoken to him in a long while. I've been out of town. I don't know why I'm calling for him now. I'm not sure he'd want me to call."

Ryan sat down in the frayed wicker chair by the phone.

"I tried his old number," she continued. "One of those electronic voices told me to call here. The kind that over-enunciates, as if you were a stupid child." She laughed.

"If you give me your phone number," he said, "I'll let you know when he arrives. I won't tell him anything."

She laughed again. "So, you like complicity." Perhaps it was an accent that colored her voice—the way she said the letter *s*, not in a lisp, but with an enlarged sibilance.

He paused. "That's one way to put it. Yes. I've always liked complicity."

Later, he went into the empty second bedroom. His previous roommate had taken everything, even the cover to the overhead lamp, so that only a bare bulb hung down. A dustpan with gray fluff in it remained in the corner near the closet. He bent over the blue milk crate and lifted the shirt that covered it. Underneath lay a thesaurus, six worn paperback thrillers, an alarm clock wrapped in its cord, a box of fluorescent crayons, a white silk scarf, a high-school yearbook, a sweatshirt and a carton of one hundred plain white envelopes with an automatic pencil sticking out of it. He fingered the scarf, then put everything back. The shirt he folded neatly

and returned to the top and then, before he stood up fully, he crouched again and pulled out the sleeve so that it spilled down the side of the crate.

The next time she called, he said, "I looked through some of his belongings."

He heard—he thought—the faintest change of breath, even though her voice remained cool.

"He's moved in then?"

"Only one blue milk crate that's been here for several days. Not much in it. Some clothes, some envelopes, his high-school yearbook, crayons."

"I can't tell you how curious I am to see what he looked like in high school. He never showed me any photographs of himself from earlier points in his life."

He was now beginning to detect an ironic tone in the formal shapings of some of her sentences. Perhaps she had grown up, as he had, in a working-class family in a working-class town, had gone to a prestigious university, had adapted without allowing herself to be impressed.

"Would you like to meet somewhere?" he asked. "I could show you the yearbook."

After a delay—he imagined her caught by surprise and having to recalibrate her tone of amusement—she answered. "All right. Let's meet then, and you can show me the yearbook. That sounds dangerous. For you, I mean. He's likely to show up just when you're carrying it out the door."

The next morning, Friday, a light drizzle fell, and he was not assigned to tag any equipment. Instead, he had to type into a computer those items that he and previous inventory clerks had successfully tagged, along with the corresponding numbers. There was a backlog of data to enter. He worked on an ancient terminal, whose monitor displayed skeletal green letters on a black background. The items that the other clerks had tagged sounded much more interesting than the ones he had been assigned: cell disruption bomb, cast acrylic head phantom hole, lesion maker. Deep in the physics, chemistry and biology labs of the university, life had attained a

complexity not found in the rest of world, where coffee cups, sneakers, mayonnaise and paper clips had all become so familiar that they faded, hardly existed. He felt that now he understood something about the need for scientific inquiry: it provided reasons for new devices, for new terminology, for throwing out the old. Who could imagine a need to make lesions? Yet a need had been found, an instrument manufactured.

The rain had stopped by the time he left work, leaving the air cooler and less steamy. He dried off his bicycle seat with a Kleenex and rode home. For dinner he made curried potatoes with chutney and eggplant salad, and drank a glass of red wine. It was important, he believed, to treat oneself well, so that one would feel comfortable treating others well. When the time came, he retrieved the yearbook from the empty second bedroom. The blue ink had rubbed off the raised letters on the cover, which was made of a gray leatherlike substance that felt slightly greasy. Only by holding it to the light could he read BELL SPRINGS PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL.

She was standing just outside the café when he approached. They had not exchanged descriptions, but he recognized her immediately by the intense way she slouched. She was perhaps a few years older than he. She wore denim cutoffs, a lemon-colored T-shirt, and a loose black long-sleeve shirt, unbuttoned down the front. Her short brown hair fell so straight and fine that the tips of her ears poked through. A hollowness to her face suggested either an illness in her recent past or a metabolism in overdrive. When they shook hands, he noticed two black threads protruding from her sleeve like antennae.

He liked her eyes, brown, solemn and, in a certain sense, *fat*, as if in contradiction to the ascetic lines of her body; they did not waver from looking at him.

"Let's have some coffee," she said, and held the door for him.

None of the café's chairs matched, and all seemed to have been bought at garage sales or fished out of junkyards. Johnsie did not order coffee, but rather iced tea, and he followed

suit. When they looked around for a table to sit at, he headed for one with two huge, overstuffed maroon leather chairs next to each other. They made him feel cozy.

"What do you do for a living?" he asked. Immediately her eyes became less interesting; he could see it was the wrong kind of question to ask.

"I work for the electric company," she said. "I read electric meters."

They did not speak as they sipped their drinks. In the corner, two middle-aged women played chess. By the windows, a teenager with freshly-trimmed-looking hair sat alone, slurping from a mug with a guilty air, as if at any minute someone might require him to show proof he was old enough to drink coffee. The only sounds were the groans of buses passing outside, the tinkling of ice cubes in glasses and the occasional felt-muffled whack of a chessman moving into battle.

Johnsia slid the yearbook toward her and began leafing through the pages. He leaned in next to her and they examined the rows of photographs, all polished with a professional sheen that only highlighted the not-yet-fully-grown faces. The smiles looked forced, or else naïve. The students with mustaches had rushed things, and those with perfectly coiffed hair had only called attention to the immaturity of their foreheads, their cheekbones. Their eyes gave everything away. One could tell at a glance who had organized the prom and who had avoided it. One could tell at a glance who had had sex and who had not.

Johnsia turned pages idly and then stopped. Curtis faced the camera with closed eyes. He wore braces, even at seventeen, but grinned as if he didn't care, or perhaps as if—the heavy eyebrows suggested this—he were flashing weaponry. Despite the expression, his face was handsome: something in the line of the jaw, the soft mounds of the eyelids, the simply combed hair that had the rich coloration of a wheat field.

Johnsia gave an amused snort, riffled the remaining pages with her thumb and closed the book. She slid it back to him.

"Is that all you wanted to see?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"You're the most nonchalantly obsessed person I've ever seen."

She smiled then and gave him a steady look. "Maybe I'm simply obsessed with appearing nonchalant." She tapped the book with her short, white fingernails. "I don't know, do I seem obsessed with him? I'm not sure I liked him to that great a degree. We were very close for a short while. Not much more than a month. When it's that short a time, when you spend almost every day with someone and then break it off, you feel as if you've missed something. Even if you probably haven't."

He nodded and suggested they go for a walk through the town green. The lamps had come on, even though dusk had hardly fallen, and their white globes made him think, *Too many moons*. The rain earlier in the day had darkened the wooden benches. He talked about his childhood, thinking that perhaps it would be elemental enough to interest her—he told her how, when he was very young, he would stand with his ankles in his grandfather's pond and place a leaf in the shallows; then he stirred up sand with his foot and, when the water cleared, the leaf seemed to have vanished, as if by magic. She told him of the yearly festival in her hometown, in the autumn, devoted to apples, with a parade and booths selling pies and fritters and cider and turnovers, even apple soup; when she was sixteen she had refused the nomination to be the Apple Queen because she had gotten sick of apples. She seemed to relax in his presence. He was not tall; he told her he had been called elfin in the past because of the single black eyebrow that ran across his forehead, and because of the slightly springy way he walked. He could sense that she found him appealing. She touched his arm, and they stopped at a restaurant whose tables were covered with checked tablecloths. They drank red wine. He wanted to get rid of the yearbook, perhaps leave it on the empty chair next to him. She reached across the table and pushed aside the thick black

hair along the side of his head; he asked her what she was doing and she said she wanted to check to make sure he did not have pointed ears; he laughed. Wine only made him more aware of her hands, long and thin and prone to folding and unfolding with languid motions. He forgot about the yearbook when they stood up to leave the restaurant. The waiter hurried to hand it to him as they went out the door.

In his apartment they had to wait while he drew all the curtains. The eight tall windows of his bedroom were squeezed together on three walls, with almost no space in between. He had borrowed heavy blue curtains from a friend; they lacked pull cords. He had to stand on a chair and reach with a yardstick to push the drapes together at the top where they hung from the rod. While he worked, she named each item of clothing she was removing. "Now I'm taking off my socks," she said. "Now I'm taking off my brassiere." Slowly the lights of the city were shut out, and the air took on a muffled tone. When at last he turned around and stepped down off the chair, he could not see her in the darkness, but he sensed her, so palpable he felt that he was touching her already, even before his palms brushed her skin.

Through the night, when he woke briefly and only halfway, he thought to himself that what he had been missing most, in however many months it had been, was the smell of another person close to his body. Johnsia's skin had the dark lemony flavor of cumin, the brittle, sweetened-tea aroma of dried oak leaves. He lay there in the dark with his nose near to her shoulder, and the waking and falling asleep he did only seemed to him another kind of breathing, a higher kind, in which sleep was an exhalation, and the awareness of another body an inhalation of something as essential as oxygen.

In the morning he woke to find the other side of the bed empty. For a moment he thought she had gone, but then he heard a faint clacking sound. He swung himself out of bed and walked quietly to stand in the doorway of the second bedroom. Still naked, she sat cross-legged on the floor, looking through the items in the blue milk crate. She held up



the sweatshirt for scrutiny, read a page of one of the thrillers, clicked the automatic pencil to discover there was no lead in it. She unwound the alarm clock's cord and got up to plug it in. When she pressed a button, a primitive electronic voice said haltingly, "The time is 12:00 A.M."

"I remember this," she said. "Every morning, the alarm was set to announce 6:34 A.M. If we didn't wake up, it kept repeating the time, more and more loudly."

Ryan leaned his head against the door frame, feeling the hard wood through his hair. He watched her face intently, but could detect no trace of longing, nothing but a detached curiosity that made him feel sadder than longing might have—he couldn't tell if it was sadness for himself, for her or for the absent roommate, who seemed, in some dreamlike way, to have turned into nothing but these few objects, like one of those doomed characters in Greek mythology.

She even looked through the box of plain white envelopes, as if reading letters that had yet to be written. "That's all," she said, putting things back in the crate. She kept out only the green sweatshirt, which she pulled over her head. She came up and rested her forearms on his shoulders. "I wondered where my sweatshirt had gone."

"Was that what you were looking for?" he asked.

"I don't know what I was looking for." She said this with her usual deadpan, but he sensed in her voice a bewilderment he had not heard before. She drew closer and kissed him. "I was curious. You were too. You looked through his things." Kissing him repeatedly, she did not shut her eyes; this close, the brown irises of her eyes resembled live sponges under glass, contracting and expanding minutely with the dilations of the pupils. For a moment he worried, absurdly, that their eyes might touch, that their eyes had thirsty agendas of their own. He moved his hands across her body, underneath her sweatshirt, and drew her to him.

They spent nearly every night that week together. He cooked dinner for her, or she brought take-out food to his apartment, and then they spent the rest of the evening idly,

in ways that he could not fully remember the next day—half-finished games of cards, rented movies whose plots lagged and then rushed to tie up loose ends, short walks around the neighborhood. Because most people involved with the university had left for the summer, the city had a certain comfortable emptiness, a roominess like an oversized bathrobe.

He managed to piece together certain facts about her: she had recently dropped out of law school; she shared an apartment with a forty-year-old Polish woman who spoke even less often than she; her mother was a driving school instructor and her father worked in a hardware store; she liked Edward Hopper paintings—she'd read somewhere that all Hopper had really wanted to paint was sunlight on the surface of a building, and she thought it amusing that so many people and dark corners had ended up in his artwork, as if he were helpless to keep them out. But she did not like to discuss her life or tell stories, and he teased her about her reticence.

"I don't have anything to hide," she said. "I just think the only things you can put into words are the dry details, and why bother? The other things, there just aren't words for."

"What other things?" he asked. She gave him a smile, half-amused, half-sad. He had become excessively sensitive to the movements of her face, because they were so small, so rare. Her mouth did not really turn up when she smiled. When she laughed she did not seem to involve her diaphragm, laughing only with her upper body. She was always touching him. In bed she liked to play with his face, moisten her finger and smooth his black eyebrows in the wrong direction, lie on top of him looking down into his eyes and fondling his ears. He had never felt so *handed* before, and he liked it, because he never detected any neediness in her; he felt she liked him without needing him. When pleasure overtook her, her eyelids slipped shut gently and her face took on the serenity of a calm lake, while a faint, drawn-out cry issued from her throat; he had never seen anyone's face *relax* at the crucial moment, it seemed humanly impossible, and it both unnerved and inflamed him.

"Do you think something happened to Curtis?" he asked.

She shrugged. They were sitting on his battered green couch, watching the sun go behind the building across the street. "He's the careless type," she said. "Maybe he's doing some traveling. He's got money from somewhere, he doesn't need it. Maybe he has a girlfriend and he's staying with her."

"What is it that made you try to get back in touch with him?"

"I don't know. I just wondered what it would be like to talk to him after a year had gone by. That's all. Have a kind of perspective. The feeling's passed. Are you jealous?" She bit her thumbnail idly.

"What about me? Do you think you've got any perspective on me?"

She did not seem to know how to answer that. She looked at him, looked away. She kept biting at the nail, examining it casually, biting it again, until he reached out and grasped her hand in his.

One night his older cousin came to town for a conference and took him to dinner. He was a metallurgist by profession, and Ryan could never remember what exactly that involved—his cousin liked to say it involved putting ragweed next to bars of iron to see if the iron sneezed. Ryan liked him, even though he kept his appearance a little too neat, in subtle ways—his fingernails always showed even half-circle slivers of white, the hair on the back of his neck was always trimmed down. Even his blue jeans seemed to have been freshly ironed. After dinner Ryan bought ice cream cones and showed the cousin the university art museum's sculpture garden, whose gates were still unlocked, as they often were, even though night had fallen. There, while they ate ice cream seated in the hollow of a twisted marble cylinder, Ryan told his cousin about Johnsia.

"Sounds like she's just waiting until the other guy shows up, and then she's planning to get back with him."

"I don't think that's it."

"Maybe she killed the guy, maybe that's what's going on. Maybe you're next."

Ryan answered this with only a look.

"She sounds a little on the relentless side, anyway. You have to be careful with women, they—"

"No, I hate that," Ryan said, standing up and almost hitting his head on the top of the cylinder. "I hate blanket generalizations like that. Women this, men that. How do I know, maybe I'm the crazy one here, maybe I'm the relentless one. I call her every day. I think about her all the time, I feel like her face has been engraved in the folds of my brain. I'm not usually like this. All right, maybe I have been a couple of times, a little, but that was when I was a teenager, when you can hardly hear yourself talk because your hormones are fizzing and popping in your ears."

His cousin clamped his hand over his mouth, then opened his fingers just wide enough to say, "I won't say anymore."

"Sorry." Ryan looked at his ice cream cone. Only the tiny point remained, with a milky dot at the bottom. He ate it and wiped his fingers with a paper napkin.

"Let's go for a beer," the cousin said. "Ice cream always makes me think of beer, I don't know why."

Ryan didn't get home until after 11:30. He did not turn on any lights. He went about the apartment pushing all the curtains closed. At the last window, his foot slipped on the chair he used as a step stool, and he fell heavily onto his desk, bruising his knee. The darkness made him feel drunker than he had thought he was. He lay still for fifteen minutes, smelling the pencil shavings on the desktop and the beer on his breath. Almost three weeks had gone by since the blue crate had arrived. All at once it occurred to him that Johnsia and Curtis had gotten in touch with each other weeks ago, that even now they were lying in bed together, laughing at him. His heart shook. He knew it was a stupid notion, but he could not rid himself of the thought. Perhaps his cousin was right, perhaps she was only waiting until Curtis finally arrived. He had not asked her enough questions about herself; he knew nothing about her; he had let her get away with mystery.

He went over to the phone and dialed Johnsia's number.

"Hello?"

"He's here," he said.

There was silence. Then, casually, "So he finally showed up."

"Yes." He sat down in the wicker chair, pulled his sneakers off. "I didn't get home until 10:30. I decided I would just go to bed, call you tomorrow. But I couldn't get to sleep. It was too hot. Then I heard something at the door, someone fumbling for keys. I thought it was one of the people who live upstairs. I heard these noises, *plink plink*, like someone trying to get a key into the lock but just hitting the metal around the keyhole." With his toes he unrolled his socks off of each foot, proud of his coordination. "Then I thought, A burglar. But I knew who it must be. I went to my bedroom door and watched the front door swing open. He stood there. I couldn't see his face, just the silhouette of his body. I knew it was him. He kind of swayed there. It was clear he was drunk."

"Drunk," she said. "That would be just like him, to show up the first time drunk."

He smiled and, moving his hand over his chest, felt his heart beating rapidly. "Yes, he kind of stumbled in, and I thought he was going to forget to close the door behind him, but then he remembered. I don't think he saw me. He went over to his room, looked in for a moment. Then he came back out to the living room and started unbuttoning his shirt. It took him a while. I could hear him breathing. He took off his shirt and shoes and the rest of his clothes, everything, and then he threw himself down onto the couch and went to sleep."

"And is he still there?"

"Still there."

"What are you going to do?"

"Do?" He looked at the couch. The windows were open, a soft breeze blowing the curtains into the room fitfully, making light from the street lamp come and go over the couch's nubby back.

"When he wakes up tomorrow morning. Are you going to kick him out?"

He listened intently to her voice, so intently he almost missed her words. He wasn't sure what he was listening for. He must have woken her up—her words sounded a little thicker than usual, and came like afterthoughts.

"What are you going to do?" she repeated.

"What do you think I should do?"

He heard a rustle and imagined she was leaning back into the pillow with the phone. "Kick him out. Tell him you've rented the room to someone else, he's forfeited it by not showing up."

He closed his eyes. Now he did not know what was true. He could picture Curtis, naked, lying on the couch, the street lamp's light curving along his back. He could picture Curtis next to Johnsia, propped up on an elbow in bed, listening to the conversation and grinning the way he had grinned in the yearbook.

"Okay," he said at last. "I'll do that."

He sat in the chair for a long while after hanging up, the wicker bumps pressing into his shoulder blades. Then he got up, undressed and went to bed.

The next day it rained again. He spent his hours at work entering data into the computer, unable to concentrate. He continually had to correct his typing. The names of tagged items seemed designed to taunt him. Rabbit pump. Forearm plethysmography system. Ethernet sniffer laptop base unit. Male reproductive system. Was that a set of pickled organs floating in a jar, or a plastic model like a child's toy?

He tried to remember the sound of her voice over the phone, whether she had caught her breath when he said Curtis had arrived. I hate this, he told himself. Why am I asking myself these questions?

That evening he ate a quick supper at a sandwich shop on the way home, then called her and asked her to come over. He didn't say anything more. She hesitated before responding, and he knew she wanted to ask questions, but she did

not. When she knocked on his door he let her in without a word. She walked to the center of his living room, glanced into the empty second bedroom with its unchanged tableau. She regarded the couch, then sat down on it and studied him where he stood by the front door. He thought he could detect the slightest crease in her forehead.

"So," she said, her words coming slowly, "so, it was all a lie?"

He did not tell her about the drinking; he did not want to blame it on that.

She laughed.

He came closer to her, watching her, her hands still in her pockets, her head back, rolling along the tops of the sofa's cushions, her thin hair spreading out along the fabric. She went on laughing.

"You should be mad at me," he said.

She kicked her leg out and hooked him behind the knee, making him almost fall over. "You bet I'm mad." She kicked again, hitting his legs with the side of her sneaker, not hard, but not stopping until he moved out of reach. "I'm mad," she said, "but that was damned inventive, that little story you told. Where did you come up with that?"

He felt angry that he could not read her face. Even now she revealed so little. She must have learned secrecy at an early age. "I needed to know," he said.

"Needed to know," she repeated.

"I needed to know if it was me you kept coming for, or him."

She removed her hands from her pockets and leaned forward. After a moment, she took one of the long back cushions from the sofa and held it pressed in her lap. Then she stood up and began hitting him with it.

At first he laughed, but her strokes did not let up, and the cushion kept hitting his face, its texture rough against his skin, musty-smelling dust particles assailing his nose, and at times the zipper along the edge struck his skull like a tiny spark. "It was you, goddamn it," she said, "it was you, who

the fuck was I sleeping with? It was you." He could hardly breathe; he sneezed twice, coughed, buckled to the floor and found himself taking refuge under his table. The green cushion beat against him like a wing.

At last the blows stopped. His breath came raspily, and he sneezed twice more, half-sobbing. The inside of his throat felt like corduroy. He coughed, and she brought a Kleenex over and began dabbing at his face. "Jesus," she said softly. "Jesus."

They rested for a while on the floor, their heads pressed together at the temples, their arms around each other, their legs askew. They both radiated heat from their faces and hands. He could feel her start to shake at times, then stop, then shake again, and he pressed her tightly to him. When he felt as if he could stand, he got up, pulling her with him, and they sat on the sofa for a while, holding each other, and then they went into his bedroom.

Darkness had fallen, and only the streetlights illuminated the room. On the street below the trucks were coming out for the night, coming to wait with their rumble at the intersection, waiting for the light to change. He pulled her T-shirt off her body but left it hanging around her neck. She removed one of his shoes but left the other on. Though their gestures were playful, they did not smile, as if they were actors trying to amuse a very ill child. They struggled for a while, half-clothed, giving each other little bites until that seemed too dangerous, and then they divested themselves entirely.

In the morning he woke to hear her in the shower. It was a pleasant sound, though reminiscent of the sizzle of bacon frying, and his stomach growled at the smell of breakfast in the eatery below. When she came out, toweling her hair, she held out his hairbrush. "What's this sticker doing here?" she asked. It had a bar code, and a six digit number, and announced it was the property of the university.

"I had some extras," he said sleepily. "It's time to keep track of things around here." He dozed off again, and when he woke, sunlight shone on his head. He threw on some clothes and went into the living room.



She was sitting on the sofa, dressed in her shorts and shirt from the night before, her hair still wet. She had Curtis's yearbook in her lap and was leafing through the pages.

He must have said something—begun some word—because without looking up she gestured for him to come over. He sat beside her. In the back of the book, where more informal shots of students and faculty had been placed, faces glowered dully in classrooms, young bodies twisted in the air after a basketball, a physics teacher set fire to a sheaf of papers. Across these photographs, students and teachers had scrawled messages: "Curtis—I'm glad I got to know you this year—Rick," "I'm sure you'll succeed, whatever you do—Mrs. Whitlock," "You got a helluva backhand, Curt, but I still beat you on the mat—Ray," "Go Tigers!" (or perhaps—it was hard to tell from the handwriting—"Go, Tiger!").

"See?" she said.

He shook his head.

She thwacked the page with her fingernail. "He's got the same dopey things written in his yearbook as anyone else."

He nodded. "Okay." He tried to take her by the hand. "Let's have breakfast."

"No, wait." She grabbed a pen from the side table. "We can write messages."

"You're crazy."

Pressing deeply into the page, she wrote, *Curt baby—you are the one! Go get'em!*

When she handed him the pen, he hesitated. "I never even knew what to write back when it was legitimate." But he wrote *Curt* in a big looping script and then, after tapping the pen against his teeth for a moment, added, *Wish we could have gotten to know each other better.* He did not sign his name.

Monday he spent in the inventory office. When not entering data, he furtively typed letters to chiropractic colleges requesting informational materials. He knew he would have to take biology and organic chemistry courses on the side to meet the requirements. Perhaps then he would be initiated

into the mysteries of equipment. He knocked on the cubicle of his boss. "Do you know what a small rodent ventilator is?" he asked, holding up the sheet. But his boss only shook his head, bemused, and leaned over his desk again.

That evening, when Ryan and Johnsia were drying the supper dishes, a key scraped in the lock and the front door opened. A voice called out, "Hello? Hello?" Both of them froze, Ryan with a cereal bowl in his hands, Johnsia with the spoons. "Hello?" The door closed and footsteps went through the living room. Ryan tried to catch Johnsia's eyes, but she was staring at the side of the refrigerator. The footsteps began to return, then stopped. Quietly, Ryan stepped to the kitchen doorway.

Curtis stood with one foot on the coffee table, the blue milk crate balanced on his knee. He wore a brown rugby shirt buttoned only at the lowest button, dark green shorts, and brand new sneakers with thick red soles. He had let his blond hair grow long—it curled up at the back of his neck, and in front it fell down over his forehead, terminating with a soft edge above the ridge of bone over the eyes. His cheekbones cast the faintest of shadows. His lower lip protruded slightly over the chin. A dried scar left a thin dotted line that ran down the shin of the right leg and disappeared into his ribbed white sock. The laces of the sneakers stood up stiffly in their bows, as if at pains to seem alert. He stood, broad-shouldered and tall, like some kind of furniture.

He was staring at the yearbook. It lay open on the coffee table, where Ryan had left it. Curtis picked it up and shoved it down the side of his crate. Then he looked up and saw Ryan watching him. Johnsia came up behind Ryan, dish towel still in her hands. When Curtis flicked his gaze to her, there was something in his eyes that Ryan could not fully interpret, something troubled and fearful and desiring, something that pulled the muscles of his face back, as if they were retreating. And then his heavy forehead seemed almost to come down like a visor, shutting off all expression. He glanced again at Ryan.

"I don't care," he said, and curled his fingers around his crate. "Why should I care?" He turned and walked out the door. He did not shut it. The key still protruded from the lock.

Ryan's heart beat fast. His scalp itched. He turned to John-sia, could think of nothing to say. The dish towel was bunched in her hands.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, but he did not know what it was in his face that made her ask. She went into the kitchen and put away the spoons she'd dried. It seemed to take her a little longer than necessary to arrange them in the silverware drawer. When she came back out, she kissed Ryan's cheek and turned his wrist so she could read his watch. "I promised my roommate I would go with her to the movies. I should probably head out."

Ryan followed her to the door, holding the cereal bowl before his chest with both hands, as if it were a tiny steering wheel. "Call me later?" he asked.

"That inventory number you put on your hairbrush," she said, her voice apologetic, "shouldn't you peel it off?" She backed out of the room, pulling the door with her, studying him as she went. He thought that she seemed less bony than when he'd met her, that his cooking had done her some good, but her eyes were still solemn.