

**NOT FOR JUST AN HOUR**



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**By**

**James R. Kincaid**

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**Things may not be fair—always  
That's when I'll be there—always  
Not for just an hour  
Not for just a day  
Not for just a year**

**—Irving Berlin, “Always”**

To Joseph Dane

## CHAPTER ONE

Might as well start with a couple of pages from my notes, one from early on in all this, one later:

“The five suspects agreed to speak without legal representation, claiming that such assistance would violate their principles. They also agreed to have their statements recorded electronically. I urged them to do neither, though I don’t know now—fifteen minutes later—why I did so. My impression was that they were eager to confess, regarding their criminal activities (repeated felonies or misdemeanors) as ethical statements in which they took some sort of glowing, perverse pride. I wonder if they are setting up a plea of insanity or reduced mental capacity. They do seem in possession of their faculties, such as they are. Still, what they’ve been doing and their justifications seem to me positively lunatic. Glad I am not the one having to decide. I’m trying hard to stick to my job, not to yield to curiosity or whatever it is causing me to worry so about these reckless felon kids.”

**And then—**

“Ms. LaVelle says she became suspicious after her daughter complained about ‘feeling funny.’ Within a day or two, her son reported that he also felt ‘funny’—which made her ‘deeply concerned.’ Her trust in the commune members was so great, she says, that she ‘naturally’ did not initially suspect that they were in any way connected to these problems. Only what she calls ‘facts I could not escape’ led her, first, to question her children and, finally but none too quickly, to file formal charges. ‘Only when I had nowhere to turn but the truth, could I find it in my heart to protect my darlings by driving here to your station and laying out the horrible things these criminals did to my own ones. Those kids had sex on my kids and worse. Pedophilic pederasty, to say the least. I don’t even want to think. I come to you to look for what any loving mother would look for and no more, which is justice.’”

You may regard Ms. LaVelle's statement as somewhat porous, but when she wandered into accusations of molestation, that was it: the case would now move fast.

That's how it all started. I am trying to keep it from ending.

Me, I'm John Atherton, detective.

The truth matters to me, insofar as it can be collared. Facts as well. These five kids seem to have a different relation to both: their minds work in ways strangely fixed, without the self-correcting mechanisms that trouble a lot of us. Maybe that's not it. I don't want to be in a hurry to describe them as if I understood. I don't, and I'm tempted to say that my impulse to think they lack something the rest of us have is wrong. Maybe it's the reverse.

My usual way of thinking is not much help to me—that's what I mean to say.

I have spent my salaried life inquiring directly into the circumstances surrounding cases brought to my attention and, incidentally, into the nature of crime and punishment. That's the sort of thing I've routinely done, in my hour-by-hour, day-by-day, coffee-breaks-included job. I have few illusions about finding a position unpolluted by what we simply want and need to think, what our jobs tell us, what the world we live in sees for us. Still, I make my living and keep my sanity by being able to distinguish between asses and elbows, likelihoods and stretchers.

My investigations have been remarkably free from distortions introduced by personal feelings—or so I say. Unlikely, but perhaps not as unlikely in my case as in most, simply because I never give a shit about what happens, feeling nothing much one way or another about alleged perpetrators or their alleged victims. Contempt has always seemed to me a guarantee of fairness. Plus, it came naturally.

I cannot make the same boast in the case at hand, as my views are colored by those very personal ootches. One day I woke up, looked at the accused, and discovered—kiss my hard-boiled ass—

feelings. Worse, feelings I could neither understand nor contain. And they didn't go away after breakfast. Still haven't.

My report is somewhat haphazard, worked out mostly in the order it came to me, based partly on official materials I have collected from Case # 465-A-488—2019. But my best stuff isn't in the office file, has been obtained on the sly and squirreled away, never mind how.

My plan is to back off and let the primary materials speak, not because that's the fair thing to do but because those materials, minus me, stand the best chance of helping these kids. That's my aim. If I also find, along the way, some understanding of the legal system, myself—well, that's just fine.

So, to the facts. I have every cop's attitude toward facts: disdain and reverence. The last place to look for facts is a newspaper, so I'll start with four key [unedited, mostly] articles from our very own **The Courier Standard**:

***August 31, 2019—"Trial of 'Porn Commune' Begins"***

*Jury selection has ended in the trial of five teens, each accused of sixty-seven counts of burglary, arson, destruction of property, assault, larceny, criminal mischief, production of pornography, and indecent exposure. If convicted on all counts, each could face one-hundred-fifty years in prison.*

*District Attorney J. Philip Timmons said yesterday, "We will try these defendants as adults. Some have been saying they are really not adults. I tend to agree. I hesitate to employ any common moniker when it comes to these five."*

*The teenagers in custody are Mary Baldwin (16), William Krasinski (18), Miller Tyler IV (15), Jason McDowell (16), and Darcy Simmons (14). They were arrested on June 12 after the latest series of felonies brought them into the grasp of Detective Atherton. Some would say, "Finally!" They have made little secret of their multiple crimes, and have all but sent out invitations to their latest activities.*

*These five modern-day hippies ranged in age from twelve to sixteen when they moved in together, some two years ago, and initiated what they term “anarchic protests.” Journals kept by the group since its inception were captured by police. These startlingly self-incriminating records, we are told, document a long history of criminal activity.*

*The prosecution says they also have in their possession the group’s scripts for several pornographic films, actual movie versions of this filth, and other evidence of what officials call perverted sexual practices.*

*One of the accused, calling himself “Plain,” aka Miller Tyler IV, spoke with this reporter. Boasting that Plain was his “hanger,” i.e., gang name, Tyler explained that the group had determined, “after a period of mistaken screwing around,” to commit to practices dictated by “pure anarchism.” When asked to expand on that, he said, “It took me months to wrap my mind around all this, dude. You expect me to [deleted] summarize in fifteen [deleted] seconds so your Yahoo readers can get it?”*

*Caitlin Moore, the attorney representing the five accused, has insisted repeatedly that the charges are baseless. She said that the statements made by “Plain” were not to be taken seriously. She called him “a lighthearted joker” and said his negative characterization of the citizenry was “the issue of youthful high spirits.”*

*A local civic coalition, CPA (Child Protective Alliance) has issued a bulletin labeling Miller Tyler IV’s statement, “heinous and sociopathic.” As of Tuesday, they say that further study of the evidence has now convinced them that none of the five deserves to live outside a jail ever and that “our society must show that it will not tolerate such sick and evil doings by acting decisively and removing these monsters from our midst without possible pardon ever. If they do not deserve a life spent in prison, we’d like to know who does.”*

*The CPA statement goes on to propose that, while none of the offenses, taken separately, are life-term crimes, taken together they*

*should be. "It may be unprecedented," says spokesperson Arlene Draper, "but at one point justice is always unprecedented. We know we're asking that the community at large support these demons for life in some country-club prison, and we hate that: where does it say we should work so they can do nothing? But that's the law, and however soft on criminals it is, we stand by it. Still, what they have done and what they stand for is beyond forgiveness."*

***December 1, 2019—"Anarchists Exposed as Child-Molesters!"***

*Today the prosecution introduced vital testimony from JoAnne LaVelle, who says the accused, each one, had committed sexual acts on her two small children [names withheld].*

*The five have agreed to these new charges being considered along with the previous accusations. Strict procedure would require entirely new proceedings, but the accused, acting against the advice of counsel, have asked that "the whole mess be lumped together," as their spokesperson put it.*

*According to Ms. LaVelle, the five teens, living in a house at 117 Filmore Street, invited her and her children to stay with them. Ms. LaVelle was separated from her husband and out of work at the time. She says she accepted the invitation after visiting the communal dwelling several times and satisfying herself that the occupants were, in her words, "obviously off-the-track but seemingly harmless."*

*She says she was forced to leave her children unprotected as she went looking for work. "There were signs, I'm not saying there weren't, but I failed to see them. I was too concerned with providing for my darlings to think clear. I couldn't believe that any kids, no matter how messed-up, could do such things. They had my babies under mental control. Nobody could have known what they were up to. I blame myself, but hindsight is 20/20."*

*The defense denies all charges, "most especially these outrageous tacked-on allegations."*

**May 2, 2020—"Pedophile Quintet Case Goes to Jury"**

*In a trial marked by unusual acrimony, loud courtroom outbursts, and violent cross-accusations, one thing is clear. It is now up to the jury.*

*Pundits had expected a reduction in some charges, dropping of others, and considerable backroom dealing among attorneys. However, the original charges, spread evenly over the five defendants, were handed intact to the jury. We can perhaps speculate that the prosecution saw no reason to offer any deals.*

*In a passionate closing argument, District Attorney J. Philip Timmons asked the jury for maximum sentencing on all counts. He particularly urged them not to be misled by the youth of these criminals or to imagine they might later be transformed.*

*"Do you see any repentance?" he asked the jury. "Do you really want to trust these thugs to a parole board down the line? Do your duty now."*

*Many public opinion polls have backed overwhelmingly the maximum sentence for all five. Timmons declined to comment on these polls.*

*He did, however, refer to the five during his summation as "ruthless, amoral, sociopathic animals" and as "predators who have no place in decent society."*

*As it stands, each one may be sentenced to as much as 650-700 years (most of this coming from the molestation charges), if they receive the maximum on all counts and if the sentences are made to run consecutively. It is this reporter's belief that if the jury recommends a provision of "not eligible for parole," the judge will accept it.*

*Defense attorney Caitlin Moore twice broke into tears in speaking of the defendants. Whether the jury was moved by all that remains to be seen. Moore characterized the accusations as "inventions of a group so eager to spot evil they go after unconventional but harmless citizens who have been injured."*

*She called Ms. LaVelle's children "victims, certainly, but not of my five clients. Little [names withheld] are victims of their unscrupulous mother, a woman so depraved as to submit her children to vast emotional torment in hopes of feathering her own nest."*

*Moore drew attention to the wealth of the parents of several of the commune members, claiming that such a thing should never have come up in the trial, that it wasn't the American way to judge people by their backgrounds.*

*She did, however, allege that Ms. LaVelle had attempted to draw on that same wealth by blackmailing the accused prior to filing criminal charges. "When that didn't work, she took the next step to satisfy her greed," said Moore. "The criminal trial," she argued, "was simply a pretext for the subsequent civil case LaVelle hoped would yield her a 'disgusting windfall.'"*

*Moore pointed to what she termed "an entire absence of consistency" in the testimony of the prosecution witnesses. She argued that D. A. Timmons was playing to unfair stereotypes in all his "rich brat" references. "These are just five good kids, like we all hope to raise."*

*Responding to Timmons' characterization of Darcy Simmons, aka "L.L.," Moore repeatedly urged that she was no Charles Manson. "No one in the group was mesmerized and no one took on the part of leader." She said the group was like a "true democracy," working together to "locate ways of being better than anything they saw in the world around them."*

*She said the five were "honor students bravely trying to find a noble and independent way to exert themselves in community service," objecting to characterizations of them as "gang members," "cultists," and "perverts." She insisted that they were no more than "fine young people out to make their lives and the lives of those around them better and fuller."*

*District Attorney Timmons countered by noting that “forging a better life does not, for normal people, involve robbery, assault, criminal mischief, burglary, and child molesting.”*

*He urged the jury not to be misled by “their contrived cuteness.” “These five look so very very sweet in their cunning and calculated way that you could almost believe they were normal kids out to have a little fun: harmless teens deserving of nothing more than a good talking-to. Look at them now. Don’t they all look so very cute? I think so, too. I think they **look** perfect. They are dressed so cunningly and expensively they seem to belong in a fashion magazine, but I am confident you’ll put them very soon in drab prison grays. That’ll be even more becoming. Let them try to be cute there, to mince around and spend their way out of that!”*

*“Products of wealthy homes and permissive parents, these defendants are,” he said, “violent, selfish brats, who think of nothing but their own twisted enjoyments.” Comparing them to the infamous Leopold and Loeb, thrill-seeking child-murderers, Timmons said, “These five are, like those Chicago monsters of long ago, empty inside, without conscience.” “No one,” he continued, “should lay their crimes on their parents. Lots of parents spoil [sic] their kids, but most spoiled kids manage somehow not to become criminals and vicious pedophiles as teens. They give new meaning to the term, sub-human.”*

*Pickets surrounded the courtroom, some friends of the accused carrying placards reading, “Railroads are for locomotives, not teens!” They were outnumbered by hundreds of others, chanting, “Death to Pedophiles.” The Child Protective Agency, active recently in calling for the heaviest penalties, served coffee and baked goods to their numerous supporters.*

***May 7, 2020—“Verdict In Anarchist Cult Case Suspended: Defendants Disappear”***

*The jury in the terrorist case returned today to a court-room packed with journalists, attorneys, and spectators. The only ones missing were the defendants, all five.*

*Free on \$500,000 bail throughout the trial, the defendants had arrived, early and smiling, every day. But not today.*

*Judge Orin McDavid ordered the verdict sealed until the defendants could be apprehended. Both District Attorney Timmons and defense attorney Moore declined to comment. The jury was instructed to maintain complete and absolute silence regarding the case, though they are no longer strictly sequestered. Judge McDavid warned the jurors that he would impose maximum contempt penalties, if there were "any leaks of any kind."*

*Police report that there are no immediate leads on the whereabouts of the fleeing criminals but are confident that they will be apprehended "very soon." All five parental groups are said to be in custody for questioning. Oliver Brown, a friend of the cult group who played a prominent part in the trials, is also being held for questioning, according to courtroom sources.*

*The Child Protective Agency issued a statement offering a reward of \$501,000 for information leading to the apprehension of any or all of the five fugitives. "We consider it our duty," they said, "to meet and top the \$500,000 bail money these rich degenerates used to try and evade punishment."*

*CPA Director Susan Gander said that her group had not appended "Dead or Alive" tags to their reward posters. "The law does not allow it," Gander said, "and we operate strictly within the law. If such tags have appeared, we are not responsible. We have asked all our members for restraint, and are confident our appeals have been and will continue to be successful. We must understand, however, that every decent person in the community is deeply and justly outraged. Let's remember who the criminals are here."*

*Police Captain Righetti said the five defendants are now fugitives from justice, subject to further charges. He said they are to be regarded as desperate and extremely dangerous. He also cautioned citizens locating the criminals to alert the police and "not take matters into your own hands, tempting as that is."*

***August 2, 2020—"No Word on Missing Pedophiles"***

*There are still no clues as to the location of the missing defendants involved in the terrorist cult case that was to have closed several months ago. The five took flight the day verdicts were to be announced and have not been heard of since.*

*The police report that both federal and state officials are "extremely active" and that there has been no let-up in the search for the fugitives. "We will catch them," said one source, "and give them what everyone agrees they deserve."*

*CPA Director Susan Gander said her organization had been the subject of "absolutely absurd" rumors linking them to the disappearance. Gander points out that her group had been most active throughout the trial and even before in seeking the maximum penalty for the five criminals. "Why would we want them at large?" "Why would we help them to escape?" As for suggestions that the CPA had harmed the five, she said, "Even more ridiculous."*

*The jury has maintained a strict silence on their verdict, having been ordered to do so by the judge. It is this reporter's understanding that, upon being apprehended, the defendants will face punishment for their fugitive crimes, in addition to penalties that will come to them were the jury's verdict to be "guilty" on some or all of the counts.*

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Me again. So much for the news. Now is the time to introduce the accused and the massive amount of trouble they initiated or found dropping down on them. I think it all started as a sort of teen rebellion, fueled by idealism, a determination to live in a state of purity, wacky as that sounds. It's intriguing to realize that these young teenagers collected themselves as a unit stable enough to offer shelter to others.

And such others: a screws-a-poppin' woman with two little ones! Not to mention that the five communers were at the time pursuing what the prosecutors called a life of crime. What were these kids thinking, involved as they were (for whatever reason) in quasi-

porn films and committing themselves to such other outside-the-law activities as occurred to them, from day to day? Why collect witnesses? Surely they wouldn't imagine that JoAnne, Brandon, and Missy could usefully augment their criminal ranks.

The key thing is that these five seem to have developed a true coherence—not that I can make out what the terms of that unity were. How could they come together? Were they gathered around some vision? Did they find a darkness located outside that both threatened and glued them together? Why do I continue to think of them in terms of some kind of—goodness?

I keep stumbling as I try to approach them, what they seem to have discovered. It's not so much new territory—more that they found a focus on what's there for us all, if only. . . . I can't find it, put myself before those lenses. Nor can I stop trying.

I've been counting on the primary materials to do the work here, offer a persuasive vision of the kids, their innocence. I might wish to force those materials into shape, but that can't work. The problems I face are more subtle: "objectivity" isn't going to be much help. I know that parading these materials will not yield clarity: they point in too many directions, including straight back at me. They don't speak in one voice, and seldom sweetly.

The kids kept a Journal, subject to elaborate rules as to alternating authorship. I plan to reproduce all that we have, which may not be all there is. I'm doing so in hopes it will bring to me what I do not have now—understanding for sure but something more, a sense of their presence. Every day they seem a little more distant, come forth from my memory more slowly when summoned. So here's a roll call: William and Miller and Mary and Jason and Darcy. Better—Willy and Plain and Mary and Moo and L.L. The names are all I have left.

## CHAPTER TWO

### First Journal Entry

It's Moo. My parents weren't so bad. My dad was OK, pretty much didn't give a shit. My mom was fucked up. But I don't care. I didn't go with you guys because of my parents but because of you guys.

I mean, there doesn't have to be anything wrong about my parents. There might be, but that doesn't mean that that's it.

I don't see my parents and they don't see me. Fine with me and fine with them. It doesn't fuck me up, or them, any worse than they were fucked up before.

L.L. was going on about Oedipus complexes. She gets really worked up about stuff and she sure was about old Oedipus and Freud. She said she didn't feel like she had been castrated. She said maybe boys want to sleep with their mothers and kill their fathers, but she sure as hell didn't think she was a deficient boy—not even in her deep subconscious. She said, “dicks are overvalued.” That's what she said. That sounded OK to me. If you take notice, in showers and stuff, dicks aren't much to look at. I'm not being homophobic: some guys are fine to look at, in other parts of them. Dicks are like intestines turned wrong-side out, should have been tucked in, popping out only when they are needed, on a spring. As it is, they're one-eyed maggots. Plus, they all look the same.

I've been in more than one dick-matching contest, and I can honestly say I don't think anybody really gives a rat's ass who has the biggest dick. It's like we're supposed to care. Funny thing in those contests is there's always an argument about thickest versus longest, and the same thing happens, which is that people start examining too close and it all ends. L.L.'s right about them being overvalued. The only thing dicks are good for is to rub, and everybody's works then—except old

guys, where they might as well cut them off and put in a faucet. Kind of sorry I said that, but we're not supposed to erase.

Anyhow, L.L. was screaming and nobody was disagreeing with her, because nobody knew shit about what she was talking about—also because we're scared of her (I am). That's the problem with the Oedipus thing. It's a story made up by parents to make themselves important. They think all we are is what they did, even if that was completely fucked up. We're supposed to be nothing more than a bunch of screw-ups and complexes THEY caused. Like we could never escape, like they're still in control.

Fuck that. The biggest influence my parents had was naming me Jason. Half the fucking kids in the world are named Jason, boys are. So I gave myself this name, Moo. I moved here when I was nine and took this name, so I could pretend I had it on the farm I had been on. Moo means I was a champion cow screwer. Of course I didn't grow up on any farm, but in my opinion it's kind of interesting in a disgusting way to think of fucking a cow—without, you know, picturing it exactly. At least it's better than being called Jason.

It's Plain. We're passing this around, in case you hadn't figured, which was L.L.'s idea, which naturally we have to do it, since everybody but me is scared shitless of her. Moo and Willy shake in their socks when she enters the room. I ain't scared of you. Mary isn't scared either, prom queen Mary. But I think this is a good idea, this journal thing.

Only L.L. said we had to do five pages, which fucking Moo did only three and not even three. Moo isn't too illiterate, gets As in school, but even he should know this isn't a diary. All Moo did was talk about dicks and how they aren't important, which next time you spy on his you'll see why he said that.

In addition to telling us how weenie his weenie is, he talked about his parents, old farmer Delmar and his wife, Sadie.

Moo's so very hot on telling us he don't need his parents because Moo's twelve or something.

No, Moo's OK. Only nobody ever thought he diddled cows. He made that up so nobody would think he was a wuss. Imagine telling people you were a cow fucker, hoping they'd think you're all cool. We won't say anything about you lying, though, and your deep secret's safe with us, dumb fuck, which isn't even a secret.

Anyhow I am not going to spend my time writing about you guys. I'll just say I like it here, the five of us, and I have some ideas about the place where we're living and things we can do. I think that's what this Journal is for, ideas and suggestions. Right, L.L.?

As for me, since I guess we should say something about ourselves (only not go on and on). I am called Plain cause I'm not. I can say that right out, all blunt, not because I think I'm like great looking but because other people call me Plain as a joke on how I look, which makes it true. Trouble is—I'll say this because L.L. had us pledge to tell the truth—I wish I looked different. I ain't whining, but I wish I looked less like a cliché, maybe had a disfigurement or was more rugged, though I'm not being sexist. Still, some girl told me at school last week I looked like Adrey Hepburn. I didn't even know who Adrey Hepburn was, so I went and looked it up and Jesus Christ. (Only difference is her hair is black and I'm less muscular.) So anyhow, that's why they call me Plain.

My parents think they did me this big favor because they're rich. They're rich because their ancestors were, so it's not really them. But since their ancestors are dead, it's them that seems rich. They didn't do a fucking thing to get rich. Not that they give me much. I guess when they're dead I'll be rolling in it, but now it's all tied up in trusts, or they're spending it on themselves. Maybe I can speed along their funerals. No need to

tell me the whole system sucks and that rich people like me just feed off the poor.

But I don't want to be like Moo and talk about my parents and I don't want to talk about myself. This isn't for gossip but ideas, like L.L. said. I like it here, though it don't always seem like it, I know. Sometimes I'm not easy to be around. Wish that weren't true. I appreciate it that you put up with me.

But fuck that.

What I'd like to see is more attention to two areas of our lives, which are the house and activities. We have enough money. We spend all our time talking about how to get more, when it seems to me we should be talking about the house and activities, like I say.

Let's look at it this way. There's five of us and the car. I added expenses up and figure we're maybe \$300 short a month. L.L.'s grandmother gives us a lot pretty regular—but it sucks to figure on that.

What do we do? Here's Plain to make it all clear. I tell my parents I'm not getting enough to eat and need regular help. I thought about telling them I have this condition and need medicine, but that'd bring them into close range. I'll say, "Of course if you guys don't want to help, that's OK. I understand if you don't want to enable this." They'll say, "We wish you weren't doing this"—and they're worried and what do I need and I'll say I can make it on \$300 a month, I think, probably. I'll end up with \$800 a month at least.

Maybe we should save some regular for taxes, right L.L.? Or Willy?

Anyhow, here's some of the things I think.

[There follow ideas on decoration, remodeling this and that, landscaping, a backyard sports area, a homemade swimming pool, and on and on—down to redesigning the mailbox. Some anarchists!]

I'm now beyond my five pages, I think, which gives me no time to get to activities, which I will do next time. I just want to end by saying I think this journal is a good idea, L.L., and that you aren't a bitch (sometimes) and that Moo is OK.

Hey, I just thought about another way to get dough all at once rather than have it leaking in. I could tell my parents Moo was having a big operation and needed ten grand. You know? Which Moo's parents wouldn't give it to him or didn't have it and he'd fucking die if he didn't have this operation. A brain operation, we could say, for obvious reasons. My parents like Moo a lot, for some reason, and they'd do it. They'd ask lots of questions, of course. But I suppose they'd check with hospitals and doctors and Moo'd have to pretend to be sick. Sounds pretty involved. Maybe it wouldn't work.

Mary here. I enjoyed reading what Moo and Plain said, and I hope Moo isn't upset by Plain's teasing. I know you like Moo a lot, Plain. Got that, Moo? Plain likes you! He may be a crumbum, Moo, but he's about as pretty a crumbum as you'll see—I've ever seen. And he does like you. In a good way, a sexual way.

On Plain's idea of having this journal for ideas and plans—yes. I think we can also use it to tell about how we're feeling, even to work out problems. Don't get me wrong. I don't think this should become our bitching book.

In fact, let me get ahead of myself and say that we should think of having a weekly council—with popcorn and beer—and have a free-for-all talk. That'd be the place to get into the open anything that's bothering you, like Plain leaving his food out or Willy correcting everybody. I mention those two things because they already came up when we were sitting around. Willy didn't mind, volunteered to pay a nickel to a kitty every time he corrected. Plain didn't mind either, though he didn't offer to pay. And it worked. Plain picks up his food and Willy is less opinionated.

Anyhow, that's my suggestion. I notice we don't really have a kitty, and I don't think we should. Maybe if we were a sixth-grade, giggle-and-get-boobs club, a kitty would be terrific. But we're beyond that. (Ever see Moo without a shirt? Wow! Plain brags about his body but never exposes it—very modest, like all of us. That's embarrassing to say, but, like Moo, I'll stick to the rules and not erase.)

I have another suggestion: a book and issues club. I mean we're really not much of a gang yet. We talk about being violent, but we don't. I know we will, but we can also think about things and discuss. We could pick a book that goes with an issue—and have a discussion every Tuesday night, when Willy has off.

One other suggestion. A film club, based on the same thing.

One other suggestion. We learn a foreign language. We pick one none of us knows. That'll be easy, since none of us knows any. We can get stuff from the library or on-line.

I love all of Plain's ideas.

I also agree with what Moo said about parents. They think they're so important. My parents gave me "permission" to move out, just so they could pretend to be in control. Then they said, "If you feel you have to do this, we'll manage somehow. Just don't drop out of school." But, as Moo said, they'd rather take blame for us than face up to the fact that they're just biological conveniences, less important than mom and dad marigold.

Well, I should get to me. I'm fourteen years old. Nobody else said their age, but I like my age. I know Willy is older, since he does all the old stuff for us. I don't know about L.L. I'd say you are thirteen. You seem lots older, but how could you be?

I don't know what to say about me. I didn't join up because I was unhappy. I love it here. My parents told me I'd regret it and be back inside a week. But we've been here three weeks and so nyah, nyah, Mom and Dad! I will never regret doing this.

I think I am changing a lot. I know we just started, but that's how I feel. Sure, we have problems, but I love this house and what we're doing.

Hey, we've made it this far. I've never been so happy. I expect not just to change, by Jesus, but to grow and grow through this experience (a cliché, I know).

I love you all!

Willy's turn. I feel as if I have been anticipated a little by Plain and Mary, not that I mind. At least Moo kept to his self-centered ways. We love you, Moo, and your complete detachment from parents. You've forgotten them—now you see them, now you—.

Once Plain stops being nasty, he issues forth with some really good ideas that can be productive for us—keep us stimulated, focused on the future.

Mary, too, has a set of fine proposals. (Crumbum, Mary? You been watching old movies, I'll bet.) The weekly council, the book club, film club: all swell. We have to watch that we don't get clubbed to death, but Mary has good instincts. She wants to keep us from becoming some kind of idiot-drool Greek bunch, high-fiving and rotting our brains. She's also on the road to giving us some structure. Even gangs, which I agree we will evolve into, need that. Of course not all idiot-drool activity is so bad. I am not dreaming of turning us into Future Accountants of America.

I've been too bossy, and you're right to point that out. My parents, mentioned here for the last time, often got annoyed, in their mousy way, because I tried to boss them. You'll yell when I get all corporate-manager on you, right?

But what I think is fun is that we're now what anybody outside would call alienated misfit losers. It's because we've reformulated drastically.

It hits me that the word "alienated" does the same work as Oedipus Complexes in making us extensions of adults. It says

we're not making decisions because of anything we want; we're just bouncing off some super-reality. We're pipsqueaks that need "understanding," as if the adults had hold of that. Nobody wants to think we're five people doing what seems to us interesting and right. I guess it's more like it'd never occur to them, couldn't. If we're independent, where are they?

What can we make of ourselves? How will we change? How will we keep from being static? What will happen when problems come along—when one of us gets sick or pregnant or wants out? Will we let anybody in?

That's one reason I've been bossy. I'll tell you something about myself. I'm so much not a boss that I'll probably agree to anything you want to do. True, part of me wants us to become businessy: set up offices with dividers, form a company, advertise. The other part wants a loin-cloth commune, where we grow our own food, make our own music and our own babies. Do we want to talk about sex? I don't want to be the one to bring it up, unless I just have.

Back to money, where I'm more at home: that does seem to me something we need to be orderly about, draw up a budget. Are we going to start something profitable so we can fund the schemes Plain outlined or group vacations?

Too capitalistic? Plain seems to have in mind something different. Mary, too? Maybe Mary just wants long nights of sitting on bean-bags talking about sweat shops in East Timor. (Sorry, Mary. I do like your ideas.)

So, think about it. I don't want to ram any schemes down the throats of such good friends and such an open, beautiful group.

I wish we could agree on a gang name. Then I could end my entry with "Power to the \_\_\_\_\_. " What about "Hog" for a name? "Power to Hog!" I read this passage in a story: "a name, which, I admit, I love to repeat, for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion." "Power to

Hog!” Rings like unto bullion. And a prize to the person who can identify the quote: a back rub from me.

L.L. speaking. Melville—“Bartleby the Scrivener,” Willy, and you can keep the back rub for your own personal delight.

Aren’t we the sunshine kiddies!

Mary, I know you are curious about ages. God knows why. Willy—sixteen, I’d say. Plain fourteen at most. Moo really is fourteen. I skipped some grades, which is maybe why you think I’m old—fourteen, sure! I don’t like the skipping, though I’m not claiming it messed me up—who knows. Something did, right? Anyhow, I’m a year or two younger than Moo, which would make me twelve, wouldn’t it? A freak of nature. A mere tweeneer in years, burdened with the dark wisdom of the ages.

So let’s have no more of that. Apart from getting licenses and beer, it doesn’t matter. Willy is a special case, as he was on his way to being an MBA. But he sees that, will get rid of some on his own, and we can beat what remains out of him.

I am having a good time. We annoy one another, and that’s good. Don’t pretend that the shit is showers of flowers and don’t be upset when it hits us in the face. We can’t always be having councils or moaning about cereal bowls on the floor.

Don’t expect terrific. Hope for unpredictable. We didn’t do much screening of applicants: you wanna join? We’re about as selective as the goddamn army. We’ll have a rough time of it; that’s for sure. The key thing is to roll with the punches. Even mine.

Right now, it’s like being on some kind of honeymoon—won’t last. I hope it won’t.

As for the proposals from Plain and Mary and Willy. I like them all. I also agree we need plans so as to keep our brains jumping. That way maybe we won’t be obsessing on who stepped on the cat and who hasn’t changed his (I do mean HIS) sheets.

**One last thing: language. What do you say we stop saying and writing “fuck” all the time? It’s as if we’re trying to sound tough and managing only juvenile. How about a contest where we express ourselves without saying “fuck,” “shit,” or “asshole.” And Plain, for Christ’s sake learn how to use “which.”**

### CHAPTER THREE

I ‘m guessing they hadn’t been living together long (Mary says three weeks) before the preceding was written. If they were together about eighteen months before the charges—well that seems about right. Better to have false security than none at all.

That’s what being a detective has taught me.

Now is the time to offer some of the material from before the trial pushed the kids on stage. There are the on-going school reports—routine exercises designed to show that the exercise has been completed, the written equivalent of push-ups. Over-burdened teachers writing them just want to get something down without getting themselves sued or fired.

Still, there’s always the chance that a useful insight, *any* insight, might somehow creep in, so here are excerpts.

**Miller Tyler.** As is always the case, the reports are loaded with formulaic non-specifics. “Miller gets along well with others and often helps his little friends who are less quick” (3rd grade). “Miller is above grade level in all subjects but has difficulty staying on task” (4th grade). “Miller tests higher than he performs, and therefore we are advancing him one level” (5th grade). He also skipped seventh grade, but there’s more to the story.

At the start of his eighth-grade year, the tone becomes more lively:

*Miller Tyler IV is both the most delightful and the most troubling student I have ever encountered. Much younger than the other students, he also seems in some ways more mature—but not in many ways and not all of them good. He is, for instance, able to do the most original project work I have seen, but he resists other assignments and not just routine ones. One might be tempted to regard Miller as a right-brain-focused child with creative insistences, but that isn’t it. You never know what he is going to choose to do or, more commonly, not do. More worrisome, he seems eager*

*to get attention by being mischievous, perhaps acting out. Some of his pranks have taken a decidedly obscene turn: sexual jokes, for instance. He often passes prurient notes to classmates, both boys and girls. Also, early in the year Miller sold tickets to a "Plain Sex Show," "Plain" being his nickname. Vice principal Hartman and I spoke at some length with Mr. and Mrs. Tyler, who seemed cooperative (if somewhat distant), but we noticed no improvement. After a short quiescent period, he was back to his disruptive behavior patterns. It seems he is not closely supervised at home. His family has means but perhaps have not given Miller clear limits. We have therefore decided to advance Miller one year, hoping he will achieve the emotional and social maturity he requires.*

Apparently, he achieved nothing of the sort. The reports from the next years reprise these observations, minus the sex show. Plain gets straight A grades in many subjects, D grades in two, and nothing in between. He failed American Government his freshman year. He's never been suspended, though there are long lists of minor infractions and against-policy pranks. Each one is trivial; taken together, they sure as hell suggest something.

To be fair, I'm no clearer on him than those entrusted with his education.

His most salient characteristics in the Journal are his good looks and anger, with a surprising range of practical abilities thrown in. The anger seems to lessen dramatically as time goes on. I've noticed no anger myself—and he may be the prettiest boy I've seen. He's also personable and funny. I loved being around him and miss him now.

**Mary Baldwin.** There is not a damned thing to be learned about Mary from school reports. If there was ever the slightest blip on the screen, no teacher was awake enough to register it. Like the others (except Plain), she consistently gets high grades, no variation, "a delight" in second grade and in tenth. If she did anything to attract attention, no one mentioned it.

Mary seems so acquiescent that the school can afford to know everything about her. She is less a person than a standard success story. “Why can’t all children be like Mary?” She is either someone the school system molded to perfection or someone who had them fooled.

Her parents are another matter, but I’ll sneak up on that subject later.

Incidentally, Mary seems to me the most likable and least predictable of all.

**Jason McDowell.** More complex story, though the schools don’t tell it. Jason is a transfer student, has apparently done well here—spotless personal record, excellent grades.

(Does *everyone* get A’s now? These seem to be unusual kids, but averages *above* A? I gather they get extra points for Advanced Placement courses.)

Jason’s old school (near Hocomo, Missouri) throws a different light on our boy. Seems “Moo” was a constant trouble there. Grades outstanding but there are parent conferences, a note about “runs in a dangerous crowd,” truancies, and two suspensions (smoking, fighting).

Moo says his parents moved here because of his dad’s work. Parents say they moved to try and “straighten him out.” They are very protective of him (or themselves) and I could never get them to explain what they meant or why they thought this town would straighten him out. The school reports give no clues that I can spot.

**Darcy Simmons.** Like Plain, L.L. skipped two years. None of her compatriots seemed to recognize how young she is: only twelve when it started. Easy to see why they overestimated her age. If you look close, she appears no older than she is, but it’s hard to look close. She disarms such examining, stares you out of countenance. I don’t like her and have to be careful here. She’s rude and snotty, acts superior. Still, she’s such a young kid.

The reports are all over the place, sometimes in the same year and from the same teacher: a leader of the school student body; a

recluse who doesn't mix—attentive and lively; distracted—warm; cold—works hard; unmotivated. No teacher seems to have had idea one about what to do with her, who she was. Perhaps that's why they rushed her through so quickly.

I get the feeling I should scratch at why it is I don't like her—I fear competent women? Two things: she is a startlingly beautiful girl. Maybe her beauty activates a guilt reflex: maybe I direct this guilt back on her, blame her for it. The second thing: she seems utterly indifferent to her attractiveness, doesn't try to hide it but seems not to give a shit. That's insulting. If people honestly didn't give a shit about attracting others, where would we be?

L.L. is very popular inside this group. Those who were open with me, I think, were Mary, Willy (probably?) and Moo (rarely)—certainly not L.L., and with Plain I just don't know. They all admire L.L. as a leader. That's the word I would use, though the kids all insist it doesn't apply. Willy said at one point, laughing, "We all love her and she knows that—allows it, too, but I don't think she reciprocates. She's actually kind, but that's probably as far as it goes. She lives in a different country."

I'm not sure I admire her, but that may be because I find her so vexing. Maybe she's too smart. Maybe it's just that she doesn't like me. Maybe she has no use for any adult, looks on us as annoying globs of all that is irrelevant.

In any case, she's the only one of the five no teacher ever warmed to.

**William Krasinski.** Reading the Journal, you get the feeling Willy is a self-centered geek who runs into a spell of depression midway through their time. I thought at one time he had faked the depression, hoping to grab attention, this peculiar odd-man-out.

But you never know. Talking with him was one of the strangest experiences I've had as a detective, and they've mostly been strange. He's friendly and scary at the same time.

The school reports on William are the most unlikely of the lot, and they don't add up for me. In Grade One, "Billy's parents and I

have discussed his aggressive behavior, especially toward two larger boys in the class.” Mr. Cherin [school psychologist] says Billy’s acting out physically in losing situations is a way of “negotiating gender uncertainties.” Maybe so.

Unsurprisingly, it’s not long before “Billy” is getting his ass kicked regularly. Also, it appears that he not only sets off fire alarms but fires as well, twice in the third grade—the janitor’s closet, the teacher’s lounge. One summer, he’s in a program called “HEAL,” inpatient, heavy duty mental health regimen for problem kids whose rich parents can pay hefty fees. Willy’s parents are not rich, and I don’t know how they managed this.

In seventh grade, the police investigate a stabbing, Willy putting a knife deep into a classmate’s thigh as a half-dozen were working to unpack new desks—on the floor, covered with paper and bubble wrap, sawing at the twine. The cops had nothing to go on and allowed it to pass as an accident. I expect it was an accident. Here’s Willy with his box-cutter, putting all his upper-body pressure on forcing the blade downwards, only to have it slide off the unyielding twine, the packing stuff, and straight into the kid’s hidden thigh. Deliberate? The victim said nothing against Willy, though he was offered but a single question to handle: “Do you think William intended to stab you?” He answers, “I don’t know. No—he just kind of slipped.”

In eighth grade, Willy was twice hospitalized. Drug overdose, classic head-in-the-oven. Given this record, the calm banality of the psychologists’ reports is overwhelming: “possibility of mild borderline personality disorder. Paranoia is counter-indicated.”

In high school, Willy suddenly has no recorded problems, not one. Grades perfect and fewer geek signs—not even Secretary of the Chess Club.

**Brandon and Missy.** This is the hardest part. These kids are dear, but what I feel for them does not say anything about the case, does not, for instance, say that the five are guilty.

I cannot imagine how to introduce these kids or discuss them—nor why that’s a problem. I have rough copies of the courtroom sketches done by the trial artist. They are so bad, though, I am sure you can do better on your own. Go to it!

**SKETCHES OF BRANDON AND MISSY—You Do `Em**

[here]

You get the idea. Cute as the buttons popping open on Lolita’s jumper. Perfect for the prosecution. What is at stake is the ability Brandon and Missy have to attract—let’s call it admiration? More than that. In that “more” lies the key to one dark aspect of this trial.

Plain cut uncomfortably close to the bone with his ironic joke about Brandon and Missy being too ugly to screw, reported in our local news. Juries are not supposed to read newspapers, and sometimes they don’t; but Plain’s disastrous flippancy was spread all over the courtroom. His raw Oscar Wilde allusion sends a flash through the brain, a sharp image lasting for a disastrous millisecond: “Hey, those two are pretty, look older than. . . . What am I thinking? What kind of monster am I—is Plain?” The protective

backlash could mean curtains for all five: we KNOW what they did, because. . . . Shut up! They are the monsters.

We're pretty canny in understanding pedophiles, though it never reaches consciousness.

I did check the Wilde trials. The prosecutor, Edward Carson, asks Wilde, "*Did you ever kiss him?*"

*"Oh dear no!" Wilde said, "He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly. I pitied him for it."*

What followed is so horrible, it still makes the skin crawl, showing how some kinds of hysteria never die:

*"Was that the reason why you did not kiss him?"*

*"Oh! Mr. Carson: you are pertinently insolent."*

*"Did you say that in support of your statement that you never kissed him?"*

*"Not at all."*

*"Why, sir, did you mention that this boy was extremely ugly?"*

*"For this reason. If I were asked why I did not kiss a door-mat, I should say because I do not like to kiss door-mats. I do not know why I mentioned that he was ugly, except that I was stung by the insolent question you put to me and the way you have insulted me throughout this hearing. Am I to be cross-examined because I do not like it? It is ridiculous to imagine that any such thing could have happened in the circumstances."*

*"Then why did you mention his ugliness, I ask you?"*

*"Perhaps you insulted me by an insulting question."*

*"Was that the reason why you said the boy was ugly?"*

And on and on!

Back to Missy and Brandon. The first time JoAnne took them to a clinic, she kept it quiet, for some reason, failed to inform the police—and the test data is private.

Later on, she hauled them to a medical center, where they found only "inflammation," in both: Missy had "a bladder infection"; Brandon some "very light" bruising on thighs and buttocks, "common in normal rough-and-tumble boys."

Ms. LaVelle did not report either examination in her formal charges, filed two weeks later. When confronted with this lapse, she told me she had forgotten; then said she remembered but thought it irrelevant. “I didn’t see no way it was part of what these monsters did. They must have started with my babies later on, or these doctors didn’t notice or didn’t want to notice, if you know what I mean.”

I pressed and got what she always gave: contradictory material spilling out in a chirp, sentences ending in question marks. Until much later, she never changed tone, and it was impossible to dislodge her from this manner: anecdotal, flirtatious, ditzy. I kept thinking she was parodying a Robbe-Grillet novel: “Oh yes, detective, it was Tuesday, I know? Because I was going past Victoria Secrets, never mind, tee hee, and they had this sale? And, not Monday, do you like raisin bagels? My girlfriend says they aren’t real bagels and don’t count? She’s from New York? That makes a difference. Monday. When I think of what I did to my babies without meaning, I should have seen, but these sick brats are good at seeming normal, all five of them, though I thought Mary? You know Mary, but who could tell, when that’s what you’re dealing with, detective? Could I maybe get a Coke if it’s not too much trouble, detective, and maybe you’d like one yourself, so it’d be like us, me and you, going out for drinks together? No raisin bagels, though, right?”

When I asked her why she took the kids to the clinic, she said it was (a) because she suspected they had been molested, (b) because she was sure they hadn’t been but anyhow, (c) because they had colds, (d) because she thought they might be molested in the future, (e) because she was in the neighborhood, (f) because her girlfriend, but not the one with the low opinion of raisin bagels, had been there and told JoAnne, “You can never be too careful.”

Trying to determine why she had hidden this from the police, I threatened, yelled, slammed the table—and she simpered and giggled and blurred.

The accused say in their Journal that Ms. LaVelle later confronted them with molestation claims. They say she quickly “dropped the outraged virtue act” and offered a deal, blackmail. She demanded \$200,000, soon dropping the figure to “probably \$100,00,” “considering that you are my friends.” That screwball stuff rings true, which doesn’t mean it is. The commune says it flat out rejected the deal, didn’t take it seriously, and therefore didn’t report it to the police.

(As it turned out, none of this was of much consequence. The defense soft-pedaled JoAnne’s alleged blackmail attempt, worried, Caitlin told me, about laying one attack on top of another and making it an issue of “spot the victim.”)

The Child Protective Agency issued attacks on this blackmail claim, raising it to the sort of public prominence both the defense and prosecution wanted to avoid. I’ll reprint one of their leaflets here—assured, angry, bloody:

***So Now The Child-Rapists Are the Victims?***

***Can anything be more brazen than the attempts by the heinous five to transform themselves into innocent little lambs?***

***You heard it, right? They say Ms. LaVelle tried to blackmail them before issuing charges. Why didn’t they report this “blackmail?” “We didn’t take it seriously.” What?***

***How about, “There was no blackmail attempt?”***

***Or, “We are sociopathic liars, willing to hurt anyone to save our worthless hides?”***

***Don’t be fooled by these brats and the shyster team defending them. This latest ploy shows, AGAIN, the contempt they have for decency and the people of this town.***

***The sooner they are gone, FOR GOOD, the better.***

As for material evidence we uncovered in the case (in addition to the Journal), there was the following:

1. The porn tapes and scripts
2. Photographs of the sleeping arrangements
3. Photographs of the basement party room

4. Stolen goods, as detailed in the Journal

5. The medical reports on Brandon and Missy

1. The “porn” tapes and scripts are probably the most important part of the prosecution case—in terms of the impact on the jury (though these materials are not illegal).

2. The prosecution pointed to “irregular, swapping beds” sleeping arrangements. We found no evidence of this. In fact, the kids seem to have been unusually private, even prudish. When Ms. LaVelle moved in, they gave her and her children two private rooms and doubled up—by gender.

3. The basement is much like a 70s rec room, not an insidious “den.”

4. The kids admitted the theft freely, and in any case, these crimes faded into the shadows as the molestation issues took center stage. They came up only because both Mary and Moo let things drop in testifying. Mary was so fine in apologizing for this “false step in the experiment” that the DA jumped off that frying pan before he began to sizzle.

When Moo said something about “a lifetime supply of underpants plus all the stuff we’ve ripped off from Plain’s parents,” the DA didn’t press him. He told me he feared Moo might also express remorse, and he was anxious “not to humanize these beasts.” The DA figured his best line was not to let the jury regard the accused as members of their own species.

5. The muddled medical evidence was probably harmful to the prosecution—it is what juries want to be unequivocal. Timmons couldn’t ignore it, but all he managed was an expert he-said/he-said stand-off. He occupied as little time as he could, but Caitlin, who has been around the block, kept it going, under the pretense of getting at the exact truth.

Apart from the porn script and tapes, there was nada in physical evidence. And the scripts and tapes seem not to have involved Brandon and Missy in any way.

There was no smoking gun. No semen, no eye-witnesses, no non-contradictory evidence, no confessions, not even consistent accusations.

One thing stands out: the addition of the molestation charges to the already-brewing case of felonies and misdemeanors seems to have confused everyone.

Anyhow, the fullest evidence lies in the accused five and their Journal, to which I'll soon return. I've got it in the best order I can, but the chronology still bothers me. I wish now I'd gone over it with the kids, but who would have thought they'd not be around to help.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **The Journal, Part 1**

#### **The Great Shoplift**

**We decided to make a record of our main adventures This here will be an objective record of our activities, those that count.**

**I'm the one writing up this activity. (Me, that is Mary. Hi!) And we'll rotate this chore. So I will refer to myself as "Mary" in this account, not "me," even though it is me. That's enough, Mary! OK! Stop it! OK! I mean it! OK! You won't, though! Sure I will. I know you won't. I'll try. Not good enough!**

**After we finished the Journal and before our Council meeting, our still-nameless gang decided to make a "sweep" (Moo's term) of local stores and shoplift necessities. All were enthused, though Willy and Moo admitted they were new to this. Mary said she'd taken jewelry and cosmetics; Plain said he regularly got his condoms that way (sure!); L.L. refused to say, but went along. We made a list of items and then divided: one team to steal; the other as lookout.**

**First, Macy's. Mary and Moo lifted boys' undies, Mary mashing packs of four into her stretch pants and purse while Moo kept watch and stuffed some into his jeans. They got all they wanted in less than a minute, working the counter like pro snatchers, operating beneath the range of the security camera.**

**Upstairs later in girls', they found it more challenging. For one thing, there were people around. For another, the counters were in the center of the floor, where the cameras were aimed. Moo carefully set himself between Mary and the camera, with his coat held way up, so even his hair couldn't be identified. Trouble was, the actual thievery was slow work. Mary was looking at size and color. Moo, meanwhile, was becoming**

embarrassed—standing there with his coat up over his head. I think he was also embarrassed lingering so long in girls' panties. "Will you hurry up, Mary!" he kept hissing, "I feel like a fucking perv scarecrow." Two girls our age—I didn't know them—stopped, ducked under Moo's spread-out arms so they could stare at his face. They started giggling—"Hey geek! Hey panty-boy!" Finally, Mary finished and they beat it. Turns out they had also some nighties—little kid sizes (L.L. uses them as tee-shirts). Still, the underpants were good: the girls' pairs matched the waists and tastes of the two who could properly use them; the boys' were a variety mix, and not too many of them were perfect fits, I guess. That's what they said.

L.L. and Willy went into True Value, using a big carrying bag. Most of the stuff was too bulky. Tools, though, were doable, so they wandered in that direction, trying to appear routine. Willy wasn't about to duplicate Moo's scarecrowing, so they edged themselves into an aisle, crouched, and shoveled in what was on the lowest shelves: screw drivers and wrenches, nails and screws, and four tape measures, it turns out. They wanted a hammer, but they were high up, as were electric-powered things.

They got more wrenches than we could ever use. But who knows? Maybe each of us will need one simultaneously, with a couple of back-ups. L.L. hatched a getaway plan: bought a hammer and saw—went right through the check-out line. The hammer and saw cost a lot, but every homeowner needs them, it goes without saying.

Plain had wanted to go on these shoplifting runs, but we were afraid he was too eager. Nobody said that—but Plain ended up as lookout man, watching for cops or KGB strong men that might drop down on us. He didn't like that job much, Plain didn't. Anyways, he was finally called on for the grocery run, he and L.L.. It was harder: groceries are pretty big and there's only so much you can stuff into clothes. So they took a

cart and strolled, stuffing and carting. Nobody seemed to notice. People who work in big grocery stores mostly hate their jobs, so they probably wouldn't have turned them in anyhow. Since most other shoppers are blind-blank indifferent, L.L. and Plain could have grabbed the whole meat department, along with the lobster tank, and breezed out of there. But they stole only a bit, trying for the most expensive items that were smallest: olive oil, cheese, and (for some reason) yogurt. This time they wanted to avoid the checkout line, just ditched the cart near the entrance and strolled out.

Arriving back at the house, we had a great time examining our haul, like opening presents. We all put on some jockies over clothes and danced. Mary lead the way.

You can see why the DA didn't want Mary talking. She's so pretty and careless, entirely without conceit, and her eyes are never still. While she was testifying, her long hair was brushed silky but haphazardly, and one of the buttons on her blouse was undone.

She never giggled during the courtroom examination, was a model of a respectful child. In a way, she is self-contained, but that's not what inspires such deep trust. She's hair-trigger responsive, empathetic. She seemed, in giving testimony, more interested in the questioner than in the question, locked into a world that contained just the two of them.

### **The Great Parental Invasion**

Willy here. On Thursday May 4, 7:30 p.m., we were set upon by a group of intruders: Moo's parents, Mary's parents, L.L.'s parents and older brother, and my parents, younger sister and older brother. Apart from Plain's parents, they were a full collection of the opposition forces. We have long known that we didn't have to worry about the police, county agencies, the school, bill collectors—door-to-door arsonists, burglars, serial killers, cult leaders, rival gangs, drug dealers, or big mean bullies.

Of course they don't see it that way.

So here they come to the door, in cute little family groups. To emphasize kindly concern, two of them brought inferior home-made cookies.

"We just wanted to ask how you kids are doing, just wanted to bring you some treats, to let you know we care, know we're here for you."

Blah, blah, blah.

They forced their way into the room we're always in and sat down, mostly on the floor. We stayed standing, planted on the edges throughout the whole performance, except Plain. He stayed for a minute and then headed outside.

Once the intruders were arranged, they set loose the same barrage of clichés—wind-up dolls. I wonder if they rehearsed: "First, you soften them. Then you come down hard with a truckload of guilt, and finally, you offer them money or unlimited ice cream."

Finally, Moo's dad said it: "You kids have had your fun. I don't blame you for it. But it's time to stop being children, and come home. Not just you, Jason, but all of you."

"Don't call me Jason," Moo said.

"Why not? That's your name."

"Fuck it is," explained Moo.

L.L.'s mother, smiling over the top of all this and looking like a fashion model, said, "Well, honest conflict is good. We don't want to run your lives, but do consider whether this experience is advancing your interests, especially as you extend it week after week. Are you attached to the idea or just the habit? I know you want to be open and flexible, but are you falling into a trap?"

L.L. looked at her as if she were so bored she might doze off at any minute.

**You can imagine the rest. They talked on top of one another and moved quickly past “we don’t want to run your lives” to when-all-else-fails threats and name calling.**

**(Moo’s little brother was there, too—didn’t say anything, though when things heat-ed up he started to cry. We ought to rescue him, move him in with us.)**

**There were a couple of high points. Mary’s parents had been the quietest of the bunch. Fatso mother was using the “how could you hurt me so” tactic, sitting there with big watery cow eyes, looking wounded. It seemed to be working, as she had Mary sniffing and then actually crying, soft but clear. That pissed off Moo, who had been yawning and ignoring his parents. When he saw Mary crying, he lit on the fat mama: “Leave her alone, shit bag. You just want her home so you don’t have to look at ass-face there” (Mary’s crumpled-up dad). It could have been more eloquent—but it wasn’t.**

**But it was plenty good enough to ignite Mary’s father, who tried to take a swing at Moo. Mary’s dad is about as fat as a sumo wrestler, had trouble rising, and then, part-way to his goal, didn’t have patience to get his balance. You could see how much he wanted to hurt Moo. But he toppled and hit nothing, his momentum carrying him over the coffee table, flopping into my mom, my younger sister, and L.L.’s mother.**

**It sounds funny but nobody laughed. For one thing, Moo is what you’d call slight. The idea of this walrus trying to punch him as hard as he could was sobering. It’s not that we thought these bozos came over to beat us up, but Mary’s father showed us how pigass they are. I think we realized then that we were doing the right thing.**

**They came here to show us what we were missing and ended up demonstrating why we left in the first place. I mean, we left because we wanted to be together. It’s my view that we all also left because what we had wasn’t worth a shit.**

After the wallow, they didn't leave right away. They'd only been here maybe twenty minutes, and would feel guilty if they gave up so fast. They didn't expect to get us back, didn't want us back; they just had to be able to say to themselves: "We tried reasoning with them, but it was no use. We tried everything, everything!"

Then somebody, I can't remember which one, stood up and said, "Now, let's all keep our cool. Many emotions are running around the room here and. . . ." Then followed more blab, exactly in the same line.

Finally, Mary, of all people, said, "So you've told us. Why don't you go home?"

Mary's mom, seeing her wounded sow act wasn't working, blared, "Young lady, we came to get you and that's what we're going to do. If we told you it was OK, we were wrong, and besides we never thought it would . . . . We don't intend . . . If you think for one minute we're going to just. . ."

Then L.L., who hadn't said a lot, said a lot. "We listened to you politely." (That wasn't exactly true, but we'd been a lot more polite than they.) "You come in here and threaten us, try to hurt us, and use every low trick you can dredge up. When nothing else works, it looks like you're going to filibuster us to death. Mary doesn't need you, woman! We don't care what you think. We don't care if you want us back—that's your problem, not ours. We're here because we want to be, not because we hate you or want a bigger allowance. We're here because you don't matter to us. We are doing what we want. You come here and tell us that's not what you want. What you want is NOT more important than what we want. What you want you can stick right up your ancient asses. I apologize for the language. Now get out of here."

That's pretty close to accurate, I think. L.L. was fluent. She didn't seem mad, more like tired and patient, a teacher explaining something for the eightieth time, knowing nobody'd

get it. L.L. has these hand gestures she uses without thinking: they seem as if they are pleading with you. It's almost as if she's petting you, offering something.

I wish I could say the intruders were so ashamed they quietly shuffled out of the room. Nope. They hung around for another half hour, going through the motions, wanted to be the ones to say they were leaving, having the last word. So, finally, they started their exit routine. "We're getting nowhere here—like talking to a brick wall. You kids will be sorry. I told you it was no use. Don't think you've heard the end of this. I blame myself for being so permissive. You kids think you know it all, but not by a long shot."

Then they left, trying to pretend they hadn't just been crapped out and flushed.

I realize I didn't mention my own parents. They love me, I suppose, and aren't so bad—but that's OK. They're like the rest. Maybe they rule me by guilt—I don't know.

I added this last part because I didn't want anybody to think I was sneering at their parents and shielding mine. I know we're all detached and don't care. It's hard, though. What they did wasn't amusing. I don't know if they meant to hurt us, but it seems as if that's the one thing they know how to do. And so they do it.

I think this is *not* the place for me to talk about the parents. I had interviews and their affidavits. But I'm worried about delaying The Journal, about getting everything up front *except* the center, which lies somewhere inside the kids.

### **The First Council**

This is L.L. from the most bollixed meeting (PTA, KKK, DAR, CRIPS—somebody gag her!) ever. It wasn't what any of us was hoping for. I sure Jesus hope it wasn't.

We spent the first part, maybe twenty minutes I swear, talking about who should run the meeting and what that

person, if there were to be one, ought to be called. The dumbest suggestion—it was a close race—was that nobody should run it. The next was that the person holding an object would be temporary chairperson. Like in *Lord of the Flies*. Hold a conch, or, since there's not a conch within a thousand miles, a grapefruit, a shoe. Finally, we decided we'd rotate who was running it.

We turned to a discussion of so many things I'll mention only a couple.

—We talked about what we are. Most were fond of a gang. We think we'll become a gang naturally if we don't press. There is one in town, and maybe we could go up against them, whatever that might mean. Moo suggested we ask them for their rules, steps to followed on the road to gangdom. For that he got a lot of grief. I think it's a good point: gangs are highly conventional, not unlike Lodges. We might not ask, having some regard for our dignity, but we can be observant, imitate without admitting we're doing that.

—As for Plain's long list. Everybody had a different opinion about everything, except: we agreed that Plain should gouge his parents for a monthly \$800. Why not? Mary asked Plain why his parents didn't come along, said they must be really cool not to join in. Plain was mute.

—Mary's list was discussed. It was decided to start up the book and issue club first. Our first issue will be school shootings, starting way back at Columbine.

—We talked about a pet. We couldn't decide whether to get one, how many, or what animal(s). Willy and I kept saying we should make sure we had a stable operation before taking other live things in. I mean, next thing we know we'll be wanting to adopt a baby!

Wish I could get closer to how I think about L.L. One thing is clear: what so many of her peers, not just those in the commune,

find altogether admirable and magnetic in her eludes me—even those hand gestures. Who cares what I think!

### **The Second Journal Entry**

It's me, Moo. Plain shit on me first time around for not writing enough. I don't think he'll do that this time. For one thing, Plain and I have gotten closer. For another, he knows I'll kick his ass, mess up his Audrey Hepburn face. (It's Audrey, idiot, not Adrey, like anybody would be named Adrey!) I told him he doesn't look like Audrey Hepburn anyhow. He's too girly. Audrey Hepburn had shorter hair and smaller tits. She's dead. Fell off the back end of a yacht—or was pushed. Big mystery to this day. You notice how I said, "Plain and I?" L.L. hates it if you get stuff like that wrong.

I think it's going good. We're eating well, have plans. I mean, bitching about Plain leaving his food on the floor—c'mon! And Willy as a tight-ass? He's working on that. Besides, he buys beer. Keeps things in piles and sorts them. Are we treating Willy like a parent? Maybe we should all pitch in; and then Willy will leave those fucking messes alone, stop making lists. (I was searching for a good place for "fucking," like L.L. advised.)

I have one complaint: we're tame: paying the mortgage, putting in a patio. Bore ourselves through life. I thought we'd be doing wild and illegal stuff. I know we will; I wish we'd get to it. I see I've contradicted myself. I know I'm not as smart as you all and feel bad about it. Tell me I'm stupid. You won't be telling me anything I don't know.

I did enjoy the shoplifting. In spite of those girls calling me a perv.

One thing I feel bad about is having Mary's dad swing at me—sort of itching him. Mary's mom was pissing me off the way she was putting the guilt squeeze on Mary, but I shouldn't

have said that. I think what I did made Mary feel worse. I'm sorry, Mary.

I'm sorry, too, to Plain if I haven't been nice.

This is Plain. God, Moo, don't be sorry. You make me feel depressed as hell. I liked it when you were about to kick my ass, saying I looked like Miss Pre-Teen Iowa. We're not here to make each other feel like shit. I've had enough of that to last me for the next sixty years. (What a pose! "I've had enough—can't take any more! Poor me! Boo-hoo!")

You're not dumb. Fuck, Moo, you get all As. You're smart *despite* that. I think this came up before and I said the same thing. Maybe I have Allsheimers.

What you said to Mary's mom was right on. That's what my ass dad would say. "Right on, Miller!" he'd drool whenever he wanted to show how much he understood me. Anyhow, Moo, get your balls and brains sorted out. You're a good guy. So is Willy and so is Mary and so, even, is L.L.

About construction ideas. I think we should draw up plans. I bet Willy and I can do it—or all five working together.

I can't wait to talk about school shootings and Columbine. I know you all will say smart things, but to tell the truth, I'd like to do it. Not shooting kids, but teachers and the deans and counseling assholes. Coaches. The windows, desks, trophy cases, basketball hoops. God, think of all that fucking juice and guts. And yelling.

I really like what Moo said about not getting tied up in groups and wholesome cooking classes. We should do real things—violence. The shoplifting gave us a rush. But I say we learn about the Sharks by wiping the street with their skinny asses.

As for pets: if we're going to have animals, let's make money out of them. We could breed something. Guinea pigs? Probably not a big market, but maybe birds, like parrots. Tell customers it's all "Save Endangered Species." Or get animals

and eat them ourselves, like pigs, if they weren't so big—and messy, as are chickens. And pigs are smart—it'd be like killing cousins. Breeding is better.

Mary here. I'm not mad at Moo—no. I was feeling bad then and crying, damn it, because of my mom. When you yelled and my dad tried to hit you, it made me see they'd been controlling me. Thank you, dearie. I should have told you then that I appreciated it. It's just that I was embarrassed by my parents. I know they're separate, not me—but I still sort of am embarrassed and hate myself for feeling that. Besides, Moo, you're cute.

Audrey Hepburn didn't fall off a yacht, Plain honey. You have her confused with another ancient star, Natalie Wood. Audrey Hepburn also didn't get Parkinson's Disease and still keep making movies with all those tremors. That was her older sister Katherine, which wasn't her sister at all, right Plain?

Pets. God! But if we do decide, maybe snakes are good. People pay a lot of money for those big, fat-as-my-mom snakes, and they eat rats, I think (snakes, not my mom—so far as I know). We could trap rats here—keep leaving your food out, Plain. And they don't need walking every day to pee on mailboxes. (I know rats are smart, like dolphins.) Or tarantulas? I like the idea of breeding monsters.

I'm grateful to you guys for going along with the book and issues club. But I agree what we really want is to make some noise. I don't know much about the Sharks, but I agree we should kick butt. Not hard, though. (Why do I have more trouble saying "butt" than "ass"? Maybe because "butt" is a body part and "ass" just a word?)

Back to kicking Shark butt—really a ritual, right? Gang fights. People flying and falling, nobody's hurt? Let's kick some of that kind of butt. Could we arrange it?

I was really shaken by what L.L. wrote, about not thinking everything's going to be perfect, cause it shouldn't be. I hate it

when somebody wants me to be perfect. Even worse, I really was perfect, of all the horrible things—doing what others want. That’s one reason I love L.L. She sees right through that bullshit.

But for now you’ll have to tell me about me.

I don’t yet know how to respond to what Plain was saying about Columbine. I’ll wait until it sinks in.

Willy. I’ve been hearing I’m as bossy as ever. It seems you’re telling me that when I apologize, it’s like I’d paid admission and can return to the movie theater I’d been kicked out of. I’ve been wondering. L.L. told me the other day she wasn’t going to let me turn this into an experiment in corporate living. I see. But it also might be that you have it in your head that I’m that way and won’t see me any different no matter what I do.

I just want this to work and don’t want to make things harder. I think Mary is wrong to blame herself. She is sensitive and kind—perfect. Unlike Mary, Moo’s being hard on himself is deserved—he can use it. Perfect, Moo is not.

What Plain said is clear enough, but it just doesn’t take up lodging in my head.

L.L. and don’t you forget it. I think it’s too early to know how we’re doing. The self-searching of Mary and Willy is maybe a bad thing, and I don’t know what to make of Plain and Moo, with their cavemen whoops. But I’m not Mama Bear, and I shouldn’t always be going last in the Journal.

Come to think of it, if you want to take on the Sharks, I’m willing. Not enthusiastic but OK. Do they have any fighters? What I suspect is that they’re all show and have few members. Aren’t they the only gang in town? How tough would they need to be? I worry that attacking them could turn into a run and sob fest. Either that or they have about three-hundred members and will annihilate us as if we were chickens in front of a lava flow. But let’s give it a try. It won’t be Mary’s notion

of Hollywood dance numbers. If somebody flies, they'll get hurt. I also hope it's not what tough-guy Plain has in mind: scattered body parts floating in blood.

I'll try to be less of a pig—won't change much, though. The rest of you don't try—please. We'll just end up giving ourselves mind-fucks. (Don't change: you're all four as good as anybody on the planet.)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **The Great Gang Rumble, Written by Moo**

I can't believe this fucking happened. We were sitting around one night and Mary, of all people, said, "When are we going to take on The Sharks?" Everybody was excited, except maybe Willy, and he's not bad once you see how he operates, which seems bossy but is really just kind of twittery. He'll do anything. He did say to me yesterday, "You have no idea how violent I could be if I let myself." I thought he was kidding, but he was looking at me with fucking snake eyes like I've never seen, though I don't think he was threatening me personally. I wouldn't want to be a Shark if he got mad.

We decided to do a good turn to The Sharks by re-arranging their body parts. One problem was figuring out who they are and how to start a fight. L.L. said it wasn't the sort of thing you send invites to. We decided to begin by asking around at school.

We discovered there are not that many Sharks, and that they wear wee iron-on shark things on their shirts. I scouted around and finally saw two kids with them. I was with Plain at the time, so we walked up and started giving them shit. They were just little kids, scared. They being so small took most of the fun out of it for me, but Plain kept going, sitting one of them in the water fountain. Even Plain wasn't thug enough to start in serious, but he was scaring them so bad, I broke in: "Hey pussies! Why don't you get the rest of your gang and meet us tonight—at the field? We have things we need to discuss." They were petrified, but said they'd be there. I was about to ask how many in their gang, but that seemed chicken. I didn't want to start a contest for who was most frightened.

After they left, Plain yelled at me—why did I stop him from humiliating the fucking baby Sharks? Glad it wasn't me he set

in the fountain. I sort of worried that the Shark squirts might not know where the field was, or which the hell field I was talking about, but I kept that to myself, so as not to give Plain something more to yell at me about.

We told the other three in our gang, who didn't seem excited. L.L. said we should all wear something similar, so we wouldn't beat on one of our own gang by mistake. We decided on white, easy to spot. Trouble was me and Plain only had these white dress shirts our parents had bought us for fucking important occasions meaning what? Willy had a lovely white pullover sweater. I'm not making fun of you, Willy—very stylish! All in all, we were dressed wrong for what old movies called a rumble.

We got to the field thirty minutes early, which was stupid, as it's no fun standing around, when what you want to do is break somebody's face (or, to be honest, worry about your own face being broken). Pretty soon we saw them coming up the street. Holy shit

We got quiet, standing there waiting. When they got closer, we could tell there weren't but maybe twenty, about half girls, too. Of course we were also about half girls, only I hadn't counted on busting up some girl—not to be sexist. Funny thing was we knew all these kids just about—an expanded version of the fucking Debate Team.

One of them stepped out after they got maybe ten yards away. His name was Larry, the kind of nerd who grins all the time and giggles when there's nothing funny. Larry says, "Hi." When some nerd says, "Hi" to you and stands there giggling, it's kind of hard to start bashing away. "Hi," he said again, "what did you guys want to discuss?" It was like he wanted to join hands for the prom decorating committee.

Plain tried his damndest: "We want to discuss kicking the shit out of every one of you, you miserable twerpy nerds. You want to discuss that, Larry?"

Honest to God, Larry giggled again and somebody in the back of their group yelled, “Cool it, Plain. This isn’t some movie.”

That really pissed Plain off, so he ran up to Larry and acted like he’d slug him, at least knock him down, but even Plain’s not that much a terrorist and sort of eased Larry to the ground and pretended to kick him. But some of the other Sharks ran up, obviously to try and protect him. Plain wanted bad to have a fight, so he treated them as if they were attacking and started shoving and drawing back as if to punch. I was with him by then and trying to get in some shoves and pretend slugs.

Plain was doing his best to incite them, but they mostly seemed to be getting in the way, trying to avoid Plain. They got in our way, too, which made even shoving hard. Willy and Mary were with us in a minute, but I don’t think they hit anybody—even shoved. They were just moving about and fucking Mary was laughing. I finally tripped a kid, Terry Barnes, and got on top of him and hit him real light in the shoulders a few times. He rolled around and said, “Why are you doing this?” That made me mad—I realize now it made me mad because I didn’t know the answer. I didn’t punch him, though.

Plain was still shoving and mock-punching. There were two girls pulling on Plain’s shirt trying to get him to stop. Finally, they trapped him in his shirt, and one of the girls then reached down and gave him a wedgie. I thought sure he’d slug them—by now I had let Terry up and was standing there wondering what to do—but he didn’t hit the girls, Plain didn’t. He looked like he might laugh.

Then L.L. was yelling in that voice of hers that shuts everybody up. The whole crowd froze. She went over to one of the Sharks and talked to her for a minute, then came back. Mary was giggling and talking to a couple of Shark girls. I was standing there not knowing what to do, keeping away from

Larry, since I was embarrassed. I thought he'd want to talk, and I didn't know what to talk about. None of the Sharks ran away—I'll give them that. They tried to help one another, but were willing to let me and Plain have our fun—which made it no fun at all. I think Plain hated it, too, since he's not a freak.

Anyhow, like I say, L.L. comes up and talks to this Shark girl I don't know and then comes back and says, sort of quiet, which made everybody else quiet, "We're finished here. We're also sorry, Sharks. We didn't know what kind of gang you were."

That's how it ended, L.L. apologizing, which sure put the whammy on any future gang fights. Maybe they would've gotten mad eventually and returned the favor. Thanks, L.L. Leave it to her, and we'll join up with the Sharks and have a bake sale, put on a show.

I have to admit this was really messed-up. I'd not want to do anything like it again. A real fight? Maybe But not this. I think most of us felt that way. Not Plain, maybe. But I still am twitchy about L.L. apologizing.

The CPA somehow got hold of this Journal. How? The DA leaked some of it to the papers and tv, but not much and not altogether irresponsibly, as these things go. DAs generally operate more unscrupulously than most of the guys they prosecute, so it is possible he was using the CPA deliberately. I asked Timmons about the leaks and, in denying there were any, he let me know he was mystified by the CPA's access to it. So far as we knew, there was only one copy.

Doing my duty like a dutiful duty-doer, I asked the CPA, several of them, and got back the same shit, delivered with indignation: they'd done nothing illegal, are working in the community's best interests, have to protect their sources. The unmelodious accompaniment was how "the system" (me) gave rights only to criminals, was indifferent to children, hand in glove with child rapists, and left decent law-abiding citizens no choice

but to protect good people “by whatever means necessary.” Every one of them used that phrase, because they are, singly and collectively, as dumb as a bucket of rocks and can only mimic things, like mynah birds.

In any case they put out a version of this entry we’ve just read, shamelessly altering it so as to highlight (and invent) the one-sided violence and to erase, where they could detect it, the absurd comedy and the clear indications of hesitancy and moderation.

It is an ugly event. I can’t easily imagine kids being so hot on this kind of melee when it was so clearly one-sided. Plain especially. I talked to him about it, but that was much later.

### **The Great School Boycott, Written by Plain**

Let me explain something. We have these rules which say that when you’re writing something up you have to stick to what it is you’re writing about, no matter how much you want to add stuff. I guess that makes sense, though I think we’re getting a whole truckload of rules here—from L.L., who I thought was tough until what she did to end the fight.

The School Boycott was her idea. The way she explained it was: we’re going to school because WE think it’s important, *our* decision, so as not to fuck up our futures, however stupid school might be (is). However, going to school habitually (we do) might look like (and we might start thinking) we were going due to the pressures of assumptions. She said we had to dramatize our control by showing that it was up to us. The thing was to find a time when the school really wanted us to be there and also when we wouldn’t fuck ourselves up—hurt them a lot, while hurting ourselves none. Pretty tricky.

By the way, I’ve been thinking about whether I want the kind of future the school says it can give me. What I see adults doing I don’t want. I know I haven’t seen every fucking adult, but you have to decide based on what you can see. Why do I want to work my ass off and give school control over me so I

can get the kind of life *they* say I want? Maybe it's not that simple—I have a way of getting all hot about the way I think and making things too simple. I don't mean to be such a know-it-all.

What future would we be fucking up if we stopped going to school?

So as I was talking about, the boycott, we picked three days when there was a big shitpile of things like assemblies, college big shots coming, and state tests. They'd have to give us the test at another time, since everybody who could draw breath had to take them, so the school could get its budget and stuff.

So we did. We all spent the three days cleaning up and watching movies, talking—board games and painting (pictures, not walls), and reading and playing the great version of hide and seek Willy knew about. We also tried new recipes. L.L. and Willy are good cooks, and so am I—not as good as they are. Moo sucks. Mary does small bits. (It's fucking amazing how much fun stuff like cleaning is when you are horsing around while doing it. I admit also I've always liked cleaning, makes me feel like I'm doing something useful when I look at what was messy and dirty, and now it's neat and clean.)

When we went back to school, we used fake notes—Please excuse young Jason, as he had the three-day trots fierce, and wasn't fit to be among decent people or furniture—nobody said anything. I asked L.L. how would we be “dramatizing” anything if nobody noticed? She said we were making the point to us. I hope we can make the same point real often, regularly scheduled “dramatizations” of our power?

### **The Book/Issue Club**

Mary here. I like that way of starting. I had an aunt used to visit by opening the door, walking in, and yelling, “Selma here.” I know it made my parents mad, but I liked it. The way

Aunt Selma would come in: it was like the whole world was free to go visiting, opening doors and calling out names—Welcome to All! No Admission Standards—Ever!

I want to thank you-uns for agreeing to this. I don't think anybody but me was hot for it, so I take it as a personal kindness that you gave it a try. I think it was a success. Don't you? And I regard the club as showing how willing you all are to go along with what anybody thinks. It's got so you don't have to worry if something is cool—just try it.

Our topic was the Littleton shootings. We read the statement one of the shooters had written the night before. He said not to blame parents, gaming, the media, guns, rock music, or the school. He said they were doing it not because somebody had influenced them but because they wanted to. They wanted to and so they did it.

Once we latched onto that, we got into fine territory. Adults are anxious to make something like this about *them*, can't stand that a young person would act outside adult influence. Blaming parents or the media or gaming is just a way of circling the wagons, taking the story away from kids. Even bullying they say is about bad parenting. Adults don't have a thing to do with it. They are so scared because down deeper than they can reach they know kids motor along without regard to them. It's like parents saying we're here with each other because of them. But it's our lives, not theirs. And the Littleton event is about kids.

Adults are hysterical when it comes to something like Columbine. The sad thing is all the money they're wasting on metal detectors and classes on bullying. It's not like they care if schools have money for books and lunches for the poor. Adults will spend any amount of money, though, so they can get the story back.

We talked about whether we might want to do something like the shooting. That's interesting, especially if you don't answer right away but give it time to sink in—Plain! I don't

know for sure. (I think I'd be leaning Yes, if we shot principals and vice-principals, not teachers or other kids.) The more I thought about it, the more deeply I wasn't sure. I don't know if I could get myself to think that was ALL I wanted to do. Something like that would take absolute dedication. I don't know if that thought could take over my head.

Anyway, it doesn't seem to be a question of whether you had sufficient guts or rage. It's not like jumping off the high-diver. We all could do it, if we ever get to that point, so clear and focussed. I'm repeating myself, but this is a new idea for me.

L.L. said she thought it depended on how well you could think. For me, it's a matter of obsession; for L.L., it's a matter of thinking so well you could see yourself doing it and then you would.

Plain and Moo and Willy all said they could do it, if things were right. Plain then said he could do it period, only guns and bombs seemed to him "cowardly." I think he'd rather beat everybody to a pulp with his fists. I couldn't tell about Moo—he's tough to figure out. Willy said he'd love it only I don't think he would. Willy, I can't imagine you getting inside all the horror. (Like I have warrant for such certainty.)

We decided to have the next meeting in six weeks, since we're all doing a lot of different stuff besides school and our duties here. We are going to read *The Virgin Suicides*. Everybody has to steal a copy. No buying.

The CPA released a version of this, doctored so it looked like the kids planned to imitate Columbine, would have done so if they hadn't been nabbed for just-as-heinous crimes. The CPA was also warning, in its brickbat way, of the terrible consequences ensuing, were these psychopaths suffered to go free. To me, the discussion reads like kids trying out ideas, impressing one another. But I realize what I just said would irritate them more than the CPA line, my own smugness being an example of what drove them into this commune in the first place. We know kids according to a simple

*James R. Kincaid*

formula. Once you consider how it is adults know so much about kids, it does, as they say, suck. Wonder how our five, my five, feel about this particular report, written by *an adult*. I hope they'd think of it as a report written by *me*. I believe they would.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Third Council Meeting—Willy

The meeting was shorter than any we've had, probably because L.L. was in charge and kept asking, "What's your point?" Not a soft murmur either. That did move things along. I'd say that L.L. was born to be a manager (of an S/M parlor), but she'd kill me. Plain pretends not to be afraid of L.L., but I am. L.L. might say I write that in hopes she'll pity me. Please! I'm a needy sort, oh I am, and I know what a sucker you are for needies.

We mostly talked about money, which perhaps contributed to the brevity of our proceedings. It's so boring that even Billy Gates here was bored. But it was important, as boring things always are. That's a vital truth I recognize and you don't, but will when you hit my advanced years, if you keep your ears open and your flies zipped. We hit on fund-raising ideas, including a fake tag day: make up a heart-wringing cause and sell tags in support of it. We gather tag days were common in times of yore. They're not done now, which will make our revival all the more successful.

We also talked about Plain's idea of breeding birds. Mary's alternative, snakes or spiders, was discussed, but we didn't any of us know how snakes or spiders reproduced exactly, or how to make them do it, assuming they might be subject to pressure in that line. Mary's going to look it up. Moo suggested we think of a fish farm, using the area out back, digging a place and filling it with water. That seemed to everybody a good idea. For one thing, fish seem less smelly and underfoot than other stuff, and they don't wander about and get hit by cars or fly away. Moo is going to look into what a fish farm is.

The fight with the Sharks was brought up. Some were embarrassed by it, some were angry, and some found it

amusing. Plain asked L.L. why she'd apologized; she said it was obvious. Plain said it wasn't to him; L.L. said that was because he's a sociopath. Plain went into some kind of rage—knocked over a chair and screamed at L.L. I felt the way novelists say you do when you see your father cry—as if you'd wandered into a world where you had no place. Moo was saying he agreed with Plain. L.L. stared at him, finally sneered, “You do?” Moo was blushing but tried to stick to his principles. “You better fucking believe I do.” More staring from L.L. Mary said we should move on, me agreeing. Moo got pissed at me, a safer target than L.L. Mary kissed Moo on the mouth, which shut him up. Wonder if I acted like a preposterous asshole, Mary would treat me the same?

We talked about the reading club. Mary's posting the schedule on our bulletin board, a board which *one of us* made it up out of his or her own materials and nailed to the wall at the most convenient place. Nobody agreed on what film we should watch. Mary said she'd pick one and let us know. And they say I'm bossy! But it's impressive, Mary, how you get a lot done by saying what we should do. It's lame to call you “impressive,” Mary, and I use that word because I'm embarrassed to say more.

We agreed to spend some time with the house plans we've been drawing up, all of us involved but haphazardly. Since Plain had left and was the one who had come up with the plans and did ninety-percent of the work, it didn't seem right to proceed without him.

At the end we talked about what had gone best so far, and that, everyone agreed, is the eating. We collected some cookbooks the first day—took them from our parents, trying lots of different menus, and part of it has been great. It surprises me that nobody has bitched, not fucking once, as Plain would have said were he there. (I really missed him.) Kids our age bitch about food the way adults bitch about crab grass.

**Moo was eloquent on this point. “It just struck me: what you’d think we’d be complaining about all the time we don’t fucking complain about ever.” Mary and I thought we might assign cooking nights on a rotating basis, but Moo and L.L. hated the idea. We figured anarchist Plain would hate it too, so we dropped it.**

**I can’t help adding that I expect you all to give me lots of compliments on my very excellent writing in this entry. I know I am impressed.**

When I talked with Moo, he often used the same phrase Willy quoted, “It just struck me.” Many of us go through life without the help of that phrase; and here’s this kid, using it with confidence. I asked him about it. He told me he got it from David Sedaris, in a story called, “Dinah the Christmas Whore”—a story I found funny and also tender. Some might find it sentimental, but people use that word to deny emotions welling up within and embarrassing them.

It’s a sophisticated story about Sedaris and his sister, Lisa, taking a beat-up and not at all indestructible whore home to meet the family. Dinah lives off the fuel provided by her morning vodkas and a stable of generous and inapplicable nostrums. The Sedaris kids (Lisa, really, with David’s reluctant and inept accompaniment) are rescuing Dinah, but only temporarily, from a drunken and abusive boyfriend, and an overall hard-grit life. Well, that’s what it looks like to the reader (this one certainly), but Dinah doesn’t find her life lousy and neither does the Sedaris family. Dinah is miles away from seeing herself as a victim. As she sits at the Sedaris kitchen table, throwing down drinks, she sheds her gutter skin and appears as what she is: a self-possessed and charismatic figure, having a fine time and a fine life. The kids love the chance to question this exotic being: “Do you charge extra for spanking?” Dinah is never ridiculed; nobody is—except the narrator, David. It’s one of the most generous stories I’ve read, and I was thrown off balance when it was Moo who directed me to it.

I asked Moo what he liked about the story. At first he pretended it was familiarity, his long-term experience with Dinahs. "I grew up around people like that." Turns out he not only didn't grow up around whores, but, also not around people as unjudgmental, kind about other's lives as the Sedaris menagerie. The feast of curiosity set out in the story drew him in, just as some are drawn to space fantasies. "They all listen to Dinah," he said, "no matter what she says, and she knows they do. They're not just nice to her. Nobody yells at the kids when they ask those personal questions. They think, they all do, she might have hold of something they don't."

### **Journal**

**I'll start—me, that's L.L. Let's keep this Journal useful: as Dennis Hopper says in some movie, "Just because it happened to you doesn't make it interesting."**

**In my opinion, the best thing that's occurred so far has been Plain's anger. Plain got mad, left without punching anyone, and we went right on. The problem's not solved. Problems seldom are solved. We live with them, ignore the hell out of them.**

**Moo's turn. I don't want to get into this between L.L. and Plain, and I hope they work it out. Want my help? My door is always open. Counsellor Moo. Truth, I have no idea what went on or what L.L. just said. That would make me an ideal counselor, judging by the ones at our school. I agree with L.L. that it's good to have tension. Anyhow, I've been surprised by Mary coming out of her shell. I just realized that's a phrase my ass parents use. Sorry. Anyhow, I like Mary's criminal ideas.**

**Willy. I don't have much to add to the Plain—L.L. battle. I think it's odd L.L. thinks hostility is good, but it's really interesting what L.L. says about ignoring bad feelings so they stay alive. I see what she means but have trouble digesting it. We need crises: that's interesting to me, but I don't quite get it**

I did want to say that I feel I'm being stereotyped. All the rest of you get treated as an unsolved puzzle. Not me. I don't mean the "Billy Gates" nickname (which is funny) but the way you all know what I'm going to say before I say it. Fuck, if that's going to be the way it is, I might as well go back home. That's how my parents treated me. Moo talks about Mary changing. I noticed it, too, and am just happy as hell for her. But this same Mary has no trouble boxing me in. Look what she wrote about our Columbine talk—nobody could predict their reaction, and Moo and Plain might very well shoot. When I say I might do it, she says, "No way!"—I'm a fucking predictable machine and not a person.

And Mary's no different from the rest of you.

Plain's turn. If L.L. wants to pretend nothing happened and wants to call names, that's fine. But she wants the last word, and fuck that. I think it was a cowardly thing to apologize to those Sharks. They came for a fight and then wail their way out of it and you apologize. Fuck you. I'm right and you're wrong and that's the last of it.

I see what Willy's saying and feel terrible that it's so. It's sort of that you are steady smart, Willy—I'm not shitting you—and it's easy to get used to it. But that's no excuse. It's still taking you for granted. You're a good guy and no more easy to understand than any of us. If L.L.'s looking to apologize, it ought to be to Willy and not those Sharks. I apologize to you, Willy. I think you're right that we have been taking you for granted, letting the jokes about how businessy you are kind of sink in. Don't leave. We may be assholes but we are your assholes. What did I just say? (I'm being repetitive, not my usual real calm writing. Trying to be honest. L.L. aside, I do have an anger problem and don't want to go exploding on you guys, who mean more to me than any people ever have.)

I'm still liking this, and I think we're doing OK. Let's have more action and also get to work on making the place nicer.

That'll take our minds off the fiasco with the Sharks and the woozy actions of one bossy bitch among us.

Hi, it's Mary. I am really sorry, Willy. I didn't intend to stereotype you, only meant you had more self-control and maturity than the rest of us. I wanted to say, in my lazy way, that you wouldn't do something so psycho as blow up a school. But I see what you mean: it isn't necessarily psycho to blow up a school, and I don't have any idea what you would do. I let myself off easy. Anyhow, Willy, you are absolutely right—and I apologize.

I'll keep mum about Plain and L.L., just because I don't know what I think.

I hope we're not coming apart. If L.L. thinks discord is a good thing, she's got it now. I'm not used to it much, not when it's on the surface, but I can learn from it. I came here because I wanted to change, find the new and open.

### **The Great House Renovation**

I'm L.L. One thing—we've managed to lay out plans for Plain's good ideas. You know how lots of ideas sound good and then, when you look at them close, they collapse? Plain's ideas just get more interesting. Maybe Plain would, too, if he gave us a chance to see. The out-of-control violent guy thinks so well and has the patience to fiddle things out. And he can be sensitive, too, when he isn't smashing someone in the mouth. I'm not pleading with Plain to expose himself. I understand not wanting to do that.

("Expose himself"? I am really sorry, Plain. That's a Freudian slip, and not a kind one, as you've let us know that you are so modest. I understand that and should try not to let my own horniness squeak out, not when it's hurtful.)

I think I'll try to copy the plans here, smaller in scale. That way, we'll have some idea of what they are. Here they are, in order.

[I'm omitting this strange fussiness—if you're interested, just call me. I'll admit this intrigues me, who am not a home-remodeling sort. But the details! One thing to throw stuff together and another to engage in all this hard, slow work. Kids are supposed to be incapable of delayed gratification, but this bunch. . . . I would never do this sort of thing now, nor could I. Would I have tried it at fifteen? When I house that fantasy, being fifteen, connected to this commune, it's dizzying. Wasn't like I ever had the chance. Fruitless to think about it: a better kid than I ever was, fifteen years old, in a house with five dear friends and no adults in sight.]

**Plain here! (You should be worried about me being an embarrassment, not a danger to life and limb.) How did I get assigned to do this report? Oh—because my parents bubbled over \$1000 a month, plus \$10,000 as a slush fund. A lot of you have been saying, “Way to go, Plain!” Stop it. I didn't do anything except play on their idea of good parents, which makes me sick. We ought to figure out how to get real dough by robbing them. They'd never suspect their own Miller of doing it, not when they give me everything. Oh sob, sob. They gave me money, oh sure, but what good is money, when what you need is—sob—limits, advice on drugs and playing with yourself. They gave me money. Terrific parents.**

**And they left me alone. It's just Hollywood myth about kids' needs. If only all kids were neglected in that way. And please—I am not hurt because they didn't come to the Great Parental Invasion. I knew they wouldn't and was glad. Except, you know why they didn't? Because they knew I wouldn't like it and didn't want to interfere. They're so enlightened it makes you want to shit on their heads.**

**As for L.L.'s apology, I don't know what to say. L.L., you sure as anything are a mystery. I was going to write “sure as fuck,” but that seemed disrespectful. I'm embarrassed to say it, but I'm touched by what you write. It's so kind, which you don't want to hear. You're right—my talk about sex is bluster**

and undressing would be awful hard. I'm ridiculously prudish. I need to work on that and I know you'll all help me. But thanks, L.L.

Back to my bunghole parents: they got these rare books, which they think makes them intellectuals. I told them intellectuals actually read books. They smiled and agreed—arrrrggghhh. My parents hog up books the way some people collect baseball cards. They also have paintings worth a lot, and silver and that sort of boorshwah stuff. (Don't nobody correct my spelling—Willy!) Jewelry. We'll just walk in and grab it when they're asleep or out social working. Just figure out how to sell it all—a fence?

I see I made a joke about Willy. I am so sorry, Willy, and know I just illustrated what you were saying. I'll really try to change.

There follows budgetary details from Plain and then Willy—who says this:

We should recognize what Plain has done. He's worked really hard on this budget and also, though he doesn't want us mentioning it, bilked his parents out of all that padding.

### **The Great Tag Day**

Mary here. L.L.'s grandmother told us yesterday about old-time tag days. Unlike parents, L.L.'s grandmother is not a giant quivering rectum. (I admit that wasn't my phrase. Amy Claridge—you know her?—told it to me. Now that it's down on the page, I'm not so sure it's something to be proud of.)

Anyhow, she told us about tag days they used to have, raising money for worthwhile things. We talked it over, decided to try it. There was always a chance nobody'd know what we were doing and we'd stand around like escaped lunatics, hands outstretched.

So Moo designed these tags. They turned out looking pretty handmade, not Moo's fault—brilliant plan, faulty execution.

Willy said the homemade quality might increase their appeal. Once we hit on that, we made them even cruder and real big. Like this:

**I HELPED!**

**“SUPPORT THE COMMUNITY” TAG DAY**

**MADISON HIGH COMMUNITY ASSISTANCE CLUB**

**“WE ARE THERE FOR YOU”**

We decided to do this at the main mall, which gets the most traffic. So to the mall trooped we, where we set up card tables, five, borrowed from Willy’s garage. (That night we returned them.)

We dressed up as nerdy old-fashioned as we could. Looked like Junior Rotarians. Moo and Plain had on jackets and ties, like upscale used-car dealers. Willy had on a sky blue sweater and a white shirt, along with shiny new slacks. All three boys have long hair, but they blew it dry and brushed it out so it was pretty—but strange.

(I know I should muffle this, but you three turned me on—made me think how you worked on yourselves, showering, changing clothes. I’m starting to get embarrassed. No need to worry about me peeking or setting up spy cams, though those aren’t bad ideas, and I wouldn’t be rejecting them if they hadn’t come to mind—so you should be worrying.)

L.L. sewed a part of one dress to most of another, resulting in this plaid jumper. She made the skirt wide and billowy and hemmed it up short. She put on a little-girl blouse under her jumper and altogether looked like somebody’s idea of Lolita. That turned me on, too. L.L. is sexy.

I didn’t do anything imaginative—just lifted from the parents this black and white polka-dot number I refused to wear until now. It was also short, tight in the waist and upper butt and then blowing out. L.L. ironed it and made me wear these stiff petticoats underneath. You get the picture. Actually, I hope you don’t. It was shameless.

I was afraid people would catch on that we were making fun of the cute kid idea, setting ourselves up to get on *www.underagecuties.com*. But it worked. They were drooling. I was called “adorable” about six thousand times, and everybody else got the same verbal ogling. Neither L.L. nor I got touched much, a lot of arm patting but the boys said they got hair ruffling and back pats. Plain said a couple of hands found their ways to his bottom.

We worked 9-1 and thought maybe we’d better quit before we got caught by smart people or asked too many questions by dumb ones. People did inquire about what we did to support the community and nobody acted suspicious or, for that matter, interested. They just wanted to let us know how much they appreciated us, when you read every day about druggies, saggars, getting pregnant—and the music! We were there to be what these adults think teens ought to be, just like *they* were eighty years ago. Some of them probably got so steamed up they stormed home and yelled at their kids because they weren’t helping the community like those well-dressed, perfectly-mannered children down at South Mall.

Luckily we had come up with a list of admirable things we did in our zeal to assist the community, make it better for white people. The list was longer than we needed, since none of the adults had an attention span long enough to hold onto many. But the list was so inspiring I wished we were doing it—our spay and neuter programs, landscaping public parks, getting help to old people whether they wanted it or not, candy-stripping, sports programs for the disadvantaged, community choirs, “cut your heating bills” programs. We also had car-washing for the lowlies (Moo had suggested free car repairs, too, but that seemed dangerous territory.) We had grocery shopping for shut-ins, to whom we also read the Holy Bible. We babysat children and pets, trimmed hedges and beards.

**We expected to get a quarter for each tag, but a lot of people gave a buck and a few sentimental blumb-buckets gave five. I told L.L. they gave that much in place of fondling us. She said next time we should do lap-dances and make millions.**

During the investigation I checked with the school about this last escapade, to see if the fake tag day or Madison High's "Community Assistance Club" had raised suspicion. The principal shuffled papers, drew himself up, sniffed, and said he knew nothing about it, had received no "complaints or other forms of notification or communication, official or informal; nothing of this nature crossed my desk before or after the alleged incident."

Our local "Courier-Standard" got wind of this spoof and published a piece on it:

***FAKE TAG DAY HELPS FUND COMMUNE PORN***

*Sources close to the pedophile commune have revealed evidence showing that our community unwittingly helped fund the production of child pornography and other criminal activities.*

*Just over a year ago, the five, posing as members of the fictitious "Madison High Community Assistance Club," held a tag day to benefit a student club that officials say never has existed. Focusing their activities at the Centennial South Mall, they managed to raise well over \$1000 in only four hours.*

*Sources say they celebrated the success of this scam by throwing a party, characterized as "indecent."*

The CPA denied knowing more than was in the papers. However, Arlene Draper, one of their chief ministers of virtue, told me she found it "especially interesting that they had put on disguises in order to pass as normal people."

How did Arlene Draper know about their dress? There's no mention of it in the paper. The CPA's position has been that the DA alone had control of the Journals and that the CPA could not be held responsible for what Timmons might tell the papers. As arrant nonsense as ever was spoken, as the CPA often has published information the papers would have killed for.

Like a nitwit, I asked Arlene about her access to the Journal, providing her with the sort of occasion she lives for. I was taping everything then; and here, just to show how recklessly devoted this Reporter is to the whole goddamned truth, is the conversation:

Me: How was it you knew about the clothing?

Her: What?

Me: You heard me. You have the Journal and you pluck from it without regard to accuracy. But what I want to know is how you got the Journal.

Her: We do *not* have any so-called alleged Journal. And just why may I ask are you badgering me? All along, you have done nothing but protect these monsters.

Me: We charged them. And we didn't need to distort the evidence to do it.

Her: Because you had no choice. You've repeatedly stalled the investigation, withheld evidence. I'm happy you're filled with compassion for pedophiles.

Me: I have a lot of compassion for you, Ms. Draper.

I won't record her reply. Stopping the conversation at this point may leave the impression that I stunned her with my wit, left her staggering, arms akimbo, lips flapping soundlessly, as I walked away with my quiet (if smirking) dignity intact. Of course that's not how it played out—she managed to derail my inquiry and put me on the defensive.

Arlene, one of those whose face has been lifted so often she looks perpetually startled, did have a single good point: why was I concerned about this Tag Day? It doesn't appear central to her—or to me. I was, however, puzzled by the ties between the DA, the press, and the CPA. I still am, and I wonder what they all knew, what they have managed to do, what damage.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Fourth Council Meeting

Willy here. I will keep this brief, since most of the stuff we talked about was money. Right as rain, as my idiot dad always chirped.

After some fiddling, we agreed on Plain's budget. If you want more details, inquire.

Let me add just one thing—the \$10,000 we have (second mortgage) we decided might find a good home in a mutual fund.

So, I asked old Potter at school how to do that. You should have seen his eyes light up. Thought I'd never get away; he figured he had a disciple. He brought me the next day a lot of prospectuses. I just looked helpless, asked what he'd do with \$10,000 to invest. He took about six hours, finally said, "National Mutual Trust." He also said, "I can't imagine having \$10,000 to invest." He didn't look sad, just dreamy. You know he lives with his parents, who must be 120 years old, since Potter's about 90. I think he takes care of them.

Imagine teaching investments forever and never being able to do it. Must rip his heart out.

The camping gear idea was voted down. I think everybody liked the idea of doing cheap vacations in the outdoorsy way, but nobody but me (and I was wrong) thought we should buy equipment. The small stuff we can steal, and tents and bags we can lift from parents, or if we are hit by attacks of virtue, rent.

Poor Willy. The one idea he has is rejected. These kids never did seem like camping types, though it turns out they did some later, an act of kindness to Willy. Willy pretends not to mind being nixed. Kids who get hurt a lot don't build up immunities. Before we slide into the slough of sympathy, I'll note two things: (1) I'm enjoying being condescending to him; (2) there's part of him that's

not geeky. I feel easier with the stereotype: the other part of Willy is not easy to cozy up to. Detectives are supposed to be magnetized by darkness. Me, I'm a sunshine boy.

#### **Fourth Journal Entry**

**L.L.** I hope to Jesus we're through with money. I understand we asked Plain and Willy to do it, and I'll admit I'm impressed. But look at us! We got a mutual fund, a savings account, two mortgages, plans for a patio and little family vacations. Anarchism? Can you imagine the Crips laying flagstones, planting petunias?

Let's put this prudential stuff behind us, turn our attention to making some noise. Plain, show us your Mr. Hyde.

On a different note, as Principal Pimplebum says: here's a proposal. Willy graduates soon and the rest of us will shortly thereafter. How about we agree to go to the local college, Westminster? It's not Harvard, but it's OK and we can all get scholarships. Plus, it doesn't have yuppie stuff like business and law. What it does have are all those things guaranteed never to get you a job—like theater and lit and botany.

Whadyasay? We stay together because we're going to make life among us better than any other life can be.

Think about it. I didn't go into this just for teenage rebellion.

Moo next. Now there's a kick in the ass. L.L. says we sign up for permanent duty here in our love nest. Willy would say I was being sarcastic to avoid "confronting my feelings." Anybody ever tell you you were a blue-ribbon dick, Willy? Maybe he and Plain can go on until their golden years, making budgets by the light of the moon. What I mean is, maybe Willy can go on mooching off Plain's ideas. What a kiss ass!

I see what L.L. is saying. I hadn't really thought about the future. I moved in because I wanted to see what would happen, and I thought it would make us free. Adults don't ever seem to

do what they want; neither do most kids. Adults try to get kids to act like adults think they should. But why? They want kids to grow up and flatter them: take over their slots. Again, I wonder why. The adults we have now are, so far as I can see, unhappy fuck-ups. So why should they want more of that and why should we agree?

As I think about it, adults don't *want* kids to grow up a certain way. Adults don't plan it out. They automatically treat kids the way *they* were treated and get the same fucking results. Everybody goes through the cookie factory, comes out the same.

I'm not pretending to be deep. I'll leave that to Willy. I just don't see any future outside of this group.

Same with college. People go nuts over SATs so they can go to Princeton instead of Asshole State, but they're no different, except that Asshole State might be a little more real. Yeah, I'll pledge to Westminster. My name's on the dotted line.

I've been thinking about what L.L. said. We'll work it out as we go. I guess that's why we're writing so much, to think on the move, recognize when we fuck up and adjust.

Also, I've really enjoyed it here. I think this place would be perfect if we kicked Willy out. But I can live with things the way they are, if you all can. I'm surprised Plain can—with Willy hanging on to him like a third ball.

I'm not sure what L.L. is saying about Plain, but it's real interesting. I feel out of my depth there, so I'll shut up.

It's Mary. I think we all know why Moo and Willy have been picking at one another like flies after the same dog doo. (Sorry, Plain. I don't mean you're dog doo.) They want Plain's attention and are jealous. Why don't you do a threesome? You know, what boys call a circle-jerk. That's the right term? I'm sure you could educate me as to its proper meaning. I think it'd solve all your problems if you do it regularly, and it'd let the

rest of us have some peace. That's what you call win-win, or, in this case, win-win-win.

L.L. tells me that being crude isn't the same thing as loosening up. But it's fun, and I am certain a circle-jerk would be even more fun. I'm sorry I couldn't participate. Maybe I could, but it sounds awkward. You veterans would have an informed opinion. Now this IS getting embarrassing. Anyhow, why don't you, Willy and Moo, get mad at me instead of each other? Maybe lust after me rather than Plain? I'm easier, if not as pretty. And Plain, you stop egging Moo on to be jealous of Willy.

I am now serious. Naturally we're going to have sex issues. We might as well say it right out. Here we are, five hot people sharing the same shower, wearing each other's underwear. I know we're private, but do you suppose we could talk about sex? It might be less thrilling to you boys, since you like sneaky stuff. (So do I.) But if we talk we might retain the tingles. Maybe Plain would let Willy and Moo play with him. (Plain, I'm going to stop being delicate, since you said you'd rather we didn't tip-toe around your modesty. What a terrific person you are, Plain!)

I realize I'm being crude. When I'm nervous I do that. Other people bite their nails; I descend into foul-mouthing. I don't want to make things worse. Just see what you think. We can talk. We can do more than talk. I don't mean to be naive, but it really IS just flesh and nerves and clothes (on or off or part-way) and membranes and excitement.

I'm in agreement with L.L. We're in this for a life, not a spring break. And I love what Moo said about adults and how we have the chance to fall off the assembly line. Moo made me think more clearly. I want us to make what we're doing a life and not an escape. I agree that adults seem to be inside an excuse for life, following along, as if they were in a play somebody else wrote—a life spent being safe, ducking and

hiding. So I pledge to go to Westminster and to hang here with you guys till the big bang hits or Jesus comes or one of us chops the others up for stew.

What L.L. said about Plain is a great kick in the butt, very positive. I see what she means. Plain's a tough book to read. That's good. I think that's why Willy was protesting before, because I was making him into *Little Tommy Goes to the Seashore*.

Plain. I'm having a good time, better than I ever imagined possible, and agree we should start doing stuff. I don't mind talking about sex—though I'd a lot rather *do* it. I'm not telling the truth there, as you know. I'm going to talk about it here, since you've all been so—I don't know—dear and kind to me.

Probably Mary is right about our shyness and how we'd like to start patting and fondling, though I think she is pretty fucking blunt. I'm some kind of prude, which is ridiculous and true. I feel there's a million things I could say to Mary and none of them would be what I really think. What if I don't think anything or lots of things? What if I haven't much idea what I'm thinking? What if a lot of things seem equally true? When it comes to sex, I think everyone on the planet is clearer on it than me. I know I'm wobbling all over the place, but that realization seems like an advance. I promise to keep thinking and talking. I trust you guys like I've never trusted anybody; I never knew what the word meant. Don't treat me like some frail neurotic. Go ahead and make jokes about my butt and being naked. I'll know you like me and trust me.

I don't mind going to Westminster and trying to do what L.L. says. I don't believe Moo is not afraid of her, but I believe Moo said good stuff about how we want to live our lives. You're smart, Moo. Count me in.

Thanks, L.L. You changed your mind about me a little, and I appreciate it so. I know I am loud-mouthed and sometimes an ass. You're smart, and also, which you hate to hear, sweet.

I feel bad about what I said earlier, Mary. I don't know why I can't feel right about saying how I feel. I'm sorry, Mary.

My turn at last. This is Willy. I know you'll be surprised that I'm the one with reservations. I think I've been the happiest here. Many days I feel like I'm on drugs, euphoric. Like all of us, I didn't come into this to escape, but I still have felt like a big sack of concrete has been taken off my shoulders. It hasn't been what I expected—I didn't have it in me to imagine how fine life could be. I know I can be bossy, and I've tried to correct that. I thought I was getting someplace. But I've been hurt and offended by what Moo wrote. And it's tough because I have this anger problem—can't risk igniting it.

OK, on Moo. At first I went into my "understanding" attitude. Oh poor Moo—undisciplined, doesn't have ways of controlling himself. And maybe Mary's right about Moo being in love with Plain and taking it out on me. When Mary said that Moo and I were jealous of one another, I'd say if it were true, but it's not. I am not being homophobic. I like Plain so much and I think he's hot, but I am not especially turned on by him. I'm not saying Moo *is* turned on by Plain—doesn't matter.

I know I shouldn't let Moo get at me this bad. (And I apologize to Plain for talking about him as if he were a pole dancer.) I really think we should go out back, Jason, and I'll kick the shit out of you, you violent undersized asshole.

So, I have trouble with L.L.'s proposal. The rest of you, yes. It'd be way more than fine. I don't have any trouble with Westminster either. I agree with Mary's idea of talking about sex. I don't imagine I'm more solid on this subject than is Plain, but I'd try.

### The Great Mystery Council

Plain reporting, along with Mary. But there's nothing to report, since nobody will tell us what the fuck happened. Compared to you, the CIA is a bunch of blabbermouths. All we

know is that L.L. at dinner told Moo and Willy to come upstairs afterwards into her bedroom. Moo and Willy were sitting there staring at each other like two gunfighters. I made a remark about that which made both Moo and Willy pissed. I thought they'd turn on me. Then L.L. said, "You two! Come to my bedroom!" Right, Mary?

Yes, Plain, that's right. (Like we're a tv news team: "Back to you, Mary!") They were up there two hours. Plain and I cleaned up the dishes and messed around outside making garden plans. When we came in, they were still up there, so we continued on our sketches, then played cards for a while, talked about this and that, sex mostly, very personal and steamy. (I can see you blushing, Plain.) Then Moo and Willy came back down. L.L. stayed upstairs for another half hour. Moo and Willy didn't say anything, not even when we asked them what had happened. "Nothing," both said. They looked red in the face, as if they'd been crying or punching each other. Plain asked them whether they were going to stage a gunfight, but they didn't laugh. I asked them if they were friends now. Neither said anything for a minute, then Willy: "I don't feel like talking about it." Moo said, "I don't either." So Plain and I went back to playing cards and guessing back and forth in whispers, when we weren't being real personal, Plain telling me about nocturnal emissions and me telling him about inner thighs.

God, Mary! When L.L. came down, I asked her—"I" being Plain—"What's up?" L.L. smiled at me. First time I ever saw her smile—just about. She said, "Mind your own fucking business, pretty boy." I said, "Yeah, prom queen, but what happened? Everything straightened out? Mary and I want to know." L.L. said, "I suppose you do." She didn't sound snotty. She sounded like she'd keep putting us off, if we kept on. We quit trying.

I don't know what the fuck to think. "I" being Mary. I (Plain) don't either. I (Plain) added two words to Mary's first true sentence opening the paragraph. Guess which two words. I'll give you a hint: one of them words is "the." I (Mary) want to guess. Can I? I (Plain) say OK. And I (Mary) get to name the consequences if I'm right, OK Plain? OK, Mary, says Plain. So (says Mary), the word is "fuck," and the consequence of me being right is you gotta trade underpants with me, Plain. God, Mary! (says Plain).

### The Great Party

I know it doesn't sound likely, but we had a party. [Moo reporting.] One hell of a party. We cleared out the back yard, made a miniature golf place. Willy and I (yep!) stole the clubs and balls from Target. Willy slipped the clubs (six, it turned out) inside his trench coat and down his pants. He walked stiff-legged and kept his hands in his pants clutching at the clubs—looked like some perv. He was good at it, just acted cool, like he fucking knew what he was doing. Willy's a hell of a shoplifter.

I got the golf balls. Willy worked at Target one summer and stole one of those deactivating things they use when you buy something so it won't set off the alarm.

So we cleared off a place in the back yard. L.L. got this roller from her garage. It weighed about 800 pounds and it was hell getting it in the truck and out again—it took all of us working to get the ground packed down and pretty level.

Stupidly, we did that packing-the-ground-down work before digging the fucking holes, which were then damned near impossible. But we done it. We didn't make fancy tricks, the way they do at mini-golf places. We put up boards at angles. We tried a water hole, but the water kept seeping into the ground. We did make a windmill out of an old motor Mary stole from her parents' garage. That worked good. We tried

some up-the-chute, at-an-incline holes, but they weren't too great, though one of them was.

Anyhow, the party was this. We all got dressed in somebody else's clothes, just for the hell of it. The way it worked was everybody went downstairs and then, one at a time, went up and put on someone else's stuff. I think Plain and L.L. both put on Mary's clothes. Anyhow, it was funny as hell. Mary came down wearing nothing but a bra thing, I think, and some boy's underpants. Plain wore this skirt of Mary's. I wore Plain's stuff. Willy, I think, got some of L.L.'s scraggy stuff, which was pretty gutsy.

So what we did, we put on records and danced, not up close and ass-grabbing. Then we played golf. The rule was this: the person who won a hole had to down a shot of vodka. We went around four times. Everybody was pretty drunk. Then we went back in and danced more, some up close. I wasn't too sure who I was dancing with.

I think this is what the CPA had in mind when they spoke of "sexual orgies and drunken debauchery." It does sound a little unusual, all this cross-dressing and miscellaneous clutching. But there's an element of playing house —innocent. Anyhow, what we have here is the erotic effect the kids were after in their porn videos: hot, inhibited, and uncomfortably childish.

I spent some amount of time with each pair of parents—meeting them as a big group was useless. I taped it all. Why? All I know for sure is that I was agonizing to get the story straight, a goal I knew was impossible and vital.

The kids insist vociferously that they are detached from their parents. Maybe part of what they say is silly, but there's something left over. What's left over may have the simplicity that comes close to hard truth, to a possibility adults don't want to entertain. Maybe we all suspect that in much of what we say and do there is an undercurrent of rapacious lies, lies so necessary they need never be acknowledged. The kids say that adults need the tie to kids in order

to give themselves the reassurances that come from that structure. Without kids, adults would not be. L.L. once told me that adults had only “relational being.” Adults are reactionary formations relying on constructions of what a kid is: dependent, innocent, rebellious, incapable, reckless, yearning for “discipline”—nowhere, nothing without adults.

Maybe in some pocket of their minds reserved for terror, adults know that. (I get this kind of talk from L.L. and a couple of books she told me about.)

Funny how some things leap into your mind. Out of nowhere comes a passage from Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh*. I read the book in some class. It’s no part of this story, my three-year college sojourn, but this one wonderful class somehow supplied my mind with so much nourishment I am still feeding on it. This book is like an acid bath, especially when old crusty Butler gets to parent-child relations:

Why should the generations overlap one another at all? Why cannot we be buried as eggs in neat little cells with ten or twenty thousand pounds each wrapped around us in Bank of England notes, and wake up, as the sphex wasp does, to find that its papa and mamma have not only left ample provision at its elbow, but have been eaten by sparrows some weeks before it began to live consciously on its own account?

That’s one way of getting at what our kids were doing. They were united in thinking of themselves apart from adults—confused and at odds as they may have been on everything else. This was their foundation.

They were not defined by adults, hated to be called rebels, apprentices in guilds already ordered. They believed that if they lived their lives deliberately, there would be no such order. For them, the virtual identity of all adult lives came from defective vision, an inability to imagine otherwise.

They were working on their eyesight. They moved in together not to discover a scheme and live by it but to develop certain

useable tactics, to be fast on their feet—heedless and together. Depending on one another to spot openings, they feared only being at rest.

The parents had some glimmering of all this, and it made them envious, anxious, proud, wishful, hurt. Sensing the kids' radicalism, they replayed it as their own failure: felt guilty and felt left out. No one knew their kids the way they did. They clung to this. Their knowledge might be confused, but it was unrivaled in density and depth. Even if they didn't know, they could lay claim to a privileged ignorance.

It was on this point that the kids differed most emphatically from their accidental elders. The parents drew a continuous line from birth to the present and held onto the pencil. They allowed that their kids were resistant to *them*. And they understood. We were all kids once.

The kids denied that. The state of being a kid is not homogenous nor are the experiences transferable. Besides, what any parent remembers about being a "kid" is a lie concocted unconsciously to suit a different state of being and to provide the parents with weapons to use in forming these very diverse smaller people into dull reflecting mirrors. It's not that we were all kids once. It's that we all, sadly, become adults. Maybe that was avoidable, that particular decline into scripted being. They didn't want to freeze time. Motion, risk, refusing to settle. Let's find a life of continuous development, limited by nothing. That's what the kids were after, recklessly staking everything on that unlikely possibility, even, maybe, their lives.

I'll start with L.L.'s parents. I talked with them most often, longest, and I got least.

I saw them yesterday. They're very active in trying to find the kids. Hired a private detective, offered a reward, far too large. It'll draw out sludge and clog up searches.

Trim and Cooper are their names—Cooper should be running a feminist magazine, bossing an up-scale union. Intimidates me.

Here I am, your hard-boiled gumshoe, and she sets me to apologizing. Partly it's her moneyed air. I detest that, naturally, since it always works on me. She didn't sneer, but a sneer was always at the ready. I'm being sexist, I know.

Trim (a nickname he acquired in college) is a social worker, too. He wears privilege like an old tee-shirt, knows every trick of insinuating congeniality. His manner to his wife, to me, anyone was the same. We moved him alike, amused him, ignited his unflappable fondness.

I've concocted a composite report of what went on in the several interviews:

Me: Can you tell me about Darcy? I'm trying to understand each of these young people. It may help me get deeper into the case and to locate them now.

Cooper: What case is there now?

Me: You mean the jury has decided, and the police should be through. But without understanding the case, I'm in the dark as to where they might be.

Cooper: If you didn't understand the case, why did you charge them with these crimes? Is charging first and understanding later standard procedure?

Trim: Well, we're on the same side here. What is it about Darcy you'd like to know?

Cooper: Hand over all you gleaned from coaching her soccer team.

Me: You did?

Trim: Yes.

Cooper: For how long?

Trim: My schedule got tight. Darcy, now: she's always been independent.

Me: Did her independence ever get her in trouble?

Cooper: No, why should it?

Trim: I didn't mean she was headstrong.

Me: What about friends?

Trim: She always had lots of friends.

Me: Dates?

Cooper: No.

Trim: Yes.

[Silence]

Cooper: Not what you'd call dates.

Me: Were you close to Darcy, would you say?

Trim: Yes, oh yes indeed.

Me: Are you surprised she would take up with this commune?

Cooper: Yes we were, but you know kids.

Me: Not this kid I don't.

Cooper: Neither do I.

Me: Did you try to dissuade her?

Trim: We went along with the other parents to see what we could do.

Me: That's it?

[pause]

Cooper: [suddenly cordial] Look, Lieutenant, we know you're not asking about Darcy but about us. You're not going to find out much.

Me: Really?

Trim: We raised Darcy with respect for her singularity, her eccentric integrity. From about the time she was six, we took a service role, created a space for her, made ourselves available for when she needed us.

Cooper: Which she seldom did.

Me: So it was perfect. You should write a child-rearing manual.

Trim: [laughing]. Are we on trial here?

Cooper: Look, Bubbles, if you're thinking our plan was an ex-post-facto rationalization, as you *are*, if you're thinking this plan fit with our self-absorption, as you *are*, if you're thinking we are indifferent to Darcy, as you *are*, you are one simple-minded prick and have found your proper niche in life as a plod-along detective.

Trim: Nothing's that simple, detective. We were both smothered as kids. We wanted to behave differently as parents.

Me: And you did.

Cooper: The way it worked out, day to day, involved a set of minute adjustments.

Trim: Partly to our lives.

Cooper: Of course, but to Darcy's, too.

Me: I see, but it was something day-to-day, changing all the time.

Cooper: It seemed to work. Darcy was doing fine, insofar as we could tell.

Trim: We did inquire.

Cooper: From time to time.

Me: So you don't have anything special to tell me.

Cooper: Look for yourself.

That was that. I wasted many hours with these two, asking them specifics, but they knew none. "Why do you think Darcy was such a leader?" "Because she seems to have developed what you would call 'leadership qualities.'" "Was she always a leader?" "I have no idea."

In don't think they were hiding anything.

Most of the other parents had certainties aplenty. They knew their kids, could answer any question. All in all, they were less helpful than old-sport Trim and copperhead Cooper.

Maybe they have it right: give your kid essentials—and get the hell out of the way. Just as Samuel Butler dreamed. Certainly L.L. isn't any parents' nightmare. She might be about as good as it comes. If I were fairer to her, I'd think so.

The other parents will appear later. Back to the Journal.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **The Division of the House**

(On rereading, I realize how tedious this is—a description of how they divided the house into sections, made additions, and painted it, so I'll just say that, by damn, they did it all.)

### **The Great Sex Scandal**

Me again. (L.L. for those not paying attention.) I get assigned the most embarrassing thing of all, sex. Woooooo. I really don't find it embarrassing, just banal.

It started with a full evening's discussion. Mary threw down the gauntlet, and we picked it up, idiots that we are.

Everybody (but Plain) was so really NOT embarrassed. Or maybe it is just that I was the one embarrassed. I am. To start with, who in their right mind would call sex banal? It's my attitudes that are banal. I get scared talking about sex. I do think if people want to have sex, they should do it. I think if one person wants to have sex and another doesn't, it's fine if the horny person tries to talk the other(s) into it. If anybody still doesn't want to do it—then absolutely not. If anyone is confused or ambivalent, don't. Sex talk gets in the way of being free and easy about sex, even if that's possible, which it isn't.

Just to contradict myself, I think it was maybe the best talk we've had. After all our initial bluster, people did start to listen. In my opinion, Plain is the only one honest enough to admit being embarrassed, and Mary is the only one who feels at ease. She's so unthreatened, she seems to enjoy the talk and doesn't try to direct it. She's smart about it, has interesting stuff to say. Maybe she gets aroused by it, and I figure she won't mind me saying that. After a while, we started to listen to her. Plain began by claiming he would like to have sex with everybody and then fessed up (as he has before, sweet Plain) and admitted

he was a neophyte fool; then he got quieter. Moo, who entered himself, along with Willy, in the “I can impersonate a cool guy” contest, finally said he didn’t know anything about sex except what his buddies and the sex ed class had told him. Willy didn’t say anything personal, but he quieted down and even said, “Yeah” to Moo a couple of times.

I don’t think we learned much. Sex’ll probably happen, just because it generally does when people are together. But I don’t think we can redirect our lives by starting with sex. I think we’ll let sex take care of itself. Nothing is more conventional than sex—and here I am being all smart-ass. Oh yeah, L.L., what do you really *know*, huh?

We did manage to be respectful, and that’s an advance. I know I go on about “profitable conflict,” but not with sex. Maybe we can think of other ways to be real.

One thing we didn’t talk about, and it’s the one thing that’s important. (You guys have to tell me when I come out with sentences like that, where I sound like the Pope.) Next Council we have to bring up this thing. Babies. You know, propagation. If any of the sex involves Mary and intercourse, do we want to have a kid resulting? This is partly a group decision. If Mary doesn’t want kids, then that’s that. If she does, that isn’t that.

This fumbling sex talk was of no interest to the CPA. Strange, considering the charges. The CPA might have made something of this: these criminals are unable to relate to their peer group, and thus attach to children. But that argument is too wrap-around for the CPA, I guess.

And, though one hears variations on it all the time, it’s a pretty weak argument. How many befuddled adolescents turn to pre-teens to solve horniness pressures? And aren’t all adolescents befuddled about sex? And how common is sex between kids seventeen (Willy, let’s say) and ten (Missy). It probably happens, but so does lightning striking chickens.

What sense did the charge make if you don't cite the older ones, Willy and Mary? Then you have to suppose that five slightly older kids assaulted the two slightly younger ones. L.L. was barely thirteen when she entered the commune; Brandon was himself twelve when he came there. Interesting that one is a "predator" and the other a "child."

But maybe so. One cannot render it all absurd by sneering. My working assumption had been that there was maybe fire behind this smoke. How else could I build a case? My starting point has been that nobody is telling the truth, not consistently or usefully. That doesn't mean that everyone is hiding, just that none of the stories told by those inside can constitute a truth I can accept as adequate.

All I have to work with are variations on the inadequate.

**The Great Mailbox** (included because I liked this)

**L.L. gets to talk about sex, which she does only fair. I (Plain) get the mailbox, which I do like the A+ student I am (or would be if I applied myself the way I should if I were a mature kid with my head screwed on straight from having experienced proper discipline and limits so that my values would all be properly mainlined). Mailbox! Fucking great! Actually it was. Moo and L.L. and I made it. We spent a lot of time, mostly planning. Mailboxes aren't that interesting to start with, so we had a real challenge.**

**We talked about putting in an alarm system, so we'd know when the mail was there. But we didn't know how to do that and it didn't seem all that fucking useful as well as potentially very annoying.**

**We considered using a conveyor belt, so we could just draw in the mail. The way that'd work is by having the bottom of the mailbox drop out. It'd fall to this belt, see, which would bring it into the house. The problem was not so much the belt as how to drop the mailbox bottom down. The easiest way seemed electrical, using a solenoid to pull back a metal support that**

held the bottom. We experimented some. It was fun, but we ran into a million problems. For one thing, the box would have to drop about a foot—free fall. It doesn't sound like much, but as soon as we dropped a board that far, it whacked down hard as hell and spilled all the mail. Another problem is that the mailman stuffs the box, puts in packages and all kinds of shit. We figured that sometimes the board would drop but there'd be mail still in the box. Then there was a problem with protecting the conveyer belt from bad weather. But we had a hell of a good time playing with the idea. It was crazy to start with, but what a wild-assed time! For one thing, the belt kept flopping and spilling off anything we put on it. It was a big thick belt we had running between two big drums we swiped from the gas station. Anyhow, we finally got me on one end and Moo on the other, right behind the drums, trying to steady the fucking belt. L.L. then climbed on the belt and did a fucking handstand, while Moo and I ran her back and forth between the drums. Then Moo and I tried it—once and couldn't do it. Only L.L. stayed on.

This seems trivial, perhaps, but four thousand years from now they'll want to know what a really cool mailbox put up by cool kids was like.

Posterity will take this for a graven image, like in the bible, connected to puberty ceremonies, or they'll say, "What advanced kids these were! Wish we had kids like that now. How come you little shits aren't like these kids from long ago?"

Great fun for sure. I wish somebody'd steal it so we could start all over.

### **Plain**

The Plain who went into the commune was not the one who went to trial, seems to me.

The two psychiatric reports done on Plain for the trial were based on two one-hour sessions—whee. Here is the central section of the first.

By the way, Plain's parents had a story a lot like L.L.'s. Strange, as it's seldom that parents abide by a decision to keep away from kids' lives. Now, as promised, the shrink reports:

Miller scored in the normal range on tests (see Appendix A) designed to measure gender adjustment and sexual age-appropriate attitudes, as well as assessing adolescent personality pathology. Despite these results, there are indications of a much wider-than-average deviation from standard. The subject admits to having little age-appropriate sexual experience, but wants to lay claim to a mature position on virtually all sexual variants. Such posing is consistent with other findings, pointing to immaturity and the possibility of dangerous regression. He is capable of channeling excessive anger and fear into appropriate teen experimentation, but not on a consistent basis. Far too often, he will find himself unable to find productive outlets.

Much of this problem may be rooted in attempts to compensate for parental neglect. Overly indulged in material goods, his expressions of indifference to parents indicate a terror of abandonment he tries to ward off by roleplaying the part of the parent himself. In this fantasy, he can be the neglectful one, preempting the authority to abandon and placing his actual parents in an infantilized position. Failing to find parental structure, he is fixated at a late oral stage, thus his homosexual tendencies.

His cold comments on his mother indicate a failure to engage pre-Oedipal tensions and to complete a normal sequence of adjustment. Consequently, he is his father's wooer, a hopeful courtesan. His effeminate manner coordinates into physical characteristics that are traditionally termed girlish. This reinforces a perverse psychic tendency. No doubt his feminine features have been emphasized unconsciously in a way of handling his latent homosexuality, frozen at a pre-Oedipal state that has polymorphous

sexual expression and ambiguous aims that precede clear gender markings.

His adolescent uncertainties are expressed often with violence, especially against those he can feminize, if only in his fantasies. Overall, his profile is consistent with that of one seeking solace and sexual satisfaction with those considerably younger. It is not positively a criminal profile, but criminal activity is not counter-indicated.

The second report was even more cocksure, labeling Plain “a clear case of Narcissistic Personality Disorder” and listing the following (an abridged list) “indicators”:

- Expects self to be perfect (in appearance, achievements, performance)

- Tends to think in overintellectualized terms

- Tends to be needlessly competitive

- Appears to feel privileged, expects preferential treatment

- Is articulate

- Tends to see self as rational, uninfluenced by emotion

- Tends to be haughty and dismissive

- Tends to be self-righteous and moralistic

- Tends to be self-critical, sets unrealistically high standards for self and is intolerant of own human defects

- Has little empathy, seems unable to understand or respond to others’ needs unless they correspond with his own

. This personality disorder [the report concludes] is not usually associated with pedophilic tendencies. However, the subject’s acquired and exaggerated feminine mannerisms and indicated insecurities may well have allowed such behaviors to develop. All of this nonsense from these psychosleuths was read out in court.

To return to the land where reasonable folk dwell, here’s testimony from one of Plain’s friends, Thomas, a strong witness for his buddy, in that he was respectful and just good-looking enough. Here’s part of what he said:

Caitlin Moore: Would you call Miller Tyler wild?

Thomas: No ma'am, no more than me or anybody else.

Moore: Can you give an example of his moderate wildness?

Thomas: Yes. One time we rigged the PA system, Plain and me, so we could cut in on this class. We had this guy—do I have to give his name?

Moore: No.

Thomas: OK. This guy I was mentioning could imitate the vice-principal, Mr. Noblock, really well. We rigged it so he could make announcements over the PA direct into this class. He'd call out, "Ms.—do I have to give her name?"

Moore: No, just tell your story a little more briskly.

Thomas: Yes, ma'am. This guy imitating Mr. Noblock, who was in the boys room, I think was where he was, would call out, "Ms. Huh-huh, please send Thomas to the principal's office." Then we'd ditch, but we got caught the last time.

Moore: Did you ever know Miller to assault anyone?

Thomas: He was in some fights in grade school, he told me. Assault? I know he broke up two fights I know of, wasn't in the fight, broke them up so nobody'd get hurt.

Moore: Did he ever assault you or anyone you know of?

Thomas: No ma'am.

Moore: Do you know of times when he helped people?

[Objection: Vague! Where is this leading?]

Moore: I'll rephrase. Did Plain, as you call him, ever help other students, perhaps younger students, with homework?

Thomas: Yes, ma'am. It started with my own little sister, you know, who has been sick a lot, in the hospital, and got behind. Plain said he'd help her in math. Pretty soon there were about seven kids coming in every day, just about, to our house to get help. He did that the whole term.

Moore: Which term?

Thomas: Last one.

The prosecution got after Thomas pretty good. Moore objected, but mostly was overruled.

DA: That's a very touching story you tell about Miller helping out those young children. How old were these children he gathered around him?

Thomas: My sister was ten. So were the others, ten or eleven—around in there.

DA: About the same age as Brandon and Missy. Did Plain's assistance include more than math tutoring?

Thomas: Other subjects, you mean, sir?

DA: I mean, did he talk to the kids, play with them sometimes?

Thomas: He talked about the subjects. Playing? I don't think so.

DA: Wrestle with them, maybe, cuddle them?

Thomas: No.

DA: I thought you said you didn't know.

Thomas: Well, I do.

DA: How did Miller get the nickname of Plain?

Thomas: I don't know who gave it to him.

DA: But you do know what it meant?

Thomas: No, sir. Well, I guess it was a joke on how he looked—not so plain. He isn't plain in other ways either.

DA: Let's concentrate on his looks.

Thomas: If you want.

DA: How would you describe Plain's looks?

Thomas: Pardon?

DA: What don't you understand? Describe how he isn't plain.

Thomas: He's sitting right there.

DA: I want your words.

Thomas: He's good-looking, I guess, cool.

DA: You guess? You're not sure?

Thomas: Yes, he's good-looking.

DA: Good-looking how?

Thomas: You know, he looks good, cool.

DA: Pretty?

Thomas: No.

DA: Girlish? Would you say he looked girlish or effeminate?

Thomas: No, sir.

DA: He was teased about that, right?

Thomas: No, sir, he wasn't. Not that I know of. I'd say he wasn't.

DA: How can you be sure?

Thomas: Because people like him, because he's cool. And it would be mean to call him effeminate, like you say, and it isn't true anyways.

DA: Did Plain, as everybody thought of him, have any girlfriends, being so ungirlish himself?

Thomas: He has lots of friends, girls, too.

DA: You know what I mean, girlfriends.

Thomas: I guess so. I don't really know.

DA: Boyfriends?

Thomas: No, I don't think Plain's gay, and I don't care anyhow, and I'm damned sure he's no child molester.

Several jury members smiled at Thomas' outbursts, seemed to be on his side—maybe.

Plain's own manner on the stand, his tone, I now see as pure parody, but I don't think the jury or the prosecution detected it at the time. I sure didn't.

Here's a sample:

DA: Should I call you Miller or Plain?

Plain: Either is fine.

DA: But which do you prefer? I want you to be comfortable.

Plain: Thank you, sir. I think I'll be comfortable with either.

DA: You don't mind if I call you Plain, even though it refers to your looks?

Plain: No, sir.

DA: It doesn't strike you as too familiar?

Plain: No, sir. I'm used to it.

DA: Do you ever regard it as mocking name, a suggestion that you appear girlish?

Plain: No, sir. I don't think my friends are mocking me.

DA: Plain it is, then.

Plain: Fine.

DA: Plain, why did you enter this commune?

Plain: I could make up an answer, but the truth is I'm not sure.

DA: Do you regret having joined?

Plain: No, sir.

DA: Unsure, though? Were you unsure when you went on crime sprees?

Plain: Pardon me? Oh, you mean shoplifting and taking stuff from my parents. I guess I didn't think much about it. That's how immature I was.

DA: You was? Were. You aren't now? You pronouncing yourself cured of immaturity?

Plain: Well, sir, that's not for me to say. But I think I've changed.

DA: Were you sexually active in the commune?

Plain: No, sir. None of us was—were.

DA: I'm interested in you, not in hearsay. Did you ever hug Missy or Brandon?

Plain: Yes, sir.

DA: Why?

Plain: Because I like them. I think little kids need affection. I think we all do.

DA: But you wouldn't hug me, just because I need affection.

Plain: Sure I would. Want a hug?

DA: Were you erotically attracted to Brandon and Missy?

Plain: Well, sir, I've thought about that, and I can honestly say, no, I was not, not once, not ever.

DA: You know what I mean by "erotically attracted"?

Plain: Yes, sir, I think so.

DA: How do you know?

Plain: I think everybody knows, sir: you get aroused, your pulse quickens, your breathing gets short and labored, your. . . .

DA: I mean how do *you* know? Were you erotically attracted to the other commune members?

Plain: Yes, sir.

DA: Which one or ones?

Plain: At different times and in different degrees, to all of them.

DA: Including William?

Plain: Yes, sir.

DA: Including Jason?

Plain: Yes, sir.

DA: And both girls?

Plain: Yes, sir.

DA: If you are aroused so indiscriminately, why not these kids you were hugging?

Plain: I've thought about that, sir. I can honestly say that I was not aroused—not at all, never. I wonder if most people don't have some kind of on-off switch when little kids are involved. I think that's true of all normal people.

DA: And you're normal? Living in a sexually mixed commune, engaging in repeated criminal activity, making porn films?

Plain: I think what we did was experimental, and I don't think we caused much damage. We also did some good things. As for being normal, yes sir, I think I am.

DA: In spite of everything?

Plain: I think we're pretty typical teenagers. We pushed it farther. We never meant harm—and we certainly did no harm to Brandon and Missy. I think they enjoyed living with us. We treated them well. They're like a little brother and sister to me.

DA: Even if they are ugly?

Plain: I explained that—it's Oscar Wilde. Brandon and Missy aren't ugly, just kids.

Intriguing stuff. This jury is especially hard to decipher. I've had fair luck getting a line on juries, but only because I just guess, never try to be rational. I don't think juries are stupid. It's just that once they get off in a room by themselves they start telling stories.

One story leads to another and pretty soon they are inside a Victorian novel and multiple plots. Wrapped up in all that, any member is convinced that he is making sense. And he is. It's just that his version of sense often has little contact with what is concocted by those outside, waiting and predicting. The outsiders are making stories, too, but theirs are never as rich as the jury's. The collective stories concocted in jury rooms always contain so many compromises, accommodations of leaps and twists, that single authors need never confront. That's why ballads and other oral tales that build over time and allow all sorts of people in are always finer than single-author fictions.

I flatter myself that I can understand the activities of juries better than the next guy, simply because I love absurdist stories—Kafka, Camus. They knew how unpredictable predictability is. Verdicts can be anything. Predicting the results is like looking at the last page of a conventional novel: dead or alive, married or jilted, guilty or beat the rap. What matters is the process, the way the story shifts and twists, takes on more as it goes. If I were the accused, I might have more interest in the last page.

So, what did this jury think of Plain's testimony? Did they use what he said or what their running stories demanded he should have said? Reading this over, it looks as if Plain whipped Timmons's ass. But juries don't often read back over; they may remember tags and phrases, looks and gestures, clothing—forgetting whether the words were embedded in answers or questions, who said them and why. Timmons asked questions about arousal. Maybe that's enough to put together a story. And Plain let fall that word, "affection," a loaded term.

For all his determinedly incomplete state, Plain is very slick. I don't think his testimony reveals a damned thing. He could grin and squirm, call himself "normal" and the group just "typical teenagers," consummate actor that he is.

We have a report from a social worker on Plain and his family. Love these social worker reports, which invariably get closer to the

workings of the heart than other pros. This one is less melodramatic, noting how distant Plain and his parents are but emphasizing the absence of animosity. Maybe it's indifference; maybe it's an odd kind of mutual respect. She suggests that Plain's expressions of hostility to his parents are manufactured, noting how nonspecific his abuse is. But she is also skeptical about the parents' rationalizations. She is nicely unjudgmental. The report concludes with an admission of failure or, maybe, a rueful whisper: "Despite early indications of aggressive behaviors, Miller now seems considerably more mature and self-confident than is usual at his age. Maybe his parents' hands-off attitude, however rationalized, ended up working better than the conscientious 'caring' that is so often misapplied."

I talked with Plain a lot. We went through a stage where he was playing goody-good, as he had on the stand. But then he seemed to get interested. Fool that I am, I was flattered, as if I were back in the tenth grade and this popular guy was noticing outcast me. He was relaxed, humorous, apparently forthcoming. He was able to get me talking about myself, often becoming so involved I plum forgot to interrogate. I realize now I was forming a friendship. I hope he wasn't always faking. Here are bits of our conversation (recorded):

Me: Plain, your nickname draws attention to your looks. How does that make you feel?

Plain: When I was younger, I think I exploited it some, partly unconsciously, at least with adults.

Me: You flirted with them?

Plain: Exactly. I could tell they were interested. Sometimes, when I was at other kids's houses, I would see if I couldn't get their parents worked up.

Me: How?

Plain: Smiling, letting them touch me. Sometimes if we were watching tv, I'd sit on an adult lap. I'd sometimes take off my shirt and wear loose pants.

Me: Why did you do this? Did it turn you on?

Plain: Probably it did, but I did it mostly for the power. Also, they'd give me stuff. They'd ask me to do odd jobs and overpay me, for instance.

Me: Let me ask you, did you tell your commune friends all this?

Plain: Oh, yeah. I finally talked pretty freely about sex and my body and my pathological modesty—and about this half-deliberate seducing I did.

Me: Did anybody ever make a pass at you? I mean, before the commune.

Plain: Lots of hair-tossing, butt-patting. Didn't you experience that as a kid?

Me: Well, maybe. I doubt it—but I didn't look like you.

Plain: It was a phase. When I was younger, my looks were a pain in the ass. I was concerned about being a woos. I got in fights, trying to prove I was manly—at eight-years old.

Me: You still that way a little—aggressive, proving something?

Plain: I was when the group started. For sure. That stuff with the Sharks, for instance. Jesus!

Me: You think that explains your aggression: you strike out because of your looks?

Plain: Ah, ain't you the sly one! No, I don't. You're the one who ties things together: you did this because of that. I don't believe in that sort of reasoning—whatever you call it.

Me: Causal.

Plain: Right. Thanks. It's automatic, easy. No offense.

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Me: How about your family? You seem pretty cold in your comments about them.

Plain: You know, this whole parent business is the best thing about our group's idea. Maybe anybody is just as connected or as isolated as they say they are.

Me: You can will yourself into being independent?

Plain: Not exactly. Declare it, like I say.

Me: You think it's that simple?

Plain: I don't know what you mean by "it." Saying you are disconnected is the foundation, not the whole building. Why should we accept the idea that we're all connected inside a family—that parents explain kids? And if a kid does something, look to the parents.

Me: So you think kids are disjoined from their parents, aren't even influenced by them?

Plain: That's what we're starting from. It's not a matter of "thinking" that. Of course kids are "influenced" by them. They're usually in close contact. But maybe it's a matter of believing it because it's in the air. The talk says that parents are your source; that talk becomes like the weather. *There*. Talk different and you might be out from under it. Kids our age get trapped into fighting with their parents—and then turn out to *be* their parents, pretty much. You see?

Me: No.

Plain: Fuck, doofus! That's the trap, thinking parents are all—you need to outfight them. You're still playing a game adults have made up. Love 'em, imitate them, fight with them—it's pretty much the same. Well, just forget 'em! That's what we are testing.

Me: *Are* testing?

Plain: Are.

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Me: Can you tell me how you were able to get angry with defenseless and unaggressive kids?

Plain: I can't explain violent impulses too well. Sometimes I get that way. I do know I got so pissed at these Sharks standing there giggling and talking like it was a Sunday School picnic that I—I don't know.

Me: Wanted to kill them?

Plain: Oh no. I don't think I've been in that place, for sure not against the Sharks.

Me: You still angry?

Plain: I haven't felt that way for a long time.

Me: What about me? Here I am, the enemy. You feel violent toward me?

Plain [laughing]: You? Hell, man, you're not the enemy, even if there was one. Just the reverse.

[I was dying to know what he meant but was too embarrassed to ask.]

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Me: If you're acquitted, do you think you'll reconvene the commune?

Plain: Absolutely.

Me: You sure the others will want to?

Plain: Absolutely.

Me: Will you keep to the path of crime?

Plain: [laughing] Now that'd be tipping you off, you super sleuth. But now and then we might. The law is one big machine designed to produce uniformity. Not the only machine, though—a crude one, but hefty.

Me: What changes would you all make in your commune.

Plain: I couldn't predict that. Can you plot out your future?

Me: I try to learn from my mistakes. For instance, if I were in a commune, I wouldn't take in plainly neurotic strays with needy kids.

Plain: *Plainly* neurotic, huh? We might do it again. I don't think you learn from experience. Do we really know JoAnne? How many are like her, anyhow?

Me: More than you suppose.

Plain: Oh, Mr. Dark Shadows Detective! "What darkness lurks in the hearts of men?"

Me: How would you know that? "The Shadow" is long before even my time.

Plain: While you're journeying to the dark side, I read.

Me: So you'd regroup and set out repeating the same experiences.

Plain: Listen to yourself. The same experiences never come around. It's always different, if you don't blind yourself. It's a matter of seeing.

Me: So you learned nothing?

Plain: Did you ever—from experience?

Me: Yeah. I learned when to shut up, when to quit on a line of questioning.

Plain: I see what you're saying. I suppose we learn and change—not to be safe. I guess I want to find out where we would go to locate risks, not avoid them. It's hard to explain.

Me: You don't want to learn to be safe?

Plain: Is that it?

Me: You tell me.

Plain: I think you see what we are. You don't seem to me like someone who lives his life looking for places to hide.

Me: Because I'm a detective.

Plain: In spite of that. No, because you like me and don't want to pat my butt.

Me: I see. Don't be too sure about the butt issue, though.

Plain: Any time.

Me: Plain, I'm a smart-ass by habit. But that doesn't excuse what I said. I do apologize.

Plain: I get it. You're a nice man.

Me: Thanks. I don't want you to think I'm joining the line waiting to molest you.

Plain: [smiles]

Me: Anyways, as you see it, you guys are dedicated to finding a new way.

Plain: Sort of. I suppose there's no way. We're trying not to stop trying. The adults we see seem to have given up. Not all. Not Ollie. Not you.

Me: Thanks. So it's not all a matter of age?

Plain: Generally, but there are exceptions.

Me: So you'd think of letting me join your commune?

Plain: You got any little kids trailing along with you?

Me: Nope.

Plain: You're in!

Me: Not as a parent or as an adult.

Plain: No.

Me: As a friend?

Plain: As my friend.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Fifth Council Meeting

Didn't I do the last Council report? Am I getting type-cast? I fucking know that L.L. said it was weak to keep using fuck, but if she doesn't fucking like it, she can fucking well go fuck herself. How's that for old Willy Nerd?

A short Council this time. We discussed the second mortgage but nobody wants a rehash of that. On cleaning services—it seems to me ugly to pay poor Mexicans to clean up dead skin (house dust). It came up at dinner—whether these workers were illegal, being exploited by low wages and no benefits. One of us got so worked up as to inquire, visiting the Better Business Bureau. Twas Moo! Just goes to show you!

Then sex. Number 1 Topic—exploiting Mexicans; number 2 is, let's see—oh yes, sex. Everybody was interested in Foucault, so L.L. told us a lot. Mary said she'd get two of his books out of the library for us.

Mary then said she'd like to have sex—with me: “How about some sex, Willy?” Of course I giggled. Mary said, “OK—some other time.” Moo said, “How about me?” Mary said, “Soon as you hit puberty,” but smiled and then kissed him. Right on the mouth. Mary is like no other person who ever lived.

We talked about babies. Plain asked L.L. why she was worried about Mary having babies but not her. L.L. threw a book at him, hit him right on the nose. How would it be for us, having kids? (Maybe adopt some of the poor kids we seem to attract? I don't suppose we'd be any adoption agency's dream, but it's something to think about.) Meanwhile, we agreed that all boys must wear condoms and girls must be protected—or Mary must be protected. Where are you in all this, L.L.? And

don't throw a book at me. It seems funny writing this. So far as I know, nobody's having sex. (And I'd *know*!)

Moo raised the Yuppie issue. L.L. said all this money might make us comfortable. We ought never to be comfortable. That's interesting, though I'm not sure what I take in is what L.L. is giving out.

We ended with a vote on yet another gang name, the Voles, proposed by Plain. Everybody liked the name, but, as Mary said, foxes aren't really very tough. Actually, they are quite cute. By the time it came to a vote, even Plain had turned against the name.

#### **Fifth Journal Entry**

We had this graduation party for Willy in the basement, which we should have cleaned up more and got more lights in before having a party in. It was OK, and nobody asked me and Willy to kiss and make up. I'm Moo. (Everything's pretty good now with us, if everybody'd keep quiet about it.)

Plain had a good thought, the party, but it just didn't turn out like we figured.

Willy is all signed up for Westminster and got a big scholarship.

To be honest, like L.L. said we should be, I'm real confused by the sex talk. Mary kissing me I can't get out of my head. Mary's so beautiful and always looks so good.

Plain here. All I have to say is I'm really sorry, Willy. Sorry to you all. I wasn't thinking. If my dad were here, he'd say, "That's your trouble, Miller. You never do think." (Actually, he never said that. If he'd provided the right sort of firm discipline, then I wouldn't—sob, sob—be where I am today, directionless. And screwing up things for good friends, the best friends.)

Willy. I really appreciated the party, especially Plain's idea, which was funny and generous. If I'd been more mature, it would have worked out. Thanks, all you friends.

On another subject. I think one thing we can say for sure: we've gotten easier. For example, look at Moo's entry. I'm not saying Moo isn't an open and daring guy, but look what he said about Mary. I can't imagine him saying that unless he had this strange experience creeping in on him. I know I couldn't say anything so unprotected. (And I agree with you, Moo, about us. It's getting so I like you—a lot.)

Mary here. I'm really touched, Moo. If you want more kisses, just wave, write me a note, blink, lay a finger aside of your nose. I like kissing, running my hands over backs and legs. I love having hands rubbing me. It's not sexual, really. Well, I guess that's what it is. Got that, Moo? Anybody else? Everybody else?

(I'm moved by what Willy wrote on Moo. It's not my business—but lovely.)

I keep replaying in my head our surprise party for Willy and trying to make it come out different. (You ever do that? My brother that's not at home now—he's great—told me he was never on anything but losing sports teams so he played the games over in his head.) I'm sure not being critical of Plain's kindness. I don't know what exactly went wrong, but there's nobody to blame. Like *Little Dorrit*.

L.L. will tell us to get on with important stuff.

No, I won't. What you're looking at as a mess was a test we passed. You think we lost but we won.

Plain, I am not criticizing you. You had what looked like a nice idea. You thought a lot about it and wanted to please Willy. Who could guess how it would turn out?

When the girl with the spangles came out of that box, it was a test. You think we should have laughed like we were at a bachelor party and stuffed dollars in her bra. But she wasn't

having fun, as we all saw. I kept wondering if maybe she was in my class, she was that young. She looked so scared.

Sure, it was embarrassing, especially for Willy, who wanted to be a good sport. I think Willy would have let her strip naked and give him a lap dance, just to go along. But who stepped up and covered the girl and said she didn't have to do it? It's worth saying "fuck" to see Moo doing that again in your mind.

Go Moo! We were all quiet and embarrassed, and the girl was crying and it was awful. But we did OK. It was our mid-term exam.

### **The Great Fish Farm**

I like what L. L. said about flops being good, and you'll soon see why. I'm Plain. We dug shallow pits, lined them, dumped water in, got the water out again when it pulled the lining down, making mud. We relined the holes, refilled them, put the aerator thing in the water, dumped in chemicals like it said and got tiny fish and put them in. They died.

Nobody did postmortems on the plan leading to these massacred minnows. L.L. would call this a win. What is this, L.L.? You want us to live through flop after flop, becoming ever so fucking mature? Maybe we could create a disaster that will wipe us out.

I think I found a new contact that can get us linked up to a fence for stolen stuff. The contact is Downtown Ollie Brown, and he's remarkable, despite wearing the name of a third-rate old-time ballplayer. Anyhow, he's awfully nice. And interesting. I like him. He said he might know about a fence.

### **Landscaping**

Mary here. What ball player?

Anyhow, we did manage to lift a lot of plants and part of a hedge. We threw the hedge away, since we didn't get enough of it to cover. The plants and the four trees we put in the front,

but then Moo pointed out how people we stole them from might spot them. So we dug them out again and put them in the back. The vegetation doesn't seem very healthy to me, but what do I know?

Should we just er-ah-maybe-gee buy shrubs or trees? Do we have to kill ourselves stealing everything? If we just gave in to capitalism now and then, we'd be less predictable, right? And the planting would be soooo much easier.

This is boring. But it's fun to do, even the stealing. I'm amazed we weren't caught at the one place where we were making so much noise. Every time somebody would bend over to dig, somebody else would grab him (her) by the butt or put something down the pants. Are we horny or what? Just me?

#### **Film Club**

Hi—Mary. Our movie choice—"Happiness," a grim one. Before we watched it, L.L., who had seen it before, told us not to "godamn it giggle at all the gross stuff."

We ended up talking until two in the morning, which was great, since we started the movie at six-thirty. I think it was the best talk we've had. I was crying several times and so was Willy—maybe others, too. Just two things.

We kept coming back to the doctor dad and his son. The dad drugs and then rapes boys—his own kid's friends. When the son finds out later, he asks his dad if he'd ever fuck him. The dad pauses only a second and then: "No." "Why not?" the kid asks. "I'd beat off instead." Then they both throw themselves into heart-breaking sobs. We started by talking about what a creep this pedophile dad was. But after a while we modified our tune. We noticed the warmth between the father and son and how he, oddly, didn't seem to mess up the kid's mind. The kid trusts him. Not that he's not a monster, the Dad, but he's also more than that. Made us confused.

The other thing was the fat couple—desperately lonely people: the guy makes disgusting phone calls but he’s also pathetic; the woman murders her apartment janitor by breaking his neck—but. . . . The point for us was why these two misfits couldn’t be happy together. More than being messed up, they are desolate, so alone, and they got together. Why couldn’t they make it? You start to see that each of them only has one problem, that it’s the same problem, and that they can solve it. They have a fine time that one night they are together, dancing and confessing. The guy says he likes her, which is probably the first time he’s ever said that to anyone. You know she’s never heard it before. There’s a sweet scene where they go to bed together. She’s under the covers in her pretty granny nightgown and he’s on top of the covers, his belly lopping over his belt. No touching, which makes the scene all the more powerful, suggests the risks they’re taking. Two broken people doing a bit of fixing for one another. But it goes nowhere. Why? We agreed that the director, Solendz, wanted to look cool and hard by showing how nobody can be happy.

I’m so inarticulate, trying to imitate Moo, who has a natural loose style. I see I implied that Moo is inarticulate. Sorry, Moo. You know I don’t mean that. If you’ll stop being so standoffish and let me give you just a few dozen kisses, I’ll show you what I think of you and your natural writing style.

Don’t forget *The Virgin Suicides* (the book) in three weeks. The CPA turned all this into a leaflet:  
*The Smoking Gun?*

*What are we waiting for? The child kiddie porn peddlers are innocent until proven guilty. So, let’s prove it.*

*In their own writing, we can watch them talking themselves into pedophilia—sickening, but so it is—and there’s more where this came from.*

*Here’s just one instance among many: they are discussing a serial child-rapist in the movie “Happiness.” “At first,” they say,*

*the man seems “a creep.” (This is a criminal who drugs into unconsciousness and then brutally rapes his own boys’ classmates.) For our anarchist friends, he is merely “a creep.” Normal people would find stronger words—maybe?*

*They soon convince themselves—and we bet it was real easy—that this monster in the film is not even a “creep.” He’s a great dad, really “cool.” Watch out, Brandon and Missy!*

The CPA doesn’t mention that “cool” is a term used by a child (victim) in the movie, not our five, or that this discussion occurred about a year *before* Brandon and Missy were around to incite them. At least, the CPA can no longer pretend they don’t have this Journal. I’m damned sure Timmons isn’t feeding them anything. He hates them.

### **Sixth Council Meeting**

We say we’re going for real stuff and then? Thrilling landscaping, schemes to murder fish, and a thirty-hour film discussion. The only real thing is Downtown, who may lead us to fun illegal stuff, though I know him, too, and have my doubts. I agree with Plain that he’s nice. He also seems so much in another world he wouldn’t know a fence from a cop. Plain, is he trustworthy? A pervert? You’d know that for sure. Kidding.

This is Moo. Thanks, Mary, for the comments on my writing—I know that “cool and natural” isn’t the only way to describe it. Mary’s just about the kindest person I’ve known. For her, I’ll study grammar and try to write better.

What else went on at Council? I’m here to tell you.

No pets, we decided, except those we could easily breed and sell, which eliminates fish and rabbits and chickens.

L.L. and Plain said we shouldn’t steal hedges and stuff, buy them instead, echoing Mary and cheerleading us into regular capitalism, keeping us from theft that makes no sense. So—here’s where it gets exciting: we’ll buy soil supplements, rake the dirt, then rake it again, and then purchase things at the

nursery (watch for sales!) and plant grass seed. I am proud of what responsible bleeps we are.

I swear to Satan that was it.

### **Sixth Journal Entry**

**Plain:** Damn, Moo, don't be Main Bitch. Some of us are enjoying ourselves. Even the Mafia doesn't mess somebody up every fifteen minutes, you sociopath. They turn to other things, like landscaping. Cooking—remember “The Godfather”?

**Downtown Ollie Brown** played for the Philadelphia Phillies in the mid-70s. My grandpa who died told me about him, said he was a great home run hitter, earning the nickname “Downtown” for his awesome four-baggers. I looked him up and found he did not hit many home runs, none that set any distance records. He was in the Big Leagues from 1965-77, the last four with the Phillies. He had two good years, 1969-1970, still not an All-Star, though he hit 23 and 20 homers. For the Phillies, he got 16 homers in four years, so I don't know what grandpa was remembering. I guess you could say Ollie did OK, hanging around that long in the Bigs. He makes the “Leaders List” twice: in 1970, he was eighth in doubles, and in 1968 he was seventh in grounding-into-double-plays.

Sorry I looked it up. My grandpa was the best guy in my family.

That satisfy you, Moo?

**Moo:** I said what I wanted to say in the Council Report. I'm sorry Plain is so cruel.

**L.L.:** Remember when we thought this was going to be perfect? Willy, you OK? You seem upset—was it that film discussion? Moo, your talk present compelling arguments for attacking. Even cream-bun Mary must get worn down by you.

**Mary:** No more Ms. Cream-Bun. Moo, I'm with you. Let's real it up before we reach middle age at seventeen.

I was wondering if we could think about scams, quiet but steady criminal activity. What I am talking about, like Moo, is locating ways to have a different life and not just now-and-then juvenile delinquency, enlivening our uneventful savings-account lives.

For instance, is it even a crime for minors to do porn? “Happiness” made me think of it. What if we made our own porn, and sold it on the net? The people who bought it might be in big shit, but how can they mess with us, if we’re minors?

We could make millions with very little—undressing each other teasingly, necking. Invent plots. Boy would our parents love this plan! Wonder if they’d help distribute them? Even better, have them participate in the action sequences. Oh, gag!

Willy. Thanks, L.L. I don’t mean to make you all uncomfortable.

As for Mary’s idea. I’m willing to do the camera or lights. I’m no expert, though. I can help with the scripts—make them kind of parodies. Act, too (thanks, Mary), though I’d kill the market for kiddie porn. (The FBI should hire me—a secret weapon against the rising tide of pedophilia!) For our movies, I could be the chauffeur watching in the rearview mirror while people go at it in the back, the guy handing out towels in the locker-room. (I’ve seen some of these.)

### **The Great Cash Robbery**

L.L.: In hopes of satisfying the violent demands issuing from Moo and Mary, and bringing some distraction to dear Willy, me and Plain decided we’d “knock over” a McDonald’s. Once we thought of it, you could as easily have stopped the tides as held us back. We figured the clerks would be kids our age who wouldn’t give a shit if the place were looted. Give them a little excitement and annoy the bosses.

So, Plain and I bought these thick black panty hose. Plain said, “They’re a brilliant cover. We thought about toy guns, but

decided we'd just stick our fingers in our pants and push out." Plain used a comb.

We distributed the panty hose—more like long johns, they were so thick. Mary said they were support-hose, but I think they were just cheap. We covered our faces where butts should be. It wasn't too easy to see, but you sure couldn't peek in.

Moo tried to argue against the caper. He said the fucking McDonald's in fucking Mount Fredericks wouldn't have any fucking money and that we should do a 7-11 or a fucking bank. I'm not suggesting that Moo was a little unnerved. Cluck, cluck, cluck.

We got there, parked, and put on our hose with the legs hanging down the sides like bunny ears. We had to hold them up around our necks, all bunched up—a little awkward.

Luck was with us: no customers, only this girl and boy in uniforms and paper hats. They came bustling out through a little door, looking as if they'd been making out back by the French fryer. The boy seemed scared by our criminal getup, but the girl laughed. Plain poked his comb under his sweatshirt and said in this real deep voice:

"Quiet, bitch, or I'll drill ya. Then you'll be not laughin. Yeah—that's—well. . . ."

That made her laugh more, and the boy started laughing, too. Making things worse and trying to support Plain like a good gun moll, I pushed my finger (sweatshirted) out, too—just to show them we meant business! But I couldn't see down there because of the thick panty hose and ended up having my bare finger stick out.

"You gonna drill us, too?" The girl said. She was laughing so hard she almost fell down: "Wi-wi-wi-with yer fi-fi-fi-fing fi-fi-finger?"

Then Moo attacked the ketchup and lids counter, throwing things about. He attempted to tip over the Pepsi machine—but couldn't. That made the boy and girl laugh even more, so Moo

picked up a handy booster chair and rushed at them and finally tossed it their way. The girl put her arm up instinctively, and the thing hit her.

We were just standing there, when the boy said, “Push the cash register code button, then sale, then 76414. Take the money and get out of here, you shits. You hurt Julie, you shits. We’d have given you the money anyhow.”

Moo apologized, but the boy was pissed. The girl was holding her arm, trying not to cry. Time to go. Mary cut in front of Moo, said we didn’t want any money.

We beat it then, though the boy called after us, “Why’d you have to hurt Julie?” Why indeed—nice girl, with her kind boyfriend and her pain.

## CHAPTER TEN

This seems a good time to discuss Moo. This was his nadir—and he does ascend. Now, he's confused, unable to direct his own violent feelings or needs.

The first court psychologist was so concerned with Jason's record back in Missouri, she hardly seems aware that there is a person right there before her:

*A history of repeated problem with authority figures, confrontations brought on by subject, as well as results from the ERT BATTERY, indicate a low level of self-esteem and a defensive inflexibility when confronted with new situations. Jason tends to regard even minor change as a threat; and any counsel as intolerable criticism. As a result, he has difficulty adapting to new circumstances, bestowing trust—seeing opportunities as dangers, necessitating the erection of defenses. His constant fighting is a way of seeking control, striking before he is struck. As the subject is unable to form secure relationships, a program of extensive therapy in a monitored residential facility, is advised.*

*His profile is consistent with sexual aggression toward an unthreatening party. While his test results in this area are normal, his personality disorders suggest a possibility of pedophilic assault. It is not counter-indicated.*

The second, who always seems to work with a chart in front of her, diagnosed Moo as exhibiting “avoidant-constricted personality disorder” symptoms. She offered a list matching Moo with the signals of this disorder:

- Appears inhibited about pursuing goals; aspirations below potential*
- Tends to be unreliable and irresponsible*
- Tends to feel bored easily*
- Lacks social skills; acts inappropriately*
- Is easily distracted; has trouble concentrating*

*—Has little insight into his own motives, behaviors, etc.*

*—Is unable to consider alternative interpretations of his experience*

*—Tends to be neglected or avoided by peers*

*—Seems to know less about the ways of the world than would be expected, given his age and intelligence.*

She concluded that his instability and extreme lack of social skills “allow for the possibility that inappropriate sexual advances may be indicated.”

As always, the social worker is more moderate:

*Jason’s difficulties in Missouri, however severe, do not seem to have been transferred. He is an impetuous young man, but he seems to have done well, over time, within this special group. There are recurrent but minor collisions with William, who manifests similar common traits. Still, Jason managed to adjust well to circumstances within this group and seems, overall, to have felt happy and accepted. In this sense, the experience was excellent therapy for him, insofar as therapy was called for to begin with.*

For some reason, the defense produced only one witness devoted to Moo—and she wasn’t very impressive. Here’s an example from the trial:

Caitlin Moore: How would you describe Jason’s character?

Amanda: Well, I’d describe him as very nice. He was very nice—is very nice.

Moore: Would you call him honest?

Amanda: Yes, yes I would.

Moore: Dependable?

Amanda: Oh, yes. He’s dependable, I think.

Moore: Can you recall examples?

Amanda: Yes, I can. There was this one time he broke up this fight and when he broke it up he talked to these two kids who were fighting, and he made them be friends, Jason did.

Timmons gave Amanda a pass.

Here’s a portion of my interview:

Me: Well, Amanda, what did you really think of Jason?

Amanda: In what way?

Me: As a friend.

Amanda: He's nice.

Me: Were you girlfriend and boyfriend?

Amanda: No.

Me: So, what about him did you like?

Amanda: Well, he's nice—nice to everybody, you know.

Me: In illustrating his dependability, you cite a time when he broke up a fight. That same example was used by a witness in talking about Plain.

Amanda: I noticed that.

Me: Did you maybe get them mixed up? Was it maybe Plain?

Amanda: Huh?

Me: Did Moo actually break up any fight?

Amanda: Well—maybe he helped Plain, you know? Maybe they both did it?

Me: But it wasn't because Moo was a peacemaker, however effective, that you liked him, right?

Amanda: Huh?

Me: You say Moo is "nice." Is he fun to be around?

Amanda: I guess.

Me: Is he funny?

Amanda: In what way?

Me: In any way.

Amanda: No. I'd say, you know—no.

I talked about Moo to some of the kids called to testify for Plain and Mary. Most of them said they really didn't know Jason, had no idea he was called "Moo." One boy named Ben, when asked him if he knew Moo, said, "not really." It was as good as I got, so I went at him.

Me: So, why don't you like Moo?

Ben: Who said I didn't like—Moo?

Me: I did. What is it you don't like about Moo, apart from his name?

Ben: Do I have to be in love with him or something?

Me: Yeah, that's required, Benjamin.

Ben: My name's Robert. So I have to love him?

Me: Robert? Benjamin Robert? Robert Benjamin? Robert to your friends?

Ben: Robert period. They somehow got my records screwed up and I never changed them—figured it was a way I could wreak vengeance on my parents. I can't imagine now how I figured that. I told *you* my right name, since you're the police and make me shudder.

Me: Are you gay?

Ben: How did you ever guess?

Me: You're self-possessed, good-looking. So why not love Moo?

Ben: You require all gay people to love anybody inside their own gender?

Me: Sorry.

Ben: That's OK. Anyhow, his nickname's irritating. Moo!

Me: So, he's repellant, ugly?

Ben: Look—sir! First of all, I don't know why you'd say Jason was ugly—he's pretty, as far as that goes. Second, gay people don't operate on a meat-market principle.

Me: You know Plain?

Ben: Yeah.

Me: Would you have sex with him?

Ben: [laughing] You got me. The limit to our principle. It's not just that he's hot.

Me: No?

Ben: Plain's a wonderful person, maybe the best guy I've known—not that I'm close to him. But that's important to know about Plain: his wit—his sensitivity and kindness.

Me: Uh-huh.

Ben: I don't care if you believe me—and I don't know why I'm talking this frankly to you—but wanting to have sex with Plain doesn't prove anything about Jason—Moo! Would you have sex with a more or less pretty woman if she were a terrible person?

Me: I'm ashamed to say I've done just that. I have cajoled and lied in order to have sex with women, not all of them beautiful.

Ben: I'm sort of surprised.

Me: I'm not proud of it.

Ben: You were young, I imagine.

Me: So are you.

Ben: Yeah.

Me: To tell the truth, it never occurred to me to think in much different terms back then.

Ben: Really?

Me: You kids are more honest—easier about sex, able to think about it. We didn't think—talked about it constantly, but didn't think. You understand that?

Ben: I guess. But that's sort of why I'm not close to Jason.

Me: He's like me?

Ben: I don't know about that. My guess is he's homophobic. All that vulgarity and fighting—macho stuff.

Me: You think he's warding something off?

Ben: He's awfully anxious to prove he's straight.

Me: Makes him violent?

Ben: Verbally, emotionally sometimes. I've seen a little. I didn't see him break up any fights, as the girl testified to. I've seen only the other crap.

Me: You think he's unreclaimable?

Ben: I'm not a missionary.

Me: But?

Ben: He's real smart in school stuff, and he can be pretty original here and there. I've noticed that. He just isn't relaxed. Maybe he is with little kids.

Me: Why do you say that?

Ben: I've noticed him with little kids—was nice to them. I was surprised.

Me: You think he's attracted to them?

Ben: God, man!

Me: Well, that's what he's charged with.

Ben: You been tricking me into this?

Me: So what did you mean?

Ben: That he might be way different when he doesn't feel challenged.

Me: So you'd like him then?

Ben: I'm what challenges him.

The one excellent positive character witness was Rita Gonzalez, called to speak on behalf of Willy, too, but primarily for Moo. Ms. Gonzalez runs an ESL and Literacy program for kids where Jason volunteered, had done so for a year, twice a week.

Caitlin Moore: Can you describe your dealings with Jason?

Rita: He was a volunteer at our Center. Twice a week—never missed.

Moore: His duties?

Rita: He worked one-on-one with clients, children having difficulties with English, ESL students, or those with general linguistic disabilities.

Moore: Did he do more than tutor?

Rita: He went out of his way to help clients, offered them counsel. I know he gave some of them a little money to help out. That's against our rules, but I blink at it—not that it's a problem usually. Jason is exceptional in many ways. He's kind as well as intelligent.

Moore: Jason related well to the children?

Rita: I've never seen better.

Moore: How did he communicate with children whose first language is not English?

Rita: He knows Spanish well, which is immensely helpful. As regards students with other first languages, Jason used a technique we often employ.

Moore: What is that?

Rita: You induce the client to teach you *their* language. That way the student operates within a comfort zone and is forced to use English in explaining. With Jason, it was more than a technique; he took it seriously. He picked up a little Korean, Portuguese, Chinese. The kids knew he was listening, trying, making mistakes, joking about it. They loved it.

Moore: Were his general relationship with the kids positive, then?

Rita: More than that, it was loving. He made a difference in their lives, gave them tools for learning and affection. I'd be very proud to have a son like that.

The DA pounced on this, not directly through Rita, though. He later told me he didn't want to grill her and have her saying more glowing things about Moo. "I don't care if the kids loved Brandon and Missy; I care that they molested them. If Jason found ways to hang around kids, that suggests something dark, and I don't want do-gooder Rita whitewashing it."

So he produced an expert witness, who gave us the surprising news that pedophiles often put themselves where they are in contact with children "in their age group of choice."

DA: Why did you enjoy working with these children?

Moo: I thought I was helping them.

DA: Did you ever touch them?

Moo: Not in that way.

DA: What way?

Moo: Not in any improper way—not bad touch.

DA: Are you sure?

Moo: Absolutely.

DA: Did you find some of them cute?

Moo: Little squirts, more like it.

DA: Were you attracted to them?

Moo: Pardon me?

DA: Do I need to repeat? Does the question stun you, make you feel uncomfortable?

[Objection. Sustained. Moo answers anyway.]

Moo: No, I wasn't attracted. Of course not.

DA: Ms. Rodriguez testified you had "loving relationships" with them. You agree?

Moo: Yes.

DA: Do you think that's proper?

Moo: I did what seemed right to help them. I didn't hurt them or touch them.

DA: Your idea of helping them went way beyond teaching them English?

Moo: Not to anything bad.

DA: But you were in love with them?

Moo: I wouldn't put it that way; neither would the kids. I don't think there's anything wrong with liking them, loving them. You make it about sex, which it wasn't.

DA: You say it was Platonic, your love affairs?

Moo: No, that's not what I'd say.

DA: They weren't Platonic?

[Here Caitlin objected and was sustained, though Moo again charged ahead.]

Moo: They weren't affairs, you dickhead.

Oddly, in my interviews, Moo seemed reluctant to discuss this volunteer work. He was easier with his problems in Missouri, parents, immaturity, violence. He could become very defensive, but even that went up and down like eyelids blinking. He manifested no interest in me, a generic adult, not so much as a cop, except insofar as all adults are cops to him.

I concentrated on a whole range of other topics—with consistent zero success.

Me: What went on between you and Willy?

Moo: How is that important?

[Most questions were “irrelevant.” Pressed, he’d say, “I don’t know” or “If you say so.”]

So I went right for it, figuring I had nothing to lose and probably just as much to gain.

Me: Were you opposed to Ms. LaVelle and the kids moving in?

Moo: You saw the Journal.

Me: Yeah, but what did you really feel?

Moo: What I said.

Me: The Journal suggests you got along well with these three intruders. Right?

Moo: If it said so.

Me: Did you have sex with Brandon?

Moo: No.

Me: Well then, help me a little or I’ll just assume you did.

Moo: [silence—staring at the floor]

Me: Look, I’m just trying to understand. I’m not your enemy.

Moo: I see—*Dad!*

Me: I understand the difference between liking kids and molesting them.

Moo: Well, yes, I do like kids. I listen to them, don’t look down on them. I don’t think kids are magic. I think they’re a lot odder than most people see. I like kids and old people, mostly. Others, too. Downtown is great. So are Plain and Willy. Also Mary and L.L. I’d die for them. Anyhow, with kids: if they like you, they hug or kiss you and then go back to what they’re doing. Kids don’t much like cuddling—just touching now and then, show you they’re there—not what any sane person would regard as sexual. I had fun with Brandon and Missy; I hugged them and they kissed me—on the head, shoulder.

Me: You think most people who like kids hug and kiss them, if they’re not their own?

Moo: I think adults never *see* kids, except to think about how they reflect on parents.

Me: What do you mean?

Moo: Adults are so brainwashed by clichés about of what kids are. They don't see kids; they see what they've been told.

Me: I think you're right.

Moo: You do? You trying to suck me in?

Me: I suppose. But I really do think you're right.

Moo: Thanks.

But that was it. I would never get back to that point again. I did agree, wasn't shitting him. It was, like his love for the Sedaris story, one of those instances of clear-heartedness in this boy. When I was tempted to think he was conventional, I was seeing what I wanted.

I wonder why I didn't press hard on Moo or on the others. Maybe I let my curiosity leave me open. Open to what? Nobody was attacking.

Moo gives me a clue. There were times when I was struck with waves of feeling almost blinding. Here was this distant, small boy looking at me from under long suspicious lashes, wishing I'd go away; and I was ready to hug him. This disabling warmth didn't come over me often, but when it did, what I felt was so mastering I wanted to tell him. But tell him what?

It may be that Moo reminded me of myself, somehow, abandoned and lost as he was. He'd found his first comfort and steady affection with this group, and I didn't want him to lose it. I'd catch myself not listening, thinking of how small he was, unprotected, this furious lonely kid.

He'd be appalled if he knew I identified with him. Maybe. I can't pretend to read him well enough as to have any idea. The least mature of the kids was more mature than I.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### **Mary's Parents—Merlin and Patricia**

Mr. and Mrs. Baldwin sent me a letter early on, before the trial:  
Dear Detective Atherton,

We know how busy you are with this case. Our hearts go out to you as well as Mrs. JoAnne LaVelle. Please don't think we do not understand and fully sympathize.

You must see for yourself that these are a very different quality of kids—there are the leaders and there are the followers. The leaders are mentally and emotionally sick. This is sad, but it does not excuse them. Not in our opinion. We feel that children today have been so pampered they do not know what responsibility is. It's a permissive society. That does not excuse criminals, as you know. Just the reverse.

How do parents protect children from schools, where students carry guns, and violent sexual music and don't get us started on phones! You probably have children yourself and we are "preaching to the choir."

Speaking of protection, we sympathize with Mrs. LaVelle. We know how hard it is to protect children from predators, especially the way legislators pass laws to protect criminals.

Take our Mary. We admit we failed to protect her. As a parent yourself, ask yourself what is to be done in the world we live in? Had Mary been born earlier in a different generation, had Mary been you or your Mother so to speak, this would never have happened. This doesn't help us now, but it sets a context. "Totally," kids used to say—their lingo changes so fast!

I'm sure you can see how young she is and, yes, innocent. Not just her. We don't want to be partisan just to Mary. Miller Tyler IV, as you have observed yourself, is every bit as innocent and a victim. We regard his parents as neglectful, to be frank, but we hate to make judgments.

We have made our share of mistakes. Who hasn't? As we always say, babies don't arrive with instruction manuals. We have tried to provide the "3 Ls": love, limits, and learning.

Mary and Miller Tyler IV have been drawn into a mistake by peer pressure and some personalities that are unfortunately criminal. Mary is good but she is naive and easily led. Before she knew it, she was being controlled up to a point.

Obviously she had no part in the molesting. She did take part in the shoplifting and should have known better. She wasn't brought up to disrespect private property.

Thank you for your patience. We don't want to cast stones or be the ones to further blacken William and Jason and that Darcy Simmons. Though we do not have what you might call evidence against them, we have strong indirect evidence we would be glad to share.

Sincerely,

Merlin and Patricia Baldwin

Merlin and Patricia were jumping out of their girdles to get Mary off the hook. When pressed, on the "strong indirect evidence," they produced adjectives. They wanted the others to fry, exempting Plain only because adding him to the innocent seemed to them a cunning strategy.

Merlin and Patricia were the most annoying people in the entire circus troupe, as self-righteous as they were dim-witted. I figured they knew nothing about their daughter, but I couldn't drop them from the circle of interviews. Therefore, I dicked around with them for a bit:

Me: I want to begin by thanking you very much for your letter.

Merlin: Thank *you*. Pat and I thought we should try to get things clearer. I hope it did.

Me: Very much so. We value parents' views.

Pat: We hope it wasn't inappropriate.

Me: Kids are hard to figure out these days, and who knows them better than parents?

Merlin: I agree. I don't know if we really know Mary, if you know what I mean. Teens!

Pat: Merlin is wrong. Deep down we know Mary. Deep down.

Me: Then, deep down, why did she feel the need to join this group of kids?

Pat: She was pressured into it. She never meant to.

Me: In your letter you say you failed, failed to protect her. Was it all your fault?

Merlin: You tell me. How in hell could we protect her from kids like this? Have you any idea of how that Simmons girl is able to influence kids, just like a snake does.

Me: Oh, I—

Merlin: Excuse me. What you're asking is what no parent can do—protect her from other kids. If you think you can, I'd sure as hell like to know your secret.

Me: You are the ones who called yourselves failures. Want me to read that back to you?

[Silence]

Me: Did you belong to the PTA, in leadership roles?

Pat: Yes—well, we belonged.

Me: [ominously] Ah, ha.

Merlin: We went to school programs and—

Me: You attended?

[Silence]

Me: Did you take Mary on true family vacations?

Merlin: Every summer.

Me: Educational ones?

Pat and Merlin: [stumbling over one another] Yes—mostly—yes—out of our way—there was that museum, Mt. Rushmore. . . .

Me: How about educational summer programs run by universities?

Merlin: We have limited means. . . .

Me: Many are very inexpensive and have scholarships. Did you bother to investigate?

Pat: I guess it didn't occur to us. We didn't hear of such programs. Sorry.

Me: Don't apologize to me. Don't you think finding ways of providing Mary positive stimulation might have given her life meaning it obviously didn't have?

Merlin: What in hell do you mean? Her life had plenty of meaning.

Me: Really? Then why did she throw herself into this commune?

[Silence]

Me: Did you provide her with after-school and weekend opportunities?

Pat: We encouraged church activities. When she was younger, Mary was involved.

Me: When she was younger?

Merlin: Before these so-called friends started influencing her.

Me: What did you do to counter that influence?

Pat: We talked with her.

Merlin: Grounded her.

Me: Why did you ground her?

Merlin: To set limits.

Me: What did you ground her for?

Pat: I don't think we ever did. She followed our rules—  
[sniffing] I guess we failed.

Me: Did you provide her with foreign language training?

Merlin: She had that in school.

Me: Standard fare was good enough? You had no idea she was gifted, might get bored? You didn't think of making sacrifices for her?

Merlin: You trying to make us the guilty ones?

Me: Why did you, Merlin, attack Jason when you visited? Isn't he small?

Merlin: Oh, my heart bleeds! I didn't punch him, not that he doesn't deserve to have his little ass beat real good.

Me: You'd enjoy doing that?

Merlin: He needs to wake up. The electric chair would do that.

Me: Do you often try to beat up children?

Merlin: Fuck you! I resent that.

Pat: Merlin!

Me: Mary was there over two years. You visited twice. I'm curious—does that look like caring? Is it a question of a snake mesmerizing her or of you abandoning her?

Pat: We also called her sometimes.

Me: People call distant cousins *sometimes*. Did that strike you as sufficient? Maybe she saw you didn't want her back, what with your neglect.

Merlin: Jesus! We tried two interventions. The other parents thought we did no good and should let the kids come to their senses.

Me: The other parents thought that?

Merlin: Yes.

Me: Peer pressure?

Merlin: You're twisting everything we say.

Me: Did you send her money?

Pat: She knew she could have money—within reason. Just come home.

Merlin: Why should we fund her when she's in a pervert den, a cult?

Me: There are cult debriefing programs.

Merlin: I didn't mean a cult in that way.

Me: Let me ask you to respond to the comments in the Journal that you ruled by guilt.

Merlin: That's what I mean about that Darcy snake.

Me: It was Mary who said it.

Pat: [crying] Oh, I think you're right, detective.

Merlin: That little bitch said that about her mother? I wash my hands of her.

Pat: No, Merlin, don't say that [sobbing]. She's. . . .

Me: Yeah, Merlin, and after all you've done for her.

Merlin: Goddamned right.

Me: You don't care what's happened to her. It's nothing to you. She's no daughter of yours.

Completely uncalled-for, inappropriate. They deserved every bit of it, deserved worse.

Back to the Journal written by these criminal, perverted kids. What a relief!

### **The Great Basement Job**

**I'm Plain, in charge of the basement, where we're spending \$38,000. New floor, walls, lights, and plumbing—built-in bar and little stage. I thought this whole thing would cost \$5000. Well, Miller, live and learn, as papa always said—he didn't. Actually, I am learning. Maybe I'll be a contractor, though you have to know a hell of a lot. Interesting stuff—a million problems. I could start as a carpenter's assistant. [details omitted]**

**L.L.'s grandmother got us a deal on the air-conditioning. I think the "deal" is she's paying half.**

**I hired this "coordinator," who gets \$3500, and all he does is farm out the work. L.L.'s grandmother told me it would save money. Also, it'd turn out like what we wanted, which is the most important thing and which is the right way to use "which," L.L. witch.**

**Our coordinator is a great guy, Peter (don't call me Pete), who has arms as thick as my belly. He told us he was gay. Probably wanted to see how we'd react. No real news from Downtown. He calls about every other day. "I'm on the job, Plain, old honey. Keep on the balls of those big feet." That's about all he ever says. I like him a lot.**

This methodical stuff might have been a tool for the defense. Their prim remodeling of the basement and so forth could argue for

how conventional these kids were. Of course it could also suggest that they didn't hesitate to surround themselves with comforts. But that's not the convoluted sort of logic juries or anybody else generally uses—detectives, for instance. Actually, there's often one person on juries who does make such arguments: it looks A but if you think about it it's B. These smart-alecks are universally despised by their more level-headed peers but sometimes manage to hang juries. It's a common heresy among lawyers, judges, and cops that juries often reach bad decisions. I think juries do err, not in making wrong decisions but in making any at all. Where do they find the blind confidence to pretend to have sorted it all out?

I asked Caitlin Moore why she didn't read out passages like those on remodeling or the passage on ferrets we have coming up in a bit. Wouldn't such fussy devotion to the mundane argue for settled maturity? She said there was a down-side: the jury might be just as aggravated by super-kids as by demons. She was trying to make the jury relax, not trouble them with the unfamiliar. "These are normal kids, acting childishly but not criminally. You can recognize yourself in kids making mistakes. Normal, normal, normal. Give 'em a break!" Pretty smart. Shows why she's a lawyer and I'm a gumshoe.

### **Foreign Language Club**

**Mary here. Not every idea is a great idea. Thanks for coming to the meeting and trying to be interested, but it's obvious most of us would rather have barbed wire shoved up our noses than learn Swedish or something. I agree.**

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **The Great Rooftop Improvement**

**Moo reporting.** For a mere \$9000, our main man Peter can fix up the roof for us, since the floor up there is solid, he says. [That's enough of that—trust me.]

**I don't want to talk about the robbery.** That girl was laughing at us, but I am sorry for what I did. Maybe we should try again? Maybe not.

**Anyhow, Peter's going to put in all this weather-resistant stuff and plants and a penthouse roof and some furniture and a shed to keep it in.** [And we're off and running—]

**The fight with Willy—yeah.** I guess it had been brewing and I guess it turned out to be a farce. Willy, I'll admit, was great at keeping me from doing a damned thing. Didn't think he was so athletic—or cool. I'd love to forget it.

**Mary asked me why I was so mad.** I thought she was referring to Willy, but no—just generally. I told her I didn't know. That's the truth.

### **Seventh Council Meeting**

**Moo doing this.** This idea of me reporting sounds like it came from L.L., but it was Plain. The new Plain, on his way to becoming a Republican who plays golf. "To get some distance on things," he said. "That'll be useful, right, Moo?"

**Wrong!** To tell the truth, I don't know. But you don't know either—though maybe you do. Distance on what? OK, I'll stop with the questions. To tell the truth, I see that I'm supposed to get some distance not on Willy but my anger. OK, rage.

**The Meeting.** We didn't talk about the fight. L.L. said these things happen and shut up, so we did. Fine with me. Willy said fine with him.

**We talked about two things—ferrets and sex.**

**Ferrets—Mary and Plain have been working on making money out of animals. They were on the web, Plain and Mary, doing research.**

**They gave a report, like in school: ran through a list of animals we shouldn't use—they breed slow, they're fragile, the market's flooded, profit margin is low, nobody wants them. Therefore, no tropical birds, tropical fish, Dobermans, hairless Egyptian cats, tarantulas, pythons, alligators, guinea pigs, ladybugs, rabbits, iguanas, turtles, chameleons, fancy frogs, goats, ocelots, bats, Korean pigs, falcons, lambs, chickens, or Brahma bulls.**

**Turns out we should do ferrets. They're delicate and their mating is, says Mary, "uncertain." But they are gentle, intelligent, easy to handle, and clean. Best of all, they aren't plentiful and the market is terrific—"fierce," Plain said.**

**I think Mary and Plain will want to say more, so I am going to let them add a section. They sure as fuck know a lot. I'll just say that it sounds like a lot of work, but I'm willing. Everybody seemed lukewarm, except for Plain and Mary.**

**OK—sex. Turns out we're getting serious about what I thought was a joke. The porn movies. At first, everybody seemed to find it funny, then not so ridiculous, then maybe, then let's do it. Mary's idea is to do first-date movies, not just right-to-the-down-and-dirty, the way most of them are, I guess. (I never saw one.)**

**Mary said we'd have people going on first dates and ending up on couches—making out. (Just the preliminaries would get the audience all hot, I'd guess—I'd know.)**

**The humper-actors will roll around, but we'll only show confusing bits of raw flesh nobody can identify as to exact origin, thanks to the artistry of Willy's magic camera.**

**Holy shit but this is hot. Maybe I shouldn't say that, if it sounds creepy. It is true, though, I don't know, though, about**

the acting. Both Mary and Plain have been in plays, but the truth is we don't know shit. I don't. All the same, if we have to experiment to get it right, who's going to complain? I'm set to enroll in Sex Lab.

It's embarrassing to think about being sort of naked in front of you. Does anybody else feel that way? I don't mind strangers. But you guys! Are we shy around each other? I guess we won't be after the cameras roll for a few days.

I should have reported the reason Mary said we should hide private parts, along with it being hotter, is that then the movies wouldn't be hard core and we'd be in less trouble if we got caught. We wouldn't be selling them at church picnics or at recess at a grade school. But how WOULD we sell them? Anyhow, I think these movies will be better than hard core. Like I've mentioned about seventeen times, being obsessed with the idea.

I should have said that we intend to make a series—every section with the same plot, building up slowly to nothing. We'll have to work on variations. The first step in this project is some scripts. L.L. says we should make them comedies.

### **On Ferrets—by Mary and Plain**

Ferrets are cousins of weasels and skunks—they're not rodents—descended from European polecats. They're somewhere between cats and dogs in the way they act but are smarter than either. They are beautiful and very playful, and they like humans.

They are delicate, so we'll need a vet handy, but they're easy to take care of. We'll keep them in a pen with a solid floor, since they dig. They're clean, use litter boxes.

Here's some facts, a male is a hob, a female a jill, unless they are neutered, in which case the male is a gig and the female a sprite. Babies of both sexes are called kits, the same as foxes, we think. A whole group is called "a busyness of ferrets." The

largest sellers are in Mississippi, Blanthorne Ferret Breeders, but they sell ferrets to labs to be tortured in experiments. Blanthorne Farms are rotten bastards.

About breeding. The animals go into heat at different times, so you need to have several males on hand. It's different from other animals where one or two males will do for a whole lot of females. Their mating is violent and can take from ten minutes to ten hours, usually about an hour. (Ten hours is way too much of a good thing, Mary says.) When they're done, they need to be separated, fold up from exhaustion.

Once a female goes into heat, if she is not impregnated, she dies. Women have it tough all over, but I think it doesn't get much worse than that. It's like dying of terminal horniness, which is a disease that will strike all of us, unless we move fast (Mary wrote that to make you think it was me, which it isn't.)

They breed in spring and summer. The kits are born in forty-two days, and females can have two litters a year. There are between two and seventeen kits in a litter. Kits are weaned in six-eight weeks and are best sold at eleven-twelve weeks.

They sell for about \$100-\$120 a ferret, and that's what a lot of people pay for dogs or cats, dogs anyhow, and probably parrots and tropical stuff and those pigs.

We figure we should buy six or so hobs and as many jills. We could get, say, \$5800 in a year from an investment of about \$2800 (including cages, shots, food).

The ferrets seem to have been a success. They looked healthy to me, sleek and clean. I guess they'd sold eight or so and might have gone on to develop a flourishing business, there being, so far as I know, zero competition in that section of the market. I snatched two myself in the official looting we always do with the accused. I was playing with them while they were with us at the station and got hooked: they seemed so clever. They might nip at you but they won't tear off your face. I told L.L. I would pay her the hundred bucks they were charging for each. She said I could have them and

get them good homes. Later she offered to trade me “a collectors set” of the porn videos, for a sturdy spoon she could use to dig her way out of the slammer. She was fun, that L.L., in an unlikeable sort of way.

And now I have my ferrets, pretentiously and unfairly named Goneril and Edmund.

### **Seventh Journal Entry**

**L.L. here. God, Moo, don't you think you're being a little stand-offish. I think we should all encourage Moo to open up, be a bit more touchy-feely. We're all friends here, Moo; no need to be shy. Talk more about kissing and stroking, what it feels like to wet nuzzle. After all, it's a natural human need, if creepy, nothing to be ashamed of, probably. Drooling on Mary's blouse and whimpering on her shoulder the way you do, all panting and snorting: we've all done it—and if we haven't, we're tolerant sorts.**

**Just jerking on you, Moo. You're a prize and we're proud to be your partners in crime—which explains why you're always being kissed. And I want to know why Mary's kissing everybody but me. Huh? What is it, Mary? Lesbian panic? (And if anybody takes me seriously I'll, I'll, I'll.....)**

**Things are going OK. Nice being out of school. I'm interested how we'll get along with more time together, see if we settle into ditches or can stay shifty and exposed. In forty-seven weeks (a wild guess, but close, right?) we've changed some, I think. To say we are changing sounds a lot like the sort of thing you say when you are deluding yourself, as old Mrs. Cunningham says—“And if you think you can pass this course without studying, then you are delusional and will find yourself awakened with a SNAP!”—but I'll say it: many changes. Mostly for the worse. That's good.**

**But all this confidence is based on pretty thin sticks, don't you think? How many schemes do we have brewing? Not even**

counting the fascinating financial stuff and the one-hundred-thirty-seven remodeling initiatives, we have the dealings with Downtown, the ferrets and now the creation of a porn industry. And I'm not the girlie to apply the brakes. It's a step up from gang fights or playing Bonnies and Clydes at fast foods.

Mary. Hey, Moo (and everybody else), I'm always ready for cuddling. I just don't want to embarrass anybody.

Good job of covering up, L.L. You must have guessed that L.L. and I sneak off very chance we get to have these I-won't-ever-tell, oh-what-the-hell sessions. Upstairs, downstairs, inside the hedge, in the park, behind the gym. I'm not revealing any secrets. Who is surprised that two hot babes would be sneaking in a little grab and grovel? That's what sexually blessed people do. I am sexually blessed. L.L.—sure. And we are both non-binary. And so are you all, so just follow our example: shoot from both ends of the court. You don't imagine you can do it, but you can! (I love making up those metaphors: she pitches *and* catches; she hides *and* seeks; she is the early bird *and* the worm; she blocks her own shots; she is the two it takes to tango; she enters *and* exits.) Plain said most of these make no sense. That's because you got a literal mind, Plain, and are a prude besides. (I wish I hadn't added that last sentence, since it's mean.)

OK—I have this idea about the porn films, incorporating Moo's flash of genius. Let's make it one long story, a love story and not just cheap lust, nosiree—building very slowly toward the sex and nudity that never arrive, just as Moo says. We start with these teases, where the characters touch so shyly, and then start doing a *little* more each time, building up slow—slow—slow, sometimes taking a step back: a hand down a blouse or inside some elastic in one episode, hesitation in the next, hovering. I think most people have an underwear fetish. I know I do. Anyhow, then we finally get glimpses—seen, as Moo says, in ambiguous slices. People will find the build-up more exciting

than the actual thing, especially with arty camera work and such beautiful real kids, way under twenty, not the usual oldsters in these films: hairy guys in black socks. With us, it may be felonious but not pathetic. It makes me sort of excited just thinking about it.

Plain's turn. L.L. says I have changed—thanks—changed from being charming but erratic and immature to being charming and dependable. Boring, too, but never mind. This is interesting—to me. I do feel different about myself and more relaxed. That's never happened before. I'm more fascinated by what L.L. says about changing being the most important and also the most improbable thing in human life.

I'm up for the movies, so to speak!!! (Some things don't change—like being an immature jackass with the sense of humor of a fifth grader.) Anything you want done, I'll do it—I'll try. I'm prudish, but that's changing. Hard to believe, but it is. You want to pull in Ollie for a scene with me, I'm as prepared as a Boy Scout. (I know that sounds bad.)

We did a terrific job, me and Mary, getting the ferret information. Only it wasn't really from Google, Moo, but mostly the library. You know, a *library*?

Willy here. Nobody's mentioned me being a turd, and I appreciate it. I feel a lot better. I did go to a doctor, who gave me some stuff for depression. He said it was a chemical imbalance. I didn't tell you, but I was worried as hell that it was coming here that had made me depressed. It made no sense to me, but I'm not an idiot, and I saw that (a) I came here and (b) I was depressed. It wasn't just emotional either but sometimes physical, no energy and a feeling like there was something quivering inside me. The doc says just fixable chems. I've only been taking the stuff a week, and it takes thirty days to start to hit, he says, but I am so relieved.

That make sense to you? It's just that this group life experience is the best thing that's ever happened to me, so

much the best thing that it's almost like the only thing in my life I would count as having meaning. I so often think I don't belong here, and that you're all better quality people than me. Sounds like I'm begging for reassurance, but no. It's also true that you made me feel like I belong. I've never felt anything close to this good.

You see why the depression might be rattling. It was almost as if I had no chance. That sounds melodramatic. I'm just trying to explain. I'm being less self-absorbed now, reaching outward. That's because of all of you and the way you've treated me, makes me see that I've never really had friends before and that nobody has friends like you.

I want to thank all of you for being so good to me. Moo especially. I know Moo doesn't like me, but his dislike has been out front. He treated me honestly, often kindly, far better than he is aware. Moo didn't change because I was depressed. I'm sure he saw it but he didn't change, even took pokes at me when he'd had all he could take. He wasn't about to start boo-hooing or treating me as a victim. See what I mean? Moo has been the one more than anybody to let me see what I needed to do and keep me from sinking.

I wish Moo liked me better, but that'll come. Or it won't. Meanwhile, I'll take him treating me like a responsible being and be grateful. Way more than grateful, though I don't want Moo to get embarrassed about what I feel—Moo or anybody else.

I've been talking to people about cameras and movie-making. We'll need to spend some dough, you guys realize that? We not only need a good camera, but sound equipment and lights. I think we can do it very well, though, produce a high-quality product. I'm good at things like this—technical stuff, not nude sex acting.

The tricky thing is distribution and sales. How do we do that while avoiding the clutches of the law? My guess is we go

through another country. It's not a mystery you can solve by asking a librarian, your local police, or a chat room. Would Downtown know?

Moo. Well, fuck! Damn it, Willy. I'm speechless. I feel like pure shit that you say I don't like you. Fuck, man. Who am I not to like you? It's not that. Sometimes I get pissed off. But not really at you—I have anger control problems. Maybe I could be a little more embarrassed here. Even if I am, I got to say that I have always respected you, Willy, and that's true. I am not a "better quality" person than you. I think it's real gutsy of you to say that. I think that about all the rest of you, though I'd never had the guts to say it. I think you and Mary and Plain and L.L. are people who would never be friends with someone like me, if I weren't living here and you had to. Only, that's not how I feel recently. What a change! And L.L. even likes me, too, and you would, Willy, if I gave you a chance.

I do like you, Willy. The wonder of it is if you would like me.

I might as well continue to be embarrassed. On the sex films we're going to make: I've never even made out. You all talk as if you knew everything about it but I've never done anything and don't know anything. I can't think of what else to say about that.

### **The Great Vandalism**

About time we had a success! Let me also say, Moo, that you and Willy have a lot of guts—way more than me. All that about thinking you didn't deserve friends and maybe you don't have any, and if anybody truly knew you they'd hate you. I know about that. You guys talking that way made me think maybe everybody feels that way. (I'd never admitted this before, even to myself.) This is Plain, as you knew.

Easy as pie, we lifted stuff from my parents. We used Willy's parents' truck, a double larceny. The truck is a pick-up

he “borrowed” at midnight and returned in the wee hours. Even pumped gas in to the level where it was before. They might notice the mileage but probably not, as Willy says his parents are too slipshod (great word, Willy!) to notice.

Anyhow, two days ago, Ollie, our mentor in all things criminal, called. I was there—he won’t talk to a machine: “Plain, honey, the wind is from the West.” “What?” “The road crews have picked up their tools and left.” “This you, Downtown?” “Shhh. Yeah honey. You reading me?” “OK, Downtown. I read you.” “Nuff said.” I can’t believe I again said, “I read you.” It’s like the robbery and saying we were going to “drill” those kids. You get in situations and end up sounding like a bad movie.

Sorry to get off the track, which is how my mind goes. I’m pretty excited writing about relieving Mumsy and Dadums of their excess. It wasn’t so much a robbery as a mercy mission—revenge, though I can’t explain what I mean by that. We got all the stuff we wanted and more. We wore masks (“gender-adjusted,” L.L. said they were) and we went in our socks, which we ditched in a dumpster, thought better of it, retrieved, and burned. My parents have a burglar system, but it doesn’t take a genius to turn it off, and we went in through a window. There’s always windows left unlatched, and my mom is always yelling at my dad about it. So now he’ll get it good.

I knew where pretty much everything was. We took books and some paintings they inherited and said were valuable—we’ll see—and some jewelry my mom leaves in the bureau, along with the silverware box. The paintings were the hardest—I dropped one—but the parents didn’t awaken. We took some stuff just for the hell of it—fancy electronic kitchen gadgets and some pottery. We thought about taking the monster tv but it seemed too much of a challenge—and where would we put it? A couple of printers, scanners, and shredders. A lot of personal family photos, just to fuck them over. You’re

wondering how we could do all this, stumbling around and dropping things (not to mention L.L. sneezing like some rhino with the flu) and not wake them up. Two reasons. One: my parents take pills by the handfuls to sleep—they say they’re all “natural products,” as if cocaine and opium were not. On top of that, they play these sound machines real loud, rain sloshing and running brooks that sound like flushing toilets. Truth is, they have insurance and bottomless wells of money anyway, and probably aren’t attached to this crap. Except the photos. I’ll give them that. I know you all see how much I have to strain to say so often what assholes my parents are—but that’s for another time. What we took was worth a lot of dough, has that high-shine, who’d-ever-need-this look that my parents go for. Odd that useless shit that isn’t even beautiful is worth more than what counts, a bed or a furnace.

L.L. asked me if I felt a little bad about this. After I went on a little about how I did *not* feel bad, she said, “Yeah, Plain, but tell me why you feel so bad about this.” If I let myself think about it much, I’d want to cry. So I won’t think. I wouldn’t feel bad because of the stuff. But there’s something about my attitude that isn’t honest. I don’t want to know why I didn’t mind taking stuff. It sounds like I want my parents to love me and am calling out for attention. I honestly know that’s not it. I don’t want my parents to be any different. But what were they thinking getting all that stuff? And what else they might have done with the dough—all the misery and sadness everywhere. But I know it’s not them I’d feel so awful about if I let myself.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### The Great Police Station Raid

Reporting again, which is L.L., which seems as if I do every other time, which is not fucking true but sure fucking feels like it, if you know what I mean, which you don't. I don't mean to be insulting, but you came in way under the low limit at the brain weigh in. The first sentence honors Plain, who ignited this most stupendous of our adventures. This one could find place of pride in one of those men's magazines about guys who fight off grizzlies and survive for six months in the wilderness by eating their own appendages. But it fits even better as a true-crime story, the sort once very popular in America, as I know from a highly praised report (I'd give you the grade but modesty forbids—A+) for *Modern American Popular Culture* (Mr. Jermaine, teacher, fresh Ph.D. and unable to get a university job, a disappointment he don't hide), which introduced me to the colorful prose now disappearing from our literary scene, here vividly reproduced. That is to say, buckle your seat belts for some genuine imitation Raymond Chandler.

It all started with a call. The jangling broke rudely into the calm of our evening like angry parrots set loose in a funeral home. It was Plain, in jail and not liking it. Here we go again, another breakout. The last six breakouts I engineered involved broads, springing canaries from aviaries. But this was Plain, who may be a broad, maybe not. I don't ask questions. You keep breathing a bit longer that way.

I work alone, but this time, just to vary the menu, I added two lunch-sized minute steaks and a creampuff: Willy, Moo, and Mary. Our idea, designed like Beethoven's 10th, was to create a diversion, a freak-packed sideshow that'd attract the rubbernecks and let us spring the sardines from the can. Mary's part called for her to flop a faint right in the front

office; Moo was going to froth and foam; Willy was to scream that he'd been relieved of his wallet. Bit part for me: I'd nab the key with my pinkie and spring the lid for Plain.

Great plan.

Defective execution.

Turns out the lobby of the pig trough was busier than Walmart during a girdle sale, so when Mary did her swan dive onto the floor, she had to look about for a vacant spot, like a sky-diver picking through the pines. By the time she located empty real estate, Moo had already begun all-too-discreetly foaming, while standing there stiff as an elm trees with its sap dribbling out, and as quiet as a nun changing her bra in public. He might as well have been a red-neck in a soiled NRA tee-shirt at a trailer park for all the difference he made in the scenery. True, he did, as directed, started choking on the shaving cream, like a flounder coughing up a soda can; but he was as discreet as a priest playing with himself while dishing out the wafers, so nobody paid attention. Mary, meanwhile, had found a resting place on the linoleum, but was so far off-center stage that people noticed her about as much as they do the way freckles glow in the dark. It'd be easier to find a canary at a cat convention. Then Willy came in and started yelling like a gouty guy who'd shoved his foot under a steam-roller. For once, something worked. Well, "worked" might not be the right word. It might be about as wrong a word as "Whassup!" at a funeral. Willy's one-man rock concert made people clam up and gawk at our boy, who was loud but about as decipherable as a pig trying to sing while swallowing a pineapple. He made people back away from him like he was on fire and spouting lava, but that wasn't altogether good luck, as one of the fatty backers trod on Mary's thigh and then proceeded to bounce, as if Mary were a heavy-duty trampoline. As might be expected, Mary yelled like a fellow who'd just discovered his ass was missing and she stood up, Mary did, forgetting her faint. Willy

proceeded to do some forgetting of his own, about being mugged, and did a dash over to play Red Cross on Mary. All this time, Moo was holding onto his impression of a stuffed bear in the Natural History Museum.

Turns out, seeing how the land had been plowed with teaspoons, I got Plain out by the shortest route. I forked over the fine, like it was a rat I'd located in my spaghetti. The only downside is that Plain isn't allowed anywhere near the Walmart for a year. Whatever will we do for pool toys and fabric softener?

Here's a place for a closer look at L.L., the sort of self-contained woman who would say, "What ya lookin at, asshole?" A girl in the fourth grade once said to me, with a sneer that'd wither a flourishing plant, "Whay-un yah git yahr eyes full, fill yahr pockets." Nipped my embryonic self-confidence right in the bud. I've been primed for humiliation ever since.

The court psychologists had a terrific time with L.L., enjoying the opportunity to take command of an elusive personality. Darcy posed the sort of challenge a suddenly-sprung-on-you dinner party for thirty presents to a country-club social-chairfellow. Our old psychologist friends advanced on L.L. with their full professional arsenal of conclusions. Both came up with official "disorders" in their slam-bang diagnoses, but I have no right to ridicule their failures in the case of L.L., equipped as I am with no story at all. Here's the first expert:

*Darcy Simmons suffers from Borderline Personality Disorder. This neurosis, diagnosed most frequently in young women, has an APS Index of "Dangerous" and can be ascertained with some confidence by means of the Clairborne-Regis Test. Miss Simmons scored a 12 (on the 0-30 scale). While it is true that the "strong indicator" level usually begins at 18, the severity of the subject's symptoms and the likelihood that she lied on parts of the test justify affirming the likelihood of this diagnosis.*

*The disorder is commonly found in older females, ages 21-35, but Miss Simmons is precocious in many areas. Indeed, her precocity is one of the most certain indicators of this diagnosis, in that it correlates with “an inability to adjust well to peers” and “an inability (often masking as a refusal) to accept age-appropriate views and expressions.”*

*Miss Simmons’ apparent self-confidence is a shield she erects to ward off intimacy. It is a desperate cry for help, but when help comes, in the form of peer group friends or adult counselors, she reacts with panic, using sarcasm and the kind of affectless indifference others sometimes mistake for aplomb. Darcy is not “cool,” but rather cold. She is unable to feel, and expends enormous psychic energy protecting herself from feelings.*

*She is sexually immature, embarrassed to discuss her erotic feelings with me. It is likely she represses any sexual responses; they would appear to her a terrifying threat.*

*Though other test scores—Parsons, Kansas State CRN, and McDormitt-Doyle—were in the normal range, it would be a mistake to give them determinate weight. The canny paranoia associated with BPD allows her to impersonate normalcy convincingly.*

*Also consistent with BPD is her ability to attract others with disorders similar to hers, and an inability to function normally in social situations. Her bravado is a screen for an underlying timidity which, in this case, seeks out a world of eternal infancy, a protected shelter (the commune) and attempts to hide this timidity from consciousness by moving out from her safe place sporadically, in random acts of desperate self assertion.*

*Notwithstanding the rationalizations for their behavior offered by her parents, their failure to involve themselves in her activities, and unwillingness to provide structure, forced her to devise for herself as best she could some explanation for her home life. It is hardly surprising that their neglect would signify to the child a failure on her part, i.e., “I cannot win their love. I am unloveable.”*

*Her attempt to assure herself of her independence takes paradoxical forms, necessitating a return to those strategies which, designed to alleviate pain, exacerbate it.*

*There is a correlation between the profile developed here and the activities consistent with the criminal charges brought against her. Turning to find safety, she could quite possibly treat young children in an aggressive sexual way in order to replay her neurotic drama, allowing her both to confirm and to deny her unlovability. While assaults on young children are not a certainty, there are no strong counter-indications.*

The second wizard was just as certain that L.L. exhibited the “Inhibited Self-Critical Style Prototype.” The “Items” to prove this, according to the “Sheldon-Western Assessment Procedure—200 for Adolescents,” were proudly displayed:

- Tends to be shy in social situations*
- Tends to be conscientious and responsible*
- Expects self to be perfect (e.g., in appearance, achievements, performance, etc.)*
- Is empathic, responsive to other people’s feelings*
- Has difficulty acknowledging or expressing anger*
- Tends to feel responsible, for bad things that happen*
- Is articulate*
- Is troubled by recurrent obsessional thoughts*
- Tends to feel like an outcast*

The social worker, waging her merry war with the psychologists, saw things differently. I said before that the social worker seemed to me more acute or at least more persuasive. I need to fight my tendency to prefer common sense to the officious analyses of academics. While it is true that the pros see it as their duty to make things complicated, things often *are* complicated. Court psychologists habitually turn things inside out: she looks and sounds sweet but is pathologically angry; he looks confident but inside is a scared, quivering little boy.

Social workers, in my experience, hate that. It's not that they have small minds or can't handle layered meaning. I think they regard such convoluted analyses as automatic and unproductive. Rushed and overworked as they are, social workers don't have time for these excesses. If things are convoluted, social workers might fuck them up. But psychologists and their elaborate inside out games are probably far less often right (my view, of course), and they seem to proceed with techniques that are self-confirming. When things are as they seem, psychology blowhards are more than a nuisance: they carry the authority of their stuffy confidence into real influence, confidently liberating the guilty and jailing the innocent.

Of course my admired social worker was so nettled personally by the psychologists that she may simply have been rebounding. In any case, her she is:

*Darcy Simmons is a reserved but very intelligent young woman. True, she is not always forthcoming in her answers, tending to be mistrustful and sarcastic. But such a posture is not unusual with gifted young teens, nor is it difficult to understand, especially in these circumstances. She is wary of questions, feeling that questions are never innocent, and that the nature of the charges against her carry with them a presumption of guilt. Despite her reserve, she manifests an unmistakable maturity and strength of character. She did issue a string of negative statements directed against her parents in the Journal, but these have about them a ritual quality typical of teenage utterances. In fact, Darcy has a strong relationship with her parents, and they share an unacknowledged sense of trust. Down deep, she respects their parenting style, which seems to have influenced many of her current beliefs. Most certainly, she does not experience her parents' expressions of trust and their granting of freedom as "neglect."*

*Despite her age, Darcy is a leader, mostly because she is unostentatiously considerate of others. While decisive, she is able*

*to recognize the intricacy of situations and has often acted as a brake to the rasher impulses of her housemates.*

*My conclusion is that Darcy Simmons is a well-adjusted and strong young woman, gifted with unusual intelligence which she feels no need to flaunt. She entered into this experiment not because she was desperate but because she had the self-assurance to follow her curiosity. There are no signs of serious problems, much less "criminal maladjustment."*

I suppose that somewhere in all this are clues to L.L., though whether any of it relates to the crime she is accused of seems doubtful. But then, with L.L., my itch to know her has little to do with the crime, if there is one, and my professional duties, if I have any contact with them.

I was surprised to see that L.L. had a good many non-commune friends, all eager to testify on her behalf. Moore was faced with an embarrassment of riches, since she couldn't have ten character witnesses for L.L. and one (and that one hardly a sparkler) for Moo. I did talk to a couple of L.L.'s friends, though, and they revealed a side of her that compounded my already extravagant confusion. Here is one of the many Jennifers, the one Moore put on the stand:

Moore: Would you call Darcy a friend?

Jennifer: Yes, I would.

Moore: Were you close?

Jennifer: I only saw L.L. at school, but she was nice to me. All the time. And really fun.

Moore: Anything else?

Jennifer: Thank you. That was a lame answer. Lots of people are nice and fun. L.L. you can depend on. She doesn't care if she's popular, so she never turns on anybody.

Moore: So you. . . .

Jennifer: Excuse me. I apologize, but I think it's kind of important that L.L. didn't care if somebody was poor or fat or had, you know, peculiar interests. She would look you in the eye and listen to you, real encouraging, never phony. Also, she never lied.

I don't think. That's so rare. I mean she wouldn't even lie to you, for instance, if you said, "What do you think of my sweater?" and she didn't think you looked too great in it. She'd be nice and all, but she wouldn't lie. That's a bad example. You wouldn't talk to L.L. about clothes so much as how you were thinking, problems you had. She'd always help and she'd be real smart. Sorry.

Moore: That's perfectly OK. Did L.L. have any enemies?

Jennifer: No.

Moore: Can you be sure?

Jennifer: I think so, yes, ma'am.

Moore: Despite telling the truth?

Jennifer: She never hurt anybody's feelings. She was on another level, pulled us all up.

Moore: How about teachers? Did they like her?

Jennifer: Oh, that. No. Not that they were enemies. Well, maybe. L.L. is very smart and she would argue with them, make them mad.

Moore: Why do you think she did that? Do you have some idea?

Jennifer: Yes, I have an idea. I asked her—a lot of us did—why she would push buttons. She told us she wanted to keep free of them. That's what she said.

Moore: Teachers?

Jennifer: Not all teachers. Adults, really, the ones she thought would take you over, get you to think like they did.

Moore: Did you agree with her?

Jennifer: Yes, I did—do. Adults get you in their web and you can't get out. No offense.

And, as you guessed, Timmons glommed onto that.

Timmons: Jennifer, you say you agreed with Darcy about adults, right?

Jennifer: I know it sounds rude, sir, but yes, I did. Adults as a group, but mostly individual, too.

Timmons: Me, for instance?

Jennifer: I don't know. Probably yes, not to be rude. You know, you're what L.L. would call a hired gun. You have to say and think what everybody else does.

Timmons: Do I, now?

Jennifer: I think so. I don't really know what you're like privately and all.

Timmons: But you think—no, you are sure—I am a stooge. L.L. taught you that.

Jennifer: Not taught. I said I agreed. I thought about it, looked around. L.L. put it clearly, you know. She's smart. But I agreed.

Timmons: Would you say she helped give form to your idea?

Jennifer: Yes, something like that. She helped give form to ideas I was thinking.

Timmons: Provided the words.

Jennifer: Yeah.

Timmons: With the other girls, too, the ones who agreed?

Jennifer: We talked about it quite a bit.

Timmons: So Darcy indoctrinated all of you in this— that you should hate adults.

Jennifer: No!

[Caitlin objected and was sustained, but, as they say in those remarkably authentic courtroom movies, the damage was done.]

I spoke to Jennifer's friends and discovered little more. L.L.'s friendship did seem profound, allaying others' insecurities, giving them confidence. They glowed when they spoke of her, but it didn't seem like blind worship. She did impart to them something like strength.

Still, I don't doubt that this general notion and some of the language was imparted to them along with the ability to resist mainline pressures. I do believe Jennifer: it was inside them all along, inchoate. As the girls saw it, their power depended on detaching themselves from adult renditions of how things are. As they caught some self-assurance, the idea developed alongside. But

even if L.L. wasn't Minister of Propaganda, she sure as hell was Strength Coach.

One other thing: L.L. was doing volunteer work, among other things honest-to-God tutoring undersized illiterates. This side of all five of the kids is puzzling. Criminal outlaws doing good. Silently, too—not like they were making tactical use of it.

L.L. is most puzzling of all. Read the Journal and she seems to be a chameleon Svengali, shifting roles according to circumstances, goading the others, shaping them. That's certainly not the characterization her many friends offered; and I guess it shouldn't be mine. She influenced potently, but maybe only because she was saying what all these friends already thought, wanting to grab for the formulation as soon as they were able to catch hold. She gave voice to both hope and anger, making them coalesce. Is that it?

I think that in the trial L.L. took care to appear un-Svengali-like without being cowed, often avoiding polite. She did what is easier said than done: acted natural. If L.L. managed to irritate the jury, it was probably because she was smart.

Moore: I see you skipped two grades and are youngest by far in your class. Is that right?

L.L.: It may be. I don't really know.

Moore: Has being so young caused you any trouble?

L.L.: No. I like my classmates.

Moore: I mean, do you sometimes feel out of place?

L.L.: No.

Moore: Why did you enter the group?

L.L. It seemed like an experiment I couldn't miss, a chance to be active in determining the shape of our lives. It offered a way to avoid being caught up in fitting our beings to pre-existing patterns. Being part of the group was a risk worth taking, the risk being part of the allure. Risk was our vehicle, the key we wanted to use to unlock an open life.

Moore: Were you the organizer of this venture?

L.L.: There was none. It arose spontaneously in conversations we had. We joined together as a way of making clearer what we had all been worrying in our minds.

Moore: Which was?

L.L.: Being active in shaping our lives.

Moore: Did you find part of the attraction of all this to be its originality?

L.L.: Not exactly. After all, there are plenty of precedents for us. It's a very American idea. We knew about it from writers like Thoreau, who said he wanted to live an examined life, to live deliberately, and not, when dying, come to realize that he had not lived at all.

Moore: So it was a patriotic venture?

L.L.: Sure.

Moore: Were you forced out by your parents?

L.L.: No. None of us was.

Moore: Were you running away from them?

L.L.: No, our parents are fine. They had nothing to do with our decision.

Moore: That's very hard for most of us to accept. Can you ...?

L.L.: I know. Most everyone thinks of kids and parents as a sequential unit. Let's just say we don't. We moved in together because we wanted to. Simple as that—and a positive thing. Our parents don't hold the key to this; they are irrelevant to what we did and why.

Moore: Would you say that, as things developed, you were the leader?

L.L.: No. I won't say we were leaderless, but the leader part shifted according to who had ideas and could forge agreement. In terms of what we actually did, I'd say I instigated few ideas or actions. My friends carried me.

Moore: Your witness.

Timmons may have sensed that he wasn't going to get a lot from her. He didn't admit that, but he did say the cold manner of

this girl and her strange way of talking (never bumbling) might do his job for him—despite her beauty, evident sincerity, and extreme youth. So he passed some time with her, hoping the exposure would serve his ends, irrespective of what she said.

Timmons: The others carried you?

L.L.: In terms of originating ideas, yes.

Timmons: So the assaults, burglaries, vandalism—not your idea? You’re blaming the others, throwing them under the bus?

L.L.: They were group projects. We all freely agreed. Not a question of blame.

Timmons: You proud of all that crime?

L.L.: It happened.

Timmons: Like the weather, I guess. Like the activities with Brandon and Missy.

L.L.: Yes, we all spent time with Brandon and Missy.

Timmons: Doing what?

L.L. Going to movies, to the park, story-telling, drawing and painting, projects, studying.

Timmons: Were you a model for them, a kind of parent?

L.L.: I certainly hope not.

Timmons: So do we all.

[objection—sustained]

Timmons: While you were baking cookies and playing hide and seek, did you engage the children in conversation?

L.L.: Of course we talked.

Timmons: About what?

L.L.: A number of things.

Timmons: Sex?

L.L.: No. I suppose from one point of view, with kids this age, everything is about sex.

Timmons: What point of view would that be?

L.L.: Common sense. But I meant Freudian, psychoanalytic.

Timmons: So you *did* talk about sex?

L.L.: No.

Timmons: Sorry, but could you clarify? You just said you did.

L.L.: Sex never came up—and certainly none of us raised the issue. But Missy would ask about cute boy bands, that kind of sisterly talk. Brandon talked about things like video games and sports. Both were interested in science, in ideas, in art, in exploring issues.

Timmons: Did you wrestle with them?

L.L.: Yes.

Timmons: Hug them?

L.L.: Yes. Kissed them, too. How do you like that?

Timmons: Not much.

L.L.: You would live with normal kids and never show affection?

Timmons: Since you ask, I think I might live with hurt and vulnerable little kids and manage somehow not to sexually assault them, yes.

[Objection! Sustained with a warning.]

Timmons: Did you talk to the little ones about the kiddie porn studio in the basement—I mean, when you weren't engaged in necessary hugging and kissing sessions?

L.L.: No.

Timmons: Why not?

L.L.: We didn't want to involve them in what they might not cotton to. Had they asked and wanted in on it, that'd been different.

Timmons: That's fascinating. How about the law, criminal statutes? How about their ages? Wasn't that a factor?

L.L.: In what way?

Timmons: Well, you go on about kids' freedom to choose. Did you libertarians happen to notice that they were minors, innocent and certainly unable to make choices like these?

L.L.: I think kids can choose—a whole lot better than those presuming to choose for them. Also, you're confused about libertarian politics.

Timmons: Ah, well maybe someday you can educate me. How did you yourself feel about the porn films?

L.L.: Our biggest challenge. We knew nothing about how to do it. As minors ourselves, we did talk about whether we were actually breaking any laws, but that was an academic question. We figured our movies weren't likely to win Oscars, but they were the most risky thing we tried.

Timmons: Were you the leader here, the brains behind the sleaze?

L.L.: It was a group project.

Timmons: Whose idea was it?

L.L.: I can't remember. That notion of origins doesn't apply to us.

Timmons: What? Never mind. Take a minute and try to recall whose idea it was.

L.L.: [silent for some time]: Nope. No good.

Timmons: Did you have sex with Brandon and/or Missy?

L.L.: Of course not. None of us did. God, man, we didn't have sex with one another.

Timmons: Maybe because of all the respect you had for the rights of little kids to choose? Or because, as you say, it just happened? Maybe to get back at your parents? I can think of a million reasons.

L.L.: And doubtless good reasons—for you. But not for us, since we didn't do it.

Timmons: Please answer my question, using your vaunted superior intelligence and risk-taking openness: it's not unthinkable, sex with these kids, right?

L.L.: I see what you're saying, though I already told you the many reasons why that could not have happened. But by your lights, you can see little reason why it would not. Do you run into a lot of this: teen groups forming an alliance to molest kids barely younger? I don't have your expertise in human misery and cruelty.

Timmons: I'll ask the questions.

L.L.: You lift that line from a movie?

[Here Timmons asked permission to treat L.L. as a hostile witness. The judge denied but told L.L. to confine herself to answering questions. L.L. stared at him, said nothing. The judge, pissed—"Do you understand?" L.L., all Shirley Temple perky,—“Oh yes, sir.”]

Timmons: So, your contention is that your experiments included filming one another in sexual situations, but that for some reason, you stopped just short of actually doing it among yourselves, at least when the cameras weren't rolling?

L.L.: You're implying we had sex off camera, which isn't true: we were celibate in all dimensions and media. No sex period. We hugged and kissed, that's all.

Timmons: Nothing but that?

L.L.: No, depressingly conventional and normal, probably even innocent, right?

Timmons: Normal and innocent? Hardly.

L.L.: Thank you.

Timmons may have gotten what he wanted. L.L. won the duel, but at what cost? On the other hand, L.L.'s little-girlness is very apparent when she's cleaned up, and she is both extremely pretty and small. On the stand she looked as young as she is, just a tiny kid. The jury may not have liked seeing her getting clouted, even if she were a smartass.

I was determined not to fight with L.L. myself, but I must admit that my attempts to find any footing other than adversarial were mostly flops.

Me: Tell me, L.L., how did you get that nickname?

L.L.: No, I don't think I will.

Me: That's fine. I was just curious. You seem to incite everyone's curiosity, you know?

L.L.: Yes.

Me: Why do you think that is?

L.L.: A kind of erotic nosiness, I guess. I haven't given it much thought.

Me: Why do you suppose your life with your friends took a sexual turn—the movies and the molesting charges?

L.L.: I don't think it did take a sexual turn. I think most adults get off on imagining teens in a perpetual rutting season, so they project their desires onto us and run the resulting images in their heads. The whole thing is an *adult* fixation, a way of imprisoning teens in what adults tell themselves teens are.

Me: Well—

L.L.: *And*—the movies and the monstrous lies we're charged with are not related. I think you know the movie making says nothing at all about pedophile activity.

Me: Why should I believe that?

L.L.: Because of the evidence. JoAnne's charges are hoked up, inconsistent. Her baseline story fits the way you think so well you don't notice what a poor version she's telling: you fill in the gaps without knowing you're doing it. The notion of kids screwing kids is so irresistible it doesn't matter if it's absurd. Poor Brandon and Missy have been coerced by sex therapists trying desperately to get them to "disclose." I haven't seen the kids' statements, but I know *they* know they weren't molested. What were they pummeled into saying I don't know.

Me: Well, it's the case against you, but you're very close to being 100% accurate. Brandon has consistently denied being molested, and Missy has gone back and forth, depending on how the question was put or how much pressure she felt. I don't disagree with you. I even agree with what you say about the voyeuristic projections. I think you're right in saying that the little ones have been coerced.

L.L.: Poor little kids. Why are you telling me this?

Me: Because it accords entirely with my own experience, what you say about adults projecting onto kids a whole host of needs and fears and then imagining that's what kids are.

L.L.: I'll be damned. Why would you say this to a suspect you gotta imagine is guilty?

Me: Because I respect you and dislike you and feel terrible about both.

L.L.: OK, so why is there a case?

Me: Because our experts say (a) Brandon is in denial; (b) Missy's refusal to disclose is consistent with being molested—one yes cancels thirty no's; (c) the testimony of Ms. LaVelle; (d) your communal crimes which predispose you to regarding law-breaking lightly; (e) the pornography tapes and scripts.

L.L.: Overwhelming, isn't it? What horrid details was Missy battered into reporting? You guys ever think what you're doing to little kids, inducing them to imagine these things happened, bad things, bad bodies, bad touch? You even care?

Me: I do. I love Missy and I agree with you.

L.L.: I know you didn't do that to her—what I just said.

Me: No, but—

L.L.: You think we're guilty. You got to or how could you let them do that to Missy?

Me: I thought the evidence against you gave me little choice but to turn it over to—oh, hell, I don't mean to duck my responsibility. Little Missy is so—.

L.L.: What exactly did they do to Missy? Brandon, too? You know he's hardly older than she, composed and old-mannish as he sometimes seems.

Me: Brandon has steadily denied anything in the least improper. They say he is in denial.

L.L.: Yeah. But what are the techniques? With Missy?

Me: The therapist had her talking to puppets. The transcripts are with Caitlin now.

L.L.: Puppets?

Me: Yeah. The puppet figures urged her to reveal molestation: "Mr. Peanut wants to know about the bad things they did to you. Point to Mr. Peanut to show where they did bad things." Almost always she'd refuse or point to a foot or hand; they ignored that.

L.L.: I've heard of that technique. Did some of the puppets have penises?

Me: Yes, they did. Others had Velcro clothes for demonstration purposes.

L.L.: I thought these methods had been discredited as coercive, forcing kids into saying what the therapist idiots were sure they *should* say.

Me: I'm with you. Missy did say she was touched in a bad place. Who knows how often she insisted she wasn't touched at all or even how well she comprehended what they were trying to get her to say? But she did say it.

L.L.: She did.

Me: You don't seem surprised.

L.L.: Neither are you. I already said what I think. God, it's what you think, too. Coercing kids into imagining themselves raped and hating their own bodies. What's a bad place?

Me: [wrenching myself with a terrible effort back to my detective role] You don't know what a bad place is?

L.L.: You know the answers; don't fake it.

Me: I know. I don't want to have this argument. Missy didn't say anything specific, even when it could appear (if you were bent on seeing it) she was making accusations.

L.L.: Making accu—

Me: Excuse me, L.L. It's bad enough being where I am without misrepresenting things. Missy never made anything you or I or anybody outside the league of true believers would call an accusation. The most that can be said is that she agreed, sporadically and reluctantly, with suggestions. When she is tiredest and most confused, she can sometimes, on tape, sound uncertain. If it were up to me, you'd all—. I can't say that.

L.L.: Yeah. Look, I can't see why you are doing this to us. You don't think we did anything to these kids. You know we are innocent—and you could have stopped this train long ago.

Me: It doesn't matter what I think.

L.L. Not now, maybe, but you could have stopped it before. It didn't just happen today. At some point, you became certain of our innocence and you let it go on. Do you hate all kids or just me?

Me: I don't hate you.

L.L.: Not me, then—us. Do we threaten you somehow?

Me: L.L., I've seen threats, and you aren't one. None of you is, not singly and not collectively.

[Said with confidence I didn't feel.]

L.L.: Well, then, I think you are very cruel.

[Right then, this cagey, self-assured leader of the pack seemed close to tears, looked like the little, cornered kid she was. I've never felt more like hugging someone and more certain I couldn't, not because she would reject it but because I'd forfeited my right to exist on the same moral plane.]

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Just to keep things incoherent, let me put down here what I got from Willy's parents. They brought along Willy's sister, Taylor, about the same age as Missy. They looked like immigrants huddled at Ellis Island in 1904—babushkas and thin cloth coats, the little girl with scared eyes trying to hide behind the big people. Timid, permanently out of their element, they were not so much eager to please as anxious to avoid ridicule. And they were achingly proud of their son.

Me: I understand Willy had some problems with anger when he was little—is that right?

Sonia: Yes, sir, he did.

Dennis: But he's been over that for some time.

Sonia: Oh, yes; he's fine now.

Me: How did you feel about him moving out and joining with the others?

Sonia: We didn't understand.

Dennis: But we know he didn't do anything wrong. He's a good boy.

Me: He seems so to me, too. Did you know he has suffered from depression for a time?

Sonia: Not until recently. We found out about it, though. It's chemical.

Dennis: Yes, sir, chemical. We thought it was because he was with these other children, but it wasn't that at all. We're glad he got help.

Sonia: He's feeling fine now.

Me: Do you think your son is doing well?

Dennis: He's in college and getting excellent grades!

Sonia: We love him, so our opinion is—prejudiced; but yes, he is doing well. Of course there is this trial. A terrible misunderstanding.

Dennis: We've always respected him.

Me: Do you get along well with him these days?

Sonia: He's very independent. We are proud of it.

Dennis: That's right, dear. It's good that he's independent and makes his own decisions.

Me: Yes, you wouldn't want him over-dependent.

Dennis: Thank you, sir. We've worried about whether we've done the right thing.

Sonia: Yes, we have, sir. We knew all along we'd have to let him go, but we think maybe we should have helped more somewhere when. . . .

Dennis: We miss him.

Me: You did the right thing. Is he a good brother, Taylor?

Taylor [barely audible]: Oh, yes.

Me: Does he play with you?

Taylor: We used to play this game where we both hide, you know, and then make ghost noises to scare Mom and Dad.

Me: That sounds fun.

Some detective work, right? I couldn't bring myself to ask about their boy's crime or ask them what they thought about the

charges. They seemed so fragile, held up only by the strength they attributed to their son and a sense that they should have done more for him. Poor people trying to get by, decent. No way I could attack them. Or maybe I was inept, unable to change the direction of the conversation. I can't believe I said what I did to the little girl: "Is he a good brother?" Jesus! I should have been artfully digging to see if Willy had made advances to his sister. The poor little dear who missed her brother and his ability to make really spooky ghost noises. I wanted to embrace her, arrange for a visit with Willy, and give her \$50 for candy.

I imagine Sonia will show up any day now at my door, armed with some pickled cabbage or a jar of pear marmalade.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### **Back to the Journal— The Great Camp Out**

Willy reporting. To celebrate what Moo called—thanks, Moo—my “inauguration into the wonderful world of heavy drugs,” we went camping last weekend. (It’s Sunday night—we left Friday.) It was a total surprise for me.

Friday morning, my boss called and said he got a replacement, so it was OK for me to miss. What the hell? I was so surprised I didn’t say anything—somehow got off the phone. Plain came down, punched me and went and got the others, who said they’d:

1. made reservations at a campground
2. called my boss and made things right
3. obtained, in honor of me, two tents, sleeping bags, and other stuff
4. bought Frisbees, lanterns, board games, food, vodka
5. bought fishing gear, taking on trust that there was a lake “close by”
6. packed the car

You coulda knocked me over with a Kleenex, as L.L. /Raymond Chandler would say.

The weekend was more than terrific. That sounds so lame. Let me put it this way: the experts say depression is purely chemical and that no amount of fun can change that. Well, maybe not always. I can testify positively that the weekend lifted my mind and spirits so far above the trough they had been in that I forgot all about being stale—like a cigarette butt doused with yesterday’s beer. (I really admire that entry of yours. L.L.)

We didn’t do anything in our usual felonious line—no break-ins, sexual assaults. We fished and caught some

unfriendly looking things nobody knew the name of. We would have killed them if we'd had reason; we have not tender hearts. But nobody wanted them around, so back they went to their nasty underwater existence.

No need to go on and on. During the day we hiked, horsed around, played games. At night—and this is true—we set up the lanterns and—no, we did not sing campfire songs—we played board games. Exploding Kittens and Survival and Search for the Nile. The last one we just got started on, played it for six hours and still had just begun. It's one of those elaborate things, like war games, designed for people like me who need to have their time occupied with pointless complexity for six weeks straight. Not as bad as Dungeons and Dragons, but very extended. Everybody said we would pick it up when we got back; but I sensed (sharp guy that I am) that nobody's heart was in it and that everybody was being kind to old chemically dependent Willy.

I hope that's so. I sure don't want to go on for days with Search for the Nile. (It is an intriguing idea. My parents—one of the many good things they did—rented a many-part old BBC special on Search for the Nile, and Nerd here watched it twice, beginning to end. You'd like it, colonialism raw and brutal—Stanley and Livingston and John Speke and crazy Richard Burton and Africa's beautiful landscape and astonishing horrors.)

Thanks, everybody. And thanks again. I'd say more if I had the words. The tents were super, even if we did sleep boy-boy-boy/girl-girl. Mary kissed me goodnight both nights. And she didn't kiss Plain at all. Nyah, nyah! Moo, of course, but they got a thing going, I believe, and I'm glad for them.

You notice the passing reference to "sexual assaults?" A joke, right? Willy says, "No break-ins, sexual assaults." Anybody reading through this material catches on to the developing self-

mockery, their way of teasing themselves about their inability to be much of a criminal gang.

But the CPA didn't see it that way. Surprise! Ignoring the glaring fact that Ms. LaVelle's entrance into the gang's lives is still off in the future, our Protectors issued another handout based on this camping trip, just to keep things hot:

*It's No Joke to Us*

*Run-of-the-mill Pedophiles, the experts tell us, are shy and secretive, hiding in shame and self-hatred. Not our five. They laugh about their child molesting the way other kids might joke about ditching a class. It seems these anarchists took a camping trip to rest and gather strength for more attacks on decent people.*

*"No sexual assaults this weekend!" moaned one, appealing to this group understanding that they would be back to just that after a rest-up.*

*We're not bloodthirsty, as interested parties have said, but how can we react to this? How do you react? Is it just teenagers joking around? Is it, just maybe, EVIL?*

**YOU DECIDE**

Back to the Journal.

### **The Book Club**

Mary reporting. *The Virgin Suicides* turned out to be even richer for us than "Happiness." We talked on into the night, taking a twenty-minute break at 1 a.m. to get more food. L.L. and I took a fast shower. Did the boys? But they sat far off, so we didn't mind. Actually we cuddled, some of us. (Why is it that none of our boys ever stink? Boys generally are not walking flower shops. But you can count on Willy and Moo, even Plain—just joking; Plain is the cleanest person I've showered with—to be neutral boy-smelling.) I can't remember the cuddling pairings, as they shifted around. I guess that sounds impersonal, but you all know better.

We spent a lot of time trying to figure out why the girls did it; then we talked about why the boys didn't rescue them. Then L.L., who is so smart, pointed out we were falling into a trap, trying to save the girls by imagining some other way the story could come out. Everybody shut the hell up, waiting for her to go on. I'll try to quote, since it was what set us off in an exciting direction, along about 2 a.m.

"The book gives us so many opinions on *why* the girls did this. Look at all those opinions and notice what they have in common. They start by assuming that the girls acted abnormally, that something in their lives was wrong, that somebody normal could have stepped in and saved them. Some of the opinions are bound to seem to us more sensible than others, but why? The ones which are most confident and lethally persuasive come from those who are farthest away from the girls. The closer you get to the girls' lives, the closer you get to silence."

That last sentence is accurate. I thought it was impressive.

Almost all the opinions can persuade us, if we start inside their assumptions. Even contradictory opinions. We'd rather have any opinion than none at all. Words protect us from emptiness. The boys in the story come close to having no opinion. That's terrifically scary. What if the girls killed themselves and that's that? We are left without a cause.

There's a way in which we saw what L.L. was saying, but it took us another two hours of talk to get there. We want so bad to understand and really, I now see, "understanding" is a way of protecting ourselves, fitting a formula. If we really understand, we might see that suicide is either a reasonable response or one that comes to dominate us. That's what L.L. was so patiently letting us discover. We each had to approach her view from some distance, circling in on it, until there it was. Sometimes you have to talk your way into something.

For me, the story is about how we cannot often do that, find our way to where L.L. was. Partly because we are so scared. We work very hard not to get on that particular train. There's nothing there and no way back. Enda fuckin story.

### **Patio Thrills**

Plain reporting. I think there's some detestable gender bias working here. (Good word, "detestable," fed to me by Mary.) The girls do the brainy reporting and we get the mind-numbing, ass-going-to-sleep construction and budget stuff. Girls are smart and have ideas; boys lift heavy things and hammer? We also sweat and smell. Come to think of it, maybe the clichés are just for me. Moo has turned all sensitive and what Willy calls "introspective." It's just me you peg as dumb hulk? Before anybody leaps in with a crusher, I know I'm not a hulk. The patio now lacks only a top and a bottom and some of the middle. [And here we go—with details even I find—whew. Let me know if, for whatever reason, you want any of this and I'll supply you—gleefully.]

### **Eighth Council Meeting**

Mary here. For most of the meeting we talked about whether we're starting to coast. L.L. kept pressing this. She argues that we've been sagging into economic coziness, and it's not really money that's the problem.

She stops there, as if she's hoping we'd pick up and figure out for ourselves what she was getting at. It was our longest Council meeting by far. I'll give a little of the talk, not accurately but to see if I can recapture the way we moved.

L.L.: It's not money that's the problem.

Silence

Moo: I agree.

Plain: Agree with what?

Moo: It's not money that's the problem.

**Willy:** I see what Moo's saying. We're stale, very cozy. It's a lot like being happy, though.

**L.L.:** Is it?

**Willy:** I want to think about it. Are we falling into habits, you mean?

**Plain:** I still don't understand.

**Mary:** L.L. always says we should worry about not having conflicts.

**Plain:** Yeah, and Willy said that L.L. seemed to make sense, but it was hard to get your mind around what kind of sense. Tell me again. Keep explaining it to me.

**Silence**

**Moo:** I think maybe L.L. is thinking of what happens when adults get happy. They get boring. Bored, too, I imagine.

**Plain:** My parents are happy and kinda dead.

**Willy:** But that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of unhappy people—who don't have what they need and could do with less conflict. I don't think L.L. is saying we need to create conflict for no reason—or that we should discover the thrill of poverty.

**Mary:** What's she saying then?

**Willy:** Damn, Mary, I don't know.

**Mary:** I wasn't being smart-assed, honey. I think you do, if you just keep talking about it.

**Moo:** Sorry, Willy—it just hit me. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think L.L. might be saying that if we're trying to do real stuff and not evading, then we'll have conflict. We don't have to go looking for it—it'll come if we're putting ourselves out there—taking chances, not just doing what we already know we can do.

**Willy:** That's good. Right, L.L.? You say we make our lives an open experiment—we need to be pushing, as Moo says. The minute we relax, we're back in a groove.

**Plain:** It's like we're programmed?

**Mary:** I don't get it. There's happiness that's getting it all smoothed out, and there's happiness that's exciting, stays undone—challenging all the time.

**Moo:** That's good—"stays undone."

**Mary:** I borrowed it from Plain.

**Moo:** It's so hard, even to be aware. One thing: once you get good at something, stop doing it.

**Plain:** I sort of see. There's no knowing.

**L.L.:** As soon as we think we KNOW where we are, we're in the wrong place. We have to find new territory. When it seems familiar, it's time to pick up and leave. You can't ever be home.

**Plain:** Well, fuck me.

**Mary:** OK!

**L.L.:** Maybe we all can. Plain, you think you can manage that?

**Plain:** L.L.!

**Willy:** I don't mean to distract us from Plain's body, but I want to see if I got it straight what Moo is saying. It's a question of taking risks, right? And that's much harder to do than it sounds.

**Mary:** Sorry Plain. I see, Willy. We don't know what risks to take or, really, what are risks and not just dumb things to do.

**L.L.:** Right, but we do know we don't want to judge risks by whether we think they'll work. Working or not isn't the issue.

**Moo:** What?

**L.L.:** Sorry, Moo. It's not just that we have to be gutsy but we have to think a lot.

Cultivate the imagination. We make the world be what we want it to be.

**Willy:** We're not the first people to try and live our lives deliberately. It takes more than saying we're not going to run with the herd. What exactly do we do?

**Plain:** We don't know.

**L.L.:** Exactly. I think we're best, even happiest, when we're chasing we don't know what or why—running as hard as we can. Though there is such a thing as just being reckless idiots, I suppose. Maybe a risk to take.

**Mary** back again. Keep it open. Like Plain's patio plans.

The other thing we talked about was the ongoing thriller—our heist from Plain's parents. Ollie Brown has been “moving” the stuff, Plain says, and has passed along—get this—\$22,000 so far. Plain says Downtown tells him we can expect another hundred-fifty thousand bucks. It seems to me unreal. It's a lot of money, but I get the feeling we're ripping off Plain's parents pretty ruthlessly. Plain doesn't mention them hardly at all, except in a real general way.

The kids were right about one thing. Ollie Brown was trustworthy. I knew him a little before as a likable local character and have come to know him better since. At any rate, his ability to get inside this criminal network and move stolen goods was pretty impressive. My guess is he nosed around until he located the right crooked broker, counting on his charm to get results. He sure as hell is charming—no wonder he and Plain became so close.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### **Eighth Journal Entry**

**This is L.L. grabbing the leadoff spot—and I don't have much to say. On the heist: it all happened in an evening. Plain got the valuable loot to his pervert friend everybody likes so much—I do, too. Then all of a sudden we have all this money and don't even talk about it.**

**I want to raise three issues and that's one of them: why didn't we all leap gleefully to figure out how to spend this dough? Maybe we aren't interested? Or do we feel guilty about slurping our sustenance out of the big cash sprinklers Plain's parents let spray on us? Or are we losing interest in remodel do-do? Do we sense that we've crossed a line and lost our open-endedness? It's fun if you have *some* money, but an excess kills curiosity. We might give it away and put ourselves back where things are interesting. I'm serious.**

**Maybe it wasn't so lucky to hit the big time so fast. What's left for us? I mean, if that's the big time, then. . . . Of course what we did wasn't daring. Still, as long as you haven't done something, it's exciting. I don't buy the idea of the addicted criminal. I think criminals keep wanting to make themselves attracted enough to crime to keep doing it. They aim to keep their status, their potential as criminals-in-the-making.**

**(How do we understand people ever getting married? It's like giving up. That's what Martha thinks in the Albee play. George sees her and says, "Oh, that'll do." People marry because they're tired of being enticed—it's all over with.)**

**L.L. may be about one-eighth right about marriage, though I think this is one of the rare points where she's being cocky, ignorant, and a real pain in the ass. The comments on crime as a kind of existential game come from a privileged kid whose had a few barely-illegal experiences. Criminals may sometimes want to**

up the ante and challenge themselves, in movies and bad crime novels, but most flesh and blood sorts settle into what they figure out how to do, often not all that well, and keep doing it—over and over, until such time as equally-play-by-the-rules cops catch them. Criminals are about as interested in challenges as your average CPA. (Pathetic that I feel competitive with this little girl, fiercely competitive and overmatched.)

**The second thing is the movie series. We know nothing about making movies except we shouldn't be doing it and wanna. So where do we go? Where we go is straight toward high art, museum quality porn!**

**The third is tension. We're a corny family drama, so enclosed and static. I know we have a borrow-a-cup-of-sugar relationship with Orson and Sally, who seem to find us amusing. And Downtown. But these are about the only exceptions. Every day the same. Nobody minds? Want to punch somebody or lasso us some new members or *have sex*?**

**That's all I have.**

**That's all L.L. has. Well, kiss my ass. Couldn't you come up with some more downers? I'm Moo. I was thinking we were doing great and that I was happy like I've never been and that even Willy was fun to be around. (Sorry, Willy. I know you're depressed, though that medicine ought to be working soon and then I can re-start kicking your ass—or provide my own ass on a platter for you.) L.L. always convinces me. If I'm happy and she says I shouldn't be—well, I stop being happy. We all regard L.L. as a sage, we just do. I'm not saying that's bad. I just wish she weren't so depressing. I wish you were more like a preacher my parents made me go hear, back in Fattybutt, Missouri—“Ree-Joyce! Ree-Joyce! Be Glay-ud! Let youuu-er hearts beee fill-ud with-ah joy!” Tell us that, L.L. Fill our speeruts with joy-uh. Pour it ee-un! Praise-ah the Law-urd!”**

**The porn movies. I need help there. I've been worrying about making movies with no clothes on. Being naked or**

stripping and acting—I can’t imagine doing it, not without a lot of help. I keep reminding myself that Mary’s idea is to do make-out movies without real sex. But that seems even harder. I have no idea what to do. I may have hinted at this before, but nobody mentioned it, so I guess maybe you didn’t take me seriously.

I’ve never really made out or anything. I’ve kissed some, but even that not much. The one time I kissed a lot was in the back seat at that old-time drive-in movie place out by the Loews while Trent Moore, you guys know him, was in the front seat with his date. I didn’t know what to do except keep kissing. I had the feeling I should be doing something else, but I was so afraid of making an ass of myself trying the few other things I considered—nuzzling her ear or doing something with her stomach—that I didn’t, just kept kissing. My mouth got sore and my tongue, too. I expect hers did, but she was super nice, didn’t say anything. By the end of the evening, I was just glad not to have to kiss any more. To make things worse, when I did try to move because something was going to sleep, I kept gouging her or one time stepping on her long dress, which was scrunched on the floor because she was leaning over toward me.

I don’t know how I could have embarrassed myself more than by what I’ve just written, so OK. Maybe I could help Willy with the camera. Plain could do all the male parts. I don’t mean to be pathetic. I’ll try hard to do what you want, if you’ll help me.

I think what L.L. said about all that money and why we don’t care about it is interesting. Another reason might be that it’s all new having this much dough, but really I think it’s like she said—we don’t care much. Maybe we should do what L.L. says and give it away—like \$10,000 to any kid younger than twelve who’ll break a teacher’s jaw.

Willy. If Moo and L.L. are right, we'd be the first true-blue capitalists ever to feel that making dough was tedious. It seems to work the other way—more, more, more! Like alcohol. But maybe we really don't care. Hearing about the massive amount of dough we are making is like learning that the fucking football team won. I don't give a sheee-uttt!

I wanted to talk about Downtown and why we all like him. I do, too—the hush-hush secret agent stuff. Do we assume Downtown is a crook and still like him? He doesn't seem to me a criminal, just some guy who'd know criminals—probably in the same way he knows hairdressers or exterminators, because he knows everybody and wins everybody's trust. Who wouldn't trust him? Downtown listens to you and doesn't try to match what you're saying. He's also never embarrassed. If he doesn't have anything to say, he'll come over and sit beside you and smile. I find myself talking to him all the time. Mostly, he'll answer, "Oh yeah!" He doesn't ask for anything. He assumes we'll like him and isn't embarrassed to show that he likes us. I've never met anybody even close to that. I love it when he's around. I love him. He's the best grown-up I've known.

I think Moo is gutsy to admit his inexperience. I take it as a compliment, not as anything deficient in Moo. Good, Moo! I'm older than you, though a lot uglier, but I haven't had much more experience. I don't suppose we want confessions here, but with me it's funny. I've had sex with four girls, but I don't know much about preliminaries either. The sex I've had was sort of shut-your-eyes-and-jump-in. For them, too. It was embarrassing. Very hot, too, most of the time; but none of us knew what the hell to do, outside the basics. And I didn't acquire any mastery with repeated experience. The only thing that made it different from dogs humping was the dialogue. Here's where it gets embarrassing. I remember worrying about what to say during sex—so, you know what? I just said, "Yes—oh yes!" Over and over. Not another word. Two of the girls had

the same vocabulary as me, and one (a six-time repeater) was mute, just grunted. The fourth was more versatile, but I couldn't make out much of what she said. It sounded often like she was saying, "Why?" Real loud. Was I supposed to answer? Was she asking a question?

I shouldn't make a joke of it, since it sounds like I was ravishing these girls and didn't care about them. No, I was in love with all four, at least during the one or two minutes it took to have sex. Sorry.

I'll have to think about the tension issue L.L. brings up. I agree with Moo that we regard L.L. as our Dalai Lama. I don't think we're wrong to do so.

Mary. Yes on the porn scripts. How would it be if Plain and I started working on an outline? L.L., too? Willy? Moo? Maybe we could do it in small groups, since it's hard to get a finished product with too many writers. I make it sound like I'm a big-time writer, when all I've done are essays for class and a diary I start every six months, and short stories—seem great while I'm writing them and lousy when I look at them the next week. So, what the hell are you saying, Mary? Damned if I know.

I love you guys.

L.L. talks about tension. L.L., I listen hard to what you say, but I think you're wrong here. I've never thought as much about anything as keeping things moving, opening out, and not getting into ruts—not being satisfied, keeping off-balance. It's not that we shouldn't be happy, but there're different kinds of happiness—one is where you get something that stays there and the other is when you are trying to get it, don't know exactly what it is you are chasing. One is the happiness of a pig in the mud or somebody settled into the suburbs with the crabgrass under control. Let's say they are happy because they've finished something, something is behind them. It's the dream of winning an Oscar—everybody's cheering and the lights are

on you and it's all right there, receding into the darkness even as you reach out and grab for it.

But the happiness I'm talking about is like when we were fucking up the mailbox and kept working and didn't know what we were doing. We just kept changing it, moving from one flop to another, and it was like we were outside time. Now that it's done, I don't think any of us has looked at it.

So, L.L., what you call tension seems really just the way we're coiling back like a bunch of rattlesnakes ready to strike. Who knows at what? But it's energy, like you said. I'm surprised at you, L.L., for wanting to release it. Why not keep coiled, ready? And what a funny way to think about sex, L.L.—wanting it all to be over. I probably have it wrong, L.L.—hope you aren't pissed. I wish I could keep myself from writing that last sentence.

In our porn series sex is something you want to extend. I don't mean one episode after another, but ways to depict sex so that it stays alive. Postponing it—prolonging it. (I think Moo is sweet and funny, too, talking about necking for hours on end, parking in the same place). I felt this shock of recognition—I necked all the way through “Harry Potter,” which seemed like a thirty-four hour movie by the time I could come up for air, straighten the cricks in my neck.

Sex as art—ways to keep inventing while doing it—like the mailbox.

Maybe that's one reason Moo is uneasy, and I am, too. It'd be simpler to make porn movies without clothes. It's getting them off that's embarrassing. Also, it's what's arousing. Part of the arousal comes from knowing the person is embarrassed—you suppose? That's pretty cruel, but maybe so.

What Moo was talking about as tough to do is not just procedurally difficult. Not only is it tough to unhook bras and unzip flies, but not knowing how the other person feels about it. (That's the reason you might get stalled: this works and

she/he doesn't object, so it's safe to keep doing this [but only this], even if limbs and lips ache and I'd rather be working in a coal mine than keep this going one more second.)

I hadn't thought about this until I started to write about it, but it seems to me Moo's plan is intimidating and exciting because everything is so uncertain. If we do what Moo suggests, it's make it up as you go along, zero security. That's the way truly amateurish sex should be. It's probably different with experienced kids. But with most of us, it's going to be jumping into the pool without any swimming lessons.

It just struck me (thanks, Moo) that we could use this idea as the basis for our scripts. Isn't that what Christopher Guest does? Willy was saying Guest just roughs out situations for the actors and lets them improvise—shoots a lot of film and edits it down. What do you think? We'd still have to work hard on the script, but our plots are pretty obvious underneath, so to speak. We can improvise the story—the cheerleader and the jock, camping trips, first date, lost in a cave, marooned on an island, the horny babysitter.

This sounds fun. Thanks, Moo. Thanks, Willy. Thanks, L.L. I'll thank Plain later, after we see him (and his lovely body) in a few of these teaser tinsel-town triumphs.

About Downtown. I like having him around OK. He's very comfortable, seems like a baby fawn. That's funny, given that he's sort of chubby and rumped. I've given it some thought and wonder if maybe innocence just doesn't interest me much. I don't mean to be insulting or say I'm more sophisticated. It's just that I've always had something missing when it comes to stuff like babies and kittens.

God what a long entry. I'm sorry.

Plain. Mary, if you stopped being sorry, you'd be perfect. My God are you getting prettier! If I weren't being romantically loyal to Willy, I'd try to seduce you, I would.

Since we're talking about sex—. I notice Mary said not a thing about her and sex personally. Not her history, her make-out experience, her feelings about petting, her worries about taking off clothes. Willy and Moo are courageous, letting their whangs dangle out. And Mary? A lot of smart stuff, but it's not too personal, now is it? Tell us about times in the back seats of cars, on the beach, in the woods, in the chem lab supply room. L.L. was quiet, too, but she went first, before the sex talk got started. When she gets a chance, old L.L. will just spill her guts, I know.

Oops. I just looked back and see Mary did say that funny thing about necking all the way through "Harry Potter," but she was just sympathizing with Moo, not being truly "forthcoming," as Counselor Martin-Simms says. Mary *is* more forthcoming in the action line than the rest of us, so maybe she'd consider extending the action a little—say to horny, left-out Plain, for instance.

I like what everybody's saying about catching sex in motion in our films. Delay and finesse—anticipation leading to more anticipation. It'll be like soccer, not just goals but strategy and passing the ball and moving in unexpected ways over the field and sliding and grabbing and colliding and licking. So licking isn't a major feature of soccer. (Did you know I gave up a terrific career in soccer to devote myself to—not clear what yet. I was the whiz of fourth-grade unisex soccer. I throb with agony when I think of what I've lost.) I've learned a lot from reading the *Journal*, even if it is so fucking long it's like a novel.

As for me and the films, I want to try and be as honest as all you others. I have had sort-of sex once, when I was eleven. It was with my seventeen-year-old cousins, a boy and a girl—not brother and sister. It left so many different images in my head—I remember it all vividly but differently. We were at a lake. It was raining, so we went into this boathouse, the three of us, and they asked me if I wouldn't like to "fool around."

**You'll have no trouble believing that I was modest then, ridiculously. (My modesty comes before this experience, isn't caused by it.) Maybe my cousins just had in mind undressing me. Anyhow, they did that, and real slow. They took off everything except my underwear and then spent about ten minutes fooling around. I can't quite remember everything, but I know I was on a table somehow. Anyhow, I finally ended up naked, and they played with me, my whole body. The boy and girl finally used me, sort of. I don't think they put anything in me. I can remember feeling good, flattered I guess, that they were moaning and groaning over me. They told me not to tell, asked me not to, more like it, but didn't threaten. The girl told me she was real sorry and cried, but the boy just looked embarrassed, which made me feel like I was the mature one. I told them it was fine, that I wasn't going to mess it up by spilling the beans to anybody's parents.**

**I'm not sure why I'm telling you this, except that it's my one sexual experience. You all recognize that the way I talk is an apology for my prudishness. I don't know why I am this way—not because of the boathouse, I don't think. I've been out with girls a lot and made out, I guess, but I never go far. It's hard to say this, but I don't like girls pawing at me. I guess what everybody's saying about nudity and clothes applies even stronger to me. I don't mind being nude, been skinny-dipping a few times with girls. I don't like undressing, though, or having people mess with my buttons and zippers and trying to get inside clothes. I'm less that way since moving in here. You guys have done so much.**

**So, these movies will be interesting for me. I think Mary's absolutely right about the kind of movies we should make: modest people giving up their modesty real slow because they can't help it. Kids so horny they don't have any choice but to lose what they most want to hold onto.**

Sorry to go on. Just one other thing. I can imagine wanting to reach over and touch Downtown, in a friendly sort of caressing way. He sometimes makes me feel like after you've been running. I talk so easy to him and then my eyes start to water, and I wonder if it'll ever be any better than it is right then, with Downtown listening to me and nodding and laughing and now and then giving advice.

Mary's right, yep, on tension. It's there and it's good and we only have to worry if it goes away. And it won't go away if we keep moving.

On the movies. Yes, Mary! But we don't want five people doing five scripts. You and I will do it, the Christopher Guest sort.

The CPA issued so many bulletins and leaked so much on this porn-movie-making that it's dizzying. They spliced together quotes from different dates to make all this look unspeakably vile. Maybe it is. It's the hardest thing about the kids for me to get inside. Why on earth would they do this? For a long time, I guessed that they needed an excuse to fondle one another. But what an idiotically risky excuse. And the petting they managed was—I've seen the tapes—very mild, when it wasn't outright faked. Maybe later I'll have better ideas on these movies. If only the kids were here, I could find out. But if I could see them, reach them, it wouldn't be the movies I'd want to discuss.

### *Innocent Pornography*

*Those defending the child-molesting commune want us to believe that their crimes—robbery, assault, burglary, breaking and entering, underage drinking, child endangerment, felonious mischief, vandalism—were the results of youthful “high spirits,” all normal and innocent. Do you agree? Of course not. But how about producing and distributing XXX child pornography?*

*They planned it carefully, joked about the audiences they could “arouse,” bought the very best equipment with the sale of*

*stolen property, wrote the scripts, took the starring roles, shot and edited, and sold. These “arousing” tales of wanton child sex.*

*They thought that, because they are technically “minors,” they could get away with it.*

*AND—they roped Brandon and Missy into this hog pen of pornography. We won’t say they went out and stalked these two little kids, kidnapped them. We don’t know that for certain, and we want to say no more than what the facts indicate. Those anxious to protect these child-molesters have accused us of jumping to conclusions. Reach your own.*

*Ask yourself, “How ‘innocent’ are these kiddie porn producers, and why would they arrange this ‘erotic’ activity, making what they themselves call ‘porn,’ while housing two little tykes?” Consider that.*

*You wonder why we are pushing for the death penalty?*

*We are not blood-thirsty demons. We believe, like you, that the death penalty should be reserved for the very worst crimes.*

*Have you heard of crimes worse than these?*

Gotta admire how they promote the lie that the films were sold and, even more lethally, that Brandon and Missy were used in them, without exactly saying that.

Still, one can get so involved in hating the CPA that he ignores the actual difficulties posed by these movies. That Missy and Brandon were in the house while all this was going on may argue a pervasive atmosphere that would be consistent with a super thoughtlessness allowing the little kids to be included. Possible—given the group’s contempt for received wisdom on all fronts, including kids’ innocence.

But the CPA wasn’t raising questions. They were certain.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

With all the talk about Mr. Brown, perhaps this is the time to introduce him. He testified in the trial and I talked with him as part of the investigation and later, informally and even more extensively, as part of what I came to see as friendship.

Timmons: Mr. Brown, did you receive stolen goods from the defendants?

Downtown: Yes, sir. Not from all of them, exactly, though I knew them—wonderful children.

Timmons: And they employed you to fence stolen goods. How wonderful!

Downtown: Did you want me to respond? I think they are; I know it. I was told the goods, as you call them, were from parents, and I believed them. Anybody who knew them would.

Timmons: How can they have been borrowing them, if you sold them?

Downtown: Yes, that occurred to me, too. I think it was kind of borrowing, so to speak. They told me they'd replace the things worth replacing or otherwise square things.

Timmons: Does that seem "borrowing" to you, so to speak?

Downtown: [laughing] Since it was inside the family—I agree. It's an original idea, isn't it.

Timmons: I don't think it's all that original, nor funny. Probably most larceny, the vicious kinds, have been called "borrowing" by the dishonest.

[Objection. Sustained. Please do not characterize the witness's answers.]

Timmons: Which ones were you involved with in your fencing?

Downtown: Well, eventually, all of them.

Timmons: Who made the initial contact?

Downtown: I forget.

Timmons: Will the Judge instruct the witness to answer.

Downtown: No need, your honor. I am answering. I forget.

Timmons: Do you know you can be held in contempt?

Downtown: Well, I hope not, since I have no contempt for you or Your Honor. You see, eventually we all got to be friends and it all blurred together.

Timmons: You were friends?

Downtown: Yes, sir.

Timmons: Just friends?

Downtown: And business associates. But friends, yes.

Timmons: Aren't you much older than any of them?

Downtown: [laughing] Oh yes, sir; nobody can doubt that.

Timmons: Did you have a sexual relationship with any or all of the defendants?

Downtown: What? I don't know what to say.

Timmons: You don't know what a sexual relationship is or you don't know if you had one with them?

Downtown: Why would you ask that? I would drop by, and we'd talk and have fun.

Timmons: What kind of fun?

Downtown: Talking, taking walks, playing cards. Sometimes I'd hold a ladder or a flashlight. They were doing lots of work. They'd go over plans with me. I did some minor art work for them. That kind of thing.

Timmons: As such an integral part of the family, did you hug them?

Downtown: Yes.

Timmons: You don't call that sexual?

Downtown: No sir, I don't.

Timmons: Did you know about the porn films?

Downtown: Oh, yes. I joked with them about giving me a part.

Timmons: Really? I was going to get to that, but since you admitted it, please tell us more.

Downtown: Well, I knew they were going on, because they kept telling me about them and giggling, you know, and so I said, “Don’t you have a part for me?” and Mary said, “You bet, Ollie, we’ll write you into the next script—a starring role!” I knew they were joking.

Timmons: You were sorry they were joking? You wanted to take part?

Downtown: Oh, no, sir. I know I’m no movie star.

Timmons: Are you just being modest?

Downtown: No, I. . . .

Timmons: No more questions.

The DA must have known Caitlin could clear things up, but maybe didn’t care. He’d managed to create the impression that Ollie was a perv. It’s a lousy tactic, but maybe it worked. Downtown is so gentle, fat, and soft, that he fits a lot of people’s ideas of a degenerate.

Caitlin: Mr. Brown, did you have anything at all to do with the couple of short home movies that were actually made—writing the scripts, producing them, filming them, acting in them?

Downtown: Oh no, ma’am, nothing at all.

Caitlin: Did you view them?

Downtown: No, Miss.

Caitlin: Mr. Brown, were the hugs you shared with the defendants sexual in nature?

Downtown: Oh no, Miss. We would hug the way friends will. I don’t think anybody would call that sexual. I am sure my friends didn’t think of any of that as sex.

Caitlin: So, you were not involved ever with any of them sexually.

Downtown: [laughing] Oh, no.

Caitlin: Did anybody tell you what parts they wanted you to play in the movies?

Downtown: Yes, miss. They were joking, as I say, but they kidded me about two parts. In one I was a bouncer in a club and in the other I was a school principal.

Caitlin: Did either of these roles require you to engage in any sexual activity?

Downtown: No, Miss. They weren't serious in the first place.

Caitlin: Did you watch the movies being made?

Downtown: Oh, no.

Caitlin: Why not?

Downtown: Oh, they invited me, but what they were doing was private. I thought I'd be Peeping Tom if I watched. I liked my friends so much and I respected them. I do so now.

Caitlin: That point bothers some people, because of the age difference. Can you help us out, especially with what you call liking them very much, being their friend?

Downtown: Well, Miss, I think you don't get that many chances to have good friends. I am very lucky to have lots. I have friends who are my age, older and younger. I have friends who are police officers and friends who are crooks.

Caitlin: What was it you liked about the defendants?

Downtown: They're good of heart—trying to live a fine life. They don't shut anybody out.

Caitlin: Would you say that you loved them?

Downtown: I did and I do.

Caitlin: And they you?

Downtown: I hope so. I believe so.

I don't know what got into Caitlin, going on as she did with all that on Downtown's non-existent movie roles. I think she was falling in love with Downtown right on the spot. But she may have skillfully erased the image of perversion from the jury's mind and then, with consummate awkwardness, proceeded to redraw it.

My own official interview with Ollie yielded almost nothing. Brown wouldn't say which kid contacted him, though the Journal makes it clear it was Plain. When I said so, he responded by going

on about what a honey Plain was—but he just couldn't remember who had contacted him—it was a blur, really—didn't think it was Plain, though it might have been—you know, might have been Mary, but. . . . Made you want to throttle him, sweet and cuddly as he was.

The informal interview didn't tell me much more, though I managed to avoid falling in love with the witness, I think.

Me: Are you married, Mr. Brown.

Ollie: No, sir. I've always been single.

Me: Do you have a romantic partner? You don't have to answer.

Ollie: I don't mind. No, sir, I don't. I have had. I have lived for pretty long periods with two women, not at the same time. When I was in college I was in a commune, and you might say there were lots of romantic partners there.

Me: Including men?

Ollie: Yes, sir. But not much. In the years when I was doing sexual things, I wasn't able to be easy with men and sex. I regret that now. But, sir, I see what you're after, and it's OK. I know how pretty these kids are and you're wondering if I was friends with them because I was attracted to them sexually. Nah.

Me: How do you shut it down, your sexual instincts?

Ollie: It's easier than you might think, sir.

Me: Really?

Ollie: The way I see it is to protect yourself. To keep from getting hurt and feeling ashamed. You just put yourself in a different life. It's OK.

Me: Are you happy?

Ollie: That's hard to say, for me, but no, sir.

Me: Why?

Ollie: I think my life is OK. Not bad. Not what anybody sets out to get, though. Right now, I'm very afraid for my friends.

Me: What about you? Are you going to be charged?

Ollie: Well, sir, you'd know that, not me. I suppose so, but that's OK.

Me: Really?

Ollie: Sure. I've been in jail before. You know that, of course.

Me: Ollie, do you think there's a chance these friends might have involved Brandon and Missy in some kind of sex? Even just touching them or getting them involved in the movies, creating a bad atmosphere for them?

Ollie: Not a chance, sir. They were like uncles and aunts to them. And they weren't that much older. Their hearts opened to them, you know. They didn't want to protect them; they explained that to me. They wanted to help them get free, inside. They knew Brandon and Missy had been kicked around a lot, you know, and deserved a chance to breathe deep, find out they could make their own choices. That's what Moo said to me. L.L. told me that talking to the little kids about the movies would rob them of their freedom. No, there's no chance any of them did anything but good for Brandon and Missy, made their lives so much better. You think because they are rebel kids they wouldn't care about having sex with the little ones, but that isn't so.

Me: Ollie, do you know of the CPA?

Ollie: I've seen their posters. I don't think I know any who belong.

Me: Why do you think they want these kids put to death?

Ollie: Yes, sir, that bothers me a lot. Hating them that much. I guess they are afraid, the CPA. They must be very afraid.

Me: Of these kids?

Ollie: That's just it. They afraid, and they don't know what they're afraid of. I wish they'd visit my friends and talk with them. If they did, they wouldn't want to kill them.

So, folks, apart from some talk with Ollie about being a fence and illegal betting, that was about it. Tell the truth, I didn't press him much on these crimes. For one thing, he didn't seem to hide a damned thing, which makes it terrible being a detective. Like

fishing in a stocked bathtub. For another, I guess I did come to love him.

### **The Great Fire**

**Moo here. This is the story of how we helped the community like deep-down do-gooders. We're getting a commending from the Mayor or Fire Chief. I don't know if we can survive all this virtue. I can only apologize for getting us into this. I didn't mean to, lame as that sounds.**

**What happened was—I was working on the patio, trying to see if I couldn't roll the ground out with a big barrel we have in our shed. As near as I could tell, I made no difference at all in the ground, though it was harder than hell to roll the barrel around, part of which is because I'm not too tough. I worked up a big sweat, though, and was grunting and groaning and giving myself two or three ruptures a roll. I think we should put grass killer on it and then dig it up—yeah, sorry to go off topic. I just thought if I didn't get that in I would forget it, because to tell the truth the patio doesn't interest me much. I was out there because I thought maybe I could fix it by myself and surprise you all. And you then would have a high regard for me and say, "I used to suspect that Moo was a fool but now, since he did the patio, I see I was wrong. Let's throw him a party." But I failed. Anyhow, you notice how sometimes we've done that—you know, cleaned something or rented videos and made popcorn—without telling anybody or announcing it in advance? Once Plain stole me a shirt.**

**OK, I know. So, here I was out there and I looked up and noticed on the mountain behind the house across the street some smoke and then, right away, flames. So I ran in the house and called 911. They answered right away and I said, "I want to report a fire!" "Where?" "I want to report a fire, right behind a house." "Please calm down and speak slowly—what is your name?" "Fuck my name. I want to report a fire." So I**

finally got this dumb ass to take down the address and I hung up then.

Then I got you guys, who were doing homework, and we all, except Mary and L.L., took right off for the fire. Turns out Mary and L.L. went to grab shovels and rakes. Even with all that stuff loading them down, they caught up with us. The people across the street weren't home, so we went through their yard and back fence, which had this dumb hook on it which was harder than hell to open—but we did.

We got up the hill not even that far and we could see the fire better. It was making a roaring sound and was in the trees, running away from us up the hill, the wind blowing it. God it was hot, even with all the wind behind us, since the trees in front of us were still burning—making all this noise, sounding like they were loud firecrackers. Mary called us all together and told us—she had to yell so we could hear—to take off our shirts and make a mask over our mouths and noses. That was smart, it turned out, since there was so much smoke and it even made your throat and chest hot to breathe, and so dry—you couldn't make spit at all.

Nobody but us was there. Mary told us to start digging and make a line down the hill back toward the house, away from the fire, moving real slow but making progress. (I knew we were “making a line” later when the pros told us that's what we'd been doing.) We were digging and throwing the plants and stuff behind us. We couldn't go up the hill anyhow because the fire was there and the heat, but what we were doing was trying to take away the brush, in case the wind shifted and started down at us toward all the houses. We didn't get all that far, but it was neat how we spread out and worked without anybody saying anything or giving orders. Plain and L.L. went back up to the top of the line and started putting out little fires with dirt. The rest of us kept inching the line down the hill.

Luckily the dirt was soft, but some of the plant stuff was deep in it and prickly.

After a little while, I don't know how long, you could hear all these sirens, and the fire trucks pulled up behind us. The first firemen there were great. As I think on it now, I'm surprised they didn't say, "Get the fuck lost and let pros do their job." But they were relaxed and calm and kind. They kept saying, "How did you know to do that? Are you guys trained in this? Nothing for us to do here. By Jesus, you guys are great."

But they sort of took over then, real smooth and quiet—finally said, "Hey, men and women, there's snacks and drinks down there. Let us spell you for a while." They then started fighting the fire in the right way and we went down to the street. There were about four trucks and within a half hour another bunch came. They gave us stuff to eat and asked us to hang around so we could talk with them. L.L. said later they were just blowing smoke up our asses, as if they needed our information. We all sort of knew it at the time, L.L., but it was still really nice.

The tv people were around all over the place and they started yanking at us, sticking microphones in our mouths. The fireman guy who was in charge, the captain or something, kept telling them how we had spotted the fire and "cut a back line." I love the way that sounds. He said we had done exactly the right thing and had saved the buildings below the fire, which were in "grave danger," had the wind shifted. Of course, the wind didn't shift, so it would have been all the same if we hadn't done a damned thing. Still, being heroes for no reason is as good as actually doing something, or just about. I loved being on tv. Except a couple of reporters kept asking, "So, Mark, how did it feel?" Mark! I had no idea how to answer. At least I didn't say, "It felt good, Jennifer." I just said, "I don't know" and "pretty much like I always feel." They came out with these

phony laughs and said stuff like, “There you have it, folks, young heroes as modest as they are brave.” I’ll take that!

There was this one guy, wanted to preach about how it was fine to see such fine kids doing fine things and not pissing up their lives with drugs and pregnancy and gaming and sagging and horrible music (I don’t think he said that last thing, but he might as well have). He asked L.L. what she had to say to the confused youth of today. L.L. said, “Yeah—stay confused.” The guy tried to treat it as a joke but didn’t manage too well. He didn’t give up. He asked Willy if this was as big a rush as taking drugs—and then, before Willy could say anything, he added, “not that you’ve taken drugs, of course, I just mean—hypothetically speaking.” As he was bumbling around, Willy said, with this big shit-eating grin, “Oh, I’ve taken drugs—they’re better” and just stood there grinning. The guy tried to treat that as a joke, too. By the time he got to me, he wasn’t taking any chances and just asked me what happened. He didn’t ask how I felt.

The bad thing about being on television we got all these calls from the parents. Oh how proud they are! Can we celebrate as a family? Can they bring a cake?

Moore did bring this fire-fighting heroism up, along with probably her most valuable character witnesses, the drop-by-baked-goods neighbors, Orson and Sally Raymond. Orson and Sally, whose home they had tried to protect and whose gratitude made them pretty regular visitors, were not only able to say positive things about the kids but add many details. More important, they could testify that Brandon and Missy seemed lively, happy, and at home. Caitlin kept them focussed pretty closely on the fire. My guess is she thought the fire-fighting heroics were going to do more work for her than they probably did.

Beyond Orson and Sally, she called up a fireman, who repeated the story Moo had told, giving the defendants too much credit. He was an over-eager witness, nice guy that he was, and might have

done damage to the cause had not Timmons also overplayed his hand:

Timmons: As it happened, the buildings were in no danger, right?

Fireman: They certainly could have been. It was very dry and.

...

Timmons: But, as I understand it, though they *could* have been, they weren't? The wind held and blew the fire steadily away from the houses. Is that wrong?

Fireman: It wasn't at all that simple—but, yes, in a way, though. . . .

Timmons: So, even without the interference of the accused, the buildings would not have burned. They pretty much just got in the way, right, were well-intentioned, possibly, but not heroes by any sane definition, hardly examples of youthful courage, scratching in the dirt *behind* a fire going away from them, as they played in perfect safety?

Fireman: No, sir, not at all. I can't allow that account to stand. First of all, they were not in the way. They somehow knew to do the exact right thing—to protect the houses by making a back line. I don't know how much experience you've had firefighting, but cutting a back line is very hard and dangerous work. If the fire suddenly turns, and it often does, there is no guarantee they could have gotten out. They were working very close to the center of the fire. Very courageous. Even as it was, they inhaled plenty of smoke and were working in intense heat.

Timmons: Thank you.

Fireman: Somehow they knew to put cloth over their mouths, giving their lungs and throats some protection. But to say they were in the way or were not heroes. No, sir. That couldn't be more wrong. I've never seen civilians act better. Absolutely they are heroes.

Timmons should have left well enough alone. Why bother with this episode, occurring long before Brandon and Missy enter the

scene? After all, our gang members could be heroic firefighters and still molest kids. All Timmons did was draw further attention to what was an irrelevant issue and one that certainly showed his monsters as good humans.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### The Great Art Show

L.L. We talked some about cashing in on our celebrity while it would last—about three days—with another tag day or something. But there are disadvantages to being visible. So, we decided to do one more good deed, and let this be the last.

Willy and Mary have been doing volunteer work for some time at this local school, which might as well be called *Black Kids Nobody Gives A Shit About Elementary*. It's a place for leftovers who don't get bussed to the white schools, so you can imagine how loaded it is with great equipment, vibrant arts programs, modern textbooks and laptops. Willy and Mary say most of the teachers seem great. Anyhow, our two do-gooders got me and Plain to volunteer there. Moo's still holding out, which is fine. He's doing other volunteer stuff, is my suspicion.

We began this program, after school originally, but that didn't work, so we switched to free periods, with the help of the teachers. The kids started doing things that Willy and Mary planned. I more or less just rounded up money from my grandma for supplies (and secret stuff like clothes). I don't pretend to know a thing about juvenile art, and I suppose what they did was horrible, even by those standards. Still, it was enthusiastic and colorful. We gave them oils and canvases, then mounted the things in good frames. (My grandma paid a pro to do that.) This was all a buildup to an art show raising money for the school's art program, which they didn't even have one to begin with, as Plain pointed out.

So, we made up these excellent fliers and had the kids spread them. And we also got a big banner across Main Street. Then we bought some radio spots. We put posters on telephone poles and sent letters to service clubs.

We first thought we'd hold the show at the school, then realized the school wouldn't be so poor if white assholes were

comfortable going. So we rented the VFW Hall. We had to hustle the kids up and even did a few ourselves, just to cover the walls. Mary and Willy actually know what they're doing, and Moo did about ten at a fast clip. Moo's are what I think are called minimalist—white canvas with a black line on it. Funny thing is they look pretty good, so maybe Moo had something in mind.

We attracted a big turnout, had the artists there talking about the paintings and hawking them. They sold them by not trying to sell them, being surprised anybody would hand over cash. The whole stock was pretty well cleared out by 2:00. People would come up to a painting, even some awful thing of a barn and a cow, done by a kid who'd never seen either, and this little kid would start talking to them and what the hell could they do?

We had to force them to ask \$50. It was sad what they thought the work was worth—fifty cents, a buck at most. I suppose some kids might learn how to be cute, just for the free holiday dinners and crappy toys. But I don't think these kids were putting on an act.

This one girl, Laetitia, I was helping. She's in third grade, seems like *Bartleby the Scrivener*—so remote, by herself. I'd think about bringing her here, if there were some way. I learned to hang around and shut up, and now and then she'd talk.

I was standing with her in front of her paintings, all marked for \$50. I tried to get her to raise the prices or at least vary them, but she said, "They're all the same." The paintings were faces, not realistic. I sure wasn't about to ask. They were frightening if you looked close. The eyes were so heavy with paint that they almost disappeared—the opposite of those eyes-follow-you-everywhere paintings. I don't know anything about this, and Laetitia deserves better, but all she's going to get is me, so I'm trying.

This fat, kind-faced white woman comes up and stands looking at the paintings for maybe five minutes, moving her eyes back and forth from the art to Laetitia—like she had come up against something for which she had no defenses. I think there may be a lot of white women like that, living their lives in seclusion, decorating the suburbs and waiting to die. Maybe men, too, but hell with them.

All of a sudden this woman started to cry, not real loud, and just went over and hugged Laetitia. Laetitia let her, even hugged back. I was so surprised. The white woman kept crying and said something to Laetitia. All I heard was, “I’m so sorry.” She wrote a check for \$1000 and took the three paintings. She patted Laetitia’s shoulder as she left and Laetitia grabbed her hand for a minute. Boo hoo, I know. But it’s true.

The school made a shitpot full of money for the arts program. I’m not sure I want to volunteer again, not for a while. That’s a lousy response, I know. Maybe you all can help me. Please.

I’ve tried talking with Laetitia, but I couldn’t navigate past her silences. She probably thought I was trying to get something out of her. Maybe she was worried I’d make her give the money back—but I’m ashamed I said that. I think it was only that I’m a cop and she knows that I’m not a friend. She’s got a lot to lose by talking to me, she figures. This is getting gooey, and I have to remind myself that we’re talking about some serious charges. That word “innocent,” Mary and Plain both convinced me, is disabling for kids, empties them out, renders them helpless against adult protectors. I can see that, but what if some kind of sex did occur with Brandon and Missy? Even without the idea of innocence, we’d agree that little kids lack the maturity to consent to sex. That’s what lies behind the age of consent laws: minors cannot consent to sex.

Of course all the commune kids but Willy were themselves minors, legally incapable of consenting to sex. In a way, what allegedly happened is impossible. Consensual sex among kids

unable to consent to it? Still, the courts have been dealing with this for decades and have no trouble making older kids competent to induce sex with the younger—to commit rape. The criminal becomes the victim if the partner is slightly older—consent is impossible.

None of the defendants raised these points. I now and then tried to interest them in the clumsy connection inherent in age of consent laws, but they didn't take the bait. I guess you don't go to the accused for an interesting conversation on the charges facing them.

Did these kids do it? Did Plain, Willy, Mary, Moo, L.L. have what most people would call sex with Brandon and/or Missy? Did they? Depends on what time of day it is when I ask. Mostly, I am sure they didn't. Sometimes, you know, I almost think I haven't the capacity to understand, will always be wondering—and detesting myself for stopping there.

And another question: where are they now and who put them there? That's not the only question that comes into the room now.

**So, let's turn to Willy.**

Willy offers lots of obvious material for psychologists to chew on, right? Wrong, at least, in the case of these two court doozies. They slogged through his psychoses as if he were a kid worried only about acne.

The first one said that Willy's strategy for dealing with unresolved issues was to overachieve. What had appeared earlier in his life as expressions of rage now came out as excessive commitment to "*rewarded performance*." She noted the mild anti-social tendencies, seemed to forget his depression, and concluded that his "*introverted compensatory modeling*" was consistent with "*seeking out unchallenging romantic partners, e.g., younger ones*."

The second, the labeler, contented himself with slapping "*Emotionally Dysregulated Personality Disorder Prototype*" on him:

—Emotions spiral out of control, leading to extremes of anxiety, rage, sadness.

—Tends to feel inadequate, inferior, or a failure

—Tends to feel unhappy or despondent

—Tends to feel at the mercy of forces outside his control

—Tends to feel life has no meaning

—Tends to react to criticism with feelings of rage or humiliation

—Wants to punish self, avoids opportunities for pleasure or gratification

—Tends to catastrophize; is prone to see problems as disastrous

—Has a distorted body image, sees self as unattractive, repellant

—Tends to be hostile (whether consciously or unconsciously)

My social worker buddy said, “William’s early problems seem to have been overt. Now they are moderate and internalized, emerging as mild depression, under control, and occasional feelings of inadequacy. He feels little confidence around women, perhaps, but he has had conventional sexual experiences, more than many his age, and seems to me much like most teenagers whose adaptations are rocky, but, over time, successful enough.”

Caitlin told me that she was most worried about Willy. It’s conventional wisdom to keep defendants out of the witness box, but there were reasons why she called them. In the absence of much evidence, she figured she had a good chance in any he-said, she-said. Three of the kids—Mary, Plain, and L.L.—figured to make fine witnesses—polite, articulate, and smart enough not to overreact. I would have thought that L.L. was doubtful, but that’s one reason I’m not an attorney. Moo was “an uncertainty,” Caitlin said, “because he seems less mature and stable. I don’t know how mature or stable any of them is, really, but the others put on a good show. His extreme youth is good, though. You notice how wee he

is, and how pretty when he's dressed up? You will when I get through dressing him. Plain is a no-brainer, as is Mary. But Willy?"

So why is Willy a problem? She told me, bluntly enough, "He's not as comely as the others and he's older. The looks might work in his favor, as he doesn't present the problems the pretty kids do: misplaced eroticism, class resentment, and the general antagonism felt by the plain and conventional toward the unconventional and the beautiful. ("Oh, I know," I said to Caitlin; "I've had to deal with that all my life!" She laughed.) "Willy's looks can be fiddled with, but age is a biggie. You know sweet Phil's not going to let the jury forget he is no minor. Willy also can be mopey, which is exactly the impression you don't want." "He'll say the right stuff, not let Phil get to him, I don't think. That's the issue with Jason. No, I worry about Willy being believed. If any of these kids fits the part of a screwed-up teen unable to get any age-appropriate tail, it's Willy—fits the profile most people entertain of a child-molester."

Willy's courtroom performance didn't seem to me all that bad. He was dressed in a tan sweater and brown jeans—looked very good. He answered in a bright voice I never got from him myself. That part was excellent. He wasn't perfect: he did get a little hot with Timmons. Here's some of it, Caitlin first.

Caitlin: William, you are now enrolled at Metropolitan College, is that right?

Willy: Yes, I am.

Caitlin: Do you have a major?

Willy: English, I think. I may double major; I also like French.

Caitlin: You were an honors student in high school.

[Timmons. I wonder if my learned colleague could ask a question sometime soon, maybe about the charges?

Caitlin: Your Honor, these questions go to establishing character.

Judge: Yes, yes. Objection overruled, but get to the point, Ms. Moore.]

Caitlin: Would it be fair to say that one of the things holding the group together was the chance to have serious discussions?

Willy: Yes, I think what drew us together was our interest in fundamental questions about how to lead our lives. We did also discuss social issues, some philosophy and books; but we kept coming back, selfishly I suppose, to us, what we sought to be and do. We were anxious not to live by assumptions, to slide into the usual sort of automatic life.

Caitlin: Can you tell me more?

Willy: We were all, some of us in different ways, repelled by the lives our parents were living—and all adults we could see. No offense.

Caitlin: I see. . . .

Willy: Excuse me. But our impulse wasn't negative, which is what I've made it sound. We weren't just rebounding. We didn't believe the just shall live by faith alone, as *The Bible* says, but we did believe the just shall live by questioning. The idea is never to stop, to say, "This is OK."

Caitlin: Didn't you spend time in discussion groups devoted to serious issues?

Willy: Some.

Caitlin: Were you also active in after school activities devoted to the welfare of others?

Willy: Me or the group?

Caitlin: You—no, the group—and you. If you would.

Willy: We did some tutoring and organized an art show—other activities. I don't want to exaggerate this. We tried to avoid doing too much, as it's a goody-good trap, very obedient to standard scripts, a way to get pats on the head.

Caitlin: But nonetheless you did quite a bit of work for others.

Willy: Honestly, not all that much. I did less than most, partly because I was working and partly because I didn't want to. Lots of high-school kids spend many hours on charity. You have to do that to get into schools with big reputations and that sort of thing. Ours

was less organized, maybe; and some of it was very successful, I'd say. But it'd be wrong to think of us as a service organization.

Caitlin: Do you regard the porn films as daring, confronting adult restrictions?

Willy: No.

Caitlin: Why not?

Willy: They were more put-ons of porn films, or what we imagine porn films are. Some of us haven't seen any. I had seen several. We were making fun of those films, where it's just getting to the raw sex act as fast as possible. We did the opposite, slowed it down, ridiculously. Of course we also thought that'd turn people on.

Caitlin: But mainly these were, would you say, parodies? The intent was humorous.

Willy: Yeah, OK. Certainly there was nothing hard-core about the ones we made.

Caitlin: So, in the films, William, did you engage in or simulate sexual activities?

Willy: No, I did technical work—camera, editing, lighting. There really was not what you'd call sex in any, so there wasn't any question of simulating anything.

Caitlin: Did you involve Brandon and Missy in these?

Willy: No, of course not.

Caitlin: Did you ever have sexual or erotic contact with either Brandon or Missy?

Willy: No.

Caitlin: Did you ever touch their genitals?

Willy: No.

Caitlin: Their bottoms?

Willy: Not touch, but swat—you know, in games. We'd play basketball and stuff, where it happens—all the time, as encouragement. Watch any game.

Caitlin: Sexual swats?

Willy: Of course not. No more than The Green Bay Packers do. Maybe one could say that was sexual in a homosocial sports way, but no more than that.

Caitlin: Thank you.

Willy is one of those agonizing witnesses who is both clever and so inept at tying things up that Caitlin should have got him out of there faster. The more he talked, the more he left uncovered. Timmons' questioning was all over the place, maybe part of a plan to suggest that, no matter where he probed, darkness lay.

Timmons: You say there was no overt sex in the films you shot. Is that because your plans were cut short when you were caught?

Willy: I don't understand.

Timmons: Had you been able to proceed with your plans, were you going to introduce what normal humans might call "sex?"

Willy: We talked about it, and considered early on leading up to simulated sex, but soon dropped that idea. Moo—Jason, I mean—had all along argued for never getting to sex. I think it was clear we were going to run out of interest long before we got to that point. We were getting bored, very bored. It's a lot of work.

Timmons: Is that what determined what you did or didn't do: interest, boredom?

Willy: Yes.

Timmons: No moral or ethical considerations?

Willy: I didn't say that. It's more complex.

Timmons: I see. You want to explain? I don't want to cut you off. Are you saying that moral and ethical issues were going to be introduced later in the film series?

Willy: Not exactly. These were put-ons, not intended as social commentary. Sorry. You asked about why we did things generally.

Timmons: And you said your motivations had nothing to do with morality, as we who are not honor students might understand it.

[Caitlin: Objection. Judge: Sustained. Mr. Timmons, please do not badger the witness or rephrase his answers in ways so obviously

prejudicial. The jury is instructed to disregard the last statement of the District Attorney.]

Timmons: William, you say that, as an honors student, you were disgusted by the lives of adults around you?

Willy: [pausing several seconds] It had nothing to do with being any sort of student. But—yes.

Timmons: Your parents, your teachers, artists, poets, your President?

Willy: Adults generally.

Timmons: What disgusted you?

Willy: Complacency. The death of the imagination, the death of the heart. Everybody's struggling for what nobody really wants.

Timmons: Did you rehearse that answer, may I ask.

Willy: Yes.

Timmons: It was what we used to call "the rat race" that disgusted you?

Willy: I think we were trying to be more positive. We didn't spend time worrying about adults or the system that drives them.

Timmons: In what way were you positive?

Willy: We agreed to some ground rules. . . . Excuse me. Let me start over. We weren't interested in understanding why other lives seemed to us poor. We were trying to find positive answers, different ways to lead our lives.

Timmons: We've heard that phrase before—different ways to lead your lives. What does that mean? You're the oldest of the lot, and you should know.

Willy: Being older has nothing to do with it. What we're after isn't something that comes to you as you get older; it's more like something you lose. I imagine younger kids might have more of a grip on all this than we do.

Timmons: Is that the reason you were so irresistibly attracted to younger kids?

[Objection. Sustained.]

Timmons: I'm a little lost here myself, not being an Honor Student. You say that "it" is something you lose. Can you help me with this "it"? What is it you lose?

Willy: Curiosity, the fun in finding problems, extending them, not solving them.

Timmons: So, back to seeking out difference, your Journal often refers to your group as a gang. There seems to be general agreement among all five of you problem-finders that you desperately wanted to be a gang. Does belonging to a gang, committing felonies, strike you as a blindingly original way to live?

Willy: No, you're right. The gang idea was a phase. It looks pretty juvenile at this distance, but I don't think it was a mistake. It probably allowed us access to other ways of being. You must understand that it's not as simple as being original. We're not naive.

Timmons: I must understand that? So you were seeking other things, not simply trying to find a new mold to pour yourselves into? Have I got that right?

Willy: I guess so. Your phrasing it is so sarcastic. But OK. We were trying other things.

Timmons: Other things?

Willy: Other things.

Timmons: Such as the thrilling and challenging lives of child pornographers?

Willy: Like charity and book clubs and helping kids with literacy problems and art and making our house over and trying to face hard questions and live our lives deliberately, also trying to sustain a real community among us.

Timmons: Was Ms. LaVelle in the community?

Willy: [pausing] Not exactly. She was a guest.

Timmons: [mugging and pretending to be dumfounded] She wasn't in the gang?

Willy: By the time she moved in, we'd dropped the gang idea, as you know very well. Not original. It's also possible that

originality is not the best goal or that it might be found not in particular activities but in one's readiness to move in and out of them.

Timmons: Fascinating. So you patted Brandon and Missy on the butt in your quest for activities to move in and out of?

Willy: Just playing with them, as I've explained earlier.

Timmons: Sorry to be slow. What kind of play involved touching private parts?

Willy: Their butts, I said.

Timmons: Were they clothed as you were touching these private parts?

Willy: Of course. And I said swatting, not touching.

Timmons: Did you ever see them naked?

Willy: Kind of.

Timmons: Describe for us, please, what you mean.

Willy: We lived together—and I saw them, one or the other, running down the hall to the bathroom, that kind of thing.

Timmons: Did you plan to be there when that happened?

Willy: Of course not.

Timmons: Did the sight excite you?

Willy: What? They are kids—of course not.

Timmons: Did fondling their buttocks excite you?

[Objection: Sustained.]

Timmons: Did you ever see them in their underwear?

Willy: Yes. They're just little kids, and sometimes they'd come down to breakfast that way or sit and watch television or play board games.

Timmons: Was everyone in the commune this casual about nudity and undress?

Willy: Not in front of one another and certainly not in front of Brandon and Missy.

Timmons: You just induced them to display themselves for *you*? Never mind. I withdraw the question.

There was more. I got the feeling at the time that Timmons was making the jury restless. Sometimes he got Willy to say careless or even suggestively incriminating things. Other times, it seemed he was badgering, straining to make the normal into the perverse. On the whole, Willy did a good job of pointing out the unfairness of Timmons' questions without getting too angry.

Anyways, Timmons went after him, he told me, because Willy was the oldest, now a legal adult. I asked Timmons if he believed the five were guilty, together or singly. He actually came back with those tv lines—I'm just representing the people, the question is up to the jury. I'd never heard an actual being talk like that. I pressed him, but no luck. Finally, I got mad and said that if he wasn't convinced of their guilt he sure as hell was doing dirty work trying to put them away for life. His response consisted of counter-attacks—"Hey, John, who brought the case to us in the first place?"—and clichés about "having trust in the wisdom of juries." I told him I knew neither of us trusted the wisdom of juries. We parted on bad terms then but have put all that behind us and are back now to where we were before: mutual dislike.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I talked with two of Willy's teachers, the computer instructor and an English teacher. I discovered nothing about his character but a little about his mind.

Me: Mr. Casper, you teach computers?

Casper: No, Detective. I teach computer science, mathematics, and systems theory. I do not teach how to tweet, play games, download songs, or access porn.

Me: I see—sorry. Can you tell me anything about William?

Casper: Best student I've seen. I don't know why in hell he's going to Metro. He could be at M.I.T. Should be, for Christ's sake.

Me: Was he ever troublesome?

Casper: What do you mean? This isn't kindergarten. William's a fine mathematician, ingenious. Was making inroads into theoretical mathematics; very few do that.

Me: Was he dedicated?

Casper: He had something like complete concentration when it was turned on, but he wasted time tutoring underprivileged kids and such.

Me: He tutored poor kids?

Casper: Taught them some stuff—language. I suppose it gave them what he called basic literacy. Once he tried teaching programming. Pearls before swine.

Me: Did you like him—William?

Casper: He was interesting, quick, and he had something close to ideas.

Me: You miss him?

Casper: Not him, his head.

The English teacher had a different take on Willy and displayed a personality less like that of Joseph Goebbels.

Me: Ms. Ramsey, would you tell me a little bit about William's work in English?

Ramsey: William was an excellent student. If you're asking whether he displayed criminal tendencies in his writing, please don't.

Me: You mean he did and you don't feel you can tell me?

Ramsey: [laughing] I guess I was on a high horse. No, Willy didn't display criminal tendencies, whatever they are. Willy was actually a very nice boy, polite and guarded.

Me: Guarded?

Ramsey: Safe. For a while, he hid behind the declaration that he was "a science geek."

Me: He was pretending?

Ramsey: He was guarded, as I say, but he may well have thought he couldn't write. That's a self-imposed limitation kids sometimes internalize.

Me: What was his writing like?

Ramsey: Actually, excellent in some ways. Without question an A student. That was his limitation, too. He could write excellent essays on any subject whatever.

Me: Formulaic, by the book?

Ramsey: They weren't lifeless, but he wasn't taking chances. So I decided he needed pushed into risk-taking. I don't know if that was a bad idea, though the result wasn't exactly the outpouring of the authentic William I imagined I was hoping for. Actually, there never is an outpouring of the authentic anybody, as I should have known. It doesn't happen that way; language doesn't work that way.

Me: So, with William?

Ramsey: He started writing poetry filled with anger, anguish, desperate longing.

Me: That sounds real enough.

Ramsey: Yes, doesn't it? It probably is, but it's what happens when nine out of ten teenagers take to poetry. Once they strip away a layer, there's this great sea of banal emotionality. I'm sure you know.

Me: No, but I can imagine.

Ramsey: William left his comfort zone, analytical essays, and found he was better off back there. It may have been therapeutic, but I couldn't help him as a poet. He went from stiff discipline to none at all.

Me: Nice work.

Ramsey: Wasn't it, though! Teacher of the year!

Me: I'd vote for you. Would you say he was immature?

Ramsey: I don't mean to be evasive, but I don't think that's a useful word, detective.

Me: Well, what would you say?

Ramsey: That William is a capable kid who has a fair idea of his strengths and weaknesses, that he is not a poet, and that he is completely innocent of these charges.

Me: Oh? You found that out from the English class?

Ramsey: I can't get my mind around a story of child molesting that has William in it.

Me: The fact that it doesn't make a good story doesn't mean Willy isn't guilty.

Ramsey: Oh, Mr. Hard-Boiled! Take my word for it, he's innocent.

Me: I wish I could. Your word's worth taking.

I can hardly believe I allowed that stuff to come out of my mouth. It's as cringe-inducing as Willy's poetry must have been. But she's kind of enchanting, Ms. Ramsey. She deserves much better than "your word's worth taking."

Looking back, there's a story here—one where Ms. Ramsey and I take our bantering to a neighborhood bar and everything escalates, driving us after several drinks to a couch (my place or hers?) and to a developing, quite heart-warming relationship, not short-term either. I haven't seen her since.

Caitlin told me that Willy's friends from high school, surprisingly quite a few, had most of them scattered and that those left behind were "loyal, steadfast, and shallow." They would testify

to Willy's friendliness, reliability, and refusal to cheat on exams. Willy was a good guy who managed to go through high school doing not one damned memorable thing. Violent as a young kid, he capped his inner volcano. No wonder he was depressed.

Moore put a couple of Metro U computer geeks on the stand to demonstrate that Willy was regular in attendance, helpful to less able students. In talking with these kids, I did stumble on a few minutes of surprising conversation with one:

Me: So, Ted, I'm still trying to get a feel for Willy.

Ted: You get inside the heads of criminals? Are you able to *become* them as they work themselves up to the point of absolutely having to kill?

Me: Well, Ted, I don't do that myself. That's film noir mythology, spooky-psycho profiler stuff. I try to stay outside, and don't have trouble doing so.

Ted: You keep away because it's dangerous to let them inside your head?

Me: It's dangerous to let Hannibal Lecter inside your head, but most people I deal with are not homicidal masterminds.

Ted: [obviously disappointed] Oh.

Me: But, to drop the cynicism, Ted—yes, you're right—I want to stay away, because there is some terror involved. I don't want to look closely at why I have to *keep my distance*.

Ted: You do and you don't? I mean, you feel drawn and repulsed?

Me: I don't like the part of me that resonates with the way they think. But in order to do my job, I have to approach them with something like empathy, imaginative projection. It's something I can do, but I can't face doing it directly. I have to let it happen, but I cannot acknowledge that it's happening.

Ted: So, with Willy, you want to get inside him indirectly, through me?

Me: We were talking about criminals, Ted. Do you think Willy is a criminal?

Ted: I just meant whether you wanted to get inside *my* head to empathize with Willy,

Me: I don't want to hurt you, Ted.

Ted: That's OK. It's not like I know what Willy did with the porn movies and those little kids—but I am sure he did nothing wrong, nothing to hurt kids, ever.

Me: Did you and Willy talk about sex—that sort of thing?

Ted: Talk—ha!

Me: What?

Ted: No, I don't mean we *did* it. God, man. I mean, he showed me all these sites. Well, we found them together—wasn't like he initiated it.

Me: You'd watch together?

Ted: Yeah. Look, I don't want to get him in trouble. I was in it as much as Willy.

Me: I promise I won't turn you in. So you did watch sites with sex, nudity, kinks?

Ted: Yeah.

Me: And the kinks were—?

Ted: A whole range—bestiality, S/M, big asses—sorry, butts.

Me: That's OK. And kids?

Ted: Not real kids—people in their thirties or even more, trying to look like kids—frilly dresses, ugh! Newsgroups with “lolita” in their title, but no kids.

Me: Can you tell me if these kid sites seemed familiar to Willy?

Ted: Kid sites? I just said that the kids on these sites were obviously not kids. They'd shave, you know, all over.

Me: I see. Did Willy seem to be familiar with these sites?

Ted: I don't know. We just found them. You sure I'm not in trouble?

Me: You're not in trouble. How about downloading pictures?

Ted: Yes.

Me: Including pictures of underage girls, or those represented as underage?

Ted: Yes. You understand, Lieutenant, that “downloading” just means looking at them. You go to one of these sites, the picture comes up, and that’s what “downloading” is. The word sounds more, I don’t know, active than what we did.

Me: I see. Were some of these sites featuring boys as well?

Ted: Yes—a few—and the boys were even older, at least in their forties.

Me: Did you spend most of your time with the pretend-kid sites?

Ted: Oh, no, not especially—all kinds of kinky stuff.

Me: How often did you do this?

Ted: Two-three times—when we got together and looked—at school, too. That was real smart.

Me: Did Willy seem particularly interested in any of these categories?

Ted: No. I couldn’t tell, really. I don’t mean to lie. I couldn’t tell.

Me: I understand. Let me try once more: how did he react to the pictures?

Ted: You know, he’d laugh. We’d laugh. Oh, and—

Me: Yes?

Ted: Once he said—I remember because it made me feel bad for laughing, “Poor little kids—can you imagine if they really were kids?”

I wish I could have steered the conversation somewhere beyond this, but I could not. And I couldn’t quite handle that final comment of Willy’s. Poor little kids, indeed!

After the case went to the jury, I asked Willy:

Me: Tell me, did you visit sites that purported to display images of underage children?

Willy: No, of course not.

Me: Did you download pictures from such sites?

Willy: How could I? I just said I didn’t visit them.

Me: OK, William, let's start over. I know you did visit such sites and download images. You're not charged with that and I'm not turning it over to the D.A. I'm not trying to trick you into incriminating yourself.

Willy: OK. Please call me Willy. Nobody calls me William.

Me: Thanks. Tell me honestly, are you turned on by naked kids—pictures of them?

Willy: Not of kids, of course. The sites purporting to be of teens were old hairy women and guys, shaved badly.

Me: So nudity has no effect on you?

Willy: I didn't say that, Detective.

Me: Like Brandon and Missy—you testified that you saw them naked.

Willy: Yeah—so?

Me: But you said that didn't turn you on. But a picture might?

Willy: How is this relevant? I didn't look at pictures of actual kids. The theory is that pictures can be made abstract, impersonal, which is key to porn. But that has nothing to do with any of this.

Me: So you didn't fantasize about Brandon and Missy?

Willy: You know the answer to that.

Me: Yeah, I do. I know you did download with another—a kind of porn party, right?

Willy: Oooohhh—I'm impressed.

Me: Who was this person?

Willy: I won't tell you.

Me: Why not?

Willy: Downloading is a felony, I think. Isn't it? You told me it didn't matter in my case, what with so many charges against me. I don't believe you, of course, but it would sure be different for an innocent person.

Me: You're not innocent?

Willy: Got me. Just like tv: "OK, I'm guilty! Lock me up! I can't take it anymore!"

Me: Why didn't you invite this friend to join the group?

Willy: Our group developed a being of its own. It wasn't a club.

Me: JoAnne—did she join?

Willy: Interesting, isn't it? I suppose her moving into the house changed things, even apart from the attempted blackmail. But she was only squatting as a charity case we didn't know how to disengage from. I guess you could say we were naive.

Me: Did you love Brandon and Missy?

Willy: Yes.

Me: Want to qualify that?

Willy: You either understand or you don't. I think you do, but I don't know if you'll allow yourself to.

Me: Um.

Willy: What you want to know is whether I had sex with the kids. No. I could tell you that I have had sex with an underaged girl but so what?

Me: You did?

Willy: When I was seventeen, I had sex with a girl who was sixteen, possibly fifteen. I didn't ask. But she was a year behind me in school.

Me: Were you turned on by Plain?

Willy: You're not interested in me having sex with an underaged girl?

Me: No.

Willy: And you want to know if I was turned on by Plain? Yes, I was.

Me: And jealous of Moo, who was also?

Willy: [laughing] I see you've read the Record. It was complicated. I was turned on by all four. Just as likely I was jealous of Moo, because Mary kissed him a lot. Mary's hot, too, as I bet you know. Also, Moo isn't bad—grows on you.

Me: Do you think Plain was turned on by Brandon and Missy?

Willy: What? Oh, you think I wanted to please Plain, so I went along with molesting the kids? Gee, Detective, I guess you got me again!

Me: The fact that you anticipated it doesn't mean I wasn't right. The fact that it's a dumb sounding idea also doesn't mean it wasn't dead on—maybe.

Willy: Um.

Me: You don't come across in the Journal as dependent, but are you?

Willy: Yes, I am. If you ask me to elaborate, I won't.

Me: Anything you'd like to ask me?

Willy: Yeah. I think you can see how unlikely it is that any of us did anything to the little kids, except help them. I think you figure it's likely that JoAnne LaVelle would try blackmail first and charges second, not because she's evil but because she's shallow and without any operable morality. You're absolutely certain we're innocent. So why did you get us into this terrible situation? Why did you do it?

Me: It doesn't matter much what I'm thinking, Willy, and my inclinations are less clear than you suppose. Certainly, my heart is with you and most of my mind. But you put yourselves in a vulnerable situation by doing such a lot of eccentric things, including criminal activities. Messing around with porn films doesn't suggest that engaging in some kind of sex with kids would never cross your minds. You seem deliberately amoral. I can't assume you're ordinary. You put yourselves miles away from that sort of thinking, especially when you are acting in concert. I tilt toward you, but that's not important.

Willy: But doesn't it matter how much you tilt? I still think you're tilting so far you're toppling. Doesn't that matter?

Me: Not much. Don't believe detective novels. We go by the law and not by hunches. I don't know whether you're innocent or not. OK, I would be surprised, now, if you were guilty. But in terms of the way I do my job, it doesn't matter much.

Willy: So you don't care if you send innocent people to jail—forever.

Me: I don't have anything to do with that. If I know they're innocent, I wouldn't have them arrested. I don't know that you're innocent, not in the way knowledge is constructed legally.

Willy: And you don't care.

Me: Oh, Willy. . . . I don't know what to say. You can't possibly know—I care a lot, but not for reasons that would do you any good.

Willy: So fuck us, I guess.

Me: I think it would be understandable if you wanted to say, "Fuck you!"

Willy: OK. Fuck you.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

This is a good time to insert what I found out from Moo's parents. Moo seems to have been a difficult child, all in all, and it became clear that they moved from Missouri in hopes of helping him. Pretty selfless. Here are excerpts of their talk.

Me: Can you tell me about Jason and how you regard these charges?

Eleanor: They're ridiculous. Jason is an exceptional young boy, quite gifted. But. . . .

Chad: No need for that now.

Me: Jason?

Chad: Well, Jason is no criminal, but he shut us out.

Eleanor: We tried to help.

Me: What did you do?

Chad: We moved here, hoping. . . .

Eleanor: We lived our lives for him. Maybe we made a mistake doing that.

Chad: Maybe?

Eleanor: I mean, we may have created an obligation, and. . .

Me: OK, but do you think Jason may have committed this crime?

Eleanor: Oh, no!

Me: Why exactly did you feel you had to leave your happy life in Missouri.

Chad: Eleanor and I thought we could give our son the sort of opportunities our community there could not provide.

Eleanor: I feel very guilty about this. Chad is a dear, saying we both decided to move together, but really I was the one pressing it. Thank you, dear.

Me: Excuse me for interrupting, but had you been close to your son prior to moving?

Eleanor: Oh yes, very.

Chad: Not so much.

Me: Well?

Chad: We probably convinced ourselves that we were, but it's easy to imagine.

Me: And after you moved?

Chad: He became even more silent and self-absorbed.

Eleanor: He did get very distant. And angry, too. For no reason.

Chad: Less than no reason.

Me: Does it occur to you that most parents encounter pretty much what you have and that Jason's behavior was typical for his age?

Eleanor: Oh yes! He's a really good boy down deep.

Chad: Everyone says that: typical teenage behavior. That's no help.

Me: Well. . . .

Evelyn: He's the only thing we have in our life.

Chad: I hope that's not so.

Back to the Journal—

### **The Great Suburb Raid**

**Plain here. Without anybody planning it, we got into our truck after dinner and went out to fuck up the suburbs. Trouble was it was 8 o'clock at night on a Wednesday, not a time experienced sociopaths would choose for mayhem. We tried bashing mailboxes with a baseball bat from a moving car (lifting the idea from some movie), but Moo about killed himself hitting one too far down on the bat and having his arms yanked damned near out of their sockets. They made it look easy in the movie—which it ain't. We then went back and got some paint and tried to throw it at front doors. We got two pretty good, but at the third place, the door opened before we could launch the paint. This older woman, pretty but with crossed eyes, came out and said, "Hi, children! It's so nice to**

see such dear young children. Wouldn't you come in, have some fruit punch?" Batty old dame. But we did.

That sort of took the lift out of our peckers. We went home and out again at 3 a.m.: tore up some shrubs and pissed (males only) in a swimming pool. But twice dogs attacked and nearly got us so we finally said fuck it and came home. I hope we're not ruined for violence. We seem very poor at it. I blame Moo. What he should have done was set fire to the house across the street rather than saving it. Those damned neighbors are now *visiting* and bringing us stuff—marshmallows and chocolate candy squares (really good but gooey). That's two groups of chummy neighbors! We may have to rub 'em out.

### Ninth Council Meeting

I get to do this report, too—lucky Plain.

This was short. We talked about whether we'd lost our edge. Willy, who is now a college freshman and knows, said he thought we were worrying too much (which I agree with, so it must be so). He said we should "ride it out," that we were in a low point on a curve and that things would take care of themselves. L.L. said she pretty much agreed (*what?*) but that we should be alert to opportunities for conflict. "What kind of conflict?" Moo asked. L.L. said, "If you have to ask, then we're in trouble."

We spent more time than it deserved talking about what L.L. meant and what kind of conflict we wanted. Jesus.

Moving along, we have a few ideas that will unfold in time. Mary kept bringing up the movie project, which I think has everybody on edge.

I think we decided to find conflict, at least notice it when it comes. That fiasco with the batty treating us as friendly callers worried us. How are we gonna lead our lives? Willy says we should let that take care of itself, and I think we all partly agree. Laying out plans to be spontaneous is dumb, but letting it take

care of itself is like drifting, and we don't want to drift into being nice kids with secrets—or kids who hurt the helpless.

### **Ninth Journal Entry**

Mary gets to start, yes I do. We devoted the last journal entry to sex, a good subject, so I'll keep it up. (You'll all take "keep it up" as a clumsy joke.) I was wondering, do you boys feel embarrassed getting erections—in class and in the lunch line? And, now that I'm to the subject of stiffies, I think boys are too self-conscious, since nobody ever notices. Except in bathing suits. Also, of course, boys wearing dress clothes, work clothes, tight pants, jeans, and saggies. And in class and on the bus and bending over and standing up and in movies and at football games and at dances and in the hall and at dinner and sitting on couches and walking and jogging. Otherwise, stiffies just aren't there.

I was wondering if anybody observed that none of us has made any boyfriends or girlfriends outside the group. I know that all I think about is us, and it just struck me that always before I was on the lookout for friends, sexual or romantic. Not stalking, but aware. Now, I just come straight here after school or work. Except at lunch, where I don't usually see you guys so eat with different people. There's this guy—you all know Rodney, the football star?—who often comes up to me in the hall and yesterday sat and ate his smelly tuna sandwich with me, my own being a gourmet item Plain made in his frenzy Wednesday night—thanks, Plain. Anyhow, Rodney—what in hell is his last name?—seems nice, and he's handsome in a bulk cheese sort of way. He's trying hard to make himself interesting, or maybe he really does read and have ideas he wants to discuss. It seems like a show, but there's nothing too much wrong with that.

Ordinarily, I think I would have been interested in him, but I'm not. I think he senses that, which makes me all the more

attractive. I don't think a thing about Rodney unless he's in my line of sight, and that indifference makes him regard me as something from another world.

What it comes to is that Rodney is in love with me. I imagine he thinks about me all the time and tries to steer his friends into talking about me. He's all moony, but not because Rodney is an asshole. I think that's what love is—somebody you desperately want and can't find a route that leads anywhere near. The other's an alien, separated from you by vapors and opaque screens and miles and miles of air. He is in a lot of pain and it'll be terrible when he gives up. There's nothing imaginary about it.

I wish I could spare him—and me, too. I thought maybe if I said, “Hey, Rodney, quit talking about Nietzsche and let me suck your dick!” that'd do it, break the spell and release us both. But it wouldn't—he'd just think it was an angel offering him a blow job. Maybe a lot of kids in my position (and me before) would take up with Rodney, partly from feeling flattered, partly because that's what we are supposed to do. Maybe somebody might fall in love back at him, but I don't see how that can happen when things reach this stage of blank indifference. Somebody's got to be on earth or there's no ground at all. But if that's true, two people can never really be in love at the same time. One of them is always being a little bit real.

I wanted to ask whether we are too tied up with one another exclusively. As I write this, I'm not sure why I bring it up. That's not quite true is it, Mary? Kids come up and say, “You guys a gang?” “You guys in a commune?” It's just curious how we've gotten so close without really recognizing it. We're all in the same rowboat now, right? It's really that we are inside one another's minds, know answers before we ask. That's frightening—but it's no worse than being in one another's underpants—wearing, I mean.

Toodle-oodle—it's Moodle! I'm the worst person to talk about what Mary brought up, but I'll try. It's not like I have anything much else on my mind. I'm just saying that I sit back and wait for something to think about. Otherwise I don't think. Could that be?

When I said I'd talk about what Mary brought up, I didn't mean erections, which nobody that I know calls "stiffies" ("boners," maybe). I'll just say, yeah, it's embarrassing, and it can be uncomfortable. Sometimes you have to rearrange things in that area, and I've been caught doing that twice—by girls. Once, last year, this girl, I don't know her name, saw me in the hall, made a fuss: "Like why don't you go someplace private? Can you be more disgusting?" The other time, it was in pre-calculus, and this black girl you may not know, Myeesha Jackson, happened to look over as I was fumbling there. She was nice: "Moo, you must have a huge Schwanz—all that huffin and puffin." Then she laughed. Later she passed me a note: "Boner Boy! You want a job as a pole dancer, I know a guy. Good pay!" I don't know why I said she was black—that has nothing to do with it. OK, that's my contribution. Plain, you have to, too, and Willy. L.L. gets off the hook, unless there's something girls have problems with like that, which I sure as hell wouldn't know. (Of course Plain and Willy wouldn't have the same difficulties I have, not a problem of the same scope or *magnitude*.)

On Mary's other topic. I noticed, too, that we're all here all the time unless we're working. I'm not complaining. Is that strange what we do?

I just realized I'd ordinarily say, "Isn't that fucking strange?" I wonder why I didn't. Do you guys think I'm changing? I'd really like to. I hope I have or will. Is it corny to say that I haven't much liked myself the way I was?

About us hanging around and doing stuff always as a group. I think it's the best thing. The one thing I worried about

most moving in here was getting bored. I thought we'd run out of things to say. Ha! I don't want to be anywhere else. I never know what's going to happen. I like looking at you guys. But it's more than that.

Speaking of looking, I was looking at myself naked in the mirror. (I can't believe I'm telling this.) If you stand on the bathtub ledge you can see pretty much your whole body, not your feet. I was standing there thinking about the movies we're to be making, seeing what I looked like. It's like I'd never noticed, except my face when I'm brushing my teeth. I look at my face, well not all that much. Yes, I do—a lot. Is that peculiar, or what? Maybe everybody does. But it isn't my face I'm talking about looking at.

I stood there a while. I'd say I looked OK in some parts and from some angles. I can't believe I just told you. I couldn't see my butt too well, but the sides looked OK, thighs and all—but at least no growths or purple birthmarks, one cheek bigger than the other. Maybe one of you could give me a report on my full-back view. Just kidding because, like each of us, I would die rather than expose myself.

Anyhow, I don't think I could stare at myself in the act of stripping. Why is that? I guess a lot of us have been saying that. Maybe being embarrassed about being anything but all dressed up or bare naked will make our movies hot, just because people will like to see us getting embarrassed. I could picture that, even if it is sick, getting off on other people being embarrassed. You've been saying that, but I just now got it.

Anyhow, I think the reason we are so tied up being together all the time is that we want it that way.

Well damn, Moo, but you're getting into things. You ask if you've changed, and I say you have, and I'm L.L., and you better *pay attention*. You're changing and you have the guts to encourage it. You're fun now. You're trying out things as they come at you rather than skipping out of their way. You're

willing to jump and crash. I like you—the way you move and swing your butt. Surprised I'd say that? Moo's not the only one who can undergo remarkable transformations, amazing growth and mystifying enlargements.

I'm embarrassed myself about the same things as you. Why are we so prudish? Liberated and enlightened types like us? Very odd, but so it is. I'd talk about it, but I have no insight. Help me.

Moo's willingness to talk about his butt leaves me speechless. I imagine you could turn it into a money-maker.

Moo asks if girls have anatomical problems that might parallel the public horrors brought about by boners. Breaking bra straps? Noticing that some boy is looking up your skirt? Well, that last is a minor issue for most. For me, it never was minor, even as a little kid, when my parents forced me into skirts. I think some girls have embarrassments when their periods start and maybe have accidents. Maybe if you're the first girl in your class to get breasts? I wish I could think of examples from my own experience to match Moo's. The closest is third grade, where I played Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz" and had this blue gingham dress on. It was starched and short and kept flying up on me during rehearsal. One girl told me the boys were watching. I was furious with the boys but couldn't even yell at them, since that would have involved using the word "panties," which was beyond me. I addressed my problem by wearing black tights under the skirt from that point on—not very Dorothy-like. Sorry, Moo. That's as good as I can do for now. I respect you for being so daring and open—and, Mary would say, sweet. And she'd be right.

What Moo says about us being with one another all the time is interesting. I almost said, "clinging to one another," but I'm trying not to fall back into that old cynicism. I'd love it if I could learn not to be cynical in that evasive, self-centered way. Skeptical, yeah, since that opens doors; cynical, nah. It's like

being a bully. How's that for never saying it once if six times will do. Like every teacher I've ever known, just about. And here I am being cynical. Lots of teachers are fine and don't repeat themselves. But how boring to qualify opinions and be fair. Maybe I can find out about me—if I think some and stop babbling. Sorry. I hope this is the worst paragraph I ever write.

Moo says we're together for no special reason. I'll go with that. I can't think of any reasons that are more persuasive than Moo's—his way of putting it seems so open.

Willy's turn. I'm doing fine in my classes, but the only class I like is freshman comp. Everyone is supposed to hate it (and most do) and here I am in computer science (for now), and all I like is writing themes. I write more than are assigned, though I don't turn in the extra ones. I get the feeling our teacher, though she's awfully nice, would not regard that as a favor.

I have some trouble admitting this—wonder why?—but I've been writing poetry. I showed one poem to Ms. Ramsey. She was polite, but didn't say it was good. I noticed that. I'm going to keep working. I'll bug you, but I'd rather wait until I get better—assuming I will. I have a feeling that writing poetry is not like roller skating, practice makes perfect. Maybe only one person in fifty million can really do it, no matter how hard they work. I don't mean that writing poetry doesn't take study and effort. It's not just, "Look in your heart and write." You could work and work and learn the craft and still not be a genuine poet, not even a bad one.

I don't care why we spend all our time together. It's great for me.

I'm OK talking about erections, though I can't remember many embarrassing moments. My mom once caught me masturbating in the bathroom. Just walked in and stood there a second—didn't say anything, but I felt like eating the magazine—a centerfold thing I was "pleasuring myself" with.

I shouldn't make fun of that phrase, which is sort of sweet and modest if you think of it.

I see what L.L. is saying about Moo being in process. He isn't always saying "fuck," he's not angry—dresses better—admires his butt in the mirror. I'll do a butt video for you, Moo, if you like—your butt, I mean. If you need privacy, I'll set it up and leave—just start the tape going, climb up, and shift around so the light catches it in its most irresistible grooves and valleys. I'd recommend soft focus, and be sure to rub Vaseline on the lens.

Hey, let's make some money while we're at it. As a warm-up to our porn films, we can do some stills on the internet, a pay site, only \$29.95 a month.

Just to show nobody's perfect, the CPA neglected to inform the public of Moo's heinous butt-viewing and its decisive connection to the charges he faced.

Plain—with construction details. I really enjoy that, the diagrams and the contractors and the work—and I'm learning a lot. These building guys are great—every one of them, seems like. I suppose some are pricks, but the ones we've had here are cool. They're patient and they all seem pretty witty. It's a kind of talk I'm not used to—like "You dumb fucking pretty boy, you're gonna hammer your pecker to the floorboard you do it that way. Here, let me show you." If I'm quick enough, I say, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." They just roar and punch me. How is it they seem so easy about stuff like that? Makes me easy, too. I know it sounds like locker-room joking, but it seems different. These are older guys who know what they're doing. Every job, they have to think and invent stuff and figure out details. I really like it that they let me hang around.

But I won't talk about the construction stuff.

We're staying with one another all the time, to hang onto the piece of clothesline you've all been putting your socks on,

because we are much hotter than anybody around. I'm always thinking that if I waste time with other people, I'll miss just the opportunity to play with Mary or L.L. or Moo or Willy.

Just kidding—not.

I respect what you've all said about embarrassing things—and Mary has to take her turn next time around. If she wants to, but Willy was really cool when he said he wasn't trying to force everybody to talk about their dicks popping through their flies while working a math problem at the board.

I guess I told you about my embarrassing sex experience—the boat house. But I'm really closer to L.L. Nobody caught me trying to deal with a boner, not that I know of. My skin-crawling embarrassment has to do with underpants, like L.L. In elementary school the idea that my waistband was showing would worry me. I have no idea why, but once in the sixth grade, this boy started chanting, "I see Pittsburgh; I see France" about me, and it was all I could do not to break into tears. I still have the same worry, as you know.

Just one more thing, though I'm not sure I'll write this until I do. I mean I'm not sure I want to write it and I'm not sure what it is I'll write. All my life I've been conscious of people looking at me, sometimes touching me—even relatives, kids my own age. When cousins wanted to wrestle or a friend, I'd react—and when they found ways to grab or brush against my whang or butt. I did react—but I thought I didn't. This is confusing.

Anyhow, some of these construction guys are like that, in a distant way. I've also noticed—and this is the harder part—that I've encouraged it. Flirted. And I think I've always done that, though I kept myself from realizing it until now.

What sucks is the frustration I've caused other people. If I was going to get them to come on to me, the least I could have done is let them fondle me or something. It's not like I couldn't

enjoy it, though I'm not sure about that. I'm so used to enticing others without giving.

If other people wanted to do whatever, who was I to care?

I could never say any of this to anybody but you guys. It sounds so conceited and stupid. I won't apologize, though, unless I just did. Can you help me—please?

## **Bedrooms**

L.L. here. Plain, I'd love to talk about this—we have lots in common—but I'm the one always complaining about talking personal outside the Journal. I'm moved by what you say. We will talk.

The bedroom remodel will start in three days. Get your shit out. I know it'll be unhandy, especially since we can't store stuff in the basement. Use the dining room. It'll be crummy for about four weeks.

I'm not going to reveal the details of the remodel. I'll just say things'll be nicer than we thought. Let it be a surprise. OK?

Plain is right about these guys. It's true even with me, though maybe not in the same way. Once they realize you're interested, they'll talk to you about anything. I'm amazed, too, like Plain, at how tough their work is. I like it that they have this surface ease—everything's going to be terrific; we'll have no problems, have a nice day—that they drop as soon as you seem human. They talk like guys in an old novel, but it doesn't ever sound phony. “Jesus, Missy, this is one fucked up hallway here, and you want how many closets, you addled old bat?” They seem to thrive on pretend hostility: they solve intricate problems without anybody noticing. They must hate customers. I'll bet they hate the indifference even more than the ignorance. Anyhow, Plain, maybe you and I can be pipe-fitters someday.

### **The Great Auto Theft**

Willy here. Downtown told us not to do this, and he was right. “Willy boy,” he said, “the problem with car heists is too many steps. It’s no more complicated, my friend, to build one of these automobiles than it is to remove one from its owner.” I asked him what he meant, though I was getting a glimmering. “It’s a question of steps, honey, and it’s like a dance. You know how simple it is to learn the lindy-hop?” I told him I didn’t, wasn’t too sure what it was. “Where was you born, you deprived white boy? Well, you seen it in real old movies, like jitterbugging. Sure you have—and you know how simple it is.” I told him I’d never done it. (I saw where all this was going, but didn’t want to interrupt the flow.) “Right,” he said, “You’d learn and do it good, dear Willy, but not in five minutes. There’s many a step has to be mastered. It’s not like slow shuffling. Once you have the auto, which in itself isn’t too difficult, you still have many jobs. New plates, new paint, new serial, new registration, finding a dealer, hustling the dealer or trusting him, working into the network, arranging your fair cut, maybe paying off a police friend or two, and fifteen or twenty more things. This is not to say that some slicks can’t make adequate livings off such a complicated process, but they are more likely teams than solo amateurs. It takes volume! It takes experience!” By then, I was bobbing along with his drift, but he wasn’t through: “You dearies wouldn’t think of going into counterfeiting, now, would you?” I said, “No.” “Why not?” I went along: many steps, too complicated, takes volume, takes experience. Downtown laughed that great laugh and punched me. I could talk to him for days.

Anyhow, we didn’t take his advice and ended up with something worse than being jailed: belly groveling humiliation.

The impulse for this terrible plan came from me and Moo. Mary was obviously skeptical but is devoted to going along with

any damned thing anybody thinks of. Plain and L.L. were nice, but did everything they could to derail the plan without being obvious. Plain said we should take one of his parents' cars. L.L. offered to substitute an Internet scam, setting people up with dates and guaranteeing that they'd fall in love. But Moo and I were pigheaded about grand theft auto. Maybe it was because we hadn't been getting along and this was a cooperative thing.

We cased out the streets down past the center of town and located this new-looking Toyota. Moo said Toyotas are good to steal because they're popular and the parts are worth a lot. I don't know how he knew that, but it sounded reasonable. It also sounded down and dirty, which put me right into the playacting role I'd been looking for.

So, middle of the night, a Wednesday, every one of us got up at 3:30 and drove down there. Actually, Plain was on us even then to go back, have a few beers, talk about being really "self-contained" by planning a theft, getting to the spot, and then by Jesus not doing it. We *could* do it, and then, whatdya know, we *wouldn't*. I know he was making it up as he went along, but I wish we had listened to him. If you *can* do a thing, why do it?

I'm trying to postpone the embarrassing parts— first, we jimmied the doors by wiggling a hook inside the windows. Downtown had taught L.L. how to do that and given her this tool, a cross between a coat hanger and a crowbar. It has a cool name, if I could only think of it. Then we hot-wired the car. That didn't go well. It was my responsibility, and again Downtown had told me how. (To be fair to me, Downtown's teaching was all, "You do it like this, honey, but don't do it. I'm telling you, don't do it or you are going to have old Downtown posting bail.") It seemed easy, just like the movies, holding two wires together and getting a spark. When I touched them they didn't spark, and when they finally did, no barroom-barroom. Mary and Plain both started laughing, and I got frustrated and

mad. I'm not being deliberately psycho-dramatic here, but my rages scare the life out of me sometimes.

I guess we were making a bit of noise, all huddled over the goddamned wires, getting in one another's way, getting in *my* way. But then L.L. said, "Oh, Hello! My God! Sorry!" We all jumped and crawled all over one another.

Outside was a very short guy in what my grandpa called a "topcoat." He was saying something but it was hard to understand. Plain finally got out of the car so he could get close and make out what he was saying.

"He wants to know why we're stealing his car."

I admit I said, "Tell him we didn't know it was his car."

"Like that matters," said Moo.

The guy just stood there. I suppose we could have knocked him down and taken off running. If you'd seen him, though, you wouldn't have. The guy's head was bigger than it should have been and his mouth was over on the side. He really seemed just curious. Not mad, just wondering.

Funny, but we just stood there talking. He didn't say anything about calling the cops and we started trying to explain. After you got used to the way he talked, he wasn't hard to understand. Mary and L.L. together, with little help and some hindrance from the male contingent, finally got it clear to him that we were trying an experiment with how we lived our lives, that all we knew was that we didn't want to do what we were supposed to do, since that seemed to lead to "lives of inconsequence," L.L.'s phrase.

The guy listened, didn't say anything. He seemed interested—odd, considering that we were trying to rid him of his new car in our quest for lives of consequence.

Finally he sort of grinned and said we weren't as alone as we thought. He said he respected what we were doing, insofar as he understood it. We thought for a minute—I did anyhow—that we were all going to hug and go our separate ways.

But then the guy lit up a little. I don't know if he was mad or what—didn't seem like it. He said that our attempt to find a different life shouldn't hurt others, that we hadn't thought very hard if we concluded we could be different by being crooks. "How different is that?"

He said he thought we should do some community service. He never said anything about the cops.

How could we say no? He had a good point—and was holding all the cards. Plain asked him what kind of service. He said he'd think about it and call us, if we didn't mind giving him our number.

The last thing he said was, "I'll call you, now. Don't worry—I won't be badgering you or sending over people wanting help." Then he smiled. He gave us a card, Mr. Yamamoto did, said to call him any time if we happened to "feel the need to talk."

Caitlin did not summon Mr. Yamamoto and the DA didn't want to touch him either. Heartwarming volunteer work did ensue, though hardly entered into voluntarily. Also, Mr. Yamamoto was an unpredictable witness; there was no knowing what in hell he would say.

I liked him a lot, though he had me biting my own ass.

Me: Mr. Yamamoto, why didn't you turn these thieves over to the police?

Yamamoto: The police are ill-equipped to handle such challenges.

Me: Well, with all due respect, it isn't a challenge; it's a crime.

Yamamoto: Which illustrates exactly what I mean.

Me: What does?

Yamamoto: Confusing opportunities with threats.

Me: So you think it's fine to take the law into your own hands?

Yamamoto: Into my hands? Oh, no, you don't know where they've been.

Me: Are you making fun of me? I'd really appreciate your help, you know. I'm not out to hurt these kids, just understand them.

Yamamoto: Of course, of course.

Me: Do you like these kids?

Yamamoto: Hardly.

Me: Really?

Yamamoto: Sorry. Please forgive me. I do like them. These are very good children.

Me: Do you think they are genuinely original?

Yamamoto: Original? No, and that's what I do like about them—not that they fail but that they try. That makes them as original as I said they weren't.

Me: But don't succeed?

Yamamoto: That's not the worst thing. They imagine that they can find the way by challenging their guilt, overcoming their repugnance.

Me: I guess I understand. Why have they done that, do you think?

Yamamoto: Because they're fine kids and care and have grown up in a world where goodness appears to them tedious and automatic, even when it's genuine, which is hard to find—even the fakes are rare.

Me: You see them as good kids, incapable of committing the crime they're accused of?

Yamamoto: I didn't say that.

Me: So you think they may have done it?

Yamamoto: If I were you, I would.

Me: You think they did it?

Yamamoto: If I were you. Not to be rude. You and I are much alike—in some ways.

Me: Thank you.

Yamamoto: I am the one who is honored

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### The Great Meanness

Moo here. The community service we ended up doing, thanks to Mr. Yamamoto, is more stuff with kids—mentoring little shits. Every goddam day, except for weekends and Wednesdays. These are down-and-out Japanese says Mr. Yamamoto—but my two kids are Korean. “What country are you from?” I asked real loud and slow. “America,” they said, real loud and slow, laughing. Maybe all Koreans are poor and no Japanese are. They’re all small, so you can’t tell that way.

OK, maybe I’ve pissed off everybody enough by now. The trouble with this community service is that it’s sucking us in. The kids are nicer than hell and smart and funny. And Mr. Yamamoto is like Downtown, hanging around, listening to us and even bringing us food. It’s fun with the kids, and we’ve started using the backyard, playing football and tag. One of Mary’s kids, Sun or something like that, kissed me the other day and told me she loved me. She’s about ten, I think. Resist that!

I just had a thought. Why not use these kids in our movies? They’re as sexy as most of us, except for Willy. We’d sell more—just say don’t tell Mommy and Daddy.

And I do apologize. Even I can’t keep that up.

I wasn’t the only one noticing that good works are more fun than crime and that we were “gliding into goody-goodness.” Guess who said that. After all, this isn’t our first good deed—there was the fire and the art show. We’re still fooling around at the school, spreading joy. All of us are doing private stuff, too. There’s even a move afoot—thanks, Willy—to bring the black kids over—a cultural mix, doing our bit for world harmony.

I'm having trouble getting to the story, another flop, one more in our regular round. Not since last spring's shoplifting have we tasted success. Plain's parents, the remodeling, clubs and discussions. But crime? Violence? We don't even beat up on one another.

Anyhow, all this was my idea/fault. I said we needed a meanness to keep ourselves open, not become The Methodist Youth Fellowship, roasting hot dogs and curing the blind. All agreed. We have to leak out in all directions. I like that way of putting it.

So, to our meanness. To be fair, it wasn't a total flop. We decided to avoid fast foods and stores where poor people work. Get the rich: all rich are assholes and all assholes are rich. True: the first part absolutely and the second part mostly. We decided on a country club. Mary went over to apply for a job as a waitress, though she's too young. They showed her around, so she got to ask questions, get handouts and maps.

So, the plan: we spent major dough on cleaning uniforms, ones that said, "Bust Up and Clean Up." They were coveralls, striped in two shades of grey, and looked like shit, and the name of the company—Bust Up? But it was Mary's idea, and everybody is so in love with her, it flew by. Anyhow, we got these long janitor brooms, slung them over our shoulders, went to the entrance gate, and said we forgot where we were to go. This real nice guard asked us what we "poor kids" had done to end up cleaning a "shithole like this." So kind—considering he wasn't a junior partner at a Wall Street firm himself. We'd have felt bad and left, except that it wasn't him we were attacking. He said we should go to the maintenance building, luckily way off behind the main clubhouse.

We shot the shit with him a bit, and then went as directed. We had planned to pee (boys only) in the swimming pool and tear up turf (unisex) on the greens—for starters. We figured other stuff would occur to us on the spot. Nothing else occurred

to us, so we peed in the swimming pool and messed up the turf on some of the greens. Mary had some salt and threw it around, saying it'd make it hard to regrow grass. I learned in Latin class that the Romans had salted over some conquered country just to show what vicious sorts they were and to remind them Corinthians to be quiet. No, it was Carthage—Carthago delenda est.

But we didn't delenda anything—didn't "bring the ruling classes to their knees," as Willy says. We laughed, had a good time—were as mean as a troop of Brownie scouts. We snuck back out over the fence, so as not to get the entrance guard in trouble.

The CPA went right after what they took to be the kids' casual attitude toward private property, not to mention smaller kids, film production, and casual diddling:

***WHAT IS A SOCIOPATH?***

*We've been accused of waging a vendetta against the defendants in this case. They say we have twisted facts to make the gang members appear worse than they are. They say we have used words recklessly—like sociopath. Are they sociopaths? A big word? A bad word? Not one to be used loosely. Webster says a sociopath is one whose crimes against society are not accompanied by feelings of remorse or any feelings whatsoever. Sociopaths strike out with such violence because they lack the normal controls even common criminals possess.*

*We have an interesting document written by the group where they say they are worried they might be "too goody-goody," need to find some "meanness" to "open horizons." That's it. Any sort of "meanness," the worse the better. Declaring "all rich people are a\_\_holes and all a\_\_holes are rich," they set out to vandalize Mt. Anthony Green Country Club. And they do so, employing lies, burglar tools, and deposits of their own waste. Why? No reason.*

*The reaction from them? None.*

*Sociopaths? We leave it to you. To you and Websters.*

As always, they provide a model of temperate judgment, tempting us to take the kids' side just to avoid this wormy bunch of vigilante thin-lips.

But "molesting" is largely situational, very seldom systematic or even plotted. From that standpoint, any of these kids could have done it, maybe in their quest to avoid the predictable. If you stand back from the actual five kids and think only of what they wrote and what passes for common knowledge on child molesting, there's little reason to suppose they didn't do it. They convince me that there's less reason to suppose they did, but, taking one thing with another, no rational person could conclude positively that they did not. Those are limit positions. They leave out of account the kids themselves, their in-the-flesh being. But I mustn't forget the fight with the Sharks or the way they hurt the fast-food kid or the size of the rip-off from Plain's parents. Sociopath is a silly word, in my view, and not just because the CPA uses it. But these kids do respond in odd ways. Their winning openness seems fueled by a strange indifference to consequences—not the anticipation of criminal thrills, but rather a dark inability to feel much of anything. I wonder how much of that I believe.

### **Plain's Parents**

Miller and Molly are both social workers, long-term. They make diddle-squat and work very hard. And they're loaded, of course, liberal do-gooding millionaires, having inherited big time. Their social working seems sincere, but it does not keep them from piling on luxuries. I think much of what Plain fenced were book and art collections they had amassed. Odd as hell.

Molly was beautiful. Miller was delicate-featured and small-boned—maybe made Plain worry about what he might turn into. (I guess I'm as obsessed with Plain's looks as the commune members.)

I went into the interview figuring they didn't know much about their kid. Maybe so, but they were filled with opinions that looked a lot like insights.

Me: Did you know your son was nicknamed "Plain"?

Molly: I think he both welcomes and detests it.

Miller: We heard friends calling him that. He never told us.

Me: Do you think his looks bother him?

Miller: When he was nine or ten, he'd complain about it, got himself the most God-awful haircuts, wore baggy clothes.

Molly: Miller, all the kids did that. But you're right; he did complain.

Me: Complain how?

Molly: He'd say, "People stare at me!" "I look like a girl!"

Miller: Excuse me, detective, but how are Plain's looks relevant?

Me: Just making conversation. He's a striking young man, and the others in the commune talked about his looks. He mentions them himself sometimes.

Molly and Miller: [silence]

Me: Plain says you left him alone pretty much. Is that accurate?

Molly: Yes, We can explain, of course.

Me: So you let him go his own way?

Miller: To a large extent.

Me: You neglected him?

Miller: Did he say he felt neglected?

Me: To be honest, no.

Molly: I'd be surprised if he did—hurt, too, I guess.

Me: Really? Would you say you had a good relationship with Miller?

Molly: No.

Miller: No.

Me: Why? In what way not good?

Molly: In ways anyone can predict but never prepare for.

Miller: We were so close up until about the time he turned twelve. Miller was affectionate, funny, and unselfconscious. We did everything together. We loved him almost painfully.

Me: Painfully?

Molly: [laughing] Erotic pain. We had sexual trios. That's probably why he went on to molest these kids.

Me: You find this funny?

Miller: God, detective, we're with Family Services. We know these cases and how often they are misdiagnosed. They're always tragic but seldom in the way police suppose. You'll understand that we think the police have almost no idea about how these things actually work. Police operate with indifference to actual research, guided by a set of brutal clichés.

Me: You mean I haven't the proper sympathy for pedophiles?

Miller: Detective!

Molly: Let's back up. We were saying we know about these issues and you don't. Of course, our son had no connection with any molestation.

Me: You're saying that because you know all there is to know about molestation and not because you're his parents.

Miller: We're also saying it because he doesn't fit the profile. Admittedly, profiles are not guarantees. Anything's possible, as you know very well, but some things are so unlikely as to rank with the chances of hummingbirds attacking falcons.

Me: Were you aware that Plain had directed his friends to your house to steal a great deal of valuable property?

Molly: We prefer not to comment on that.

Me: How about if I force you?

Miller: I don't know what you mean, but I don't think you can do that.

Me: Sorry, I withdraw that. I was just startled by your attitude. OK, I think I can predict most of your answers. Is there anything unexpected you might say?

Molly: I think you misread Plain, imagine him as older, more experienced and sophisticated. He is pretty much protected, not by us but by himself.

Me: Is he gay?

Miller: He may be—that is, he may have experience with males. I'd be surprised if he's had much sexual experience of any kind. Don't you think, Molly?

Molly: Yes, a fixed idea like "gay" doesn't fit him, though it might someday. For a kid who has so much going on for him—

Me: Like money.

Molly: C'mon. May I continue, detective? For a kid with all this, he's not very sure of himself—partly a lack of self-confidence but it's also that he is sensitive to other people. He's a good kid and is reluctant to accept other people's high evaluation of himself. He's overcautious about being conceited, the term he uses to describe those he detests and the quality he is so anxious to guard against in himself.

Me: That's an insight I can file away. On another matter, why do you think Plain has been active in some pretty serious criminal activity? You knew about that?

Molly: Well, I don't know if we have the full story. But I can't answer the question in the way you put it.

Me: Can you, Miller?

Miller: I can't give a simple answer. I respect the voyage he's on, as I understand it, simply don't know enough even to guess at why he's taking this particular course.

Me: So it's a nice little yachting trip?

Molly: It may be neither nice nor little, but he's out there looking. I respect that.

Miller: Me, too. As for your metaphor, I think you give too much weight to the spoiled brat aspect. It's not going to get you very far.

Me: How much weight should I give it?

Miller: None.

Me: So he's an unaffected regular guy, at sea without a map. Intrepid explorer. What's not to respect?

Molly: Are we through?

Under other circumstances, I would have befriended these two. As it was, ten minutes after they left the station, I found myself still sitting there, diddling with the coffee cups, staring at my hands and the fake oak tabletop. It was as if I were in shock, as if I'd lost something I'd never again have the chance to catch. I know they had much to tell me about Plain. I cannot imagine why I didn't want to hear it, couldn't tolerate the fact that they knew. As I look back over my notes, I see that I hastened to derail the conversation whenever it approached illumination. Maybe someday I'll revisit Molly and Miller. Someday, when I grow up.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Mary

Anyone lucky enough to have avoided the dark and dismal swamps of courtroom psychology would assume there was nothing for those nabbers of neuroses to say about Mary. If I were a smart ass, I'd say there was plenty of nothing to say and that these people didn't hesitate to say it. It takes a native vacuity and ponderous insensibility that can only come from God.

Both psychologists found Mary to be hiding a whirlpool of torment beneath her placid surface. They regarded her "strategies" as "alarmingly self-effacing," saying she absorbed her identity directly from her surroundings. This chameleon would never initiate anything criminal (ignoring her director role in the films) but would go along with the plans of any dominant personality. Thus, said Psychologist #1, if "inappropriate activities" with minors were taking place, Mary would involve herself. She would have no choice, as the idea of "choice" didn't apply to a person who waited for others to supply the ingredients of her being.

Psychologist #2 unearthed a disorder, "*The Inhibited Self-Critical Personality Style Prototype*":

- Tends to be shy or reserved in social situations
- Tends to feel ashamed or embarrassed
- Tends to be conscientious and responsible
- Expects self to be perfect (e.g., in appearance, performance, etc.)
- Tends to be overly compliant and obedient with authority figures
- Is empathetic, sensitive and responsive to other peoples' needs and feelings
- Has difficulty acknowledging or expressing anger
- Tends to be unhappy or despondent
- Can express self well
- Tends to be passive and unassertive

—*Tends to feel like an outcast, feels as if he/she does not truly belong*

Mary is soft-spoken, articulate without being smart-assed, old-fashioned sort of pretty, and modest. She is impossible to dislike. And, as every lawyer knows, a prosecutor's dream. Caitlin, of course, saw this and tried to get what she could out of Mary's magnetism without setting her up for Timmons. She called two of Mary's friends. Here's one:

Caitlin: Kimberly, would you say you were close to Mary?

Kimberly: Oh, yes. Mary and I are close. Yes, ma'am. You can count on her, you know, to keep secrets or that.

Caitlin: Have you spent a lot of time together?

Kimberly: Well, not really. Mary is very busy, you know. She does a lot of charity work and helping others. But we're still very close.

Caitlin: Has she helped you?

Kimberly: Oh yes, you know. Mary is *soo* helpful! Once she.

...

Timmons went after Kimberly like a shark after a flounder, doing her in with one bite:

Timmons: Kimberly, you speak so highly of Mary. Would you say she is perfect?

Kimberly: Perfect? We, I mean. . . . Yes.

(Nothing worse than defending a perfect person. We can all find ways to warm to scoundrels.)

Caitlin: Mary, how were you persuaded to join this group?

Mary: I didn't need persuading—was more than ready. We all decided together. Are you asking why we wanted to be together?

Caitlin: Well, yes. What was your reason?

Mary: My reason was the same as everyone else's. We wanted the chance to experiment, see what would happen if we were in control and could do what we wanted with our lives.

Rather than being bottled up by conventional constraints, like parents, or rebelling against them, we wanted to set up a neutral

ground so as not to be following somebody else's orders or violating them, trying to live our lives by terms we discovered. That way we'd have no excuse if we messed up—it was us. Sorry to go on so long.

Caitlin: Let me see if I can clarify: isn't it true that you wanted not simply to do whatever you wanted but to find a more worthwhile life? It wasn't merely self-indulgence, right?

[Objection. Overruled but see if you can lead the witness less blatantly.]

Mary: I want to be honest. We hoped to see what would happen if we put some space between us and what our parents were expecting. But a more worthwhile life? Worthwhile sounds so conventional. Of course we responded to what was around us. We have political views and principles, but we didn't leave home in order to find a way to serve humanity. Keeping things open meant avoiding preset paths. That's what we still want, naive as that may sound. Also, the great joy of being together. I would feel like a liar making it sound all moral.

Caitlin: But you ended up doing a lot of good.

Mary: I think so, but it's hard to avoid. What we did that was nice to others was somewhat accidental. What you might call the criminal activity was more planned.

Caitlin: Do you think anyone was harmed by anything you did?

Mary: I'm sure, though it's hard to calculate. That girl we hurt at McDonald's, probably others. And whatever the consequences of taking things are—property.

Caitlin: Did you make some lives better?

Mary: Yes, I'm sure, though not in real big ways. All the kids we tutored, the art program we set up, a few other things. Sure.

Caitlin: Would you say—

Mary: Excuse me, but the thing we did that was best was with Brandon and Missy. We provided them with stability and good times and love. I don't mean to be confrontational, but that's the truth.

Caitlin: Do you think you've learned anything from this experience?

Mary: You mean the trial? Being falsely accused, arrested?

Caitlin: No, I mean the communal living experiment.

Mary: Not a negative lesson. We did a lot of things that didn't work, but it was a process we were faithful to. I wouldn't change anything. So the answer is yes.

Caitlin: How do you feel about JoAnne LaVelle?

Mary: Tough to understand—a bit sorry for her but mostly angry. I think she set us up and then caused all this when blackmail didn't work. I think she's a snake.

Caitlin: How do you feel about Brandon and Missy?

Mary: I love them. I wish we could deposit the mother in some padded cell and take the kids in with us.

Caitlin: Did you do anything improper with Brandon and Missy?

Mary: I was honest with them and we talked a lot. I answered their questions—on all issues. Some might find that inappropriate, but people have stupid ideas about children. Of course I didn't have sex with them. Those charges are ridiculous.

Caitlin: Do you think there's even a chance any of the others molested either child?

[Timmons of course objected, was sustained, and had his turn.]

Timmons: Mary, some of your school friends characterize you as "perfect." Would you say that was accurate?

Mary: No.

Timmons: How do you think they got that impression?

Mary: For one thing, they have kind hearts. For another, I have this surface sweetness, kind of a Sunday-school veneer.

Timmons: But that's not the real you?

Mary: Whatever that is. But no, I'm not sweetsie.

Timmons: So you cultivate the appearance of being perfect but actually are far from it?

Mary: Cultivate it? I wish I could find a way to lose it. But you're more or less right.

Timmons: Was it your idea to do the porn films?

Mary: I don't want to say it wasn't, but really I can't remember if that idea came from any one person. If it did, I might have been the one. But the idea of an originator doesn't apply to almost anything we did. A lot of things we thought of came from the group as a whole. With the pseudo-porn series, I certainly was amused and interested in it, helped write scripts and acted, if you can call it acting.

Timmons: I'm willing to call it that. So the perfect girl turns porn queen, huh?

Mary: [laughing] Ain't that a kick? It was only parody. And we lost interest. I didn't even get to wear a cheerleader costume.

Timmons: That disappoint you?

Mary: No. It was fun but pretty embarrassing. The embarrassment was part of the fun.

Timmons: Did you. . . ?

Mary: Could I explain further?

Timmons: On the porn movies, of course.

Mary: The porn movies were not an obsession with us and didn't generate the excitement we expected. It was fun, but it was also lots of work—getting the lighting right, the angles, the dialogue (bad as it was), trying to act when we didn't know how. We ran out of gas.

Timmons: Because it was boring.

Mary: It had run its course.

Timmons: You told Attorney Moore that you regretted nothing. Is that right?

Mary: I meant that I wouldn't change anything, since it was part of the process. But yes, I do regret having hurt anyone.

Timmons: But it was all worth it for the process?

Mary: Well, certainly not to the people who got hurt—I wish no one had been hurt.

Timmons: Yes, but you wouldn't have changed anything, things being what they were?

Mary: Yes, that's right.

Hard to imagine a worse witness, right?

Mary: Detective, can I ask you something?

Me: Listen, dame, I'm the one asking the questions!

Mary [giggling]: Oh, you're so big and burly.

Me: I'm wise to your tricks, little lady, so don't try none of your wiles on me.

Mary: I can't keep up. Do you think we're going to be convicted?

Me: I can't read juries.

Mary: They didn't have a strong case, did they? Against us, I mean.

Me: Not very, but the mother, Ms. LaVelle, was a better witness than dithery sorts usually are—and then the nature of the charges. . . .

Mary: You think they might find us guilty?

Me: They might.

Mary: Do you think we're guilty?

Me: I really shouldn't say. It's hard to—no, I don't.

Mary: So, with me, you don't think I molested the kids?

Me: Right now I have an easier time thinking the world is flat. But my views count for nothing. Anyhow, let me ask you about the Journal and the sexual activity going on. It seems you are often inciting sexual interest.

Mary: You had to have been there. Wish you had been. You can see how hot my buddies all are. Plus, they were all pretty shy, you know, prudish, so it was fun to tease—titillating. You're not wrong about that. I was inciting sexual interest, but in a general way, an unfocussed way, was how L.L. put it.

Me: And activity?

Mary: Just as it says in the Journal. I don't care if you call it sex, but most people probably wouldn't. I don't mind what it's called, all the cuddling.

Me: In my day, "making out."

Mary: Making out? That's a nice phrase. Making out. It sounds so casual. Bet you'd say things like, "Hey, Mary, want to go over to the water fountain with me and make out?"

Me: Well. . . .

Mary: Detective! You're blushing!

Me: Mary, you. . . .

Mary: Sorry. You were saying?

Me: Did any of the boys have sex with one another?

Mary: Yes—of the same sort.

Me: What did that "sort" leave out?

Mary: What most people call "sex."

Me: Intercourse, oral contact with genitals, anal contact?

Mary: You got it, big boy!

Me: I think I know what you'll say, but is there any way in which you were influenced into joining any of these activities?

Mary: Yes—but I'd say we all were and that I was more of an influencer than an influencee. We created an atmosphere where it was easy and sweet to touch and fondle.

How could I get into these kinds of conversations with a girl too young to be my daughter? Not only that, but it was easy to see why all three boys (and L.L.) loved her so. It's not her beauty only, though it's that.

Now, back to the kids' Journal. I have wondered if it is doctored to hand over moderately dark truths, hiding darker ones. It came to me listening to the tapes I made of my conversations with Mary. Who *is* she? How can I understand her? Or any of them. They sometimes seem so far beyond my horizons, so remote.

Well, paranoids like me love double-agent plots and aren't able to follow them without somebody explaining. The idea that I might be concocting just such a plot is absurd, but that sort of story

provides the only access I have. In the dark confusion of faces and words, the clash of brutal certainties from the CPA, psychologists, lawyers, and cops, I need a story to hold onto. But not all stories have plots, I've learned. "Plot is the most insignificant part of a tale," said Anthony Trollope. I like that, but I don't think it's a safe guide for professional detectives.

### **Porn Script 1—Mary and Plain**

**This initial film is basic to the complex artistry of the whole design. It's called, "Double-Dare, Double-Date," which is a fine title. The idea is to introduce the four main characters, set up situations, get viewers expectant, and show them nothing—promising much. Remember this is Christopher Guesty—make up the talk on the spot and keep filming until we get good stuff.**

**Plain and I think this will be a new kind of porn, not the same old faking, but with kids who truly are horny. We'll go by instinct: whatever turns us on.**

**Do what you would do if you're really excited—but you're shy and don't want to make an ass of yourself. The horniness will come natural. While Plain and I were writing this script, it was all I could do to keep from pulling his shirt out of his pretty jeans up over his head, binding him while he half-resisted, then licking. . . . Just kidding—sure!**

**I have heard that some couples rent porn films for at-home nights. Maybe we should do that. It'd be business expenses we could deduct on income taxes, right Willy?**

**I guess there are certain fantasies we don't want to cater to: sadism, bestiality. Playing with unasked-for pain seems wrong. Of course we're not excluding mutually welcomed pain. Maybe have Willy playing the school principal telling kids: "We notify your parents, or we take care of this ourselves right here and now!"**

Anyhow, all four kids could be eager and timid, hot and reluctant. That's why the plots move so slowly, with build-ups leading to more build-ups, sometimes retreating. We'll all try to "act" shy and ignorant and scared and hot and desperate to do it and not wanting to and hoping things will stop where they are and anxious to keep things going.

We think that should be easy—for us.

**CAST:**

**Mark—Plain**

**Kim—Mary**

**Jason—Moo**

**Brittany—L.L.**

**Opening Credits**—designed by Willy—as they roll, the camera zooms in from outside the high school to miscellaneous student forms, sliding over their bodies from the top down.

**Scene I:** The background is grass and trees, clear definition, rich colors—a parody of squeaky clean high school life. Even the brick wall they sit on is new. The clothing is spiffy. This should look like a comic book scene.

Kim and Brittany are sitting on the wall talking about boys (make up names at random). They are wearing school uniforms—white blouses and pleated plaid skirts. The talk is young and perky. The camera, reversing the opening sequence, glides upwards from shoes, lingering on their skirts. As they talk, the girls cross and uncross their legs, swinging them forward and back—innocently. The trick here will be to get some thigh, teasing.

**Scene II:** Mark and Jason at a school lunch table. They wear moderate saggies and "cool shorts." (Plain says he and Moo can come up with these.) They are talking about girls in some outdated way, with slight sexual hints. As they talk, they slither

around. The camera catches them as they move and as their shirts ride up, paralleling the girls's flashing thighs.

**Scene III:** The boys approach the girls, ask them to meet up after school. They all giggle. Each is motivated by awkwardness and uncertainty, covering desire. We're looking for something bland, not suggestive.

**Scene IV:** Cafe. Improvised talk that gradually gets warmer. They are gossiping, and somebody asks if some not-present kid is "hot"—"You think they're hot?" someone else says, "Not as hot as— (somebody at the table)" and that allows them to be a little more personal—not paired up yet. The camera angles should be mostly above the table, with only a sneak peek under—feet shuffling nervously, hands on thighs. The scene ends with plans to meet at the picnic table for lunch tomorrow. (I said this would be slow.)

**Scene V:** Very short—girls on phone to one another—giggling and talking just a little more frankly about the boys. Cut to boys on phone talking even less frankly about the girls. (We want to make the boys more embarrassed than the girls—keep it all smoldering.)

**Scene VI:** Lunch Table—same clothes for girls, boys with different shirts. The idea here is to pair off (any way) and start getting a TINY bit more personal. Somebody, out of the blue, suggests they play Truth or Dare. They play the tamest game of Truth or Dare ever—but we're never sure it isn't going to escalate.

Decide, awkwardly, to double date.

**Scene VII: Inside movie theater.** We could add a scene getting there, but that sounds boring. (Can we do this scene, Willy? Inside a theater somehow or suggest that?)

The kids are sitting boy-girl//boy-girl. The camera records arms snaking around the backs of seats, hands being held. In the hand-holding, one girl moves the clasped hands onto her thigh—not crotch—and the other girl moves them over onto the boy’s thigh. There is some slight rubbing of the thighs and shifting around—they’re excited and trying to hide it. No panting or oogle parts. They are too shy.

**Scene VIII. Goodnight.** We can let go a little. Cut between one couple outside the front door of a house and the other couple in the car waiting for them.

The couple at the door kisses passionately. The couple in the car sits awkwardly for a bit then suddenly starts kissing, with their bodies separated. The kisses at the door start close-mouthed and then open up so that there is visible tonguing. Moan and grind just a bit. Hands roam over shoulders. Dialogue is minimal. Maybe a couple of “ohs.” The pair at the door finally stops and says good night and the couple in the car breaks apart as the boy comes back.

The last shot is the car pulling away, receding in the distance.

### **Tenth Council Meeting**

Moo here. Was this ever easy! We talked about things, none important, without one single argument. L.L. must be peeing herself— “where’s the conflict?”

The food. We said we were getting in a rut—also that we could eat out more. But we’re holding to our budget, and I guess that’s good. Besides, eating out makes me think of my parents, who could never understand that I didn’t regard it as a treat to go to some stuffy place, spend two hours, eat strange

food, and have waiters ruffle my hair at the same time they're calling me, "Sir."

Community Service. We're working way more hours than we signed on for and spending money on these twerps—why? They're around way too much. Yeah, and nobody believes that. My idea is we can turn these kids into a gang, tell them what a bunch of shits their parents are and how cool we are—but they already know that. This guy Adam Phillips I read (Willy told me to) says it's not possible to "teach," only plant suggestions. I'm getting lost. But it seems to me true.

Remodeling. The bedroom is done, part of the backyard, and the party room. The patio: oh well. We got the mailbox.

Don't forget decorating. I notice Mary has made some outlines on her side, her fifth part, and so has Willy, who started painting. Maybe we can all pitch in on Sunday? Me and Mary can pick up paint and stuff. Stencils? Shutters? Weather-proof posters?

We got some grass here and there now, but the landscaping is hardly started. Should we hire somebody?

The sports area is getting there. Ferret cages set up. Six starter ferrets doing well.

Enlarge the kitchen?

Do you want me to be the guy who takes suggestions and gets the stuff and hires the people? Fuck you if you don't.

Sorry for saying fuck all the time. Slipping back.

We talked about the scripts and everybody seemed as embarrassed and hot as the kids in the movie—just as Mary said we would.

We also talked more about being goody-goods and finding ways to get out of that. I know we'll do it. If it weren't for these kids with the slanty eyes. Fun to joke with them about that. They say we have hairy eyes and look like owls.

Willy said he is feeling better now, and then I mentioned I was relieved and could go back to kicking Willy's ass. We

watched “*Trainspotting*”—AGAIN!!—and some of us cuddled. It was funny that we ended up acting a lot like the kids in our porn script—arms hesitantly around shoulders, hand-holding. I had what I thought was L.L.’s hand and was mashing it into my thigh, when I saw it was Willy’s. Any port in a storm. You don’t have sweaty hands—but maybe you could wash now and then?

### Film and Book Club Discussion

Mary here. Kind of hard to think of other things when great art is on your mind, or porn, or, in our case, both. But we had a discussion of *Trainspotting* night-before-last, and it was great fun, fired us up. I had pasted post-it notes saying we might want to read the book, too, before watching the movie. Willy managed to pinch five copies from the bookstore. He said he felt bad about it, since they were in a stack for a lit class and probably some students wouldn’t be able to get it now. It’s like Willy to worry, but even I think he may be straining here. Besides, the bookstore rips off students, most of whom don’t have a lot of money. I could have given a quiz we’d all have passed, rad butts that we are. Pretty impressive, since it isn’t very easy to read until you get used to the dialect.

Once again, we switched fast from one thing to another. We started off wondering if we admired Rents, since he screws over his friends in the end. Actually, the only one anybody cared about was Spud. Sickboy and Begbie seem less important. Begbie talks all the time about loyalty but only uses it for his own psycho violent ends. Sickboy is another matter—we discussed him endlessly without coming to a conclusion. We wondered why the author does that, makes us like Rents so much and Spud even more and then has Rents do that to such a dear, sensitive guy.

But gradually we started to see. The world Rents lives in is so pointless and ugly that even drugs can’t rescue him. He sees

too clearly, no matter how much he drinks or shoots up. The novel isn't about drugs, but about how trying to make sense of things can be cruel. When people see the emptiness they get scared, and scared people are heartless.

You're born and then you live and pretty soon you go downhill and then you die. It's not that drugs are harmless—Wee Dawn dies because of the careless drug-takers—but that thinking of good and bad isn't going to make the nothingness go away. That's what Moo said. You are very smart, Moo; also you have this gift of making up phrases that get to the guts of things. Not all the drugs in the world can make the emptiness leave.

Our favorite part was where Spud defends the squirrels and says there really isn't any difference between forms of life. It's not that we're all vermin but that we don't have any way to make distinctions, so what the hell! If you're Spud—and we should be—might as well try to defend all the squirrels.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### Tenth Journal Entry

(I'm inserting this here, I being Plain. We started out doing this Journal once every two weeks, like a fucking clock. Started being a pain, so now we meet when we want to and write it up occasionally and that's fine with me and fine with you and what you want to do then that's what I'll do and also when we meet, I mean, which is "lucid and graceful prose," as Ms. Kelly says.)

[So we detectors lose whatever grip we might have had on a verifiable time frame. I can only guess at the intervals, and being a lousy guesser, am easily confused.]

**Willy, the reborn Willy. No longer sloppy, depressed.**

I've been writing a lot. I didn't mean to keep it a secret, but I haven't got anything to where I can show it. I have a lot of pages, but it's all over the place. I have two short stories, a novel, and a play—started. Some of it's half-assed. Most is half-finished, so it hasn't reached the half-assed stage yet.

I've been inspired by these funny kids who are underfoot all the time. I keep listening to them. It's fun tussling with them.

I don't think it's working bringing these black and Japanese kids together and imagining they'll find a way to integrate. Right now, they ignore one another. I've never seen anybody so good at being blind. They do seem to have fun. Most of them I can talk to easy, one-on-one or in small groups. But we need them to acknowledge mutual presences. A few of them do. Maybe we should do not one god-damned thing, just be patient and let it work itself out on its own—or not.

L.L., how long is this bedroom remodeling going to go on, eh? Well? Huh? I know it'll end up super—the guest rooms will be perfect for the kids. But Moo's turning me on terrible these days and I want, *need* to get back to privacy. Nudge, nudge!

*And*, porn dollies and dudes, you'll be delighted to hear that our script can soon become flesh. I've got all the equipment except one light. Count on me, yer Willy, to procure this last twiddle standing between us and sleaze-filled stardom.

L.L.—God, Willy! Is that your normal state now?

So, the movie. I'm ready, I guess, to do my part. But I worry about displaying leg bands and bra straps. As I write this, I see that embarrassment is what Plain and Mary are after. They got it.

I already told you about the bedrooms, and I'm not talking about it no mo. Pay attention. But as for the kids, I'm for it. Move them all in. Adopt them. They are such fun, but that has nothing to do with it. We seem to be so much better when they're around, after we stopped trying to teach.

Kids are unpredictable without thinking about it. Am I just besotted? We have to struggle about what it means to be open; they just are.

Another thing. They seem never to be blunt. That's what you hear: kids just say what's on their minds. Hell they do. These kids seem pretty tactful, reserved, even when they're blabby.

These kids coming up like they do and slipping their hand in yours or squirming up on your lap. What could be more erotic? I mean it, and that's the word—pure eroticism, self-contained and leading nowhere.

Plain—he's here! You guys notice what we're NOT talking about? Whatever happened to money, house plans, Willy's depression, L.L.'s elevated commentary on the rest of us, Moo's violence, pets, philosophic reflections? To be sure, the house stuff moves along steadily. The ferrets are doing fine. They're not breeding yet, but seem healthy and fun to play with. Anyhow, I'd like to mention a few things we're not mentioning. (And which I hope you notice my elevated language—"to be sure.")

School, video games, television, dating, jobs, clothes. That's a partial list of things we don't address. I also could say we don't talk about physics, world hunger, classical music, art history, or healthy eating. L.L. would say we should avoid thinking we've achieved something. Whatever it is that's happened, you couldn't have predicted it by looking at us one at a time. It's only as a group that we've moved to wherever it is we are.

L.L. calls our feelings for the Pittsburgh Steelers kids (black and gold, get it?) "erotic." I won't scream in horror. I look forward to seeing the kids and playing with them. I always thought of erotic as meaning you wanted to have sex. That's absolutely not what I feel with these kids, nothing like that. I think I'm agreeing with L.L.

And the movie—whoopee!

Moo's in town and comin' down! That's catchy. I'm the one who brought you the coolest nickname, "Moo," and I can make up cool phrases, catchy. That's why I'm so popular, being captain of the football team and King of the Prom.

I like what Plain said about what we don't talk about. It's true. Before I came here I really did talk about video games and movies. I watched tv, streaming, and never do now. Why? It's like it just happened. As a group. Like Plain said.

Suppose I said, "I want to watch tv, and you can watch or not." I mean, do we all, really, *want* to watch tv but are ashamed? And video games? I'm going to do an experiment, top secret, just to see if we're being conformists together.

Erotic kids? What in Christ are you talking about? They're fun, I agree, and it gives me a superior feeling to be helping out the littles, disadvantaged by being poor and mostly stupid. I don't want to misunderstand, but can you explain more clearly?

Listen to Moo and polish your shoe!

**Back all hairy? Sleep with Mary! Moo, what are you doing? I think you need another session of butt-observing, inviting the rest of us in as commentators. It'd settle you down, build up your confidence. But we love you and your sweet well-formed bubbly one-a-little-bigger-and-hanging-lower cheeks.**

**Enough of Moo, since I can't imagine what he's after with all his experiments and rants. That's a mean thing to say, especially to my honey-lovey. You seem happy, Moo. Everybody does. Must make you fidget, L.L. All this harmony.**

**Let's go with the movie. If L.L. wants her panties safe from view, I'll show mine: shoot under skirts, billowing out, nothing else visible and nobody'll know which of us it is. I can do multiple shoots: one with flowered panties, one with bikinis, one with white cotton, and one with Willy's jockey shorts.**

**I love Plain's list, but do we know that most kids our age spend their time playing video games and worrying about clothes? Aren't we assuming a lot— maybe elevating ourselves above what Ms. McComas calls "the common herd." We love books; they love games? What if we've lost something they have? We're talking about patios, savings accounts. That's not what Ms. McComas calls, "the bohemian tradition."**

**Somebody has to say it.**

**The kids. I think all of you, especially Moo, are more responsive to kids than I. I enjoy having them around in short bits, but it's seldom short bits. Several of them are winning: like having puppies jumping on you.**

**I'm dribbling around saying nothing—a terrible way to end this section. So, how about another phrase. Don't be silly— Go Down on Willy! Or You Want a Thrill, Do It With Will. Or You're Safe With Will; He's On the Pill. Sorry.**

**Guess what the CPA made of this—several flyers, each suggesting, that this kids-are-sexy conversation was an ongoing obsession. Here's one of CPA's public-spirited publications:**

**HOW MUCH PROOF DO WE NEED?**

*Defenders of the “civil liberties” of the pornography-peddling commune five say that, after all, there is only “circumstantial evidence” against them.*

*Oh really? Is that all?*

*The word of an anguished, betrayed mother is merely “circumstantial”; the presence of disgusting child porno movies they made is “circumstantial”; the addiction to violent criminal activity is “circumstantial”; the corroborated medical evidence is “circumstantial”; the amoral (at best) views on all ethical issues and utter contempt for decency is—?*

*But what about this? In their Journal, they talk about some small children they had lured to their den under pretext of “helping” them. One says, “It is fun wrestling with them.” Another admits they are all hot after the little innocent bodies of these unwary children.*

*We cannot, for obvious reasons, go any further into the criminal indecencies of these vicious passages. Are the “accused” simply indulging in sick pornographic fantasies? Absolutely not! These are real assaults on real bodies, habitual and unrepentant, carefully arranged by them. Regular visits by troops of pre-teen children, chosen for their attractiveness and vulnerability, don’t happen by accident.*

*Isn’t that what pedophiles do? Are we supposed to admire those who find innocent small kids “hot,” “irresistible”?*

*What sane person needs more evidence? These are child molesters—predators who lure their prey into dens. Can there be any doubt?*

*Of course not. Now is the time to ACT!*

Timmons was furious about this, its flamboyance and inaccuracy. Such wild brewing threatened to poison the well, make it difficult to bring up this evidence without giving the defense room to claim a prejudicial pre-trial atmosphere. “Bad enough that these little shits look so innocent and are such consummate fakes. The

maniacs at CPA keep distorting the best material I had. quoting it inaccurately.” I asked if he had made any kind of deal with Caitlin. “What kind of deal?” “Say—you lay off the Asian kids they were tutoring and she ignores the ‘corrupted atmosphere.’” “Not exactly that,” he lied. “Of course we talked, but not to make deals. It’s not like we’re enemies or want to win at any cost.” I said I did think he wanted to win at any cost, like every DA I ever knew. Timmons, to his credit (I guess), laughed.

I think neither side did much with this stuff, just because it pointed in no clear direction. The talk was outrageous, but the work with the kids counted in their favor. Plus, as an operating truth, the horrors of child molesting are granted only to white-kid victims. Nobody really cares much about black or Asian kids being sexually abused—or at least they don’t talk about them.

Timmons did approach Plain cautiously about all this but backed off when the answers weren’t going where they could help him: “We said rude things about the kids, tried to one-up each other finding ways to talk about how appealing they were. It was in real bad taste, but most of what we said was in real bad taste. Very shrewd, as it suggested what everyone acknowledges: all kids that age do love to be rude and shocking. Caitlin simply asked Mary if they offered tutoring and counseling to underprivileged kids and then let it drop. The CIA had managed to erase it all from the trial.

My own view is that the accused, free and easy, curious and affectionate, were magnets for smaller kids. Vice versa? Maybe. They certainly spent lots of time with children, these five mates of mine. Circumstances contributed, but circumstances always have a way of contributing to what we’re wanting. Me spending time with my five, for instance. Wish they’d drop by now.

### **Expanding Kitchen**

**Mary here. This is the smoothest thing we’ve done—cost less than we figured, too. Old Frederick saved us a lot of money by charging ridiculously little, perhaps because he cleaned up**

doing the basement and the roof. But he upgraded some of the old appliances and extended the existing flooring, and—. You still awake? Well, now we have a kitchen almost twice as big, with more cabinets and the big chopping table. I like it because it isn't like every other dream kitchen in America. It's funky and odd. Thanks to Frederick and to Willy, who helped. Frederick listened to what we said, discussed things seriously, didn't ridicule us. I can sort of see why you find all this so fascinating, Plain—sort of.

The Great Sex Out—L.L. and Plain (see if you can tell which)

We decided, L.L. and me, to discuss a feeling we've been having, which is that we're creating a hothouse here. What L.L. means, and I agree, is that we're talking about sex, making parody sex films, raising sex to a fever pitch, and not doing it. What we, me and L.L., think is that we don't want to change what's happening. Maybe it's the last thing we should discuss, which makes it irresistible.

We brought it up at one of our family dinners, Moo, serving up "comfort food," a term he imported from down there in the Ozarks. This version featured meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and applesauce. Last time it was meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and salad. The time before it was "hamburger steak," mashed potatoes, and applesauce. L.L.'s turn—

Jesus, Plain. You're sounding like Ollie, whose stories move like a ball in a pinball machine. The point is not Moo's menus, wherein one bedrock feature, mashed potatoes, does improve, growing less bumpy with every go-round, but the discussion we had on sex. We agreed that as we focus more on sex, the likelihood that we will do it decreases. The reason: similar to why kids do not hump siblings, the incest taboo. We've gotten too familially entangled. OK, Plain.

Yes, the mashed potatoes are better. A little soupy, but that beats the pebbled stuff. Now, as for the meatloaf—just kidding.

So, we decided not to mess with internal relations but to go out and get laid—or go out and see what might happen.

So we took off Saturday AS A GROUP. That seemed natural then, but it's pretty strange if you think about it. Most people don't go looking for sex as a quintet.

First, two bars. Both laughed at us, despite our fine IDs. And Willy is legal and looks it, too—will for sure when he starts shaving. So—L.L.—

We ended up at “Ben's Barn,” used to be a roller-skating rink. Now a dance club with cokes and candy bars for kids who lack great IDs. Here's what happened: Willy, Moo, and I got a coke and stood off to the side, staring straight ahead. We didn't talke among ourselves—couldn't think of anything to say. Plain and Mary headed for warm bodies like heat-seeking missiles.

After a bit, Moo started dancing without seeming to notice who was opposite. You are a fine dancer, Moo, fun to watch. This guy, Thomas, came up to me and talked, didn't dance. I like Thomas because no nickname ever stuck to him. He's Goth—so thirty years ago—but he's sweet to talk to, and he reads a lot. Willy was talking to one of the women checking IDs. She looked to be about twenty and very pretty. Every time I looked over, she seemed more interested in Willy and less interested in checking IDs. Plain, you're up—

So, here's what I did, slime that I am. This girl Marcie, I don't know if you know her, she's young as shit, let me get her a coke. I'd been dancing with her and thinking she was pretty. I lured her over near the left speaker, partly to carry out a scheme I wasn't yet clear on, partly to work up some lust, and started idiot talk that I blush to think on, as she told me about her family vacation. I eventually got one hand up under her dress, down her panties, clutching her butt. All this time she was telling me about how at a restaurant her little brother had spilled chocolate milk and how the waitress had slipped and almost fallen ha ha ha ha—“Oh, don't, Miller, please, not here,

please.” I felt like a criminal. I can still hear her: “Oh, please, Miller, later we can—oh, please, Miller—I can’t help it, but please—I love you so, but—.” I got my hand untangled and talked another half hour to her, that’s how guilty I felt. I also got disgusted with myself. She’s not a bad person at all, Marcie, and not stupid. It was just her being so aroused she couldn’t think of any way to handle her guilt except to imagine she loved me. How awful that is—of me.

As for Mary, she danced and talked to lots of kids but sure didn’t let anybody back her into a corner. She says she kissed both Mark Jenkins and Niola Brown—Mary doesn’t mind kissing and hugging, just as she always says. L.L.—it’s yours.

That’s it. Nobody went out to the car with somebody and had sex. Keep-the-kids-wholesome teen centers don’t encourage such natural expressions of delusion. The result of this little experiment was to show us how messed up we are. We might as well take vows of celibacy. Maybe we have.

### **The Great Drug Bust**

Moo talking. What a title for a bunch of nothing—a fucking juvenile prank. I see I just wrote “fucking,” a word I’d like to stop using automatically, just like Plain, whose efforts in this direction I can top. Wanta bet? I’ll go as high as \$4.

We haven’t talked about what kids at school have been saying about us. Of course they know and they burbled and bleeped. “You guys have an orgy every night? I hear the girls are just a cover for you gays. When are you going to have a party and invite us?”

We never made rules about having others over. And I suppose it’s funny we never opened up our house and grounds for general inspection, win the admiration of our peers. We’ve talked about how we hang out here all the time, always just us. But why don’t we have a party? (Are you getting repetitious, Moo? Why are you getting repetitious? For emphasis. You sure

it's not just lousy writing, Moo? It is excellent writing, creating point.)

OK, so we haven't had anybody here and that's odd as hell. If a party is too mammoth a production, how about we have kids over to watch a movie—or to guest star in our family film. It's not like we don't have other friends, right? I guess I don't. Sounds like I'm whining, but it's just true. True for you all? I don't think so. Willy has his college buddies. Plain gets along with everybody these days (now that he's stopped assaulting them). L.L. I don't know about, but when I see her at school it's like the fucking Queen of England and her entourage. Mary has these boys in love with her, like Graham.

Since we're so off by ourselves, there's no wonder other kids are scratching their bums wondering. It's almost like we set out to make ourselves mysterious. I mean, nobody asks me directly, just round-about comments. When we didn't explain, they must have thought we were a religious cult. Anyhow, we drove them nuts.

So, these four guys at school I hang out with at lunch—Jason Baker, Mark, Noah, and that fool Larry, the Shark OG. They are always on me about our group. They call it a “cult” just to piss me off. Always competing with each other. I notice a lot more of that since we've set up here, by the way, like the competition that passes as friendship. These guys keep on me about coming over and I keep putting them off, saying, “Fuck yes, absolutely!” —but they're too dorky just to drop by.

Then two weeks ago they said, “Look, Moo, if you guys have a party and invite us, we'll get you the best shit you've ever smoked.” I can see now, looking back, that none of you were hot on the idea. You said OK because you were being nice to me and thought they were my friends and I, who didn't have any friends nohow, needed some, even loser friends, poor Moo, boo hoo. So I told them we'd have a pot party Saturday—just them and don't invite anybody else or say a fucking thing about

it or I'd rearrange their ears for them. That's really what I said, pathetic imitation of tough-guy talk that I know it is.

Friday, then, Noah comes up to me at my locker and gives me this huge zip-lock bag full of pot, right there in the open. "Hi, Moo!" he said, real loud. "Here's for the party!" "You fucking stupid shit!" I hissed, but he just giggled his double-doofus giggle. I put it up my shirt, and I don't think anybody saw. So, Saturday comes. We had the pot on the dining room table, waiting for these fucks to show at 8:30. By 9:30 we were ready to smoke it by ourselves, but we kept waiting and then finally a knock at the door. Cops! Four of them in uniform came in and started pushing us boys around and asking, "Where is it?" And "You children know the drug laws around here?" They lined us up and told us they were going to do a "full body cavity search" unless we confessed. L.L. and Plain were both ready to smart-mouth them, I could tell, so I yelled out—I did not "blubber," L.L.—"It's on the table, sir. We are really sorry. We didn't use any at all, sir."

Then the turds started laughing, told us if we'd give them blow jobs they'd leave us alone. After jerking us around a little bit, they told us they were older brothers of my four classmate scrotum suckers. They left and told us not to smoke the shit, since it was lawn grass and poison oak mixed up. It was only me who got sucked in, but everybody, even the fake cops, was nice and treated it as fun and not an illustration of how stupid I am. I was scared—all that about cavity searches.

We talked some about beating the living shit out of my four classmates. I talked about it, I should say. Plain said there was no point in messing them up—just congratulate them on pulling it off. So I did. I know they were disappointed that I did that. They were hoping I'd be pissed, not that they wanted their noses smashed to the back of their heads, which is what I had in mind.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### Suck Our Tongues

Willy reporting. I suppose it was inevitable that we'd get original and start a garage band. The only difference between us and the seven million others is that we didn't use the garage. We could make awful sounds here in the living room. Also, we had a terrific name for our inexcusable band—Suck Our Tongues. Problem was that we didn't have what you might call instrumental expertise—just that one thing standing between us and astronomical success.

We had deficiencies, but it wasn't like we had no ability whatsoever. Mary can play guitar, and that's a plus. Mary might not be fine, but compared to the rest of us. . . . I can't play drums, though I said I could. I played "rhythm instruments" in middle school and that set me up as a drummer? Plain had eight years of piano lessons. He's very good but didn't want to play the keyboard, went instead for bass guitar, feeding his dream of one day playing it, which ranks with Moo's idea of being power forward for the Knicks. L.L. plays the tuba. Moo plays the ukulele, figured it was first cousin to the guitar, which it doesn't seem to be in terms of talent transfer.

At least we didn't buy a lot of stuff—rented it. Good sound equipment, too, like we wanted to amplify our blare. We thought louder would mask some minor problems, which maybe it would have done, had our problems been minor.

So, we had Plain on keyboard (when he could be tickled into it), Mary and Moo on guitar, me on drums, and L.L. on tuba. We worked at it for hours and got the results that usually follow dedicated attention to details: no improvement at all, which just shows that practice don't make perfect, that hard work is usually unrewarded, that nothing is worth doing that

doesn't come easy. If at first you don't succeed, it's for a good reason. We got progressively worse. Mary and Plain were probably sounding good—and they probably sang well, too. That's a guess, since we were all singing, and it was hard to separate the singing from my drumming, whatever Moo was doing, and that goddamned tuba.

We did write songs, three. In my opinion, they were of much higher quality than our performance. And the songs were no better than inexcusable. I don't think we want to preserve for posterity these songs—even the lyrics. But here's a taste:

Give it to me, baby  
Give it to me good  
Let me feel your bones coming through the other side  
Give it to me baby—etc.

Doncha know, baby, oh doncha know;  
I just gotta do it while there's time,  
Don't matter if it costs a nickel or a dime.

My country piss on me  
Oh-oh-oh-oh fuck  
Amber graves of Wayne  
Shooka-shucka-shucka-suck!

We drained our supply of creative juices on these, a limited repertoire but more than enough for all but the wildest of our fans, which numbered in the nothings. Watch for “Suck Our Tongues” at your nearest Moose Lodge.

### **The Great Trip**

It's L.L. We decided that, because we had done nothing of worth in several months but interfere with little kids and make

filthy movies, we deserved a treat. We'd successfully avoided falling into goodness traps, so we figured we'd reward us.

At the beginning of our venture, we'd anticipated doing a great deal of travel to savor nature and stroke our souls. But we didn't follow through, managed only a couple of quasi-trips and the one camping weekend for Willy. So, it was about time, we agreed, to try a little shake-and-startle for our spirits.

First, we drove five hours to find a campground less attractive than ones nearby. Our spot had a swimming pool, I think it was, and a store. The resort is run by the state to torment the citizenry with barren fields, bugs, and a ranger who makes San Quentin wardens seem hospitable. There are wonders: a defiled barbecue grill, a crampy parking space, and a weathered list of rules tacked to a board, not to mention a splintertrap three-legged picnic table and a non-functioning electrical cord for you to trip over.

We pulled into our assigned space, which was, honest and true, right next to a camper, which was right next to five others, while 293 spaces stood vacant. These enormous Marge-and-Fred camping vehicles plus our tents were lined side-by-side in this bitty corner, right where the sun was hottest, the dust thickest, and the shade nowhere. The "woods" they advertise were scraggly trees that would have offered relief, had they not been several hundred yards away. Next to us was a block-long Winnebago with resource-draining things to plug in, plus a couple who looked like they had just emerged from an asylum. They asked Mary if they could use our outlet, and she was so charming that they decided to sit a spell. They were the sorts who force you to participate in their talk:

"You ever run out of gas right next to a station and have to push the car to the pumps, only it was uphill and raining, Prain?" They'd wait until you answered.

**“Prain” isn’t a misprint. Plain was Prain, Moo was Blue; I was Ellen. Only Mary and William escaped with their identities intact.**

**After about thirty hours, they got up to leave, walked off a few yards, went into a huddle, and bounced back with an invitation to dinner: “You ever tasted Mildred’s creamed baked beans, Blue?—Ellen?—William? How about sharing our dinner?” Willy, I could tell, was about to refuse when Prain said, “Sure,” an idiocy echoed by Blue as well.**

**Before we knew it, we were inside, I write blushingly that we pitched in like nice kiddies from times gone by—helped make Kool Aid, tiny hamburgers, some minced onions that fried up like a dream, a cucumber and tomato salad (lotsa olive oil), baked beans (not creamed—Harry’s joke) and a dozen other dishes. It was about as good as any food I’d had since that week in Paris I never spent. Just goes to show you.**

**After dinner, we played Trivial Pursuit, Harry and Mildred letting us win. Then, if you can believe it, Mildred brought out this keyboard and played old favorites and we sang. She had song-sheets. “What’ll I do with just a photograph to tell my troubles to? What’ll I do with only dreams of you that won’t come true? What’ll I do?”**

**When we got back to our tent it was 1 a.m. Good thing it’s me writing this up; otherwise the sugar would be oozing off the end of the page.**

**Harry and Mildred were gone by the time we got up in the morning— left a note:**

**Dear Mary, Blue, Plain (they got it straight), El, and William,**

**Thanks for putting up with two old bores. You are very kind people, and surely deserve everything good in life. Just because you deserve it does not mean you’ll get it, as Mildred’s father always said, but one thing is sure.**

**You will make many other people happy, just as you’ve made so happy these two old lonely folks wheeling across the**

country looking for nothing more than for time to pass. We are lucky we ran into you. Send us your address and we'll mail some freeze-dried creamed beans!

Your grateful friends,  
Mildred and Henry Stephens

They didn't leave an address. We decided to come back early.

The CPA, ignoring the evening spent with Harry and Mildred, made up an entire leaflet out of L.L.'s opening comment: "interfere with the little kids and make filthy movies."

*Naive Kids?*

*We've heard so often that these pedophile clan members are "innocent and naive children who weren't aware of how others might regard their harmless actions and jokes" that some of us have almost made ourselves believe it.*

*But are they "naive"? Are they being victimized by us, by spoilsports who have lost their awareness with [sic] how "harmless" little things like child-molesting are?*

*Here's how the innocent little gang describes one of there [sic] many out-of-town jaunts, expensive little retreats funded for these spoiled brats by their many felonies. "We decided that, because we had done nothing worth anything in several months but interfere with little kids and make filthy movies, we deserved a treat."*

*They deserved a treat because of months spent in the difficult labor of "interfering with" children, so busy-busy-busy in pursuit of their careers as big-time producers of child pornography that they are exhausted, really needing a break from the heavy demands of molestation. Does this sound innocent to you? Naive?*

*You make the call.*

*It seems to us that common decent folks are capable of making up their own minds on these issues. We aren't out to persuade anyone. All we want to do is balance things, make*

*available both sides of the story. What you do with the information is up to you.*

What intrigues me most about the indefatigable CPA is the depth of their hatred, the determination to do all the damage they can. They'd love not just to get them convicted but to kill them. The motives driving the CPA are, in one sense, clear as a bell. But I don't understand these people on any level closer to the bone. Why are they so devoted to their cause? What satisfactions do they derive? What do they really want?

### **Porn Script 2—Plain and Mary**

**Plain and Mary reporting.** When we come up with a script, we'll report on it, we guess. Are we losing interest, Plain? I'd say yes, Mary. Okay then.

### **Eleventh Council Meeting**

**Willy here.** Somebody tell me why we're numbering these, especially since they're sometimes weekly and sometimes quarterly. It distresses my orderly soul.

I read through everything we've written, and it leaves out a lot. Maybe what we have is representative, not that it's accurate. Minor stuff gets overemphasized and major stuff downplayed, but I don't want to go back and correct. It seems to me strange that our record is so impersonal—and that we have spent so much time on top of one another, inside one another's hearts and ideas, without forming duos. Not even temporary ones. I used to think that's because we are prudish and klutzy, which is true but not very important. It's almost like we are beyond that sort of exclusivity. I started out only to say I have this feeling that I can't find words for how we've developed a closeness so deep and intense as to preclude you-and-me-forever-and-screw-the-rest-of-the-world romantic sex.

We talked about the swimming pool and decided to proceed. Plain called the references the three prospective

contractors gave him and tells us we should go with the most expensive, since they have the best reports, use better materials or something. Plain is so enthusiastic about it, the rest of us pretend to know what the hell he's talking about.

It strikes me that all these former customers must be pretty shocked to hear a little kid's voice asking them probing questions about the details of pool-making. I'm not poking fun you, Plain. You can't help being cursed with a soprano voice that makes you sound about nine on the phone. Anyways, we now have it pretty well set, right, Plain?

There were other reports on our ongoing remodeling, landscaping, and profitable projects (well said!). We also have all been doing a lot of extra work on various learning programs, improving ourselves. History, physics, play-writing, Spanish, anthropology, Renaissance poetry. But nobody wants a report on this, though we sure spent tons of time talking. Geek Towers, that's what we got, without the Towers. We do have the rooftop dome, though, and spend time up there, though the hockey is a bust. (Barriers to keep pucks and bodies from hurtling over the edge have been judged by the group, not unanimously, to be unsightly.)

#### Eleventh Journal Entry

I'll go first, the only non-wuss. We've been getting along so smoothly even our crimes have become routine. The only difference between our robberies and weekly trips to the grocery is that we don't have to pay to rob—usually.

So, who is speaking here? Give up? Let fucks from the future, pouring over these pages, decide, right L.L.? Speaking of: she keeps chirping about our need for conflict. How we going to get that unless we stop acting like SAT-striving sucks? You are the worst.

Dorks, even Plain, who was great when violent but now ought to run for Student Council Pres. And Mary, daily fading

into the beige shag carpeting. So, I say, fuck it all. We need some catalytic agents here, some fucks to fucking stir fuckers like us the fuck up.

What a clever disguise! Using foul language and the irritating tics of everyone—except yours. You notice how Mary has been easing up on the book and film and current issues discussion group reporting? The reporting, but not the discussions. We’ve had about seven reports—exactly seven. And we’ve had infinite discussions that have gone unreported. Here’s what we’ve done, not in order: *The Virgin Suicides*, *The Stranger*, *Happiness*, *Trainspotting*, *Get Out*, *Freeway*, *US*, *Blue Velvet*, *Among the Thugs*, *Parasite*, *Jojo Rabbit*. That doesn’t count some I forgot. Truth, I miss Mary’s reports, since they gave us a way of getting back in touch with fine times.

“Catalytic agents,” huh! We need an external injection to stir us up? Well, you know how I feel about all that. I don’t disagree about being in a rut. I had that problem back in Missouri, too, adopting habits and being unable to break them.

There’s a letter for Plain and Moo (Miller and Jason) been on the table for about ten weeks (well, three days) that’s burning my gonads to find out what it is, especially because it spells both names wrong—both. What idiot is corresponding with them—and putting cologne on letters? My guess is that it’s that raging slut Elise Damon, who wants to set up a threesome. (Here’s some inside dope from the girls’ locker room: Elise doesn’t use \_\_\_\_\_ but does use \_\_\_\_\_ since she has false \_\_\_\_\_ to cover her malformed \_\_\_\_\_.)

This is Moo now before you and that was L.L. who just went: I don’t think anybody’d be fooled into believing that was me. Like I would count the number of discussions we’ve missed. And L.L. can’t even remember the name of the town where I was from, which was Possum’s Dick, MO. Besides, why would I talk about a letter to me in the third person? (“There’s a letter for Moo. . . .”)

I wonder what's in that letter, too.

You're rejecting the idea of "that woman" without knowing a fucking thing about who she is or why Moo and I are interested. So, up your bum with a pogo stick, my beautiful L.L., whom I pine after.

God, Plain—you forget you're pretending to be me and talk about "Moo and I," you idiot. Also, aren't you in some sort of contest about not using "fuck," which you just went and did, spraying it around like that cologne I wish you were using. I agree that the rest of you are being paranoid about "that woman" and "those kids."

I just figured out what I think was so worrying about Plain in his violent state. Maybe he was wanting someone to mess up his body, so he wouldn't have to think of its radiant energy. More than that. Imagine having a name that is your body. Girls know all about that, but you don't see girls getting into fights with tire irons. Maybe eating is their way to fuck themselves up—or not eating.

Am I the only one scared about this filming?

I went and opened the letter—sorry, Plain—and it's from JoAnne LaVelle, who has two kids, named Brandon and Missy. She was writing to thank me and Plain for helping her a little, you know, with food, and she had a proposition to make us, sort of, that we'll bring up, Plain and me, at the next Council meeting.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### Secret (Undiscovered Until Now) Censored Activities

Willy. That's not the best heading, but you all agreed at dinner last night we should provide a record of what has escaped being recorded, a speaking of the silent, revealing what isn't there to be revealed. That's the way this one guy in my English class talks. Makes me sick, only it doesn't, as I'm impressed.

So, here's what we agreed to: each of us records what it's odd we haven't recorded before. When I noted last Journal that we'd left out a lot of stuff, you all noted what I'd noted and thought it was worthy of note. Ha ha. We agreed to do this.

Mine is this: about three months ago, L.L. got sick. That's odd in itself; we almost never get sick. L.L. had to miss school, over a week. Bad flu, I guess, though we never could get L.L. to go to the doctor. I guess she doesn't trust them. I couldn't figure it out, since it's not like L.L. to do something unintelligent just to prove what a tough guy she is.

The reason I noted that time, though, was that it was Moo who put up with L.L.'s abuse and nursed her, not in some cooing way, just getting her soup and even taking her temperature and running to the drugstore to talk to the pharmacist and get pills and liquids that probably made things worse but that were kindly meant.

The rest of us backed off when L.L. barked, satisfied ourselves with perfunctory inquiries. Moo was the only one more interested in L.L. than in his own feelings. I's not like we didn't care, just that Moo seemed to take over all the caring.

Even odder, L.L. seemed to accept Moo's nursing. Not that it seems to have made any difference in the way they get along these days. By all rational reckonings, it shouldn't have happened. Now that it's gone, it's as if it hadn't happened.

L.L. One of the rules Willy made and didn't follow was "be brief." Another was, "Just give us your thing—not other people's thing." That saves me from talking about dear Moo's nursing. I don't know what I'd say, anyhow.

Mine is an observation. I had worried coming in here that we might get all familiar with one another, start proving how easy and at home we were by giving up on our privacy. I figured we'd feel we had to walk in on one another, dress optional, take joint showers. That didn't repulse me exactly. I'm trying to be honest. It scared me.

What's happened has been close to the reverse. We seem to trust one another more and touch less. I think we're getting more prudish—says prude me. Even Mary, who is the healthiest person I know on this, seems to me more restrained. Plain way more. It's so against common sense that things went this way. What is the first thing anybody would imagine about our life? Yeah, that's right. And it couldn't be further from the truth.

Mary. We all gradually withdrew from those vital extracurricular activities at school, thus putting in jeopardy our future Ivy League careers. Oh sure, we're doing lots of things for poor people and domestic violence victims and the homeless, but not through school programs. It just happened, which is maybe why nobody thought to write it down. I think we all wanted, more and more, to spend our time together.

Moo. Our Frisbee golf tournament. We had this game in the backyard—got drunk, had a fine time. Nobody mentioned it. If I was taken away from here and locked up tomorrow and never got to see any of you, what I'd remember would be the good times. I'd remember them and miss them so much I couldn't stand it.

Plain. God, Moo. I know we're not supposed to comment, but all that about us breaking up. That really touched me. This is embarrassing, but what somebody should have talked about

is love. That's what's been left out. Not just liking one another but a whole lot more. I love Mary, which anybody would; and L.L., which is just as obvious if we admit it; and Moo, who is way more than a buddy; and Willy, who I thought of as a brother until I realized I loved him beyond that. That's the thing we haven't written about.

### **The Film—Part 1**

Willy, reporting from behind the camera. We completed our first films, second still in abeyance. It took much longer than we thought, and the film is longer, too. One hour and four minutes for *Opus #1*. Unusual length, even with the heartless editing done mostly by Mary, who has a real feel for it. One thing: Mary's notion that all we needed was "honesty" in our acting turns out to be about as true as thinking good poetry comes from strong feeling. Doing the same scene twenty times, we found, drains us of our natural instincts and makes us rely on faking, and that's good. The less spontaneous we are, the better. Not that we know one thing about acting, but it's something to feel that acting is sure not "the authentic."

We talked a lot about uploading a teaser onto the internet and selling the film that way. Downtown was so shocked by the faintest hint of our artistic endeavor that he ruled himself out as a source for inside dope.

He's oddly prudish, is Ollie, or maybe just protective. He often tries to dissuade us from activities he regards as dangerous, imagining that we are wobbly-headed and reckless, wherein he isn't altogether wrong. (He also thinks we are naive and innocent, to which we say, "ha" and then again, "ha!"). We did spend quite a bit of money on equipment and worked on the movie so hard (wasting film stock prodigiously) that the final product is very clear and watchable—I mean, in terms of the quality of the film and technical matters.

Whether it's worth watching on other grounds, well. . . . It turned out funnier than we had imagined, and I'm not sure if humor is what you want in this sort of film. People don't buy them to laugh.

When we started making up scenes, it turned into a set of situations the script hadn't called for. Things took on a life of their own, not often sensibly. I wonder if this happens to Christopher Guest? The result for us is that the film is very talky and static. We'd planned to tease, promise but not deliver, but I don't know if that's exactly what we produced, I mean the teasing. For sure, we didn't *deliver* anything.

My guess is that viewers, if there ever are any, will find the teasers OK. The talk is titillating, when it's not hilarious, and the actors are hot. The embracing was good, and the glimpses of bellies and knees. The idea was to lodge the rhythms in your head.

Overall, the movie is really, down deep, as prudish as Ollie.

I wish someone in the group had picked up on Moo's suggestion, however confused, that somewhere deep inside, these kids often just didn't care, especially about themselves. That idea arrests and scares me. Reckless indifference seems to me to make a better fit with the dark side of the group than Moo's alternate notion that Plain (and, by extension, the others) was trying to hurt his body in order to deny his identification with it. Of course the nihilism could be adolescent posing, but I believe Moo is talking here about something he knows. It's on this level that these cuddly criminals—and they are—can be frightening, a kind of zero at the bone.

The film was not shown at the trial, not even privately to the jury. During deliberations, the jury sent a note out asking to see the film but were denied. Timmons told me early on that he saw it many times and had decided to try and use it. So why didn't he? He said he started worrying about it when, in chambers, Caitlin put up

such weak resistance. Then he started thinking it was so docile he had more to gain from the jury's imaginative projections.

But why would the defense be more ready to show this film than the prosecution? Doesn't seem to make sense. Timmons at one point forgot himself and said he had moral reservations that kept him from exposing these kids to public shame. Yeah, and snakes can't bring themselves to strike helpless prey. He also said he thought that the part of the case involving the porn film made his skin crawl, that the "unfortunate comeliness" of the molesters encouraged an "ookie interest" in these defendants. That at least seemed honest: who knows what happens if the public gets the chance to focus its prurience on these five?

Caitlin was more direct and acknowledged her ambiguity: on one hand, she thought that the film was so funny and innocent it might make the jurors lighten up and see it as little more than a prank. On the other hand, the danger was that the film did too well what they set out to do: arouse by promising a lot and handing over nothing. "For God's sake, John, what if the jury gets aroused?" That backlash is so often a factor in cases featuring kids and sex.

Just as I was losing myself in very smart and safe reflections of this sort, smiling Caitlin let fly: "Did you find it erotic yourself, John?" Here all along I thought Caitlin and I had a good feeling for one another—and then she knees me in the nuts. (I am pretty sure she thought I was betraying kids I knew were innocent and hated me for it.) After issuing her question, she was waiting for me to blush or oh-shucks, standing there staring coldly at me. Hey, I ain't about to be outfoxed by some dame. I looked my enemy straight in the eye and—dammit—went, "Ah hell, Caitlin, I mean, gee, I—."

I'm not even a film amateur, but I did stream the Christopher Guest movies to see what our young folks were talking about. The kids' film is a lot like Guest's in form, sometimes embarrassingly silly but more often extremely funny. The humor is, as Willy says, pretty disconcerting, especially in a porn film—if that's what this is. It depends on how you see it. I think it is more like a parody,

working the same way that “This Is Spinal Tap” does to ridicule syrupy movies worshipping rock bands. Is the kids’ movie even illegal? They show nothing. There are very few coarse words, maybe none now that I think of it, not even much kissing. Suggestive stuff, for sure—it’s nothing but suggestive.

As for the CPA:

### **The Movie Nobody Saw**

*Not being prosecutors, we have no access to the sort of mind which would hide the strongest part of his case, block the showing of conclusive evidence, the smoking gun. We know that at least one highly child-pornographic and completely illegal film was made—a film that not one person, even their “stars,” has referred to as anything but child pornography, a filthy film involving minors in graphic depictions of sexual perversions.*

*We do not say that the wide-ranging sexual abuse of Brandon and Missy included forcing them into these films. We do not know for certain. Neither does the jury. Why does this crucial matter remain a mystery? Because District Attorney Timmons seems to find serving as a back-up defense counsel more to his taste than prosecuting.*

*DAs have a heavy responsibility. They are poorly rewarded for all they do for us. We taxpayers pay Mr. Timmons only \$184,000 a year. That is a lot for most of us, but it’s about a week’s work to a lawyer in private practice—like, let’s say, defense attorney Caitlin Moore. We are not unsympathetic to Timmons’s complaint. Indeed, why should Ms. Moore make all that money and DA Timmons make so little? Is it fair?*

*We are not implying that the DA had these thoughts in his mind. And do we need to remind you that the defendants’ parents are filthy rich? There is so much wrongdoing in this case, there is more than enough to go around without including DA Timmons.*

*We simply raise the question. How can we explain DA Timmons's tireless work on behalf of the pedophile five?*

This poster was not signed by the CPA. I didn't bother asking them about it, nor did Timmons, I expect. They attack him so unfairly it's almost enough to make one side with the unscrupulous prick. They have only one goal, keep it in view: hurting the five kids as much as they can.

### **The Second Great Parental Invasion**

OK, so you're a parent of a kid who has moved out and established an independent life. For reasons in no way clear to you, that independence galls you sore, as does the success. Is that success a measure of your own failure? You feel as if you should be doing something. Why? What? Those questions have no real answers, but that makes them all the more urgent. Parents are supposed to keep kids from being independent. They don't put it that way, but anybody visiting from another planet would see it straight off: the function of parents is to trap kids into the same patterned existence the parents imagine they have chosen and even struggled to achieve.

This is vital. Parents need to make kids think that Mom and Dad are to be congratulated for the lives they have made a pattern for imitation. If the parents can't pull this off, then they must (and do) resort to brute force. If the kids still manage to be different, the parents are told to feel guilty, act as if there were an emergency, wrench the kids back from their success. I mean, what's the point of being a parent if your kids are happy and strong?

Well, the parents in our case had a double dilemma: they are stuck with these nightmare independent kids and, even worse, they are doing nothing about it. No calling the cops, no helping, no understanding them. Far worse, over a year goes by since the last halfhearted "intervention," yielding from them

only the whining phone call, sentimental card, infrequent made-from-a-mix brownies, or store-bought sweater.

And here they come again. Their prolonged absence is an embarrassment, so they act according to the handbook: turn defects into virtues, then into weapons. Can you predict how they did it here? They had stayed away, you see, in deference to our wishes, as an act of consideration, allowing us (they had been kids themselves) to let this phase run its course. The absurdity of it all would occur to us, as we slowly matured, just as they had in their time. They realize that deep-down we are good kids, just immature.

That we should have gone to such juvenile extremes, been so spoiled and self-indulgent, caused them much grief—not that they would mention it, long-suffering as they are. Love endureth all things, even bad kids.

So, here they were, on a lovely Sunday afternoon, interrupting us in the middle of our hockey tournament.

We were called from our harmless play by the Second Coming of our biological presumptives. We collected in the front room, Moo and Plain doing an imitation of suburban hosts: “Anybody care for refreshments? Lemonade? Barbiturates? Old Crow?” They laughed as if it were funny, all but Willy’s parents and Mary’s. My parents looked as vacant as a Christian think-tank. Plain’s parents seemed easy. They scare me. I find myself liking them, wanting them to like me. Moo’s parents I don’t want to characterize. They were explosively angry from the minute they came in. Unlike the rest, they were beyond using guilt as their weapon. They seemed to feel that Moo had so wounded them they had every reason to strike back, to hurt him or someone very badly.

The course of events wasn’t much different from the first go-round, though I think we did better this time: no histrionics, no pompous speeches (by me). The parental marauders ran through the usual questions, pleas, and attacks. We kept our

cool. Mary didn't cry and Moo didn't call anybody a withered bungle and Plain didn't leave. Mostly we were quiet and super-respectful, irritating the life out of them.

Except for Plain's parents. They had trouble finding space in which to talk, what with so many imagining they had just the formula that would win us back—make them feel better about themselves. When Plain's parents did talk, it was in a different key.

"How do you manage down times?"

"I think you've done some imaginative things here—but what in hell do those murals represent?"

"How do you manage conflict?"

Best of all—"Isn't there a ton of sexual tension? Obviously it's working for you."

The other parents regarded such expressions, at first, as irritating interruptions to the flow, then, as cause for protest: "Who the hell cares?" rising to "You are as juvenile as these kids!" and "Would you kindly just shut the fuck up!"

I'd like to get to know them sometime. They seemed intrigued, unable quite to understand. I'm not going to let our doctrinaire views on adults stand in the way of finding out. One of my many faults had been a tendency to know more than I know.

(My own parents have a kind of superficial resemblance to Plain's, but there's a gap—I think. It's even possible that Plain regards my parents with something like the same tentative admiration I feel for his. What?)

The rest of the afternoon was the first invasion all over, apart, as I say, from our side's ability to hold onto indifference. As a result, we sucked the wind out of their bowels (an image as delicate as it is expressive) and made their failure more evident. Probably not to them. Parents have bottomless resources of illusion on which to draw.

At the end, Plain's parents hung back a little, told us they knew we didn't need their support but had it anyhow, if we wanted anything. . . . Then they hugged us all, one at a time. It made me feel rotten bad, as Huck would say, to have stolen their stuff, but I figured if they could stand it, I could.

Plain was pretty quiet, but he let them hug him, which surprised me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### The Great Lottery (*Ours*)

It's Moo. Oh, snuffle snuffle snuffle. L.L. writes like that fuck Charles Dickens what we had to read in English class, all boo-hoos and people doing heavenly good or hellish evil. Actually, I love his stuff. I wouldn't want this to get around, but I went and read two other novels not even assigned. Those novels what I read was *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which is the funniest book I've ever made it all the way through, which the other one was *Little Dorrit*, different and Marxist, said George Bernard Shaw: "All over Europe people are in chains for works not one half as seditious as this"—or something close to that.

Well, lollipops, we decided to run a lottery, having cleaned up with the tag day. Marking our steady decline into decadence, this one was entirely on the up and up. It was this: "Pay a dollar and the winning ticket gets a 5-day trip to New York City to see shows and stay at the world-famous Waldorf Astoria—for two."

All to benefit "Hands Across the Waters," our program for joining together in eternal understanding the continents of Africa and Asia (and ours, too) by linking in bonds of love the little children to our own purple mountains and fruited plains. "Hands Across the Waters" is a slogan I picked up from some books I was reading for a report on World War II. But I wasn't in charge; nobody was, as usual. (Or so we say. It's all a lie, though. I do 73% of the total work and come up with 86% of the good ideas.)

We made posters and lottery tickets, worked hard, though the little kids were wonderful in designing the arty posters and getting almost every store in town to put them up. Each poster was different. My favorite was Shaneesha's:

**PUT YOUR MONEY ACROSS THE SEAS!  
HELP OUR YELLOW AND BLACK GROUP TO LEARN  
THINGS  
WIN A BIG TRIP TO NEW YORK CITY AND SEE  
BROADWAY  
ONLY \$1  
TAKE A FRIEND ALSO  
YOU GET TO STAY FIVE DAYS  
YOU WILL LIKE HELPING US**

We also took a classy picture of the kids, Willy did, and put it on additional posters. We left tickets at all the stores, where they sold like hotcakes.

The downside was that the local paper saw this advertising and made a big deal of it: we are what all teens should be and so seldom are, what with drugs and pregnancy and tattooing and rap and phones.

The grand-prize trip was arranged by a coalition made up of Ollie (who helped us hatch the idea, maybe even created it), Plain's parents, and L.L.'s parents. They knew travel agents and got this whole shebang for \$2,400, for two. That's practically nothing for airfare and hotel and tickets and lots of free meals. Willy said the actual price was more like \$10,000, even with discounts. Plain really went after his parents like a fox pursuing a chicken—I heard him on the phone. It didn't seem fair to put the squeeze on them so hard, when they'd been so cool. Plain seemed quiet afterwards and kind of smiley, so it was clear they came through. (Funny about Plain smiling. He almost never smiles. When he does, it's like the whole world catches fire.) This last paragraph needs rewriting. I want to learn to write better and have been getting tips from Willy, who ought to be a teacher, so very patient is he.

(It also just occurred to me that one picture we heisted from Plain's house is hanging right there in our front room, along

with two ancient pots, worth a lot, and a bunch of old leather-bound books. Just right out there. We didn't fence them because we liked them. His parents obviously saw the stuff.)

(It's worse than embarrassing. Makes you want to rethink all we've been saying about adults—maybe all adults, except Plain's parents.)

So—this is getting very long, but I'm having fun—we had a lottery-drawing outside the newspaper office. They got the assistant mayor to do it, Jesus Christ Almighty. This old folks couple won. They probably had never been beyond their front yard and were poor as shit, you could tell. Now they get to stay at the world-famous Waldorf Astoria and go to plays. They even get to go to the Metropolitan Opera, which they can talk about for years and years. Until they are dead, I'll bet.

Almost forgot to say that we made—I'm not kidding—\$47,000. That includes a lot given to us by businesses and \$6000 from the newspaper. Because of Plain's parents, it was all pure profit for the dear little kids, which I can't believe I just called them that, only they are.

We thought at the start we might make two thousand to take the kids on a modest trip. Now what are we going to do? Guess.

Well, first, we got a deal—through Ollie by way of a computer store—to get each of the kids set up with a first-class computer and printer. About \$22,000 total for the 20 kids, which is less than one-half the actual price. L.L. and Willy are doing computer classes for them.

That left almost half the money. We thought about a trip, but here's the best idea I have had (and I've had lotsa good ones). Instead of a trip to Bermuda, which would have been way too educational, I said we should buy them books. At first, we were going to spend it on a library here at our house; but I said we didn't want to be in the charity business forever and that we'd get rotten tired of these kids pretty soon. So, I said,

let's get each of them a lot of books so they can have them on their own. I finally found this company, Dover, that had a list of great books that are cheap. I got a person there who talked to her boss who said they could let me have that many books for such a good cause at 1/3 the price. We put together a classics library for the kids and each ended up with about 200 books. You should have seen the kids—what with the computer and all those books. Made your heart grow. Probably the computers will get busted and also nobody'll read. But it makes us feel great!

I picked a few of the books myself, including *The Naked and the Dead*, which I'd read, and *The Virgin Suicides* and *Among the Thugs*, that we did in our group. *The Bluest Eye* and *The Awakening*, Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin. I also added all the novels by Charles Dickens and a lot of horror books, just so it wasn't all classics, but some of them were good material too—you know, Poe and H. G. Wells, and *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* and *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Member of the Wedding*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Invisible Man*, a lot of books I liked. Dover made a lot of good suggestions, along the lines of *The Great Gatsby* and *Huck Finn* and *In Cold Blood* and *Wuthering Heights*. *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The Dover woman included things they didn't even sell. Used her influence to get other companies to pitch in.

### Swimming Pool

It's Plain. There's nuthin to say here, kids, what with all the pleasure of this excitement being packed into the doing. These construction guys, like always, were terrific to hang with. I guess I thought creating a swimming pool was just digging a hole, cementing it, putting in a drain and pump, and filling it with nice clean water. But I realize I'm the only one interested in the procedures, so I'll spare you, as my pa used to say just

when you were starting to think he might be getting interesting. (Thanks for the nice things you guys said about my parents. I see what you're saying and maybe someday I'll agree. Anyhow, I know you mean well. There's a play I read where a character says, " 'I know you mean well' is the most aggressive cliché in the language." Hope not. What I feel for you guys isn't aggressive, even on the unconscious level L.L. has been teaching us about. What I feel, top to bottom, for all of you, manifest to latent, is love.)

So, the pool got done. The slide works and the diving board, though I don't know how to dive. The umbrella table and chairs are generic, but it's fun sitting out there and reading. So, it's finished, and like all finished things isn't very interesting. Things only exist when they're *in potentia*. Maybe it's true only for us. Maybe it's not true at all. But we got us a pool.

I know that's boring. Truth is I had a bad experience with one of the tile guys. I'd almost rather swallow it, but I don't want to hide anything about myself now. I was hanging around, trying to get them to tell me what they were doing and asking stupid questions, shooting the shit. I've always loved that, but I see I had romanticized it—acting around them and thinking about them in what L.L. calls a fantasy haze, as if the whole world were a cartoon. And I see I'm blaming this guy, Otto, when it may have been my fault.

All he did was pull down my shorts a couple of times. Later, I noticed him edging behind me. It was embarrassing, but I didn't want to let on I minded. Then once he tugged and my pants didn't come down, so I saw how embarrassed he was, felt like pulling them down myself. I kept hanging around and acting goofy, trying to let him know it was no big deal—really trying to tell myself.

The bottom line, as Vice-Principal Clayton loves to say, is that I shouldn't care but I do. The worst part is the shame in being such a self-absorbed dick. People have real problems in

**this world, terrible problems. I obsess over some horny guy pantsing me. The only thing I did right was tell Otto I was sorry—and that probably made him feel worse. Fucking pervert. I am sorry, Otto. And I'm sorry to all of you buddies for letting my phobias spill over, as I'm sure they do, and make you all feel uncomfortable, as I'm sure they must.**

I asked Plain about this passage. He kept returning to the sentence where he beats up on himself for making so much of a problem that was nothing compared to all the horrors in this world. He found some key to his situation in that formula. I think he was starting to see that he was about the luckiest kid in the hemisphere in terms of a bulging package of natural endowments, money, and record-setting parents. He was good at getting himself to understand things like this—his unearned advantages—then pushing to face the most painful possibilities. Plain ruthlessly examined his life, giving himself so little slack it was almost cruel. Thought of in that way, his personal problems with his body and others' fascination with it seemed trivial, self-imposed. Plain was aware of a third possibility, that it was a phantom issue. He just would not allow himself to rest there. It answered too many things too quickly, let him off the hook.

Joking, I asked Plain how he would feel if I yanked down his pants right on the spot. The boy looked truly shocked. I apologized to him, much in the same way he apologized to Otto, I expect. Too earnestly and too often. He deserves a lot more than being forced into the role of a pin-up. I am sorry, Plain. I am sorry, too, for all the Ottos of this world, driven by needs spilling out of their control, giving pain to those they long for and to themselves while they are at it.

### **Film and Book Club**

**Mary here. This time we tried a combo: films and book for the same evening. We got pizzas delivered and started the movies at five, having read the novel beforehand. Everybody**

was ready to go at 4:50. How obedient we are! The book was *Lolita* and the movie was two of them, the real old one by Stanley Kubrick and the later piece of ordure (L.L. fed me that word) done by some lead-headed, self-aggrandizing jerk. Kubrick had Nabokov there on the set, of course, but that's not all that made the difference. (We read that Nabokov really wasn't all that much help, produced a forty-hour-long screenplay and then didn't want to cut any of it.) The more recent film was so proud of being a millimeter more explicit about the sex that it forgot to do anything else.

So, to back up, we didn't talk about Humbert as a sicko, analyzing his peculiarities. Plain pointed out how Nabokov blocks us from using half-assed psychology with his sarcastic preface by John Ray, Ph.D. Dr. Ray hilariously heads off at the pass the attempt to "understand" Humbert. We all got the point, avoided the traps set up for dumb people, which we are proud as punch not to be.

We cut to the essay at the rear of our paperbacks, the one written by Nabokov, where he says the novel is not about its subject matter but about art, language and shape, "aesthetic bliss." It lolls around with *Lolita* and enjoys that rapture of Humbert's, but its appeal is never what you expect. We all backed off being so certain in order to see what would happen if we admitted that the book is way beyond us. That's interesting—not trying to sound smart. It's tough, since that's what we're good at, but it's liberating. Anyhow, we aimed to go where we didn't understand. If the novel is about itself, then we could sort of see that Humbert isn't really a character but a way to set up writing, writing so terrific we all wanted to read out loud. Not that the writing in this novel is any one thing. It's sometimes funny, sometimes cruel, and sometimes passionate, often scuttling from one affect to another real fast in the same paragraph or even sentence.

We started reading passages and talking about “what was happening”—not inside the passage but to us, what the passage DID. There’s no way I want to reproduce any of that, but God was it fun.

The two “*Lolita*” movies were useful to us in the same way, showing us how to avoid staking our egos on getting it right. There’s other ways to enjoy experiences like this—reading the book, watching a movie—and one is to regard them as self-contained experiences, not as classes with exams at the end. The awful movie with Jeremy Irons begins with a voice-over “explaining” Humbert to us. According to this dumbo idea, Humbert is a case of arrested development, frozen by a love affair he had at thirteen with a nymphet named Annabel [a jokey reference to Edgar Allan Poe]. There you have it, all you need to know: Humbert seeks hopelessly (a cross between Hamlet and Jeffrey Dahmer) to recreate that lost love, to find his reincarnated Annabel and possess her. And here is the REAL clue to the REAL Humbert. You’d think the movie makers had never read the book.

Kubrick begins his version with the ending of the book, which is played like a wacky Marx Brothers comedy, “absurdist,” Willy says. It has Humbert and Quilty (played by Peter Sellers) in a scene where ping-pong and murder are equivalents. “This is absurd,” it says. “Don’t continue if you don’t get it.”

This novel gave us a way of thinking about, FEELING our living experiment as something beyond being formulated. As we talked, we realized we were talking at least as much about our lives together as about the novel. Maybe I can illustrate this better by copying out one of our favorite passages:

And so we rolled East, I more devastated than braced with the satisfaction of my passion, and she glowing with health, her bi-iliac garland still as brief as a lad’s, although she had added two inches to her stature and eight pounds to her

weight. We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep.

Willy, who's been writing a bunch and taking all those writing classes, says any writer would give his arm to be able to produce that last sentence, for the parallel series which links together what isn't parallel at all, going from maps to tour books to tires to sobs. The odd parade of plain old stuff turns heartbreaking with just the oblique warnings in the adjectives—"dog-eared," "ruined," "old"—the devastating "ruined." I see what Willy means, but I wouldn't have thought it. L.L. said, "the sex between adult and child is merely the occasion for all this art. It is a weak reading that imagines that pedophilia is the center."

Did the CPA fasten on this? With posters that featured prose which would not soon be confused with Nabokov's. L.L.'s statement, the one Mary closes with about sex being merely the occasion for the book, becomes, in CPA's rendering, an enthusiastic approval of pedophilia.

That the quintet (my sorely missed friends) were not warming up for attacks in their perhaps over-opinionated talk on *Lolita* does not, of course, mean they didn't carry out such attacks. (And that there's a sentence Nabokov himself woulda been proud of.) Let's see: "worn-out gum shoes, tarnished badges, crusted ashtrays, misplaced hopes, found again in the night—every night, every night—only to hide again in the morning. . . ." Perhaps not quite, not close, though the rhythm works.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### Twelfth Journal Entry

We agreed—with differing degrees of enthusiasm—to allow JoAnne LaVelle and her kids, Bert and Misty (that right?), to stay with us until she gets things together and finds a place of her own. This is Mary. Plain and Moo know her, say she is a good woman who has been terribly treated by men, especially her husband, who simply up and left her, having wearied of beating her.

That may be, but L.L., Willy, and I thought we might have gotten to know them a bit before having them plop in for some unspecified period. I can't speak for the others, but I feel, after one meeting, that the kids are about as sweet as kids get and that JoAnne is not. She's a cartoon character, a gum-snapping hair-in-curlers babbler with the self-awareness of a slug. (Reminds me of *Pride and Prejudice*: "Her character was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper.")

And here we are inviting them in. I am surprised at myself for not echoing the enthusiasm. Hell, I trust Moo and Plain absolutely, but I somehow can't swim in their currents here. I wish they were not coming.

That's said, and that's that. I'll do everything I can to be good to her. The kids are no problem—so beautiful and winsome—graceful and thin, with a kind of strange immobility: it's almost as if they were crouching in a corner—don't want to assume, thinking you'll turn them out. Dickensian outcasts, never daring to risk saying it: "Please, sir, may I have some more?"

There are other fetching things about these kids. Their clothes always seem to be too small, over-worn, over-washed. It's as if they scrubbed themselves as a last ditch stand against

destitution. They remind me of that old Dolly Parton song Willy likes—“Late one cold and stormy night, I heard a dog a barkin’”—“Me and little Andy,” I think it’s called. It’s so corny, and it makes me cry every time. “God knew little Andy would be lonesome with her gone.”

How can we tell them they can’t stay warm here and have some food? Of course it’s summer, hardly a time of howling storms, but it doesn’t matter. The helpless little ones have no power to choose and no choices to make. What’ll they do? They’ll have five big siblings playing caregiver, the guardians they drew in the lottery. We’ll buy them books. They can use the pool. I wonder if they know how to swim and when’s the last time they’ve been to school. Hell, can they read? Sorry. This is the first time since we came together I feel off-balance.

Plain here. Dear Mary, our honey. How you outshine us all. I really am sorry Moo and I threw you a split-finger fastball. If you have qualms, you almost pass them on to me—like the chickenpox. But, you see, Moo and I have this intuition about JoAnne: beneath that trailer-trash, google-eyed, purple-finger-nailed, blabby exterior, there’s a fine person. She isn’t educated—not her fault. When she talks about how her husband and boyfriends treated her, it makes me ashamed to be male. JoAnne’s not been careful, I imagine, or smart. She’s made a lot of mistakes, but she’s hardly ever had even a slim chance. She wanted to find someone who would love her, and also wanted a good time. She kept trying.

I respect her for her “mistakes.” She has more spirit and bounce-back than any adult I have run into, apart from Ollie.

Anyhow, I think you women are suspicious of her because you have been taught by the culture to regard other women as shallow and manipulative. I read that in a feminist text—said the worst feature of the patriarchy was its ability to force women to internalize degrading views of other women.

The text did go on to say that male sympathy was shallow and sentimental, just another weapon, a show of being “sensitive” so as to trap women. It’s sure possible that Moo and I are being conventional, showing our “feminine side” by being stupidly male. It’s almost as if JoAnne were that old figure from patriarchal tradition, “the whore with the heart of gold.”

That’s a possibility, and it’s the worst. I just don’t think it’s true. I don’t think me and Moo are melting in the face of a cliché.

Mary’s getting low does worry me. But we’re in the soup now, right? And Moo and I will take responsibility.

Of course I agree about the kids. They’re so small and so lost. It’s hard not to grab them and give them stuff. Poor dears. Talk about sentimental! Wouldn’t you love to get these kids in one of our hot movies? God!!

I hope you’re enjoying the pool. The birch trees will grow pretty fast, and then we can get rid of the fans. We’re living the life of people who want to do what they want to do and do it. Feel guilty?

Willy here. Semester’s finally over—though I’ve never loved any school experience like the one I’m having at old Westminster. I never loved any school experience at all before. Isn’t it odd, then, that I’m glad the semester’s over. How could that be? Conditioning, living the life of a cliché, just as Plain said when he was putting out that brilliant stuff about male sentimentality. (It’s really more than brilliance; it’s the intellectual energy it takes to see how school stuff actually fits life, so you’re not just studying for tests and then forgetting, but really *thinking*. Plain does that so much better than I.)

Plain’s right about how easy it is to relax, thinking how original we’re being, just as we settle down with the most conventional role. I’ve always hated summer vacation—and I’ve always itched for it to come. Even now. I have trouble not living with my mind and heart sitting in the future—a way of

not living at all. L.L.'s been talking to me about this. And the book and film discussions have helped me a lot. I have had times, here with you friends, when I wasn't thinking about what I'd do after whatever I was doing was over. If you live your life that way, you just hop from one completion to another, exchanging one death for the last. Maybe I can stop wanting it all to be over with.

I love the pool, Plain, the complexity of your plan, and how well it works. I was angry as hell at the tile guy. I agree it's OK if he was turned on, wanted to look at you. But this Otto was so self-centered. I've noticed how much you enjoy your connection with these craftsmen and how passionately you throw yourself into these projects. Not having your dynamic curiosity, I can still see how these problems are always morphing into ever new monsters to be tackled. You're an interesting guy, Plain, and a dear one. And I say that not just because I like you and see how different you are from me.

As for Ms. LaVelle and her children, I think we're moving terribly fast here, but, like Mary, I'll be glad to help make it work. I sort of wish Plain and Moo had reached some understanding with her about the length of their stay, but I see that sort of specificity would seem to them churlish. They regard her as very fragile. I can't say she strikes me that way, but they have spent time with her. She's bound to have more substance than she allows to show. A one-celled creature would.

May I remove myself from the chorus humming so swooningly over the wee shits coming? They seem to me mousy and moping. Maybe I'm just used to our spirited Steeler outfit. And Plain and Moo will be sure to upbraid me (ain't that a dandy verb?), reminding me of how these wee kiddies have been cowed by a life so tough I could never even imagine. They're pretty, give 'em that. Maybe we could use them as lawn ornaments. Doesn't seem they have consciousness enough to protest.

I'm kidding. I'm sure they're angels, just a troddin on this earth for such a brief time, like me and little Andy.

L.L. here. I like the pool a lot. I like Plain a lot. I agree with the gist of what Willy and Mary have said. Actually, I love our life here and love each of you so and am scared that we're messing everything up. I can't put this rationally. Still, I yam what I yam and feels whats I feels. Hope I'm wrong.

Moo here. Think of it this way: we're taking a risk. L.L., is always saying we ought to put mystery ingredients in the stew. Well—? (I love you too, L.L.)

Back to the new lodgers: JoAnne has had a life I can't even imagine. She told Plain and me she was systematically raped by her dad and grandfather, made to do things I don't even want to say. It's amazing she's been able to keep her life together as well as she has. She made a bad marriage, but who doesn't? She's raised those two kids. I mean, she must be doing something right.

Actually, I'll take that last sentence back. What's wrong with me? I don't think her kids being great tells us anything about her. Maybe their looks do, but they are a lot prettier than she is. She is all gross healthy; they are skinny and wan. ("Wan" is a word I got from this poem Mary showed me: "Why so pale and wan, young lover? Prithee, why so pale?")

Thanks, Plain. This house is so nice and the roof. Our life is perfect. I love it, like L.L. said. And I love you all, too, like she also said. I can't believe she wrote that, but I can't believe I did either. JoAnne and the kids won't be here long, and we'll learn a lot from the experience. We're too strong together for anything to fuck us up. Hey, we survived the attack from the Sharks, didn't we?

This last long entry I had examined to see if there were signs that it had been doctored or maybe inserted later. Nope. No signs of fakery, and I'm willing to take it. The entry is so important, but I guess it's possible to read it in different ways. What the DA and

the CPA thought it said was very different from what Caitlin milked out of it. I'm closer to Caitlin, though I have to keep reminding myself that these preliminary comments on JoAnne and her children may have little to do with what happened later on. Still, I think a fair reader would be less likely to believe the molestation charges after examining this entry.

For my money, the accused seem to have managed a smart reading of JoAnne and the kids, despite coming down on different sides. They saw her ditzy quality, and they can be forgiven for failing to suspect that it might hide something ominous. They admire her ability to survive, not suspecting that she might be perfectly willing to survive at their expense. Even the three with reservations on the upcoming cohabitation register nothing like suspicion, but I can't imagine myself, in their shoes, reading JoAnne any better.

In fairness, I should say that it's not clear that she planned to use them. It's not even clear what exactly she did or, much more to the point, what the five (slightly) older kids did. The more I extend this Report—unmercifully (partly in the forlorn hope that more words will somehow yield insight), the more I feel myself swaying toward my five, not because of the evidence but because of them. I know being seduced is not the same as being convinced. It's better.

The CPA found so much juicy material here, perfect for their uses, provided they ignored context and tone, contrived to read everything through their usual filters. But were they really all that crafty? I have wondered sometimes if they were so wrapped up in their own virtuous rage they didn't recognize their many distortions. They do have feelings, boxcars full of them. Fueled by righteousness, they probably didn't distinguish between canny strategy and responsible reporting. As I write this now, I can't ignore the fact that I too am in the grip of a passionate partiality of my own. Maybe we differ only in the direction of our passion.

It's tough not to cringe as these kids joke about using Brandon and Missy in the movies or, even worse, as lawn ornaments.

Timmons, to give him credit he doesn't deserve, showed restraint here, barely mentioned these passages. He may have felt direct questioning of the accused on their motives for inviting the outsiders in would lead to no good. He probably didn't want the jury hearing that this ruthless gang felt sorry for Ms. LaVelle or that some of them were reluctant to have her disrupting what was working so well. Better for him to suggest that they plotted to get Brandon and Missy there and lured them into their sticky web with malice (and lust) aforethought. Prosecutors are like novel writers: their strongest plots are set in motion by silence.

### **The Great Local Educational Establishment**

**L.L.—**What with it being summer, you'd think our Asia-Africa coalition would abandon us. But the kids keep coming for work-till-you-drop classes. Plain and Mary—all of us, but those two especially—do elaborate things. Mary is teaching them French, which they find funny. The kids are remarkable mimics, but so great are Mary's persuasive skills that they dive eagerly into vocabulary and grammar rules. Plain has them doing algebra and geometry—which he says is fun. (Sure!) He has them outside surveying, drawing plans, fiddling with tools.

I am teaching chemistry and biology, Mary—drama and music, Willy—literature and writing, along with basic computer skills. It's a full-time job.

Add to that taking on two more ignorant pupils—with no increase in our non-pay. B and M have almost no structured abilities, though they seem curious and godalmighty quick. They're willing to work hours without bitching, follow us around like abandoned puppies—but they seem used to making themselves not there. Ask one of them for help and it's pathetic how eager they are.

So here we come at them like clowns in a circus, and they're a little disoriented, but happy as hell. They worship Plain, who talks to them like they're his age, consults with them on his

never-ending plans. For all I know, they're useful in some way. It doesn't seem to be an act with Plain. He never wrestles with them or treats them like toys (as I'll admit I do). He hugs them about as often as he does the rest of us, which is fairly often.

Plain doesn't talk about Brandon and Missy, but he makes us think about it because he is with them in a world the rest of us can only gape at. He shows us that we were sliding into treating Brandon and Missy as pets, stuffing them full of guilt and gratitude. Right from the minute they walked through the door, Plain expanded his playground and let them in. I think he's waiting for the rest of us to catch up. I can hardly imagine being like Plain, trusting so much.

As for the kids, they do seem to have escaped the ferocity of the general cultural molding. They don't know the script of being kids too well and aren't good at faking it. They're not too polite, for instance, and don't hide how much they'd like to know personal stuff about everybody. They never ask for anything, doubtless because they're not used to receiving much. They're very direct in conversation, and they love to talk, say whatever the hell they're thinking.

I asked them the other day if they'd like to go to a movie. I figure they've not been to many. They were excited, of course, but then I thought about Plain. "You guys rather just go to the park and hang out, talk, see what's going on?" They said they'd rather, so we did. I kept quiet and they babbled all afternoon. I stopped worrying about finding things to talk about. I stopped asking them questions and gradually lost my own shyness. We fed the ducks, had ice cream from a truck, played tag, and just walked around. We drew diagrams in the dirt and dug in the wet places for worms.

They are becoming not just nice kids, as disarmingly beautiful as Plain and Mary in their way, but something more. "Friends" seems like such an inexpressive word; and the reality is something else, the way these little kids start to become part

of us. Sure, we teach them academic subjects and sure we want to rescue them. I suppose we still regard them, lethally, as “cute,” but we’re doing better. Of course, we love them, but that’s to be expected and doesn’t count for much, unless it spurs us on to being in some ghastly way parental. That’s the danger, the one way in which we might hurt them.

I don’t think we’d be hurting them by including them in our films. Ask them first, and then let them help with scripts and acting, or work with Willy on camera. They are sensual, seems to me, though they’re also extremely modest—again, probably connected to their experiences in some way. It’d be some kind of good test of our ability to detach ourselves from protecting or “helping” these kids to ask them. Show them what we’ve done and then ask.

I hate to interrupt L.L., but this long entry screamed its way into the trial. Timmons read out parts, and Caitlin read out much else, trying to undo some of the damage. L.L. was completely unrepentant about her statements. She did, with Caitlin’s prodding, manage to lay out pretty clearly the line about being careful to treat the kids the way they (the accused) wanted to be treated, their odd Golden Rule. I don’t know if it helped (or made sense to the jury) for L.L. to say they wanted to honor the kids’ autonomy, but it was better than suggesting they’d lured them there to conduct screen tests. According to L.L., the film was one way of allowing Brandon and Missy a way out of the standard “script” imposed on kids and enforced not only by parents but every part of “the cultural machinery.” L.L. made her reasoning clear, but what could the jury do with all that, clear or not? And why were they talking about what never happened?

Who knows how the jury took this? L.L. is in no way conventionally likable (maybe I’m projecting here), but that no-nonsense way of hers, the rock-hard cockiness, the confidence she has in her own purpose, can make it very hard to doubt her on points of fact. Without understanding her motives, fearing and disliking

her, I could never suppose she was lying. She didn't think I was important enough to warrant a lie. No adult was.

It's possible the jury read her as she directed them to, suggesting that in some ideal culture Brandon and Missy would be allowed into every corner of life they might seek out. They would never be protected, since nobody had the right to protect kids, to force onto them a drama in which the world was filled with threats and kids were incapable of finding their way without step-by-step guides and coercive badgering. L.L. is eloquent on this point, speaks with passion. Still, it's tough to imagine her persuading anyone, apart from soggy-hearted detectives and kids. Are the notions adopted by L.L. and her beloved compatriots puerile, insane, or visionary? I've come to find them attractive, but that's not a judgment I can use in my job. Even more useless is the wave of something like longing that sweeps over me when I let myself think of a world in which kids don't need permission.

One last thing and I'll let L.L. proceed. I went over with her my understanding of her argument, taking my time, trying hard. She looked at me politely. It was only when I told her I found it all "alluring" that she reacted. She smiled—the only one she ever directed my way—and touched my arm: "I thought only kids could be inside all this. I was wrong."

OK, L.L.:

**Brandon and Missy prove our point—nothing at all like their mother, nor simply a reaction to her. I think they've responded to their environment and experiences, sure, but their way of surviving without losing anything has been theirs alone. Brandon and Missy aren't specimens to be analyzed. Where am I?**

**On JoAnne: one thing I can say is that she's not needy. That she's disgusting goes without saying. After Plain and Moo fell for her, I was sure she'd be a multiple victim with nothing but her wounds to fight with. But, by jiminy, she is a tough one, self-sufficient in a way and about as interested in us as she**

would be in the History Channel. She's not around much, obviously glad to have us occupying her kids. When she's with Brandon and Missy, she seems nice to them in a distanced, unbalanced way. Sometimes she treats them as if they were about three years old, using this sugary voice and calling them "my babies." Other times, she speaks to them only to ask for aid: "Brandon, could you get me my curling iron, hun?" "Missy, you seen my eyeliner?" I've never heard her say anything mean to them. She has the passive virtues of the self-absorbed.

But being around her is like having your most delicate body parts slowly ground up in a cast-iron meat-grinder. (My grandma has one, makes her own hamburger.) JoAnne might be one of those mad characters in *Tristram Shandy* (which Willy tells me about). She can hardly pay attention to what she is saying long enough to get through a sentence: "It's a nice day out—where was I?" Worse, one boring thing reminds her of another, and she runs after it, no matter that running leads to more running, no chance of a capture.

Putting it this way makes her sound colorful, but, for the most part, she's aggravating. When I said she was self-sufficient, I should have said that she's almost supernaturally indifferent to anyone. She opens her mouth and lets anything in there flow out. "I hope you kids got all the strawberries you wanted, though I never liked strawberries as much as peaches, on cereal, not ice cream, though Martin [who?] did, but not so much lately, I think, after we left Wheeling, a genuine dump, without even a decent coffee bar, and you know I saw a program making fun of them, but if you were living in Wheeling, where there's not only no busses, worse than East Liverpool, though there was a time when my aunt ran a dry goods store, never did know what dry goods were, what's wet goods . . . ."

No need to listen. You could walk out of the room and she'd keep going. I don't think she knew anybody's name, here or anywhere in the world. She called us all "dear," with some undifferentiated warmth attached.

JoAnne should be beat-up, sagging, garishly clothed, floozie inside and out. But she is handsome, uses little makeup, and wears surprisingly modest, simple clothes. Go figure, as Moo used to say, before we broke him of it.

She leaves every day, looking for work, she says, and she gets a fair number of phone calls. She never talks to us or to the air about her current life, and I can't imagine being curious about it—apart from hoping she gets a job soon, holds up a liquor store, just gets out.

We'd miss Brandon and Missy, but we can stand it. Besides, she'll just leave them behind. That's a possibility we might want to consider. Inviting the two to stay with us, I mean. Legal problems, do you suppose? Duh.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### The School Play

I, Plain, am late writing this by about 6 weeks. As Luther says in that great movie, *48 Hours*, “*I’ve Been Busy!*” (I guess you had to hear the line to appreciate it. He spits it out in this strangled, furious voice, like he’s ready to sink his teeth into your soft body tissue and tear.)

It ever bother you that there are so few plays written with 23 speaking (or singing) parts? You probably knew that and were resigned to it. You ever think how much time you could waste in libraries paging through *Let’s Put on a Show* or *Shakespeare in Your Living Room* or *Big Drama for Little Actors*? Those are real books, yes they are.

Moo it was who came up with a better idea: write our own play and different kids can play the same parts.

So we spent days helping them. They did the writing and ended up with—surprise!— a great script. True, we lifted some from the original, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Say what you will, that novel kicks ass, though when Willy assigned it, I thought it was too young for us and too old for the students. I feel bad that I keep judging kids so conventionally. I hope I’ll get past that.

We were worried we’d find the book silly. Well, ha! It is dated and paints Holden as a delicate boy so sensitive you might want to slip him a testicle. Clearly, he’s a centerfold for old perv Salinger. All the same, we all, us and the kids, got juiced about the same things while doing this play. The mutuality of our turmoil was the best part.

We got a script ready, with sixteen scenes—each four-to-seven minutes long. The kids had the great idea of sixteen different kids playing Holden, males and females alike. We got some blue sweatshirts and are sewing big H’s on them. The kids

not currently playing Holden slip in and out of the other roles—Stradlater, the cab driver, Mr. Antolini, Luce, the nuns, Maurice and Sunny, Sally Hayes, Old Spenser, Phoebe.

We used a minimalist set. Black curtains and blocks gave us everything we needed. Had the most fun choosing music. Willy did the lighting and sound.

If you can believe it, we were working on this for over a month before it struck us that we needed an audience. Big problem—but not for long. We called our friendly local principal and asked, “You need a show, written and directed by your own students, free of charge for several performances?” “Why, thank you; that’d be just lovely,” he was more or less forced to say. And then we found the Asian kids’ school and talked them into it, though I got the feeling (it was me and Mary made the calls and visits) they weren’t exactly thrilled. Maybe they were hiding their excitement.

Moving the show around was tough, but Willy managed all that so well. Both places had auditoriums and microphones. Wish I could have helped Willy, but I was going crazy trying to do costumes and makeup. The kid playing Old Spenser, who’s about 90 years old, was tiny and had a high pipey voice. His name was Woo, a funny little kid who kept giving me rabbit punches. When we put flour on his hair and dressed him up in old pajamas and a ratty bathrobe, he didn’t look bad, and I’ll be damned if he didn’t work up this limp and shuffle, sniffing and hacking in Kleenexes he then strewn all over the stage, and speaking in an unreal husky voice that was funny, if not exactly geriatric.

So, we ended up doing four performances at each school. The script, adapted by the kids, added some up-to-date language, though mostly it was a close imitation of Holden’s. There were a lot of “ass” references, as in “my ass was going to sleep.” But there were fewer than you’d suppose. The only other fun word was “shit,” I think, used by the nuns, naturally.

There were school officials there, along with teachers and a fair number of parents. But nobody complained or called us on our PG designation.

I don't know when we've had so much fun. Two of the kids in the play cried after the last performance, theatre being a kind of communal/tribal thing and hard to break free of. I was about to cry, too. Did.

The cast got what was going on, understood it to the bone. At the very end, Holden loses his Peter Pan desire to freeze the kids, catch them before they fall into adulthood. At first he wants especially to protect his dear little sister, but before long recognizes that he can't—and shouldn't. As she's riding the ancient carousel, the same one he had so loved as a kid, she reaches out for the brass ring. Holden sees her trying to float in the air, way beyond safety, and he doesn't try to put himself between her and what she wants, disastrous as the results may be. He's no longer the catcher. In our kids' version, Holden says, "Maybe she'll fall off and break her neck. If she does, she does. If you say anything, like 'Be careful,' it's terrible. Kids have to do it themselves, do everything."

Still, I feel like a would-be catcher myself and wish there were nothing on this earth but kids, forever and always. I wish we could spend our life making and doing these plays, never changing, always there, as in Holden's museum:

The best thing, though, in that museum, was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody'd move. You could go there a hundred thousand times, and that Eskimo would still be just finishing catching those two fish, the birds would still be on their way south, the deers would still be drinking out of that water hole, with their pretty antlers and their pretty, skinny legs, and that squaw with the naked bosom would still be weaving that same blanket. Nobody'd be different.

I suggested that we put this in the play, and the kids turned on me, polite but incredulous. They didn't say so, but that sentimental part of the book about drove them damn near crazy, as Holden would say. They knew about adult desires to freeze. They'd been in that museum, on display, and they figured that at least WE were more than gallery visitors. Nobody'd move? Nobody'd be different? That's an adult's idea of Paradise, but not a kid's.

**And kids are right: nothing lasts but longing, and you have to let all sizes fall off horses in their own ways. Otherwise, it sucks. And it's always otherwise.**

There's a tape of this show. Caitlin tried half-heartedly (I thought) to introduce it. The Judge disallowed. I watched it three times, for some reason—not because I imagined it would contain the key to it all. But the production was so much better than it had any right to be—so much cannier—that it did seem to be telling me something I might profitably hear. But I still haven't heard it, haven't grown the right ears.

### **Council Meeting—Blackmail and Baloney**

Mary here. We had a pretty upsetting meeting. I'll just report it. We were going on about the usual stuff, having fun. Our pet business is doing well, though it's hard to part with the little kits. There was more paperwork than we thought, setting up a business and getting the Health Department to sign off. Also, we got a vet to inspect our setting and advise us. Dr. VenEchell. What a superior guy! He's been dropping by pretty often to see the ferrets and talk to us about this and that. He lets us have stuff very cheap and showed us how to administer shots. He gave us free needles, said, "You kids go trying to buy needles and you'll have the crack narcs over here just as fast as those Bumblebums can move, which isn't like lightning—but they'll come!" Almost all our business has originated from him. He got some ferret pamphlets made up and loads them on his

customers, the willing and unwilling alike. We've sold all the kits as soon as they were ready—fourteen—and have a waiting list of six, half of whom want more than one. I don't think we're making huge bucks, charging \$90 a kit. We've made two of them personal pets, Laius and Jocasta, who are what every kid would say about pets, not that we love them or think they're part of the family. They are ferrets. They think we're ferrets, too. They're there to be respected. I like them at a distance, though it is fun to hold Jocasta and get her to do tricks. Laius is boring. He's very affectionate in a stupid sort of way. You get the feeling he'd be just as affectionate to a post he could rub against.

Despite all their talk about being isolated, these kids attracted a fair number of visitors and friends. It seems that everyone they involved in their crimes (including their victims, most of the neighbors, and people like Dr. VenEchell) not only had good dealings with these kids but took to dropping by—and not just for short visits. Rather than a criminal den, their house seems to have been more like your friendly neighborhood stop-by-and-chat.

I spoke with Dr. VenEchell, but he was so smitten with the kids it was worthless. For instance, he did not accept that there was a porn movie, believing that the police (I) had made it and planted it on the kids or forced them at gunpoint to act in it. I was so frustrated with this that I was on the edge of forcing him to watch it, tying him down and pinning up his eyelids, like little Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*.

VenEchell doesn't trust me, but I like him. He's interesting, fun to be around, when he forgets television cop shows, imagining I'm roping him into some cunning scheme. I discover he streams old *NYPD Blue*. I do, too, but I don't pretend to be Andy Sipowicz, and I don't usually handle witnesses in accordance with some complex scheme. Sipowicz gets a confession a week. I've spent my life trying to trip people up—lots of dirty tricks—but I've gotten confessions maybe thirty times in twenty years. Still, I don't think

VenEchell is wrong to be suspicious. He's half in love with these kids, in a vague collective way, and figures I'm out to get them. I did conspire to arrest them, thinking I had no choice.

The real truth is I dressed the case up some. You're always leaning to convict the person you're delivering, finding ways to tell the story that makes it look solid, showing off: look what I brung ya! I did tell him the hard evidence was indirect, said the case seemed strongest round the edges. (I'd put it differently now.) Timmons is not above listening to my views on how to win. This seemed to me (and to Timmons) a case that could be won by avoiding evidence, appealing to instinctive bigotries—smart-assed kids, the commune, criminal activity they engaged in (technically irrelevant), the journal, the recklessness, and the parody movie. Good trial stuff, but nothing really pointing to pedophilia. And now? Well, now, the gumshoe who turned them in seems a different gumshoe from the one so absorbed in missing them.

Back to Mary—

**Sorry to burble on. I think I'm trying to postpone the unpleasantness.**

**We talked a lot about the play—which made a fair amount of money we're using for kids' school expenses and their clothes, the budget for which is supplemented by a generous grant from L.L.'s grandma and a little from our pot, growing to rival the bank account of capitalist horror.**

**We set up the next book and film discussion meeting, and got a report from our hard-working, summer-vacation-planning committee. They spent a good deal of entertaining time telling us of possibilities rejected, before recommending a two-week bike trip in board-flat Holland, a program run by the Dutch government, who gives you bikes, maps, hotels, and meals. They also transfer your luggage every day, from hotel to hotel, so all you have to do is pedal, carrying only a daypack and water. Then we heard Plain talk very well and very enthusiastically about several of his ever-new construction**

schemes, received a report from the committee on fall school plans for our various kid classes, and listened to L.L. talk very persuasively about how trying to find originality outside the law was setting us into grooves too well worn. She said maybe it wasn't very bright to imagine you can be breaking new ground by devoting yourself to crime! According to L.L., we were finding hackneyed "future directed" scripts to replace the good-white-privileged-kids-go-to-top-college one. We agreed. She also said it was important we had found that out by doing it. She gave form to what we were all thinking. Maybe that's what teaching is: you strike chords, give life to what was there inside beforehand.

Now we are at loose ends again, even looser than before, when we imagined that being a gang would liberate us. Where are we now? Moo said we were crawling out from under blankets, one at a time. Plain said it was more like molting. Whatever it is, it feels scary—doesn't seem like we've arrived anywhere. Maybe we are seeing that all the trains go on tracks. I hope not.

I am not saying all trains go to the same destination, like that's profound. So we all die—it's the trip that counts. I think we have been true to that idea, without always understanding it. I expect that, up to this point, we've made about as many mistakes as any collection of people can make. Maybe we have to fight to keep doing that. None of us wants to declare ourselves winners.

We have to stop being controlled by conventional ideas of rebellion. Our lives have to be more than reactive formations. (I love that phrase.) Trying to do what you want means finding out what that is. Not the "you" part. This is no "search for identity." Willy says, "Identity does not precede experience." What we are can only be determined in the doing, since only then is there a "we."

I'm not speaking for others here, and I'm sure what I'm saying is bombastic (nice word, L.L.) and derivative (my word). No, I'm not going to say that. It doesn't seem to me that I should apologize for a way of looking at things that I have worked so hard to get close to. We've all worked hard for that.

If nothing else—and maybe there is nothing else—we've been thinking—me, for the first time, really. That's something, even if it doesn't lead anywhere.

No use delaying. Plain and Willy think this is funny, but I don't. Just as we were about to end, JoAnne pushed in and sat down, then stood up, then sat down again. She stared at the floor a minute, and then started yelling stuff about how she'd just found out what we had done, how could we do such a thing? Why had she trusted us? She wouldn't have believed such a thing, but how could she keep from believing now? What did we intend to do about it? She kept up variations of this, but not always yelling. She struck me as someone trying to be angry. Possibly it was all genuine, if that word has any meaning when she's in the room.

I won't try to recreate the scene. It took us some time to find out what she was talking about, but when she finally said it straight, we fought back. Moo seemed about to punch her, but Plain started laughing and held him back. She said we had molested Brandon and Missy, "had our sexual way with them." L.L. was shushing us, trying to get JoAnne to say what she meant in some way we could understand. That didn't work, JoAnne just repeating things like, "I couldn't believe it myself!" and "I have proof!" and "You know very well what you did and I'm not going to dirty my mouth saying it!"

L.L., speaking very patiently, finally told her that if she wouldn't tell us what she meant, we couldn't talk about it. Instead of acting as an incitement to clarity, this set her off in another direction: how she herself had been herself abused as a child and could show by her own life what a horrible thing it

was and how it scarred you permanently. Plain and Moo kept trying to ask her what she was accusing us of exactly, and she finally said, “You know you had sex with my dear dear children. Oh, how could you? Sex is what you had with them and you know it!” By now, it was so stagy that it was hard not to laugh—but also infuriating.

Moo, of all people, told everybody to shut up and said in a real quiet voice, “Now, you know we didn’t do that. Why are you saying that after we invited you here and have been so good to you and your kids? What do you want?”

This set her off again. “Oh, how could you ask me what I want? Do you think I’d take money from you—for this?” As nobody had mentioned money, it didn’t take a whiz to penetrate her dark designs. Willy said it: “How much do you think it would take to help you heal the wounds your children have suffered?”

It was a very smart way to put it. JoAnne sputtered and whined and yowled some, but, after an indecently short interval, she said how much it would take to heal her dearies. Willy had given her just the language she needed. It wasn’t money for herself, you see; it was for her chicks.

Her healing price, she said, was \$200,000, a figure she announced with a lot of predictable blather, all designed to show what an upright person she was. She even started complimenting us, saying she knew we were decent kids, thanking us for taking her in, and apologizing for “this misunderstanding,” saying she knew we didn’t mean to do it, that it was “an accident,” “a temporary slip up.” My favorite line was, “Nobody’s any the worse for wear, which is exactly why we can settle it like friends.” Then, without skipping a beat, “Because we all want what is best for the kids—this isn’t for me in any way—why don’t we say \$100,000 for helping them heal, and that will be what’s fair and between friends.”

She grinned widely and stood up. She started to apologize for interrupting us, when L.L. said, in a colorless but not soft voice, “No.” JoAnne acted as if she hadn’t heard, and said, “I’ll leave you now so you can talk amongst yourselves.”

I think we all moved to stop her, saying the same thing: we did nothing to your kids and you know it; we aren’t paying a penny; now get your ass out of here. She reacted by crying, or pretending to, and saying how much she had come to love us all, every one of us, “like a mother,” and was just trying to be good to her “small little ones.” She knew we wouldn’t deprive her of the only shelter she had and the only happiness she had ever known.

We all agreed to the terms: we’ll lend you money to get another place for a while, but after that you have to leave. Without so much as a sneeze or a blink, she asked us then whether Brandon and Missy could stay with us for the time being. Honest to God. We said yes, which may not have been too smart, but we were not going to abandon those kids. Their mother was not their fault.

Well, so that’s that—or rather not, I suppose. I hope JoAnne finds a job and gets her life right, so Brandon and Missy would have someone to count on. In the meantime, they can count on us. They can always count on us.

We’ll have more to say on what I predict will be our scheme to rescue Brandon and Missy, or reclaim JoAnne, or just let her stay and allow things to go on. Things could be worse than having her around, not without some winning ways (though right now I wouldn’t want to have to write an essay for school on just what those winning ways were). And we won’t overreact to all this. We’ll discover a formula that works: it’s just JoAnne being JoAnne. We’ve gotten past way worse stuff than this.

Until next time, this is Mary the Scary, saying, “Experience Life! Bring Your Kids to Our House for Fun and Frolic and Blackmail!”

That was the last of the Journal. Mary was wrong on two counts: there was no next time and JoAnne just being JoAnne wasn't OK.

Things move fast after this, JoAnne, it appears, dashing straight from the meeting to collar me and feed me her story, or one of her stories. I had no choice but to listen and proceed, I thought. We'll never know the exact sequence of events in that period or even what "events" took place, in what sequence, or why. The group tells one story, JoAnne another. I was hoping the alleged victims, little Brandon and Missy could help me out. But first I spent a lot of time with JoAnne, imagining I could surely get somewhere with her. What was I thinking?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### Interviews with JoAnne

Me: Ms. LaVelle, could you tell me again what brought you to me?

JoAnne: I wanted your help, the law you know, and I am not the complaining sort. I know you are very busy with important criminality and don't mean to bother you with. . . .

Me: Yes?

JoAnne: You have important things to do. I have always liked the police. Never once arrested or anything. I am aware that you are occupied with important things.

Me: What you are bringing me is not important?

JoAnne: No. Yes. You know what it is.

Me: I need for you to repeat it now, slowly, for the record.

JoAnne: [weeping loudly] Those kids had sex on my kids, all of them, over and over, and I have doctors' reports to prove it, not that I need them, as I have brought my kids up to tell the truth. That's what I bring you—these kids did vile inappropriate things to mine. That's my report.

Me: Do you know more specifically what the accused did?

JoAnne: Yes.

Me: Could you tell me?

JoAnne: I cannot foul my mouth with what they did. I am not that sort.

Me: Damn it, Ms. LaVelle, go ahead and foul it. If you won't tell me exactly what you're charging them with, I can't proceed. Do you want to drop it?

JoAnne: [weeping loudly and then suddenly speaking with composure] These five monsters, all of them, first lured me into their home, house I should say, and then they proceeded to do all this to my children, named Brandon Ellis and Missy Louise.

Me: But what was—

JoAnne: I can say all this myself, without you swearing at me, if you don't mind.

Me: Proceed.

JoAnne: What they did was this, all five of them. With Missy, they made her undress, forced her to do so, and took filthy pictures of her, naked pictures and in disgusting costumes, adult costumes, too. Of course they destroyed the pictures, the way pedophiles always do and you know better than me. They also took her virginity with vegetables and their dirty you-knows. They tied her up and also had their inappropriate way. They did lesbian oral cunnilingus.

With Brandon it was the same, only just his butt, ass, of course. All the rest of the things are the same, plus masturbation with hands and mouths, and they did that to Missy, too.

Me: Do you know when all this started?

JoAnne: When we moved in, were forced to move in.

Me: Who forced you?

JoAnne: I do not know what I did to deserve that particular tone, Mr. Detective. Perhaps you could inform me.

Me: OK. You mean they started sexually abusing the children the very day you moved in?

JoAnne: Yes. No. I don't know. This is immaterial.

Me: I take it you really don't know how long this had been going on.

JoAnne: Yes, I do. I am a good mother.

Me: How did you find out?

JoAnne: Begging your pardon?

Me: How long had this been going on and how did you find out?

JoAnne: I already said.

Me: Great God in heaven. Let's try this one: *how* did you find out?

JoAnne: Why didn't you say so? They told me, my children. They have always confided in their mother. I mean I checked it all

out, by taking them to the clinic, which said they had been repeatedly done and oral sexed.

Me: I take it that any clarity on when all this started or when you suppose it started is now lost in the mists of time. Right? What prompted you to go to the clinic?

JoAnne: My children told me what was going on, as I previously reported.

Me: So why didn't you come straight to the police? Didn't you believe them?

JoAnne: My children always tell the truth.

Me: I'm confused. You trust them, but instead of taking their word you run to a clinic to check them out. That looks like you doubted what they were telling you. Can you explain?

JoAnne: What's to explain?

Me: I'll try again. Why didn't you report straight to me when your children came to you with their reports of criminal activity? Explain that, please. Sorry I wasn't clear.

JoAnne: They didn't tell me. They didn't want to bother me. They are wonderful kids and they love their mother.

Me: You said they did tell you.

JoAnne: Yes, they did. I said that. What is it you don't understand?

Me: Did they tell you before or after you went to the clinic?

JoAnne: Both. If you want to be picky, after.

Me: I desperately want to be picky. So they didn't tell you until after, right?

JoAnne: If you say so.

Me: What do you say? Please, Ms. LaVelle, I am not harassing—er—trying to make things difficult for you. I do want to help you, believe me, but I can't if you won't help me. So, did Brandon and Missy tell you before or after the visit to the clinic?

JoAnne: Thank you. I want to help you, too, and will if you'll give me half a chance. After, as I say, after I went to the clinic so as to be sure, as any mother would, any good mother, which most

are, but not all. My own, for instance. But it was a different time back then, and it's just not fair to judge what we have no way, really, to. . . .

Me: So, what prompted you to take them to the clinic? Why did you take them to the clinic?

JoAnne: To get them checked.

Me: But why did you think they needed checked? Remember, they hadn't said anything about the molestation.

JoAnne: Oh, I see what you are saying. Why didn't you say so?

Me: I'm not very articulate.

JoAnne: That's OK. You know, my father, the one who molested me, too, when I was a child, was sometimes really funny. He'd say such funny things.

Me: It takes all kinds. So, why did you think the kids needed to be checked?

JoAnne: They complained about things. You're going to ask me what things, so I'll save you the big trouble and just say. Brandon, he didn't actually complain. He's not the complaining type, but there's another reason. He's modest, you know, and that's a part of it, too. Didn't used to be that way, but when he got to be about nine, I couldn't get near him—give him a bath or change his clothes. “Maaahhhmmmm!” he'd say, if I walked in on him naked or anything.

Me: And—

JoAnne: What? Oh yes, so Brandon complained about itching around his peter. He calls it his peter, very cute. He didn't complain but let me know. Missy—

Me: Excuse me, but if he didn't say it, didn't complain, how did you know?

JoAnne: Mothers know these things. May I continue where you so rudely interrupted?

Me: Please.

JoAnne: Missy has always been so close to me. We share everything—mother and daughter.

[Pause]

Me: A man wouldn't understand. But what did she say exactly?

JoAnne: Exactly? Well, I am not a stenographer, you know. Exactly?

Me: Sorry. To the best of your recollection.

[Pause]

Me: Just continue in your own words.

JoAnne: I should think so. Missy, I was saying, told me directly that her vagina was sore and hurt. "My gynee hurts," she said. That exact enough?

Me: Yes.

JoAnne: So, naturally when they both said these things, rather than jumping to the gun, I went to where they would know, the medical doctors at the clinic.

Me: And they confirmed your worst fears?

[Pause]

Me: What did they tell you?

JoAnne: Oh, I see. They confirmed my worst fears.

Me: Can you remember what they said? It would be useful for me—in helping you.

JoAnne: They said that the reason there was hurting and itching, you know, Brandon and Missy, is because the five kids had been doing these awful things to them.

Me: They named the perpetrators? The doctors said that sexual abuse had taken place *and* that the five you were living with had done it?

JoAnne: Yes, they did.

Me: How could they possibly have known that?

JoAnne: Because they examined them, how do you think?

Me: No, I mean how could they know who had done it?

JoAnne: I told them, of course. I was able to disclose.

Me: So what happened then? I mean, when you left the clinic?

JoAnne: I took my babies to McDonalds, their favorite. We don't eat out often, but little treats, you know. I can't afford so

many things I'd like to do with my babies. Disneyland. You know how expensive that place is? My friend Cindy took her kids there, she has two like me only hers are both boys, and said it cost \$300 just to get through the gate. Even with the coupons you can sometimes get at the Safeway. They also charge for parking.

Me: Forgive me, but I meant simply whether you went back to the house on Filmore Street with your kids when you found out about the molestation or moved immediately somewhere else.

JoAnne: Well, a little bit of both.

Later Interview:

Me: Ms. LaVelle—

JoAnne: What's with this "Ms. LaVelle"? It's "JoAnne" to you.

Me: What I want to know is why you didn't tell me you had made two trips to the clinic.

JoAnne: Two trips? I made many trips. Why, any mother—

Me: Drop the good mother act, please. We both know you don't care much about your kids. You just saw a chance to use them, right?

JoAnne: I must say I cannot apprehend what it is you are driving at.

Me: You tried to blackmail the five kids who took you in, and when that trick didn't work, you decided to incite a criminal case just to get to a civil trial and collect damages.

JoAnne: How could you, detective?

Me: Did you plan blackmail from the beginning, Ms. LaVelle, pimping your kids? Or did that occur to you only after you saw what soft touches the five older kids were?

JoAnne: Soft touches? I'd like very much to know where you got that impression. They are monsters. You been molesting them? That it, Johnny boy?

Me: That's enough! We understand one another. You tell me exactly what happened and I'll make sure you get out of this free

and clear. Say you were mistaken. This whole thing will go away. I can promise you you won't see any jail time.

JoAnne: Look, you crimped old idiot, count yourself a lucky star I'm not filing suit against you.

Me: I'm very grateful, you psychopathic nightmare. Tell me, have you tried this trick before? I know you have no criminal record, but maybe that's because you have a talent for using your kids as bait.

JoAnne: Kiss my ass.

Me: Listen to me. You're not the absolute nitwit you pretend to be. Let's talk turkey. Deal with me and I'll be your friend. Think about your kids. Do you really want to subject them to this?

[Pause]

JoAnne: I have thought about that. You don't believe it, but I would rather they didn't have to testify and go through what you and all those others will put them through. Any way you can take that away?

Me: Well, I won't lie. I don't have a lot of influence with the D.A. He'll use your kids as he has to in order to try and win the case. I think the only way out is if you drop the charges. Then, of course, Brandon and Missy are rid of this nightmare—and so are you.

JoAnne: I see. You're not such a bad guy. Ugly, though.

Me: So you'll think about it.

JoAnne: No, I can't do that. I'm not lying, detective, and I'm no idiot.

I spent hours with her. I hope the loosey-goosey style that comes across in these transcriptions of interviews doesn't suggest that she was in any way charming. I don't think Plain's characterization of her as "deeply stupid" is quite right. Shrewd as he is, Plain was taken in by *one* of her many ways of being in the world. I don't think a word as clear as "stupid" covers anything as peripatetic as her mind. And the notion that she is "deeply" anything could be just as wrong. I don't know if she has anything

but surface. There were moments of what looked like lucidity, what looked like sincerity, what looked like genuine feeling. I think now such seeming transparency indicates only that, by covering every attitude generally known to humankind and some never before recorded, she was bound now and then to light briefly on conventional mannerisms, sending out signals we are bound to take just as conventionally. She was like a doll programmed to display 400,000,000 voices, locutions, attitudes, issuing them at random, one after another, without regard to the demands of context or circumstances.

Characterizing her was/is hopeless. Did she love her kids? Was she truthful? Was she mentally competent? Was she out to make money? Answering any of these or similar questions is a mug's game, since it assumes a certain consistency and coherence in JoAnne's brainwork.

And yet. . . . What I've just written is embarrassing to look back over—pretentious, certain, conclusive. "Conclusionary," as lawyers love to say. I don't imagine most people would find her all that tough to figure out. I'm not sure I did myself. Though I have, at other times, found myself charmed by women who were anything but charming, like a bewitched cobra rising slowly one more time out of the beat-up basket, mesmerized by someone's old, old tune. But even I, when it counted, was proof against JoAnne. It's hard for me to imagine a state of imbecility, loneliness, or fear that wouldn't be.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### **Brandon and Missy**

At the heart of this case squirm the two nicest children I've known. Having had almost no contact with young kids since I was one myself, I don't have comparative material. But I am sure Brandon and Missy are fine representatives of the species. They've taught me this much, along with their slightly older quintet of buddies: powerful influences don't necessarily come from the top down, from experience to innocence, from the old to the young. Maybe they do not ever move that way. Missy and Brandon never seemed to me like my kids, like anybody's kids. They didn't exist, L.L. would say, possessively but independently. They weren't explained by anybody. They completed you, made you different and, in this case, better. I didn't want to adopt them. I wanted to be their friend.

But none of that bears on the case. Let's start with the formal material.

The medical testimony was even more ambiguous than usual. Signs of irritation were there, but not strong. Causes were uncertain, ranging from incidental contact with clothing to self-inflicted to brutal assault. Of course the defense called on the first two suppositions, the prosecution on the last.

My own interviews with Brandon and Missy were corrupted almost from our first meeting by affection, mine, which was a handicap, of course, in my line, any affection. What a cliché—but it's true. And here I was almost helpless, faced with two little wide-eyed, open-hearted kids. Also, I was so furious with their mother that I sometimes let it overwhelm any sense of fairness. I found myself now and then backing off prematurely for fear of wounding Brandon or Missy, but sometimes, far too often, I was so curt I did just that. They were sometimes laughing at my jokes, sometimes recoiling in shock at my verbal cruelty, sometimes crying.

Both kids spoke warmly and enthusiastically about the older kids at the house, Plain especially. Clearly they had never run into anything like this strange boy, who treated them as absolute equals. They loved him deeply, and I think much of the disturbance they experienced came from being separated from him. Brandon and Missy also felt close to L.L., very close, and, in order, Willy, Mary, and Moo. Moo seemed always uneasy around them—his way of putting it—and Mary seems to have been a little distant. That puzzles me, Mary, the warmest of the lot. I forced myself sometimes to suspect that her remoteness signaled something ominous. Maybe not (probably not, certainly not), but it's strange.

Brandon and Missy, however, loved them all, and didn't really make sharp distinctions. I may be inventing the ones I listed. I seem to have more need for those rankings than did the little brother and sister—me an' lil' Andy. Here are pieces of a couple of interviews.

Me: Yo, Missy!

Missy: [giggles] Hi, Mr. Atherton.

Me: You feel up to talking?

Missy: What?

Me: Do you mind talking?

Missy: No, sir.

Me: Tell me if you get tired or upset and I'll stop, OK?

Missy: I won't. I mean get upset or tired.

Me: May I talk some about your life with Plain and L.L. and Mary and Willy and Moo?

Missy: Yes sir. We called it "The Cave," me and Brandon. That's what Plain called it.

Me: I see, the house, you mean. Was it like a cave?

Missy: No sir. It was a joke. Plain told lots of jokes.

Me: Do you like Plain?

Missy: Oh, yes. Do you?

Me: Yes, I do. Very much. Missy?

Missy: Yes sir. I know you don't want me to ask questions. You ask the questions. Brandon told me that.

Me: Brandon is a good brother, and you are right to listen to him. But you can ask me anything you want. I promise not to yell at you, OK?

Missy: Yes, sir.

[I'm pretty sure she didn't believe me. She knew I wouldn't yell at her, but she seemed to know she couldn't abandon all defenses. Kids are generally like that with me, polite and distant.]

Me: Missy, did your Mother tell you I might yell at you, be mean to you?

Missy: Pardon me?

Me: I said, did your Mother direct you to be suspicious. . . . Never mind, honey. I'm sorry. Can we start over?

Missy: OK.

Me: Missy, were you happy to move in with—into the cave?

Missy: You mean at first?

Me: Yes.

Missy: Yes, sir.

Me: Did your mother tell you why you were moving there?

Missy: No sir. She lets us move a lot. Nice places, though.

Me: I'll bet. Was the cave nice?

Missy: It was the nicest place we've ever been. We had our own beds and a room even to ourselves. After a while, though, lots of times I would sleep with L.L. She has a real big bed. She is so nice. I told her how to use makeup.

Me: Is that right? Was she good at it?

Missy: [giggles] No sir, not really. She didn't have any, so we went shopping. I told her to go to Target. You know that Target store over by the mall, next to it? That's where we went. It's a very nice store, but expensive. L.L. let me get what I wanted, what she needed because she didn't know, and then we went home and I made her up, you know.

Me: You did? Did she look nice?

Missy: Oh, yes. She looked beautiful. She let me do it every day, when she was going to school and everything.

Me: Well, I'll have to let you put makeup on me sometime. Would you?

Missy: [giggles] Yes sir. You'd be very beautiful.

Me: Well, that'd be a change. Missy, how did the boys treat you?

Missy: Which ones?

Me: Sorry. I mean Willy and Moo and Plain.

Missy: They were very nice. Plain was always taking us places, parks and things.

Me: Amusement parks?

Missy: What?

Me: Six Flags?

Missy: No, I mean the parks over by the creek and stuff. We'd take walks and talk and build things and make up games.

Me: Did you ever go swimming with him?

Missy: There's a pool right there at the Cave. And a game room downstairs and a ball court on the roof and all that in back.

Me: Did you and Plain ever go swimming just the two of you?

Missy: I don't know. Maybe. We all went swimming a lot. Not my mom though. I don't think she likes swimming.

Me: Did you ever swim like I used to when I was a kid—skinny-dipping, you know, without a bathing suit.

Missy: I heard of skinny-dipping.

Me: Yeah, it's fun, really. I loved it. Did you and Plain do that?

Missy: You mean swim naked?

Me: Well, yeah. Any of the kids at the cave and you?

Missy: I thought you meant Plain.

Me: Well, Plain or any of the others.

Missy: I don't know.

Me: OK, if you don't, you don't.

Missy: No, I can remember.

Me: What do you remember about skinny-dipping?

Missy: What do you mean?

Me: I'm sorry. I mean, when you went skinny-dipping, who else was with you?

Missy: Nobody. I didn't do it. Are you crazy? I'm sorry, sir.

Me: Don't be sorry. I was confused. What did you mean when you said you didn't know.

Missy: I didn't know? Ohhhhhh. I don't know if the Cave kids went swimming naked. You see what I mean? Maybe they did. Plain didn't, though. I just know. Moo wouldn't either or L.L., L.L. for sure. Willy, no. Mary, no for sure. I don't think they did. That's what I didn't know.

Me: Oh, I see. My mistake.

Missy: That's OK. My Mommy says it's wrong to be naked.

Me: I see. I can't imagine she'd. . . .

Missy: [silence]

Me: Did the Cave friends get naked a lot?

Missy: [long pause] Yes, sir.

Me: Around you?

Missy: You know, yes. We were all living there, and that.

Me: So you played games and things and had fun naked?

Missy: Ooooooooouuuuueee. No!

Me: I see. So who was it got naked?

Missy: You know, everybody. Taking showers, we all did that, and we had these model show games we played—with clothes.

Me: Did you shower with anybody else?

Missy: [Pause] What?

Me: Is that where you saw all your friends naked, when you were taking showers?

Missy: No.

Me: When did you see them naked?

Missy: I didn't.

Me: I see. You mean, you figured everybody was naked sometimes because they took showers, but nobody was naked in front of anybody else?

Missy: I don't know.

Me: [giving up] Can you tell me about the model game?

Missy: It was the fashion show game. We'd walk down this board thing Willy built, I think, wearing all these clothes and people would clap and cheer. Sometimes we'd wear other people's clothes. And Mary was the announcer. It was really fun.

Me: And when you changed clothes, you got naked, and everybody could see?

Missy: No, sir.

Me: Missy, did anybody there ever see you naked?

Missy: Brandon and my Mommy. L.L., too, when we were doing makeup and I was in her room and all. Maybe not naked.

Me: Did you sleep with anybody else there?

Missy: When we were camping.

Me: Where did you camp?

Missy: Behind the Cave, out back. In these tents we have, at the Cave, we'd all camp out.

Me: Missy, did anybody there ever do anything to you that you thought was wrong or bad?

Missy: I don't know.

Me: Missy, I don't mean to make you feel bad. I want to help you. Do you believe me?

Missy: Yes, sir.

Me: Do you know what bad touch is, Missy?

Missy: I don't know.

Me: Did any of your friends there ever touch you in a bad place?

Missy: I feel sort of tired now, like you said. Could we talk tomorrow or something, sir? I'm sorry.

That's more or less what always happened with her. "Always" being no more than four times. I was just messing with this little girl's feelings; I was never going to discover anything. I always was pushing or retreating, giving Missy neither effective pressure nor relaxing warmth. So she used politeness as a weapon, warding me off by good-mannered me to death.

But I got nothing out of her. All I did was hurt her.

Brandon's tone was different. For such a little boy (12 at the time), he was oddly self-contained. I don't think it was self-assurance, though. Twice he started to cry as we were talking, moments at odds with his calm, sometimes joking way. He provided more specifics than Missy and seemed to have a stronger sense of what I was after. That's to be expected, given their age differences, but it made him even harder to focus on molestation issues. Also, for all his ease, he is a very modest boy. He never used an obscenity or even a clear anatomical term.

It may not be modesty, of course, but repression, or panic, as I approached closer to the traumas he had experienced there at the hands of these pedophiles. Brandon would talk with me about anything else, but wouldn't admit that he had experienced the symptoms uncovered at the clinic. Still, I didn't then recognize his reluctance for what it was, so I bumbled toward the same subjects several times, with all the stealth of a musk ox smashing through the brush. Here's a taste:

Me: Can you tell me what your life was like before you moved into the house with the kids?

Brandon: Yes, sir—

Me: Excuse me, Brandon, but would you be comfortable calling me "John"?

Brandon: OK. And you can call me "Brandon."

Me: Touché!

Brandon: What?

Me: That means you got me.

Brandon: Oh—[pause]. Oh, I see. Anyhow, did you want me to tell you about our life before we moved in with Plain and all them?

Me: Please.

Brandon: Well, John, it was OK. We moved around a lot. To tell the truth, since you know it anyhow, Missy and I sometimes kinda had to take care of ourselves. But it was OK. My mom had a

bad time with her old boyfriend, you know. Carl was his name. He was pretty nice to me and Missy. He bought us stuff, didn't talk to us or anything, you know, and I like that. He would say, "Hey sport!" or "Hey, buddy, how are the girls treating you?" Stuff like that. With Missy, he'd say, "How's my little sweetheart?" or "Can you get any prettier, honey?" I don't think he knew our names. Plain said he sounded pretty good for an adult—didn't pretend to be interested. Is this the sort of stuff you wanted me to talk about—John?

Me: Sure, sport.

Brandon: OK. Carl didn't ask us to call him "Uncle Carl," never wanted to shoot baskets or take us out for ice cream—that was good. I guess he was real mean to my mom.

Me: Did you see him be mean?

Brandon: No.

Me: I got the impression your mom and Carl were married. No?

Brandon: You got that impression because she said they were.

Me: You're pretty quick, you know that?

Brandon: [stares at me]

Me: Do you know why your mom would say they were married?

Brandon: I'd rather not talk about this, unless you force me to.

Me: I won't force you to talk about anything.

Brandon: Sure.

Me: I almost never use a rubber hose to beat witnesses with.

Brandon: You use your fists?

Me: Can't. I broke my knuckles pounding on this bank robber, a mere kid, no more than seven. And he turned out to be innocent!

Brandon: [silence—so I hurried on.]

Me: Do you mind telling me how you felt about moving in with the other kids?

Brandon: I thought it would be strange, you know, but it wasn't.

Me: Brandon, you know what I'm after. Did any or all of them do bad things to you?

Brandon: No.

Me: If you could, would you want to just move everybody back in together?

Brandon: Yes.

Me: Why?

Brandon: I was so happy. So was Missy. We'd never been so happy. There was always a lot to do—the place was so much fun.

Me: The older kids?

Brandon: They were very nice.

Me: What do you mean by “very nice”?

Brandon: They never did anything bad—molesting or anything.

Me: Did they play with you?

Brandon: *Play* with me? They talked, taught me things. They had ideas, and they let me have ideas. I loved that so much. [Brandon looked like he might cry, so I hurried on.]

Me: Can you tell me one of those ideas?

Brandon: One time Mary asked me what I'd most like to do right then, if I could do anything. I said I'd like to climb up the side of the house, like it was a mountain. Like Mt. Everest. She didn't laugh at me, asked how I'd do that. I told her I'd get a rope and tie it to the plant box up there on the roof. Then I'd tie the rope around me and use it to climb up, hand over hand, like in that IMAX movie me and Plain and Moo saw. Mary asked if she could do it, too. So, we both went to the garage and found this rope and did like I said, only the rope was too short, so we spliced two. Mary is really good at making knots. Then we dangled it over the roof and Mary took my belt off and put it through the loops on my pants. Then I climbed up to the roof. It took me three times. The first time I slipped and landed right on top of Mary and the second time I landed in the grass, only I wasn't up very high so it didn't hurt or anything, but the third time I made it. Then I tossed the rope down

and Mary tried it. She kept getting her feet over her head, so she was upside down, but after about an hour, she made it, too. That's what I mean. Lots of things like that.

Me: Did you celebrate, you and Mary? I mean, did you dance around?

Brandon: No.

Me: Did Mary hug you?

Brandon: I don't remember.

Me: C'mon, Brandon, did Mary ever hug and kiss you?

Brandon: I don't remember.

Me: Did she undress you or ask you to get undressed? Did she ever touch you, make you uncomfortable?

Brandon: You just shut up!

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[Great technique, yes? Here's from a later discussion, when we knew one another better.]

Me: Brandon, I know you hate these questions, but I have to ask you.

Brandon: You going to bring out puppets?

Me: Puppets? I know what you've been through with those fat-ass experts, and I am sorry.

Brandon: [giggling] Experts, yeah. They're experts at getting you confused.

Me: Did they get you confused?

Brandon: They keep saying things like, "When you were playing those games, did you ever feel like you wanted to be somewhere else?" And I might say I did, because I could remember once being sleepy and wishing I was in bed. You know? Then she'd say, "When you were being forced to do those things, did you feel like you were bad?" And I'd say, "No." And she'd say, the one with the puppets, "Did they tell you not to feel bad? Did they tell you it was all fine?" And maybe I'd say, "Yes." I never knew what they were talking about.

Me: They were talking about Plain and L.L. and Mary and Willy and Moo sexually molesting you and Missy.

Brandon: Yeah, I knew that. I mean, I did and I didn't. I didn't know what they meant half the time. Of course I knew they wanted me to say stuff like that, but I got real confused. They didn't ask questions like you ask yours, so I know what they mean.

Me: Oh, like "Did Mary take your pants down?"

Brandon: [blushing and not laughing] That's not funny.

Me: Look, Brandon, I am sorry you got put in this situation. I think you understand that we're just trying to find out what happened. Nobody's trying to hurt anybody. You believe me?

Brandon: I don't know.

Me: How can I get you to trust me?

Brandon: You're getting me confused. I think you're trying to hurt my friends, and they never did anything bad. I love them.

Me: You love them?

Brandon: [starts crying]

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[one last snippet]

Me: So, Brandon, do you have any questions for me?

Brandon: Yes, John, what's going to happen to me and Missy?

Me: Oh, kid—you want the truth?

Brandon: [laughing] Go on. You can tell *me*. That's what you always say. Don't be embarrassed. It's just me.

Me: What I really hope happens is that you and Missy move in with me.

Brandon: Oh.

Me: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything.

Brandon: Yeah. [looks at the floor]

Me: But things will be OK.

Brandon: What are you going to do to Plain and them?

Me: It's not up to me. If it were up to me, now, I'd let them go.

Brandon: But those other cops aren't going to let them go, are they?

Me: I don't know. I don't think so.

Brandon: I want to be with them, like it was.

Me: I know you do. I understand that.

Brandon: You want to hurt them. I don't even know you.

The most damaging testimony was provided by "The Innocence Institute," which makes a business of interviewing children said to be victims of sexual abuse. The Institute has worked a good many trials, and their credentials are established mainly by their record of successful convictions. The convictions always come from the "disclosures" they extract from children. They are very proud of their record, the way their interviews are guaranteed to provide the same results every time, not that they'd put it that way. To be fair to the juries involved, each imagines that the testimony and the techniques before them are a special case, not the fruits of routine applications guaranteed to produce the same results.

I'm a tad skeptical of The Innocence Institute, whose fire-breathing certainties are not far removed in vindictiveness from those of the Child Protective Agency. The II operates on a series of "truths" that look to me like dubious nostrums: "children never lie about abuse"; "children who deny abuse are often revealing coercion or shame"; "children need expert help in disclosing." That word "disclosing" does a lot of work for them, with its question-begging, florid assertiveness. It was in the name of helping Brandon and Missy disclose that these puppeteering therapists were willing to cajole, trick, and badger:

"You know better than that, Missy! C'mon, tell Mr. Peanut what really was done to you."

"Brandon, we know you're worried that some harm might come to you if you disclose. We're here to protect you. You don't need to be afraid ever again."

"Your mother will be so proud when she hears that you were able to tell the truth."

"I know you are a brave little boy."

"Are you a sissy, Brandon? C'mon, you can say."

"Just point to the place on Miss Beany where they touched you."

The end result of this were revelations which, sifted through to remove inconvenient contradictions and inconsistencies, became powerhouse courtroom testimony, offered with practiced zeal and righteous fury. Their interviews left no doubt at all, at least in the minds of these experts. "In all the cases we have been involved in, this is surely the most heinous." "There is no doubt that both children were repeatedly subject to vaginal and anal penetration, to varieties of oral sex, and to the sado-masochistic pleasures of the perpetrators." There never is doubt. Why are we such suckers for peddlers of certainty? We know that only the sick and deluded are free from doubt, some shadow of uncertainty. Perhaps we are ashamed of our own irresolution, ashamed and afraid, vulnerable to those hawking a dark and violent truth.

These experts had an imposing record of convictions, a string of testimonials to their ability to make themselves believed. Their academic backgrounds were a little less dazzling: one had a B.S. in psychology, one an M.A. in Communications. Caitlin tried to make light of the absence of anything approaching relevant training: "We are used to this badgering," one said, "and can only respond once again that it is the usual trick of those friendly to pedophiles," or "the pain of children subjected to these tortures is not something you can learn in a textbook. We have something a lot better than books; we have experience with children we have protected, lives we have literally saved! You may sneer, and I know you are getting rich trying to get monsters off so they can go out and continue assaulting."

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Dumbos, pure but not simple. That they were stupid, propped up by feelings of self-importance and gratuitous righteousness, did not mean they were not right. I keep saying that it was almost

unthinkable that these five kids had sex with Brandon and Missy. But even for me, friend and lover of the accused, there's the "almost."

Why unthinkable? Can I be sure, ever, that I don't call it "unthinkable" just because I don't care to think about it?

But that part of me that's not fair-minded and judicious—and that's all of me, just about—has no doubt. They didn't do it.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### CPA Interview

My contacts with the CPA have been consistently unchummy. I've used my position to pull them in for questioning way more than is justified, but I have come to hate these bastards, even if, in some wrong way, they were right about the case. (These qualifiers have taken on a ritual significance for me—it's hard to believe the CPA was right, but. . .)

They've regularly replenished their posters (with the "Dead or Alive" attachments they have "nothing to do with"), issued fresh and ever more wild-eyed bulletins, and managed to occupy a great deal of air-time on right-wing (aren't they all?) call-in shows and even the news.

There is no one interview that would lead you to understand my hunch, and I can't call it more than that. I feel it more strongly every time, though. It's just their smug knowingness, the sense that they feel victorious here, holding the reins and sitting atop the only law enforcement world that is truly operative. They start each interview by asking, "Any word on the runaways?" or "Have you got any fresh leads on the pedophiles?" Taunts, pure and simple.

I have one bit of evidence: a large piece of a sweatshirt I found in one of their official cars. (They have two or three cars that roam about, big letters on the side promising safety to all children.) My sweatshirt evidence has some lettering on it that hours and hours of playing with hasn't clarified for me, even though I want very badly for it to say, "Seasalt Was Right." I figure "Seasalt" is a joke translation of "Meursault" and that any of the kids might have made it, maybe as a present for, I'd guess, Moo. It would seem certainly to fit Moo's interests and his body size (there's a visible label with an "S" size marking). They often gave one another joke gifts, and Moo would have loved this one, been touched by it.

It's a brilliant theory. Trouble is, the lettering I can make out doesn't necessarily fit that sentence convincingly. It might, that's all. It could be any of several thousand things, I guess. The CPA is uncomfortable about this sweatshirt—I do know that much. They began by denying it was in their car at all. Nervous and snippy, they kept returning to the sweatshirt, accusing me of planting evidence. It touched a nerve, and they weren't smart enough to hide it.

Still, it's possible they were smart enough to kidnap the kids. I almost hope so. My deep fear, though, is that they got nervous about the verdict and decided to enact on their own the death penalty they had been pushing for. Talking to any one of their "spokespersons," you'd probably not imagine they were quite that insane. Put several of them together and you get an exponential growth of rage and self-justifying vigilante violence, a violence that could have found a collective focus and outlet in murder.

But why would they do all this *before* the verdict? Had they planned to punish the kids and get back at the justice system, why not wait to see if they wouldn't be found guilty (a really good bet) and save themselves the effort and great risk? Two reasons, make that *possible* reasons: the penalty, at the worst, wouldn't have been capital and probably, given their ages, wouldn't have amounted to more than five-ten years. That's a stiff penalty for kids, but, by CPA standards, trifling, amounting to encouragement of pedophile rape. More important, I think, this vigilante group grew to regard themselves as super-heroes, working outside the police and courts, on a level that needed no sanctions. A little like The Mafia (yes, Virginia, it does exist), they wanted to have control of their own system of trials and punishments.

They didn't think they were breaking the law—were positive they were upholding it.

"You'll never catch them, you know!" a CPA moron named Ferdy Aster said to me once.

"Well, Ferdy, and just how can you know that?" I said, trying to appear casual, bantering.

“Never mind,” he smirked.

“You think we’re so incompetent we couldn’t spot them if they were camped out on the lawn outside the precinct, right?”

“Right. That and—never mind.”

Ferdy was stupid enough to go too far, but part of his stupidity involved the idea that he was slippery and deep, held the upper hand.

Maybe he does. That’s frightening.

Would the CPA murder these kids and still keep up this barrage of posters and announcements, even a rally or two? Could they be that vicious? I’m really not sure. But with all that they’ve said and that goddamned sweatshirt, I’m so afraid.

What scares me also is that the five defendants, I may as well say my five friends, were about fifty times as smart as the CPA’s finest, but also deliberately and willfully vulnerable. Anybody wanting to harm them could not have found an easier target. They would no more have protected themselves than they would have—well, molested Brandon and Missy. That makes a balanced sentence, but it sounds much more certain than I can ever be—officially. I’ll settle for not knowing, find my being there. Ain’t perfect, but it’s better than other possibilities.

And it shows I learned something from my friends. You’d be proud of me, L.L. and Willy and Mary and Moo and Plain: I am perpetually unknowing.

### **Timmons and Moore: The Verdict**

I asked both what their guess was as to the verdict we may never see. Caitlin said, “I have no idea. I was very apprehensive, but I really can’t guess.” Timmons said, “I am sure it’s guilty.” I reminded him that one can never be sure. “I’m sure,” he said.

“Have you seen it?”

“No, but I’m as sure as if I had,” he said, then added, “almost.”

I then asked the unaskable question: do you think they were guilty?

Moore: "No, not a chance. I'm as certain of their innocence as of my own. I've never been so absolutely certain."

Timmons: "I can't answer that, but I will. I'll also deny I said it. I went in sure they were guilty. Now, I think if they are guilty of any of the charges, it's damn few, damn few. But that's not a strong feeling. I'll tell you, though, John, since I can always call you a liar, that I wouldn't be at all surprised if they were completely not guilty. Wish we had the verdict of 'not proven.' In this case, though, these little rich shits may not have done the particular crime of which they were accused. I mean I wouldn't be surprised if they'd done nothing improper with those other two kids, the LaVelle kids. They did some bad stuff; but, between us, it mostly doesn't add up to much. Making kiddie porn, of course they did that, these kids, but it's a strange kind of kiddie porn you make starring yourself. Every day the trial went on, I got less certain. These were obnoxious little shits, but down deep, John, I don't think they are guilty. And I said none of that, never did, and you're a well-known liar."

I asked them both why the judge had set no time limit on opening the verdict.

Moore: "He's a senile old fuck!"

Timmons: "Stubbornness. As you know, I could probably force him to open it. If they are guilty, we could go after them harder. But—"

"But you aren't sure you want to?"

"Yeah, I guess that's it."

"Well, here's a side of you I've never seen."

"And you haven't seen it now."

"You think it'd be a waste of effort to hunt them?"

"I didn't say that."

"I've been wanting to ask. You think it's possible those asshole CPA people had anything to do with their disappearance?"

"Yes."

"So why not go after them?"

"You forget which of us does which job, John? You get me a case and I'll prosecute it."

"Wish I could."

"Not as much as me. Well, maybe as much as me."

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That's pretty much everything there is for now. I ran into old Downtown Ollie Brown the other day. He and I occasionally have coffee. I find him amusing, and he finds me nice and risky, being gently on the wrong side of the law most of the time, Ollie, that is. Easy to see why these kids and Ollie formed a bond: they were half in love with self-destruction. In the midst of telling me a long and possibly funny joke, he started laughing.

"What in hell is funny, Downtown? Is that the joke? You quit right in the middle."

"No, no. I was just reminded—[sputter, gurgles, guffaw]."

"Of?"

"Well, you know, Detective, when I said those words about the man in the bar which may have been a Catholic or a Muslim?"

"Ah, sadly I do recall that."

"I misused that word, 'which'—made me think of my old friend Plain."

"Yeah, I remember."

"And talking, too. He'd get all excited and start waving his arms like he did and throwing those 'whiches' around like they was peanuts he used to chuck at old Willy, just to make a mess and irritate Willy, which it didn't at all, not really. Oh, my."

"I remember that, too. You miss him, don't you Ollie?"

"You do, too, Detective, I know. Was he your favorite?"

"I'm not sure. Was he yours?"

"To tell you the truth, Detective, I loved them all, every one."

"And we'll never see them again, probably, that's what I fear."

"Oh, Detective, don't be sure about that."

"You *know* something!"

“Now, Detective, do you think I’d hold back from you if I knew anything?”

“Yes.”

Ollie laughed and laughed. “Well, so this maybe Catholic and maybe Muslim, which says to the bartender . . . .”

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Right now, JoAnne is employed as a checker at Walmart, is attending the local community college, and has a nice apartment, all courtesy of CPA. Brandon and Missy get out of all this ice skating lessons and a promised trip to some military space camp. I’m surprised the CPA hasn’t armed them. One time I talked on the phone with Missy, who told me they did send them to karate class for self-defense but that neither Brandon nor she liked it and quit. They’re both taking music lessons: Brandon cello and Missy drums. JoAnne arranged that, will wonders never cease! Just shows you nobody is predictable. In that, Plain and L.L. and Mary and Willy and Moo were right.

They were right about a lot.

And now as I think back on these last months, my whole life, I find it hard to face just how much has been lost. They are so real to me. What isn’t real is their absence, not being within call or reach. It’s almost as if I had lived with them, still do. I’ll come home at night and they’ll be there. “Hey, Flatfoot!”

It’s not nostalgia. I’m not missing what I had but what I might have had. For a while I wanted to play *Catcher*, old Holden, for these kids, those risk-taking little innocents running about in a field mined with horrors they had no means of detecting. I would be aloof, watchful, necessary. I entertained that fantasy more seriously than I can admit right now. But then the five kids surrounded me with their goddamned open-ended lives, and I never recognized what was happening. They taught me, roped me into their game, loser that I am. I’m playing now, but by myself. My coaches have vanished. It’s just me and memories I will never have, words on a page.

I spend a good deal of time with Brandon and Missy. Only I don't. There was the one phone call and two attempts to talk with JoAnne and try to arrange—I don't even know what. Humiliating attempts. I tried to appeal to her love for her kids, telling her how much I could do for them. I even tried to be friendly to her. Dizzy as she is, she knows I'm no friend.

The only time I spend with these kids now is when I spot them, from a distance. Once I waited outside the Walmart, where some guy in an old SUV dropped them off. I cut it out before it got so bad I'd have to arrest myself.

That would seem pretty unreal. But no more unreal than that all this promise and possibility, all these dear kids, would be lost—as the song says, gone and lost forever. Dreadful sorry.