

THE ESCAPE

By Logan Feys

Part I: *Routine*

Mitch Briggs tossed his backpack on the floor. The textbooks inside had constituted a day-long burden. They weren't heavy enough to cause his shoulders to ache. But they were heavy enough to be a persistent weight on his mind. From 8:30 until 4:00 each day, the backpack was like an itch that wouldn't go away and that couldn't be scratched.

Mitch fell onto his bed. He rubbed his eyes with a pair of clenched fists. Lying flat on his back, he stared at the ceiling, contemplating nothing in particular.

The silence was disrupted by a rattling sound. Mitch knew its source. He'd heard it a million times. His pet hamster's feet were racing, as if the rodent were trying to escape from a predator. But Scooter the hamster wasn't making any progress. He was stuck in an exercise wheel that kept spinning around and around again.

Mitch yawned, forced himself to get up, and took a seat at his desk. He pulled out a clean sheet of paper and began sketching "the world's longest suspension bridge." It would, he imagined, cross the Strait of Juan de Fuca, connecting the state of Washington with Vancouver Island. This drawing would be more challenging than most due to the enormous scale of the structure (he estimated the bridge would have to span nine miles).

Since he was a boy, Mitch had spent countless hours drawing unusual structures that engaged his imagination. His designs included futuristic bridges, audacious sculptures, soaring skyscrapers, and giant space stations. It did not matter to him whether a three-hundred-story skyscraper would be considered practical or possible by today's standards. The standards of the future were his to set.

The first tower of the "world's longest suspension bridge" was beginning to rise when Mitch's pencil made an errant mark. The front door had slammed shut, and the invading sound abruptly brought his consciousness back into the conventional world.

Mother was home from work. "Mitch, why didn't you clean up the kitchen like you were supposed to?" she barked from downstairs. "I'm sick and tired of coming home to a dirty house! You can fix your own dinner tonight. But not until you get down here and do your chores." She uttered "and do your chores" with exaggerated emphasis on each word.

Mother was in fine physical health. But the rapidly multiplying strands of gray polluting her once luscious, brunette locks, combined with the deep bags under her eyes, gave the appearance of a woman who had aged more than her forty-six years.

Mitch stepped lethargically down the stairs. When he appeared in the kitchen, Mother greeted him with a sigh and said, "How was school?" The interrogatory sounded more like a declaration.

"Okay," he responded.

Mitch hated school. Long ago he had tried to explain why.

Mother had interpreted Mitch's complaints about school as indicating that there was something seriously wrong — not with school, but with Mitch. "Maybe you wouldn't be so bored in class if you tried harder," she would implore. "You're a bright young man. Why don't your grades reflect your potential? Because you waste so much time on those silly doodles of yours, and you just...you just tune out."

Mitch would tell her that there wasn't much worth tuning in to at school. He'd object to being force-fed information without any practical relevance attached to it while being prohibited from going where his natural curiosities took him.

"Don't give me that attitude, young man. What you get out of school depends on what you put in to it." Mother would continue to lecture Mitch about how school prepares him for what she called the "real world." "If my boss gives me an assignment that I don't like, I do it anyway. If I did only what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it, I'd be fired. In the real world, Mitch, those who rock the boat get thrown off. You may think you somehow know better than all your peers and your teachers, but without them you'd drown. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Mother would tighten her lips and raise her chin. "Well? Well do you, young man?"

Mitch would nod in acquiescence, and that would be that.

Nothing would be any different tonight. After finishing his chores, he put a frozen dinner in the microwave. He enjoyed the meal — not because it was especially tasty, but because of the simple fact that he had selected and prepared it for himself.

Mother normally enjoyed cooking for Mitch. It reassured her that, no matter how old or distant Mitch had grown, she still had a place in his life. Tonight she refused to cook, hoping that Mitch would come to realize that he still depended on her and needed her.

Mitch spent the rest of the evening at his desk immersed in *his* world, oblivious to the unfinished homework assignments inside his yet to be unzipped backpack.

Mitch Briggs had begun the ninth grade six months ago. Although each individual schoolday occupied a unique place on the calendar, any one day was otherwise indistinguishable from any other. Several times a day at the prescribed times, the bells would ring, and the halls would fill up with masses of young bodies. The students would hurry to find their seats before the bells rang again.

Most students enjoyed lunch because it gave them an opportunity to associate with their peer group. The "jocks" sat together; the "cool kids" sat together; the "thespians" sat together; the "goths" sat together; the "kickers" sat together, and so on. Within some of these general groups were often subgroups as well. For example, jocks would subdivide according to their race, their sport, or their overall place in the school's social hierarchy (some jocks were "cool" while others were just "jocks").

Everyone found a place somewhere in the social caste system — everyone, that is, except for Mitch Briggs.

At first glance, Mitch would seem to the casual observer to be a rather normal fifteen year-old. Nothing in particular about his physical appearance was striking. His facial features were smooth, rounded, and unassuming. In subtle ways, however, he looked a bit unusual. He was a little shorter than average. His hair was dark and soft. He didn't cut it as short as most boys did. Instead, he allowed it to grow thick enough to develop natural waves and curls. He

wore plain, solid-colored shirts and pants — nothing “loud,” nothing “hip,” nothing bearing popular sports team logos or name-brand insignias.

Mitch had been the first person out the door after his third-period Algebra class. He was among the first in line at the cafeteria. He quickly got his lunch — a lukewarm, wet, lumpy, brownish concoction the school called an “enchilada” — along with two half-pints of milk, the only beverage approved for sale to students by the school district.

With his lunch tray in hand, he made his way out of the cafeteria while hordes of people were still pouring in. As he approached the dozen or so propped-open steel doors that led out, he overheard a group of cheerleaders chit-chatting. One said to another, “Look, there’s Mitch Briggs. Why don’t you go eat lunch with him?” They all laughed.

“Hey Mitch, Susan wants to talk with you,” another one of the cheerleaders shouted.

Mitch ignored the interruption and kept on walking.

“Hel-lo! Are you, like, deaf or something?”

“Hey Mitch, what’s the matter? Don’t you want to be cool?” another said before applying a fresh coat of lip gloss

The girls had expected Mitch to show some sign that he wanted their approval — or, at the very least, their attention. Confused at his apparent indifference, the girls stopped laughing. After a brief, awkward silence, one of the girls said, almost in a defensive tone, “That guy is so weird.” They giggled in unison.

Mitch took his lunch to Room 106, where lately he had been spending his lunch hour. Here he could eat his lunch in peace and then work on a sketch or perhaps immerse himself in a science-fiction novel. He had a morning Biology class in the room; during lunch, it was always empty. Mrs. Whitting, who took her lunch in the faculty lounge, permitted Mitch to use her classroom on two conditions. The first was that he do her the favor of wiping down the chalkboards so that they would be clean for her afternoon classes. The second was that he leave no crumb behind. Mitch was careful to never give Mrs. Whitting cause to complain about his use of her classroom, and she never did.

Mitch relished the opportunity to get away from his peers. To him, they were like a whole different species. He couldn’t understand their behaviors, their motivations, their goals. He understood only that they were all social creatures. They never did anything on their own. By their nature, social creatures want more than anything to be accepted by others, to be popular. That much was obvious. But, Mitch wondered, what was it that made something — an article of clothing, a slang word, or a music group — socially desirable?

To say simply that everyone values what everyone else values explains nothing. All it means is that it’s popular to be popular. But what sets the process in motion? What causes something to be valued in the first place? Mitch couldn’t figure it out. No one actually sits down to decide on what will be socially acceptable and what won’t be. Yet everyone seems to know the unwritten rules of the game and follow them all to the letter, as if they were inscribed in some sacred text.

Or maybe inscribed directly onto their minds. Mitch sometimes wondered if there were some mysterious force that had commandeered the minds of the students, taken away their independence of thought, and replaced it with this social instinct. He told himself he must have taken a few too many science-fiction novels too seriously.

Barely into his first bite of “enchilada,” Mitch heard a set of feet marching down the hallway. They were fast, steady, and deliberate — not the sort that would be made by a student. The pounding stopped just outside of the classroom door. Then the door flew open.

“What are you doing?” a voice cracked. Mitch turned to face the intruder. It was George Connerly, principal of Abraham Lincoln High School.

“Just having lunch. Just...minding my own business,” Mitch said.

“Your own business?” When Mitch didn’t immediately respond, Connerly bellowed from deep within his larynx, “Haghr! Haghr!” It sounded like a fierce growl disguised as an exaggerated laugh. It was unaccompanied by a smile. “Around here, everyone’s business is my business. What’s your name?”

“Mitch Briggs.”

“Mitch, why aren’t you eating lunch in the cafeteria with everyone else?”

“I feel more comfortable here.”

“Oh, you do, do you? Well Mitch, what if every student decided to eat wherever they felt like eating? We’d have complete chaos. There would be food and cafeteria trays all over the place. We’d see all our silverware disappear. How would you like to have to eat your...ah...” Connerly stepped closer so that he could identify the clump of food on Mitch’s plate.

“...enchilada...with your fingers?”

Mitch assumed that it was a rhetorical question. It wasn’t.

“Well?” Connerly demanded. He grabbed Mitch’s fork and knife and dangled the utensils over his lunch tray.

“No,” Mitch said.

“No,” the principal echoed. “That’s why we have a rule, Mitch, that cafeteria trays and utensils are to remain in the cafeteria.” He returned the fork and knife.

“Then I suppose I’ll bring my own lunch from now on.”

“That’s fine and dandy, Mitch, as long as you eat it in the cafeteria. No foods or drinks of any kind are permitted inside classrooms — except by teachers. Students aren’t even supposed to be in classrooms unsupervised. I’ll bet Mrs. Whitting would be very upset to learn that a student has been trespassing in her classroom.”

“But she told me that —”

“I don’t want to hear it. Now you’re breaking a lot of rules, aren’t you, Mitch?” Connerly noisily cleared his throat for emphasis. “Aren’t you?”

Mitch moved his head slightly upward and downward in a sluggish motion that amounted to enough of a gesture to keep Connerly from repeating the question again.

“And what happens when we break the rules?”

“Hmm...I don’t know.” Mitch, in fact, hadn’t been formally disciplined by anyone at Lincoln High School. His disengagement in class frequently drew the ire of his teachers, but he wasn’t disruptive and therefore wasn’t considered to be a “problem student.”

“What happens is that we have to take responsibility for our behavior. In this case, that means a week of after-school detention.” Connerly grasped the student ID card that was hanging like a cheap, oversized necklace around Mitch’s neck. As Connerly pulled it taut to get a good look at it, the attached chain dug in to Mitch’s nape. Connerly jotted down Mitch’s student identification number and let go of the card.

“Mitch Briggs — student number three-six-two-nine-oh-four-two-oh-one — you will report to the In School Suspension office immediately after school today. If you’re late, you’ll get a week of ISS in addition to the detention. Now clean up the mess you’ve made and go eat lunch with everyone else. Got it?”

Connerly's words caused Mitch's body tighten. His hands were clasped firmly around his thighs. His lips contracted, as if he were trying to drink a thick milkshake through a narrow straw.

Connerly, with his arms folded across his chest, was waiting for him to move.

He wouldn't. "I would prefer to remain where I'm at," Mitch protested. "I'm not bothering anybody, and nobody was bothering me until you —"

"Excuse me!" Connerly roared. "You were given an order!"

"But sir —"

Connerly cut him off before he could complete the thought. "Look at me, Mitch." After years of practice, Connerly had been able to stare straight into students' eyes for as long as need be without blinking. Students always blinked first. And if they attempted to avoid his gaze by looking away, Connerly would repeat: "look at me" — until the students were defeated. "I have a poster hanging up in my office that lists *Mr. Connerly's Rules for Success*. Rule number one: *Obey those who have been given authority over you*. I have asserted mine, son."

"But I just —" His voice had become soft and weak. He wanted to resist Connerly's authority. It was an intention. Its actualization required a reserve of self-confidence that Mitch lacked. He felt like a weightlifter who was trying to bench press a heavy load of iron but whose strength was insufficient for the task.

Connerly raised his voice. "Rule number three: *Listen at all times and speak when asked*. Mr. Connerly didn't ask you speak. Mr. Connerly asked you to go eat lunch with your peers." Connerly paused, focusing his big, dark eyes on Mitch's frozen mouth. "Lincoln High School is a community that not only seeks to foster students' intellectual development, but their social development as well. School is a social environment, Mitch. There is no place in the schedule for private time, and there are no private spaces for students anywhere in the building. That's no accident, Mitch. Learning is a social activity. And socializing is a learning activity. You can't do either by yourself, now can you?"

"What I can do is —"

"No."

"But I would like to explain —"

"You were asked to follow Mr. Connerly's instructions. Can you do that for me, Mitch?" Connerly's thumb stroked through his thick mustache in a slow, calculated motion. His eyes were those of a falcon, focused singularly on its prey. For Mitch, there could be no escape.

Mitch let out a sigh. He knew that anything other than complete deference to Connerly's *will* would be futile. "Yeah."

"What did you say?"

"I said, *yeah*."

"Yeah?" Connerly said mockingly.

He had already gotten what he wanted out of Mitch — his obedience — but Mitch's word-choice indicated that he was still struggling to avoid submitting completely.

"How about *yes, sir*?"

"Yes. Sir."

"That's...better. Now I'm sure you'll be able to find a group of kids in the cafeteria to socialize with. You'll fit in just fine if you make the effort."

Mitch did not look at the principal or say anything to him on his way out of Room 106.

He studied the rows of rectangular cafeteria tables, hoping to find a place to sit down and finish his lunch. Surrounding him were tall, plain, white walls of concrete. The outlines of large

bricks had been etched into the concrete to give the surface the appearance of having texture. The thick walls amplified the noise made by hundreds of loquacious students. Individual conversations were undecipherable. They blended together to form a collective roar.

Mitch spotted but a few empty seats. He chose one at the end of a table near the cafeteria entrance. Adjacent to him were a group of guys he'd seen around school before. They hung out together before school, after school, during lunch, and in between classes. He'd never talked to any of them, and he didn't know any of their names.

Their shirts were embroidered with the names of currently popular clothing companies. They could afford to buy only a few "cool brand" shirts and jeans. So they wore the same outfits over and over again like uniforms. They didn't mind if their clothes became faded, worn out, or torn, as long as they still bore the right insignias. Of the shirts they had received as gifts from aunts, uncles, grandparents, and parents, those that were the wrong brands remained tucked away in their closets, never to be worn in the sight of their peers.

Their voices were much louder than necessary, even in a raucous cafeteria. Each of them were shouting, as if to make their presence known at other tables. Each spoke for only a few seconds at a time before another boy jumped in. Sports, homework, chicks — the same subjects came up day after day. The students were like regulars at a bad restaurant. The only taste of variety they got was when the same old menu item was prepared a bit differently. The thought of looking at a different menu for a new conversational item never occurred to any of them.

One of the boys glanced at Mitch. Then he looked back to his lunchmates, trying to gauge whether it would be okay to find out who this outsider was.

"Hey man," one of the other boys said, speaking for the group.

"Hey dude, what's up?" said the person who had first spotted Mitch.

Mitch turned to see five sets of eyeballs staring back at him. "Hello," he said.

"Hey man, what's up?" said another of them.

"What's up?" said a fourth voice.

"What's up?" echoed the fifth one.

Mitch turned his focus back on his lunch, which seemed slightly more interesting.

The boys turned toward one another, as if to reorganize and pick a different strategy. One of them gave voice to what was really on the group's mind: "Do you usually eat lunch by yourself?"

"Yeah," said Mitch, without bothering to look at the person to whom his words were directed.

"Come eat with us," said one of them with a goofy smile that nearly progressed into a laugh.

"Why?"

"Hey man, we're just trying to be nice. We noticed that you were, like, eating all by yourself and, ah, anyway, you looked all alone and stuff."

"I understand," said Mitch.

"This guy is weird," one of them said in a voice just loud enough for Mitch to hear.

"Why are you sitting here, man?" hollered the pack's most dominant personality.

"Because it's available. Actually, I don't normally eat lunch in the cafeteria. But I am today. Look...I just got slapped with a detention by Mr. Connerly, and I'm not in a talkative mood."

In junior high school, the group of boys may have regarded it as cool to get in trouble. But in high school there was too much at stake. Everything from grades to extracurricular

activities to one's status in the social hierarchy could be jeopardized by running afoul of the rules. Troublemakers were regarded as losers.

"What dumb-ass thing did you do to get detention?"

"I told you I don't feel like talking."

The boys snickered boisterously.

Mitch realized that if he continued to play defense, he would be inviting more harassment. However, if he said more than they wanted to hear, or more than they were comfortable with hearing, then they might lose interest in him. He just needed to be himself for a minute. It was always an effective repellent.

"I think Mr. Connerly just didn't like the fact that I actually questioned him — his authority, I mean. Did you hear about the two students who were caught violating the zero-tolerance policy on public displays of affection? Some girl gave her boyfriend a kiss on the cheek. They apparently didn't see Mr. Connerly standing right behind them. He suspended the girl for initiating a public display of affection and suspended the guy because he made no attempt to avoid it."

"Uh huh," one of them said. "That's funny."

Mitch ignored the comment and continued. "I'd like to start some kind of campaign to get these zero-tolerance rules abolished. I don't know what exactly to do. The student council is a joke. The *Lincoln Ledger* is censored by the administration. It would be very hard to organize a protest without it being immediately put down. But if we keep sitting here passively accepting everything the school tries to shove down our throats, the repression will only get worse. We have to stand up for our rights, our dignity. We're individuals, not sheep who exist to be herded up by our masters."

"All right, man. Whatever." The boys, now perturbed, wore sour expressions on their faces.

"What do you guys think can be done?" Mitch said.

One of them said, "Shit, dude, don't ask us to think during lunch."

"We're just here to chill, not to think about anything," another added.

"Yeah, man. I guess you're on your own," said the boy who had first spoken to Mitch.

"I think he likes being on his own," said one of them softly so that Mitch couldn't hear.

The five students chuckled.

"Hey, look! See that hot-looking chick over by the drinking fountain?"

"Whoa! She *is* hot."

"Where did that fine bitch come from?"

"She's new. She's in my English class. Candice — Candice Something."

Mitch didn't bother to look at the girl who was the source of their excitement. He enjoyed looking at pretty faces just as much as any fifteen year-old. But he preferred to flip through women's magazines and women's apparel catalogs, because he could project his own idea of a mind and a personality that would be appropriate for each face he found attractive. This Candice girl was probably another mindless slut — the sort of girl with a proclivity for making human beauty seem wholly ugly.

He dipped his fork into his "enchilada," but it had cooled, and the thought of taking another bite upset his stomach.

* * *

“How was school?” Mother said as she set down her purse on the kitchen counter.

“Okay,” Mitch answered reflexively. On this day, the sound of that word coming off his lips was like the sound of fingernails scraping across a blackboard. Mitch couldn’t bear it anymore. “Except that —”

“What, dear?”

“Well...” Then again, what would be the point in telling Mother anything other than “okay”? She didn’t ask questions in order to get answers. She asked questions in order to hear what she wanted to hear. “Oh, never mind. It’s not important.”

“It’s important to me. I’m your mother. You can talk to me about anything.”

Mitch took a deep breath and said, “Mr. Connerly kicked me out of the room where I’ve been eating lunch all year. I wasn’t causing anyone any problems.”

Mother frowned. “Why weren’t you eating lunch in the cafeteria?”

“I prefer to eat by myself these days.”

“Did you have some sort of disagreement with your friends?”

“I don’t have any friends.” He spoke as though he were confessing to a terrible crime.

Mother played the part of the parent who couldn’t bring herself to accept the reality of her son’s guilt. “Don’t be silly! Of course you have friends. You may not be the most popular person at school, but —”

“Mother. I have no friends. Does anyone ever come over to see me? Do I ever get any phone calls? Do I ever go anywhere on Friday nights?”

“Mitch, I...” Mother covered her eyes and shook her head slowly from side to side. “I can’t believe you’ve been eating alone all year,” she said, almost in a whisper. “Thank God Mr. Connerly was looking out for you.”

She sighed, then continued in a more aggressive tone. “I love you. More than you can know. I only want the best for you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. I didn’t raise you to be anti-social.”

Mitch stuffed his hands into his pants’ pockets.

“Damn it!” Mother screamed. “What did I do wrong?”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Then...then damn you! Why can’t you learn to be normal, like all the other kids? Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is for me when my friends ask about you, your interests, your talents, your friends, and whether you’re dating? I can’t bear to tell them that my son doesn’t do normal teenage things. I never know what to say. Sometimes I lie. Sometimes I try to make excuses for you. Oh, I’m so sick and tired of it. Your social immaturity reflects badly on me as a mother. And it’s not fair!”

“Mom, I’ve tried to explain it a thousand times. I’ll try once again. I’m different from all the others. I don’t understand them. And to be honest, I have no desire to be like them. Or to be liked *by* them.”

Mother lifted her right hand, and in the next instant Mitch felt it crash onto the side of his face. When skin met skin, the impact produced a sharp crack of thunder in the air.

And then there was silence. Mother had nothing more to say. There was nothing that Mitch could say.

He ran upstairs to his room and shut the door behind him. He went to pet his hamster, but Scooter scurried to avoid Mitch's touch. He collapsed onto his bed and buried his face in his pillow, where he deposited a steady stream of tears.

When he woke up, it was one o'clock in the morning. He was surprised that he had fallen asleep. His body now felt relaxed. His mind didn't.

He rolled out of bed and went to his desk. He turned on the lamp. He pulled open the top drawer on the left side of the desk and took out a spiral notebook. Thoughts were racing through his head like bees swarming around a hive. He picked out a few of them and scrawled them down.

Wouldn't it be nice to go back to sleep and never wake up? Eternal sleep...how perfect. No tomorrows. No worries. No people. No one would miss me. I wouldn't miss anyone. Society has nothing to offer me. I have nothing to offer it. Not now. Maybe when I'm older. Much older!!! Maybe when I'm somewhere else. Maybe when I'm NOWHERE.

He thought of Father's old .357 revolver. Ever since his death, Mother had stored the gun in her nightstand — "just in case."

What if right here in my own bed, I...

He stared at the clean, white sheets hugging the bed and imagined Mother's reaction upon discovering them to be stained with her son's blood.

Part II: *Identification*

At lunch, Mitch chose a seat at the end of a table situated in the back corner of the cafeteria. The table had been deliberately segregated from all the others. Next to him were several mentally retarded students. Mitch thought it to be an ideal location, given the circumstances. No “normal” students would venture over here.

“Mind if I sit here?” a girl called directly across from Mitch. Her voice was gentle, almost childlike.

He said nothing. Slowly, he raised his head until his eyes met hers. He felt a tingling in his stomach. He had never seen anything so beautiful looking back at him. Her long, dark hair framed a face so soft, so free of any blemishes, that it could have belonged to a princess in a fairy tale — except that her demeanor was that of a businesswoman.

He struggled to make his lips move. Part of him wanted to be left alone. But the part of him that didn’t spoke. “Sure. I mean, no, I don’t mind if you sit here.”

The young woman smiled at Mitch in acknowledgement and took her seat facing him. He could now see that she wore no trace of makeup. He took a bite of food, hoping he’d again be interrupted by the sound of her voice. Suffering under the silence but afraid to break it, Mitch turned his gaze upward. Their eyes met again.

“My name is Candice,” she announced, as though answering a question that had been posed nonverbally.

“I’m Mitch.”

“This is my first week at Lincoln. Are you new to this school also?”

“No.” Mitch shrugged. “I’ve been stuck here all year.”

“Do you usually eat alone?”

Mitch’s eyes wandered. Unable to conceive of a way out of her direct question, he answered it directly. “Yes.”

“I’m intrigued. Why aren’t you part of a group?”

Mitch wasn’t sure whether Candice was attempting to ridicule him or whether she felt sorry for him. It didn’t occur to him that she might sincerely be interested in his answer. He said, “I don’t know.”

“I bet I do.”

“What?” Mitch was incredulous.

“You don’t fit in. That’s obvious. You’re probably disgusted with high school social life. That’s why you sit at the retarded table. They’re the only ones who aren’t part of the social system, who don’t play the social games.”

“Yes,” Mitch said, his voice becoming stouter. “That’s exactly why I sit here.”

“I chose to sit here for the same reason.”

“I seriously doubt that!”

“Why?” Candice asked, her voice exuding the honest innocence of a little girl, her firm facial expressions projecting the confidence of a mature woman.

“I may not know you well, but you seem friendly, and secure, and...ah...attractive. You’ll probably be one of the most popular girls here. But for the time being, it’s not helping your social life any to be seen sitting at this table.”

She laughed playfully, as if the only thing Mitch had said was, “ooga booga!” Then she said, “No, I suppose it isn’t helping my social life. Should I move?”

The first word that came to Mitch’s mind was “no.” But that’s not what came out of his mouth. A little voice inside his head said that as soon as Candice found out about who he really was, she’d move as far away from him as possible. “I’m sure you will eventually. You’ll make new friends. And to maintain your social standing, you’ll have to steer clear of losers like me.”

Candice didn’t immediately respond. But her eyes remained focused on him. When she spoke, she asked him why he regarded himself as a loser.

Mitch said, “Haven’t you noticed? I have no friends.”

“Neither do I,” Candice said matter-of-factly. “So I guess we’re both losers as far as the social pecking order is concerned.”

“You strike me as being the very opposite of a loser.”

“Likewise.”

Mitch paused to try to grasp the meaning of the word that had left her mouth. She didn’t seem to be joking. Maybe she was just naïve. “I don’t think you understand who I am. I’m a complete social outcast. No one likes me — not my classmates, not my teachers, not even my mother.”

“So what?”

“So I’ll never amount to anything in this society.” He turned his gaze down to the table, then back to Candice. She wasn’t laughing at him. She wasn’t offering him any pity, either. She was listening.

He leaned forward. “Candice,” he began. “Have you ever felt like there is something within you, something that is an intrinsic part of who you are as a person, that makes you unable to live your life according to the expectations of others?”

“Why else would I have chosen to sit here?”

The tension in Mitch’s body lessened, and for the first time he felt comfortable smiling back at Candice. He had lost interest in the mostly untouched food still before him. His full focus was on the conversation. “People fear what’s unfamiliar to them,” he observed. “They know only how to deal with the phony pretenses everyone projects in order to buy social acceptance.”

“What if they met an individual who refused to play the game?” Candice said. “Not someone who tried to fit in with the group and failed, but someone who didn’t give a thought to fitting in. They’d avoid her. As if she carried a deadly, contagious disease. But she’s not sick. It’s she who is immune from the social disease that afflicts everyone else.”

“Is there a name for this disease?”

“Yes. It’s called *conformity*.”

Mitch reflected upon his struggle to come to grips with what seemed to be an inexplicable force that had turned the students into zombies. “What is it that makes them conform?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? What do you mean?”

“I mean that they could choose to stop conforming. Conformity is a state of mind. There is no one — not parents, not teachers, not peers — who can get inside anyone’s head. They can pressure us. They can threaten us. But they cannot write their values onto our minds. Not directly, anyway. If we become conformists, it is because we have *chosen* to relinquish our free will.”

“I’ve been in public schools longer than you have, and I can attest to the fact that we’re trained to order our lives around rules, assignments, routines, and obligations. We’ve been conditioned to become unaware of the sovereignty of our own minds. Choices are made for us. Attempting to make choices for ourselves is futile. That’s what teachers’ assignments ultimately teach us.”

“I think I know what you mean,” said Candice. “An assignment is supposed to be good for us. It’s supposed to help us learn. Sometimes it does. But sometimes an assignment is redundant or just plain pointless. Sometimes a student knows he’d get more out of doing something else. But he doesn’t do that something else. He does the assignment. He never speaks of *choosing* to do homework. He speaks of *having* to do homework. He can’t bear to carry the contradiction of choosing to do something that he regards as wasteful. So he convinces himself that no choice is possible. He shuts down his decision-making faculty. As a result, he becomes completely dependent on others. He wants to be given orders from the teacher. He wants to follow his peers. He likes school, because the endless opportunities to obey dictates and measure himself against others give him the only sense of purpose he knows.”

Mitch wore the expression of a child who had just seen a magician perform a trick before his eyes. “You just put into words what I think I’ve always believed on some level. We are treated as cogs in the social machine, and that’s how we...rather, *they*...treat each other. In the classroom, the teacher wields power over the students. In the hallways, the students are battling each other for power. Popular students are always superior to unpopular students. Groups are always superior to individuals. Everyone knows these rules and obediently follows them. It’s as if they’re reflecting and reinforcing the authoritarian structure of school.”

Candice’s brow rose. “I’m impressed...by your analysis, that is.”

“There’s still something I don’t quite understand. Why is it that those who conform the most seem to be the happiest? The popular people are always smiling and laughing. Just take a look at the *in* crowd over there.” Mitch pointed at a crowded table in the main eating area.

“Do you honestly believe you would be happier if you were one of them?”

“Well, I’m not necessarily saying that.”

“Would you rather be sitting at that table instead of this one?”

“No.” He answered without a hint of hesitation.

“Why?”

“It just seems like...they’re not really real,” said Mitch.

“Maybe they’re pretending to be happy. Anyone can put on a smile to hide their inner insecurity, or anxiety, or dread. Socialites believe that by achieving a certain social status, they’ll be happy. But whenever they’re by themselves — that is, whenever they have to *be* themselves — they are helpless and miserable. Why? Because they lack self-esteem. Why? Because they have no distinct *self* that exists apart from others.”

“So, in other words, they always have to be *one of them*. They can’t ever just be *one*.”

Candice nodded and said, “They might as well be living in a different world.”

"I've often suspected that they are."

"They perceive everything through a social lens. Things that might seem meaningless to you or me are like gold to them. And vice versa. What is a shoe? To me, it's something to protect your feet. To a socialite, it's something to impress people. What is a friend? To me, it's someone I value on a personal level. To them, it's anyone who elevates their social status. To them, *you* are from a different world."

Mitch's face tightened as he thought about what to say next. Candice didn't attempt to jump in or move the conversation in another direction. She waited for him.

"*They* outnumber us," he said. "*They* hold the reins of power. It's *their* world. I feel like I'm doomed to fail in it."

He thought Candice would say, "You're not going to fail." Instead, she remarked, "I'd rather be a failure in my life than be successful at living someone else's." Then she said tersely that she needed to go stop by the office before her next class.

"Wait," Mitch cried. "Will we talk again?"

"Of course. I'll see you tomorrow at lunch."

As Candice made her way out of the cafeteria, Mitch traced her path with his eyes until her figure couldn't be differentiated from the crowd of students in the distance.

Candice Tillett's mother had succumbed to cancer six weeks ago. Candice's estranged father, whom she had not seen in years, was awarded custody.

According to the law, anyone under the age of eighteen is a "minor" — a legal dependent. Candice had informed the court that her eighteenth birthday was approaching. She argued that she should be permitted, at the very least, to choose her legal guardian.

After her request had been denied, she wrote a letter to the judge and sent copies of it to bureaucrats, elected officials, and newspaper editors. In her letter, she asked why the mere accident of a genetic connection between her and a drunken, volatile man who was not her father in any meaningful sense should take precedence over her wishes. She explained that her aunt had helped home-educate her and that she wanted to live with her aunt and uncle. Her letter concluded with a plea to be seen for who she was.

The government and my so-called father claim for themselves the right to run my life -- a subject they know nothing about. They say that I can't possibly know what's good for me because I am merely a teenager.

Well, I resent the very label of "teenager." My age is not my identity; nor is it indicative of my character or my decision-making ability.

Further, why should I grant the distinction "adult" blindly to everyone who happens to have spent more than 18 years (or 21 or whatever the law may dictate) on this planet? I judge people based on what they do with their days, not on how many they've accumulated.

I suppose it would be unreasonable of me to request that I be judged on the basis of who I am -- my thoughts, my actions. But that's what I'm doing.

Candice's letter had not garnered any responses from government officials or any attention in the newspapers.

James Tillett, the biological father of Candice, earned decent wages as a skilled carpenter. But he was flat broke. Years of blowing his money on booze and slot machines had left him thousands of dollars in debt.

Tillett had begun his carpentry career when, at the urging of his father, he dropped out of high school to work at his old man's construction company. Tillett blamed all his subsequent failures in life on his father's lack of concern for his schooling.

James Tillett knew that he had rarely been a good father to Candice. But it wasn't his fault — or so he told himself. When the two had met at the courthouse, Tillett struggled to find words that might somehow resurrect their dead relationship. "I know I ain't always been the best daddy in the world. But I think your mama turned you against me. She made me out to be the bad guy. I had no chance these past few years."

"Just what are you trying to accomplish with this?" Candice had said.

"What I'm trying to say is that I'm your father, damn it! And whether you like it or not, you're my daughter."

"You don't even know me."

"Hey. I don't care how long it's been. I know how to take care of my girl. Your mama kept you out of school, and that isn't no good. School is important, you hear? You won't get nowhere in this world without a diploma. One of my biggest regrets is that I never got mine. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let you miss out on yours."

Candice explained that she expected to earn her GED later in the spring and that it would be the equivalent of a high school diploma. In the meantime, she said, she would be busy reading books on astrophysics and preparing herself for an eventual career in theoretical astronomy. She didn't have time to bother with schoolwork.

Tillett didn't care. "I've already talked with the school district about putting you back in school. They said you'll have to take some tests, but you'll probably be enrolled as a junior. That means you can graduate at the end of the next school year. Your new school's called Lincoln High School."

Mitch raced from Algebra class to the cafeteria, where he took his seat before any of the retarded students arrived. During the last few minutes of Algebra, he had come up with the idea of putting an observation deck atop one of the skyscraping support towers of the "world's longest suspension bridge." He imagined that sightseers would use the pedestrian walkway spanning the length of the bridge to access the elevators that would carry them to the top. The glass ceilings and glass doors of the elevators would offer unhindered views in every direction.

The bridge would be more than merely a means of moving automobiles from one shore to the other; it would be a destination in itself. The vistas from the observation deck would be like no others on Earth. One would be enveloped by the majesty of the Olympic Mountains, the stateliness of the evergreens, and the serenity of the dark ocean waters. Juxtaposed against this natural beauty would be the man-made splendor of the bridge's exquisitely shaped steel towers rising up, and up, and up.

Mitch was eager to begin shaping the shafts through which the elevators would ascend to the observation deck. But just as the sharpened tip of his pencil met paper, she appeared.

“Where’s your lunch?” she said, setting hers on the table.

“Oh, I haven’t gotten it yet. Actually, I’m not very hungry. I think I’ll skip lunch today.”

“Is that your drawing?”

Mitch had nearly forgotten it was still spread out on the table. “Yes.”

“May I see it?”

Mitch handed it to her. Candice studied the design for several seconds. “I’m impressed. I’d ask you which bridge it is, but somehow it doesn’t look like any bridge that’s ever been built.”

“It’s just something I dreamed up. If it did exist, it would be the longest suspension bridge in the world. It’s not going to exist, of course. I suppose it’s just a silly doodle.”

“You obviously put a great amount of thought and time into your work. It must be important to you.”

“To me? Yes, *to me*. I enjoy creating things that can’t or wouldn’t be created in this world. In a way, I’m giving life to the dreams that occupy my mind.” He was telling her about the 300-story skyscraper in the desert and some of his other fantastical creations. All of a sudden, it occurred to him that Candice had characterized his drawing as his “work.” He asked her how his designs could ever have any practical use.

Candice looked again at the drawing. Her eyes remained focused on it as she answered. “Art that inspires us to reach higher and dream bigger is practical. It’s practical because it’s idealistic.”

Mitch felt a tingling in his stomach not unlike the sensation that he felt when his eyes met Candice’s for the first time. “I..I don’t know what to say except that no one has ever called me an artist before. I doubt I’d ever make it professionally.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Even if my skills were top-notch, would there be a market for my kind of drawings? I don’t do traditional paintings of flowers or fruits or birds or other mundane things that most people hang on their walls as decorations. And I’m not a practitioner of post-deconstructionism or whatever it’s called that seems to be trendy among artsy types.”

Candice looked at Mitch quizzically.

“You know, the sort of stuff you find at modern art museums. It’s gobs of paint strewn randomly on a canvas. It’s an empty room with a pile of sand on the floor. It’s a sculpture of a human being assembled from discarded soda cans and rusty shovels. I don’t think a suspension bridge is ironic enough to be considered *art*.”

“Regardless, my pencil sketches don’t amount to much of anything. I’ve never even attempted to bring color to my drawings. Not that anyone would be interested anyhow.”

“I am.”

“And you’re not just...trying to make me feel better?”

“You mean, trying to insult you?”

It hit him like an epiphany: the person sitting across from him wasn’t normal at all. *Yes*, he told himself, he *was* conversing with a person had no pretensions or ulterior motives. She meant every word she said. She was the kind of woman whom Mitch had glimpsed only in old movies. Candice wasn’t a young Katharine Hepburn. She wasn’t Ingrid Bergman. She was much more: she was real, and he was talking to her.

“Candice?”

“Yes, Mitch?”

“You are truly special. Amazing. Like no one else I’ve ever met in my life. My family is irrelevant. My teachers are irrelevant. Everyone in this school is irrelevant. Everyone in the world is irrelevant as far as I’m concerned. Everyone except for you.”

“And you.” She punctuated her words with a wink.

Mitch had lunch with Candice every day at the retarded table. Occasionally, other students would stare. Mitch didn’t know whether they were staring at him, or at Candice, or at both of them. And he didn’t care. For one hour during the day, there was a person with whom Mitch could communicate. That one hour made the rest of the schoolday bearable. They had only known each other for a couple weeks, but it seemed to Mitch that they had shared a lifetime in their conversations.

“I turn eighteen on April the fifteenth,” Candice announced. “Next Tuesday, I will be an adult according to state law. On that day, I will escape from the man who now claims custody of me.”

Mitch had been holding a sandwich in his hands and was ready to take another bite. He dropped the sandwich like a hot potato. His mouth hung open. “Where will you go?”

“I’ll live with my aunt and uncle, where I’ll be able to resume my real education.”

“You won’t be coming back to Lincoln.”

“No.”

“Oh. I see. Well, it will be good for you to get out of this prison, Candice. You don’t deserve to be here.”

“Do you want to come with me?”

“What?”

Candice told Mitch about the farm her aunt and uncle lived on. She explained that her aunt was a former public schoolteacher who now worked as a freelance tutor for home-educated students. “My Aunt Maggie doesn’t call herself a *teacher* anymore. She’s a facilitator of independent learning. I told her all about you. She said you’d be welcome to study with us. You’ll have the opportunity to refine your artistic skills and study subjects that school doesn’t cover.”

“So what was your typical day like before you were forced to come here?”

“Each day is different. Each day is an adventure. Sometimes I get together with other independent learners in the area, and we organize trips to museums, to parents’ workplaces, to libraries, to lectures, or to wherever our interests take us. Sometimes I’ll even take non-credit classes that are made available to the general public through the community college or university. But classes are just a minor supplement to my education, not the central focus.

“I never get bored, because I’m learning about things that I want to learn about. Sometimes I spend hours surfing the Internet for information I want. I participate in physics and astronomy discussion forums, and no one knows or cares how old you are. Sometimes I spend hours reading books and magazines. Sometimes I spend all day writing. Sometimes I spend all night watching documentary videos about anything related to science.

“Typically, I spend a lot of time talking with Aunt Maggie. She knows a little bit about everything. She loves to share her wisdom, but she says she’s still a student of life. She says I teach her as much as she teaches me.

“It would be nice to have another intelligent person around to share ideas with. I respect your mind, Mitch. That’s why I want you to join me...at a place where there are no bells, no grades, and no busywork. We can spend all day exploring a single question. Or a thousand questions. We can learn in freedom.”

“It sounds...like paradise! Oh, I would absolutely love to join you there!” Mitch exclaimed.

“Do you think your mother will approve? You’re still considered to be a child, you know.”

The smile vanished from Mitch’s face.

Candice said, “I decided to suffer for a few weeks in this school and with my so-called dad because I knew it would only be a few weeks until my eighteenth birthday. I didn’t want that drunken fool or the cops to come chasing after me or my aunt and uncle. But for you, the wait until the magic age of eighteen would be too long.”

“I’ll try to get her to understand. I don’t think she will.” Mitch paused and considered the matter for a moment. As he did, an inkling of a smile crept back across his face. “Oh, it doesn’t matter! I’ll just tell her I’m going to pursue my dreams and dare her to try to stop me.”

“Then on the fifteenth of April, we’ll both celebrate our Independence Day,” said Candice.

Part III: *Choice*

As soon as Mitch got home from school on April 14, he rinsed the dishes, took out the trash, and scrubbed the toilets. He even vacuumed the carpet downstairs and upstairs — a chore that wasn't on today's list.

"Mitch, what a wonderful surprise!" Mother exclaimed when she walked in the door. "How nice of you to think of me. I'm so proud of you." She gave Mitch a hug. "Have much homework tonight?"

"Actually, I don't."

"Hmm...that's unusual. Are you sure?"

"I won't have homework for any class at Lincoln High School ever again."

"What? What in God's name are you talking about?"

Mitch took in a full breath of air before answering. "I'm talking about pursuing my education with the help of an independent instructor." He pretended not to notice the swift drop of Mother's jaw. "I'm disenrolling from Lincoln High School tomorrow."

"Like hell you are!" Mother roared. "No, no, no." She shook her head vigorously. "How could you even say such a thing? No son of mine is going to be a dropout, do you hear me?"

"I'll get my GED."

"Oh, so you think you're too good for school? Is that it? Why you...you spoiled little brat!"

"Mom —"

"Hush. What would your father say? He's probably rolling over in his grave. Have you forgotten everything we've tried to instill in you? Are you so full of yourself that you can't appreciate the hard work and sacrifices we made for you all your goddamned life? How could you be so ungrateful?"

"Mother. Please. I intend to make something of my life. I thought maybe you'd want that for me. I have a real opportunity to study subjects I've always wanted to learn more about. I'll also be able to develop my drawing skills. I met someone, whose opinion I respect, who thinks I may have what it takes to be a successful artist."

"So that's what this is about, huh? You want to sit around all day and draw. Gee, that sounds like fun. Do you want me to buy you a box of crayons and a coloring book, *Mitchie*? We could spend all day drawing together — if only I didn't have to work to put food in your stomach. Well, I've got news for you. You have to work, too. Your job right now is school."

"But —"

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear it. You will go to school tomorrow, young man. And you will get your diploma. It’s what I want for you. It’s what your father would have wanted for you. When you’re an adult, you can make your own decisions. But as long as you’re living under this roof, you’ll do as I say. Do you understand me?”

“If only you’d listen to what —”

Mother stomped her foot on the hard kitchen floor. She looked up at the ceiling and screamed — as though a masked man were chasing her with a knife. She took a step toward Mitch. “Do. You. Understand me?”

Mitch’s breaths were rapid and shallow. He searched frantically for a way out of the trap. “Yeah,” he answered finally.

Mitch Briggs marched up to his room. He sat down on his bed and watched Scooter the hamster. As usual, Scooter was tirelessly spinning his exercise wheel and perpetually stuck in the same place.

Mitch opened his backpack. Nestled between his *World History* textbook and a three-ring binder was a folded sheet of notebook paper. He had written Candice’s cell phone number on it.

Mother had given Mitch a telephone for his bedroom as a birthday present last year, hoping to encourage him to be more social. Tonight he would finally use the phone.

Languidly, he dialed Candice’s number. In the tone of a failed political candidate giving a concession speech, he said that he fought the good fight but that he could not overcome his mother’s insistence that he remain in school.

All Candice said in response was, “I respect your decision.”

“Wait! It’s not my decision. You don’t seem to understand that I have no control over my life. I’m not an adult like you now are. I’m a slave.”

“I understand your frustration. And given the circumstances, I certainly respect your decision.”

“You’re not listening to me!”

“Are you certain of that?”

Mitch sighed, and in a softer voice said, “To be honest, I’m not certain of anything right now.”

“Why don’t we take up this conversation again tomorrow evening? It sounds like your mind needs time to reflect on the day’s events. Tomorrow, you might approach the situation with a different perspective. My Aunt Maggie once told me something I’ve found to be true time and time again when it comes to seemingly unsolvable problems. She said, *if you look from only one perspective, you won’t see the full picture.*”

Candice heard nothing but static from the handset. “Goodnight, Mitch.”

More static. As she was lowering the phone down to hang it up, a faint, muffled voice was trying to come through. Just before the handset hit the receiver, Candice heard the word “goodnight.”

Mitch peered into the interior of his backpack. He grabbed the smallest book there — the only one, in fact, that wasn’t a standard textbook. It was an autobiography. Mitch remembered that Mrs. Freeman had assigned it to her World History students at the beginning of the week. They were studying World War II, and this book was supposed to offer students a first-hand account of survival in a Nazi concentration camp. He needed something to take his mind away from his own troubles. However bleak his prospects seemed, they surely were bright compared

to those of a prisoner in a death camp. Mitch stared at the cover, seemingly in contemplation over the decision of whether to open it. “*Night. By Elie Wiesel,*” he mumbled.

He turned to the first page. Every couple of minutes, he’d turn to a new page. His eyes never left the book — until he came upon a passage that caused a modest grin to spread across his face. He read the section again. This time his face was like stone. He pulled out a highlighter from the accessory pouch of his backpack, aimed it on several words in the middle of the page, and bathed them in bright yellow. He folded the corner of the page to mark it and then continued reading. He didn’t stop until he reached the end of the book.

At lunch, Mitch sat at his normal spot. He imagined that at this moment Candice was enjoying her lunch out on the farm as she took a break from her studies of the cosmos. The thought warmed his body. He leaned forward and folded his arms on top of the table. He lowered his head onto the padding of his forearms and closed his eyes. The yawping cafeteria no longer existed. He was alone with his thoughts...

Until he felt a finger tapping on his shoulder. Stunned, he immediately turned around and saw a dour, mustached face staring back at him. “Ahem. Are you aware that this table is reserved for students enrolled in the Special Education program?”

“I’m aware that they sit here. However, I don’t think they’ve reserved these unoccupied seats at the end of the table.”

“Excuse me. A simple *yes* will do. There’s no need for sarcasm...ah, Martin, right?”

“Mitch.”

“Almost nailed it,” Principal Connerly said under his breath. “Mitch, there are six-hundred different faces with six-hundred different names attached to them in this school. I figure I’ve got half of them committed to memory. That’s not too shabby, is it, Mitch?”

“I suppose not.”

“You suppose not. Ha! Ha! Hagh!” he barked. Then, in a more level tone, he repeated mockingly, “you suppose not.” Connerly ran his thumb through his mustache and said, “Now Mitch, I need your help. I need you to do me a favor and go sit at one of the other tables with your peers.”

“Fine. I’ll do it.” Mitch figured that arguing would only prolong the ordeal. Regardless of what he said, he ultimately would have no choice about whether to move. He reached for his lunch tray, but before he could lift it up, he felt Mr. Connerly’s hand on his shoulder. Connerly pushed Mitch back down onto his seat.

“Mitch, I know you’re not bothering any of the Special Ed students. That’s really not the issue. Who I’m concerned about is *you*.”

Mitch closed his eyes and bowed his head, as though he were engaged in prayer.

Connerly dealt with the problem at once. “Look at me, Mitch. Look at me.”

Mitch lifted up and rotated his head slowly until his eyes met Connerly’s.

“Are you a member of any club here on campus?”

“No.”

“I think it’s time we changed that. You know, Mitch, there are dozens of student organizations you can join. I often tell parents that at Lincoln, there is always a place where your child will belong. Stop by my office after school today. We’ll find a club or two for you to join.”

“I’d prefer not to. I...” Mitch hesitated; the words now on the tip of his tongue were painful for him to pronounce. “I have better things to do with my time.” Knowing that he did have better places to be and better people to be communicating with made the present situation all the more torturous.

“It seems that we’re being a bit selfish, now, aren’t we? You know, Mitch, school isn’t an all-you-can-eat buffet where you pick only those things you want and pass over everything else. And neither is the real world. We have to report to work every day. We have to pay our fair share in taxes. So you see, sometimes we have to do things that we don’t necessarily want to do. Why? Because in the end, they are for the good of others and for our own good. Do you follow?” Connerly didn’t stop for an affirmation from Mitch. He spoke as though he were delivering a prepared speech that he’d given dozens of times before. “It’s our job in the schools to mold young, uninhibited, undisciplined minds into maturity. The country depends on us to produce good, democratic-minded citizens who will be useful members of society. We seek to develop in students a sense of community and interdependence. You need your peers. They need you.

“Now, as I’m sure you know, one-hundred hours of volunteer community service is required for graduation. That goes for every student in the entire school district.” Connerly paused. His mustache widened as his lips spread into a taunting grin. “That’s right, every student, including Mitch. It’s not technically required that students do the hundred hours of volunteer work through a school-sponsored organization. But I am going to require it of you.”

Mitch bit his lower lip and clenched his fists as his cheeks acquired a noticeably reddish tone. “That’s not fair,” he protested, looking right into the black of Connerly’s unblinking eyes.

Connerly laughed and said, “Years from now, you’ll thank me for giving you this little push.”

Mitch recalled that when his mother was pulled over for speeding a few weeks ago and the police officer wrote her a ticket, she cussed; she called the officer names; she vowed she wouldn’t pay the ticket. The police officer said, “Drive safely.” An honest police officer doesn’t regard himself as superior to the citizens he’s charged with protecting. But anyone who wields power over others *for their own good* must regard himself as superior to them.

Connerly would never admit to deriving any pleasure from exercising power over students. He simply regarded it as necessary. Why do schools exist? To *force* students to learn. If there were no authority-based hierarchical structure, then no learning would take place. It was only logical.

“You will report to my office today after school and inform me of which club you have chosen. It can be the Key Club, the Earth Club, the Spanish Club, the Multicultural Awareness Club, or any other group that has been authorized to perform volunteer work. Are we clear, Mitch?”

“I can’t answer on your behalf, sir.”

“What?” Connerly looked thoroughly confused. “Listen, Mitch, you better watch the way you address those who have been given authority over you. Now I have to meet with a faculty member...” He glanced at his watch, synchronized to the second with the school clocks. “...in less than two minutes. My office. After school. In the meantime...” The principal gestured for Mitch to get up and move. He obeyed.

Mitch got some food and then wandered around the cafeteria like a lost dog. Finally, he found a table with several empty seats bunched together. He chewed his soyburger with big, violent bites. Each bite reinforced and intensified the fire heating up within him — the same fire

he had deliberately suppressed only moments ago. He wished desperately that he was free to tell Mr. Connerly what he really thought of him and his school.

He recalled his last conversation with Candice. He asked himself why he *chose* to respond to the principal passively, like a weakling. But as soon as he posed the question, he realized he couldn't possibly answer it...unless Candice was right, after all.

Mitch took his seat in his World History class twenty seconds prior to the sounding of the tardy bell.

Today Mrs. Freeman would be leading a discussion of the assigned reading for the week. Although Mitch had read the book with intense interest last night, he cared no more about his teacher's or his classmates' comments on this particular day than on any normal day when he hadn't done the assigned reading.

Mitch had an idea for a new super-structure that he thought could begin taking shape during class. What Mitch envisioned was a sports stadium with a seating capacity of one-million people. It would play host to a sport similar to baseball, played on a field twice the size of a typical Major League ball field. The balls would be engineered to travel twice as far as normal baseballs. They would emit a bright orange luminance to enable even fans in the very last row of the top tier to follow the action.

A gently sloping lower seating bowl would allow for several cantilevered seating terraces to be stacked on top of one another. In addition to its breathtaking size, the stadium would be unique in another regard. Approximately 20,000 spectator seats would be positioned *underneath* the playing field. The seats, tilted upward to give fans a proper sightline, would be buried under thick sections of unbreakable glass. The glass would extend 250 feet from the edge of the outfield wall, wrapping around the field from foul pole to foul pole. To enable players' shoes to grip the surface, the glass would be coated with a thin layer of transparent padding, which would also cushion falls and help prevent injuries.

Mitch tore out a sheet of notebook paper, and with his pencil he began shaping the playing field that would eventually be dwarfed by the myriad levels of seating decks and skyboxes towering over it. He could hear the teacher's voice grow nearer, but he was so enraptured in the concept of his design that the thought of stopping to look at her didn't enter his consciousness.

Suddenly, a hand slammed onto the paper. "Not in class," growled Mrs. Freeman. She swept the paper off Mitch's desk. "I'm tired of you wasting class time with these little drawings of yours. This isn't art class." The teacher held up the paper and showed it to the class. It contained nothing more than a couple of perpendicular lines and the beginnings of an outfield wall. "And you sure ain't Michelangelo." The classroom erupted in laughter. Mrs. Freeman crumpled up Mitch's drawing and dropped in the trash can. She looked back at Mitch. "Now get out your book, child. Sit up. Pay attention. Come out of the clouds." A few more students giggled.

The teacher turned her menacing gaze toward each of the other rows of desks. "I don't know why you all are laughing. The material we're going over today will — I repeat, will — be on the test tomorrow."

Mrs. Freeman began pacing around the front of the room as she orated. "I tell you what, I'm not in a good mood today. So if I have any problems with *anyone*, I'll give you *all* a pop

quiz at the end of class. I don't want to hear a sound out of your mouth unless you've raised your hand and been called on," she sniped.

"Damn, you people get on my nerves," she muttered, ostensibly to herself but intentionally loud enough for the class to hear.

She sighed and went to pick up a piece of bright, white chalk from the dusty railing of the front chalkboard. She held the chalk between her thumb and index finger and gestured with it as she continued with the day's lesson. "What lessons can *us* as a people learn from the Holocaust? Anything? What does Elie Wiesel teach us? I'll make a list of what we come up with as a class." Mrs. Freeman wrote on the chalkboard "Holocaust Lessons" and underlined it. "Keep in mind that the answers aren't explicitly spelled out in Wiesel's biography." Her copy of his autobiography was resting on top of the Teacher's Edition of the class textbook, which was sitting on the overhead projector stand. She moved *Night* out of the way and with both hands held up the textbook for the class to see. "Here's a hint. Open your *World History* textbooks to page two-eighty-six and look at the chart that says *Lessons of the Holocaust*," she stated mechanically.

Almost immediately, hands went up. "Tolerance," one student offered. "Respect for diversity," answered another. "Dangers of unchecked greed," another said, as Mrs. Freeman recorded each response on the board.

Class participation was a significant component of students' grades. Teachers believed that it was important to foster a cooperative learning environment in which students learned from students. Mitch had observed that class participation generally consisted of students reciting answers to teachers' leading questions or completing teachers' sentences by supplying withheld words. Mitch never volunteered his participation in class, but if called on he would usually say whatever needed to be said. He had no intention of failing any class and being forced to repeat it.

In one sense, the classroom seemed chaotic. The teacher would constantly stop, ask for class participation, respond to students' responses, and go off on any number of tangents. Relevant facts, irrelevant facts, conjectures, opinions, and lies were all scrambled together.

In another sense, the participatory classroom was rigidly controlling. In a straight lecture format, students are recipients of information, like they are when reading a book or watching a film. They are intellectually free to question the ideas being presented. But when students themselves are forced to become *participants* in the teacher's presentation, they aren't allowed to be cognitively independent.

Mrs. Freeman looked for another volunteer, but no new hands were raised.

"Who haven't we heard from in a while?" Her eyes wandered around the classroom, then locked in on Mitch. "Mitch, what do you think?"

He looked at the textbook. The words the teacher wanted to hear were right there on the page. But he didn't read them. The answer to the question *What do you think?* wasn't anywhere in the book. The teacher stared at Mitch peevishly, trying to coax a response out of him. At last, he decided to speak. "Dangers of vested authority. Everywhere. Including schools. *They* are the concentration camps of the mind."

A few students snickered nervously. Most stared at the teacher with bemused expressions as they waited for her response.

"If that's supposed to be some kind of a joke," Mrs. Freeman said, "it ain't funny. I suggest you look at page two-eighty-six and study the lessons that you're supposed to know. In

the meantime, I think you owe us all an explanation. If you don't want the class to have a pop quiz, you better apologize right now."

"I do owe you an explanation. Here's what I'm getting at. If schools are analogous to concentration camps, then we students are the Jews. Mr. Connerly is Hitler. And the teachers are his henchmen. The Jews spilled their sweat and blood at the hands of their oppressors. We surrender our independence and individuality at the hands of ours."

Mrs. Freeman was caught in that unnamable emotional state that lies somewhere between outrage and shock. "What? How dare you? How dare you?" she said, the growing harshness of her voice unaccompanied by a surge in volume. "I've never heard anything so offensive and so...absurd...in my life. School is a place for learning. Class participation is designed to give you a chance to participate in the learning process. I will not allow you to disrupt my class." Like a witness picking out the criminal from a police lineup, the teacher pointed at Mitch with her index finger. "You're in hot water, child. I'll speak to you after class. Now, everyone, let's move on."

Mitch, however, wasn't finished. "Our ultimate destiny is not the gas chambers. It is to be set free. Free...to join the rat race. Free...to keep up with the Joneses. Free...to vote for political candidates who proclaim that they know what's best for us."

"Stop!" she snarled. "Before I wire that mouth of yours shut."

"Free...to be cogs in the social machine."

"Now!"

"Free...to lead the lives of unconscious, self-denying conformity that school has conditioned us —"

"Look here! If I hear any more crap out of you —"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Freeman, but you interrupted me. I'm not finished."

The class troublemaker told Mitch to "shut up."

A student who consistently got straight A's called for Mitch to "give it up, man."

A student who was failing the class blurted out that Mitch was an "idiot."

Mrs. Freeman dashed to her desk and pulled open the top drawer. Mitch turned to face the teacher, who was busily filling out a Student Conduct Report on him. "May I read a relevant passage from the assigned reading?"

The teacher looked up, pressed her lips firmly together, squinted, and said, "You may go straight to the Principal's office as soon as I finish writing you up."

"In that case, here's something else to add to the referral. This is how Elie Wiesel described life in a Nazi concentration camp..." He opened to the page he had marked the night before and placed his finger on the highlighted section. "*The bell. Everything was regulated by the bell. It gave me orders, and I automatically obeyed them. I hated it. Whenever I dreamed of a better world, I could only imagine a universe with no bells.*"

Mrs. Freeman slammed the freshly marked up Student Conduct Report down on Mitch's desk. She ordered him to leave the classroom at once or else be escorted away by school security.

On his way out the door, Mitch turned around and looked into the eyes of all thirty of his classmates. "Does anyone else dream of a world with no bells?" The students gaped at him blankly, like robots whose sound capabilities had been muted.

Mrs. Freeman, however, let her temper, and her shrillest tone of voice, loose. "Out!" she fumed. "Get out of my classroom! Get your fascism...your hate...your evil venom out of here. Now! Before I knock you upside the head!"

Mitch calmly made his way to the administrative office. He showed the Student Conduct Report to the secretary. She directed him to take a seat in Mr. Connerly's office and wait for him to arrive.

It was a spacious room, but the oversized desk sitting in the corner made the area feel cramped. Behind the desk of darkly stained wood appeared a large, black picture frame displaying "Mr. Connerly's Rules for Success." Mitch vaguely recalled the principal having made mention of it. Two navy, plastic chairs of the variety that were standard in all classrooms were placed in front of Connerly's desk. Mitch took the seat nearest the door.

George Connerly stormed into his office. Upon noticing the presence of this unexpected visitor, he said, "Mitch...Mitch, I told you to come by *after* school to get signed up for a club. Why aren't you in class?"

Mitch handed him the Student Conduct Report. Connerly assumed his position behind his desk and looked it over. He pretended to be continuing to read the document as he contemplated his disciplinary strategy.

Then he said, "Close the door." He waited for Mitch to complete the task.

"Mitch Briggs, it seems you're having serious problems adjusting to high school life. Mrs. Freeman says you were disrupting class by making foul, mean-spirited remarks toward her and her students. She says you likened her and...the administration of this school...to Nazis. What a dim-witted thing to say. I mean, Mitch, how ridiculous can you get? *Nazis*? How highly, highly inappropriate, Mitch. Don't you appreciate the fact that Mrs. Jackson and everyone here at Lincoln are sacrificing their time for you? We all want you to succeed. But you're making it hard. You're your own worst enemy, aren't you, Mitch?"

Mitch waited patiently for his turn to speak, then he spoke as though Mr. Connerly hadn't said anything at all. "I'd like to point out a few things about Mrs. Freeman. She seized and destroyed property belonging to me. She attempted to humiliate me in front of the other students. She screamed at the top of her lungs — disrupting neighboring classes, I'm sure. She even threatened to hit me. Her behavior was immature, disrespectful, and abusive. I would like to file a Teacher Conduct Report on her."

Connerly frowned. "Do you think this process is some kind of joke?"

"I'm quite serious."

"Well then, I suggest you —" Connerly stopped in mid sentence, as if something had startled him. "Look at me. Frankly, Mitch, your attitude stinks. What you did in Mrs. Freeman's class is grounds for suspension. Do you realize that?"

"I can't say that I care," Mitch retorted. The words came out effortlessly. He felt like he was being propelled by the momentum he had created with his first step of defiance in Mrs. Jackson's class.

"Excuse me! What did you say?"

"I. Don't. Care. If you want to kick me out of school for expressing a thought of my own origination, then go right ahead. You'll only be affirming the validity of the statements I made in class today."

"What?" Connerly said accusatorily, his mouth open, his eyes bulging from their sockets. "You will cut the sarcasm right now! Got it? Now! You will speak to Mr. Connerly with the respect due his position. Am I clear?"

"Mrs. Freeman asked me what I thought. Considering that class participation is a requirement, I was obliged to give my opinion. She obviously didn't agree with it. But the First Amendment guarantees my right to speak my mind, doesn't it?"

“The Bill of Rights does not apply within these walls. This does,” Connerly said as he swiveled his chair and pointed at his “Rules for Success.”

“So if I’m asked to express my thoughts, I must lie? I must express someone else’s and pretend they’re my own? Reciting some neatly packaged state-approved textbook answer...is that what you call *thinking*?”

“Now you hold on just a minute! This is not some sort of court proceeding where you get to cross-examine us or argue against us. I want you to listen. Got it? Listen. I’ll ask the questions. You’ll answer them. Didn’t your mother ever teach you the virtue of showing deference to those who have been given authority over you?”

“She tried. Apparently, she failed.”

“Yeah. Apparently. But guess what? Mr. Connerly doesn’t intend to fail. Now look at me, Mitch. When a teacher sends me a Student Conduct Report, it’s proof of the student’s guilt as far as I’m concerned. In all my years of being an administrator, I have never had a teacher write up a student without a reason. Anything that a teacher deems to be inappropriate or unbecoming of a student at Lincoln High School will not be tolerated. Period. Am I clear?”

“Crystal clear. Teachers are always right. Students have no rights. Volunteering is compulsory. And schooling is slav —”

“You! Shut the hell up! Right now!” Connerly roared, lifting his upper lip to reveal his tightly clenched teeth.

Connerly must have realized that he had just made the amateurish mistake of allowing an irksome student to get to him. The principal was supposed to be in control at all times. Connerly quickly calmed himself down and continued in a mellower tone. “Mitch, engaging students’ independent thought and creativity is important to us at Lincoln. That’s why every student is required to have two fine arts credits in order to graduate. The school board has designed the curriculum to give students appropriate channels through which they can express themselves. Disrupting your classes is not appropriate. Questioning the motivations of school officials during class threatens the very...ah, well, it’s just not an appropriate thing for a student to do.”

“What about self-esteem? Is that an appropriate thing for a student to have?”

“Look at me.” Connerly wiped a few beads of sweat off his brow.

Mitch’s unblinking eyes peered directly into Connerly’s. “I’m looking right at you. What I see is a man whose facade of self-esteem would crumble if he ever lost his position of authority. If you ever met someone who didn’t give a damn about your social status, you’d feel inadequate in his presence, wouldn’t you, George?”

Connerly rose from his chair. His right hand swept across his desk, launching pens, pencils, and paper clips through the air. “You cannot speak to me in that manner! You cannot! You little smart ass, you’ll get what’s coming to you! You’re going to ISS. And you won’t come out until you produce one-thousand handwritten sentences: *I will not disrespect Mr. Connerly or any of the teachers at Lincoln High School.*”

Mitch examined the pens and pencils scattered about the floor. Mitch’s actions thus far had gotten him in-school suspension, possibly to be coupled with an after-school detention or other disciplinary measures. He’d be punished for a week or two.

However, a physical assault on a faculty member would almost surely, under zero-tolerance guidelines, result in expulsion.

Mitch thought for a second — and a second was all he needed. The young rebel was about to make the boldest move of his life. He bent over and swept up a couple of pens that had

rolled off George Connerly's desk. He stood up and, like a pitcher unleashing his fastball, hurled the pens at his target. Before Connerly knew what was happening, he felt the objects crash into his mid section. They bounced off and rolled back onto the floor.

"I will not disrespect myself," said Mitch, as he moved toward the door.

Connerly rose from his seat. He extended both arms out in front of him, evoking Boris Karloff's archetypal portrayal of Frankenstein's Monster. He reached for Mitch to try to pull him back into the office. But Mitch was too quick.

"Stop...I said, stop! That's an order! If you don't get back here this instant, you'll be expelled! Do you hear me? I'll have you kicked out of here for good!"

Mitch neared the end of the main hallway. Only a row of dark red, steel doors stood between him and his chosen destiny.

"If you walk out that door, there's no turning back..."

He burst through. The open door allowed a sheet of sunlight to penetrate the school interior. A small section of the floor looked as though it were glowing. A row of lockers lining the hallway seemed to sparkle. But the light from outside receded as quickly as it had entered, as the door pulled itself shut.

Mitch trekked through the parking lot and crossed the street. The house was a mile away. He was too full of adrenaline to walk, but he was too weighed down to run. Next to him, on the edge of the sidewalk, was a trash can — one of several purchased by the student council as gifts to the community. He unzipped his backpack and pulled out his copy of *Night* along with a folder containing some of his sketches. He set each down on the sidewalk. He hung his backpack, and the rest of its contents, above the trash can. He turned the bag upside down and watched the textbooks tumble down into the black hole. He grasped the Student Identification Card that was dangling from his neck, yanked it off, and let go of it. The card became lodged in the rotting remains of someone's after-school snack.

He returned the Wiesel autobiography and the folder to his book bag. He was about to strap it on his shoulders, but he decided instead to tuck it under one arm.

Mitch began to run. As he ran, he felt like a bird gliding through the air. He was weightless now — fearless and free.

He ran until he came to Bodacious Burgers, about halfway to his destination. In his pocket he had three dollars and some change — enough to treat himself to something good.

"How may I help you, sir?" said a middle-aged employee standing behind the counter. "SCOTT" was stamped in big, bold letters on his name tag.

"I'd like a small chocolate milkshake."

"Anything else?"

"I'd also like a hamburger."

"That'll be three-thirteen."

Mitch reached into his pocket and pulled out nearly everything in it.

"Thank you," said Scott, as he took the money and went to retrieve each of the items Mitch wanted.

Mitch hurriedly took a few bites of the tasty hamburger and gulped down most of the soothing milkshake before continuing on his way.

He charged through the front door and went straight to the kitchen phone. His breaths were still strained as he dialed Candice's number from memory. After she picked up, the first words out of his mouth were, "I'm free."

He told Candice all about his day. He spoke continuously for several minutes, driven by the unbridled exuberance and pride that filled his inner being. Finally, he asked Candice what she thought of his classroom speech on the parallels between concentration camps and schools.

“You had bottled up years of frustration, never allowing your quiet rebellion against the system to manifest itself overtly. You decided to let it all out today. And you said something that desperately needed to be said. If I was a student in that classroom, I would have stood up and applauded you.”

“I know you would have.”

Mitch told Candice that he wanted to meet Aunt Maggie and begin his education anew. Candice indicated that she would borrow her aunt’s car and come right over to pick him up.

Mitch agonized over what to do about Mother. There was no possibility of her ever sanctioning his actions. But all he needed was for her to accept the reality of the situation — not approve of it, just recognize that she is powerless to change it. Her first instinct would be to deny it. Then she’d fight it angrily.

She needed time. Mitch scribbled down a note and left it on the kitchen table.

Dear Mom,

I'm at my friend's house. I probably won't be home for dinner. I'll call you later in the evening.

For now, you should know that I've been expelled from school.

Mitch

“Mitch, this is my Aunt Maggie.”

“I’m excited to be here and to meet you, Mrs...”

“My friends call me Maggie. Shall we be friends?”

“That would be nice,” Mitch said with a smile.

“And no, you don’t need to raise your hand before you speak,” Maggie said, chuckling.

“And you don’t need to get anyone’s permission in order to use the bathroom,” added Candice.

Mitch burst out laughing. He laughed so hard that a tear welled up in his eye. “No tardy bells? No detentions? No cafeteria food?”

“Not around here,” Candice said.

“How did you come to be a...” Mitch began.

“A facilitator of independent learning?” Maggie chimed in. “Well, after five years of teaching high school, I became frustrated. The students weren’t interested in learning. All they cared about was their grades. And some didn’t even care about that.

“I came in to the teaching profession with lofty ideals. I thought I would be the nice, caring, heroic teacher that I always wished I’d had growing up. Instead, I was becoming irritable, harsh, and cynical, like so many of my seasoned colleagues. I didn’t like what my job was doing to me. So I quit.”

“Then what did you do?” asked Mitch.

“I began tutoring on the side. I worked with home-educated students, some of whom never spent a day in school. I have them to thank for opening my eyes. They came to me with questions they wanted answered. They told me what they wanted to learn. It felt strange at first to let the kids take charge. It was a total reversal of my role as a schoolteacher. But I could see the excitement on their faces, and I thought, *this is what learning should do.*”

“And what schooling doesn’t do,” stated Mitch.

“The greatest minds of science either did poorly in school or didn’t go at all,” noted Candice. “Original thinkers are by nature free-spirited eccentrics. They are spontaneous, restless, and bursting with questions. I wonder how many young Isaac Newtons, or Benjamin Franklins, or Thomas Edisons, or Charles Darwins, or Albert Einsteins are today being routinized, normalized, and bored out of their minds by school.”

Maggie nodded and said, “It’s a good thing universal public schooling didn’t always exist. In earlier times, teenagers were expected to be self-reliant. They produced. They ran businesses. They started families. They were treated like adults. Most teenagers today act like children. And we wonder why. From the first time they set foot in a school and are made to walk in a straight line, their daily lives are driven by passive compliance and, ah...”

“Conformity,” Mitch said.

The three chatted for a few more minutes in the living room, then Maggie announced that she was going to begin preparing dinner.

Candice asked Mitch if he’d like to take a tour of the farm. Mitch answered by rising from his seat. She showed him the corn fields, the horses, the tractors, and the main barn. Lastly, she took him to a smaller, plainer, obviously older barn on the other side of the pond. “That’s my sanctuary,” she said. Candice pulled open the tall, sliding door. At the back of the mostly empty barn was a ladder which led up to a large plywood platform. She climbed up, and Mitch followed. She said, “I come here to read, to write, to think, to wonder.”

There was a telescope in the corner, extending out of the big, barn window and pointing up toward the cloudless sky. “Last night, I was looking at Orion,” said Candice, “which will come back into view in about two hours. I’ll show you around the galaxy some time.”

He stood directly behind Candice. Her long, straight hair the shade of black coffee danced playfully in the wind that snuck through the open window. Mitch moved closer to her until, as if drawn by magnetic force, his body was nearly touching hers. “Thank you, Candice,” he said, his voice nearly dropping to a whisper. His lips were being pulled slowly toward Candice’s cheek. Candice felt his warm breath caress the silky skin of her cheek and rise up into her ear. Instinctually, she turned to face him. As her neck rotated, her lips made contact with his.

Mitch didn’t know how it was supposed to feel. The rush of radiance that passed from her mouth to his filled his entire body. It was like nothing he could have imagined.

He didn’t know what he should say. He feared that any words would spoil the pure sublimity of the moment. He smiled at Candice. She smiled back. They had said more than words could possibly say.

They walked side-by-side toward the house. As they approached the front lawn, Candice concluded the tour by saying, “Welcome to the real world.”

Mitch’s face tightened. He wrapped his hand around his chin, as if in deep contemplation.

“What’s the matter?”

“My mother. I...I need to call her.”

Candice told Mitch he could use the phone in her room. He walked there alone and closed the door behind him. The phone felt like a boulder in his hand.

Mother picked up on the first ring. At once, she berated Mitch for his irresponsibility and his immaturity. She said she had already called the school and apologized to Mr. Connerly on Mitch's behalf. She had begged the principal to reconsider the expulsion, but he replied that if Mitch ever again stepped foot on school property, he'd be escorted away by the police.

As Mother continued to scold and lecture and threaten Mitch, he said nothing in his defense. Instead, he moved the phone a few inches away from his ear. At this distance, he could hear her voice but not her actual words. In this way, he'd let mother throw all the punches she wanted — only he wouldn't serve as her punching bag. Eventually, she'd tire.

When her voice finally faded out, Mitch brought the handset closer and said, "I know you're upset. I know it must be difficult for you to understand why this has happened. All I can say is that I acted in a manner that was unbecoming of a student at Lincoln High School. You can tell me a million times how stupid I was, but it won't change what's happened. It won't change the fact that there's nothing you or I can do about my expulsion.

"I still need to continue my education. I can't do it at Lincoln or at any other school in the district. With the proceeds from dad's life insurance policy all but dried up, you couldn't possibly afford to send me to a private school. As things stand, we'll be lucky to hold on to the house for another four years. You've said as much yourself."

"Goddamn it! How could you put me in this predicament? How could you be so...so thoughtless? What the hell am I going to do now? I'm going to be the only parent in the whole neighborhood whose kid was kicked out of school. I'll be the subject of everyone's gossip!"

Mother waited for Mitch to say something. Mitch forced his mouth to remain closed.

"I suppose you have your own little plan for studying with that girl and her aunt," she said, speaking in a level tone for the first time in the conversation.

"That's right."

"I don't like it. It's not...oh, even if you could learn everything you needed to...I just...I don't think it's good for you to be isolated socially."

"I can't go back to school. That's reality. The alternative to pursuing my education here, with two people who take learning seriously...is to do what?"

Mother was quiet for several seconds. She sighed, then said, "Well, I'd have to have a long talk with this woman before I turn you over to her for the better part of the day. We'll have to discuss this situation some more when you get home. I can't even describe how mad I am. I want you home. Now, young man."

"I'll ask Candice to take me. As soon as she's finished with dinner, she will."

Mitch made his way to the living room, where Candice was plopped on the couch with a news magazine. "How'd it go?" she said.

"As good I could have expected."

"Dinner is served in ten minutes," Maggie called from the kitchen.

Mitch looked out the window. "I think I'm going to take a quick walk outside, while there's still sunlight. I just need a couple minutes to myself," he told Candice.

Mitch paced briskly in the general direction of Candice's barn. He allowed his senses to absorb everything surrounding him — the sound of birds chirping, the feel of the cool, evening breeze, and the sight of things scattered in every direction, in every shape and size, exhibiting a rainbow of colors. He was sure he could still smell the sweet scent of Candice's hair, and face, and lips, with every breath he took.

Mitch Briggs lay down in a patch of unmowed grass, allowed as it was to grow wild and free. He placed his hands underneath the back of his head. Directly behind him, the sun was setting. In front of him, the gently rolling hills seemed to be touching the endless blue of the sky.

He imagined that the sky was being pierced by a space shuttle the size of a tall building. It glimmered brilliantly in the horizontal rays of the sun. In his mind, the shuttle was loaded with hopeful passengers who were on their way out of this world and destined for another.

He closed his eyes. The image remained.



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