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Coming of Age Novel
Setting: Suburban Pasadena (1969-74)

The Society for the Complete Extermination of *Ethan Frome*

D. J. Phinney

Prologue

If only we'd stop trying to be happy, we could have a pretty good time. *Edith Wharton*

“How you react to *Ethan Frome* tells how you feel about yourself.” My wife gazes from Alioto’s toward sails on San Francisco Bay. She offers me a mint. I face her sapphire eyes and shake my head, rejecting her idea or her candy. I’m not sure which.

I ask, “How many men read Edith Wharton?”

“You did, Allen.”

“Fifty years ago, in high school, when they forced me.”

She sets her glass down, strokes my palm, and invites me toward her kiss. On her breath I taste the cabernet we’ve shared. She closes her eyes, smiles.

I yield to temptation.

Our waiter interrupts. “Sir, your check.”

We Uber home, and my mind returns to high school. They’d made us read *Ethan Frome*, the year they’d licensed us drive. What on earth had they been thinking? Besides ensuring none of us ever named a kid Zenobia, I have no clue. But once our Uber driver drops us at our doorstep, my wife’s comment on *Ethan Frome* lures me upstairs into our attic. There, in a squashed-down cardboard box, I find a book report I wrote.

I got an F.

I haven't read the thing since 1969.

If you never did have *Ethan Frome* inflicted on you, read it.

Book Report - *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton

Prepared by Allen Daniel Martin

for Mrs. Winchcombe

Sophomore English

January 10th, 1969

There's this dude named Ethan Frome. He lives in Starkfield, Massachusetts. He's married to this battle-axe, Zenobia, who's not into him. When her cousin, this chick named Mattie, moves in to help do housework, Ethan totally digs Mattie, who always wears this hot red scarf. Don't ask what's hot about a scarf. I can only guess. Ethan also likes to dream he's like this hot-snot engineer, as if being an engineer might make him groovy.

One day Zenobia, who goes by Zeena, bails to Bettsbridge, Massachusetts. If you check *Rand McNally's Atlas*, Bettsbridge and Starkfield aren't in it. But while this hypochondriac Zeena's off consulting with some quack in this fake village, Mattie's homing in on Ethan. She serves him munchies on Zeena's china. But Zeena's cat knocks over this dish. So to fix a stupid broken pickle plate, Ethan needs to make a glue-run. First, they stash the pieces together on the top shelf of the china cabinet,

hoping the old lady will never notice.

Except, she busts him. The next day, Ethan strolls in with his glue, and Zeena's there. Sure enough, she's found the dish and fingers Mattie. Zeena tells him she's made her mind up. Mattie's gotta go. Ethan and Mattie are seriously bummed.

The ever-brilliant Mattie cooks up this scheme to crash their sled into this elm tree. In their death, she says they'll always be together. But Ethan's such a loser he even messes up their suicide. Mattie winds up in this wheelchair, and Ethan becomes lame. (Let's make that *lamer*. Ethan Frome was lame throughout his stupid book.)

Rather than go to engineering school, Ethan ends the book caring for two whiny old broads, and Mattie's bitchier than even Zeena. I found this book to be depressing. So, unless you're into downers, there are better books that should be taught in high school.

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So there you have it. Aren't you "bummed" you never read it?

Maybe you could read my story instead.

It's better.

Honest.

#

The Society for the Complete Extermination of *Ethan Frome*

D. J. Phinney

Part One - Fall

Life is either always a tightrope or a featherbed. Give me a tightrope.

Edith Wharton

Chapter One – Hitchin’ a Ride

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA: FRIDAY, AUGUST 28TH, 1970

The Society for the Complete Extermination of *Ethan Frome* met Friday evenings, in secret, in my eighteen-year-old mind. I pictured Ethan Frome and Mattie Silver on their sled, gathering momentum, zipping toward Edith Wharton’s elm.

Had Ethan been a man, he’d never crash into a tree. I saw him waving his middle finger, flipping off Miss Wharton, veering from Starkfield’s sled run to careen into a chasm longer and more cavernous than my imagination. Down I let him spiral, thousands of feet down. Ethan and Mattie screamed for one whole minute and several seconds before they met an end that seemed too perfect for two narcissists who’d forced entire high schools to read their dreary little love story. Punji sticks, sharper than those amazing Ginsu knives, waited to impale them on my mental canyon floor. There, a provident earthquake, followed by an avalanche, were set to remove all traces of *Ethan Frome* from high school.

Sorry to say, my one-man “Society” neglected to convene the last Friday of August,

1970. Evidently, Ethan Frome had launched his own preemptive strike. I'd fallen racing scaffolds, and I'd landed in the hospital. In my agony, the Society had completely slipped my mind. My more immediate goal now was escaping from the hospital. My busted arm had placed me in their orthopedic wing. There, on the third floor of Huntington Memorial, I found big Mandy Richert from my homeroom.

She was a candy-striper.

She was staring through my doorway.

She was—waving.

My heart sank. *Crap, not her! Please, God, not Mandy.* I shut my eyes. I barely knew her, but I didn't want to hurt her. I scanned my *Reader's Digest*, trying to block out Lawrence Welk tunes droning from hidden speakers with wires I couldn't find to snip. I willed my plaster cast to hurry and harden around my arm so I could split.

"Allen Martin!" She burst in through my doorway, hand creeping toward a face round and puffy as a catcher's mitt. "What happened to your arm?"

"I broke it."

"Poor guy." She sounded almost sympathetic. "How?"

I mustered my kindest leave-me-alone voice. "I fell." I was sitting in my hospital gown. Too short, even for me, it let their antiseptic butcher paper irritate my butt. *Hmmm.* How to make Mandy go away...?

I'd start by being friendly. This wasn't her fault. Sarcasm usually got me into trouble.

"Howja fall?" Mandy asked.

"We were racing scaffolds."

"What?"

“On the track. At La Cañada High.”

“Scaffolds?”

“Those things we stand on to paint the high school walls and windows. If you unlock those little wheels at the bottom you get a chariot. Two stories high. Think *Ben Hur*, except on stilts.”

Mandy paused. “You were racing? You and who?”

“Don’t ask.”

We raced Fridays after work. Four painters per scaffold served as “horses.” Each scaffold became a “chariot” pulled in a race around the track. Being small, I was a jockey. I should have known this was unsafe when my coworker, the Jabberwocky, drove the other scaffold. But painting schools got boring. A mundane summer job mixed with turpentine and thinners had warped my juvenile mind. I liked to dream up entertainments between brain-deaths from paint fumes, starting with kumquat wars. Kumquat wars had lasted through July, when all the kumquat trees on campus had been stripped bare.

Next, I’d invented *Tape-O*, foot hockey with a masking tape roll. Tile walls surrounded the showers in our high school locker room. Openings on each side provided goals to be defended. We scored a point for kicking the tape roll past a goalie in the gym showers. Fat cumulus clouds, steaming through our showers, made it hard to see the tape roll when it skidded past our sneakers across bath tiles like those plastic pucks in air hockey.

It was good fun—until “Momma,” the high school principal, busted us, outlawing the emerging sport of Tape-O on the spot. The scaffold races had started after Momma’d changed the shower locks. I dared not mess with “Momma.” She could seriously fire me, and I’d never save up for college with no job.

Mandy stared at me, tapping her huge foot on the Linoleum. “Well anyways, it’s neat to see you at my hospital.”

“Sure,” I said.

Mandy didn’t own the hospital, but she sure seemed glad to see me. If a girl was jazzed to see me, why *her*?

She paced the room, Saint-Bernard large. Her candy-striper dress stretched in too many wrong places. Huge white crepe-soled shoes squeaked as she walked on checkered floor tiles. She’d been humongous since junior high, five-foot-eight in seventh grade and called ‘Girlzilla’ by laughing boys who these days never called her, period. Boys in German class were so mean they were calling her “*Die Hindenburg*”.

Although Mandy hadn’t grown, she claimed an inch or two on me.

“Howja get here?”

“The Jabberwocky drove me in his Plymouth.”

“He couldn’t stay?”

“He was pissed. My blood messed up his seat covers.”

“They’re just Naugahyde. And over a sixty-three Plymouth Valiant? Puh-leaze!” She plunged her fists into her candy-striper skirt pockets. “I mean, it isn’t like the Jabberwocky can’t sponge a vinyl seat cover. Here’s a tip. Don’t play Scrabble with the Jabberwocky. Ever!”

Mandy cocked her head. “Howja think he got his name?”

“I dunno.” I shifted on the examining table paper, hoping her question ended her inquisition.

It didn’t.

“He cheats at Scrabble. I’ll bet he pushed you off that scaffold, Allen, didn’t he?”

I closed my eyes. The plaster cast was getting hot. My right arm throbbed. I didn't care about the Wocky, cared less about his nickname, and desperately wanted to get out of here. I spun my Class of '71 ring inside a tray beside my bed. Left-handed, this took some getting used to.

"When he tried to tell us 'slithy' was a real English word. Leta Hertz and I named him 'Jabberwocky' at Palm Crest Elementary."

My ears perked. "Lovely Leta?"

"Stop it. She's my friend, Allen."

Of course. Leta Hertz could be anybody's friend. She was a "piece," a knockout, the star of every boy's wet dreams. But if Leta was a Corvette, Mandy Richert was a Buick; dependable, old-fashioned, extra-wide.

"Slithy's not a word?"

Mandy glared through sad brown eyes. "No." She shook her head. "Except in Lewis Carroll's poem."

"Shucks." I scratched my neck. "Say, how 'bout 'brillig'?"

"Quit it!" said Mandy. "Please, don't make me sound like I'm your mother."

"My mother never speaks to me."

"I'm sorry," Mandy said. "I was supposed to cheer you up. Can't a candy-striper do that?"

I flashed a grin I might have flashed were I auditioning for the Brady Bunch.

Mandy grimaced back. "You were serious?"

"'Bout what?"

"Your mother."

I shivered. Why had I brought up my mother? I stared in Mandy's eyes. *Could I trust her?* I'd been burned by other girls. Like Heather Fairchild, my "girlfriend,"—before she'd gotten the first boob job in La Cañada High School history and dumped me. Seemed her uncle was this cutting-edge plastic surgeon. Before I knew it, Heather'd anointed herself Radio Free La Cañada. Every confidence I'd shared she'd propagated at warp-speed throughout our high school. I'd vowed never to trust a girl again.

"Let's talk about the scaffold." I worked Mandy's sympathies. She nodded when I explained how the Wocky had pushed my scaffold when we'd rounded the north goal post, and then the right rear leg had buckled.

"Glad you bled all over the Jabberwocky's Plymouth. Good job, Allen."

"Thanks." I nodded, oddly grateful.

I hadn't planned to chat up Mandy. But I was willing to play along, hoping she'd drop a couple clues on how to break out of this hospital without my having to call my mother. Half the times I called my mother, she never bothered showing up.

"Hey. You're frowning. I'm s'posed to make you cheery. Don't be a sourpuss."

I scowled. I *liked* being a sourpuss.

"And why race scaffolds? I'd figured you'd be running," Mandy said. "Don't you run cross country?"

I was flabbergasted she'd noticed. La Cañada High School offered two sports in the fall. For athletes, there was football. And then, for fat jocks, there was—football. According to the football coach, cross country was for weenies.

"You like to race, Allen?"

"No."

“Then, why do you bother?” Mandy asked.

I shifted my weight. My ribs felt tender. I racked my brain for clever comebacks, staring at her, the way I’d learned in fifth-grade staring contests, where the kid who blinks first loses their Hostess Twinkie.

I couldn’t beat her. Clearly, Mandy was a staring-contest black belt. I blinked and swallowed hard. “You wanna know?”

“You think I’d ask if I didn’t care?”

“When you run—” I checked her eyes again. “When you run, it’s like you vanish.”

“Vanish?”

“You know—when life gets weird, I run. And then I’m going at a different speed from all of La Cañada. One minute, people see me; the next moment I’m gone. Better than smoking marijuana. Cheaper too.”

The dimple on her left cheek was wider than the other. “You get tired, Allen?” she asked.

“Runners get used to feeling pain.”

“You sure?” Mandy leaned forward.

“Scout’s honor.”

“I never figured,” Mandy said. “Is there someplace you run to—while you’re running away from everybody?” She straddled a vinyl chair, and foam puffed out between its cushion seams.

“Flint Peak.” Instantly, I wished I hadn’t told her.

“Where’s that?” Clearly, she didn’t share my apprehensions.

“It’s like—this mountain.”

“Well, duh.”

“Where Glendale and Pasadena come together. There’s this radio tower there. It’s got these big red blinking lights. And giant rattlesnakes sometimes.”

“Can you show me?”

“The rattlesnakes? Not now.”

“Why? Are they sleeping?”

I gave her a look. “I’m in the hospital, Mandy.”

She plunged her fists into her side. “Suppose I spring you?”

“Tonight?” I pondered Mandy’s latest offer. “You can do that?”

“Not really. But I—get off at six.”

“You’re not supposed to.”

“Ya gonna tell?”

I shook my head, astonished she’d take the risk for *me*.”

“Six o’clock.” she said.

I slowly nodded back. Ethan Frome would have to croak some other day.

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Chapter Two – The Long and Winding Road

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA: FRIDAY, AUGUST 28TH, 1970

From Huntington Memorial, we cruised California Boulevard to the stoplight at Orange Grove, where the Rose Parade runs on New Year's. We sped north on Orange Grove Boulevard toward the Pasadena Art Museum. It's that black building you see behind the Rose Parade on television. My teachers made me go inside it for this field trip junior year. This room there holds this giant herd of Degas ballerinas. Every New Year's Day, the Rose Parade hangs a right by that museum and marches east into Old Town Pasadena.

If the Rose Parade hung a left instead of a right on Colorado, they could march one-hundred yards to Suicide Bridge, which has another name, although nobody in La Cañada knows just what it is. The bridge on Colorado has been called Suicide Bridge for as long as anybody can remember.

Its construction date, 1913, is stamped into its concrete. It was once a part of old Route 66. It shows up on TV reruns; Tod and Buz in their Corvette speeding across its arches, high above the Arroyo Seco. Tonight, fluted lampposts threw silhouettes down slopes. Shadows zigged and zagged through palm trees, through laurel sumac and poison oak, past a busted power pole sticking straight up like a skewer. The canyon sent back echoes from the quail beneath the

sycamores, huddled in clumps around the boulders in the arroyo bottom.

Suicide Bridge looked like a bitchen place for Ethan Frome to die, but I was too sore at the moment to explore the possibilities. Riding home with Mandy, I had to stall to give my Mom time to get drunk and go to bed.

Plus, I was talking, a rare treat.

Mandy shook out her hair and punched her Volkswagen into third. “Can’t believe your mother doesn’t know you broke your arm yet.”

“Why tell her? Hospitals don’t care after you show ’em your insurance card. Besides, she doesn’t listen.”

“She doesn’t listen. She doesn’t talk. She a mannequin?”

I fumbled with my arm sling. “Mom’s just angry.”

“At you?” Mandy’s smile would be cute if she were thinner.

“At men in general. Mom’s reading Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*.”

“Oh.” Mandy hung a right from Colorado to Linda Vista. The gears ground. The clutch engaged. Her eggnog-colored Volkswagen lurched out into traffic. She rolled her window down, then rolled it up when the wind drowned out her voice. “What about your dad?”

“Don’t know where he is.” I shook my head.

“He’s your dad, Allen. Come on.”

“Mom doesn’t tell me.”

Mandy sighed. “Soooo—he’s not—living with you, I take it.”

“Not recently. He left a year ago before I started running.”

Mandy gave me a look. “Does your whole family run away?”

“When we’re not invisible.”

She nodded.

I was shocked she even listened. I wasn't usually so candid. My arm ached. It hurt less when I talked. She concentrated on driving, which permitted me to ramble.

I turned to Mandy, whose brown eyes held a warmth I hadn't noticed, like I could trust her. I was surprised to feel comfortable with a *girl*. I told her how we'd sneak into the weight room after paint crew, a year ago, after Snooge had ripped off the master key from John the janitor.

"Why so secret?" Mandy asked.

"Guys laugh at me."

"They do?"

"What? Do I look like some big weightlifter?"

Road noise from Linda Vista Avenue underlined her silence. Since Mandy hadn't answered, I explained how after this workout I'd jogged home after sunset, and for some reason, once I'd gotten there, our whole house had seemed chilly.

"So what happened?"

I rubbed my chin to keep my thoughts off my sore arm. I was beginning to think I liked talking to Mandy. "When I walked into the kitchen, it got chillier," I said. "Mom was staring at the counter as if her Princess phone had bitten her. She'd been crying. She held a martini glass half-full of cabernet."

A long breath. I was giving up my secrets.

"Mom glared at the telephone like she'd kill it if it moved. I poured some orange juice. Her kitchen felt as cold as her refrigerator. Mom's head swiveled like a Barbie doll's. Then she lowered her Foster Grant shades and informed me that Dad wasn't coming home."

“Allen, how awful!”

“Yup. As if she’d washed him down the sink without a care. She sipped her wine and asked. ‘Can I just be alone, Allen?’

“So I’m like, ‘You okay, Mom?’

“‘I’m fine,’ Mom rattled back in a voice that said she wasn’t. ‘It’s just....’ She grabbed her glass and left the room.”

“How sad.” Shaking her head, Mandy signaled to change lanes.

“Mom was so calm. And I’d been pumped when I had strolled into her kitchen. Now I felt more like the Michelin Man if some dude slashed his air valve.”

Mandy shifted the Beetle into third. The gearshift groaned, and the Volkswagen charged up Linda Vista. She faced me. “What’dja do?”

“Went for a walk, but started running. Hang a left at Lida.” I rubbed my arm cast near the break. “We got a half an hour. I can show you.”

#

From Linda Vista, Lida Street switch-backed east toward Glendale; two miles of non-stop up I must have run a thousand times. The slope started through a neighborhood of ivy-covered bungalows. West of Wellington Street, Lida wiggled up the San Raphael Hill slopes past a brick wall hiding acres of expensive stucco boxes. The hills upslope were bare. There’d been this fire my sophomore year. Rye grass and poison oak erupted from black ashes.

Mandy shifted into first. The Volkswagen chugged uphill. A big blue Buick Riviera roared around us. Mandy’s Beetle coughed and sputtered.

“I feel weird about this, Mandy.”

She shook her hair out.

“Because I’m riding in your car. We’re supposed to *run* up Lida.” My side coiled in sympathetic pain. “Every time I run this hill, Coach Neal’s at the summit in his minibus and t-shirt with sweat moons beneath his armpits, staring at his stopwatch, raising his sunglasses and frowning. I’ve never seen the summit without him there.”

“Why’s he make you run uphill?”

“He found ‘Lida’ my freshman year, after our La Cañada cross country team finished fourth in CIF. But we placed second in Rio Hondo League. San Marino, the State champion has won our league for years. Coach Neal keeps reminding us we’re losers.”

“He’s such a jerk.”

“He’s trying to help us. So he came up with this strategy. For home meets, we run a two-mile course above Verdugo Park. It’s called ‘The Hill.’ It’s so steep it should probably be outlawed. We run up Sunshine Drive which is like racing up a staircase. Once Sunshine tops out, this other hill, Polaris Street, is even steeper, burning your legs until, no street leads any higher.”

“Then what?” Mandy asked.

“What goes up must come down. You don’t run down Hillside Drive. More like you fall down.”

Mandy giggled.

“You’re like this out-of-control school bus rolling downhill without brakes. You put one foot before the other, and you pray you never stumble. Gravity does the rest, pulling you faster-faster-faster while you throw your legs in front of you and try to keep from falling, from crashing into asphalt, from auguring into parked Oldsmobiles. You try not to collapse on legs that wiggle like rubber bands. If you’re in shape, you sprint down Hillside Drive in total terror. If you aren’t in shape, you walk.”

Mandy seemed to catch my drift.

I explained to her Neal's strategy; how every day we'd practice Lida. San Marino's runners might defeat us on a flat course, but nobody could touch us on "The Hill."

I pointed past a yellow curve sign. "See that stop sign at the saddle, Mandy? Hang a left. Park by the cable across the fire road."

The Volkswagen rounded a bend gouged through thirty feet of granite where tree tobacco and monkey flowers squeezed up through the rock fissures. A flat spot at the saddle was surrounded by wild mustard plants. Mandy followed tire-tracks to the pad.

"This it?" Mandy scrunched her parking brake.

I popped my door, stepping into wind. "Up there." I pointed to a ridgeline stretching two miles south, following power lines that fizzed above our heads. Overhead wires shot up an escarpment on t-shaped steel trusses to a radio tower, red and white, like someone had built it out of candy canes.

"There's Flint Peak," I said. "It's like where I sort stuff out."

"Like when your dad left?"

"Yup."

"Can we go up there?"

"Tonight?"

Mandy nodded.

I wasn't sure about showing her my place. But in a town full of rich people, you needed places you could be human. Maybe Mandy needed a place too.

"We can't drive there. I mean—even if I cut the cable, there's this washout on the fire road a half a mile up. We'll have to run."

“We could walk.”

“It’s steep, Mandy.”

“I can make it.”

I eyeballed Mandy’s candy-striper shoes. “You’ll wreck your shoes, you know. It’s cold out.”

“I got gym shoes in the trunk. What do you wear when you run up there, Allen?”

“My gym shorts.”

“Can’t be that cold.” Mandy popped the Beetle hood. She had her gym shoes on before I could say no. “Let’s see those rattlesnakes.”

How could I tell her I had lied about the snakes?

#

The fire road to Flint Peak was filled with gullies. I had to watch where we stepped so Mandy didn’t twist an ankle or step on alligator lizards when they wriggled from the shade. I led Mandy to the fire gate. The padlock seemed as rusty as the cable between the posts. I stepped across the wire rope.

Mandy followed.

Although my arm throbbed, I was used to climbing hills. I charged upward in strong steps. Mandy fell behind.

“Wait for me.”

I had no choice given that Mandy had the car keys. I paced in circles by granite boulders where this storm had washed the road out. I stared at chunks of mica shimmering in sunlit gullies. Mandy huffed like a freight train. Her face was redder than a blood orange. She’d only climbed a hundred feet and bent to catch her breath.

“Sure you wanna do this?” I asked, hiding my impatience.

Mandy nodded.

What was her obsession with climbing this stupid mountain? She was gonna have a stroke. How would I call an ambulance out here with no phone booths for miles? I slowed my pace. She panted. Yet I was proud that she kept moving, as if she understood now, what it’s like to be a runner, to hear your pulse pound in your temples, to feel it throb inside your neck, to feel your legs burn, feel them tighten. “Mandy?”

A breath—a breath—a breath. “I’m okay, Allen.”

“You sure?”

She nodded. She moved slow, but she kept walking.

Her pluck impressed me. “It’s not so bad up near the ridge. It flattens out. Then it gets steep.”

“Worse than this?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But short.”

Mandy chugged and didn’t stop. Sumac and toyons yielded to greasewood and Spanish daggers. The road flattened and smelled of skunks where a fire trail slipped east toward Pasadena. The sun faded. Yucca shadows curled through weed-filled canyons. The sun blazed tomato red, and then it fell behind a ridgeline where the twilight shadows lingered.

Mandy inched up the road, tortoise slow. Veins pounded in her neck, but her breath had found a rhythm.

“Lookin’ strong there,” I said.

She grinned.

“You’re gonna make it.”

The road grew steeper. She didn't stop.

"Look! The lights are turning on," Mandy said. "Up on the tower." Three red lights crackled. The highest one was blinking.

"This the steep part?" she asked.

"Keep moving."

"I gotta stop, Allen."

"We're almost there."

Streaks of sweat ran through the dust that caked her forehead. Mandy clumbered up the road.

The fire road turned the corner, circling Flint Peak. Glendale and Scholl Canyon spread out to our right. San Gabriel and its valley rolled out to the east. Across the first ridge, Eagle Rock turned on her nightlights. Los Angeles stretched beyond, skyscrapers grasping toward stars, distant fingers of blue and orange climbing from the city. Behind Downtown, the Harbor Freeway glistened south toward harbor lights and tank ships bearing miniature white blinkers. Beyond, the silhouette of Catalina Island cast reflections on the Santa Barbara Channel.

"My God."

"Nice, huh?"

"Oh my God. I never knew." She kept climbing. "Can I see more from the top? I wanna see." Mandy acquired a second wind, scurrying up the fire road so fast *I* was panting.

"Oh my God. Omigod. Omi...."

At the peak, wind whipped through Mandy's hair. I stumbled up behind her and stretched my legs to keep them warm. She didn't shiver. She paced around the radio tower, pointing.

"There's Mount Wilson. Look! Allen, There's Griffith Park. There's LAX. I can't believe this."

She grabbed my arm cast, and my arm roared out in pain.

“Ouch!” I pulled away.

“Whoops!” She touched her lips. “Allen, I’m so sorry.”

Crickets scritch from canyons while I nibbled back my pain. “I’m okay.”

“You sure?”

Neither of us spoke. Above the distant groans of traffic came the evening scent of sagebrush. Twilight faded into darkness. Streetlamps twinkled from dark ridges. Colorado Street, Glendale Boulevard lit up in phosphorescent lines. From Hollywood, a searchlight leaped from the back of Griffith Park and sent a sword of light circling through a violet-colored sky. One by one. Ten by ten. A sea of lights filled valleys until the basin fired with bright electric glitter.

“You cold?”

She nodded.

“We should go.”

“I’m not quite ready.”

I tossed a stone. “It’s easier going down.” I helped her up. She seemed lighter than I’d expected. We walked downhill by moonlight.

I heard her breathe above the crickets, and I liked having her with me, but it felt scary to know I’d shared my secret place.

Even Heather Fairchild had never been here.

#

“So according to the quadrangle maps, that tower’s on “Flint Peak?” Mandy asked more questions going down than coming up.

I nodded. “Except nobody I know calls it Flint Peak. Just those USGS dudes somewhere

back east who draw the topo maps.”

“What do people here call it?”

“The ugly brown hill with the tower.”

Mandy was kind enough to laugh, which made me worry she might like me.

I wiped sweat from my chin. “So now you know about my hideout. I like to stand up there at night and feel the wind against my ears like I’m Zubin friggin’ Mehta, directing my neon symphony. ‘Hey you! Yeah, in Burbank. Turn those sparkly lights on.’”

“Burbank obeys you?”

“Just somethin’ I like doin’.”

“Does your symphony, like—play music?”

“I usually tell ’em to shut up. I like things quiet when I’m sortin’ out the hard stuff, like my family.”

“Or Heather?” Mandy asked.

I stiffened. “Why’d you ask?”

“She talks. It’s a small school.”

“About me?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Like, what’s she say?”

“It’s not like everyone believes her. I mean she’s been this total creep-ball since they pumped her full of silicone.”

“What’s she say?”

“Says you’re queer.”

My stomach tightened. “You mean like—gay?”

“Says you never kissed her.”

“So, I’m shy.” I gave a shrug.

Still Heather’s lies hurt like a swift kick in the nuts and made me want to crawl beneath a rock. I’d heard rumors too. How Heather Fairchild was getting it every night from Garry Jackson in the back of Garry’s Mustang up Angeles Crest Highway; how Garry was such a stud Heather always begged for more. Even if Garry didn’t like you, he never kept these things a secret.

Had it only been two weeks since Heather’d dumped me?

#

Mandy walked beside me, mesmerized by the view, and my mind fell into its well-worn rut of pining over Heather. I’d thought I’d loved her. Each night I’d nodded off with Heather’s face etched on my mind. Her chipped tooth I’d always liked, her flowing auburn hair. Then, everything had ended.

Heather traded up.

Why did women seem so sexy once they’d dumped you?

She was a transfer from Connecticut, a debutante from Darien, a year behind me at La Cañada High. Until the previous June, when I’d discovered Heather, I’d scarcely even known women existed.

Then, like Aphrodite, Heather’d tiptoed from her seashell and swapped her goddess garb for bellbottoms, a cameo choker, a Doors t-shirt. She worked Saturdays in the Montrose Theater ticket booth on Honolulu Avenue, wearing this scarf across her forehead, like a nickel-arcade gypsy. Except on Heather, scarves looked foxy, and she wasn’t reading fortunes.

I’d been jogging home from a time trial on Coach Neal’s crummy “Hill.” My chapped lips tasted salty from my sweat. I’d shaved four seconds off my time, even beating Ivan

Alphabet. By all rights, had I been capable of pride, I would be gloating. But L.A.'s smog gnawed at my lungs. A pebble was wedged in my Adidas. I had a blister.

I'd stopped by the Montrose Theater to dump the pebble and snag a Pepsi. The marquee for Saturday's matinee said *Easy Rider*.

I grinned at Heather. "One adult."

From her ticket cage, she studied me, the way a pitcher on a baseball mound scopes out a rookie batter. She was calm while I wiped sweat. I hadn't caught my breath yet, and my temples pounded.

"Do you always breathe that hard?" she asked at last.

"Sorry, I've been running. We had a time trial at Verdugo." I bounced up on my toes to look athletic.

"Don't be sorry," she said. "D'you know your shoulders are way cute?"

Not sure what to say here, I said nothing. Heather had zipped me a no-win question, a trick I'd soon learn she excelled at. If you agreed you had "cute shoulders," you were "totally stuck up," and if you disagreed....

"I paint schools."

Heather seemed impressed. "Don't you go to La Cañada?" Her tone betrayed she knew, plus it was obvious, with "L.C. SPARTANS" stenciled on my gym shorts. She gazed up at me with brown eyes peering beneath her black silk scarf.

"Yeah," I said. "You too?"

She nodded. The cameo on her choker nodded with her. "You know my brother? Jack?" She rubbed her freckled forehead. Red hair cascaded around her cheeks and feathered to her shoulders. She smiled from one side of her mouth while the other side stayed blank. "My brother

says you're bashful, but you're smart."

"So you're Jack's sister?"

She snapped her gum, exhaling a spearmint-flavored sigh, as if struggling to save this conversation. "Um, yeah!" she said. "I'm my brother's—uh—sister."

"Sorry. Stupid question. I'm Allen."

"I know," she said. The other half of Heather's mouth curled into an imp smile, almost omniscient, like Mona Lisa flirting with the boys down at the Louvre. Heather's smile made me feel like she almost read my mind, as if she actually enjoyed whatever she'd found in there to read.

"I'll need a dollar, Allen."

"Of course."

Then, I realized—*crap!*—I'd stashed my money in my gym shoes. The only cash I had on me was drooling with Adida juice. "Cute" shoulders deflated. Why didn't gym shorts come with pockets?

She smiled, as if she had a thing for *eau-de-dirty-socks* or didn't mind when it was lathered onto other people's money. My dollar squirmed as Heather watched it dry.

"Kill it, Allen. Ish! It's moving."

I stretched my hand and flattened it.

"Hey! No. Let's put your dollar on top," she whispered. "My boss licks the bills at night to wet her fingers to count the money." She giggled.

I laughed. Easier than gagging.

Heather counted out four quarters. "Buy me a tub of popcorn. Oh, and Allen..." She smiled again. "Wait five minutes. I get off then." She popped her gum and winked. "I can get

you in for free.”

“They let you do that?”

“You’ll have to sit beside me.”

Yesssss! I was amazed Heather wanted to sit by *me*. Maybe nobody had clued her in cross country was for weenies. She liked my *shoulders*. When you’re five-foot six, and all you do is run and study, you don’t turn down opportunities when they’re foxy.

#

We split a tub of buttered popcorn in the theater. While Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper were scoping out America, I scoped out Heather, hoping my jock odor, those stains beneath my armpits, and my stinky dollar bills didn’t offend her.

Somehow, Heather didn’t mind. I soon concluded she’d seen *Easy Rider* half a dozen times. I couldn’t scope out Heather because she was scoping *me*.

By Fourth of July we were an item; holding hands, picking out china patterns at Ivers’ Department Store. Heather scheduled our rendezvous on weekdays after work. We met between the Waterford crystal and the Royal Doulton china. I punched out at three from my paint job, skipping Tape-O to see Heather. It took me seventeen minutes to sprint from La Cañada High up Michigan Avenue to Foothill Boulevard to Oakwood Drive.

There, Heather waited, drumming fingers on “her” china. I clocked in at seventeen past three, “Ivers’ Standard Time,” she called it. There, squeezing my paint-stained fingers, she’d tell me her preferences in crystal, while I gazed at her luxurious frost-pink lips, hearing her talk. She talked a lot. I feared one day she might go silent; ask about *my* day.

Happily, she never asked. What could I say about my day? I painted toilet stalls. I patched concrete cracks in basements and painted them over with gray enamel. Even janitors

outranked me. But I was saving up for college. What do you talk about when paint fumes are killing off your favorite brain cells, and your job is to sand graffiti and paint partitions?

Still, each stall became a masterpiece completed in Heather's honor. After power-sanding limericks through the battleship gray topcoat, through a mustard-gas green layer to a crusty sheet of metal, I primed and rolled each surface, then brushed out roller marks with my bristle brush. I alternated strokes up-down, left-right before repeating the process for that extra coat of paprika needed to cover the battleship gray, the mustard-gas green, and the rust. With each completed stall, I imagined Heather nodding, as if I had redecorated one of seventy-three toilet stalls inside her palace. Then, I removed the masking tape beneath each painted partition, revealing an inscription:

ALLEN MARTIN + HEATHER FAIRCHILD.

To see this, you had to slide under the stall, flat on your back, usually through a puddle of someone's urine. Our names were on each stall, in three-eighths-inch capital letters outlined in bold mustard-gas green.

By July 21st, my eighteenth birthday, Heather had named our children. There'd be four of these, she said. Delilah, Dahlia, Dusty and Destiny. She lifted the bottom seam of her faded Woodstock t-shirt and tapped her belly button, with which, she assured me, she'd dial in our offspring's genders."

I bristled. "Whoa! Time out. We never talked about four girls."

"It's a woman thing." She adjusted the cameo on her choker. "I can't explain it to you darling. You could use a course on women."

“On women? You want me to take a class?”

She flashed her sideways smile. I’d be studying under Heather. Her class was titled “Woman 101.” This was my present for my birthday. She’d teach me all I’d need to know. “Everything about women—and then some,” she assured me.

It soon became apparent the “Woman 101” curriculum was focusing exclusively on Heather. If you liked women (meaning Heather) you had to like the Association. You could *not* like Jimi Hendrix or Janis Joplin. I scribbled in my three-ring binder, that Heather’s favorite ice cream flavor was Rocky Road, that Heather’s favorite actor was Robert Redford, that Heather thought the fabric pills on my t-shirts were disgusting.

I bought new t-shirts. I read fan mags on Robert Redford. I bought Association eight-tracks and memorized the lyrics until I wondered if I could mold Heather into someone who could cherish me. Each morning, before the mirror, I sang into my razor, imagining Heather Fairchild on the far side of the glass. She asked me if a time might come when I’d grow tired of her. I, of course, whispered, “Never, my love.”

One day she failed to show up for my lesson.

I was blindsided. I hadn’t seen it coming. Sometime during the summer while we’d been picking out her china patterns, she’d grown prettier. Her hair had filled out. Sun had bleached it Ann-Margret red, and when she’d come back from “vacation,” she was “stacked.”

On my lesson day, I saw her with Garry Jackson from the football team, upstairs in the cashmere section at Ivers’. Garry was buying her a sweater, “to show those tits off,” for her birthday. Besides remodeling her breasts, Snow White had dumped her dwarf—me, and had traded up for Garry, her new prince. Since preschool, I’d been a wimp. Now, Garry rubbed it in. To make things worse, Garry’s old man, who had more money than Elvis, had bought Garry a

new cherry-red 289 Mustang.

Garry was clearly signing up for “Woman 102.”

That evening, I tried to call her. Her mother told me on the phone Heather “didn’t wish to talk,” but I was “a nice boy for a Jew.” Her mother told me Heather truly hoped we’d still be “friends.”

I dropped the phone, kicking it. I’d never wanted to be a “nice boy” or a “friend.” Who’d decided I was Jewish? I *wasn’t* Jewish. I was an atheist. Still my long Italian nose left people wondering. I didn’t cry. I had to run my workout. I had to return the crystal unicorn I’d bought for Heather’s birthday. And after that, all those names on all those bathroom stalls in high school....

Crap!

They’d need a paint-over before Momma changed the locks.

#

“You’ve sure been quiet, Allen. You okay?” Mandy interrupted the private pity party I’d hosted over Heather. A moon rose over Pasadena. Mandy sounded sympathetic.

“My arm hurts,” I said, hiding my real reason.

Ahead, I saw the fire road cable with Mandy’s Volkswagen behind it.

“I like talking to you,” Mandy smiled wide. “Is that okay?”

I paused. This was a compliment. I didn’t want to hurt her. I liked talking to her too. I just didn’t want to say so. Here was my dilemma. Mandy wasn’t popular. Not that I was either, but still....

“Look, we can’t talk like this all the time. I’m sorry.” My voice trembled.

“Well, what’s your problem?” Mandy reddened. “You embarrassed to be seen with me?”

“I’m just—not ready for a girl thing.”

“You got jacked up by Heather?”

I nodded.

As though she felt my pain, Mandy’s eyes turned sympathetic, while her mind assembled thoughts in the tempest behind her pupils. “Well then—” Mandy said “—I have a duty to girls in general. Don’tcha think you should have one of us in your corner?”

Not sure where she was headed, I didn’t answer.

“Allen, we have some stuff in common. I haven’t told you about *me*.”

She was right. This whole trip up here, I’d monopolized the talking.

“I won’t tell about myself until you ask, Allen.”

I’d been a creep. I knew it. “You’re right, Mandy. I’m s-s-sss—” the word stuck inside my throat, like I was trying to remove a tennis ball wedged behind my teeth “—sss-s-sorry.”

“Really?” She seemed all happy.

It felt freeing just to say this. Perhaps that *Love Story* Erich Segal guy had gotten stuff all wrong. Heather’d had opinions. She hadn’t cared much for the “s”-word. To Heather, being *privileged* meant never having to say you’re sorry. I’m not sure Heather knew much about love, but what do I know?

But now, I *was* sorry. If you were sorry, you had to promise to do better, to try not to repeat whatever stupid thing you’d done. I *hated* making promises. Keeping them was painful. I dreaded making any promise to Mandy.

“I want you as a friend, Allen, the way we were when we first got here.”

Mandy had a point. Not many girls were such straight shooters. Maybe Annie Oakley Junior here deserved a second look.

“Okay. But just you, Mandy.” I faced the tower. “And—what we talk about up here stays on this mountain. Dig?”

She slid into her Volkswagen and revved the engine. I wasn’t sure what she’d do next. I half thought she’d cruise off and leave me standing by the fire road, but when Mandy popped the door lock open, she grinned.

“Deal,” she said. “Your secrets never leave this mountain.”

“Yours don’t either,” I said. “They never leave Flint Peak.”

Her smile widened.

Privately, I was glad we’d cleared the air as the two of us sped north toward La Cañada.

#

Chapter Three – I’ll Never Fall in Love Again

LA CAÑADA-FLINTRIDGE, CALIFORNIA: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2ND, 1970

“Run, you faggot dwarf!” Garry hollered from the bleachers. I warmed up with Ivan Alphabet around the La Cañada High track. “Don’t disappoint me, dwarf, I bet twenty bucks on you.” I was practicing with Ivan just to see if I could run with my arm wrapped in a cast up past my elbow. Garry annoyed me. This was a warm-up. If stupid Garry and Pudge McMasters were betting money on this lap, I’d make sure that Garry lost. I’d settled things with Pudge when we’d fought back in second grade. Garry had been taunting me since preschool.

Ivan glanced at me. “Ignore him. Garry drives that Mustang ragtop cuz his puffed-up head is so huge it won’t fit in a sedan.”

I smiled and kept running. Ivan and I weren’t bosom buddies, but we went back to second grade when Ivan had moved out west from Queens. Most of Ivan’s friends were Jewish, but we still shared some traditions from Paradise Canyon Elementary School that weren’t Jewish. The most sacred of these had been “The Sacrament of Wax Packs” held on the final day of school at Paradise Canyon every year.

We’d sit Indian style beneath the jungle gym, unwrapping baseball cards for hours, dividing a full carton of Topps wax packs. With mouths wadded with gum, we’d guzzle down

bottles of Bubble Up. The soda covered up the gum taste. Topps gum tasted like cardboard, assuming you could chew it to begin with. Ivan would wear his Giants t-shirt. I'd wear my Dodgers ball cap. We'd sing. "Mine eyes have seen the glory—" delighting in bad harmony "—of the burning of the school. We have tortured—" a Marichal and a McCovey flipped into Ivan's pile. "—every teacher. We have broken—" Koufax, Drysdale, Maury Wills landed in mine "—every rule." Ivan made up verses, and I sang along off key, shaded by guardian eucalyptus rows towering over our playground. We divvied up the cards. He took Giants. I took Dodgers. The rest were cut between us to be traded.

We'd done this every year on the final day of school. Seven days, each spaced exactly one school year apart, had been the happiest seven days of my pathetic prepubescence. My Dodgers' baseball card collection had been the envy of my neighborhood....

...Until just weeks ago, I'd sold them to buy Heather's crystal unicorn.

I'd watched little Vinnie Skinner strap his shoebox to the bike rack above the rear wheel of his brother Richard's Sting Ray. Vinnie had whooped and pulled a wheelie, spinning gravel across my shoes. Every Dodger that had suited up since the team had moved from Brooklyn was in that shoebox. Every Dodger from Hank Aguirre to Don Zimmer.

They'd been sorted out by seasons, secured with comfy rubber bands to their teammates and wrapped up in wax paper to keep them warm. I hadn't even said goodbye. They were seriously *gone*, sold to Vinnie Skinner for forty bucks.

I chewed my lip. This had been a heavy price to pay. I'd just watched half my childhood ride away on Vinnie's Schwinn. But Heather, I'd convinced myself, was worth it.

#

And now, not only were my baseball cards past tense, but seventy-three bathroom stalls

with our names on them required my attention. I emptied three bottles of Testor's model paint into the trash. I scoured the pigment out with turpentine, refilling each glass bottle with Dunn-Edwards enamel, paprika, same color I'd been dealing with all summer. I'd managed to lift a pint from the supply room.

At ten p.m., I parked my Yamaha 60 where nobody could find it, in the bushes in Oak Grove Park across the chain link from the high school. I grabbed my bike bag and carried it past picnic tables and fire pits. It took forever for the Michigan Avenue stoplight to turn green. At last, I could get busy with my mission.

I'd done the math. I had ten minutes per stall. The clock was ticking. There were only two nights left to get the job done. Snooge had warned me the janitors were changing locks on Friday. After that his bootleg skeleton key was worthless.

Tonight I'd have to work non-stop through five a.m. It was my only chance to finish work on schedule. I had six hours, enough time tonight for thirty-some-odd stalls. My operation was straightforward. I had to sneak through every door and slide beneath each stall on my paprika-spotted beach towel. Thirty strokes with coarse sandpaper, twenty with the fine. I'd clocked it out. It took me nine minutes and 30 seconds per stall.

With the precision of James Bond, I prepped each toilet partition. I opened the glass jar from my pocket. I pulled my half-inch bristle brush from my bike bag for what usually took two coats. Because I'd mixed the paint with spackle, it went on extra-thick in just one coat.

By five a.m., I'd finished bathroom stall number 30. The spackle had worked better than I'd expected. You'd never see the words I'd painted over. I was cruising. To stay on schedule, I worked beyond my time limit.

Men's bathrooms were easy. Women's bathrooms scared me spitless. I had these

nightmares of a teacher walking in on me. There were more stalls and fewer urinals—*no* urinals in fact. Women's bathrooms took forever. I checked my watch. Five-thirty-five. Two more stalls remained for me to finish 40 stalls. Daylight crept around the doorframe. I had to hurry. After sunrise, God knows what sweet thing might walk in on me and call the cops.

Now, every noise, every squeak curled up my spine—a teacher, some girl, I didn't care.—I was too terrified. I worried about some female slamming open the steel door, and I'd be busted—squished like some masher against the corner of her bathroom, while she let out a chilling scream that Edvard Munch could never replicate. Or I'd be sitting with my paintbrush and my feet above the toilet so nobody could see my hairy legs.

Then—footsteps. *No way!* This couldn't really happen! At six a.m., what were women doing walking around my high school? There was one out in the hallway. With that pissed-off high-heel rhythm, a block away. I knew exactly who it was.

Momma!

A key turned in the lock. I jumped and grabbed my spattered towel. Balancing on the toilet, I pretended not to breathe. I saw sandpaper on the floor. I didn't dare retrieve it.

Shit!

I didn't say this, but I thought it extra loud. So loud it surprised me Momma didn't hear me think. Crouched on the toilet seat, I squeezed my spattered towel against my armpit, teddy-bear tight, holding my breath, praying Momma wouldn't see me or, worse yet, perhaps decide to take a dump inside my stall.

Her footsteps filled the ladies' room. She bent down and grabbed the sandpaper, crumpling it in her fist. She lit a cigarette.

Silence.

For as long as it took Momma to suck down one Virginia Slim, my too-brief life unreeled in my mind. I already saw the headlines: LA CAÑADA BOY CAUGHT PEEPING. I tried planning my escape. But with more stuff than I had hands for, a towel, a paintbrush, paint, I couldn't even run away. The paint jar and the sandpaper on the floor would tell the tale. I was *so* busted. Even Momma would know exactly who I was.

She hacked her smoker's cough. I managed not to move.

Then Momma ran the sink forever. I heard this whoopee-cushion sound. Momma was *farting*—in slow motion—like this went on for thirty seconds. It filled the bathroom up with rotten-egg scents worse than any cesspool. Any moment I was terrified my eyeballs would start melting. I held my nose to keep from gagging, terrified I'd feel my brains, or what was left of them come melting through my nostrils.

She turned the faucet off. The plumbing thumped.

Momma flipped the lights.

Slam! The door closed.

Whew!

I heard her walk away.

A whiff of putrid air refilled my lungs with toxic gas, reinflating me like a beach ball but with pure hydrogen sulfide.

I coughed it back. I gasped and somehow managed to find air.

I waited five long minutes as Momma's clicking heels faded, willing them to carry her to someplace far away. I left the lights off just in case, not daring to turn them on. I waited ten more minutes, until my heart returned to duty. Then, I finished off the toilet stalls by Braille in the dark, until the dawn came glaring in beneath the doorsill.

More than half the stalls were finished.

So far—so good.

#

The next night, I took precautions. Supply shopping was in order. I found these go-go boots, just like Mrs. Dunlap's, at the Bargain Box, a thrift shop. I even bought a checkered maxi-skirt to drape around them. As I touched up every stall, I dropped the boots in front of the toilet. I slid the dead bolt on the stall and dropped the skirt around the boots. You couldn't be too careful. By four a.m., the stalls were finished, except those in the gym where Momma'd already changed the locks.

I'd get these later. They were the only eight stalls left.

Right now, I had a score to settle with Momma.

I left the go-go boots with the maxi-skirt in the faculty lounge bathroom. It seemed a bitchen place to store them until I needed them. When I slid the dead bolt on the stall shut and slid under the partition, it looked just like Mrs. Dunlap had camped out on the toilet.

I wondered who'd have the gall to interrupt her.

#

Ivan Alphabet's real name was Ivan Alexandrowycz. Everyone called him Alphabet for short. The welcome mat on Ivan's doorstep was eighty inches wide. Ivan's mom had ordered it from a catalog house in Cleveland. The doormat didn't fit on the Alexandrowycz family doorstep. The "wycz" flopped off the concrete and got lost beneath her fuchsias. Still, it offered lots of real estate if you had to wipe your shoes, even if reading the "wycz" was problematic.

Besides the trading of baseball cards, Ivan was responsible for a custom that began in our senior year. Before races, some guy always came to take the runners' names. It helped them

figure out who'd won (while all the winners were off puking.) Ivan called these people "clipboard weenies."

He hated them, worse than I did. You'd be waiting for your race. Nerves were firing in your belly, and then some freshman showed up. He usually had a crew-cut. He *always* had a clipboard, and it took this guy forever to write our names down.

"Your name?"

"Ivan Alexandrowycz."

Things went downhill after that. We were pumped full of adrenaline, each wound up tighter than a Superball. Then some guy wasted ten minutes trying to write down Ivan's name. Ivan swore clipboard weenies had cost him six or seven races. While some guy scribbled on his clipboard, Ivan freaked. He paced. He gyrated. He clawed dirt to burn adrenaline. Soon, Ivan crossed over from psyching up to psyching *out*. By the time the starting pistol fired, Ivan had lost his edge.

At the Crescenta Valley meet, Ivan took action.

"Your name?"

"Alphabet. A-L-P-H-A-B-E-T." Ivan glared like he might eat the freshman's clipboard.

"That's a reaaally funny name." The freshman giggled.

"Deal with it." Ivan scowled. "I have a race to win."

Snoogey gave him "S-N-O-O-G-E."

Rusty Howard gave him "B-O-O-B-O-O."

The Jabberwocky signed up as "the Jabberwocky."

I was the only dude who gave my real name.

The clipboard weenie scrawled our names down. And then the gun went off. The time

had come for us to do our job.

Which was to *win*. Once Ivan had given his name as Ivan Alphabet, Ivan ran the best race of his life. He came in third, not fourth, the way he did when he psyched out. As usual, Jabberwocky won. Booboo came in second. Snooge fought it out with me and kicked for fourth.

I'd never had a kick. Everybody knew this. I was the official Indy pace boy. No matter how hard I ran, I hit a wall. Teammates hung on me for tempo, then beat me in the sprint while my sides cramped in giant knots. I'd cross the mile in exactly four minutes fifty seconds—every race. If I didn't, it was time to fix your stopwatch. It was a good time, enough to leave Crescenta Valley or any other team in the dust—any team but San Marino, the C.I.F. champions. Except all my teammates knew, if they let me set the pace, they could beat me in the last 400 yards.

I crossed the mile and a half at seven minutes fifteen seconds, exactly the same pace I'd run the mile at. Then, the pack scattered. The Jabberwocky tore ahead. Like the world's fastest toothpick, he dashed the last eight-eighty, throwing elbows, spit and cusswords at anything in his way until he'd guaranteed nobody beat the Wocky.

Booboo finished next. Booboo ran like a gazelle. He didn't even look like he was trying when he beat you.

Ivan Alphabet always looked as if he'd lost his large intestine. He grabbed onto his jersey as if his sides were falling out, and his chin hung as though it had dislocated.

I never saw Snooge until the last 400 yards, when he shot past me. I finished right behind him at nine minutes 40 seconds. I'd be staring at Snooge's jersey. I always stared at Snooge's jersey. I always finished at precisely the same pace I'd run the mile. I grabbed my "stick" with that disgusting "5" in Marks-a-Lot at one end. After you finished, your "stick" helped scorekeepers write down where you placed. Mine proved I'd finished *fifth*. I finished *fifth* in

every race. You'd think after a while they'd remember.

It wasn't really a stick. It was a tongue depressor. Still, they should have written my name on it, since I got it every week. I walked across the infield, folded over like an envelope. My legs tried to buckle as I tottered toward the bathrooms or the dumpsters or the bushes or whatever I found first, so Coach Neal couldn't see where I threw up.

While I was puking, the other team trickled past the finish line. I never saw this. It took forever for the pain to leave my side, until my pulse no longer pounded like two jackhammers in my skull, until I felt like I could stand up and not blow over if someone sneezed, until the world blurred back into focus, and my throat burned.

Somebody with a microphone called out the winners as usual. Except our names today were seriously better.

"In first place—from La Cañada—Jabberwocky."

I raised my chin, walking in a circle. I was dizzy. At least my legs moved.

"In second—from La Cañada—Booboo."

"Woo-hooo Booboo." I recognized the Jabberwocky's voice somewhere in-between the throbs that flooded my temples.

"In third place—Alphabet—from La Cañada."

I tried to laugh, except I hadn't caught my breath yet. Some reporter from the *Valley Sun* was writing down the names.

"In fourth—from La Cañada—Snooge."

"Hey Snoogey!" Ivan hooted.

"And in fifth—from La Cañada—*Alien Martian*."

Snickering. Laughter. "Yuk-yuk. Haw-haw." The *La Cañada Valley Sun*'s ace reporter

wrote me down as “Martian.” *Crap!* I dropped my head. I wanted to just vanish. That stupid clipboard weenie had given me a nickname.

Coach Neal rubbed it in. “Martian,” he laughed out loud. “Alien Martian. The name fits you real good.” He spat a loogie. “You’re so damn alienated you might as well go *live* on Mars, you freak. Every race, you start out well, and then you choke. Get some courage. Get some *cojones*. Get some *balls*,” Neal said. “Maybe then, someone’ll want you as a friend.”

I stared down at the dirt and walked alone toward the team bus, wondering why the hell I put up with this torture. Coach didn’t hate me. It was Neal’s way of training us to win. Part of being on the team was putting up with the abuse. Every coach at La Cañada was some ex-military hard-ass on a mission to shame us into winning. I didn’t have the balls to tell Neal I didn’t run to win, but ran to vanish the way I longed to vanish now.

#

The big story when high school opened was Jimi Hendrix. He’d suffocated in his vomit on September the 18th. In my running shorts, outside the teacher’s lot, I overheard my English teacher, Mrs. Zinicola, express surprise they’d lowered the flag.

“For some dead rock star?” Mrs. Z asked.

“Wasn’t a rocker,” Momma said and looked away.

Mrs. Z nibbled her ring finger and pinky.

“Some kid died in Vietnam.” Momma smoothed her tailored suit. “The *Valley Sun* says he was a student here at La Cañada High.”

“What was his name?”

Momma shrugged. “Mike somebody,” she said.

“How did he die?”

“I don’t remember. Somebody shot him I suppose.”

“How very sad,” said Mrs. Z.

“You get used to it,” said Momma. She swiveled on her shiny black high heels and walked away.

I felt a shiver, and my gut knotted. *Poor guy was somebody I knew.* His name was Michael Patrick Arthur. Guy lifted barbells with the older kids two houses north of mine. Mike used to drive his blue Camaro every morning up Oak Grove Drive. He’d park his Chevy in the Senior Lot behind the chain-link backstop. Penny Clark would be there waiting with her Beatle boots and books, smoking a cigarette. All of us had figured they’d get married. Then Penny ditched Mike for some rich dude with a law degree from Princeton and a medical deferment. Mike bulked up, lifting more weights. Someone told me he could bench three-hundred pounds for twenty reps.

Mike signed up with the Marines and said he wasn’t coming back. We never heard from Mike again. None of us thought he really meant it. But now the flag was flying half-staff “for Jimi Hendrix” we kept hearing. Seemed like nobody remembered Mike at all.

Coach Neal, who’d never heard of Jimi Hendrix *or* Mike Arthur, looked at my arm cast as he strolled across the track. He scratched his head. Then he spat beside his Pumas and dug his spikes into the cinders. Seven a.m. My balls were freezing. The sun was barely waking up.

“You can still run, right, Martian? Even with your arm busted like that?”

I nodded, and I shivered.

“Good.”

End of conversation. Coach Neal blew his whistle. We lined up barefoot on the grass inside the oval. There’d be an hour of 440’s before first period started. For 60 minutes, we’d run

around in circles.

I stood behind the Jabberwocky outside the fifty-yard line. The whistle blew. We took off. My arm felt good, even though the cast was heavy. I dropped my wrists. Best to run your quarter-miles staying loose. My head circled in an easy rhythmic motion. My running music, “*Born to be Wild*,” rumbled through my mind. My breathing kept the rhythm. I’d be fine.

Running numbed my broken arm. I finished my first quarter in official pace-boy time. Seventy-two seconds—and a half. There’d be twenty-nine more quarters, but I’d checked into my groove, grateful my injury from the scaffold wouldn’t sideline me.

The freshman-sophomores ran next. While the Varsity caught their wind, the Jabberwocky paced in little circles. The Wocky liked to do things when he wasn’t running laps. Usually he brought a javelin or discus; he liked to throw things. This particular morning the Wocky’d brought a football.

He’d brought three of them, in fact, propped each up on a kicking tee on the thirty-yard line and drilled one through the goal posts. The football sailed between the uprights like he’d shot it from a rifle.

“Whoa-hoa, great punt Wock!” Our jaws dropped in admiration. The ball bounced against the cinders and it caromed off the chain-link. It wobbled to the track curb.

The Jabberwocky grinned and shook his hair across his shoulders.

Coach Harron, the football coach sitting in the bleachers, pretended not to notice the Wocky’s “field goal.” The Jabberwocky moved his tee a few yards toward the center of the field and kicked the second football straight between the posts. He raised his arms straight-up above his head.

“Good punt,” we cheered again.

The Wocky grinned. His long locks flowed in the breeze like in those posters for the *Hair* musical. He danced a shuffle and drilled the final football between the posts from 40 yards.

Strutting to the track, he refilled his arms with footballs.

I caught my breath. I liked this little drama.

It was no secret. Varsity Football lacked a punter. The first-stringer had blown his knee out. The second-stringer sucked. Even the first-stringer on his best day had never nailed one from the 40. But Coach Harron had a policy. If you wanted to play football, you got a U.S. Army Airborne Ranger regulation buzz-cut. A flag tattoo was good for extra credit.

With the Wocky kicking field goals, Harron faced a new dilemma. Either he had to bend his rules, or he'd lose games thanks to "The Policy." Now, everybody saw, if not for Harron's stupid rule, their unproductive football team might win.

Except, Coach Harron never bent rules. Harron might have been a redneck, only God forgot to give the man a neck. "You disgrace the game of football," Harron shouted from the bleachers.

The Wocky slouched past Harron and flipped him off.

"That your IQ there?" Harron called.

The Wocky kept on walking. We lined up on the 50. Coach Neal blew his whistle, and we ran another lap.

I wondered how long this adventure might continue. We could feel the tension build between the Jabberwocky and Harron. They were like two opposing charges, one's hair Jim Morrison long, the other's Frankenstein short. The Wocky drilled another football between the goalposts from the 40.

Harron rose. He stomped down from the bleachers. His footsteps pounded on the track.

He was evidently ticked. He stormed across the cinders, veins popping from his temples. You could see his flat-top wiggle. His “Airborne” tattoos throbbed against his forearms.

A whistle. I had to run. I hated missing this argument. Harron was only getting started when we finished our quarter mile. The Wocky launched another football. He strolled downfield to retrieve it, twirling his new football on his finger.

Harron was shouting at Coach Neal. “Get your faggot off my field.” Harron spat when he got mad. You needed a face shield just to talk with him, especially with those f’s. Coach Neal tried to calm him. “Not so loud, Richard. They hear you.”

Neal blew a whistle. The varsity ran.

It was hard to run a quarter when you were laughing. Rounding the south goalpost, our eyes were glued on Harron. Stomping on the cinders, he was screaming.

“Get him off my field.”

“It’s not your field, it’s my track.”

“Get him off. It’s a field. It’s full of grass.”

The Jabberwocky inhaled like he was sucking on a joint.

Coach Neal blew his whistle. The freshman-sophomores ran.

Harron whispered, gyrating like a traffic cop on speed.

“What’s he talkin’ about?” Ivan’s voice.

“Discipline,” said the Jabberwocky. “Biggest word in Dick Harron’s vocabulary.”

On queue, Harron roared the word “DISCIPLINE,” as if invoking some hard-ass god.

“Your boys need discipline—and haircuts.” Harron’s words echoed from the walls behind the bleachers. “Discipline—discipline—haircuts.”

“Bull!” Neal’s voice dropped to a whisper. But we heard it all the way across the field.

“They win. That’s all I care about. This isn’t the Army, Richard. It’s a high school.”

Little puffs of dirt rose where Harron stormed from the track.

Neal blew his whistle. The varsity sprinted a 440. Clearly, all the dust had yet to settle.

#

Before third period, the football players huddled around the snack bar on the east side of the student cafeteria. They cut in line, trading wisecracks while we waited to buy sodas. I laid low. I wasn’t ready to trade insults with the jocks. Not when the Jabberwocky had rattled their cage this morning.

I was trapped inside the snack line between bubble-gum-pocked handrails. I was afraid of what I’d stick to if I moved. The kid in front of me had farted. Someone punched my back. Then—I saw Garry.

I stood rigid. I breathed shallow.

He was holding Heather’s hand. Heather hand-fed Garry from her little bag of Fritos, like she was nurturing a duckling. And Garry’s shirt had little fabric pills. The ones on *my* shirts had disgusted her. How come with Garry, Heather didn’t care?

My heart sank. I felt it crawl behind my stomach. I didn’t need this. Not on my first day of senior year. I was finally getting used to being dumped by Heather, when Garry came along and rubbed things in.

Garry grinned. Life must be sweet when you can walk around your high school with your mouth open, while pretty girls walk up and feed you from their snack bags. He looked so smug, like he *deserved* this. I glared at Garry, and my stomach twisted. Didn’t Heather know what she was doing?

For a second, I met her eyes, the ones I’d stared at for half my summer when she’d liked

me; back when I'd thought there was a soul behind those eyes. For one summer, she'd made me feel like I wasn't such a loser. I missed her. I wanted to know *that* Heather still existed; the good Heather, the one before the boob job.

Then she caught me. Her jaw fell, like she knew what I was seeing. Sheer terror—as though she'd landed on a tightrope without nets. She could *fall* in La Cañada. There was a caste system. We were the “La Cañada *Spartans*,” after all. And our caste system had been imported intact from ancient Sparta with all three castes: hoplites, freemen, and helots.

For a transfer from Connecticut, Heather had figured this out quickly, doing an end run around the entire high school food chain. But what went up came down. A food chain was still a chain, and she was chained to Garry Jackson. There was no way out—but down.

Our cruel system enforced the desired order. The caste system in La Cañada could put a Brahmin prince to shame. On the top rung, the hoplites were robed in big gray “Spartan Men’s Council” windbreakers. Their elite club of well-heeled seniors all played first-string varsity football. God had elected them to serve as “Spartan Men” at La Cañada, while other males were predestined to serve as Spartan something-elses. They were a service club, they claimed, tasked with protecting the senior lot from lower life forms who dared to park a car in their domain. They didn't like us. Hoplites had ways of getting even. But they were kind enough to share their Spartan manhood with their women.

The hoplites, perched atop the La Cañada Spartan food chain, considered themselves cousins of the Trojans of USC. Our “LC” cheers were SC ripoffs. Our fight song matched SC's; even the lyrics went “Fight on for old LC.” Our high school looked like USC, (if it were overrun by midgets) except SC boasted blacks. Of course, our students were all white.

Beneath the hoplites, the marching band, the drill team, and JV football, were, on

occasion, allowed to share the field with their betters. Freeman drove old Datsuns, not the Mustangs or Corvettes that made you eligible to park your car in the Senior area. They wore letter jackets, not lordly gray, but SC cardinal red and gold. Freeman tended to be careful not to break the hoplites' rules. They played the "La Cañada Fight Song" as if it were written for La Cañada and didn't question being a scaled-down "University of Spoiled Children."

Below the freemen, the rest of us had jobs. It didn't leave much time for after-school activities. Painting toilet stalls didn't carry the same cachet in La Cañada as playing safety on special teams or playing oboe in the band. Only losers and plebeians admitted to having jobs. We were the helots, the bottom caste who needed jobs to pay for college, given that we didn't have rich parents. Hoplites needed helots to flip their burgers and bake their pizzas. Hoplites needed someone to look down on.

Yet, beneath we low plebeians, remained another life form, "untouchables," girls cast off by aristocratic boyfriends. Such girls gave the helots someone even *we* could sneer at. I'd sanded their names and phone numbers off so many bathroom walls I was sure all La Cañada knew their phone numbers by heart. You didn't date them. Polite people never spoke with them in public. They were tarnished, no longer virgins. Rumors said they had diseases from the pick-up boys they met down near Olympic Auditorium.

I raised my gaze toward Heather. She shivered as though she knew which way was down. Garry'd warned her. I sensed the nerves behind her shudder. For the moment, she rode high with Garry Jackson in his Mustang, *but only for as long as she pleased Garry.*

Her eyes narrowed like closing curtains. Her irises choked off remnants of the Heather I remembered. Pupils shrank to tiny dots almost too small to let in light. She smiled, then walked away on Garry's arm.

#

As luck would have it, Mr. Harron taught my third period class on Government, where Garry and Heather had been assigned to sit together. Checking the seating chart, I hated it. I'd been assigned to sit behind them. I sighed. This was *not* a good arrangement.

Mr. Harron hadn't asked for my opinion.

From the doorway, I scanned the room. This might be a long semester. The world globe on Mr. Harron's desk looked old enough to vote. He evidently didn't know that Abyssinia had changed its name, and Tanganyika and French West Africa were long gone by 1970. But it was tough getting excited about American democracy taught by some Nazi who'd just assigned me to sit behind my ex and Garry.

Garry Jackson shifted his fingers from Heather's bracelet to her knee.

Heather preened a fuzz ball from her cardigan.

It was cashmere. I'd watched Garry buy that stupid scarlet sweater up on Ivers' second floor the very day Heather had dumped me. She'd pretended not to see me. I'd pretended not to look. Garry never wasted time pretending.

It was obvious what Garry saw. Heather never seemed to mind. Each sweater she'd tried on at Ivers' had seemed tighter than the previous. At last, it had looked like she'd shrink-wrapped her bogus boobs inside a sweater so tight her nipples might have punched right through the wool.

Garry'd bought it for her. It matched her lipstick and his Mustang. Now, she wore it just for him. She wore it 'just-for-him' a lot. Below her cameo choker, she unbuttoned the top three buttons. Garry licked his lips.

Heather straightened her denim skirt.

You saw from Garry's pants how much he loved it. When he thought Heather wasn't watching, he scratched his not-so-little friend until she grabbed his roving fingers and returned them to her knee. Garry snickered at her glare. But Heather needed Garry's status. He was a senior, varsity football. Being a junior, she couldn't dump him or trade up for someone better.

Which made me sick. I'd treated Heather with respect. I'd tried to make her happy. Hadn't I adored her? Now, she was *verboden*. It made her foxier than ever. I couldn't stand it. She was eroding any confidence I had left. She even showed up to hate me in my fantasies.

She was whispering things about me in front of Garry as I stood there. "Allen never wins a race. Like, he always finishes fifth. I mean *always*. He's such a wuss."

That was so unfair even I knew it. I could have lied about my finish. Everybody else did. It wasn't like people went to cross country meets to check if you were lying. Besides, she'd never seen me race. I'd had to tell her how I'd finished. Now, she used my honesty against me.

Garry snickered, as if he could match my time.

Had life been fair, I imagined we could race for Heather's hand. Garry would never make it up the Hill. There was just too much of Garry to haul up Sunshine Drive. And coming back down Hillside—well, he'd just have to walk. Lucky for Garry he didn't need to win at all since he played football.

Heather giggled. "He has a girlfriend," she whispered to Garry.

"Thought you said he was a faggot."

"He is. But—Allen has this friend. You know that lez job in your French class who wants to be a nun?"

"Mandy Richert?"

My stomach twisted up in little knots.

“*Die Hindenburg?*” Heather smiled a very vicious grin. “I saw him riding in her Volkswagen,” she whispered.

“Noooo! Allen and Mandy? What a freak show!”

Coach Harron cleared his throat. I saw the clock. He scowled at *me*. I hurried toward my seat. Garry and Heather moved their desks. I tried to walk between them. Garry took Heather’s hand. She stuck her chest out. Even the chip on Heather’s tooth had that authoritative jut that somehow made it clear I was a loser.

“Go around, not between us,” Garry said.

Heather smiled too, at exactly the same angle.

“Dickwad,” Garry said.

“Dickwad,” Heather whispered, lowering her gaze.

I stepped back. I needed to sit down. My arm throbbed beneath my books. I breathed in deep and walked around.

The bell rang.

A foot flew out from Garry, and I tripped. Textbooks flew out from my arms. I landed on my cast. I heard a crack. And then my arm ached. It hadn’t hurt that much the first time.

“Problems, Mister Dickwad?” It was Harron.

Students snickered. Heather laughed although she didn’t move her chin.

“No sir.” I lied. My arm was throbbing like a gong.

“Sit down.”

I rubbed my arm.

“I said sit down.”

“I think my arm....”

“Gee coach, my arm hurts too. Can I go see the nurse?” It was Garry.

The class burst into laughter.

Harron massaged his chin, staring at me.

“Some day—Dickwad.” Egg pieces strafed from Harron’s teeth. “That your *real* name?”

“It’s Martian, sir.” Garry’s voice. “Some kinda Jew name.”

“Some day—Martian,” Harron paced. He turned and glared at me, eyes shooting darts.

“You know your type won’t last five minutes in Vietnam,” Harron said. “Some day, when you’re drafted, your DI’ll take one look at you—” Harron took a breath and flexed his Army Airborne forearms “—he’ll take one glance at *you*, Martian, and he’ll puke.”

Chalk squeaked across the blackboard while Harron wrote the names of all the secretaries in Richard Nixon’s cabinet. The class was mortuary quiet except for Garry and Heather’s snickers.

I found my seat. Lucky for Harron I didn’t own a gun, or I’d be waiting for the chance to pull the trigger.

#

After a lecture that lasted longer than my entire summer vacation, I shot from Harron’s classroom like a bullet when the bell rang. My arm was throbbing. Garry and Heather were whispering behind me. Heather was holding Garry’s hand. I could *sense* it, just as sure as every hair behind my neck rose to attention and zeroed in on Heather’s thoughts. Heather was giggling. I tried to hear what she was saying, but her voice dropped, and I heard nothing.

My arm pounded like a sledgehammer. I shouldn’t have run before first period. My body needed rest, needed its energy to heal. I’d been sapped, even before Coach Harron had launched his tirade. I wanted to paint a metal sign, nail the damn thing to my forehead. “MY NAME IS

ALLEN, DON'T CALL ME MARTIAN, FAGGOT, ALIEN, OR MISTER DICKWAD." But that would amuse the very people I didn't feel like entertaining, and I was beginning to wonder who I was, myself.

Just then, Mandy whirled around the corner. She lugged a locker-full of books under her arms. She smiled. Her eyes brightened like a puppy seeing its friend, as if she hadn't gotten the memo it was okay to be my friend up on Flint Peak—but *not here*. No way was it cool in La Cañada. I wasn't sure exactly where I'd learned this, but somehow the lords of bitchen-dom had hard-wired my brain. To have friends, you needed money, sex, or drugs, and I had none of these. Neither did Mandy. We were freaks. We had to fly beneath their radar.

"Hi, Allen." I was scared to death she'd wave and drop her books.

Not now, Mandy! I shut my eyes. My heart shriveled in my chest. I wanted to pull in my head and arms and burrow inside me like a turtle. *And not here, Mandy! Please no!* I could talk to her off campus, in the hospital, or on Flint Peak. But not in front of *them!*

Mandy smiled. "Allen what's up? Something wrong?"

All I heard was Heather whispering, "*What a freak show.*" Without her uttering the words they broadcast through my skull as if the hair-antennas rising behind my neck were tuned to Heather.

I whispered "Hi, Mandy" with so little of my mouth actually moving you'd have to watch the instant replay to determine if I'd spoken. I felt my arms scrunch in my sleeves until I felt like half a freak show, the little half, of course. The big half stood in front of me, looking puzzled.

Somehow, my silence let Mandy know our meeting on campus was off-limits. Her face scrunched. Her smile lost half of its air, like on those blow-up toys after they've floated on backyard pools for half the summer. No wonder I had no friends. If you were "nice," you

couldn't have friends. Only "the cool," were worth befriending. Mandy wasn't one of them, nor I.

But it seemed Mandy had forgotten to read the rule book.

And deep inside me, I wished I'd never read it either.

#