



Morning's low sun spilled around Sep as he rolled downhill. Its light gathered like caramel in the island's rock pools, burst like flashlights through the forest, and smashed hard and flat against the schoolhouse walls. The day began with the drone of flies and the rumble of working engines—and through it all time curled like a worm, bunching as it moved, alternately rushing and pausing and sometimes stopping completely.

It had settled slowly on Lamb, kneeling at her mother's cracked mirror as she brushed her hair and soaked her mind in the past while Arkle—the hive of his mind buzzing with excitement and TV—felt it whip past in a distracted, hyper blur. It brushed lightly on Hadley as she floated through her sketches and scribbles, the coffee cooling in her mug as she sat on the stairs and inked the sides of her canvas shoes. It closed around Mack on his daily run past the river where the lost things of the town gathered: a rusting trolley; the urban scum of grocery bags; and the sack that had been full a few days before but was now flapping empty in the flow. Minutes pressed on him like a deepwater squeeze as he ran back to a house of shouting and drink and slamming doors, where nothing ever changed and time seemed hardly to move at all.

And now the seconds slipped from Sep before he could catch them, cool air swirling through his T-shirt as he coasted along the gentle slope, in time for nothing but another

detention.

The skateboard's rumble unspooled behind the music in his headphones—a mixtape of early Bowie and the Cure, one side each. *Close to Me* started as the road leaned to the left, the squat brick and glass of the school growling into view above the bay's wide mouth and the stretching tongue of the old pier. The tide was high, the sea gripping the land. Wet stone gleamed as the waves withdrew, imperceptibly, like the shrinking of a dead man's gums.

Sep peered through the glare and found the mainland, only a green haze, but there, distant and solid—and everything the island was not. He had first been there when he was small, to visit family before his mum got sick, a few long afternoons reduced by memory to beaming relatives, tall buildings, and the roar of streets. He wanted that life—the busy, vibrant anonymity, not the Hill Ford fishbowl—and the lodestar of the city's engineering college shone with a bright heat that had burned through his other desires until it was all that was left: a steel chamber in his heart that beat with a single impulse.

Leave the island.

Sep rolled into the parking lot just as the bell stopped ringing, then rubbed his jaw. A strange feeling filled him—like a swelling in his ear tubes, like someone breathing just over his shoulder.

He looked up at the sky. The moon was gone, the rock and ice of Halley's Comet somewhere beyond the light.

He blinked away the pain and sucked his gums.

The other stragglers—out-of-town farm kids, sleep-ins, and smokers—melted away as he flipped up his board and passed through the doors. Scanning the foyer, he went to the vending machine, dropping his headphones around his neck. Another minute wouldn't make any difference—he was already late, and he was top of the class in chemistry. Mr. Marshall practically dribbled on his notebook.

He bought a can of Spike and—the *second* he popped the ring pull—a sharp little hand

fell on his shoulder.

“Late *again*, Hope?” whispered a reedy voice. “Every day this week. I’ll have your lunchtime for that.”

“Morning, Mrs. Maguire,” said Sep without turning. “We really must stop meeting like this.”

Maguire plucked the can from his hand and moved in front of him. “That smart mouth of yours . . .” she said. Her glassy eyes drilled into Sep’s. “I’ll have *two* lunchtimes. How does that sound?”

“Of course, miss.”

Maguire angled her head back, digging her bosom into Sep’s belly. “Why are you wearing those ridiculous high-top trainers again?”

“To keep my socks clean, miss,” said Sep, staring straight ahead.

“Three.”

Sep blinked. “But it’s Thursday,” he said. “There’s only two lunchtimes left till the weekend.”

“I’ll have Monday as well then, won’t I?” said Maguire. She leaned up until her nose was almost touching Sep’s chin. “You know what your trouble is, Hope? You have no *respect*.”

“On the contrary, miss,” said Sep, leaning away from her coffee breath. “You’ve been on late-coming duty in the same school for thirty years. Of course I respect you.”

Maguire’s eyes narrowed, and she moved her lips to Sep’s ear. “Let me give you some free advice, young man—”

“That’s my deaf ear, Mrs. Maguire,” said Sep, turning his head.

“You might be as bright as a button, but you can’t out-grade a bad attitude. Colleges want rounded individuals, not just test scores. You need to get out from behind the books, make some friends—do something interesting. I *know* your application is incomplete. . . .”

Maguire's voice softened. "What are you going to write about if all you do is study? What will you say when they ask about the relationships you've built here?"

Sep stared past her head, toward the seniors' common room. "I don't know," he said eventually.

"Well, think on. Otherwise, the only way you'll get to the mainland will be to row there on your inflated ego."

"But, Mrs. Maguire," said Sep, his face wide and innocent, "the ego's an abstract psychological concept. It's not seaworthy."

Maguire allowed herself a smile. "Then you'll sink, Hope. Get swimming."

She walked away, chuckling.

Sep waited until she was out of sight, then pumped more coins into the machine and ran to class.

He half dozed through double chemistry, even on the wobbly stool, his mind lulled by the familiar whisper of Bunsen burners. But third period on Thursday was history, and history meant Wobie.

Wobie was old. His immense, sagging frame was a monument to threadbare tweed—his one tie lavishly stained with coffee and eggs. A big-band clarinet player in his youth, he'd lost a finger and a dream during national service: now he read the newspaper through every lesson and smoked little cigars out the window. Wobie never kept his promises and never checked homework. His breath was legendary—there was a long-standing rumor that one of his enormous sighs had blinded two third years.

His classroom was the hottest place in the school, a painted-shut pit of brown walls and browner carpet, itchy with dust and lanced by sunbeams that burned the desks and dazzled the students. That the old man had not sweated to death was considered a modern miracle—his crimson face was permanently shiny, like a glazed pot.

Sep, swinging on his chair at the back of the class, watched Wobie turn the huge pages



of his newspaper with reverential care. Each time a page swished, Sep clicked a button on his Walkman, letting the tape spool through the heads, tracking the fragments of time as they died around him.

He swung forward, blinked rapidly, and tried to concentrate—reread a page of his application form for the umpteenth time. The gears of his mind crunched as the words slipped past his eyes.

Tell us about yourself outside of school. Think about times in your life when you've made successful connections with the people around you, perhaps as part of a group or team; or when you achieved something you're proud of.

He looked at the blank page for a full minute, then folded the form into his bag.

Wobie was picking his teeth and ignoring Anna Wright, whose hand had been raised for several minutes. Eventually the newspaper lowered and his poached-egg eyes dribbled over the top.

“Yes, Miss Wright?”

Anna dropped her hand and massaged her wrist. “Sir, I forgot my textbook, sir.”

“Woe betide those who forget their textbooks,” said Wobie, returning to his article. “If your illustrious neighbor, the Face and Hair of Stephen Ashton, has a copy, then you may share it. If not, then the Corn Laws’ mysteries will remain forever opaque. And that, Miss Wright, would be a tragedy—the political machine has much to teach us of society’s cadence in centuries past, and of the transient nature of this fleeting bubble we call life.”

“What?” said Anna.

Stephen slid his textbook across the desk toward her.

There was a knock at the door, and the eyes of the class snapped gratefully toward the sound.

“Enter,” called Wobie.

A fair-haired first-year girl stumbled into the room, Post-it note clutched in her hand,

kitten badge pinned to her jumper.

“Yes, small person?” said Wobie.

“P-please, sir, it’s from Mr. Tench,” stammered the girl, handing over the note.

Wobie took it and read, his mouth set in a toadish frown.

“Master Hope,” he said, giving Sep a disinterested smile. “It seems you have been summoned to the Lair of the Gangling Beast. Do you know what this concerns? Your famed tardiness, perhaps?”

Somebody whispered something, and there were sniggers.

Sep shrugged. “Could be, sir.”

“You were late this morning, I trust?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Begone then, and take your things lest you are detained past the ringing bell. Quickly now—woe betide those who disobey the headmaster.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And, Hope, stop shrugging—you look like a Frenchman.”

“Yes, sir,” said Sep, throwing his stuff into his bag. He felt the eyes of the class, but stopped at Anna’s desk.

“Do you want this?” he whispered, holding out his textbook. “Just for today?”

Her eyes widened. “Thanks,” she whispered.

“Freak,” said Stephen, loud enough for the class to hear.

A few of them laughed and Sep felt his cheeks burn.

“A scholar *and* a gentleman,” said Wobie as he teased a cigar from its box and hung it in his purple lips. “So few of us left.”

Sep felt the embarrassment lodge, heavy and familiar, in his gut as he closed the door behind him—and in its last sliver of light he saw white-haired, blank-faced Hadley, staring at him through her fringe.