

8.

Mrs. Ebbel was teaching geography. Everybody in the class had a map of the United States on his or her desk.

Bradley's map was different from all the others. California was above Wisconsin. Florida stuck out of Texas. He picked up his pair of scissors and carefully cut out Tennessee. He was a good cutter. The edge of his scissors never left the black line.

He wondered what was happening to Jeff. He knew he was at the counselor's office. He imagined she was doing all kinds of horrible things to him. He had tried to tell Jeff at recess not to go see her.

He taped Tennessee to Washington. He was a very messy tapper. His piece of tape twisted and stuck to itself.

He looked up as Jeff entered the room and watched him hang the hall pass on the hook behind Mrs. Ebbel's desk. Then he looked away as Jeff headed for the seat next to him.

When the bell rang for lunch, he shoved his map into his desk and pulled out his paper sack. Because of the rain, everyone had to eat inside, in the auditorium. He and Jeff walked there together—sort of. *He's walking next to me*, Bradley thought, *but I'm not walking next to him.*

The auditorium was hot, steamy, and noisy. Long tables with benches had been set up across the room.

"Where do you want to sit?" asked Jeff.

Bradley ignored him. He stood on his tiptoes and looked around the room as if he was trying to locate his real friends.

Jeff walked away and sat at one of the tables.

Bradley walked behind where Jeff was sitting. "Hmm, I think I'll sit here," he said aloud, as if he didn't know Jeff was there. He stepped over the bench and sat down next to him.

"Hi," said Jeff.

Bradley faced him for the first time. "Oh, it's you," he said.

They ate their lunches.

"What are you eating?" asked Jeff.

"Peanubudder sandige," said Bradley. As he spoke, bits of peanut butter and bread flew from his mouth.

"Wha' bou' you?"

"Tuna fish," said Jeff.

Bradley swallowed his food and said, "I hate tuna fish."

"My mother makes it good," said Jeff. "She chops apples in it."

"I hate apples," said Bradley. He sucked the last drop of milk through his straw, then continued to suck, making a gurgling noise.

Sitting two tables away from Jeff and Bradley were three girls; Melinda Birch, Lori Westin, and Colleen

Verigold. They were talking and laughing about something funny that had happened to Colleen that morning.

Colleen, who had red hair and a freckled face, covered her mouth with her hand. "There he is!" she whispered. "It's him!"

"Where?" asked Lori.

"Don't look at him!" said Colleen. "He's right there, sitting next to Bradley Chalkers."

"Bradley Chalkers," said Lori. "I think I'm going to throw up!"

"Don't look," whispered Colleen.

Bradley stopped sucking on his straw. "What'd the counselor do to you?" he asked.

Jeff shrugged. "Nothing."

"Did she yell a lot? Was she mean and ugly?"

"No. She was nice. I think you'll like her."

"Me?" asked Bradley. "I'm not going to see her. I didn't do anything wrong."

"She's good at helping you solve your problems," said Jeff.

"I don't have any problems," said Bradley. He bit ferociously into a red delicious apple.

"I thought you said you hated apples," said Jeff.

Bradley shoved the apple back inside the paper sack. "That wasn't an apple," he said. "It was a banana."

Jeff's face suddenly changed color, first white, then bright red.

"Ooh, I think he sees you," said Melinda.

Lori laughed.

Colleen blushed.

"C'mon," said Lori. "Let's go talk to him." She stood up. Lori Westin was a short, skinny girl with long straight black hair.

Melinda got up from the table too. She was nearly twice the size of Lori. She had short brown hair.

"No, don't go!" pleaded Colleen.

"What's the matter?" asked Bradley.

"Uh, nothing," said Jeff. "So, did I miss anything in class?"

"No. Mrs. Ebbel gave everybody a map."

"I got one."

"Don't lose it," said Bradley. "Mrs. Ebbel wants them back."

Two girls were giggling behind them.

Jeff and Bradley turned around.

"Colleen thinks you're cute," said Lori.

Jeff blushed. "Who?" he asked.

The girls laughed.

"What's your name?" asked Melinda.

Jeff blushed again.

"Colleen wants to know," said Lori, then she and Melinda laughed again.

"He doesn't have a name!" said Bradley, coming to Jeff's rescue. He hated Lori. She had the biggest mouth in the whole school. She was always laughing,

too. He could hear her laugh from one end of the school to the other.

"E-uuu, Bradley Chalkers!" said Lori, holding her nose.

"Lori Loudmouth!" said Bradley.

"We're not talking to you, Bradley," said Melinda.

"Get out of here or I'll punch your face in," he replied.

"You wouldn't hit a girl," said Melinda.

"That's what you think." He shook his fist.

Melinda and Lori backed away. "We only wanted to know his name," said Melinda.

"And what he was doing in the girls' bathroom!" screeched Lori.

The two girls laughed and ran back to Colleen. Bradley slowly turned and looked at Jeff, amazed. Jeff sat with his head on the table and his arms over his head.

"You went into the girls' bathroom?" Bradley asked.

"So what?" said Jeff from under his elbow. "Carla says—"

"Me too!" declared Bradley. "I go all the time! I like to make them scream!"

He smiled at Jeff.

“Bradley Chalkers! What are you doing out of class?”

It was a teacher. Bradley didn't know her, but it seemed as though every teacher in the school knew him. “I got a hall pass!” he told her.

“Let me see it.”

He showed it to her. “Mrs. Ebbel gave it to me. Go ask her if you don't believe me.”

“Where are you going?”

“Library,” he said. “To get a book.”

“Okay, but make sure you go straight to the library. No detours, Bradley.”

He had lied. He wasn't even allowed to check books out of the library.

The door to the counselor's office was open, so he walked right in. “I'm here,” he announced. “Whadda ya want?”

Carla smiled warmly at him. “Hello, Bradley,” she said. “I'm Carla Davis. It's a pleasure to see you today.” She held out her hand. “I've been looking forward to meeting you.”

He was amazed by how young and pretty she was. He had been expecting an ugly old hag.

She had sky-blue eyes and soft blond hair. She wore a white shirt covered with different-colored squiggly lines, like some kid had scribbled on it. But as he

stared at the shirt he realized that it was made to look that way, on purpose.

"Aren't you going to shake my hand?" she asked.

"No, you're too ugly." He walked past her and sat down at the round table.

She sat across from him. "I appreciate your coming to see me," she said.

"I had to come. Mrs. Ebbel made me."

"For whatever reason, I'm glad you came."

"I meant to go to the library," he explained. "I came here by accident."

"Oh, I don't believe in accidents," said Carla.

"You don't believe in accidents?" That was the craziest thing he'd ever heard.

She shook her head.

"What about when you spill your milk?"

"Do you like milk?" asked Carla.

"No, I hate it!"

"So maybe you spill it on purpose," she said. "You just think it's an accident." She smiled.

He stared angrily down at the table. He felt like he'd been tricked. "I don't drink milk," he said. "I drink coffee."

He glanced around the room. It was full of all kinds of interesting-looking objects. "This place is a mess," he said.

"I know," Carla admitted. "I like messy rooms. Clean rooms are boring and depressing. They remind me of hospitals."

"Don't you get in trouble?"

“Why should I?”

He didn't know the answer to that. But he knew that if it were his room and it was this messy, he'd get in trouble. “I didn't do anything wrong!” he declared.

“Nobody said you did.”

“Well, then how come I have to be here?”

“I was hoping you'd like it here,” said Carla. “I was hoping we could be friends. Do you think we can?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't like you.”

“I like you,” said Carla. “I can like you, can't I? You don't have to like me.”

He squirmed in his seat.

“I was also hoping you'd be able to teach me things,” said Carla.

“You're the teacher, not me.”

“So? That doesn't matter. A teacher can often learn a lot more from a student than a student can learn from a teacher.”

“I've taught Mrs. Ebbel a lot,” Bradley agreed. “Today I taught her geography.”

“What do you want to teach me?” Carla asked.

“What do you want to know?”

“You tell me,” said Carla. “What's the most important thing you can teach me?”

Bradley tried to think of something he knew. “The elephant's the biggest animal in the world,” he said.

“But it's afraid of mice.”

“I wonder why that is,” said Carla.

"Because," said Bradley, "if a mouse ran up an elephant's trunk, it would get stuck and then the elephant wouldn't be able to breathe and so it would die. That's how most elephants die."

"I see," said Carla. "Thank you for sharing that with me. You're a very good teacher."

He suddenly felt like he'd been tricked again. He didn't want to share anything with her. He hated her.

"What else do you want to teach me?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said coldly. "You're not supposed to talk in school."

"Why not?"

"It's a rule. Like no sticking gum in the water fountains."

"Well, in this room there are no rules," said Carla. "In here, everyone thinks for himself. No one tells you what to do."

"You mean I can stick gum in the water fountain?"

"You could, except I don't have a water fountain."

"Can I break something?" he asked.

"Certainly."

He looked around for something to break, then caught himself in time. It was another trick. He'd break something and then get in trouble, and nobody would believe him when he said that she had said there were no rules. "I'm not in the mood," he said.

"All right, but if you are ever in the mood, there are a lot of things you can break—things I like very much and things that other children use."

"I will!" he assured her. "I know karate." He raised his hand sideways over the table. "I can break this table in half with my bare hand."

"I'd hate to see you hurt your hand."

"Nothing ever hurts me," he told her. "I've broken every table in my house," he declared. "The chairs, too. Call my mother if you don't believe me."

"I believe you," said Carla. "Why shouldn't I?"

"You should."

She did, too. For the rest of the meeting, no matter what he told her, she believed him.

When he told her that his parents only fed him dog food, she asked him how it tasted.

"Delicious!" he said. "Meaty and sweet."

"I've always wanted to try it," said Carla.

When he told her that the President had called him on the phone last night, she asked what they talked about.

"Hats," he answered right away.

"Hats? What did you say about hats?"

"I asked him why he didn't wear a hat like Abraham Lincoln."

"And what did he say?"

Bradley thought a moment. "I can't tell you. It's top secret."

Near the end of the session, Carla gave him a piece of construction paper and asked him if he wanted to draw a picture. He chose a black crayon from the big box of crayons and stayed with it the whole time. He scribbled wildly all over the paper.

Carla leaned over to look at it. "That's very nice," she said.

"It's a picture of nighttime," he told her.

"Oh. I thought it was a picture of the floor of a barber shop, after someone with black curly hair got his hair cut."

"That's what it is!" Bradley declared. "That's what I meant."

"It's very good," said Carla. "May I have it?"

"What for?"

"I'd like to hang it up on my wall."

He looked at her in amazement. "You mean here?"

"Yes."

"No, it's mine."

"I was hoping you'd share it with me," said Carla.

"It costs a dollar."

"It's worth it," said Carla. "But I only want it if you're willing to share it."

"No," he said.

"Okay, but if you ever change your mind, I'll still want it."

"You can make me give it to you," he suggested.

"No, I can't."

"Sure you can. Teachers make kids do things all the time."

Carla shook her head.

It was time for him to return to class.

"I've enjoyed your visit very much," said Carla.

"Thank you for sharing so much with me." She held out her hand.

He backed away from it as if it were some kind of poisonous snake. Then he turned and hurried out into the hall.

When he got to Mrs. Ebbel's class, he crumpled his picture into a ball and dropped it in the wastepaper basket next to her desk.