

# 10.

Bradley sat at his desk in the back of the room. Last seat, last row. He felt safe there. The counselor had scared him. She was even worse than he had imagined.

He looked at Jeff, who smiled at him and then returned to his work.

Bradley was glad Jeff was his friend. *Jeff and me are a lot alike*, he thought. *We're both smart. We both hate the counselor. And we both like sneaking into girls' bathrooms.*

Actually, Bradley never had been inside a girls' bathroom. It was something he'd always wanted to do, but he'd never had the courage even to peek into one. But now that he and Jeff were friends, he hoped Jeff would take him inside one. He was dying to know what they looked like.

He imagined they were carpeted in gold, with pink wallpaper and red velvet toilet seats. He thought girl toilets would look nothing like boy toilets. They'd probably be more like fountains, with colored water.

"So, how'd you like Carla?" Jeff asked him after school. They were walking along the sidewalk next to the school building, carrying their raincoats. It was no longer raining.

"She's we-ird!" he replied. "She likes to eat dog food!"



Jeff made a face. "Did she say that?"

Bradley nodded. "She asked me why the President doesn't wear a hat! How am I supposed to know that?"

Jeff shrugged and said, "I don't know."

"You don't like her, do you?" Bradley asked.

"She's o—"

"I hate her!" said Bradley.

"Me too," said Jeff. "I hate her!"

Bradley smiled his distorted smile. "You want to go sneak inside the girls' bathroom?" he asked.

"You mean now?"

"Why not?"

"Um, now's not a good time," said Jeff.

"Why not?"

Jeff thought a moment. "There won't be any girls there now," he said. "They all go home to use their own bathrooms."

"You're right," Bradley agreed. "Good thinking. We'll do it tomorrow during recess."

Jeff smiled weakly.

They walked around the corner of the building.

"Hello, Jeff," said Lori Westin.

"Hi, Jeff," said Melinda Birch.

"Hi, J—" Colleen said so quietly that the "eff" couldn't be heard.

They'd been waiting for him to come by. Somehow they had found out his name.

"Hello, hi, hi," Jeff answered, blushing.

Lori laughed. Then the three girls hurried away.



"Stupid girls," said Bradley.

"Yeah," Jeff muttered.

"I hate them!" said Bradley.

"Me too!" said Jeff.

"Why'd you say hello to them?"

"They said hello to me, first," Jeff replied.

"So?"

Jeff shrugged. "Whenever anybody says hello to me, I always say hello back."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I can't help it. It's like when someone says 'thank you.' Don't you automatically say 'you're welcome'?"

"No."

"I do," said Jeff. He shrugged again. "I guess it's like a reflex. Like when you go to the doctor and he taps your knee, you have to kick. You can't help it. It's the same thing. When someone says hello to me, I always have to say hello back."

Bradley tried to make sense out of what Jeff said. "I know what you can do," he suggested. "The next time one of those girls says hello to you—kick her!"



A week later they still hadn't gone into the girls' bathroom. Jeff always had a good reason why it wasn't the right time. Recess was the wrong time, because it would be better to wait until after lunch, after the girls had eaten. Lunch was no good, because they hadn't had time to digest their food. Listening to Jeff, it would seem that girls *never* had to go to the bathroom.

But Bradley had never been happier. He was thrilled to have a friend. He even was beginning to like school.

Jeff had two gold stars next to his name. Bradley felt proud when he looked at them, almost like he had earned them himself.

"What do you want to do?" Jeff asked.

"Nothing," said Bradley.

It was lunchtime. They had finished eating and were sitting out on the grass.

"Did the counselor say anything stupid today?" Bradley asked.

Jeff hesitated. He looked down at the ground, then boldly stated, "I like her."

Bradley was shocked.

"She said that I can like her even if you hate her," Jeff asserted. "It doesn't mean that you and I can't



still be friends. We don't have to agree on everything. She said friendships are stronger when everyone has different opinions to share."

"You told her I hated her?" Bradley asked.

Jeff nodded.

"Good."

"Except she didn't believe me," said Jeff.

"She's weird," said Bradley. "She never believes anything anyone says. I'm not going to see her anymore."

"She said you don't have to. I told her you wouldn't show up today and she said that was okay. She said you don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

Bradley turned and looked back toward the school, in the direction of the counselor's office. "That's one of her tricks," he said.

"So what do you want to do?" Jeff asked.

"Nothing."

A basketball bounced away from the basketball court and rolled toward them. Jeff jumped up and grabbed it.

"Hey, Fishnose, over here!" called Robbie, a boy from their class.

"Kick it the other way," urged Bradley.

Jeff threw the ball all the way on a fly to Robbie.

"You should have kicked it onto the roof," said Bradley.

"Maybe they'll let us play," said Jeff. "Let's ask them."

Bradley shook his head. "No, I don't want to."



Jeff watched the boys play basketball for a moment, then sat back down with Bradley.

"Uh-oh," Bradley said. "Here come those girls again. Try not to say hello to them."

"Hello, Jeff," said Lori.

"Hello," said Jeff.

"Hi," said Melinda.

"Hi," said Jeff.

"Hi, Jeff," whispered Colleen.

"Hi," whispered Jeff.

Lori laughed as the three girls walked away.

Jeff shrugged. "I can't help it," he said sadly.

"Let's go beat them up!" said Bradley. "Then they won't say hello to you anymore." He started after them, but Jeff didn't follow. "C'mon," Bradley urged. "Girls are easy to beat up. You just have to hit them once, and they cry and run away."

"Not now," said Jeff.

"Why not?"

"Everyone will see us. We'll get in trouble."

Bradley stopped. "You're right," he agreed. "We'll get them after school."

"I can't," said Jeff. "I've got to go right home after school and do my homework."

Bradley was beginning to get fed up. "How come you're always doing your *homework*?" he asked, hands on hips. He said the word *homework* the way other people might say the word *manure*.

Jeff shrugged.

"Do you like doing it?" Bradley asked.



"It's okay. I don't mind too much."

Bradley kicked at the ground. "Do you think if I did my homework, Mrs. Ebbel might give me a gold star?" he asked.

"I don't think she gives gold stars just for doing homework," said Jeff. "But she might!"

"Maybe I should do it sometime," said Bradley.

"Why don't you come over after school today?" Jeff asked. "We can do our homework together."

Bradley's face twisted in anguish. "Today? I don't think today's a good day to do homework."

"I can help y—" Jeff started to say, then stopped. "You can help me with the stuff I don't understand."

"All right!" said Bradley. "I'll do it!"

"Good!" said Jeff.

"First, we'll beat up those girls," said Bradley, "then we'll go to your house and do our homework."