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It was enough to tax the patience of a saint.

Lifting his eyes from the road, Ted looked over at his brother, who sat well in from the window, his head bobbing as he played with a little plastic roller he'd picked up somewhere. So engrossed was Rags with inserting his fingers into the roller from opposite ends and straining to touch them in the middle that he had not heard a word spoken to him. His tongue, loosened from his efforts, wriggled in the wide cavity of his mouth, and saliva, like drops of rain, fell into his lap. This game with his fingers had, on the ride home from the Living Center, alternated with rolling the tube between his palms, blowing across the top to produce an intriguing whistle, and peering through it as though it were a telescope.

Ted Bachelor disliked the nickname, *Rags*. But to call his brother by his Christian name, *Matthew*, wasted

your time, he wouldn't answer. He repeated his question. "Rags, I asked you what you intended to tell your mother? What do you think she's going to say?"

Rags, at the thought of his mother, smiled.

"You can't go around *arguing* with people."

"You bet."

"Stop saying that." Ted, preoccupied, took the turn beyond the old Briggs Hotel too fast, and Rags lurched forward to clutch the dash. "Do you understand I'm talking about controlling your temper? Is that getting through?"

Rags nodded, reacting more to the tone of the words than to their sense. It would sometimes happen, despite the familiarity bred by a lifetime of association, that Ted's attention would be arrested by the resemblance of their features beneath the obvious distortions of his older brother's expression. Knuckled brow, fleshy nose, loose wet lips—everything his own face possessed but widened, coarsened, skewed. *Me*, he would shudder, *that could be me!* But what proved even more perturbing, as Rags had grown older—now fifty-three and, for all intents and purposes, middle-aged—was the singular guise of abstraction that shone forth from the caverns of his brother's limited grasp of things, crudely animating his features. Especially when something seized his imagi-

nation, like the roller he was now attempting to fit over a radio knob. What was going through his head? You didn't know, you couldn't.

"Leave the radio *alone*, would you? Just leave it alone."

Rags discovered that his tongue would fit perfectly into the roller.

"And get that thing out of your mouth! What're you going to tell your mother? Have you decided how you're going to explain yourself—*have you?*"

"Not so sure about that."

"I bet you're not."

He left it at that. But abandoning his point didn't mean abandoning the worry: What *were* they going to do with him? Get him another job, the obvious answer, something to occupy his time. But with the layoffs at the steelworks spilling into Ganaego's streets fully capable men by the hundreds, finding Rags a job was going to be a challenge. Grim rumors were circulating of not only particular departments closing, which had already happened, but of a cataclysmic shutdown: The entire works to be shuttered and everyone permanently discharged. Just today, a tumultuous panic to that effect had freshly swept through the nine-mile complex. In their household, it was Ted's mother-in-law who, hear-

ing the rumors from her priest, passed them on in high fever to Audrey. Ted dismissed the old clergyman as a flibbertigibbet and labeled his dire predictions *Father Opsatnickisms*. But it was true, in terms of Rags, that unless another Mr. Tambellini came along, at whose produce shop Rags had worked for decades for a never-changing twenty-five cents an hour, until the tightfisted old crab keeled over in his stockroom, they were probably going to have to resort to something more drastic.

And to be sure, by the time he pulled in behind his mother's car, that was the direction in which Ted's thoughts had evolved. Rags, the instant he came to a stop, heaved himself out of his seat—the chassis of the subcompact, at his departure, rocked like a skiff—and blundered across the hard-packed dust of the back lot toward the row house. Very little moved Rags with the speed that the prospect of food moved him, and Ted knew, could visualize it perfectly, his brother, once inside, single-mindedly plowing through the cramped, sunless rooms and clambering up the stairs to wash before his dinner, plunging his big face in the basin, gurgling and snorting and buzzing his lips, splashing water all around, then wrapping his head in a towel and rubbing his skin until his nose and ears glowed—doing, as he had done every day of his life, exactly as he had been

told: What Rags knew, he knew completely.

Should he go in? It was past dinnertime. Audrey would fret. Going in would only make a long night longer. While he debated what to do—this was the second time Rags had been sent home by Mrs. Gibbs in disgrace—Ted noticed that the rear fender of his mother’s ancient Fairlane had rusted through and on the bench the inner fender created a weed had taken root. It looked like an evergreen sapling. The car was an accident in the making. You could, before the tires responded, turn the steering wheel a full half-circle, this, while the worrisome smell of raw gas seeped back from the engine compartment and the water pump squealed shrilly enough to bring the neighbors from their beds—and now there were plants growing out of it. It was, in fact, the absurdity of the trembling green shoot reaching up through the fender that acted as a final straw—a final straw, *precisely*—persuading Ted Bachelor that it was time to put his foot down.

“You know,” he said to his mother, stepping into the kitchen, “I think we should start looking into a long-term solution? He’s headed for big trouble one of these days.”

Nettie lodged her cigarette in the cleft of an ashtray. “Teddy, you sound like Mrs. Gibbs.”

“Ma, I don’t—”

“You notice she never has anything good to say about her people? Something queer about that, don’t you think? You ask me, that lady’s in the wrong line of business.”

For thirty years his mother had spent her days in a cubbyhole in the warren of cubbyholes Albert Keezer had jury-rigged in his basement to house his insurance business. Headset bridging her once chestnut—now frizzy gray—hair, dress yanked over her knees, feet propped on a Hires Root Beer crate, Nettie Bachelor functioned as receptionist, office manager, Bertie’s personal gofer, and the single person more likely to remember the Keezers’ anniversary than either Keezer or his wife. His mother, Ted long ago concluded, knew everybody in Ganaego and their business, and, paradoxically, knew nothing about herself, or Rags, or life. “Ma,” he explained, “we’re not talking about Mrs. Gibbs. Mrs. Gibbs provides a service. People who provide services have a right to set rules. We’re talking about *Rags*. Rags is subject to violent mood swings.”

“Fiddlesticks! Rags never hurt a flea in his life.”

“Ma, we have a problem, we—”

“It’s that McCarthy girl—she keeps bedeviling him. And don’t call him a problem, Teddy, he’s your *brother*.”

Even though she had the steam heat turned up against the cool spring day, Nettie tugged her sweater about her shoulders. “As long as you’re here, maybe you can get a screen in for me? They say it’s going to warm up by the weekend.”

Balked, Ted withdrew his argument—for the moment. He followed his mother upstairs and examined a screen in her bedroom. None of the wooden screens fit into their frames anymore. He needed a screwdriver to wedge the warped thing in, maybe a hammer. He tramped downstairs to the cellar and rooted among his father’s pathetic collection of tools, not at all surprised when he failed to turn up either screwdriver or hammer. If Gunther *had* ever owned a decent tool, here is not where you would find it. Grimacing, Ted reached through a gauze of cobwebs and extracted from behind an upside down paint can a small crowbar and a pipe wrench with a gummy handle. That would do. In his hurry to escape the dankness, he climbed the stairs two steps at a time. In the kitchen, Rags sat hunched over his macaroni and cheese, a heap of stewed tomatoes he had meticulously dredged out on the side of the plate. He was transfixed by a wildlife program on the portable television: Rags adored animals.

“Looks like a safari,” Ted said indulgently. Rags’

eyes, as Ted crossed behind, never wavered from the black and white screen. Upstairs, Ted found his mother standing on a chair hammering the screen with her shoe.

“Mother!”

“This is how Gunther got it in,” she defended herself. “Banged it with his heel.”

“Which is how he did everything—beat on it until either it worked or it broke.”

“Well, he might’ve been all thumbs”—Nettie stepped down and balanced on one foot to wiggle her loafer back on—“but all I know is, by golly, he got the blessed things in.”

“And the sash of every screen in this house is broken—that’s just my point.”

“That’s not true! Gunther took good care of things.”

“Oh, is that what you call bashing in the TV?”

“He never meant to hurt it! And he didn’t *bash* it in—you’re exaggerating! We all smacked it—the fool thing never worked right from the day Eddie Friedman fobbed it off on us.” As though in the grip of a momentous idea, Nettie hugged her arms about herself. “Teddy, you have no *idea* how much you meant to your poppa.”

And with this tired comment, Ted knew what was coming: how his father was so thrilled the night he graduated from high school, how Gunther bragged he was

destined to be the first one in the family to graduate from college. *He would've been so proud of you, honey!* That it had been only a two-year associate's program was a distinction that never slowed her down. "Maybe," he said, when she was done, "I just never liked the way he treated you."

"Gunther treated me like a queen!"

"Get off it, Ma—who's exaggerating now?"

His mother's lips whitened, compressed. She sat down on the bed, hurt. Ted silently swore at his clumsiness. His intention had been to come inside and reason with his mother. With Rags' second scuffle with the girl at the Living Center—and it was, no doubt, as much the girl's fault as Rags', although the circumstances hardly mattered—he had been presented with the perfect opportunity to approach the issue constructively. He laid his tools on the dresser and awkwardly brought his arm around her shoulder. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way."

"Oh, pooh, lemmie alone." Nettie slipped out from under his arm and stood up. "Gunther had his faults—all right, so he did. But I'll tell you this, Teddy, that man was as loyal to his family as the day was long. He *loved* you boys!"

The row houses on Roosevelt—company-built like

the houses in the Plans, although not segregated like the Plans—had been sited near an underground spring. On clammy days the odor of mold, welling up from the dirt-floored cellars, traveled moistly and darkly through the rooms. Ted recognized that familiar malodor, and thought, *No!* This is not my fault!

"I'm sure he's found a peace at last," he said, reaching behind his mother for his tools.

Before he left, Ted made a special effort to talk with his brother. Rags had a peculiar fondness for postage stamps. Invariably, he pasted his stamps in his albums sideways or upside down, but it never took much cajolery before Rags would lift down his newest album from the shelf over his desk and show you his latest acquisitions. The albums were all the same. They were what the Polish guy who sold them called beginner's books, meaning they were bound, not loose leaf, with borders outlining where stamps were to be fastened. What Rags treasured were large, splashily colored stamps and British Commonwealth stamps featuring Queen Elizabeth. Somewhere, practically on every page, you could put your finger on a Queen Elizabeth.

Ted pointed at a garish South American stamp. "Brazil, you know where Brazil is?"

"You bet."

“Where? Where’s Brazil? On what continent, Rags?”

“Not so sure about that.”

Rags didn’t like to be tested. But it was important not to be always coddling him. A good portion of his brother’s problem, if you asked him, was their mother’s overprotection. “Yes, you do,” he pressed. “What’s this continent—the one we live on—called?”

Rags squinched up his mouth, thinking. “Roosevelt Avenue.”

“That’s the name of the street. Our continent is called North America.”

“You bet.”

“Listen.” The back of Ted’s neck warmed. He remembered the graphs Mr. Cabot wanted him to finish tonight, and here he was teaching geography. “Our country’s called the United States of America”—sorry he’d used *America*, that was bound to confuse things—“United States. But we don’t own all the land on the continent. Canada owns some too. You know Canada—you must have Canadian stamps? They’d have Queen Elizabeth on them, too, probably?”

Rags, beaming, pointed at a Queen Elizabeth. “Mommie stamp.”

“Well, okay, sure. But below Central America, be-

low the Panama Canal, is a whole other continent. It’s called *South America* because it’s south of us, see?”

“You bet.”

“Stop saying that! *Listen*: Brazil’s a country there, in South America. It’s a big country. Even bigger than ours.” Rags shook his head in disbelief. “Yes, it is,” Ted insisted. “I mean, I don’t know—with Alaska and everything? Oh, it doesn’t matter. What’re you doing tomorrow at the Center?” Rags gaped at him. “What are you going to be doing at the Living Center? Doesn’t Mrs. Gibbs have you work on special projects every day?”

Rags, still confused, shook his big head. “Not so sure about that.”

On the verge of scolding him, Ted hesitated, unsettled by something about his brother’s bedroom—just what, he couldn’t say. There was nothing different about it. There never was. An advertisement from a magazine that Rags had taped to the wallpaper four decades ago still hung there, a picture almost entirely drained of color of a blond-haired boy eating his cereal. Beside it was another ad, this one almost as old, of Kukla and Ollie—whom Rags had loved with all his heart—singing about ice cream. Odd things, an ashtray in the shape of a tire, the triangular rubber plexor mallet Dr. Schmutzler had once used to knock on Rags’ knees and then awarded him like

a prize, the roller he'd carried home tonight, a small rubber gorilla missing an arm—everything lay where Rags last put it down, whether that was ten minutes or thirty years ago. Both he and Rags had their mother's features, her Gallic face, long beaked nose, brunette hair, widow's peak, not their father's cherubic German face. But Rags' bristly hair by now had become heavily silvered, his arms and shoulders meatier, and the creases in his forehead and jowls, as his face broadened and flattened, grown deeper and blacker. His jabbering—what Mrs. Gibbs called perseverating and strictly forbade—had gotten worse. What *were* they going to do with him? You never thought of Rags getting old. Seemed incomprehensible. In the hall the steam pipes clicked like castanets and sent up a loud, lingering *whoosh!*—and in that moment Ted identified what it was that was bothering him: Rags' room was a child's bedroom frozen in time, like his own room must have looked thirty-five years ago, and with the shame that that identification brought him, his anger, like an old friend, warmed his blood. Ted scowled at his brother, who was trying to squeeze an acorn cap on his maimed gorilla's head: Why was he wasting his time here?

“Well, don't be quarreling,” he said sharply. “Just steer clear of that girl, hear?”

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By the time he got home Audrey and the boys had already eaten and embarked on their evening. Ted, Jr., 16, and Ralphie, 7, were absorbed in the television while Audrey worked at the kitchen table on her Sunday school lesson plans. This was Audrey's first year teaching—Ted had taught Sunday school for four years—her first real challenge since the birth of the children, and she struggled to compose thoughtful, entertaining lessons. Ted helped himself to the pot of spaghetti on the stove.

“You should heat it up, honey,” Audrey suggested. “It'd be better?”

Ted continued to heap spaghetti on his plate, then carried it, along with the bread, over to the table. In the refrigerator he found a pitcher of what looked like Hawaiian Punch.

“Is Rags all right?”

He waved her off her question with his dripping bread. “How's that coming?”

“Not so good.” Audrey, a pretty if plain woman, had so long described herself just as Ted's wife and her two boys' mother that most people, when they thought of her, thought of her, as well, as a kind of secondary person. But she clearly had something on her mind tonight. “What would you say if I quit? I don't think I'm cut out to be a teacher?”

“You’re just nervous. I got nervous my first year, too.”

“Maybe there’s another way I can help out in the church?”

“Audrey, if you give into this fear now, you’ll give in the next time, the next time, and the time after that. Just keep plugging away at it, you’ll get it.”

“Maybe I don’t want to keep *plugging away* at it.” Audrey, vexed, straightened her papers and aligned her pencil just so. “Did you call the number I gave you?”

All marriages, even good marriages, harbor petty annoyances. And this, on his side, was one of his: Ted hated the way his wife would leap from subject to subject with the assumption he would know exactly what she was talking about. Often, frankly, he didn’t know, but in this case he did, which made it all the worse. The community college had announced a job-retraining program. Audrey had excitedly shown him a photograph in the *Citizen Chronicle* of someone in a baleful black hood bent over the bumper of a car. Sparks radiated from his gloves like shooting stars. “I’ll get to it,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“They’ll fill up—they only have so many slots?”

“I’ll get to it. Just do what they tell you to do in the teacher’s guide.”

“I’ve *read* the teacher’s guide, I know what it says. I just don’t want to do this, Ted.”

“For Christ’s sake, just do what they tell you in the manual!”

Audrey, stung, jammed her papers in her book and came to her feet. “Don’t talk to me like that! I’m not one of your kids!”

She stalked out of the kitchen.

Later, after he had finished the work he had brought home and come upstairs to bed, Audrey rolled toward him. She brought her arms up. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I won’t quit.”

With so much on his mind, he was happy enough not to quarrel about something as insignificant as Sunday school. But her yielding so easily fueled, on his part, a certain suspicion. “The guides are very specific,” he said warily. “If you want, I’ll help you?”

“I can do it.” Audrey swelled with a little pride. “I’ll be fine. Would you like *me* to call the Community College?”

Now he understood why she was being so placating. “Audrey, I don’t want to spend my life welding rusty bumpers.”

“I know you—”

“Those are trades”—he rolled over, his back to her—

“I’m not a tradesman.”

“They’re not *all* trades! You big silly—you didn’t even read it. They’re also teaching computers and accounting and surveying and things like that. Computers—you’d be *terrific* at computers! The mill is *dying*, Ted—you have to do something! The government’s not going to come in and buy up Ganaego. You can’t wait until the mill closes.”

He knew what she was referring to, the Missouri town the government had declared an environmental disaster. She was trying to make all this sound lighthearted and positive, but he heard in his wife’s voice the hysteria you could hear in everybody’s voice. *The worry grid*, he called it, and he recalled the rumor that had careened through the works today. *Chicken Littles*, he thought. He reached back, found his wife’s hand, squeezed it. “Tomorrow,” he said, already falling toward sleep, “I’ll read it tomorrow . . .”

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As much as Ted labored to keep himself distanced from the worry grid, there were times, especially at night, when he could not. All his life he had had a secret and shameful fear of the dark. And when toward morning, wrenched from sleep by a nightmare, he woke

with the acute need to urinate, he could not summon the courage to get up. He lay rigid and uncomfortable, on his side away from Audrey. He was a technician in the North Works Metallurgical Lab. It was a responsible job, a salaried position. He ran regular tours through the Blast Furnace Department, collected samples, met with foremen. At his bench, he conducted tests and filled in countless forms.

But it could be swept away in a minute. The shutdown rumors had been surfacing with an increasing frequency. Today’s, possessed of an unusual ferocity, bowled through department after department, upending everyone in its path. And for sure, significant portions of the huge plant had fallen silent. Long closed were the Rod, Wire, and Nail Mills. More recently, several midsized departments, like the Hot-Strip Mill, had been idled, the machines mothballed. When whole departments were shuttered, the *Citizen Chronicle* headlined it. Such things distressed Audrey. She would talk about the closures as if she somehow personally knew the discharged men and their families. But what Audrey did not know was that the closure of small shops seldom made the news, and there were far more of them.

Last week, as Ted had passed down a corridor, he noticed on the door of a machine shop a padlock. He

wiped the dust from a window and peered in. The room—usually bustling with burly machinists in overalls tending enormous lathes and milling machines, their bare shoulders and arms slathered with grease—was unnaturally still. The wooden shelves, eternally bowed with gleaming copper armatures, were stripped bare, and across the expanse of the oil-stained floor lay scattered boxes and stray debris, isolated in the slanting sun. Needing tonight to pee but too frightened to leave the bed, Ted Bachelor brought his knees up, slipped his hand into his pajamas, and cradled in his palm his penis and scrotum.

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That morning, seized with a compulsion to push this thing with his brother forward, Ted lingered at his bench, making call after call. He began with the municipality, was referred to the hospital, was referred to a county agency, was referred to a state agency. After speaking to two more people, he obtained the number of a private institution, the Frederick M. Gilvan School for the Mentally Retarded in South Kensington, thirty miles northwest of Ganaego. With a feeling of relief then, after a pleasant, businesslike conversation, he accepted the director's invitation to visit Saturday. If things went well,

the director assured him, his brother could be admitted on an emergency basis as early as Monday or Tuesday.

Ted, a little unnerved, asked, "You can do something that fast?"

"Piece of cake," the director said. "Do it all the time."

"Sometimes it's better not to think about these things too much anyway?"

"That's the ticket," the director agreed. "You understand, this wouldn't be a permanent admittance? Loads of paperwork to take care of there, mind you. But we can help you out on that score too, no big deal. But first thing, we need to get you up here for a little look-see."

"I should bring my brother, as well, right?"

The director coughed. "Well, not all folks feel a need to do that? But that's entirely up to you. On that issue I'm agnostic. When can we expect you?"

What took us so long to do this? Ted wondered, as he tossed his clipboard into the wicker basket of the old tricycle wagon they used to pedal to the far reaches of their tours. Of course, the tough job lay in persuading his mother to agree to, first, the visit, and then the admittance. But his luck took a fortuitous turn here, too, when that afternoon Nettie called and asked whether he'd mind picking up Rags again.

"That girl, he's gotten mixed up with her again." His

mother's voice held a note of resignation. "See what you can do to soothe Mrs. Gibbs' feathers. Ask her about her petunias. She cares more about plants than she does about people."

This time even Rags realized he was in serious trouble. He was waiting outside on the front steps of the former Odd Fellows' lodge, anxiously scanning the road both ways. When Ted drove up, he climbed in heavily, eyes downcast, breathing hard. Ted offered him no comfort. He pulled into the gravel lot beside the old clapboard building and ordered his brother to wait while he went inside. In Mrs. Gibbs, he knew he had an ally.

"Frankly, I'm pessimistic, Mr. Bachelor. We're having a real problem with Rags."

Coming through the building, he had walked—somewhat uncomfortably—past Mrs. Gibbs' so-called students. Walleyed, ill-proportioned, incongruously dressed in stripes and plaids, hair frequently all awry, the Living Center people tended to form garrulous cliques. Rags, never much of a joiner, spent his days, as far as Ted could determine, in what once would have been the Odd Fellows' band room watching the half-dozen Sesame Street tapes Mrs. Gibbs played and replayed. "We're concerned, too," he said. "We're worried we might have to start looking for something more permanent, not just

a day program?"

"You'll want to find a place with a good atmosphere." Mrs. Gibbs prided herself on her green thumb. As they talked, she worked over an ailing philodendron, industriously plucking away withered leaves. "A boy like Rags needs friends."

On the drive back, Ted went out of his way to cruise through Fifth Hill. Acting on an impulse, he stopped at Isaly's, where he bought Rags an ice-cream cone. Isaly's slender, tapering cones, long famous in Western Pennsylvania, had always been one of his brother's most cherished treats. When they walked into the house, Nettie, in some bewilderment, gazed at the remnants of Rags' cone before chasing him upstairs to wash, then looked at Ted.

"He seemed a little depressed," Ted shrugged, "so I bought him a treat."

"What did Mrs. Gibbs say? You patched things up, didn't you?"

"She said Rags wasn't welcome at the Center anymore."

Nettie sat down rather suddenly. "She didn't have to be *mean* about it."

"I don't remember how she phrased it," Ted backpedaled. "The thing is she said it."

“I sure as heck hope she threw the McCarthy tart out on her caboose, too?”

“Ma, it was Rags’ fault—two days in a row now. It wasn’t the girl’s fault.”

“How do you know that? Were you there?”

He tried to reposition the argument. “He’s not happy at the Center anyway, so what’s the difference?” It would have been perfect had his mother answered with something like, *What’re we going to do now, Teddy?* But she didn’t, and he was forced to wade in. “I made some calls today.” Nettie looked at him dubiously. “I found a place in South Kensington. It’s called the Frederick M. Gilvan School, and it sounds great. They’ve got an acre of ground, athletic facilities, crafts rooms, you name it. They even show movies on the weekend.”

“So what?” Nettie withdrew her hanky from inside her sleeve to cover her mouth to cough. “I don’t care if they show movies every single night of the week.”

“I’ve made arrangements to take Rags up Sat—”

“No! I told—”

“Ma? Just listen to me! Saturday, for a *visit*. We’ll look around, get a feel for it. If he doesn’t like it, then we’ll drop it. But you can’t lock him up in his bedroom all his life? And you can’t let him wander around town either. Rags needs supervision.”

“Then I’ll quit and stay home.”

His mother’s threat to retire always plunged Ted into a moment of uncertainty. But rather than resist it—and he didn’t resist it, who, for crying out loud, was still working at seventy?—he adopted a different tack. “Even if you do, that’s not going to solve the basic problem. What Rags needs most are *friends*. That’s why we sent him to the Living Center in the first place, isn’t it?” The friends argument proved unassailable. “Look, all we’re going to do is poke around? Just a little look-see. Trust me, when and if the time comes, Ma, it’ll be his decision.”

On the way home, as his car geared down on Sutton Post Road to pull the long grade to Anderson Township, Ted passed the roller rink and recalled two things almost simultaneously. He remembered the nightmare that had wrenched him from sleep last night and he remembered the Saturday his father volunteered to chaperon the German Boys’ Club annual skating outing. It was no surprise that he would recall the skating outing. He was not capable of passing the Quonset-shaped building—abandoned now, windows blind with weatherbeaten plywood—without thinking of the afternoon that Gunther, three sheets to the wind, strapped a pair of skates on Rags, another on his big leather shoes, requested a Strauss waltz from the smirking organist, and proceeded

to make a spectacle, a total ass, of himself. But what was unusual was the blend of that memory with last night's dream. In the dream his father lay in his coffin but was not dead. Gunther looked as he had in life, fat rubbery lips, bulbous nose plump as a Bosc pear, a self-satisfied, stupidly belligerent expression on his face, like he'd just stolen a sausage and eaten it. Everyone thought he was dead, but Ted knew there had taken place a ghastly mistake. He raced to the front of the funeral parlor, knocking aside the chairs in their neat rows, grabbed his father and pulled on him. Reluctantly, the body folded forward, and the sightless eyes, as blackened as rotted plums, rolled open. From the lolling mouth emanated a terrible stench. Behind his back, Ted heard people whispering. Was his father not alive? *Was* he dead? Panicking, he shook his father, then shook him harder and harder until the violence of the emotion cracked open his sleep. Tonight, the image of Gunther's swollen face shimmering grotesquely in the pale light behind his eyes, Ted swore into the darkness of his car, "This time we're really going to bury you, Daddy."

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Before leaving his mother's, he had established that he would pick Rags up on Saturday at ten-thirty. Nettie,

keeping her end of the bargain, had turned Rags out of bed early and fixed him his cereal. While Ted waited downstairs, he heard his mother squawking about the underpants Rags had selected, ordering him to take them off this minute and put on a pair without holes. It was always with annoyance that Ted thought of his brother being fussed over this way, how his mother bent her whole life around Rags. It rankled him, and he stewed at the foot of the stairs impatiently.

Nettie walked with them out to the car. "When do you expect to be home?"

"Figure an hour drive," Ted calculated, "an hour visit, if that, lunch, hour back—what's that? Two, two-thirty? I have no idea what traffic'll be like." Nettie looked despondent. "Ma, it's just *South Kensington*. It's not that far away."

"It is if it's your baby. I talked to him, so he kind of understands why he's going."

"I asked you not to do that."

"Well, I did, tough beans." Nettie stepped up to Rags' window and motioned for him to roll it down. She kissed him on the forehead. "Ear check!" she chirped, and Rags good-naturedly swiveled his head back and forth so she could peer in his hairy ears for soap.

During the early portion of the drive, Ted attempted

to involve his brother in conversation, but maintaining a conversation with Rags was never straightforward. Inevitably, before long, they fell into their separate worlds. While Rags played with a ballpoint pen he had discovered, clicking it madly until he was scolded, Ted concentrated on his driving. The state route was two-lane, and, as would happen, they occasionally found themselves trapped behind trucks, forcing Ted to brood edgily until he had opportunity to pass. When he swung into the opposing lane and stomped on the gas, Rags, no matter how distracted he appeared, would snap out of his trance, grab the dash and cling to it for dear life. Which only further aggravated Ted. But he was determined to make of the day a success. Spotting a gift shop, he bought Rags a bottle of chocolate pop and bag of caramels. At the counter he spied a packet of commemorative stamps—those he snatched up, too.

The instant he spotted the school he had qualms. Granted, the director never really said the Gilvan School was nestled in a park; nonetheless, that was what Ted had assumed—and it was clearly erroneous. The sprawling old building, bricks soot-dimmed to charcoal, was hedged in by ramshackle factories and disorderly houses, the kind of neighborhood where people jacked up their automobiles in their front yards and removed the wheels.

Behind the school, the municipal water tower, an enormous sphere resting on stilts, loomed over everything, its plump circumference decorated with a hodgepodge of multi-colored graffiti. *This*, Ted thought gloomily, parking beside an urn that held a shrub as brown as a cinnamon stick, is not going to play well at home.

The director didn't work Saturdays, but assured Ted he would arrange with a subordinate, a Mr. Corwin, to give them a tour. And, to be sure, once inside, out of sight of the tumbledown surroundings and safe under Mr. Corwin's companionable wing, Ted began to relax. Mr. Corwin, a stubby fireplug of a man—the fellow's hands were amazingly broad, his knuckles were the diameter of walnuts—offered Rags a Tootsie Roll and slid into a felicitous portrayal of life in the institution. Rags, chewing his Tootsie Roll, made a ludicrous effort to scrutinize the things Mr. Corwin pointed out—the crafts room with its pots of paints, the thirty-seven-inch RCA television, the idle ping-pong table—vigorously nodding every time Mr. Corwin nodded. It wasn't long before Ted shook off whatever doubts he'd had. The school seemed capably administered and would serve their purpose. It wasn't a school, of course, but that he knew going in, and the residents appeared relatively well cared for. True, they seemed lethargic, aimless and depressed,

but could you claim the people in Mrs. Gibbs' program looked much different? Ted waited until a propitious time near the end of their tour, when Rags had begun to flag, to pose a question he was sure would result in a positive answer.

"Matthew here"—he'd insisted on using his brother's given name—"is an amateur *philatelist*." He pronounced the term distinctly, in case Mr. Corwin was unfamiliar with it, studiously avoiding Rags who in a million years wouldn't know it. When Mr. Corwin didn't respond, he pressed on. "Stamp collector—I assume you have a stamp club?"

Mr. Corwin looked at him oddly. "Not bound to be a big hobby around here, you know? But if Matthew has some stamps, he's certainly encouraged to bring them."

"Perhaps he could start a club?"

"No law against that." Mr. Corwin checked his watch. "That's about it for the tour. Do you have any questions, Matthew?" Rags was staring dismally through the bars of a window. "Any questions, Matthew?"

"Rags," Ted snapped, "Mr. Corwin is talking to you!" He appealed to Mr. Corwin. "He has this silly nickname—his father gave it to him years ago."

"What is it? Do you say *Rags*?"

"We prefer Matthew," Ted said. "Don't we, Mat-

thew?"

Rags looked at him blankly.

"Well, then," Mr. Corwin recovered. "Do *you* have any questions, Mr. Bachelor?"

Neither Rags nor Ted felt the need to ask any questions. Mr. Corwin consulted his wrist watch again. "Interested in a bite to eat? Good to sample the food, I always say?"

Ted had a premonition he should quit while he was ahead. But the moment was lost in indecision, and he and Rags straggled behind Mr. Corwin down a long corridor. During their visit, he had been aware of the various levels of retardation that surrounded them, individuals who appeared sentient and unremarkable, others just within self-possession. Somewhere, he knew, existed a secure ward for seriously disturbed patients. The director had mentioned that. Since there was no reason for them to see that ward, however, Mr. Corwin had wisely omitted it, and Ted had long forgotten about it. But here suddenly, as they rounded a bend, stood a skel- etally thin man in boxer shorts and undershirt, barefoot, hair sticking out, enthusiastically masturbating a thick, blood-red erection poking through his shorts. The fellow, mouth agape and tongue swinging freely, eyes lu- minous as streetlamps, smiled at them beatifically.

Mr. Corwin swore. "Goddamn it!"

Crossing behind the man, he yanked him backwards against himself. The violence of Mr. Corwin's response took Ted by surprise. Squeezing the fellow's arms in what was unmistakably a powerful grasp, he pulled the resident, who was taller, wholly off his feet, then, carrying through with his motion, spun the bewildered man around, jaws snapping down on his wagging tongue, and, like a nightclub bouncer, shoved and half-carried him forward. Beneath them, the resident's spindly legs splayed out to either side. Ted looked at Rags: His brother stood spellbound, his own mouth agape, staring at the entangled figures disappearing up the hall.

Lunch was no better. All along, it had been Ted's intention after their visit to stop at a fast-food outlet and feed his brother all the hamburgers he could eat. Although in the cafeteria there could not have been forty people, the hall was bedlam, everyone shrieking at once. Both Ted and Rags felt walled out and isolated. When Mr. Corwin launched into an analysis of the Pirates' pitching staff, checking in to make sure Ted agreed, Ted hardly responded. By now, Mr. Corwin's reassuring patter had begun to come across as a veneer of condescension that included him, and Rags, sallow, food leaking from the corners of his mouth, no longer heard a word.

As Mr. Corwin saw them to the door, he said, "I hope we'll be seeing you again soon, Matthew." When Rags, gazing off, ignored him, Mr. Corwin held out his enormous hand to Ted. "And I hope," he added cheerfully, "that mill of yours doesn't go belly-up like a dead goldfish."

The reference, so far out of context, caught Ted off-guard. "It's fine," he struggled to say. "Where'd you hear that? We're doing great."

"My brother works in the continuous castor." Mr. Corwin smiled. "Not what he says."

"Well, he's wrong!"

"Oh, he's pretty tight with the Superintendent." Mr. Corwin held up two massive fingers squeezed together. "He says they're hacking it apart and selling it off piece by piece. But I'm sure you know better."

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All his life Ted Bachelor's undoing had been his temper: the way it would seethe invisibly inside him, then suddenly flash out. And right now, as he negotiated South Kensington traffic, Ted Bachelor was furious—furious at the Gilvan school, furious at Rags, but, most of all, furious at himself for letting things get away from him. The tour had kicked off so promisingly with Mr.

Corwin and his Tootsie Rolls, the gleaming picture on the television—“Antenna’s on top of the water tower,” Mr. Corwin chortled, “jewel-box reception!” But, demonstrably, it had not ended that way. All morning, he had never been certain how much of this his brother was grasping, but Rags, most emphatically, understood now. He sat hunched forward, head down, breathing through his wet lips. At the corners of his eyes a glazed fear had set in, and, between his legs, his hands knit and unknit spastically. Up from him welled a foul odor. Ted imagined Rags bursting into the house, steamrolling past his mother in blind terror. On the outskirts of town, he spotted a Burger King, and, further unhinging Rags, swerved across two lanes of traffic. At the school, they had been served frankfurters and beans, trembling cubes of cherry Jell-O, banana cream pie, tall plastic glasses of whole milk. After all that, it was hard to believe anybody could still be hungry. But it was worth a try.

“How about a Whopper? Fries, shake, pie—the works?” Not waiting for an answer, Ted leaped out and went inside. When he returned, Rags refused to acknowledge the bag he held out. “Look, I bought the stuff, I’d appreciate it if you ate it? Here—take it!”

“Don’t wanna.”

“When have you turned down a Whopper? I don’t

believe it.”

“Not hungry.”

Ted yanked the hamburger out of the bag and shoved it at him. “Goddamn it, Rags, eat it!” He wasn’t certain of his own purpose—to make his brother accept the sandwich or stuff it down his throat. Rags wrenched away, and the bag with the French fries and milkshake toppled to the floor. The top of the milkshake container burst open, and strawberry milkshake oozed across the mat. “All right,” Ted raved, “screw the food! But let me tell you something, buster, come Monday you god-damned better have your bags packed because you’re moving—you hear me?”

Rags began to whimper. “Not so sure about that.”

“You tell me”—Ted was hardly conscious of what he was saying—“what the fuck else are we supposed to do with you? You have to go there, you have to, you have to!”

The milkshake had spread beneath Rags’ feet. Some of it, like a pink surf, had gotten on his cuffs. What a sight, Ted seethed, two middle-aged men arguing at Burger King and now one bawling. “Sometimes,” he announced, “we have to do things we don’t want to do and that’s that. Now, I want you to help me clean this mess up.” He split the stack of napkins, thrust half at

his brother. "After this, I'm going to buy you *another* milkshake and you're going to eat it, along with the hamburger, and then we're going to drive home and tell Ma how much you liked the school. Is that clear? Is that *clear?*"

Rags cowered, pulling further away. "Not so sure about that."

"Well, I am! I'm *damn* sure about that!"

After he had soaked up what he could of the milkshake, Ted crammed the sopping napkins in the empty cup and slammed back inside the restaurant. As he headed toward the restroom, to wash the pink stickiness off his hands, a boy pushing a mop and bucket on wheels stepped in front of him. "*Jesus Christ!*" he hissed, and the boy turned: not a boy, but a man, someone his own age. The fellow dipped his head sheepishly and backed himself and his sloshing bucket out of the way, and at that moment Ted Bachelor knew that what the other lab techs were saying was right, that what Audrey and her mother and Father Opsatnick were saying was right, that what Mr. Corwin had just said was right: The mill was closing, and even if Rags belonged at this Gilvan school, which he did not, there would be no money to send him there anyway.

There would be no money at all.