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## Orphan Markdown

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ORPHAN MARKDOWN

They liked to chill at the skate park in their hoodies and low-slung jeans, doing ollies and rail-slides, smoking cigarettes, blowing on their hands to warm them. When it got too cold, they'd head over to Comic Haven to antagonize the thick-lensed halitotic nerds until the owner eighty-sixed them. Then they'd jet to Perkins for the bottomless pot of coffee and maybe a plate of eggs and hash browns between them if they could scrounge enough change. They dropped acid once in a while but nobody had anything right now, not even any decent pot. Their supplier, Sir Dancelot, was vacationing in Vail with his bail bondsman. Nobody had any beer, and the effort to track down someone with a valid ID willing to buy them beer without tacking on a grotesquely unjust surtax was more than they could stomach. Tonight pretty much every citizen in town was watching the high school football game, participating in it, copping feels under the bleachers, or messing with the opposing team's cars in the parking lot. None of those options appealed to the crew.

“Maybe we could hotwire some golf carts at the country club and drive them into the pond.”

“We could huff some paint thinner.”

“Or watch that porno again, the one with the double-jointed midget.”

The crew nuked some pizza rolls and mulled things over.

“Maybe we could check out one of the orphanages.” This from Trip, the most diminutive member of the group. His parents had long ago divorced, and his mom was now an over-aerobicized walking infomercial, the owner of a 24 hour fitness club in the strip mall out by the bypass, in a former video store with sneaker-

scuffed tiles and scored marks on the wall notating where shelving units once stood—new releases, thrillers, horror, comedies, all of life’s major genres. Old video cases were still stacked in a corner of the break room, the final carapaces of a race of creatures driven to extinction by the digital era. Trip’s mom was always either working the front desk or the Nautilus machines or competing in regional aerobi-thons, so Trip was virtually an orphan himself.

“What would we do at an orphanage?” Taylor said.

“Look at the kids, I guess.”

“Jesus, Trip, they’re not like puppies at the mall,” Seth said.

“The pet shop at the mall closed down,” someone pointed out.

Trip’s eyes shone in an aqueous way. “I know they’re not puppies. I just want to see them, that’s all. They probably don’t get many visitors.”

“Which one would we go to? Aren’t there like seven out on County Line?”

“Don’t forget the ones by the courthouse.”

“I say we head to County Line,” Brock said. “Better neighborhood.” Brock was their unacknowledged leader. Everyone knew that once he cut his hair and started doing homework, his ascent would be swift.

The town was quiet. A lone shopping cart with an ad circular clinging to its leg drifted aimlessly through the supermarket parking lot, some kids lit a string of firecrackers in the dead grass outside the fixed-rent apartment complex, a couple waitresses passed listlessly back and forth behind the blazing panes of glass at the Perkins like the world’s saddest figure skaters. Buildings

gradually slid away until only a few scattered lights remained. The football stadium, floodlights blazing, sat atop a distant hill like a citadel, something held aloft for praise. The other hills looked like shadowy cutouts under a purplish sky, a moon the color of crabmeat hanging at the edges.

The first of the orphanages appeared. The sign out front said simply KIDS, bracketed in neon, a string of Christmas lights stapled along the roofline. It was the cinder-blocked, deep windowed den of a psychic or palm reader, someone who preyed on those with little to give. As usual, Brock articulated what the others were thinking. "Let's find something a little more tasteful."

What the next orphanage lacked in sophistication, it made up for in size, housed in a prefab structure of monolithic proportions with a massive parking lot including gas pumps at the far end and a convenience kiosk as though visitors might need to refuel before reaching the front entrance. It looked like a supercenter where people bought toilet paper in bulk. Several busses were parked near the front doors and kids exited the orphanage single-file in matching blaze orange pajamas, backpacks slung over their shoulders, boarding the Trailways. "Nope," Brock said. "Keep going."

The third place appeared well-tended but unassuming. Seth, piloting his mom's minivan, turned in and parked next to the lone bus in the lot. "You think there'll be nuns?" he asked, but no one knew the answer to that.

There were no nuns. Instead, a rangy fellow who resembled an extra in a John Ford Western stood on a stepstool watering a hanging plant, exhaling the fumes of an unfiltered cigarette into the foliage. Without turning, he said, "Here for a pickup?"

“We want to check out the orphans,” Trip said, looking to his friends for confirmation. They were busy picking at old skateboarding scabs or studying the water-stained ceiling panels. For some reason Trip had put the hood of his sweatshirt up, cinching it tight so it framed his face, the fleshy lips and long feminine lashes, as though he were gazing through a porthole.

The night manager climbed down from his stool and gave everyone the once-over. It was so quiet they could hear the hum of the outdated computer behind the counter. “Check them out?” The man smiled as he ambled across the room to stow the stepstool in a closet. “This ain’t a lending library.”

“Yes, Sir—” Trip began, but the night manager cut him off.

“I know what you meant, son.” He addressed the group.

“Why aren’t you at the ballgame?”

“We’re not into football,” Brock said.

“Me neither. Just a lot of meaningless squabbling if you ask me. So you want to see the kids, huh? What for?”

“We just thought it’d be nice to talk to them for a minute,” Taylor said. “You know, about school and stuff.”

The night manager seemed skeptical. “Are you getting extra credit or something?” The boys shrugged or looked away, not wanting to lie. “I guess there’s no harm in it,” he said finally, “but you’ll have to wait until the gentleman from United Bauxite is done. Mr. Forsythe’s closing a package deal.”

The crew slid into some contoured vinyl chairs that looked like they’d been snatched up at a Laundromat liquidation sale, ashtrays built into the armrests. “These would be cool for parties,” Seth commented. It felt weird seeing people smoking in

such numbers again, but with the civil suits squelched and the sin taxes repealed, cigarettes were cheap commodities. Last year's Super Bowl-winning quarterback could be seen in a TV ad, casually holding a smoldering cigarette as he walked a tropical beach with his supermodel girlfriend. The cigarette companies no longer had to include those pesky warnings about the dangers of nicotine, low birth weights, all that hoopla, and the industry was booming. Camels and Kools could be bought in vending machines by pretty much anyone with a couple bucks to spare.

Taylor had an uncle Louis who spouted conspiracy theories every holiday. One of his favorites was that cigarettes were a voter suppression tool, their "pushers" operating at the highest levels. "Look who's dying from them," he said. "Poor folks, minorities, artistic types. All the thorns in the administration's side, killing themselves a pack at a time. Hell, those bastards in Washington would probably mix antifreeze with asbestos and peddle it in pill form if they thought they could get away with it." Uncle Louis would of course be haloed in smoke as he said this, pausing to let loose a rattling nicotine-laden cough.

The man from United Bauxite emerged with the orphanage owner, Forsythe, whom they recognized from his gilt-framed picture hanging over the cash drawer and his car dealer-style ads on local TV. "Bring us your tired, your weak, your orphan masses," he would say, costumed as Uncle Sam, pointing a bony finger at the camera. Forsythe made it sound as though a woman's civic duty was to give up her unplanned child. He was very convincing. Even now the owner smooth-talked and glad-handed the United Bauxite man, trying to close the deal when it appeared the deal was already

closed. Trailing behind was a gaggle of little foundlings in PJs and comfy slippers, prepared for the all-night ride to the United Bauxite compound, all of them dragging along their kid-sized luggage. Boys, mainly, a few girls tossed in for good measure. It was rumored the orphanages liked to close these big deals on nights and weekends, when the flow of children out the door wasn't quite so conspicuous. The owners also liked to catch kids when they were drowsy, like farmers rounding up roosting hens for the butcher. The United Bauxite man called to his assistant, a fine-boned woman in a gauzy dress that looked like it might come unraveled with a single strong tug. She was the type one saw at private galleries or wine tastings. "I've got to settle up accounts with Mr. Forsythe here," said the UB man. "Why don't you get the kids loaded onto the bus?"

There was an exchange of paperwork at the front counter, an invoice with yellow and pink duplicates. As Forsythe soldiered on with the forms, the United Bauxite man took a look at the crew seated opposite him.

"We're not for sale," Brock said mildly.

The man flashed them a smile. "Too bad. I bet you'd take to our refineries like ducks to water."

Mr. Forsythe glanced up. "Harry, what are these youngsters doing here?"

"They're here to look at the kids," said the night manager, leaning on the counter.

Mr. Forsythe's face told everyone he was striving to keep things pleasant. "This isn't a nature preserve. Hair is combed, teeth are brushed, kids are in bed excepting those our friend here has

chosen for his company's needs. They've just won themselves a life as productive citizens." A nod to the United Bauxite man, who was viewing things with a certain degree of mirth.

"Forsythe," he said, "you may as well take them through. It will be a formative experience. See how the other half lives, so to speak."

And so it was settled, Forsythe doing what was required to grease the wheels of commerce. "Yes," he replied, "you're probably right. Harry, go ahead and give them a tour, but quietly and quickly, please."

Harry entered some numbers on a keypad by the door and beckoned the crew to follow. The inner chamber smelled of tightly embroiled childhood, a mix of talcum powder and no-tears shampoo; beneath that the slow mold of wet towels and sweat socks; and, another stratum below, the various secretions and discharges, toe jam and urine, a layer cake of aromas.

Bunks were spaced closely together, barracks-style, with what appeared to be a nurse's station in the corner, and the younger children, those not chosen in the United Bauxite draft, tossed and turned, attempting to identify their final sleep positions. The overhead lights had been dimmed but a few small lamps burned as the older kids lay reading tattered paperbacks. The empty, just-vacated beds spaced randomly around the room were jarring, like a stranger who suddenly smiles to reveal a mouthful of missing teeth. This must've been the boys' quarters, for there were no girls in evidence. Lying on their sides, some of the kids regarded the tourists passing through with the expressionless gazes of zoo apes.

"Can we talk to them?" Seth asked.

“Sure,” said Harry. “Just keep your voices low and don’t disturb the sleeping ones.”

But none of them could think of much to say, so they merely nodded to the children, who returned their greetings with leaden solemnity, muttering hellos.

“How much does one cost?” Trip asked within earshot of the kids.

“It all depends,” Harry answered, ignoring the indelicacies of the question. “Individual adoption rates hold pretty steady. Always about the same number of couples can’t have kids of their own. The rate’s actually gone down a bit since Washington stopped letting same sex couples adopt. Money these days is in the corporate sector. Ever since the deportations started on the immigrant front, there’s been a big uptick in demand. Harvesting, fruit-picking, working the canneries, you name it. Washington dropped the minimum wage; that helped. So did letting some slack into the child labor laws.”

“So how much does one cost?” Brock said, uninterested in the economics. They were standing at the far end of the barracks, near a communal white-tiled bathroom and shower where a few stragglers were still scrubbing behind their ears or spitting toothpaste into the gleaming basins. A shaft of fluorescent light stretched from the doorway, reaching partway across a boy’s Star Wars coverlet. The child sat up in bed, watching them with round raccoon-y eyes, hands clasped over his stomach. His face appeared flushed, and a green dewdrop of snot dangled from one nostril.

“Healthy ones with normal IQs and a documented provenance can fetch upward of five to ten grand,” Harry said, regarding

the boy with the runny nose. “It ranges downward from there.”

“What’s the cheapest one you’ve got?” Trip asked.

“Well, this one here—” Harry motioned toward the child who sat watching them—“someone could probably snag him for as little as eight-hundred or a thousand bucks.”

“Wow,” Seth said. “That’s a pretty good bargain for a living person.”

“No doubt,” Harry agreed. “The organs alone are worth more than that. Of course,” he added, lowering his voice, “we don’t condone harvesting. These are all good kids who deserve loving homes.” Harry began guiding them back toward the door. “Orphanages were nearly phased out there for a while. The trend was in foster care, people taking kids in just to snag a little public assistance. But now the laws have changed and the foster care system can’t keep up. Too many unwanted. That’s where the private sector steps in to save the day. We provide a valuable service, generate some tax revenues, the spirit of competition keeps rates down.”

Trip kept looking over his shoulder at the runny-nosed boy still visible in the light cast by the bathroom. “You’re telling me I could get that kid back there for eight-hundred bucks? You can’t even get a Peavey half-stack for eight-hundred.”

Harry laughed. “I’m saying someone probably could. A grown-up. Of legal age.”

“There’s a law against teens adopting?” Brock asked.

Harry massaged his chin stubble. “This is hypothetical, right? I mean, there was a law, but there’ve been some new statutes lately, so I’m not positive. I’m not really the one to talk to. You’d have to check with a lawyer. But this is all hypothetical, right?”

"You already asked that," Taylor said.

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"Dude," Seth exclaimed as they crossed the parking lot, gravel crunching underfoot. "We could totally buy that kid." They climbed into his mom's minivan.

"What would we do with him?" Brock asked.

"Teach him how to skate," Trip said. "Show him some guitar riffs. Sign him up for the Webelos. You know, normal kid stuff."

"Plus I bet you could teach him to pick up your room," Seth added. "Do your laundry, take out the garbage, a few chores to earn his keep."

"You guys are whacked," Taylor said. "Kids need a mom and dad."

"All I've got is my mom," Trip argued, "and she's never around."

"Me too," Seth admitted.

"There are four of us," Brock said. "That's like twice as good as a mom and dad. Besides, look who's taking care of these kids now: a couple old dudes who are just going to sell them to a corporation that wants them for picking lettuce or whatever."

"It takes a village," Seth said.

"What?" Taylor said. "What does that mean? How are we going to come up with eight-hundred bucks? This is insane. What good is a kid to us? What do we get out of it? It just sounds like a lot of work."

"Companionship," Brock said. "He'd be our little bro'."

"Companionship!" Taylor repeated. He had brought the

volume level up a notch. He had become animated. "Get a dog. We can keep it at my house. I'll even take it for walks." There was a click as his seatbelt came unlatched.

"Keep your seatbelt on," Seth called from the driver's seat.

"We'll make a trade," Brock said. "Taylor's parents' big-screen for the kid."

"What?!" Taylor convulsed in his seat, but at least he'd re-buckled. "Don't you think they'd notice their TV is missing? And who says that Forsythe guy would trade anyhow?"

"Think about it," Brock said. "The longer Forsythe keeps those kids around, the longer he's got to feed them, clothe them, pay their dental bills. He benefits from a quick turnover. Haven't you ever watched the house flipping shows? It's like that, but with kids. And this one's obviously not going anywhere. It's a win-win. Forsythe gets a new flat-screen for the orphanage, plus he offloads a hard-to-offload kid."

"Ever wonder why the kid's so cheap?" Taylor asked the others. "Maybe there's something wrong with him. Did you notice how he didn't say anything? Maybe he's retarded. Or remember that movie about the orphan kid who killed her parents? Maybe he's psychotic. Besides, you never said how we're going to make the TV disappear without my parents freaking."

"That's easy," Brock said. "We'll stage a break-in."

The streets were filled with people leaning out of car windows, yelling and honking, laying rubber, hurling obscenities at the kid working the Taco Bell drive-thru, which could only mean the town's football squad had won. Inside Taylor's house, the teens donned some rubber gloves they found under the sink and were

now moving through the rooms, scattering CDs, overturning furniture, opening cupboards and drawers.

As they strained under the weight of the big-screen, maneuvering it awkwardly down the steps and across the lawn, they saw a couple classmates heaving rolls of TP into a sycamore two houses down—Don Cramer, who helped them with their algebra homework; and Tony Mostolli, better known as “Butterball.” The crew wedged the TV into the rear of the minivan and nodded to the vandals, who silently pumped their fists in the air. Solidarity. Then Butterball winged another roll.

A number of pre-Halloween pumpkins had been sacrificed to the gods of victory, their orangey rinds scattered over the road. Occasionally the pale countenances of revelers and mischief-makers appeared in the van’s headlights like some bacchanalian dream, but Seth kept the pedal down as they drove back to the orphanage. Already the would-be parents had matured to the point where such juvenile antics were beneath them.

They panicked, however, when they saw the new bus in the parking lot, a gleaming silvery vehicle with a Coors logo on its flank. “We’ve got to get in there,” Trip said. Seth and Brock were already unloading the big-screen. They could picture the Coors man plucking their orphan out from under them to work the assembly line in some bottling plant or harvest wheat in the North Dakota tundra. Their runny-nosed bro’ would not fare well in the northern plains.

“Whoa, there,” Harry said, holding up a cautionary hand when he saw the crew and its cargo. Seth was sweating and swaying under the weight of the TV, which gradually came to rest on

the floor of the lobby like a ship coming to ground. It really was a monstrous thing with a movie theater-sized screen. "What are you bringing that in here for? Are you going to be a problem?"

"Just the opposite," Brock said, emerging from behind the TV. "We're here to offer you a solution, a bargain. An exchange, if you will. The boy in back with the runny nose and the Star Wars comforter for this almost-new Samsung big-screen hi-def TV." Brock was really laying their cards on the table. Maybe that was how business was done; none of the others were entirely sure.

Harry came around the counter and circled the TV as though it were a prize heifer at a livestock auction, lifting its tail, eyeing its haunches appraisingly. "Does it work?" he asked.

Trip scrambled for an outlet. There ensued a tense moment where the crew feared the remote had been forgotten before Taylor reluctantly withdrew it from his jacket pocket. Harry produced an antenna, and soon they were entranced before *CSI: Detroit* in all its lustrous hues.

"What in the good Christ?" Forsythe said, startling them, though there was not any rancor in his voice.

"The boys here brought it in," Harry said, pointing a thumb toward the screen. "Good picture, wouldn't you say?"

"They just brought it in, huh? Doing their part for charitable causes?"

Harry smiled, and his mustache did a little dance. "They've got a proposition for you."

"This ought to be good," Forsythe said, glancing back toward the door to the orphanage's inner sanctum, where presumably the Coors man was traveling bunk to bunk, noting pulses and head

circumferences and breathing sounds with the company doctor. The procedure for picking children when they all lay with blankets up to their throats seemed mysterious, capricious, but then every child was a little bit of a crashout, being unformed clay and all that.

“We’re willing to swap you the TV for your most inexpensive child, the dark-eyed boy in the corner,” Brock said. “Think what this big-screen would do for your orphanage’s common room. The kids would love it.”

“This isn’t a pawn shop,” Forsythe said. “We don’t take trade.” He turned back toward the dormitory.

“You can’t?” Seth said, “Or you just don’t want to? Because is there any rule that states a trade can’t be negotiated? This is a fifteen-hundred dollar TV we’re talking about, and we know for a fact the child’s only worth eight-hundred or so.”

Forsythe glanced at Harry, who looked away. “What do you want with the kid? His name’s Oriel, by the way. You’re not into sick stuff, are you? I could call the cops right now and find out. I’m on a bowling team with Detective Fellowes. I could ask him to pull your files.”

“We don’t have files,” Brock assured him, “and we’re not into sick stuff. We just think we could do a good job of raising little Oriel. And you get a state of the art TV in return. It’s a win-win.”

“It’s not hot, is it?” Forsythe asked.

Trip went over and felt the set. “No, room temperature.”

Forsythe let go a frustrated exhalation of breath. “No, I meant...” The sentence petered out. They all watched the show for

a moment. Some porn music was playing while a sexy CSI analyzed evidence under a microscope. “Harry, what do you think? Is this by the book?”

Harry shrugged, but it was easy to see he’d already become wedded to the set. His eyes kept returning to it. The icy cold reaches of urban Detroit, by way of the Samsung folks, was just too alluring to ignore. “We could give the counselor a call, I suppose,” he offered half-heartedly.

“I don’t know,” Forsythe said. He was like the lab rat that knew it’d be shocked if it reached for the cheese, but oh how he wanted that cheese. “Boys, let me think on it some. I’ve got to go in and seal this deal, but once that’s done we’ll talk.”

In the end—after a true crime program and the evening news, after the Coors man led away his single-file flock to the silver bullet bus out front, after the crew was made to sign paperwork assuming its collective responsibility for Oriel’s care, forms acknowledging the lawful exchange of goods, an impromptu affidavit attesting that the TV was not in fact stolen—the adoption came to pass, all within the span of about an hour and a half. “I can’t believe it was that easy,” Brock said. “I waited longer to get my driver’s license.”

Trip wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders as they walked together toward the minivan. Oriel had been awakened from a fitful, wheezing slumber and was still in his pajamas, which were of the tight matching two-piece variety, with scores of little faded Buzz Lightyears on them. He was too old for such sleepwear. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, snozzled the snot when it threatened to drip from his nose. His slippers scuffed against the

pavement as he walked. His possessions, such as they were, filled a single duffle bag, which Seth tossed in back.

“This is awesome!” Seth said. “Our very own kid. We can let him do all the cool shit our parents never let us do. We can let him watch all the Friday the 13th movies.”

“Hey Fartface,” Brock said, “watch your language. We don’t want him picking up all your potty talk.”

“Where should we go?” Seth asked. “I feel like we should find a party or something. Trial by fire, right?”

“You can’t take a kid to a party,” Taylor grumbled.

“Why not?” Seth said.

“Look at him.” They all turned to observe Oriël, curled now in a fetal position in the way-back, covering himself with a down coat expelling stuffing from a torn arm-seam. “He’s cold,” Taylor continued. “He’s tired. He doesn’t feel good. We’ve got to figure out where he’s going to sleep tonight.” The boy stared back at them with his big eyes. Thus far they had not heard him speak. “Is that true?” Trip enunciated each syllable as though the kid were deaf and could only read lips. “Are you tired?”

Oriël nodded. With the sleeve of his coat, he swiped quickly at the snot on his upper lip.

“Ugh, don’t do that, man,” Seth said from up front. He reached in the glove box and rooted around for a Kleenex. “Here, pass that back.” Oriël took the tissue and folded it into his palm.

“We probably ought to steer clear of Taylor’s for awhile,” Brock said, “at least until the heat dies down. Let’s crash at Trip’s tonight. His mom’s probably working.”

Trip’s house was indeed quiet, his mom at the gym and

his big brother elsewhere, whereabouts unknown, though he'd left little residues of his presence: cologne lingering in the upstairs bathroom, a wet towel on the staircase, a half-eaten Pop-Tart on the kitchen counter. They installed Oriel on the basement futon, though this was Seth's preferred spot. Parenting was about sacrifice. Trip rummaged for some clean sheets and a quilt from the hall closet upstairs. Once the child was nestled in his cocoon, sleep seemed to overtake him instantly, and the crew started playing BlackOps 19: KillZone. One by one, as they fell victim to IEDs or knife wounds or M-16 crossfire, the players abandoned the game and staked out spots on various couches or guest beds or sleeping bags in unobtrusive spots. Trip was the last surviving commando. He called in an airstrike on the terrorist stronghold, saved his progress, and turned off the TV, thrusting the basement into pitch-black silence, all the more glaring in the wake of the mortar rounds and flash grenades from a few seconds earlier. Years ago he'd called permanent dibs on the basement couch, so Trip crashed there now, exhausted, still in his clothes. This last mission had taken a toll on him. He had led his troops into an ambush—that's where Brock bit it—and he should've known to expect sniper fire from the burnt-out church where Seth was mortally wounded.

As he was trying to still these thoughts, he heard a strange snuffling sound, wet and rhythmic. The others—even those in far corners of the house who had fallen asleep to the steady discharge of assault rifles—were awakened by it and made their stumbling way toward the source. They turned on a lamp and found Oriel lying on his stomach, breathing noisily, the pillowcase painted with a thick membrane of snot. "Oh, that's sick," Seth said, scratching his

head, hair already flat on one side where he'd slept on it.

"I can't listen to that shit," said Taylor. "It's driving me nuts."

"Learn to deal," Brock said. Oriel stirred at the sound of the voices but didn't rise, and the teens stumbled back to their various sleep nests.

It was around three when they were awakened by the cries. Everyone—even Trip's mom, who'd come home from her shift at the gym—rushed to see what was happening. Trip and Brock, who'd been asleep in the basement, bolted upright, flipped on the overhead lights, and were standing now by the futon, staring at Oriel, who stared back at them, eyes wide, breaths short and shallow.

"Who's this?" Trip's mother asked.

"Octave's little brother," Brock responded instantly.

"Who's Octave?"

"A buddy of ours," Brock said. In truth, Mr. Octave was a high school gym teacher who wore tube socks with red piping along the top and school-issue polo shirts tucked into polyester shorts hiked practically to his armpits. There were rumors he'd played Division I back in the Seventies, dropping thirty points in the regional semifinals of the Big Dance. Now his knees were shot and he hobbled around sipping coffee, handing out towels, timing wind sprints with the stopwatch that hung on a lanyard around his neck.

"What's he doing here?" Trip's mother asked.

"His family went on a cruise," Seth said.

Trip's mother regarded Seth skeptically. "And they left him

at home?”

“He’s got a cold,” Trip said. “They thought the travel would be too much strain, so they asked Brock’s parents to babysit. You know how people are always getting sick on those cruise ships.”

“Yeah,” Brock confirmed, “but my folks are doing line dancing tonight, or something, so they told us to keep an eye on him.”

“Jesus, what’s that smell?” Taylor said.

“Boys,” Trip’s mother said, “can’t you see he’s terrified? He wet the bed.”

Having been accused thusly, Oriel clutched the covers around him, trying to hide the evidence. “It was an accident,” he said softly. These were the first words they had heard him speak.

“It’s fine,” Trip’s mother said kindly. Then to the others she said, “You’re going to have to get him out of those wet clothes and into a hot bath. Trip, there are some old clothes of yours in a storage bin in the laundry room. They’ll be too big for him, but at least they’ll be clean and dry. You’ll have to get those sheets into the wash. You’re also going to have to disinfect the futon. There wasn’t a rubber sheet down, so I’m sure it soaked through.”

“Mom,” Trip said, “can you help us?”

She patted her son’s head as one might a Great Dane’s.

“Not my kid, not my problem. It’s late. I’m going to bed.” She smiled then, yawned, and departed.

Brock started directing traffic, and they soon had the child bathed and dressed, clean sheets on the futon and the soiled ones in the wash. They were all exhausted by the time they collapsed again in their respective corners.

The sun had barely risen when Trip felt someone tapping his shoulder. Oriel stood before him in baggy borrowed sweat-pants, rubbing his dripping nose on the sleeve of one of Trip's old Caliber tees. "Oh, man, don't do that," Trip said. "There's Kleenex in the bathroom."

"At the orphanage we always ate at seven," Oriel said.

"That's cool," Trip murmured, eyes drifting shut.

The boy waited to speak until Trip had fallen asleep again.

"It's after seven," he said.

Trip sat up, startled. "Dude, it's Saturday. Chill out."

"But I'm hungry."

Trip sighed. "Look, there's cereal in the kitchen. I think there're some clean bowls in the cupboard. If not, check the dishwasher." Oriel didn't move. "What?" Trip asked finally.

"Where's the kitchen?"

Trip had to accompany him upstairs and sit with Oriel while he ate. He tried engaging the kid in conversation, but Oriel's answers were monosyllabic, a yes or no, sometimes a shrug. Trip wasn't able to glean much information about the boy's background—how he liked the orphanage, how long he'd been there. Oriel wouldn't even open up about hobbies or favorite movies, and Trip began to wonder if the orphans had been exposed to that kind of stuff. He was hesitant to ask about Oriel's parents. Usually the orphans were the result of hurried couplings in cars on Friday nights or too many drinks at one of the clubs downtown. There used to be other solutions to that kind of problem, but the cheap labor had come to be viewed as essential if the US hoped to compete with China in the global economy.

As soon as the others awoke, everyone started playing BlackOps except for Taylor, whose parents had called first thing to tell him about the break-in. They made him come home, there was a police officer who wanted to interview him about the theft, so Oriel took his place on the commando mission. They were raiding a village where a rebel warlord was said to be hiding, but it soon became clear the boy had never played video games before, never touched a controller, and his character kept getting blown up or gunned down, jeopardizing the mission and irritating the other commandos, who were still tired from the previous night's bed-wetting incident.

"Okay, let's do something else," Seth said finally, tossing his controller down, so they wolfed some Doritos and Chips Ahoys before going over to the skate park to teach Oriel the basics. He was given an old cast-off board of Trip's, but they soon found him to be hopelessly uncoordinated. He couldn't even stand on the board without it flying out from under him, leaving Oriel in a crumpled mass on the ground, a surprised look on his face. After awhile he merely sat on a bench watching them on the ramps and railings. By the time they went over to collect him, Oriel was shivering in the brisk autumn air, teeth chattering. They had remembered to patch the holes in his puffy jacket with electrical tape but had not thought to find him gloves or a hat. He held a tissue to his nose, trying to stem the flow of snot, but the Kleenex was insufficient to the task.

"Oh, man," Brock said, "we need to get him home where it's warm." They threw their boards in the back of the minivan and set out for Trip's.

“What are we going to do about school?” Trip asked from the backseat.

“What do you mean?” Seth said.

“Well, don’t we have to sign him up, like with Little League? Make sure he’s had his shots and all that?”

“No, I think you just put him on the bus when it comes by,” Brock said. “They have to take him. It’s the law.”

“But how will the bus know to stop for him if he’s not signed up?” Trip asked.

“They’ll see him standing there with his book bag,” Brock argued. “It’s a no-brainer.” The others nodded. And so that issue, at least, was settled.

Back home they started watching some old Pink Floyd concert footage, vintage Roger Waters stuff. Trip noticed Oriel was still shivering so he rounded up a couple blankets for him, but as soon as he had the edges tucked behind the orphan, the way Trip’s mother used to do, Oriel struggled to free himself from his blanket-burrito, looking around frantically. Seth glanced up from the TV and noticed the orphan squirming. “What’s his deal?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Trip said. “Maybe he doesn’t like being wrapped up like that. I mean, he never had a mom to tuck him in snug as a bug.”

Oriel was taking quick, shallow breaths as he had the night before. Working his arms free, he struggled to stand. “Bathroom,” he said.

Trip was pointing in the direction of the little half-bath by the stairs when Oriel put his hand to his mouth, trying but fail-

ing to stanch a mist of Dorito-flecked vomit that sprayed forth, settling over the carpet, Brock's Vans, the back of Seth's Stooges t-shirt, the gaming console. A collective cry of horror rang out. Seth clutched at his shirt as though it were some parasitic creature that had latched onto him, his hand coming away slimy. He too started feeling sick and rushed for the bathroom. Brock was running around in circles, stopping periodically to examine his shoes. Trip went to retrieve paper towels and some stain removal spray for the carpet. Oriel, looking much relieved, stood perfectly still, like the calm eye of a storm.

"Maybe you better rest," Brock said, placing his hand on the child's shoulder. This was after he and the others had managed to clean themselves, their clothes, and the basement, and were exhausted by the effort. Thankfully the gaming console still functioned.

"I feel better now, sir," Oriel replied, even managing a wan smile. "What should we play?"

"What do you like?"

"Monopoly."

None of the teens had played in years, but they managed to locate an old Monopoly game and most of the pieces under Trip's bed, and for several hours they trudged around the board, from Mediterranean Avenue to Park Place, in a state of excruciating boredom. At one point, Seth got up for a bag of chips from the pantry but was scolded by Brock.

"Why do you think he hurled?" Brock said. "He's not used to eating all that crap. We need to find something healthy for him. Kids need vegetables." So Seth rooted around in the fridge and

came back with carrot sticks and broccoli.

“Can I at least get some ranch to dip them in?” he asked, and Brock nodded. Oriel did seem to enjoy this snack, at least more than the others did. They gnawed at the vegetables half-heartedly. During the game, they again tried talking to Oriel about his past at the orphanage but he seemed utterly focused on the task at hand. Eventually his empire of hotels and railroads was driving the others toward bankruptcy. Seth, down to his last fifty bucks and stuck in jail, didn’t even try to extricate himself, despite having a get out of jail free card. Instead he spent three turns incarcerated. Once released, he promptly landed on Virginia Avenue, one of Oriel’s hotel properties. He’d already mortgaged his own properties, and when he tried borrowing a couple hundred dollars from Trip, he was informed by the banker—Oriel—that he couldn’t.

“This game sucks donkey dick,” he said, and they thought for a second Seth was going to upend the board, but he merely left the kitchen table and disappeared downstairs. Soon they heard the familiar sounds of BlackOps.

“I think I’m ready to forfeit,” Brock said.

“Yeah, me too,” Trip added. “Oriel, you win.” The child looked crestfallen but said nothing. He followed them to the basement and sat watching as they played their video game. He was wheezing now and had a rattle in his chest. Probably just a sinus infection, they supposed.

The crew felt they might be pushing their luck to stay at Trip’s for another night, so they drove over to Brock’s. Brock was the oldest of five siblings and lived in a kid-filled cul-de-sac, so his parents were accustomed to the sight of strange children passing

in and out of their house at all hours. That night they put Oriel in a sleeping bag on the floor in Brock's brother's room. Kurt was around the same age as the orphan and they hoped the two might bond, but it wasn't more than half an hour later when Kurt shuffled into the family room, interrupting them in the midst of a BlackOps firefight.

"I can't sleep because of that kid you put in my room," he said. "He's breathing too loud."

Brock abandoned the game so he could relocate Oriel to his room. He hated waking the orphan, who did seem a little under the weather, so he decided to lift him, sleeping bag and all, and carry him. Brock knew Oriel was around Kurt's age from the birth certificate they'd been given at the orphanage, but he was amazed at how much lighter the orphan was than his brother. They were midway down the hall when Oriel woke to find himself being transported through a strange house by a near-stranger toward some unknown destination. The look in his eyes was undiluted panic, and he started freaking out, yelling and flailing. Brock felt something warm and wet soaking through onto his arms and fought the urge to drop Oriel. The kid was like a porcupine or skunk, but his defense mechanism was to piss himself at the slightest whiff of danger.

"For Christ's sake, kid," Brock said, peeling the orphan from the soaked sleeping bag so the two stood facing one another in the hallway.

"Don't tell the others," Oriel said.

"Why not?"

"I don't want them to think I was a bad trade."

“You think we’re going to send you back to the orphanage?” Brock asked.

“I’m okay with that,” Oriel admitted. “Everyone there was nice. I just don’t want to be a disappointment, that’s all.”

Light from the bathroom slanted across the carpet, illuminating the otherwise darkened hallway. Brock looked up at the framed photos of his family lining one wall. He remembered when they were taken, at the studio out by the mall with the discount packages and the coupon circulars that came in the mail. He recalled the struggle to get everyone bathed and dressed in the formal clothes his mom had ironed and laid out for them the previous night, how frenzied his parents seemed as they worked to knot ties and flatten stray hairs into place, how his dad had been in such a rush to get them to the sitting on time that he almost pulled out in front of a van barreling through an intersection. Yet none of that tension was visible in his parents’ faces. In the portraits they appeared happy, relaxed. The constant turmoil had become woven into their lives.

It occurred to Brock that a child might need a family. In PR campaigns, corporations stressed their close ties to the children they adopted. They publicized efforts to educate the children, to set up scholarship funds and athletic programs for them, but Brock questioned the truthfulness of such claims. And he knew that for all the fun he and the others might have with Oriel, all the things they might teach him, they were not a family either, just a loose collective of teens linked by a common interest in skating, psychedelic rock, and low-grade drug use.

The next morning Oriel’s cold or sinus infection, whatever

it was, had grown worse. Each breath was labored, and his cheeks were flushed, which the teens mistook for a sign of renewed vigor despite the fact that the child merely curled up on the couch, shivering under a blanket.

Taylor arrived and recounted for them his interview with the police. The cops had been swamped with calls after the football game—altercations, disturbances, vandalism—so were moving quickly from incident to incident, taking little time with issues that could be resolved through an insurance claim. They asked Taylor a few questions about his whereabouts on Friday night and seemed satisfied with his answers. His parents appeared less convinced, and Taylor feared they considered him a suspect. Maybe he was being paranoid, but he felt like his dad studied him the rest of the night for signs of guilt, and his mom—shaken by the break-in—made Taylor and his sister stay home for family time, which meant watching a movie on the smaller 30-inch set Taylor’s father had brought up from the basement and planted in the crater left by the missing big-screen.

“Just don’t do anything stupid,” Brock told him, “and we’ll be in the clear.”

They wanted to check out the new issues at Comic Haven, but it appeared Oriel was in no condition to travel. After waking briefly, he had again drifted off into a troubled sleep, twisting and jerking, his breathing still ragged. Brock’s mother stepped into the family room to invite the boys to breakfast, where a huge stack of blueberry pancakes awaited them. Seeing Oriel on her couch, she went over and pressed the back of her hand to his cheek. “Who is this boy?” she demanded.

“Octave’s kid brother,” Trip said.

The name didn’t ring any bells, which was the point. “Well, whoever he is,” Brock’s mother said, “you need to take him back to his house. Can’t you see how sick he is? The poor thing’s running a fever.”

This was news to the teens. “Okay, Mom,” Brock said. “We will after breakfast.”

“No, Brock, right now. This child might need hospitalization.”

Her tone startled the boys, as did the word ‘hospitalization,’ which made them feel as though they’d just swallowed a stone, its cold bulk descending into their stomachs. They conferred in Brock’s bedroom.

“What are we going to do?” Trip asked.

“Maybe we could just drop him outside the hospital and take off,” Taylor suggested. “I’ve seen that in movies. The doctors will have to treat him. It’s some kind of Hypnotic Oath or something.”

“Yeah, and what happens when they trace him back to the orphanage?” Brock asked. If forced to, Brock would’ve admitted he no longer had much interest in Oriel. After all, he had four siblings of his own, and the barrage of bodily fluids had prevented him from bonding with the child. He was now primarily acting in the interest of self-preservation. “The cops will go question the owner, he’ll tell them about the trade for the big-screen, then we’re toast.”

“Shit,” Taylor muttered. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“We’ll just take him ourselves,” Seth said. “The doctor will poke around and prescribe some pills, no big deal.”

“Hey, numb-nuts, have you ever been to the doctor? They cost money,” Brock said. “Which we don’t have.”

“When my mom takes me, she just hands the lady at the front desk a card,” Trip said.

“That’s her insurance card,” Brock said, exasperated. “Insurance. Which we also don’t have.”

“Right, but Trip might be onto something here,” Seth said. “All we need is one of those cards. Our folks all have them.”

“My mom worked a late shift last night,” Trip said, “so she’s probably still sleeping. She keeps the card in her purse. It’d be easy enough to swipe.”

The walk-in clinics were closed on Sundays, so they had to take Oriel to the ER, which was about as busy as one might expect on a football weekend. The orphan slumped in his chair, fists full of balled-up Kleenexes, while the others thumbed desultorily through magazines detailing celebrity infidelities and addictions, candid photos of stars walking their dogs and buying lattes. The boredom quotient was off the charts.

If the doctor was surprised by the sight of four scraggly-looking skate punks chaperoning a child presenting with obvious symptoms of pneumonia, he didn’t show it. He didn’t even bother questioning their relationship to the afflicted. The physician was nearing the end of a gruesome 17-hour shift during which he’d seen—among other ailments—a dog bite, a burst appendix, acute alcohol poisoning, a botched suicide by Liquid Drano, and two puncture wounds courtesy of a husband and wife who forked each other over the last of the prime rib on the Bonanza buffet line. The only time he even glanced in the teens’ direction was when they

protested his recommendation of admitting Oriel for an overnight stay.

“He’d be too scared here by himself,” Trip said.

“He’d be more comfortable with his parents,” Brock added.

“Whatever,” the doctor said, shrugging. He wrote out a prescription for some horse pills and advised them to rent a nebulizer from the medical supply store.

“A what?” Seth said.

“It’s a machine to help him breathe.”

“Can you write it down for us?” Taylor said. Sighing, the doctor scribbled the word on the back of the script he handed them.

Trip had wisely borrowed his mom’s credit card along with the insurance card, so they had money for the pills and the nebulizer. They hustled Oriel up to Seth’s bedroom, hoping to avoid any grown-ups. After their run-in that morning with Brock’s mom and the puking incident at Trip’s, the teens had learned their lesson: parents were to be avoided. And they couldn’t risk stepping foot in Taylor’s house, which was still sort of a crime scene. They convinced Oriel to take one of the pills without too much difficulty but the nebulizer was another matter. When they plugged it in, it made a sound like an air compressor, and Oriel shied from it like a dog at the vet, shaking his head vehemently and turning his face away when they made overtures of pressing the mask to his face.

“It’s for your own good,” Trip pleaded, the words sounding uncomfortably like his mother’s.

Seth tried reasoning with him. “We wouldn’t make you do it unless the doctor said so.” But the boy remained unconvinced,

and when Brock pinned Oriel's slender arms back so Taylor could hold the mask in place, Brock experienced an unexpected, shameful rush of pleasure. He'd never bullied anyone in his life, yet Brock found that he enjoyed making Oriel do something he didn't want to do. The full weight of the feeling struck him. Those occasions Brock's father had tossed him into the car or held him down and spanked him, the time he forcibly brushed his son's teeth while Brock cried and flailed—had his dad secretly enjoyed them? Did parents relish their little flashes of tyranny? Were they an outlet, some orgasm of pent-up emotion, an expulsion of dangerous waste so the system could reset to more manageable levels? Brock let go of the boy as though he'd been holding his palms to a hot stove, but by that point Oriel had inhaled enough mist to recognize the machine really could make him feel better, and he succumbed to it without further manhandling.

After his nebulizer treatment, the child seemed more comfortable and soon drifted off to sleep while the teens sprawled on the bedroom floor. "Is anyone else starting to think this was a bad idea?" Taylor whispered.

"Which part?" Seth asked.

"All of it. I mean, our weekend is shot and we didn't do anything cool. It was all just cleaning and hard work. And this kid is practically a mute."

"It'll take time," Trip said.

"That's the thing," Brock said. "He's ours now. Forever."

This word frightened the crew, who like other teens were extremely shortsighted, the future hovering far in the distance, inky and ill-defined. They couldn't imagine being twenty, let alone forty or

fifty, possessing something that would outlive them.

“We signed papers,” Taylor agreed.

“I don’t think you can enter into a binding contract with a minor,” Seth said. His mom’s last boyfriend had been an attorney, so Seth’s observations on legal matters were given added weight. “Let’s just get him onto the bus in the morning and we’ll take it from there,” Brock said.

They were right to assume the bus driver would stop for Oriel. The driver, a retiree of the plumber’s and steamfitter’s local, was merely counting the days until he could quit this crummy part-time gig and escape to Vero Beach. If he saw a kid waiting, he picked him up, no questions asked. He wasn’t about to get canned for leaving some student out in the cold to freeze like that driver over in Harkness had done.

The confusion didn’t begin until Oriel got to school. He filed off the bus with the other kids, but while they hung up coats and backpacks and grabbed folders and notebooks from their lockers, Oriel roamed the hallways. He was wearing new jeans and a new button-down shirt, his sneakers bright white. His jacket still had that polyester-perfume store smell about it. His backpack, also new, contained packs of pencils and erasers, glue sticks, notebooks, Kleenex, a few comics, half a pack of bubblegum, and Seth’s sister’s old MP3 player preloaded with Britney Spears and techno-pop. Oriel felt that if he kept walking, people would assume he knew where he was headed and would ignore him, but as the hallways emptied his presence became more noticeable. The bell rang, startling the orphan, who had never set foot in a school before. His previous lessons had always been conducted at the orphanage.

It was the librarian who finally stopped him. When she found he could not answer the most basic questions about his teacher, his classroom, or the location of his locker, she guided him to the office, where Oriel sat digging in his pack for a tissue, nose running, feverish face flushed from all that walking.

The principal was somewhat flustered to find a strange child in his midst. After his secretary failed to find evidence of the boy's name in the school rolls, Principal Hargrove led Oriel into his office. "Son," he said kindly, "I'm not sure you're at the right place. Can you tell me your mom and dad's name so I can give them a call?"

"I don't have a mom or dad," Oriel said softly.

"Everyone has a mom and a dad," the principal explained. "That's just a biological fact."

"No, I mean I don't know who they are."

"You're an orphan?" This too caught Principal Hargrove off guard. "From which orphanage?"

"Mr. Forsythe's."

"On County Line or downtown?"

"1263 County Line Road," Oriel recited.

"How'd you escape?"

"I didn't," the boy said, a little affronted. "I was adopted."

"Oh, okay." Principal Hargrove smiled broadly to indicate some great confusion had been resolved. "Well, just tell me who your adoptive parents are and I'll give them a quick call."

Here Oriel faltered. The teens, for all their constant chatter, had never bothered to introduce themselves. He began chewing a hangnail. "One's called Trip, I think, and there's a Seth...and a

Brad, maybe. I'm not sure of the other one's name."

"Son, you're going to have to take that hand away from your mouth. I can't make out what you're saying."

Oriel repeated the names as he remembered them.

"Kiddo," the principal said once he'd finished, "only two parents to a child, that's generally how it works." Mr. Hargrove leaned back in his chair and stared out the window at the gunmetal sky. The flag was whipping back and forth, prompted by a strong north wind, the last of the autumn leaves swirling and eddying, coming to rest along the curb where the busses parked. He tapped a fountain pen on his lower lip and could taste the acrid ink on his tongue. He wondered if his lip was blue. "Did you say Trip and Seth?" he asked suddenly.

The boy nodded.

Principal Hargrove began to recall a quartet of boys who passed through his halls a few years back. They had been students of middling merit, borderline delinquents, causing turmoil in the classroom, pulling pranks in the music and art rooms. In the gymnasium, where tables were arranged each day for lunch, the boys had bent silverware and tossed Jell-O at the high gym ceiling to see if it would stick. (It did, and Hargrove was forced to hire a contractor to scrape and repaint, not to mention revising the whole lunch menu to eliminate any foods that might double as bonding agents.) Yes, he remembered now. These boys had routinely blessed the girls with window-rattling bursts of flatulence fueled by a steady diet of Ding-Dongs and Mountain Dew. They had stolen petty objects from their homes to sell on the playground, items like powerlifting gloves and swimsuit catalogs the other kids paid good

money for. Anyone they disapproved of they called a homo-tard. Many over the years had earned this appellation, so many in fact that Hargrove came to picture them as some species of early man, walking upright but with hairy knuckles dragging. To his chagrin, the word survived its creators and could still be heard knocking around the school.

By sixth grade the boys were coming to class reeking of pot and spanking it to girlie mags in the staff bathroom, which was lockable. One Halloween a miscreant spray-painted a giant neon cock-and-balls on the side of the school. Hargrove knew who it was but lacked the evidence to prosecute. Seth Grady and Trip Winton. The third was not named Brad, but Brock. Brock Ander-ton. And the fourth was Taylor Evans. What could they possibly have to do with this whole mix-up?

Hargrove called the orphanage but the man who answered was cagey with him, citing confidentiality, feigning ignorance—a dead end—so the principal started dialing parents. Meanwhile the orphan sat before him looking miserable, snot issuing from him at an alarming clip, and the principal tossed a box of Kleenex to Oriel while waiting for someone to pick up. Hargrove seemed to recall that of the four households, Brock's was the only one still intact, but when he got the Andertons' machine he moved on to Trip's mother.

"Yes?" she answered groggily, coming off another late shift at the gym. The principal stated his reason for calling and asked if she was aware of what by now he had deemed The Oriel Situation.

"The what?" Trip's mother said.

"There's a boy in my office," Principal Hargrove repeated,

“and I don’t know where he came from, but he claims your son and some of his friends adopted him from a local orphanage.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Trip’s mother murmured, and the principal thanked her for her time, about to hang up. “Wait,” she added, more alert now. “There was a kid hanging around this weekend, a younger boy, kind of sickly. They said he was somebody’s kid brother. That could’ve been him.”

After the call ended, Trip’s mother lay in bed, mind racing. She loved her son and his friends, but sometimes they could be such jackasses. The first thing she needed to do was check her bank balance and credit card statements, a lesson she’d learned after unwittingly bankrolling Pearl Jam tickets and a near mint X-Men inaugural issue. Sure enough, when she went online she found suspicious charges for Gaddis Memorial, CVS, Abercrombie, Foot Locker, American Eagle. From these it was easy enough to chart the crew’s whereabouts. They had gone to the emergency room for some reason and afterward filled a prescription. Then they went clothes shopping at the mall—whether for themselves or the boy she couldn’t be sure.

The charge from Gaddis was a co-pay, and Debbie hoped it was Trip who had required the medical attention. If someone else had been treated on her insurance card, she’d probably get stuck with the full bill. Wait, was she actually wishing injury on her own son? Sudden fear for his wellbeing stabbed at her, and Debbie grabbed her coat and purse and left for the high school, not even bothering with her hair and makeup.

Normally Trip would’ve welcomed a break from geometry, but it was ominous to receive a summons to the office on a Mon-

day morning from one of the school secretaries. The hallways were empty, the floors still buffed to a high shine where the weekend cleaning crew had gone over them. Trip noticed a sheet of paper on the floor with a dusty shoeprint on it, and when he stepped closer he saw it was Rick Shoenfeld's English homework. Rick Shoenfeld was on the swim team. He had thick casing-like legs and terrible eyesight and smelled of pool chemicals. A couple years back he made the mistake of trusting his only friend, Peter Melton, with the terrible secret that he sometimes enjoyed coating his genitals with Cool Whip and allowing the family dog to lick it off. He was promptly exposed, a betrayal that moved Peter Melton a rung or two up the social ladder and caused Rick, forever after, to be known as Whip-Dick. Trip left the paper where it lay.

The outer office was walled in a sort of semi-opaque reinforced glass so Trip could only make out shadows within, but as he and the secretary drew closer Trip saw his mom leaning on the front desk, talking to the vice-principal, her hair matted flat on one side where she'd slept on it. She was still wearing her work shirt with the gym logo on it, and she'd thrown a skirt over some workout tights. "Oh, shit," Trip muttered. The secretary regarded him but said nothing, figuring profanity was the least of his problems. The vice-principal's office was brick and windowless like some kind of holding cell. Bryce Haverford had tried to make it over into a shrine of his accomplishments, framed diplomas on the walls along with less impressive unframed certificates memorializing the completion of trainings, online modules, and CPR certifications. Vice-Principal Haverford had a Dare to Be Drug Free poster above his desk, and a letter, circa 2015, thanking him for his service as

a Kidtastic Klass Klown. Trip had not heard of the organization and wondered if the credential had been produced on Haverford's office printer.

It did not take long to break him. They started with the credit card charges, working their way backwards until Trip finally confessed that he and his friends had stolen the big-screen from Taylor's parents, swapping it for a young boy. "We weren't really thinking," Trip admitted. The inarguable logic of this left the others stunned.

Vice-Principal Haverford knew enough about the four teens to conclude they were probably the worst caregivers imaginable for an impressionable child. He had to struggle to come up with a worse option: some Hell's Angels, maybe, or some tweakers or Neo-Nazis. "Jeeze," he said, leaning back in his chair, putting his hands behind his head and gazing up at the ceiling. "I'm not sure this is a school matter." Trip and his mother waited for the vice-principal to say more. "I'm not sure it even needs to be a police matter," he added, "assuming Taylor's folks decide not to press charges over the TV. To be honest, I'm not sure what kind of matter this is. That might be for you all to decide. I just hope you get that kid back where he belongs."

Mr. Haverford called the other teens out of class, and as soon as they saw Trip standing outside the office with his mom they knew what was up. They were made to call their parents, who met them at the school, and they formed a four-car caravan over to the elementary to pick up Oriel, who was waiting for them in the principal's office.

As she drove, Trip's mother glanced over now and again

at her son. She was mad about the theft of her credit card and the Evans's big-screen, but more than anything she was baffled. Of all the things they could've traded the TV for, all the things other teens would've traded it for—drugs, cigarettes, video games, comic books, hand-jobs at the Asian massage parlor—they chose a child. Even if meant with the best of intentions it was still a tad sick and wrong. “What were you going to do with him?” she asked.

Trip looked at her, surprised. “We were going to raise him.”

“Trip,” and here Debbie found herself unaccountably on the verge of tears, “what do any of you know about raising a child?”

“We were learning.”

“What did you learn?”

“Well, for one thing you have to dress them warm. A hat and gloves. And you have to find them their own space where they feel comfortable.” He thought for a second. “And you have to give them healthy stuff to eat, not just junk food. And you have to take them to the doctor right away if they get sick, and sometimes you have to do shit with them you don't really want to do, like boring kid games.”

Now Debbie did cry a little, though smiling, as she reached over and tousled her son's hair. It was true he had learned a few lessons, had in fact picked up on this parenting thing more quickly than she ever did. But then, she was never the most attentive student.

When faced with this crowd of angry parents, Mr. Forsythe didn't put up much resistance, especially when Oriel came running in and attached himself to the man's leg. He had to admit he

missed the little bugger and regretted his decision to ship him off with a Dodge Caravan full of teenaged punks in the first place. Forsythe could see that Oriel was no worse for wear, though his sinus troubles had perhaps been amplified by the change of setting. Taylor's parents sought out their big-screen and found a whole herd of young children clustered around it as Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch burst forth in full splendor. Taylor's dad was about to unplug the set when Taylor's mom placed her hand on his forearm. "Let's think about this for a second," she said, looking upon the shining faces of the children. "We could donate the TV to the orphanage, then Taylor and his friends could work to buy us a new one, a bigger one. It's a win-win. The orphans get to keep their TV and we get a new one, plus a tax write-off."

"What about the boys?" Taylor's dad asked, releasing the plug. "What do they get out of it?"

"I didn't say it was a win-win-win," Taylor's mom said, smiling. "But they'll learn a valuable lesson."

"That's definitely worth something," Taylor's dad agreed. "Character building."

"Yes, character building," Taylor's mom said, and there was a touch of cruelty in their laughter.

Only the matter of the paperwork remained, so Brock handed back Oriel's birth certificate and the copies of the legal forms they had signed. Mr. Forsythe placed the certificate in his file drawer and shredded everything else. Seth ran out to the van and returned with the old skateboard they had lent for Oriel's use.

"Here you go, little man," he said, thrusting the board at Oriel. "You better practice so you can show us some tricks when

we come back.”

The child beamed. “You’re coming back?”

“Definitely,” Brock said, stepping forward and patting the child on the head. Trip and Taylor also came forward to pat Oriel’s back and give him high fives.

And they did return regularly all through the winter and into the spring, and when summer came, Mr. Forsythe’s assistant, Harry, would chaperone them over to the neighboring orphanage with its mammoth parking lot, perfect for practicing skateboard basics, and they even got Harry onto the board once or twice, he of the western shirts and jeans and cowboy boots, cigarette dangling from his mouth like the Marlboro Man of old. But one Saturday in September when they arrived with some new comics for Oriel, Harry shook his head from his post behind the front desk and said, “He’s gone,” and they weren’t sure at first what that meant, thinking maybe he’d simply been taken on some sort of field trip or medical check-up, but then Harry added, “adopted.”

The feeling of loss came suddenly over them, a sensation so stinging and so foreign they kept their eyes focused on the floor tiles and could not risk meeting one another’s eyes. To see the emotion pooling there would’ve been shameful—not as bad as dipping your balls in dessert topping and having a canine lap at them, but shameful nevertheless. Eventually the feeling grew more familiar to them as they split with girlfriends or were distanced from one another by jobs or junior college or, in one case, the armed forces, but they never felt it as keenly as they did that afternoon. When you’re sixteen, you firmly believe that everything and everyone is fixed in place, and the concept of endings is one that no one both-

ers explaining to you because, hey, why spoil the party?

“He wasn’t bought by one of those corporations, was he?”

Trip said, jaw clenched, staring Harry in the eye, and Harry knew how he felt, he really did.

“No, he was adopted by a real nice man and lady looking to start a family,” Harry lied.