

# Notions of Roller- Rink Infinity

## **FIRST YOU HAD TO SETTLE THE QUESTION OF OUT.**

When did you get out? Asking this was showing off, even though anyone you could brag to had received the same gift and had come by it the same way you did. Same sun wrapped in shiny paper, same soft benevolent sky, same gravel road that sooner or later skinned you. It was hard not to believe it belonged to you more than anyone else, made for you and waiting all these years for you to come along. Everyone felt that way. We were grateful just to be standing there in that heat after such a long bleak year in the city. When did you get out? was the sound of our trap biting shut; we took the bait year after year, pure pinned joy in the town of Sag Harbor.

Then there was the next out: How long are you out for?—and

the competition had begun. The magic answer was Through Labor Day or The Whole Summer. Anything less was to signal misfortune. Out for a weekend at the start of the season, to open up the house, sweep cracks, that was okay. But only coming out for a month? A week? What was wrong, were you having financial difficulties? Everyone had financial difficulties, sure, but to let it interfere with Sag, your shit was seriously amiss. Out for a week, a month, and you were allowing yourself to be cheated by life. Ask, How long are you out for? and a cloud wiped the sun. The question trailed a whiff of autumn. All answers contemplated the end, the death of summer at its very beginning. Still waiting for the bay to warm up so you could go for a swim and already picturing it frozen over. Labor Day suddenly not so far off at all.

The final out was one-half information-gathering and one-half prayer: Who else is out? The season had begun, we were proof of it, instrument of it, but things couldn't really get started until all the players took their marks, bounding down driveways, all gimme-fives. The others were necessary, and we needed word. The person standing before you in pleated salmon shorts might say, "I talked to him on Wednesday and he said they were coming out." They were always the first ones out, never missed June like their lives depended on it. (This was true.) Someone might offer, "Their lawn was cut." A cut lawn was an undeniable omen of impending habitation, today or tomorrow. "Saw a car in their driveway." Even better. There was no greater truth than a car in a driveway. A car in the driveway was an invitation to knock on the door and get down to the business of summer. Knock on that door and watch it relent under your knuckles—once you were out, the door stayed unlocked until you closed up the house.

Once we're all out, we can begin.

**MY NAME IS BEN.** In the summer of 1985 I was fifteen years old. My brother, Reggie, was fourteen. As for when we got out, we got out that morning, hour and a half flat, having beat the traffic. Over the

course of a summer, you heard a lot of different strategies of how to beat the traffic, or at least slap it around a little. There were those who ditched the office early on Friday afternoon, casually letting their co-workers know the reason for their departure in order to enjoy a little low-pressure envy. Others headed back to the city late Sunday evening, choking every last pulse of joy from the weekend with cocoa-buttered hands. They stopped to grab a bite and watched the slow red surge outside the restaurant window while dragging clam strips through tartar sauce—soon, soon, not yet—until the coast was clear.

My father's method was easy and brutal—hit the road at five in the morning so that we were the only living souls on the Long Island Expressway, making a break for it in the haunted dark. Every so often my mother said, "There's no traffic," as if it were a miracle. Well, it wasn't really dark, June sunrises are up and at 'em, but I always remember those drives that way—memory has a palette and broad brush. Perhaps I remember it that way because my eyes were closed most of the time. The trick of those early-morning jaunts was to wake up just enough to haul a bag of clothes down to the car, nestle in, and then retreat back into sleep. Any unnecessary movement might exile you from the realm of half asleep and into the bleary half awake, so my brother and I did a zombie march slow and mute until we hit the backseat, where we turned into our separate nooks, sniffing upholstery, butt to butt, more or less looking like a Rorschach test. What do you see in this picture? Two brothers going off in different directions.

We had recently ceased to be twins. We were born ten months apart and until I went to high school we came as a matched set, more Siamese than fraternal or identical, defined by an uncanny inseparability. Joined not at the hip or spleen or nervous system but at that more important place—that spot on your self where you meet the world.

There was something in the human DNA that compelled people to say "Benji 'n' Reggie, Benji 'n' Reggie" in a singsong way, as if we were cartoon characters or mascots of some twenty-five-cent candy.

On the rare occasions we were caught alone, the first thing people asked was “Where’s Benji?” or “Where’s Reggie?,” whereupon we delivered a thorough account of our other’s whereabouts, quickly including context as if embarrassed to be caught out in the sunlight with only half a shadow: “He rode into town. He lost his CAT Diesel Power cap at the beach and went to get a new one at the five-and-ten.” And the questioner nodded solemnly: Reggie’s love for his CAT Diesel Power cap, fostered by ’70s trucker movies, was well-known.

There was summer, and then there was the rest of the time. During the rest of the time, before we were separated, you could find us modeling gear from the Brooks Brothers Young Men’s Department—smart white Oxford shirts, for example, tucked in during school hours, flapping in soft rebellion when we were home. The elementary school we went to required us to wear jackets and ties, so we did. Our wrists inevitably outran our jacket sleeves despite our mother’s attempts at timely hem-jobs. The ties as a species were clip-on, but we had a few that our father tied for us at the beginning of the school year, which we then slid loose and slid tight for the next nine months, knots getting greasier and grubbier as our kiddie fingers oozed into them. We had one blue blazer and one beige corduroy jacket apiece, rotated over gray slacks and khaki pants. I was a little taller, which helped us sort out whose was whose, but not always.

What did we look like, walking down Lexington, across Sixty-second Street, side by side on our way to and from school? I remember one day in the seventh grade when an old white man stopped us on a corner and asked us if we were the sons of a diplomat. Little princes of an African country. The U.N. being half a mile away. Because—why else would black people dress like that? Looking up into his mossy teeth, I croaked a tiny “No” and tugged Reggie into the crosswalk, as my don’t-talk-to-strangers/everyone-is-a-child-molester training kicked in. The TV was our babysitter, sure, so finger-wagging movies of the week were our manual on how to deal with strangers. We eagerly riffled through the literature, tsk-tsking and chuckling over tales of neglected white kids gone awry, the sad procession of zaftig and susceptible teenage hitchhikers, the pill-

popping honor students turned wildcat over “the pressure to succeed.” When strangers stopped us on the street asking questions, we knew what to do. Keep walking, brother. What did he look like? Senior partner in the law firm of Cracker, Cracker & Cracker. What did we look like? I don’t know, but his question wasn’t something we’d ever be asked in Sag Harbor. We fit in there.

Summers we branched out in our measly fashion. Freed from the dress code, what did we do? As fake twins, we couldn’t shake our love of the uniform. Each day we wore the same make of shirt, but different colors, different iron-on decals. Every couple of months our mother bought us some clothes at Gimbels—security cameras capture her foraging for her cubs, murmuring “Two of these, and two of these”—and then tossed them into our cage for us to hyena-yip over who got what. Want the maroon terry-cloth shirt? Get to it first or else you’ll be wearing the olive one ’til next Christmas. R2-D2 jamies for you, C-3PO for me. You had to work fast. Dibs was all.

We were a bit of a genre when you pried open a family photo album: There’s Benji ’n’ Reggie slouching in the beach grass, leaning on the hood of that summer’s rented car, huddled on a bench outside the ice-cream parlor. One brother in a powder-blue Izod polo, the other in a crimson Izod drizzled with Rocky Road. Arms noosed around each other’s necks, always wearing the same shirts but for that one crucial, differentiating detail that was everything. The same, but a little off, and it was to that crooked little corner of difference that we truly aspired.

Our expressions, picture to picture? Me: pained and dyspeptic, squinting in discomfort at the discovery of some new defect in the design of the world, the thought bubble asking, “Aren’t we all just ants under the magnifying glass, really?” and “Is this the passing of our days, so much Pixy Stix dust falling in an hourglass?” The only time “early bloomer” has ever been applied to me is vis-à-vis my premature apprehension of the deep dread-of-existence thing. In all other cases, I plod and tromp along. My knuckles? Well dragged.

Say Cheese. And what’s Reggie up to? Mugging, of course, cross-eyed, sneering, fingers bent into devil’s horns, waving his dented

beggar's cup for one extra ounce of precious attention, a rare element in our household. We knew we wanted to be separated but could only bear it in slim degrees. So when our father showed up with knockoff souvenirs from the 1976 Montreal Olympics, I snagged the javelin T-shirt, Reggie reached for the shot-put T-shirt, and we broke out of the locker-room tunnel into the arena of sunlight, summer after summer, members of the same team. It was nice to have a team, even if it was just us two.

Where is the surgeon gifted enough to undertake this risky operation, separate these hapless conjoined? Paging Doc Puberty, arms scrubbed, smocked to the hilt, smacking the nurses on the ass, and well-versed in all the latest techniques. More suction! Javelin and shot put—that's about right. Hormones sent me up and airborne, tall and skinny, a knock-kneed little reed, while Reggie, always chubby in the cheeks and arms, bulged out into something round and pinchable, soft and smooth, where I stuck out in sharp angles. We disentangled week by week, one new hair at a time. Junior high, they called it.

There were no complications on the physical separation, but what about the mental one, to sever the phantom connection whereby if Reggie stubbed his toe, I cried out in pain, and vice versa? The moment of my psychic release was occasioned by Liza Finkelstein's eighth-grade roller-disco party in the spring of '83.

**IT WAS BAR MITZVAH SEASON**, a good time to be alive by any measure, but particularly for die-hard finger-food aficionados like myself. As my friends underwent their time-honored initiation rituals, I experienced my own coming-of-age, culinary-wise. I had led a rather sheltered life with regards to bite-sized snacks, having only messed around with Mini Hot Dogs, La Choy Egg Rolls, and other lovelies of the Preheat To 350 school. The racy, catered pleasures of the full-tilt, bank-busting, don't-you-love-me bar mitzvah were a revelation. I remember marveling at the silver hors d'oeuvres trays as they dipped and flitted through the air like flying saucers out of a

'50s sci-fi movie, bearing alien life forms I had never reckoned, messengers of gustatory peace and goodwill. Chicken teriyaki on skewers, Swedish meatballs squatting in brown pools, all manner of dipping sauces in dark and gluey abundance—it was dizzying, and that wasn't just the thimbles of Manischewitz talking.

I was used to being the only black kid in the room—I was only there because I had met these assorted Abes and Sarahs and Dannys in a Manhattan private school, after all—but there was something instructive about being the only black kid at a bar mitzvah. Every bar or bat mitzvah should have at least one black kid with a yarmulke hovering on his Afro—it's a nice visual joke, let's just get that out of the way, but more important it trains the kid in question to determine when people in the corner of his eye are talking about him and when they are not, a useful skill in later life when sorting out bona-fide persecution from perceived persecution, the this-is-actually-happening from the mere paranoid manifestation. “Who's that?” “Whisper whisper a friend of Andy's from school.” “So regal and composed—he looks like a young Sidney Poitier.” “Whisper whisper or the son of an African diplomat!”

Eventually I'd have some company when the occasional R&B band showed up to drag themselves through the obligatory Motown retrospective, with the inevitable “Super Freak” thrown in . . . as Liza Finkelstein, grim and silent, squashed her place setting in her fist and cursed us all. Her parents were civil rights lawyers, not that I knew what that meant, except that it compelled Liza to blurt out “My parents were there!” on that one day a year when a teacher mentioned the March on Washington. Her parents respected all races, colors, and creeds, unless that creed was their own. According to some lefty calculus they had concluded that the traditions of their faith were bogus, and consequently Liza was going to have to wait a while before entering the world of calligraphic invitations and their little guppy RSVP envelopes.

Rebellion trickles down. Liza's “My parents were there!”'s diminished in enthusiasm year by year, to be true, but I think it was bat mitzvah season, with its exuberant pageantry and lovely haul of

presents, that puckered her to new pouty extremes. To be so exiled. It came to pass that one bright spring morning our hippie English teacher Mr. Johnson mentioned the March on Washington and the assembled of Homeroom 8B instinctively turned to Liza to hear her declaration for the last time. Perhaps we were feeling sentimental. We'd be in high school in a few months, split up after being together—some of us—since pre-K. This was a milestone, and we waited for Liza to give us what we needed. The moments piled up. A suspicion or fear that Liza might not provide her necessary service began to creep across the room in the same way that, gently, menthol cigarette smoke crept from under the door of the teachers' lounge. My eyes fell to her checkered New Wave knee-high socks, and I thought, Liza's not New Wave. Then she sneered a "My parents were there," rolling her eyes and kicking her feet out into the aisle between desks. Liza didn't need the whole bat mitzvah treatment. She was a teenager in that moment.

The Finkelsteins negotiated a settlement whereby the older generation would shell out for a roller-disco party of secular design and execution, and the younger generation would cut down on her use of the phrase "But all my friends" by at least 50 percent. Usually other people's parents scared me, but Mr. Finkelstein always seemed glad to have me around. Sending their daughter to a fancy private school was a betrayal of core values, paying tuition when you were supposed to support local public schools being in traitorous equivalence with eating grapes when you were supposed to boycott grapes. Those days, every nonunionized grape was a tear squeezed out of the eye of a migrant worker's child.

The fact that Mr. Finkelstein's daughter had a bona-fide black friend mitigated the situation a bit. Hey, wasn't that why they'd marched on Washington in the first place? The pictures of that day in 1963 are majestic and holy—the black-and-white mosaic of faces and stone, the force of people such that it overwhelms the pool and the monument and wipes the sneer off the face of architectural arrogance. If you were actually there, what did you think when you saw the photographs? The mass of figures was the sheer expression

of human potential, making it possible to kid yourself that you could spot yourself in that sea of people—that's me in this important event, right there, as I was, before all this. It must be possible to fool yourself that you were not lost in the crowd. I had no problem with Mr. Finkelstein.

A roller-disco party was surely an artifact of the post-piñata, pre-intercourse era. Whither all the piñatas of yesterday? In a succession of finely furnished living rooms we took sticks and expressed our lust through an eager fury, assailing the poor piñatas and sending their sad paper fur flapping, their empty bulk wobbling above us, such a grubby mob we were. We needed to get inside there, split the beasts open, see their pink guts burst to loose that clumsy rain of mongrel candies that exist only inside piñatas, the dingy Zimzis, Dolos, and Shrats, sweet shreds that we scrambled after like well-dressed vultures. We wanted different candy now. For some, this period of pre-sexual limbo would be short. Not for me. Which made my inflated sense of self after that time Emily Dorfman asked me to skate with her all the more pathetic.

Emily Dorfman was the tallest person in our class, had been for a while. We called her Spider. Her arms and legs were pale scaffolding propping up her shirts and skirts, and she hadn't yet realized that growing her hair out might cover up the extra vertebrae she seemed to have in her neck—if she were an animal, she'd be nibbling those high-up leaves. While I believed she was the owner of a certain bow-legged elegance, a gangly grace, I had never thought of her as a sex object. We'd shared co-ed bathrooms as youngsters, seen each other's bald parts back in the day, and maybe that had something to do with it. No mystery.

We were on our second or third sugar rush of Liza's birthday party when Emily came over. I hadn't hit the floor that much. The skates were too tight, and I winced through wide, oafish circuits around the rink. I didn't know what size my feet were anymore. My body was having an off year basically, and I was not the kind of person to ask for the right size after I had committed, preferring to stumble around in pain for a couple of hours rather than speak up

for myself. And so. I was standing with the guys over by the Asteroids machine—all of us momentarily between quarters and speculating as to the training regimen of DMZ, the high scorer on the game—when Emily stepped into our circle and said, “Benji, let’s go out there. I want to skate.” She slapped me on the back to emphasize the casualness of her proposal.

I looked over at Andy Stern, who was my buddy. We played D&D together, went way back, to *Star Wars* marathons. I remembered he passed notes to Emily for a while in the third grade. Was this okay? Would he take revenge as Dungeon Master? Those days we expressed aggression by siccing orcs, gryphons, and homunculi on each other. Andy Stern scratched beneath his bowl haircut, eyes vacant. What was the big deal? I didn’t think of Spider in that way and why would anyone think of me in that way. I said, “Okay,” and we headed out.

It was all pretty innocent, just pals, as we dodged a flotilla of older kids skating together in a gossipy swarm and discovered a comfortable little slipstream on the inside of the track. Then she grabbed my hand and I almost jumped. Her hand was hot and moist. She was sweating a lot. I mention her sweatiness not to raise the specter of glandular aberration but to explain the sympathetic gushing of sweat it roused in my own hand. Guh. Our fingers slobbered over each other. I had been dragging a little behind her on account of my pained feet but I caught up and started matching her rhythm. We swooped past where our friends were hanging out but we didn’t look at them. We kept them behind the aluminum rails and far from us. I did not witness any hypothetical thumbs-up Mr. Finkelstein threw my way. As my fingers slid in the grooves between her knuckles, I reckoned that her spidery fingers provided more points of contact than those of our classmates. If you were going to hold hands with someone, this was the hand to hold, volume-wise. My perception burrowed down into those places where our flesh rubbed together. I turned to her, she looked at me and I smiled and lifted my eyebrows, this suave tic. Then it was quickly eyes down again. Too much! I squeezed her hand twice in some kind of

weird code and she squeezed back. And then my other hand occurred to me. It was empty. I wasn't pulling Reggie out of traffic or up out of bus seats so that we wouldn't miss our stop, he wasn't drifting behind me sloshing a cup of soda, he wasn't there at all. This was no threesome, I was alone with someone else. The awareness of my left hand faded and I returned to the little world of sweet contact in my right.

We were out there forever. How does one measure infinity in a roller rink? You can test the universe by asking questions—how many mirrored tiles on disco balls shooting how many pure white streaks across the walls and floors, how many ball bearings clacking into each other like agitated molecules in how many polyurethane wheels, how many inkblot colonies of bacteria blooming unchecked in the toe-ward gloom of how many rented skates. But let's say this notion of chintzy roller-rink infinity is best expressed by the number two. Two people, two hands, and two songs, in this case "Big Shot" and "Bette Davis Eyes." The lyrics of the two songs provided no commentary, honest or ironic, on the proceedings. They were merely there and always underfoot, the insistent gray muck that was pop culture. It stuck to our shoes and we tracked it through our lives. Spider and me slogged through the songs, hand in hand. Occasionally seeking each other's faces to trade brief, worried smiles.

Then "Xanadu" came on, murderer. We clomped off the track and rejoined our respective tribes, slouching male and female on opposite walls of the subterranean roller rink, never acknowledging this episode again. What made her step up? Next year we went to our separate high schools, and Emily might as well have been broken down into antimatter because we never saw each other again. Frankly, I took our moment of closeness for granted (this will be a running theme) and if I had known that that was the most girl contact I was going to have for many years, I would have taken a souvenir. Wiped her sweat off my hand with a handkerchief and cherished the hankie as an erotic aid during the long period of self-abuse that was to commence a few months later (initiated by a vision

of a glistening Barbara Carrera in the minor James Bond vehicle *Never Say Never Again*, which featured many water-themed scenarios). Retrieved from its secret hiding place, the uncrumpled hankie, saturated with Emily's sweat, would have added an olfactory component to the visual artifacts I had in my mental files, mostly snippets of Cinemax movies and adolescent sex comedies of the *Makin' It—Doin' It—Losin' It* ilk, plus the odd stray tit from *National Lampoon* as I was too afraid to buy *Playboy*. The surface area of her long fingers would have left more sweat than the average eighth-grade hand. I would have huffed that hankie for all it was worth.

The night of the roller-disco party I decided I was in big-boy territory. Other kids in our class were doing more than holding hands, and the fact of other people's greater pleasure was becoming a feature of my reality. Now even I was on my way, having received what I interpreted as an omen of glorious high school-style interaction into my fetid sandbox. Freshman year was going to be great. Reggie wouldn't even be in the same building. I was relieved the day he told me that he didn't want to go to my high school. "I'm tired of being everyone's little brother," he said. (We have an older sister I haven't mentioned yet—we both bobbed in sibling wake all through elementary school.) Fair enough. I was tired of being everyone's older brother. By the summer of 1985, we were at a time when if someone asked, "Where's Reggie?" I didn't know. And it was good to say I didn't know.

**MY MOTHER SAID,** "We're making good time." The LIE had stopped slicing towns in half and now cut through untamed Nassau County greenery, always a good sign. Apart from the occasional lump of an office park on the side of the highway, we were in the trees. I slunk back down and tried to claw my way back into sleep. It was hard to get a nice deep sleep going when heading out there—all you could really do was splash around in shallow water—and I endured my usual messy dreams, although the reason for them requires a bit more context:

Before we started staying at the beach house, we used to stay at the Hempstead House, and behind the Hempstead House was a small white wood-frame cottage with dingy yellow trim. At night, spied through the thin wall of trees separating the properties, the light in their kitchen was the only thing alive in the dark, the constant moon of summer. The woman who lived there in the '50s, my mother reminded us from time to time, used to have a fish fry on Saturdays, selling lunches, and legend had it that DuBois came out to Sag once and ate there. I nodded in a show of pride whenever my mother told us this story even though I had no idea who DuBois was. I had learned to keep my mouth shut about things I didn't know when I sensed that I was expected to know them.

For instance: there were Famous Black People I had never heard of, but it was too late to ask who they were because I was old enough, by some secret measure, that it was a disgrace that I didn't know who they were, these people who had struggled and suffered for every last comfort I enjoyed. How ungrateful. One of my uncles would be over and mention Marcus Garvey and I'd ask, "Who's that?," as the eyes of all the adults in the room slitted for a sad round of tsk-tsking. "Who's Toussaint L'Ouverture?" I'd stupidly inquire, and my father would shoot back, "You don't know who Toussaint L'Ouverture is? What do they teach you at that fancy school I bust my ass to send you to?" Not "Iconic Figures of Black Nationalism," that's for sure.

What I did know about DuBois was that he fell into the category of Famous Black People—there was a way people said certain names so that they had an emanation or halo. The respectful way my mother pronounced *DuBois* told me that the man had uplifted the race. Years later in college I'd read his most famous essay and be blown away. And I quote: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the

American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.” I thought to myself: The guy who wrote that was chowing fried fish behind my house!

Driving with my father, it was potholes of double consciousness the whole way. There were only two things he would listen to on the radio: Easy Listening and Afrocentric Talk Radio. When a song came on that he didn’t like or stirred a feeling he didn’t want to have, he switched over to the turbulent rhetoric of the call-in shows, and when some knucklehead came on advocating some idea he found too cowardly or too much of a sellout, he switched back to the music. And all these sounds seeped into my dreams. One minute we were listening to the Carpenters singing “I’m on the top of the world looking down on creation,” like so:

*Such a feeling’s coming over me  
There is wonder in most everything I see  
Not a cloud in the sky  
Got the sun in my eyes  
And I won’t be surprised if it’s a dream*

*Everything I want the world to be  
Is now coming true especially for me  
And the reason is clear  
It’s because you are here  
You’re the nearest thing to heaven that I’ve seen*

Every time Karen Carpenter moved her mouth it was like the lid of a sugar bowl tinkling open and closed to expose deep dunes of whiteness. Then the next song would send my father’s fingers to the preset stations and we were knee-deep into police brutality, the crummy schools, the mechanistic cruelty of city hall. The playlist of the city in those days was headline after headline of outrage, in constant rotation were bloody images of Michael Stewart choked to death by cops, Grandma Eleanor Bumpurs shot to death by cops,

Yusef Hawkins shot to death by racist thugs. On WLIB, they played the black Top 40, and the lyrics went like this:

*What I want to know is  
When are we going to have our day of justice  
These white people think they can kill us in our homes*

*Can't walk down the street  
Without some cracker with a baseball bat  
Trying to murder us  
Murder our children, our future  
When are we going to have our day?*

My father announced his approval by singing along or muttering “That’s just common sense,” depending on the song or stump speech. Is it any wonder my dreams were troubled? Ease and disquiet weaved in and out of reception, chasing each other down, two signals too weak to be heard for more than a few moments.

My father shut off the radio once we hit the manic nowhere that was East End radio, where ads for car dealerships and ladies’ night at the latest one-season wonder duked it out between last month’s hits. Ads for places we never went, services we never needed rendered. At the opening of summer, the words of the local DJs and merchants were cinder blocks, rebar, I beams, and bit by bit the edifice of the summer world rose from the dirt. Avoid the fender-bender on Stephen Hands Path, red flag at Mecox Beach, no swimming. With every mention of a landmark, that place came into being after nine months of banishment by the city. The words from the radio said, Stephen Hands Path exists again, Mecox Beach exists again, pulled out of mothballs, and even the tide itself has been conjured back to the shores. For we have returned.

We ditched Route 27 and cruise control and weaved down Scuttlehole Road, zipping past the white fencing and rusting wire that held back the bulging acres at the side of the road. I smelled the sweetly muddy fumes of the potato fields and pictured the corn

stalks in their long regiments. My mother said, “That sweet Long Island corn,” as she always did. Reggie had been farting for the last five minutes while pretending to be asleep. My feet scabbled under the front seat in anticipation. Almost there. We slowed by the old red barn at the turnpike and made the left. From there to our house was like falling down a chute, nothing left to do but prepare for landing.

I kept my eyes closed. A few years earlier, I would have been panting at this point, up on my knees at the window and whipping my tail at the prospect of returning to Sag Harbor. I was beyond that—anything I could have seen here was not part of summer in a true sense, just a bit of warming up. I pictured what was outside and trees and houses in gray silhouette scrolled by, the featureless, unremarkable spots I had no connection to. The gray was interrupted by places that glowed, charged in my mind by association. The charred, heaped remains of that double-wide that burned down a few seasons back—we saw the fire, rubbernecking on the way to Caldor one afternoon. The dump, expeditions to which always had me and Reggie run-walking to the Dumpsters before the over-full bags broke open. Sometimes we pushed our luck, putting off a visit to the dump during a hot spell, and writhing maggots drizzled on our sneakers.

The glowing places were previews to the main attraction, previews most definitely, because some of them had ratings. Mashashimuet Park, Rated G for General Audiences, home to the only really good playground for miles, where Reggie and I and the crew had jumped, dangled on bars, and chased one another until we were sick, vomiting Pop Rocks and cola. There was also the PG part of Mashashimuet, the scrabbly baseball field, where the boys of my sister’s age group had had a few mini race wars a few years back—black city kids versus white town kids over loitering rights to dirt and burrs. Then the turn at the pond and another hundred yards to the House on Otter Pond, Rated R restricted, as it was one of my parents’ haunts, where they went out to eat without us and drank and did adult stuff. And on past the graveyard, the biggest coming attraction of all, rated I for Inevitable, where custom called for you to hold

your breath as you passed, no matter what age you were, lest a spirit enter your open mouth. Or so it was said.

**ONE SMALL ASIDE ON MOVIE PREVIEWS**, more or less germane: our local movie palace was the Olympia on 107th and Broadway, chronic matinee destination for Reggie and me, and sometimes Friday night, too, when we had no other plans, which was more frequent than we liked. Site of what little hanging out we did that year, Hangover Central, a place to recover from the weeklong bender of misfitry that was our high-school experience thus far. The Olympia had survived the bad run that was the lot of uptown theaters in the '70s, when critters of insect and rodent descent often jumped into your lap for a little popcorn and the back rows were lost in the oily fog of cheap, laced cheeba. The real grimy joints had banks of phone booths in the lobby, old-school sliding doors and everything, so you could make a deal or a plea during the slow parts, and the worst characters were always diddling the coin slots with their fingers after that crucial dime.

The Olympia had a new marquee of hot-pink neon and new seats with red upholstery, but was still beset by a few gremlins. Management couldn't get the curtains going. First came the crackling of the speakers, and then we watched as the No Smoking/No Crying Babies messages and the first half of the previews played out on the stalled, crimson curtain in front of the screen. The ruffled images continued until the audience's invective grew loud enough that the projectionist or whatever multitasking character up there in the booth hit the switch and the curtain creaked apart. Every time. A couple of years earlier and you would have been bracing yourself for the volley of bullets aimed at the white slot of the booth, no joke.

The curtains always bugged me, apart from the obvious way they bothered everyone else. The curtains were just wrong in there, considering the dingy exploitation fare we had paid to see, the slasher flicks, the low-budget pyrotechnics of time-traveling Termi-

nators. It was a sentimental relic of the time when people came to the Olympia for the stage spectacles of a kinder, classier age, and had no place in our lives. As a former twin, I liked things separate. You are there, me over here. Be nostalgic for the old days, but do it over there on your own time. Right here is the way things are now. We're trying to watch a movie.

**WE DROVE PAST** the weathered and splitting shingles of the old houses on Jermain Avenue and Madison Street, and the empty porches that referred to conversations long past or yet to come, never now, then the quiet plot that was Pierson High School, where no soul was ever seen, as if to aid in the illusion that the town was switched off when we weren't around. Those of a narcissistic bent could find such proof in any old place, everything was a prop if you wanted it to be, the beaches, Main Street, the sky, all of it gathering dust and waiting for your animating grace.

We stopped, which meant that my father was waiting for an opening to cross Route 114, and then we were rolling down Hempstead, the official start of our hood. Official—the book said so. We had this book, *Guide to Sag Harbor: Landmarks, Homes & History*, which we kept handy by the couch, for visitors I suppose, except that the only people who ever visited were other summer people, so we might as well have been displaying a pamphlet called *An Illustrated Guide to Your Own Damn Hand*. The book had a nice map of the village in it, tucked in between chronicles of the whaling boom and florid salutes to the quaint architecture, and we knew where our neighborhood began because that's where the map ended. The black part of town was off in the margins.

Hempstead was where the houses started to have names, with stories and histories attached. "That's the Grables," "That's the Huntingtons," even if the Grables and Huntingtons had sold off years ago. If I didn't know the people, I populated the houses using stories I'd heard, drawing material from the inflections of the speaker and the reactions of the listeners. The patriarch or number-

one son of the Franklin House, for example, was surely a skirt-chasing horndog, if my hoard of random intel was any indication. Call: “Then Bob Franklin walked in with this young little gal who looked country as hell, with that big hair like they’re wearing these days and skirt up so high so everybody could get a look at her stuff.” Response: Shaking of heads, sliver of a smile.

Past Yardley Florist, whose greenhouses were visible from our old tree house. Our old tree house, which consisted of two pieces of rotting plywood lying in the dirt and three nails in the dead bark of an oak tree, was actually an ex-tree house, staked out by older kids years earlier, then abandoned. Maybe it had never been more than the idea of a tree house, an afternoon’s fancy. But we had come upon it one day in the woods and decided it had been a home to adventure and we would make it so again. We were always coming upon paths made by those who had come before us, retracing their discoveries and mistakes. We told each other, some more wood, some nails pilfered from a jar in somebody’s basement, and we’d make it into a real hideout. We hadn’t been near it in years.

Then the turn onto Richards Drive, where I clenched my eyes tighter, for extra protection from a glimpse of the Hempstead House through the trees. Soon gravel popped against the undercarriage, the car gave one last rev of exhaustion before shutting off, and we had arrived. The bay could wait, the house could wait—they never changed so there was no need to appraise them, coo over them, honor them in any way—and me and my brother beat it to our bedroom for some proper sleep. Since my sister went off to college, Reggie and I had separate bedrooms after sharing a room our whole lives, either stacked on top of each other in bunk beds or head-to-head in a twin-bed L along the walls. Having our own space was wonderful. But out in Sag, we were back to sharing a room and we despised being so reduced in circumstance. The indignity of it all. There was an invisible fur covering everything, a musty coat, and it would linger for a couple of days until the house aired out.

It was six-thirty in the morning. That was that. We were out for the summer.

**ONCE THE SEASON WAS IN FULL SWING**, you came across one of the tribe and they asked, Do you know who else is out? The tantalizing inflection meant that they'd run into someone who hadn't been seen in a long time, some unlikely soul who'd gone missing in the big wild world. Bobby Hemphill, they said, Tammy Broderick, they said, and all the ancient stories and escapades bubbled up, nods and winks all around before you got to the business of trading rumors, the undermining of cover stories. Heard he got his pilot's license, he told me he went back to dental school. Rehab. She followed the trail of hang ups and odd receipts to her husband's mistress, dumped him, and decided to start coming out again. What were they up to? "A little this, a little that, you know, making some moves." That golden oldie: "Getting some stuff off the ground." Vague as hell, but persuasive if the speaker quickly changed the subject with a "How's your mom and pops?" They were back out to see if it had changed, if it was still the same, to recoup, recover, catch a breath. It was the bed you knew the best and all that entailed. We tried not to smirk at their predicaments, smirk at home maybe but not out there in public. It's such a nice day and we were raised better than that. By that strict generation.

There was something so sad about Those Who Didn't Come Out Anymore. Sometimes we knew why they didn't come out anymore, sometimes we didn't. Slander by their name if we suspected they thought themselves better than us. Good old Bobby, Good old Tammy. We called them by the old nicknames after all this time because it kept them in our clutches no matter how they struggled. They were branded by their pasts as much as we were. It was a close community and we all had dossiers on one another.

When I woke up, I heard my mother working the phone, trying to find out who was out, if the people who said they were coming out were indeed out, or if they had yet to arrive. No one was answering. Traffic or catastrophe, who knew. Reggie was already out of bed. In the kitchen, my father was bent over the grill scraping off last year's

residue, strumming his harp with a pinkly foaming scouring pad. The pink reminded me of something and I went to check it out.

The doors to the storage space beneath the deck were secured by a cheap bolt from the Hardware Store in Town, as it was always referred to. No one ever tried to break in. I waded into the slatted light, swatting spiderwebs and half-digested creatures from my hair. I stepped over a spaghetti plate of hose and our three prizefighter rakes, one full smile between them, and approached the blue slopes of Mount Fuji. I pulled the tarp from the bike, spilling the dirty lakes that had accumulated over the winter. Reggie's bike lay a few feet away, wheels poking out from under plastic. It had fallen over at some point while we were away.

I tugged the red Fuji outside. The bike had been too small for me for a long time but now looked hopelessly lame. The grip tape on the handlebars, once a brilliant red, had faded to an inexcusably girlie pink. I'd raised the bike seat the last few summers, thin rusty scars marking the bar like the growth rings in a tree. When I raised the seat up this year, it'd be a clown bike. It needed air, and oil, and when I lifted it, it felt as light as a ball of aluminum foil.

"Reggie!" I yelled. He didn't answer. "Reggie!"

I found him up on the deck, hunched over the side of a chaise. At his feet, on some newspaper, I recognized an ancient bottle of ammonia from under the kitchen sink. It was older than I was. Reggie dipped a toothbrush into the bottle and then slowly rubbed it against the foxing of one of his new sneakers—puffy white Filas, B-boy specials he'd started wearing the week before. They weren't his usual style of footwear, a little further out into the Street than we ever ventured. He appraised the sneaker, rubbed the toothbrush against some tiny scuff, returned to the ammonia, and repeated the process. It was the most gentle I had ever seen him.

"What are you doing?"

"What's it look like? Cleaning my kicks."

Such an alien thought, keeping your sneakers clean. I'd switched over to black Chuck Taylors that spring, a gesture toward punk by my sights (no one cared), and the days had not been kind to them.

The black canvas had sickened to uneven gray, and the toe bumpers a jaundiced yellow. But the true shame was the shoelaces, which were too long to begin with, and which I ineptly tied in addition, and had over the months dragged across whole marathons of Manhattan pavement. Perhaps you have seen documentary footage of a dry lake bed in the Kalahari, where it rains once a year for one precious hour. The lake bed transforms into an all-star tribute to the dynamism of creation. Dried-out seeds explode into flowering vegetation in an instant, nearsighted pollywogs and gangs of winged bugs suddenly hatch out of microscopic eggs, and all the parched animals who have been dying for a drink scurry out on their skinny legs to fill their humps and canteens. A whole, ragged world erupting from that one thunderclap. Now imagine the germy legions and bacterial hordes slumbering in the sidewalks of New York, waiting for a little moisture. On rainy days, the shoelaces were their floppy refuge, soaking up these misbegotten life-forms and granting them salvation. They were a holy land.

I heard about his sneakers before I saw them. Reggie was an easy sleeper who occasionally talked in his sleep, and I was an apprentice insomniac and eager audience for his nocturnal soliloquies. I usually tried to engage his gibberish and get a conversation going but it never worked. His mouth was awake but his ears slumbered. The week before we went out to Sag, we were watching TV in the living room when Reggie fell asleep and began to mumble. I waited for an opening. Maybe this time I would unlock the secrets of his unconscious mind, and use what I learned against him later.

“My new Filas . . . the brambles.”

“Tell me about the brambles,” I said patiently.

Reggie turned into the cushions. He said, “My new Filas . . . are . . .” And that was it.

I saw now that the missing word was *white*. His new Filas, following his ministrations, were a sheer gleaming white. He had his hand deep in one sneaker and held it up to the sky, scrutinizing it, tilting slowly to and fro, as if it were a piece of cloud that had broken off and conked him on the head. “The brambles” I interpreted

as the unjust world, the vast array of malevolent forces out to blemish or mar his blessed kicks. I'd talk in my sleep, too, if I had such heavy thoughts roiling in my brain. (Maybe I did talk in my sleep but there was no one to hear me.) I wanted to know the origin of Reggie's behavior. Why Filas? Who told him about using ammonia? I said, "Let's go riding around."

"I gotta wait for them to dry."

Half an hour later, I was waiting in the driveway. Three months, I thought. In idle moments, I retreated into that early-summer dream of reinvention, when you set your eyes on September and that refurbished self you were going to tool around in, honking the horn so people would take notice, driving slowly around all the right hot spots: Look at me. I had a Plan coming together, and three months to implement it. Surely I was not alone in my delusion, although that wouldn't have occurred to me then. All over the world the teenage millions searched for routes out of their dank, personal labyrinths. Signing up for that perfect extracurricular, rehearsing fake smiles before toothpaste-flecked mirrors, rummaging through their personalities to come up with laid-back greetings and clever put-downs to be saved for that special occasion. Lying sprawled on their beds, ankles crossed, while they overanalyzed the lyric sheets of the band that currently owned their soul, until the words became a philosophy. Running up to bordering cliques and hurriedly exclaiming, "I want to defect!" All of them stooped and hungry, lurching after that shadowy creature, the New Me. An elusive beast, but like I said, I had three months to get my shit together.

"Come on!" I yelled.

My little bike. I leaned it away from me so I could get a good look. Flat tires, rusted joints, peeling paint, out of scale. Only a buffoon would climb on such a thing, but I'd been marked as such for a while now—some grave mistakes the first week of freshman year, and I'd derailed all my junior-high schemes of social improvement. I was one of those dullards who thought that "Just be yourself" was the wisdom of the ages, the most calming piece of advice I had ever heard, and acted accordingly. It enabled these words, for example, to

escape my mouth: “I can’t wait for Master of Horror George A. Romero to make another film. *Fangoria* magazine—still the best horror and sci-fi magazine around if you ask me—says he has trouble raising funding, but I think Hollywood is just scared of what he has to say.” And also: “It seems like we—all of us—made a mistake by switching over to Advanced D&D. The Basic game was . . . purer, you know?” Statements (of simple truth!) that had been harmless weeks ago were now symptoms of disease. And possibly catching. I was just being myself, and I was just being avoided. For whole, contaminated semesters now.

Reggie didn’t talk about his first year of high school. But he didn’t look happy, and if I was faring poorly, logic said he had to be doing worse. I had always been the capable one, if you can imagine.

“Where’s your bike?” I asked, when he finally showed up.

“Nah, I’m going to walk.”

This was a breach of protocol. Riding around meant riding.

“You can ride if you want,” Reggie said. “I’m going to walk.” He looked down at his sneakers with great meaning.

It was the last time we’d start the summer that way. It was how we always did it, that first day—get out the bikes and take the measure of things. Tour the developments to see who else was around, recruit, then hit town, the five-and-ten, the Ideal, get a slice at Conca Doro. This was our system, skidding down the streets like some fraternal tumbleweed gusted about. Technically, we were hitting the reset button on our twinhood, but it didn’t seem like that much of a cheat. Maybe it didn’t matter what went on during the rest of the year. Sag Harbor was outside the rules.

“I’m not going to wait for you,” I said. But I didn’t leave him. I wobbled in foolish loops around him, out in front then doubling back. My long legs zagged goofily about. Each time I turned, the flat tires made long farting noises as the rubber collapsed into the asphalt. Reggie kept a solid pace as we headed up Walker Avenue. There were three housing developments in our summer world—Azurest, where we stayed, Sag Harbor Hills, and Ninevah. But Ninevah was a bit of a hike, and only Bobby lived there, and we’d

trained him over the years to come to us, so it was off our itinerary. Azurest, check out the Hills, then town.

I didn't see a lot of parked cars. The summer people were trickling in. This was when there were still plenty of unimproved lots and people hadn't started building the really big places. The majority of the houses were two- or three-bedroom jobs built in the '60s. Snubbed-nosed, single-story ranch houses with cement patios and screened-in porches sat next to pastel-colored split-levels with oil-stained carports and unruly hydrangeas for that extra dab of color. Occasionally you came across a harsh-angled beach house, sheathed in rain-streaked gray pine and introduced by dark gravel that leaked out into the street after every big storm. No matter the size or make of the house, the early arrivals were tormented by the same questions. Did the roof keep through the winter, did the pipes hold, did a townie or local bad kid break in and steal the television, or was it just the raccoons and squirrels who had given the place the once-over? Is it still here or did I just dream it?

We passed the house that we always called "haunted," and for the first time we skipped our ritual, in which one of us dared the other to knock on the door, we argued about it for a few minutes, and then somebody threw a pebble at one of the windows as we ran away screaming. It was a tiny box of a house, shrinking every year into further dilapidation as more roof shingles flew away and the paint scabbed off. A motorboat on its hitch was barely visible for the weeds and bushes, beached there in cracked fiberglass after the Great Flood, and an old barbecue grill lay on its side, half in the woods, legs poking up, like a potbellied animal that had crawled there to die. Like we said, haunted.

There were a bunch of these ramshackle abodes scattered throughout the developments. The hedges grew out into—let's face it—a nappy riot, grasses filled the tire ruts of the driveways, and the front yard became a minefield of old phone books, the swollen pages of info straining against their plastic sheaths. The houses of Those Who Didn't Come Out Anymore. Who knew the stories behind them. Ask my mother about this or that house and she'd say, "They Don't

Come Out Anymore,” in such a way that you saw the weeds growing up around her words. There were obvious reasons—economic reversal, no longer living in the Northeast—but my thoughts always tended to the melancholic. Like, the red house on Milton was one generation’s gift to the next, but the kids and grandkids neglected it, didn’t appreciate the treasure they possessed, and left it to rot. Or, the people who lived on Cuffee Drive hadn’t come out in decades, but if they sold the property, what did they have? It was the most important thing they had in their lives and they held out hope that one summer they would return. Maybe the missing neighbors absorbed all our bad luck so that we could have it easy.

Over the years I discovered that there was a variety of haunted. There were houses that were immaculately maintained, but where you never saw any people. The gutters sparkled in the sunlight, the hedges were grazed into clean, perfect geometry, the curtains in the windows just so. The lawn mowers appeared the first day of spring, shredding up and down the rows twice a week, and the sprinklers maintained sure, sibilant order, calibrated to wet one molecule’s distance from the property line and no farther. But you never saw a human presence. No lights, no cars, no life-affirming barbecue smoke rising from the deck in the backyard. The houses waited all summer for their owners to appear, and then one day the lawn guy made his last visit and that was that. Well, taking into account people’s schedules, it was possible that you might miss seeing your neighbor, never pass them on the street. You could coexist in this Sag Harbor galaxy in perfectly alienated orbits, always zipping into each other’s blind spots, or hidden on the dark side of the moon. Of course that could happen to people who lived on the same street. Sometimes it happened to people who lived in the same house.

Someone was writing the maintenance checks, doling out cash to LILCO and the water company, but somewhere they got stalled out. There was a malfunction. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. That kind of house was different from the ones that were kept up all summer but were only inhabited one weekend a year, usually Labor Day. The one-weekenders were a familiar group, not known for their

planning skills. And for completion's sake, we should also respect that renaissance house, haunted for long years but rediscovered by a new generation out to reclaim some shred of childhood joy, or by new arrivals who finally owned their little piece of the Sag Harbor mystique after so long. They fixed the roof, redid the patio, finally put in a decent water heater that didn't go into a coma after one shower. Performed an exorcism. Kudos.

**WE ROUNDED THE BEND** on Walker. Marcus was first up in our circuit. The Collins House was a lime-green split-level where we were never allowed upstairs. Marcus's bedroom was on the first floor, next to the rec room, and there we had often loitered around the old Triton, but going upstairs was off-limits to kids. Periodically, his mother shouted down directives we couldn't decipher, and Marcus would curse, stomp upstairs, and disappear for a while. When that happened we knew we were getting kicked out into the street. We were already standing when Marcus eventually reappeared, tossing excuses, and we beat it out the sticky screen door to the next afternoon oasis.

The telephone book was still waiting on Marcus's front step, and this year's Oldsmobile, the next in a proud line of Collins Oldsmobiles, was not to be seen. "Let's take the shortcut," Reggie said. Walker was the last street in Azurest before Sag Harbor Hills, so it was convenient for taking a shortcut to the other side.

We loved shortcuts. For a long time, it was hard to top the thrill of slipping into a slim corridor into the woods, undetectable except for the small mound of kicked-up soil by the side of the road. Sometimes a shortcut was half woods and half a sprint through someone's property, but the best ones cut through two unimproved properties, one in Azurest, the other in the Hills. Even though you were only making your way across two quarter-acre lots, it was like hacking through primeval forests, the gigantic fronds of an alien planet. The only people who had preceded us were fellow explorers. Each time the branches shivered closed behind us, we exited our juvenile

existences and joined the fraternity of the brave. I never discovered any shortcuts on my own. I only found out about them when the rest of the gang initiated me. Didn't have the eye, apparently.

The real woods outside of the developments were the true frontier, enigmatic and intimidating. Behind the gas station, or leading out from the paths behind the park, we tramped farther and farther from the roads we knew, each fork thoroughly debated—left is madness, right is the buried treasure, the gold doubloons to be divvied up according to age and status. We stumbled across shotgun shells, remains of fires, crushed beer cans, fresh tracks gouged by motorbikes—dangerous characters were up to inscrutable things between towns. Who had left these things, who was lurking in the shadows? “The KKK” was the usual answer, the reliable if unlikely boogeyman, tossed out there to amp up the feeling of danger. Statistically speaking, there may have been some members of the KKK in the near vicinity—it was the Hamptons, a “resort community” after all, and even the worst America has to offer occasionally need to unwind, catch some rays—but it was unlikely that they were patrolling on horseback, in full getup, complete cracker regalia, behind the dirt trails of Mashashimuet Park. Nonetheless, everybody immediately traded versions of how they were going to outrun the KKK—“I'd be out in front of you dummies with a quickness,” “Knock your ass down to buy me some time”—while I kept silent, thinking of how I was going to save Reggie. Grandiose scenes of self-sacrifice came easily to me, wherein I distracted the Hooded Menace long enough to allow him to escape. He was my little brother.

When we got to the shortcut in question, there was nothing to say beyond Reggie's verdict: “That's messed up.” We were used to emerging from the woods to see a car in the driveway of a shortcut house and having to hightail it back. We were not accustomed to the woods disappearing. The old oaks and chestnut trees and low-lying sticker bushes had been uprooted and cleared. In their stead, moist orange dirt was heaped in piles, and the freshly laid cement foundation gaped at us. It was messed up, some newcomers taking over land we had claimed. It wasn't hard to picture the future. First this lot,

then the rest. One by one, the new Sag Harbor would replace the haunted houses in all their forms.

“I hate that,” I said.

“That’s messed up,” Reggie repeated.

We took the long way around. Not a lot of people in the Hills, either. Clive’s house looked dead. The brown kente-cloth drapes behind the sliding glass doors to his living room were tight. Usually, they were open from May to September, inviting us in. The grass had been cut, though, so this was a promising sign. Maybe next weekend.

“I think we’re the only ones here,” I said. Private schools were done for the year, but not public schools yet, and I didn’t know about the Catholic schools. Maybe it was just us.

“Ma-a-nn,” Reggie said.

Then we heard a far-off call. We listened and nodded to each other. One two three. Pause. One two. Pause. It was the metallic squeal of a basketball on asphalt, the teenage Morse code of indolent boys that said: I AM OVER HERE. We followed the trail.

We saw NP bouncing about in his familiar rhythm. To observe NP was to witness a haphazard choreography of joints and limbs. His invisible puppeteer had shaky hands, making it seem that NP was always on the verge of busting out into some freaky dance move. Looking back, his condition was probably caused by him trying to keep his freaky dance moves in check, whatever convulsive thing he’d taken notes on at a party the week before and had just finished practicing in his room. That I wouldn’t have heard of the dance was a given—the Phillie Bugaloo, the Reverse Cabbage Patch. Hanging out with NP was to start catching up on nine months of black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts I’d missed out on in my “predominately white” private school. Most of the year it was like I’d been blindfolded and thrown down a well, frankly.

Not that I didn’t learn anything in school, culture-wise. The hallways between classes were tutelage into the wide range of diversions our country’s white youth had come up with to occupy themselves. When I had free time in between engineering my next

humiliation, I was introduced to the hacky sack, which was a sort of miniature leather beanbag that compelled white kids to juggle with their feet. It was a wholesome communal activity, I saw, as they lobbed the object among one another, cheering themselves on, and it appeared to foster teamwork and goodwill among its adherents. Bravo! There was also a kind of magical rod called a lacrosse stick. It directed the more outgoing and athletic specimens of my school to stalk the carpeted floors and obsessively wring their hands around it, as if to call forth popularity or a higher degree of social acceptance by diligent application of friction. You heard them muttering “hut hut hut” in masturbatory fervor as they approached. Good stuff, in an anthropological sense. But these things were not the Technotronic Bunny Hop, or the Go-Go Bump-Stomp, the assorted field exercises of black boot camp. And as with DuBois, I knew I couldn’t ask what these things were. I had to observe and gather information.

Switch off this, switch on that. We hung out with each other every day, all day, all summer, and then didn’t see each other for nine months.

“Benji ’n’ Reggie, Benji ’n’ Reggie.”

We exchanged friendly outs (“This morning,” “Us, too”) and told him we’d be out for the summer. There was also the language of prison in there, in how long are you out for. Time on the East End was furlough, a day pass, a brief visit with the old faces and names before the inevitable moment when you were locked up again. That hard time that defined the majority of our days. You did something wrong, why else would such a thing like the city happen to you. For a couple of weeks each year us habitual offenders got together and got up to no good before the handcuffs pinched our wrists again. Earlier, I described Sag as a kind of trap, but the place also attracted the language of freedom. I don’t know which is worse, the trap or the prison. Either way, you’re stuck.

We called him NP, for Nigger Please, because no matter what came out of his mouth, that was usually the most appropriate response. He was our best liar, a raconteur of baroque teenage shenanigans. Everything in his field of vision reminded him of some

escapade he needed to share, or directed him to some escapade about to begin, as soon as all the witnesses departed. He was dependable for nonsense like, “Yo, last night, after you left, I went back to that party and got with that Queens girl. She told me she was raised strict, but I was all up in those titties! She paid me fifty dollars!”

Nigger, please.

“Yo, yo, listen: I was walking by the Miller House and I went to take a look at their Rolls and get this, I was like, they left the keys in the ignition. You know I took that shit for a spin, I was like Thurston Howell the Third up in that bitch! With Gilligan!”

Nigger, please.

Shortened to NP because the adults gave us trouble when they heard us using the word *nigger*. For understandable reasons. Like most authority figures, they had a hypocritical streak, as they used the word all the time, in its familiar comrade sense, but also to distinguish themselves from those of our race who possessed a certain temperament and circumstance. The kind of person that made the announcer on the evening news say, “We have an artist’s rendering of the suspect,” quickening your heart. There were no street niggers in Sag Harbor. No, no, no.

But we all had cousins who . . . you know.

We thought we were being smart with his nickname until one day we were over at NP’s house and his mom started getting on his case for some chore or other that he had neglected. He began some elaborate explanation—meteorites had squashed his bike and he couldn’t make it home—when she lost her patience and cut him off with a sudden, shrill, “Nigger, please!” Mrs. Nichols’s hand shot to her mouth, but it was too late. His nickname had approval at the highest levels. For all we knew, she’d coined it in the first place. One can only imagine watching the boy grow up in your house and knowing you were partially responsible.

Like us, like all of us, present or as yet unaccounted for, NP had come out here every summer of his life, and even before he was born, as his mother had waded into the bay to cool her pregnant belly. We had beaten each other up, stolen each other’s toys, fallen

asleep in the backseats of station wagons together as we caravanned back from double features at the Bridgehampton Drive-In, the stars scrolling beyond the back window. We were copying our parents, who went back just as far, beating each other up thirty years ago under the same sky. Eating each other's barbecue, chasing each other down the hacked-out footpaths to the beach before there were roads, beach houses, a community at all.

"Hey Benji, watch it!" NP cried out. "You're messing up my kicks!"

I had been circling around him and Reggie, and my front wheel had squeezed out a pebble and sent it flying. The pebble collided with NP's sneaker, which I now noticed was the Fila model that Reggie was wearing. And just as white.

I didn't see any mark. NP pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket, licked it, and rubbed it against his sneaker.

"Sorry about that," I said.

"These are my Filas."

"There is one thing, though." I cleared my throat. "I'm not going by Benji anymore. I'm going by Ben."

"What?" NP looked at Reggie for confirmation. I hadn't broken the news to Reggie yet. He tilted his head.

"I want to go by Ben," I said. "You know, have people call me Ben instead of Benji."

Harkening back to the aforementioned Plan: No more of this Benji shit. It was a little kid's name, and I was not a little kid anymore. Ben, Ben. Case in point: stuck there next to my brother in that "Benji 'n' Reggie" construction—it was demeaning. Benji was the name of a handholder, not a fingerfucker or avid squeezer of breasts, or whatever tyro sexual-type act I would engage in once I found a willing subject. One step at a time, and a step away from Benji was a good one.

"Okay Benji, whatever, homie." NP yawned.

Reggie shook his head. "Let's go to town."

The three of us started back down the street. I was pretty excited to get out of the developments and grab a slice. To see if everything

was where it was supposed to be. But when we should have been turning right, NP steered left, and Reggie followed.

“Where are you guys going?” I asked.

“We should take the beach,” NP said. “It’s faster.”

“I can’t take my bike on the sand.”

A moment passed where we all looked at the Li'l Red Fuji. And its pretty pink handlebars. It should be noted that they were not a pristine pink, but one much-grubbed by years of sweat and assorted boyhood antics. Nonetheless.

“I told you,” Reggie said.

“It’s a shortcut,” NP said. He dribbled his basketball for a second, then tucked it under his arm. “We’ll meet you there. I ain’t getting my bike out,” he said. “The tires are flat. Mess up the rims.”

I looked to Reggie for backup. He was looking down at his sneakers.

“Where are you going to be?” I exhaled loudly. Town wasn’t that big, but still.

“Conca D’Oro, whatever,” NP said. “You’ll find us.”

They disappeared down the path to the beach, that narrow aperture into water and sunlight. There was that one variation of out, Who else is out?, which was the most important out of all. Everything depended on it. Who else is out? We asked each other. We needed to know, Is it just you and me or is there another to save us from each other?