

I I ACCIDENTALLY VAPORIZE MY PRE-ALGEBRA TEACHER

Look, I didn't want to be a half-blood.

If you're reading this because you think you might be one, my advice is: close this book right now. Believe whatever lie your mom or dad told you about your birth, and try to lead a normal life.

Being a half-blood is dangerous. It's scary. Most of the time, it gets you killed in painful, nasty ways.

If you're a normal kid, reading this because you think it's fiction, great. Read on. I envy you for being able to believe that none of this ever happened.

But if you recognize yourself in these pages – if you feel something stirring inside – stop reading immediately. You might be one of us. And once you know that, it's only a matter of time before *they* sense it too, and they'll come for you.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

My name is Percy Jackson.

I'm twelve years old. Until a few months ago, I was a boarding student at Yancy Academy, a private school for troubled kids in upstate New York.

Am I a troubled kid?

Yeah. You could say that.

I could start at any point in my short miserable life to prove it, but things really started going bad last May, when our sixth-grade class took a field trip to Manhattan – twenty-eight mental-case kids and two teachers on a yellow school bus, heading to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to look at ancient Greek and Roman stuff.

I know – it sounds like torture. Most Yancy field trips were.

But Mr Brunner, our Latin teacher, was leading this trip, so I had hopes.

Mr Brunner was this middle-aged guy in a motorized wheelchair. He had thinning hair and a scruffy beard and a frayed tweed jacket, which always smelled like coffee. You wouldn't think he'd be cool, but he told stories and jokes and let us play games in class. He also had this awesome collection of Roman armour and weapons, so he was the only teacher whose class didn't put me to sleep.

I hoped the trip would be okay. At least, I hoped that for once I wouldn't get in trouble.

Boy, was I wrong.

See, bad things happen to me on field trips. Like at my fifth-grade school, when we went to the Saratoga battlefield, I had this accident with a Revolutionary War cannon. I wasn't aiming for the school bus, but of course I got expelled anyway. And before that, at my fourth-grade school, when we took a behind-the-scenes tour of the Marine World shark pool, I sort of hit the wrong lever on the catwalk and our class took an unplanned swim. And the time before that . . . Well, you get the idea.

This trip, I was determined to be good.

All the way into the city, I put up with Nancy Bobofit, the freckly red-headed kleptomaniac girl, hitting my best friend, Grover, in the back of the head with chunks of peanut butter-and-ketchup sandwich.

Grover was an easy target. He was scrawny. He cried when he got frustrated. He must've been held back several grades, because he was the only sixth grader with acne and the start of a wispy beard on his chin. On top of all that, he was crippled. He had a note excusing him from PE for the rest of his life because he had some kind of muscular disease in his legs. He walked funny, like every step hurt him, but don't let that fool you. You should've seen him run when it was enchilada day in the cafeteria.

Anyway, Nancy Bobofit was throwing wads of sandwich that stuck in his curly brown hair, and she knew I couldn't do anything back to her because I was already on probation. The headmaster had threatened me with death-by-in-school-suspension if anything bad, embarrassing, or even mildly entertaining happened on this trip.

'I'm going to kill her,' I mumbled.

Grover tried to calm me down. 'It's okay. I like peanut butter.'

He dodged another piece of Nancy's lunch.

'That's it.' I started to get up, but Grover pulled me back to my seat.

'You're already on probation,' he reminded me. 'You know who'll get blamed if anything happens.'

Looking back on it, I wish I'd decked Nancy Bobofit

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right then and there. In-school suspension would've been nothing compared to the mess I was about to get myself into.

Mr Brunner led the museum tour.

He rode up front in his wheelchair, guiding us through the big echoey galleries, past marble statues and glass cases full of really old black-and-orange pottery.

It blew my mind that this stuff had survived for two thousand, three thousand years.

He gathered us around a four-metre-tall stone column with a big sphinx on the top, and started telling us how it was a grave marker, a *stèle*, for a girl about our age. He told us about the carvings on the sides. I was trying to listen to what he had to say, because it was kind of interesting, but everybody around me was talking, and every time I told them to shut up, the other teacher chaperone, Mrs Dodds, would give me the evil eye.

Mrs Dodds was this little maths teacher from Georgia who always wore a black leather jacket, even though she was fifty years old. She looked mean enough to ride a Harley right into your locker. She had come to Yancy halfway through the year, when our last maths teacher had a nervous breakdown.

From her first day, Mrs Dodds loved Nancy Bobofit and figured I was devil spawn. She would point her crooked finger at me and say, 'Now, honey,' real sweet, and I knew I was going to get after-school detention for a month.

One time, after she'd made me erase answers out of old maths workbooks until midnight, I told Grover I didn't

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think Mrs Dodds was human. He looked at me real serious and said, 'You're absolutely right.'

Mr Brunner kept talking about Greek funeral art.

Finally, Nancy Bobofit snickered something about the naked guy on the *stèle*, and I turned around and said, 'Will you *shut up*?'

It came out louder than I meant it to.

The whole group laughed. Mr Brunner stopped his story.

'Mr Jackson,' he said, 'did you have a comment?'

My face was totally red. I said, 'No, sir.'

Mr Brunner pointed to one of the pictures on the *stèle*. 'Perhaps you'll tell us what this picture represents?'

I looked at the carving, and felt a flush of relief, because I actually recognized it. 'That's Kronos eating his kids, right?'

'Yes,' Mr Brunner said, obviously not satisfied. 'And he did this because . . .'

'Well . . .' I racked my brain to remember. 'Kronos was the king god, and –'

'God?' Mr Brunner asked.

'Titan,' I corrected myself. 'And . . . he didn't trust his kids, who were the gods. So, um, Kronos ate them, right? But his wife hid baby Zeus, and gave Kronos a rock to eat instead. And later, when Zeus grew up, he tricked his dad, Kronos, into barfing up his brothers and sisters –'

'Eeww!' said one of the girls behind me.

'– and so there was this big fight between the gods and the Titans,' I continued, 'and the gods won.'

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Some snickers from the group.

Behind me, Nancy Bobofit mumbled to a friend, 'Like we're going to use this in real life. Like it's going to say on our job applications, "Please explain why Kronos ate his kids".'

'And why, Mr Jackson,' Brunner said, 'to paraphrase Miss Bobofit's excellent question, does this matter in real life?'

'Busted,' Grover muttered.

'Shut up,' Nancy hissed, her face even brighter red than her hair.

At least Nancy got in trouble, too. Mr Brunner was the only one who ever caught her saying anything wrong. He had radar ears.

I thought about his question, and shrugged. 'I don't know, sir.'

'I see.' Mr Brunner looked disappointed. 'Well, half credit, Mr Jackson. Zeus did indeed feed Kronos a mixture of mustard and wine, which made him disgorge his other five children, who, of course, being immortal gods, had been living and growing up completely undigested in the Titan's stomach. The gods defeated their father, sliced him to pieces with his own scythe, and scattered his remains in Tartarus, the darkest part of the Underworld. On that happy note, it's time for lunch. Mrs Dodds, would you lead us back outside?'

The class drifted off, the girls holding their stomachs, the guys pushing each other around and acting like doofuses.

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Grover and I were about to follow when Mr Brunner said, 'Mr Jackson.'

I knew that was coming.

I told Grover to keep going. Then I turned towards Mr Brunner. 'Sir?'

Mr Brunner had this look that wouldn't let you go – intense brown eyes that could've been a thousand years old and had seen everything.

'You must learn the answer to my question,' Mr Brunner told me.

'About the Titans?'

'About real life. And how your studies apply to it.'

'Oh.'

'What you learn from me,' he said, 'is vitally important. I expect you to treat it as such. I will accept only the best from you, Percy Jackson.'

I wanted to get angry, this guy pushed me so hard.

I mean, sure, it was kind of cool on tournament days, when he dressed up in a suit of Roman armour and shouted: 'What ho!' and challenged us, sword-point against chalk, to run to the board and name every Greek and Roman person who had ever lived, and their mother, and what god they worshipped. But Mr Brunner expected me to be as good as everybody else, despite the fact I have dyslexia and attention deficit disorder and I had never made above a C- in my life. No – he didn't expect me to be *as good*; he expected me to be *better*. And I just couldn't learn all those names and facts, much less spell them correctly.

I mumbled something about trying harder, while Mr

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Brunner took one long sad look at the *stele*, like he'd been at this girl's funeral.

He told me to go outside and eat my lunch.

The class gathered on the front steps of the museum, where we could watch the foot traffic along Fifth Avenue.

Overhead, a huge storm was brewing, with clouds blacker than I'd ever seen over the city. I figured maybe it was global warming or something, because the weather all across New York state had been weird since Christmas. We'd had massive snow storms, flooding, wildfires from lightning strikes. I wouldn't have been surprised if this was a hurricane blowing in.

Nobody else seemed to notice. Some of the guys were pelting pigeons with Lunchables crackers. Nancy Bobofit was trying to pickpocket something from a lady's bag, and, of course, Mrs Dodds wasn't seeing a thing.

Grover and I sat on the edge of the fountain, away from the others. We thought that maybe if we did that, everybody wouldn't know we were from *that* school – the school for loser freaks who couldn't make it elsewhere.

'Detention?' Grover asked.

'Nah,' I said. 'Not from Brunner. I just wish he'd lay off me sometimes. I mean – I'm not a genius.'

Grover didn't say anything for a while. Then, when I thought he was going to give me some deep philosophical comment to make me feel better, he said, 'Can I have your apple?'

I didn't have much of an appetite, so I let him take it.

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I watched the stream of cabs going down Fifth Avenue, and thought about my mom's apartment, only a little ways uptown from where we sat. I hadn't seen her since Christmas. I wanted so bad to jump in a taxi and head home. She'd hug me and be glad to see me, but she'd be disappointed, too. She'd send me right back to Yancy, remind me that I had to try harder, even if this was my sixth school in six years and I was probably going to be kicked out again. I wouldn't be able to stand that sad look she'd give me.

Mr Brunner parked his wheelchair at the base of the handicapped ramp. He ate celery while he read a paperback novel. A red umbrella stuck up from the back of his chair, making it look like a motorized café table.

I was about to unwrap my sandwich when Nancy Bobofit appeared in front of me with her ugly friends – I guess she'd gotten tired of stealing from the tourists – and dumped her half-eaten lunch in Grover's lap.

'Oops.' She grinned at me with her crooked teeth. Her freckles were orange, as if somebody had spray-painted her face with liquid Cheetos.

I tried to stay cool. The school counsellor had told me a million times, 'Count to ten, get control of your temper.' But I was so mad my mind went blank. A wave roared in my ears.

I don't remember touching her, but the next thing I knew, Nancy was sitting on her butt in the fountain, screaming, 'Percy pushed me!'

Mrs Dodds materialized next to us.

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Some of the kids were whispering: 'Did you see —'

'— the water —'

'— like it grabbed her —'

I didn't know what they were talking about. All I knew was that I was in trouble again.

As soon as Mrs Dodds was sure poor little Nancy was okay, promising to get her a new shirt at the museum gift shop, etc., etc., Mrs Dodds turned on me. There was a triumphant fire in her eyes, as if I'd done something she'd been waiting for all semester. 'Now, honey —'

'I know,' I grumbled. 'A month erasing textbooks.'

That wasn't the right thing to say.

'Come with me,' Mrs Dodds said.

'Wait!' Grover yelled. 'It was me. *I* pushed her.'

I stared at him, stunned. I couldn't believe he was trying to cover for me. Mrs Dodds scared Grover to death.

She glared at him so hard his whiskery chin trembled.

'I don't think so, Mr Underwood,' she said.

'But —'

'You — *will* — stay — here.'

Grover looked at me desperately.

'It's okay, man,' I told him. 'Thanks for trying.'

'Honey,' Mrs Dodds barked at me. 'Now.'

Nancy Bobofit smirked.

I gave her my deluxe I'll-kill-you-later stare. I then turned to face Mrs Dodds, but she wasn't there. She was standing at the museum entrance, way at the top of the steps, gesturing impatiently at me to come on.

How'd she get there so fast?

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I have moments like that a lot, when my brain falls asleep or something, and the next thing I know I've missed something, as if a puzzle piece fell out of the universe and left me staring at the blank place behind it. The school counsellor told me this was part of the ADHD, my brain misinterpreting things.

I wasn't so sure.

I went after Mrs Dodds.

Halfway up the steps, I glanced back at Grover. He was looking pale, cutting his eyes between me and Mr Brunner, like he wanted Mr Brunner to notice what was going on, but Mr Brunner was absorbed in his novel.

I looked back up. Mrs Dodds had disappeared again. She was now inside the building, at the end of the entrance hall.

Okay, I thought. She's going to make me buy a new shirt for Nancy at the gift shop.

But apparently that wasn't the plan.

I followed her deeper into the museum. When I finally caught up to her, we were back in the Greek and Roman section.

Except for us, the gallery was empty.

Mrs Dodds stood with her arms crossed in front of a big marble frieze of the Greek gods. She was making this weird noise in her throat, like growling.

Even without the noise, I would've been nervous. It's weird being alone with a teacher, especially Mrs Dodds. Something about the way she looked at the frieze, as if she wanted to pulverize it . . .

‘You’ve been giving us problems, honey,’ she said.

I did the safe thing. I said, ‘Yes, ma’am.’

She tugged on the cuffs of her leather jacket. ‘Did you really think you would get away with it?’

The look in her eyes was beyond mad. It was evil.

She’s a teacher, I thought nervously. It’s not like she’s going to hurt me.

I said, ‘I’ll – I’ll try harder, ma’am.’

Thunder shook the building.

‘We are not fools, Percy Jackson,’ Mrs Dodds said. ‘It was only a matter of time before we found you out. Confess, and you will suffer less pain.’

I didn’t know what she was talking about.

All I could think of was that the teachers must’ve found the illegal stash of candy I’d been selling out of my dorm room. Or maybe they’d realized I got my essay on *Tom Sawyer* from the Internet without ever reading the book and now they were going to take away my grade. Or worse, they were going to make me read the book.

‘Well?’ she demanded.

‘Ma’am, I don’t . . .’

‘Your time is up,’ she hissed. Then the weirdest thing happened. Her eyes began to glow like barbecue coals. Her fingers stretched, turning into talons. Her jacket melted into large, leathery wings. She wasn’t human. She was a shrivelled hag with bat wings and claws and a mouth full of yellow fangs, and she was about to slice me to ribbons.

Then things got even stranger.

Mr Brunner, who’d been out in front of the museum a

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minute before, wheeled his chair into the doorway of the gallery, holding a pen in his hand.

‘What ho, Percy!’ he shouted, and tossed the pen through the air.

Mrs Dodds lunged at me.

With a yelp, I dodged and felt talons slash the air next to my ear. I snatched the ballpoint pen out of the air, but when it hit my hand, it wasn’t a pen any more. It was a sword – Mr Brunner’s bronze sword, which he always used on tournament day.

Mrs Dodds spun towards me with a murderous look in her eyes.

My knees were jelly. My hands were shaking so bad I almost dropped the sword.

She snarled, ‘Die, honey!’

And she flew straight at me.

Absolute terror ran through my body. I did the only thing that came naturally: I swung the sword.

The metal blade hit her shoulder and passed clean through her body as if she were made of water. *Hiss!*

Mrs Dodds was a sand castle in a power fan. She exploded into yellow powder, vaporized on the spot, leaving nothing but the smell of sulphur and a dying screech and a chill of evil in the air, as if those two glowing red eyes were still watching me.

I was alone.

There was a ballpoint pen in my hand.

Mr Brunner wasn’t there. Nobody was there but me.

My hands were still trembling. My lunch must’ve

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been contaminated with magic mushrooms or something.

Had I imagined the whole thing?

I went back outside.

It had started to rain.

Grover was sitting by the fountain, a museum map tented over his head. Nancy Bobofit was still standing there, soaked from her swim in the fountain, grumbling to her ugly friends. When she saw me, she said, 'I hope Mrs Kerr whipped your butt.'

I said, 'Who?'

'Our *teacher*. Duh!'

I blinked. We had no teacher named Mrs Kerr. I asked Nancy what she was talking about.

She just rolled her eyes and turned away.

I asked Grover where Mrs Dodds was.

He said, 'Who?'

But he paused first, and he wouldn't look at me, so I thought he was messing with me.

'Not funny, man,' I told him. 'This is serious.'

Thunder boomed overhead.

I saw Mr Brunner sitting under his red umbrella, reading his book, as if he'd never moved.

I went over to him.

He looked up, a little distracted. 'Ah, that would be my pen. Please bring your own writing utensil in the future, Mr Jackson.'

I handed it over. I hadn't even realized I was still holding it.

'Sir,' I said, 'where's Mrs Dodds?'

He stared at me blankly. 'Who?'

'The other chaperone. Mrs Dodds. The pre-algebra teacher.'

He frowned and sat forward, looking mildly concerned. 'Percy, there is no Mrs Dodds on this trip. As far as I know, there has never been a Mrs Dodds at Yancy Academy. Are you feeling all right?'

2 THREE OLD LADIES KNIT THE SOCKS OF DEATH

I was used to the occasional weird experience, but usually they were over quickly. This twenty-four/seven hallucination was more than I could handle. For the rest of the school year, the entire campus seemed to be playing some kind of trick on me. The students acted as if they were completely and totally convinced that Mrs Kerr – a perky blonde woman whom I'd never seen in my life until she got on our bus at the end of the field trip – had been our pre-algebra teacher since Christmas.

Every so often I would spring a Mrs Dodds reference on somebody, just to see if I could trip them up, but they would stare at me like I was psycho.

It got so I almost believed them – Mrs Dodds had never existed.

Almost.

But Grover couldn't fool me. When I mentioned the name Dodds to him, he would hesitate, then claim she didn't exist. But I knew he was lying.

Something was going on. Something *had* happened at the museum.

I didn't have much time to think about it during the days, but at night, visions of Mrs Dodds with talons

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and leathery wings would wake me up in a cold sweat.

The freak weather continued, which didn't help my mood. One night, a thunderstorm blew out the windows in my dorm room. A few days later, the biggest tornado ever spotted in the Hudson Valley touched down only fifty miles from Yancy Academy. One of the current events we studied in social studies class was the unusual number of small planes that had gone down in sudden squalls in the Atlantic that year.

I started feeling cranky and irritable most of the time. My grades slipped from Ds to Fs. I got into more fights with Nancy Bobofit and her friends. I was sent out into the hallway in almost every class.

Finally, when our English teacher, Mr Nicoll, asked me for the millionth time why I was too lazy to study for spelling tests, I snapped. I called him an old sot. I wasn't even sure what it meant, but it sounded good.

The headmaster sent my mom a letter the following week, making it official: I would not be invited back next year to Yancy Academy.

Fine, I told myself. Just fine.

I was homesick.

I wanted to be with my mom in our little apartment on the Upper East Side, even if I had to go to public school and put up with my obnoxious stepfather and his stupid poker parties.

And yet . . . there were things I'd miss at Yancy. The view of the woods out my dorm window, the Hudson River in the distance, the smell of pine trees. I'd miss Grover, who'd

been a good friend, even if he was a little strange. I worried how he'd survive next year without me.

I'd miss Latin class, too – Mr Brunner's crazy tournament days and his faith that I could do well.

As exam week got closer, Latin was the only test I studied for. I hadn't forgotten what Mr Brunner had told me about this subject being life-and-death for me. I wasn't sure why, but I'd started to believe him.

The evening before my final, I got so frustrated I threw the *Cambridge Guide to Greek Mythology* across my dorm room. Words had started swimming off the page, circling my head, the letters doing one-eighties as if they were riding skateboards. There was no way I was going to remember the difference between Chiron and Charon, or Polydictes and Polydeuces. And conjugating those Latin verbs? Forget it.

I paced the room, feeling like ants were crawling around inside my shirt.

I remembered Mr Brunner's serious expression, his thousand-year-old eyes. *I will accept only the best from you, Percy Jackson.*

I took a deep breath. I picked up the mythology book.

I'd never asked a teacher for help before. Maybe if I talked to Mr Brunner, he could give me some pointers. At least I could apologize for the big fat 'F' I was about to score on his exam. I didn't want to leave Yancy Academy with him thinking I hadn't tried.

I walked downstairs to the faculty offices. Most of them were dark and empty, but Mr Brunner's door was ajar,

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light from his window stretching across the hallway floor.

I was three steps from the door handle when I heard voices inside the office. Mr Brunner asked a question. A voice that was definitely Grover's said, '... worried about Percy, sir.'

I froze.

I'm not usually an eavesdropper, but I dare you to try not listening if you hear your best friend talking about you to an adult.

I inched closer.

'... alone this summer,' Grover was saying. 'I mean, a Kindly One in the *school!* Now that we know for sure, and *they* know too -'

'We would only make matters worse by rushing him,' Mr Brunner said. 'We need the boy to mature more.'

'But he may not have time. The summer solstice deadline -'

'Will have to be resolved without him, Grover. Let him enjoy his ignorance while he still can.'

'Sir, he *saw* her ...'

'His imagination,' Mr Brunner insisted. 'The Mist over the students and staff will be enough to convince him of that.'

'Sir, I ... I can't fail in my duties again.' Grover's voice was choked with emotion. 'You know what that would mean.'

'You haven't failed, Grover,' Mr Brunner said kindly. 'I should have seen her for what she was. Now let's just worry about keeping Percy alive until next autumn -'

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The mythology book dropped out of my hand and hit the floor with a thud.

Mr Brunner went silent.

My heart hammering, I picked up the book and backed down the hall.

A shadow slid across the lighted glass of Brunner's office door, the shadow of something much taller than my wheelchair-bound teacher, holding something that looked suspiciously like an archer's bow.

I opened the nearest door and slipped inside.

A few seconds later I heard a slow *clop-clop-clop*, like muffled wood blocks, then a sound like an animal snuffling right outside my door. A large dark shape paused in front of the glass, then moved on.

A bead of sweat trickled down my neck.

Somewhere in the hallway, Mr Brunner spoke. 'Nothing,' he murmured. 'My nerves haven't been right since the winter solstice.'

'Mine neither,' Grover said. 'But I could have sworn . . .'

'Go back to the dorm,' Mr Brunner told him. 'You've got a long day of exams tomorrow.'

'Don't remind me.'

The lights went out in Mr Brunner's office.

I waited in the dark for what seemed like forever.

Finally, I slipped out into the hallway and made my way back up to the dorm.

Grover was lying on his bed, studying his Latin exam notes like he'd been there all night.

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‘Hey,’ he said, bleary-eyed. ‘You going to be ready for this test?’

I didn’t answer.

‘You look awful.’ He frowned. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Just . . . tired.’

I turned so he couldn’t read my expression, and started getting ready for bed.

I didn’t understand what I’d heard downstairs. I wanted to believe I’d imagined the whole thing.

But one thing was clear: Grover and Mr Brunner were talking about me behind my back. They thought I was in some kind of danger.

The next afternoon, as I was leaving the three-hour Latin exam, my eyes swimming with all the Greek and Roman names I’d misspelled, Mr Brunner called me back inside.

For a moment, I was worried he’d found out about my eavesdropping the night before, but that didn’t seem to be the problem.

‘Percy,’ he said. ‘Don’t be discouraged about leaving Yancy. It’s . . . it’s for the best.’

His tone was kind, but the words still embarrassed me. Even though he was speaking quietly, the other kids finishing the test could hear. Nancy Bobofit smirked at me and made sarcastic little kissing motions with her lips.

I mumbled, ‘Okay, sir.’

‘I mean . . .’ Mr Brunner wheeled his chair back and forth, like he wasn’t sure what to say. ‘This isn’t the right place for you. It was only a matter of time.’

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My eyes stung.

Here was my favourite teacher, in front of the class, telling me I couldn't handle it. After saying he believed in me all year, now he was telling me I was destined to get kicked out.

'Right,' I said, trembling.

'No, no,' Mr Brunner said. 'Oh, confound it all. What I'm trying to say . . . you're not normal, Percy. That's nothing to be —'

'Thanks,' I blurted. 'Thanks a lot, sir, for reminding me.'

'Percy —'

But I was already gone.

On the last day of the term, I shoved my clothes into my suitcase.

The other guys were joking around, talking about their vacation plans. One of them was going on a hiking trip to Switzerland. Another was cruising the Caribbean for a month. They were juvenile delinquents, like me, but they were *rich* juvenile delinquents. Their daddies were executives, or ambassadors, or celebrities. I was a nobody, from a family of nobodies.

They asked me what I'd be doing this summer and I told them I was going back to the city.

What I didn't tell them was that I'd have to get a summer job walking dogs or selling magazine subscriptions, and spend my free time worrying about where I'd go to school in the autumn.

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‘Oh,’ one of the guys said. ‘That’s cool.’

They went back to their conversation as if I’d never existed.

The only person I dreaded saying goodbye to was Grover but, as it turned out, I didn’t have to. He’d booked a ticket to Manhattan on the same Greyhound as I had, so there we were, together again, heading into the city.

During the whole bus ride, Grover kept glancing nervously down the aisle, watching the other passengers. It occurred to me that he’d always acted nervous and fidgety when we left Yancy, as if he expected something bad to happen. Before, I’d always assumed he was worried about getting teased. But there was nobody to tease him on the Greyhound.

Finally I couldn’t stand it any more.

I said, ‘Looking for Kindly Ones?’

Grover nearly jumped out of his seat. ‘Wha – what do you mean?’

I confessed about eavesdropping on him and Mr Brunner the night before the exam.

Grover’s eye twitched. ‘How much did you hear?’

‘Oh . . . not much. What’s the summer-solstice deadline?’

He winced. ‘Look, Percy . . . I was just worried for you, see? I mean, hallucinating about demon maths teachers . . .’

‘Grover –’

‘And I was telling Mr Brunner that maybe you were overstressed or something, because there was no such person as Mrs Dodds, and . . .’

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‘Grover, you’re a really, really bad liar.’

His ears turned pink.

From his shirt pocket, he fished out a grubby business card. ‘Just take this, okay? In case you need me this summer.’

The card was in fancy script, which was murder on my dyslexic eyes, but I finally made out something like:

*Grover Underwood, Keeper
Half-Blood Hill
Long Island, New York
(800)009-0009*

‘What’s Half –’

‘Don’t say it aloud!’ he yelped. ‘That’s my, um . . . summer address.’

My heart sank. Grover had a summer home. I’d never considered that his family might be as rich as the others at Yancy.

‘Okay,’ I said glumly. ‘So, like, if I want to come visit your mansion.’

He nodded. ‘Or . . . or if you need me.’

‘Why would I need you?’

It came out harsher than I meant it to.

Grover blushed right down to his Adam’s apple. ‘Look, Percy, the truth is, I – I kind of have to protect you.’

I stared at him.

All year long, I’d gotten in fights keeping bullies away from him. I’d lost sleep worrying that he’d get beaten up

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next year without me. And here he was acting like he was the one who defended *me*.

‘Grover,’ I said, ‘what exactly are you protecting me from?’

There was a huge grinding noise under our feet. Black smoke poured from the dashboard and the whole bus filled with a smell like rotten eggs. The driver cursed and limped the Greyhound over to the side of the highway.

After a few minutes clanking around in the engine compartment, the driver announced that we’d all have to get off. Grover and I filed outside with everybody else.

We were on a stretch of country road – no place you’d notice if you didn’t break down there. On our side of the highway was nothing but maple trees and litter from passing cars. On the other side, across four lanes of asphalt shimmering with afternoon heat, was an old-fashioned fruit stand.

The stuff on sale looked really good: heaping boxes of blood-red cherries and apples, walnuts and apricots, jugs of cider in a claw-foot tub full of ice. There were no customers, just three old ladies sitting in rocking chairs in the shade of a maple tree, knitting the biggest pair of socks I’d ever seen.

I mean these socks were the size of sweaters, but they were clearly socks. The lady on the right knitted one of them. The lady on the left knitted the other. The lady in the middle held an enormous basket of electric-blue yarn.

All three women looked ancient, with pale faces wrinkled like fruit leather, silver hair tied back in white bandannas, bony arms sticking out of bleached cotton dresses.

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The weirdest thing was, they seemed to be looking right at me.

I looked over at Grover to say something about this and saw that the blood had drained from his face. His nose was twitching.

‘Grover?’ I said. ‘Hey, man –’

‘Tell me they’re not looking at you. They are. Aren’t they?’

‘Yeah. Weird, huh? You think those socks would fit me?’

‘Not funny, Percy. Not funny at all.’

The old lady in the middle took out a huge pair of scissors – gold and silver, long-bladed, like shears. I heard Grover catch his breath.

‘We’re getting on the bus,’ he told me. ‘Come on.’

‘What?’ I said. ‘It’s a thousand degrees in there.’

‘Come on!’ He prised open the door and climbed inside, but I stayed back.

Across the road, the old ladies were still watching me. The middle one cut the yarn, and I swear I could hear that *snip* across four lanes of traffic. Her two friends balled up the electric-blue socks, leaving me wondering who they could possibly be for – Sasquatch or Godzilla.

At the rear of the bus, the driver wrenched a big chunk of smoking metal out of the engine compartment. The bus shuddered, and the engine roared back to life.

The passengers cheered.

‘Darn right!’ yelled the driver. He slapped the bus with his hat. ‘Everybody back on board!’

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Once we got going, I started feeling feverish, as if I'd caught the flu.

Grover didn't look much better. He was shivering and his teeth were chattering.

'Grover?'

'Yeah?'

'What are you not telling me?'

He dabbed his forehead with his shirt sleeve. 'Percy, what did you see back at the fruit stand?'

'You mean the old ladies? What is it about them, man? They're not like . . . Mrs Dodds, are they?'

His expression was hard to read, but I got the feeling that the fruit-stand ladies were something much, much worse than Mrs Dodds. He said, 'Just tell me what you saw.'

'The middle one took out her scissors, and she cut the yarn.'

He closed his eyes and made a gesture with his fingers that might've been crossing himself, but it wasn't. It was something else, something almost – older.

He said, 'You saw her snip the cord.'

'Yeah. So?' But even as I said it, I knew it was a big deal.

'This is not happening,' Grover mumbled. He started chewing at his thumb. 'I don't want this to be like the last time.'

'What last time?'

'Always sixth grade. They never get past sixth.'

'Grover,' I said, because he was really starting to scare me. 'What are you talking about?'

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‘Let me walk you home from the bus station. Promise me.’

This seemed like a strange request to me, but I promised he could.

‘Is this like a superstition or something?’ I asked.

No answer.

‘Grover – that snipping of the yarn. Does that mean somebody is going to die?’

He looked at me mournfully, like he was already picking the kind of flowers I’d like best on my coffin.

3 GROVER UNEXPECTEDLY LOSES HIS TROUSERS

Confession time: I ditched Grover as soon as we got to the bus terminal.

I know, I know. It was rude. But Grover was freaking me out, looking at me like I was a dead man, muttering, ‘Why does this always happen?’ and, ‘Why does it always have to be sixth grade?’

Whenever he got upset, Grover’s bladder acted up, so I wasn’t surprised when, as soon as we got off the bus, he made me promise to wait for him, then made a beeline for the restroom. Instead of waiting, I got my suitcase, slipped outside, and caught the first taxi uptown.

‘East One Hundred and Fourth and First Avenue,’ I told the driver.

A word about my mother, before you meet her.

Her name is Sally Jackson and she’s the best person in the world, which just proves my theory that the best people have the rottenest luck. Her own parents died in a plane crash when she was five, and she was raised by an uncle who didn’t care much about her. She wanted to be a novelist, so she spent high school working to save enough money for a college with a good creative-writing programme. Then her

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uncle got cancer, and she had to quit school in her senior year to take care of him. After he died, she was left with no money, no family and no diploma.

The only good break she ever got was meeting my dad.

I don't have any memories of him, just this sort of warm glow, maybe the barest trace of his smile. My mom doesn't like to talk about him because it makes her sad. She has no pictures.

See, they weren't married. She told me he was rich and important, and their relationship was a secret. Then one day, he set sail across the Atlantic on some important journey, and he never came back.

Lost at sea, my mom told me. Not dead. Lost at sea.

She worked odd jobs, took night classes to get her high school diploma, and raised me on her own. She never complained or got mad. Not even once. But I knew I wasn't an easy kid.

Finally, she married Gabe Ugliano, who was nice the first thirty seconds we knew him, then showed his true colours as a world-class jerk. When I was young, I nicknamed him Smelly Gabe. I'm sorry, but it's the truth. The guy reeked like mouldy garlic pizza wrapped in gym shorts.

Between the two of us, we made my mom's life pretty hard. The way Smelly Gabe treated her, the way he and I got along . . . well, when I came home is a good example.

I walked into our little apartment, hoping my mom would be home from work. Instead, Smelly Gabe was in the living

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room, playing poker with his buddies. The television was blaring. Crisps and beer cans were strewn all over the carpet.

Hardly looking up, he said around his cigar, 'So, you're home.'

'Where's my mom?'

'Working,' he said. 'You got any cash?'

That was it. No *Welcome back. Good to see you. How has your life been the last six months?*

Gabe had put on weight. He looked like a tuskless walrus in thrift-store clothes. He had about three hairs on his head, all combed over his bald scalp, as if that made him handsome or something.

He managed the Electronics Mega-Mart in Queens, but he stayed home most of the time. I don't know why he hadn't been fired long before. He just kept on collecting pay cheques, spending the money on cigars that made me nauseous, and on beer, of course. Always beer. Whenever I was home, he expected me to provide his gambling funds. He called that our 'guy secret'. Meaning, if I told my mom, he would punch my lights out.

'I don't have any cash,' I told him.

He raised a greasy eyebrow.

Gabe could sniff out money like a bloodhound, which was surprising, since his own smell should've covered up everything else.

'You took a taxi from the bus station,' he said. 'Probably paid with a twenty. Got six, seven bucks in change. Somebody expects to live under this roof, he ought to carry his own weight. Am I right, Eddie?'

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