



The Bartleby
Brothers and the
Seal of Solomon

BRYANT POSS

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE BARTLEBY BROTHERS AND THE SEAL OF SOLOMON

First edition. March 20, 2017.

Copyright © 2017 Bryant Poss.

ISBN: 978-1541308961

Written by Bryant Poss.

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[The Bartleby Brothers and the Seal of Solomon](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter 1

I suppose I could begin like *David Copperfield* or thereabouts but I don't think every detail is necessary. Besides, I can't recall the images from my birth, and that's exactly what I would have to do because there's no one left who experienced the occasion to tell me anything about it. Also, I don't believe in ghosts, and I think a person is responsible for his or her own luck so just forget the Dickens reference. Anyway, I can't remember the day I was born. My first memory is of my mother standing over me, there's a crib carousel with white elephants slowly spinning around and Mom's just looking at me, smiling. I like to think she was smiling but it doesn't really matter because she's smiling in the memory and perception is everything. That's as far back as I can go. My memory is pretty incredible as compared to most but it's nothing like Jack's. Wait, we'll get to Jack in just a few. He's my brother who can't really do anything but he's better than everyone at everything. You'll just have to trust me on that. Right now is the time to explain why I go out in the middle of the night and investigate abandoned old houses and it all started one typical mundane day in school.

The man in the black suit stood in front of the students, alternating leaning on the podium then standing up straight buttoning the front of his coat only to unbutton it again. He was tall and lean. His iron gray hair was terribly thin on top but he wore what he had slicked back and it suited him. He was the kind of guy who would look funny with a head full of hair. With sharp, pointy features that looked tired of their struggle with gravity, he looked serious even when he tried to smile, and he came across as smart but more so in knowing the world around him rather than books. He had to be smart to have his job. You couldn't send a dumb person to find smart people. But wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. All that will come around. Right now, let's stick to the classroom. The man in the black suit stood at the front of the class, trying desperately to address the students before finally giving up and grabbing the nearest marker on the tray in front of the board. He turned his back to the onlookers for many minutes, frantically writing on the black-smudged surface of the dry-erase. After some time of the droning fan and sporadic coughs of the room, he turned around and crossed his arms, leaning against the wall with a look of satisfaction on his face along with a black mark where he'd scratched with his marker-stained hand. He pivoted his head from one side of the room to the other much like the oscillating fan in the back, watching and waiting to see if any response were made to what he'd written on the board.

Let's pan around the room with him. This is not Advanced Placement. This is not even a regular-ed classroom. This is special ed. And, I'm not talking about inclusion where some of the kids with minor learning disabilities sit in the room with regular-ed. This room is completely SPED. These are good kids. I would argue that these are the best kids because they lack so many, not all the characteristics that make bad people bad people. They are inherently good and typically selfless without having to be taught. They don't lie for self-preservation, and they don't intentionally harm one another. I could go on about everything I think in terms of the hierarchy that is education but I won't. Once again, I'm getting off track. That happens from time to time when I'm telling a story. I let my opinion get in the way, and that's not good for telling. That's another thing my dad taught me. If you're going to tell something, try to tell it like it happened and not how you wanted it to.

Anyway, back to panning around the room. Look at these kids. They range from eleven to sixteen, Jack being the only one who's eleven. They go through the same routine every day, accomplishing as much in the way of academics as they can but what they mostly learn is how to function, how to function effectively with and around other people. Functionality in this world is crucial in my opinion. In all honesty, we'd all do well to learn the same thing—there I go again.

In the back of the room sits Jack, the youngest of the group. Of the dozen kids in the room, he is the one who will never learn how to function because being around other people is directly out of his element. Does that make him a bad person? Of course not but I'm not getting into that right now either. Right now, I'm talking about my brother, and I need to tell you how he is, not how people wish he would be. Jack is skinny. How he is skinny is beyond me because he eats about four PB&Js a day accompanied by several hotdogs with no buns and glass after glass of whole milk. He doesn't exercise, so I imagine the reason he is so skinny is that his cognition burns all his calories. Yeah, that's right he thinks *that* much. He's pale too but that's not surprising since he exists pretty much like a vampire. No, that's not right because that would imply he goes out at night, which he doesn't. I guess he lives more like what he is—a Jack. He doesn't go out until somebody makes him go to school like a “normal” kid and waste his time staring at everything in the room with words on it until something goes wrong to make him lose it, to make him have a meltdown, and they send him back home. His hair is dark, almost black, and it's quite shaggy since he hates getting his hair cut. The pupils of his green eyes are dilated as they usually are even in direct light but the rim of the jade green irises always stands out. He leans his head to one side, his eyes darting from one thing to the next, one book cover to the next or poster on the wall or clothing tag with washing instructions on it, whatever he can find to read. He taps the tips of his fingers in order over and over without thinking about it, which is why he's best at the back of the room because all his ticks and movements would distract those around him. Pinky, middle, ring, index, over and over tapping against his thumb like a machine. He's got his shirt buttoned all the way to the top giving him the look of a true nerd but he won't wear it any other way because it's pointless for the shirt to have buttons on it that are not buttoned. I had this argument with him once but I walked away after the slap in the face of pure logic, and I've never brought it up again since. This is Jack, the eleven-year-old the size of an eight-year-old, caring nothing about what that man in the black suit just drew on the board, and only trying desperately to find something else in this room to read. Losing his patience, he slides the economics book from under the desk, probably left by some carefree senior from days before, and begins to read, starting with the copyright page. I look over at him and think about telling him to put it away but I know better. Let him be content for as long as possible. We all know that this isn't going to work anyway even if they do think I'm helping. They have let me miss my classes to be in here with him, at least for a few days, just to make sure the transition goes well. Since he only talks to me, the adult powers that be think that he'll be more likely to adjust to the school environment if I'm with him at first, which is why they're letting him come to the high school. Hmph, they're thinking under the assumption that I'll work *with* them but whatever. I'll milk this as long as I can. My classes are boring anyway.

Because Jack seems happy for the moment, I glance around at the open mouths facing the board, and I finally get to the guy in the black suit. He looks to be in his late forties or so, and I see that he's looking dead at me. He leans over to whisper something to Ms. Hatcher, and she looks at me too then whispers back to him. I guess he wants to know what I'm doing in this room since I look too "normal". That's put him about on par with everyone else. I look back at the board to see what it is he's got up there. He's no Picasso but he's drawn what looks to be a box with three circles in it at the bottom. There is a smaller box drawn underneath it with three short lines on it. This smaller box is connected to the larger one with a series of lines, and there is nothing else accompanying it. There is no question or math problem. There are only the boxes. After waiting an obnoxious amount of time, and appearing satisfied at what Ms. Hatcher told him about me, he finally asks the class a question.

"There are three light bulbs in a box," his voice was deep. It didn't go with the rest of him, and everyone looked at him when he spoke, well, everyone but Jack. "These three light bulbs are connected to the three switches on the outside of the box." He pointed to the small box with the short lines on it. "Each switch is connected to one bulb. You can only flip the switches when the large box is closed. How can you tell which switch goes to which bulb after opening the box one time?" He looked around the room and waited. I decided to do the same.

"You flip all the switches and open the box," a large girl in the front announced proudly.

"Well, you have managed to discover absolutely nothing by doing that but that was a nice try," black suit said, trying not to sound condescending and failing miserably.

"Pull the wires out of the box," a boy with coke-bottle glasses who sat by the door almost yelled with triumph.

"We want to try to do this by only touching the switches," black suit said, disappointment becoming strong in his voice and on his face.

"Open the top and hit the switch and watch which one lights up," the large girl chimed in again. To this, black suit gave no reply and with heavy dejection he grabbed the eraser from the board and placed it with a sigh.

"You flip one switch on for about ten or fifteen seconds then turn it off then turn on the one next to it and open the box," all the students turned around to the sound of my unfamiliar voice but I just looked at the man. Ms. Hatcher stepped forward when I finished.

"Gib, let's just let the others try, shall we?" Like she knew the answer, anyway.

"No, Ms. Hatcher, it's fine," black suit said with a smile. He pointed a black-stained finger at me. "And why would you do that, young man?"

"Well, the first bulb you turned on would heat up, so when you opened the box, you'd know that the one that was warm went to the first switch and the one that was lit obviously went to the second switch. The third bulb and switch remain unused and cool."

He looked at me for a moment and nodded.

“Is this an exercise in deductive reasoning?” I asked and he cocked an eyebrow at the question. “You want a logical conclusion reached to answer the question.”

“It is, indeed, Mr.—”

“Gib,” I told him plainly. “Just Gib. I’m in here with my brother, Jack.” I nodded to the boy with his nose nearly touching the inside of the economics book.

“Is that so, Gib just Gib?” he asked and immediately turned to erase the drawing and start another. I glanced around a little nervously but Ms. Hatcher just crossed her arms and stood back, giving me the ‘I wish I could give you a referral’ look. I looked over at Jack but he was hip deep in the definition of mercantilism. Looking up at the board, I saw that black suit was already finished with the next picture. This one far simpler, it was a side view silhouette of a car with a circle near the rear of the driver’s side window, perhaps where the dome light should be.

“You’re in a parked car,” black suit spoke looking at me. “There is a balloon filled with helium in the center of the car’s ceiling. If the driver stomps the accelerator, causing the car to jolt forward, you will be thrown back in the seat.” He looked at me and smiled. “What will happen to the balloon?”

I tilted my head and looked at him quizzically. “This isn’t deductive reasoning. It’s an exercise in physical motion.” To this, the smile left his face.

“The balloon,” I continued with confidence, “will move forward toward the windshield. The denser air will be moved back by the motion of the car, pushing the lighter, less dense helium forward.”

The noise of slightly shifting desks filled the room. It was like two gunslingers stepping out in the street at high noon to settle up over a card game. Everyone looked at black suit then back at me, back and forth as he watched me, noticeably contemplating what to do next. Without a word, he turned around and picked up the eraser, slowly erasing the outline of the car. He began drawing again without looking back. I glanced at Jack but he was enraptured in what looked to be arguably the most boring text known to man. Black suit continued to draw on the board, while I looked at the side of Jack’s face.

Let’s stop here while the guy’s drawing and take a moment to come to an understanding. Ability runs on multiple levels, and the best way to define it is—well is with an allegory, with a story as an example. Let’s say there were three chimpanzees: Frank, Oscar, and Louie. Housed in a laboratory since birth, they always were interacted with and watched by people. Monitored by their human superiors, they were tested and played with, measured and entertained. When these three were old enough, the humans thought they’d test their intelligence to see which was smartest but really just to see how smart any chimp could be. They did the normal conditioned response training. The chimps knew that if they did something well or correctly, they would get rewarded with sugar cubes. That seemed to be the most productive reward anyway. Eventually they would start carrying out the tasks even without the sugar cubes, so when the cubes were brought back into play, they knew it was time for new learning. Now, these chimps were smart, all of them. Once they were advanced enough, the humans decided to give them a truly difficult task.

Always, the humans associated a bottle cap with success. Whenever the chimps were given a sugar cube for accomplishing a task, it was accompanied with the sight of an old soda bottle cap. They did that to have a visible stimulus they could use for some tests. For this newest task, the humans placed three bottle caps inside three old, identical glass soda bottles and secured them next to each other on the floor of the caged environment. The chimps recognized the challenge at once. They must attain a bottle cap in order to succeed. Immediately the process commenced. After several minutes of trying to remove the bottles from the floor and tapping them to see how sturdy they were, the chimps realized they could not manipulate the containers to free the caps. They must then find a way to get a cap out without moving a bottle.

Frank worked for several minutes with a stick he had gotten from one of the trees in their environment. After tireless manipulation, he had worked the end of the thin stick into what appeared to be a hook, or as close to a hook as he could get it. He eased the end of the stick into the bottle and tried multiple times to pull the cap out but he just couldn't keep the cap at the end of the stick, and it always slid back to the bottom with the clinking sound of failure. As the humans watched this through their cameras, so did Oscar from within. He noticed the unfortunate attempts made by his brother to fetch the illusive bottle cap.

Oscar was indeed a clever chimp. On multiple occasions, he had been able to accomplish goals with the greatest speed, usually ones that Louie would not even attempt. He watched as Frank failed to pull the cap from the bottom of the bottle then he threw any similar attempt that he would try out of mind. Oscar began looking around the environment for several minutes while the humans observed through their cameras and wrote what they saw. After many minutes of picking up different items, Oscar jumped up and down a few times, an obvious emotion of joy, and he walked over to the water bottle. He pulled at the water bottle with his mouth for a long time then walked over to the soda bottle, leaned over it, and carefully spat the water from his full mouth into the bottle. It took him several trips but slowly, the bottle cap rose to the top with the water that Oscar was filling it, and finally he reached down to the top of the bottle and gently picked up the bottle cap that sat on top of the water with two fingers.

Frank hung his head in despair as he watched Oscar jump up and down in victory, sometimes holding the cap out to Frank as if in mockery. When the door buzzed open, the humans came in single file to witness what was to them one of the greatest feats they had ever seen. Oscar ran to the slot to receive his prize, bottle cap in hand but the humans walked past him. They walked past the slot then past the door of the environment that stood wide open. They all stood in wonder as they looked at Louie, the third chimp, who had not even attempted the challenge of the bottle cap. Louie sat in the break room of the humans, eating sugar cubes from the box they kept them in and watching television, switching the channels with the remote, and paying the upright humans no mind. He had long ago figured out the combination to the door of the environment. The careless humans would enter the five-digit combination right in front of him. He had for months waited until night to sneak out and eat the sugar, careful not to consume too much that the humans would notice.

Frank and Oscar walked up behind the humans and looked on with the same awe, the same near disbelief at their brother who had placed himself in a different category entirely. They looked on and realized what they were not and could never be. Here was a chimp that had placed himself on a similar level with those who housed him. He had transcended all they had known, moved to a realm that they could scarcely see from their vantage point let alone attempt themselves. Louie was what Nietzsche would call an Überchimp. He had become the goal rather than simply strove for it.

Now, that's about the best way I can explain ability. Keep that story in mind. Always keep it in mind, and understanding will be easier to grasp. See, to anyone looking, Oscar would be the smartest chimp in the land but that is only to the untrained eye. That is only to the person who doesn't know how to measure Louie. I knew how to measure Louie, and the guy in the black suit did too.

"Here you are, my friend," he said to me calmly and without the belittling smile. He simply stood back against the wall with arms folded, seemingly mimicking the posture of Ms. Hatcher.

On the board there was drawn what appeared to be a path or a road that forked. It split and continued in two different directions. At the fork there were two figures drawn, one with a halo and the other with horns and a tail. Nothing else was drawn on the board.

"You have a goal to reach," the man said blankly. "You must reach this goal without fail, and you can only ask one question. There are two guides on the road. One always speaks the truth, while the other never does. You can ask one question to find out which direction to go. What is it?" I opened my mouth to speak then closed it again with a snap.

"Wait," I said tilting my head to the side. "It can only be done with two questions."

"That is your answer then?" he said without changing his expression.

"No," I replied immediately then I thought for a few minutes more. "I don't think you understand your own question. In order to determine the direction, you must first discover which guide is honest and which the liar. You can't just assume it by their appearances.

"That's true to the second part," he said without moving.

"Your question cannot be answered," I said with noticeable anger in my voice.

"Then you concede?" he asked, taking a step forward.

I heard the voice from my left, barely audible, barely a wisp above the hum of the fan.

"What?" I asked, leaning my ear to the left while keeping my eyes on the man. "Wait a minute, what?"

Black suit leaned forward then turned to erase the board.

"You ask one of the guides what the other would say," I said glancing at Jack then back at the man. Black suit turned to me and waited. "You ask one guide what the other guide would say if I asked which path led to the goal? Whatever he said, I would know that the opposite is the answer."

"And how do you know that?" the man asked, alternating his gaze from me to Jack. After a full minute of silence, Jack spoke up with his nose still in the book.

“Must give it away. He must. If you ask the angel what the devil would say and he says the devil says to take the left path, you know to take right. Either the devil is lying and you know to go right or the devil is telling the truth then you know the angel is lying to you. Mm Hm Mm Hm, yep. That’s it. They must give it away. Yep, they must.” Jack started rocking back and forth to indicate the finality of his response, and I placed a hand on his back to help soothe him. “Must give it away,” he whispered to himself. He always did this as if he were checking his own answer with himself. He glanced at me for a moment then went back to reading his book.

“Yeah,” I said, looking at black suit while I rubbed Jack’s back. “I was gonna eventually say that.”

“Of course,” black suit said with his eyes wide and mouth open, practically drooling while he looked at Jack. “Ms. Hatcher, I really need to speak to these boys’ parents.”

“Well, that’s really gonna be a problem, unless that angel can tell you the way.” I answered before she could say anything.



Chapter 2

After more time than I'd ever spent in the office without being in trouble, I was finally able to get Jack and me out of there. It turns out that black suit, aka John—yes just John—makes sure you know less about who he is after you've met him than before you knew he existed if you can figure that out. Anyway, I'm no lawyer but I know that it's illegal for the school to give this guy any personal information about us, so I was glad to see that Principal Jerkins wouldn't comply with his demands about who we lived with. Appreciating something Jerkins did was another first I could check off that day. Then I had to decide exactly how I was going to deal with Aunt Lilly, or Lula as she always insisted we call her even before we moved into her house. If John Blacksuit tried to talk to her, she'd stay up for three days checking all the windows and doors, waiting for the government to come take us all away and conduct experiments on us. Lula is great, and since she is the only family we have left, she is a blessing but she gives paranoia a whole new definition. Walking up the sidewalk with Jack in tow, I thought about whether or not to inform her of the day's weirdness. If I told her, she might get paranoid for no reason, since it was very probable that we'd never hear from John again. If I didn't tell her and the guy just showed up, she might get doubly paranoid and then mad at me for not telling her. I mean, not that her version of mad is intimidating or anything. She would probably tell me I couldn't have syrup on my pancakes for one morning or something Gestapo like that. I decided to do what I always do, wait and see if Jack brought it up for me.

I didn't see any black Crown Victorias in the driveway, so I guess that was a good sign but I wasn't going to hold my breath. John had been pretty adamant about trying to find out who we were, although thinking back on it, he really wasn't yelling and screaming. He was asking about us but he also wasn't acting like it was the end of the world if they didn't help him. This was officially starting to bother me now, and I wasn't about to let it ruin the rest of my day. I helped Jack get his shoes off, and he immediately made his way upstairs to sit in his part of the house, which is better than you may think.

The house is split-level with the bottom belonging to Lula and the top pretty much to Jack, well most of the top, anyway. Being one of those amazing people who only think of the well-being of others, Lula quickly decided that since Jack seldom left his room, the best thing for her to do was take out the wall to the adjoining room and make most of the top floor one giant living area for the kid. Of course, who wouldn't have done that, right? As for me, I go to sleep wherever I fall. Lula asked me once if I really needed a bedroom, and I told her I was more the couch type, and she nodded her head, smiled and never brought it up again. So, if anybody needs me, I'm asleep on one of the three couches in the house. The living room was in the normal state of catastrophe with clothes, towels, plates, cups, just all the usual household stuff scattered throughout. We usually make it a point to go through on Sundays and try to clean up as much as possible, just to be able to walk around the place and have clean utensils to eat with. I thought I could hear the television on in the kitchen, so I headed that way.

For a second, I didn't understand what I was looking at. There were four pots on the stove, all boiling, the exhaust fan over them turning at high speed. It was like entering some twenty-first century witches den. The small television that hung underneath a

cabinet was set to one of those afternoon talk shows—it's hard to keep up with which one—and Lula was on the floor in front of the sink, nothing on but shorts and a sports bra, full-on mantra pose, while the world clattered on around her. I stood at the entrance to the kitchen taking in the scene.

Now, ordinarily this sort of activity would seem a bit odd, and granted Lula's deciding to meditate in the middle of cooking *did* go outside her bounds of what could be considered usual but other than I knew all was well. Lula had her flaming orange hair tied up in one of her many scarves. Since her hair was so long and curly, she said it was much easier just to tie it up than try to do anything with it. It covered part of her face now but I could see her lips move when she started talking.

“How did he do today?”

“No episodes,” I replied, standing on tiptoe to see what was in the pots.

“You don't sound pleased,” she replied, keeping her eyes closed. “Did they let you stay with him all day?”

“That was about the only good thing about it.”

“Did you at least learn anything today?” She opened one eye then the other, shooing me with her foot to get me away from the stove. “I know better than to think they'd have anything to teach him.”

“They've got nothing to teach me either,” I held up my hands and backed away. “School is totally unnecessary if you've got the capacity and drive to learn for yourself.”

She arched her head from side to side then stretched her legs out in front of her on the floor. She leaned over, keeping her legs straight, putting her head between her knees for nearly half a minute then she stood up and started stirring the pots in turn.

“I can't argue with you on that,” she said, smelling this one then that, adjusting the dials without looking at me. “I've never found conventional school to be useful, at least en masse, anyway.”

“You don't think conventional anything is useful,” I said with a smile, and she looked over at me, blowing the hair out her face. She opened her mouth to reply then pursed her lips in agreement.

I left Lula to whatever it was on the stove and made my way upstairs. Jack's socks were on separate steps, and I picked them up as I passed then I picked up the shoes he was supposed to put in the closet and headed his way. He was sitting in his hanging chair in the middle of the gigantic room, bent over a book in his lap. The sound of the shoes hitting the floor made a couple of thumps but he didn't turn around, nor did I really think he would. I strolled over to him and started staring at the book upside down. He hates that. He really does but I made sure to be quiet and breathe shallowly. After a full minute, he turned his head up at me, the agitation on his face comical but I knew better than to laugh. He sat in his chair that looked like an empty beanbag hanging from a hook in the ceiling, like a pea in a pod. It enveloped him, comforted him. He loved sitting in that chair to read. I stepped around and looked at the back of the hanging chair, taking a seat on the stack of books closest to him.

“Really, Jack?” I motioned toward the book in his lap. “You’re honestly reading that? That’s a girl book. I mean, it’s about vampires for crying out loud.”

“Plot moves good, moves well. The plot moves well,” he began rocking, making the chair swing slightly. He rocked when he was getting agitated, so I backed off. “The plot moves well.” He whispered. He often did that, as if he were checking his own reply for grammatical errors.

“OK, OK take it easy. I know you don’t discriminate. I know you’ll read anything.”

“Everything has something to say. Every book has something to say.” He said it definitively and the chair kept slightly swinging. I stood there for a little while longer thinking about the remark, and that’s when I heard the knock at the door. I took the steps three at a time but I could see that I wasn’t going to beat Lula, so I held back on the last step and waited. Of course, I knew who was on the other side. At least, I was afraid I knew.

I caught sight of John Blackcoat when Lula opened the door enough to walk out. She was careless that way, just walking out to talk to a total stranger. He saw me when she opened the door but he seemed to pay no attention. When she was outside, I put my ear to the door but that was no use. I moved around the room until I could finally see his back from the living room window. He waved his hands around a bit and talked excitedly. Another man got out of the car and stood beside him. It might as well have been his brother, same dark suit, same blank expression. I shuffled back toward the steps when I heard the door open.

“Have a good evening now,” Lula said, and although the man was still talking, she shut the door and turned around, falling back against the wood and blowing out with relief. “Jeesh, learn how to take no for an answer,” she saw me standing there and looked over at me. “Gib, whatever you do in life, wherever you let your feet take you, don’t, do *not* become a salesman. That’s all I ask.” She smiled at me and clapped her hands together then made her way back into the kitchen, nothing else was said on the matter.

The next morning Jack was dressed before me but he was still sitting in his hanging chair, bent over a book. Giving him my usual good morning with a tousle of his hair that I know he hated, I went downstairs, knowing better than to wait for a reply. Lula was in the kitchen cleaning the pots that had been on the stove the day before. It was strange to see her cleaning so early in the morning still I didn’t say anything about it. All I could think about was why she had blown off the black suited men at the door. She treated the situation like it was something else entirely. Surely, John hadn’t even pretended to be a salesman. She didn’t know we’d seen him earlier that day, so she thought the ploy would work. Yet, why would she do that? It didn’t make any sense; though she wasn’t bringing it up, so I didn’t know whether initiating the conversation would be my best course of action. I sat down to the plate of eggs and buttered bread on the table. The sound of a knife scraping over toast really freaked Lula out. She was petrified of it. That was the way she described it, so we’d never had toast in the house. In fact, I don’t think she’d ever owned a toaster. She blew her hair back and looked over at me, looking at her and winked.

“Morning, Gib,” she said turning back to the pots. “Coffee’s in the pot.”

“Thanks, Lula.” Something that made Lula one of the coolest people in the world was her unconventionality. The first morning I woke up in her house and asked for coffee, she pointed at the pot. You want to watch rated R movies? Knock yourself out. You want somebody to tell you when to go to bed? Too bad because she wasn’t going to but you had to live with the consequences of your actions. Too scared to sleep in your own bed because you watched *The Exorcist*? Sorry, better leave the light on and just try not to look at the staircase. Too tired to go to school because you were up all night playing *Call of Duty*? She’s not going to hear it. Drink an extra cup of coffee and get going. It was actually a great way to live *if* you had sense enough to learn from your mistakes and not take the freedom for granted. There were a few slips on my part, some trial and error but I made it through, and I’d learned the right and wrong way to do things. Because of that, we’d always been pretty open. There was really no need to keep secrets when everyone was treated as equals. That’s why this business with the dark suit man was bothering me. She had shut the door like no one was on the other side and not brought it up again. To me, that just seemed odd. I don’t know, secretive, or if not that then just plain disinterested. None of those things ever described Lula, so I just wanted to know why. If she wasn’t going to bring it up, I’d have to just break the ice myself.

“You want to know why I left those guys out there without talking to you about it, don’t you?” She asked the question and my mouth dropped open. I immediately tried to act like I didn’t know what she was talking about but it was too late. She had already sat down opposite me at the table.

“I see it in your eyes, Gib. You’ve been staring down at your plate with the same mouthful of food since you sat down. You do that when you’re trying to decide something. You zone out, and I figure that had to be what was bugging you.”

“Well, I’ve really got nothing for that but yeah. That’s what’s bugging me.” Realizing I was being rude, I finished chewing the food in my mouth and swallowed. “I mean, why *did* you just turn around and shut the door? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not complaining. Those guys kind of gave me the creeps, what did they want?”

She looked at me for a little while as if she were trying to weigh her options. She reached down and scooped some eggs from my plate with her fingers, something she knew drove me crazy sill I wasn’t going to complain. She knew I wanted to talk and that’s why she did it. She took her time chewing the food then grabbed her coffee cup.

“Principal Jerkins called me early yesterday afternoon and told me a few things, so I already had an idea about these guys, you know,” she said then tilted the cup all the way up and got up to pour herself another cup of coffee. She drank it black. “Is there really anything to talk about? You know how I feel about the government and all their agencies.”

“Do you know if they’re government agents?” I asked while drinking my own coffee, trying to sound as disinterested as possible. Lula was taking this remarkably well considering how paranoid she got about conspiracy theory. Maybe she was just trying to be equally nonchalant. She was a hard person to read sometimes.

“What else could they be, man?” Her hippie lingo thickened when she was about to get going on the problems with a so-called democracy. “This has Manchurian Candidate written all over it.” I looked confused but she just waved her hand in front of her face.

“Never mind, all I’m saying is that Big Brother knows no bounds. What kind of interaction with them did you guys have at school? I should be mad at you, by the way. You’re the one who’s been holding out.”

“Nothing direct, Lula. They asked a series of questions and we answered them, me and Jack. Well, Jack answered the last one through me but that’s all. It was weird though, you know. They were asking problem-solving questions. You know, deductive reasoning, IQ stuff but they were asking them in Jack’s classroom.” I decided just to be honest now since she was on to me.

“Maybe they were seeing if those kids are really where they belong,” she answered hopefully but her tone said that she didn’t even believe what she was saying. For some reason I got the feeling she wasn’t telling me everything. “Maybe they work for the state department of education.”

“A sound theory, Lula but not with the kind of questions these guys were asking. I bet none of the advanced kids could’ve come close.” She smiled at that and nudged me.

“Not a problem for you and Jack though, I see.”

I shrugged my shoulders, “I’m not being arrogant, just realistic. School is honestly a waste of my time, Lula. I mean, it’s not just that, it’s embarrassing. I’m fourteen years old and I’m sitting in the AP senior classes. What are they going to do with me next year, start paying me to teach?”

“No, you don’t sound arrogant at all,” she smiled and drank her coffee.

“You know what I mean,” I downed my cup and refilled it, giving it plenty of cream and sugar unlike my aunt.

“That’s how your dad took his coffee,” she said with a vacant expression then she smiled. “It used to drive me nuts. If I want syrup I’ll eat pancakes.” I grinned at her then we were silent. I decided to get back to the school conversation while I had it open.

“It is what it is as far as school is concerned, and don’t even get me started on Jack. I’ve been sitting in there with him. All he tries to do the whole time is find something to read. You know when he can’t find anything, he reads an imaginary book on his desk, turns the pages and everything. I swear he’s rereading something he read earlier. You know he’s got an eidetic memory. I bet you anything he’s reading the actual pages because he can see them in his mind. And think about that. He’s sitting in a room full of people who not only are not on his level but they can’t see the level he’s on from where they’re standing, teachers included—”

“I know, Gib,” she held up her hand to interrupt. “I know what you’re saying. We’ve had this conversation before. I promised your parents, kiddo. I promised them I’d bring you up the way you were supposed to. You still travel an unconventional road with common steps. Besides, it’s the law. You *have* to go to school.”

“We have to complete the requirements for a diploma. That does not mean we have to go to school. You know you could home school us. Well me, Jack has already been homeschooled plenty. He could just continue that.”

“I believe this conversation is beginning to sound very familiar, Gib. You know that’s how it will start. Six weeks after we begin homeschooling, you will say you’re getting nothing from it, and you need to do something else. I know how this will go.” I hung my head in disappointment, and her voice softened. “Hey, Gib, come on.” She ran her fingers through my hair, a light brown that was too coarse to grow long. “We’re in the middle of another try with your brother. Jack’s back in school, and I think he’ll respond much better if you’re with him. Maybe after a few days, you can leave him in the room more and more until he’s comfortable with the teacher. It was difficult enough getting him into the same building with you so we could try this. Let’s see how it plays out. What do you think? Can we just see if this works out?” She waited on me to respond and I picked my head up and nodded.

“Thanks buddy.” She sat and looked at me a bit longer then got up and let me finish my breakfast.

I took Jack to Ms. Hatcher’s room first thing in the morning as always. That was why we ate breakfast at home. There was no way Jack could handle being around all those people in the cafeteria in the mornings or at lunch. We all figured that out with one of Jack’s early tries at school. Crowds are a very bad thing, so I had been given special privileges in the hallways. I basically could be in the hallway with Jack at any time I wanted and that was always the time I knew there would be little to no traffic. It seemed like in school we existed on special privileges. I mean, Jack’s eleven years old. He shouldn’t even be at the high school but the superintendent was willing to let him sit in the contained class here since his ability was so high. It was all Lula’s doing, really. She had gradually built up so many privileges for me through Jack just so he could go to school that it all seemed pointless. It was like being force fed a meal that was more likely to make you choke to death than give sustenance.

I let Jack read the textbooks underneath the desk until the bell rang then Ms. Hatcher asked if I could try to keep him on task with everyone else in the class. It was painful trying to keep everyone on task. It was painful for Ms. Hatcher, I mean. All those personalities, all those different abilities, strengths and weaknesses, it just seemed wrong, stifling to get them on the same thing. It was too difficult for some and too easy for others but I guess that’s just the way the system works. Anyway, when the bell rang and Ms. Hatcher had the class trying to fill in punctuation on a printed paragraph, I took the opportunity to go to the restroom. Actually, I just wanted to get out of that room for a while and roam, do some thinking for myself. This latest attempt at getting my brother in school had really started to take quite a bit out of me. Not physically but since I didn’t exactly get anything out of school myself, it made me feel bad to know that Jack *really* wasn’t getting anything out of it. I noticed that it had kind of zapped the energy out of me just thinking about it. School might be the best idea for the masses. I would argue with Lula on that point but it certainly wasn’t great for the exceptional. All these thoughts ran through my head as I walked down a few hallways, trying to avoid running into anyone, students and faculty alike. Figuring I’d gone far enough without suspicion, I walked into the restroom next to the gym.

As soon as I passed the threshold, I should have turned around but I just didn’t feel like holding it until I got back to the science hall. The smoke from the cheap tobacco hit

me like a fist, and I saw the three boys over by the window passing a cigarette among themselves almost as soon as I walked in. They all turned and looked at me, a mixture of surprise and skepticism on their faces, so I paused and looked at them, and when I headed toward the closest stall, they commenced their activity. I could hear the hisses of their whispers, and I knew there was a slim chance of walking out of this bathroom without some sort of dialogue with these fine, future pillars of the community. I finished and headed to the sink to wash up, keeping the trio in the mirror as I did so. The one with the cigarette thumped it out the window, and I opened my mouth before thinking about it, a problem that seems to be getting worse with age instead of better.

“It’s fall,” I said, shaking my hands dry before putting them under the dryer.

“What?” the one who thumped the cigarette asked. He had pimples all over his face that he mostly concealed with dyed black hair.

“I said it’s fall. You know, time of the equinox?” I pointed at the window behind him. “If I’m not mistaken there are box woods right outside that window with pine straw that the grounds crew spreads out. It’s fall and it hasn’t rained in quite some time, so in the future you might want to run that cancer stick under running water before you thump it out the window, or I don’t know, conveniently flush it down the multiple toilets housed in this very room.” I was the one saying it, and I sounded like a smart mouth in my own ears.

“Oh yeah, thanks for the tip,” it wasn’t the butt-thumping genius this time. I don’t think he got the insult. It was the leader judging by how the others stayed behind him. His ginger hair was cut low, and he had the stubble of a full beard on his face just as long. Either he got overloaded with testosterone at an early age or more likely he was a few years past the age of his well-groomed peers. Considering how the other two stayed behind him and obviously looked up to him, I’d bet on the latter. He put his finger to my chest and backed me against the sink.

“I’ve seen you roaming the halls during class quite a bit. I know because I’m usually standing outside where the teachers put me,” he snickered and glanced back at the others who nudged him and nodded their heads, giggling. “What’s your story, dude?”

“I’ve got a small bladder. Doctor wrote me a note that gives me unlimited bathroom passes. You should get one. It’s great.” I stepped to leave but he pushed me back against the sink. I closed my eyes and counted to three then smiled, waiting to hear what he had to say. He snapped his fingers and shook his finger at me as if he’d just remembered something.

“No, you’re the one who walks the kid around the school, the freak. I knew I’d seen you around. Yeah, what you walk him around for? Is he retarded or something? He looks retarded.” The others giggled at him again and I reached back, grabbed the sink and clenched my teeth but I maintained my composure. You have to regard the level of your opposition if you want to make a valid point.

“Which one is it?” I asked, keeping the leader’s eyes locked on mine?

“Huh?”

“Which one? Is he a freak or a retard? I only ask to clarify the description. I need to make sure we’re talking about the same kid. You see, a freak by definition is a person

containing an abnormality. That is something unusual. Now, it is usually a physical characteristic but I think that *unusual* is an apt description. There's nothing physically unusual about him but he is indeed outside the norm, now that does make him unusual or abnormal. For instance, the *average* intelligence quotient for your *average* person is between 85 and 115. Now, I agree that's a bit of a wide gap and probably a little optimistic. What would you say you are? Oh psh, let's split the difference and say a hundred. Now that puts you in the norm, which personally I think is also being a little optimistic. The freak doesn't have a measureable IQ because standard problem-solving tests are too simple, so we—I say we because he and I have taken the tests on our own—decided he must fall somewhere beyond the two hundred range. Now, once you get up there, a few numbers here and there don't really matter. Anyway, he's also left handed. Now the numbers vary but the southpaw population in the world is around thirteen to fifteen percent. Actually, he's pretty ambidextrous but he *does* have poor fine motor skills so that drops him further. This freak also has green eyes, which drops him way down to about two percent of the world population. Now mine are blue though that doesn't matter. It's pretty dim in here yet I see yours are brown. Good for you. You're the epitome of standard. I try not to take him out in public too much because I don't want people talking. You know how important it is to fit in with the conventional, though you seem really to be paying attention to him.”

I stopped and waited for a reply but they just stared at me. After a few minutes I decided to continue. I reached back and put my hand near the automatic soap dispenser.

“OK, so I would have to say that he is indeed a freak if you're using the standard definition. As for the retarded part, I really can't disagree with that entirely either. Now, even though the word itself has actually become taboo—you know it's derogatory and really only used in ignorance—I am going to let that slide in light of my audience and try to see if the freak also falls under that term. To retard by definition is to slow down or hold back but you used the adjective form which is something or someone that has slow or impeded progress. I think that my IQ description renders him outside that stigma, though I am in no way saying that fact makes him better in any way than someone else you may so astutely label that word. For instance, spending so much time with the freak, I have come across some very exceptional people. Those people, in my humble opinion, tend to conduct themselves in a far superior way than, oh I don't know, normal people. For instance, you don't see them sneaking into the bathroom to smoke a cigarette or physically detaining people to intimidate or bully them. Do you understand what I'm saying or do I need to get a crayon and—”

He hit me before I was ready. I thought for sure he was going to do some monologue before he drew back to shut my smart mouth but no such luck. The straight right caught me right on the lips and all I could think was eating was going to be super fun for the next week. When my head snapped back, I heard the familiar sound of the soap dispenser and I felt the foam in my hand. Before I could see what I was doing, I shot my hand forward, catching the leader in the eyes with the soap. I looked forward to see him scraping at his face and moaning. Before his partners could react, I placed my hands on his shoulders and brought my knee up as hard as I could. The feeling and the sound made me a little nauseated. I was on the giving end. His friends stepped back, sucking in hard as their chief fell to the ground in front of them. I made it out the door before they could collect

themselves, half-running to get away but careful not to attract attention. I reached up and felt my puffy lips and decided to stop at the next bathroom to clean up before returning to Jack's class.

“Gibson Bartleby, please report to room 516.” The voice blasted over the intercom as I was dabbing my lips with a cold, wet paper towel and I immediately knew what prompted it. How could I have been so stupid? Jack had barely been comfortable enough for me to make a quick bathroom run. He certainly couldn't handle the time I spent traipsing all over the school and getting into fights like—well, like a school kid—an ordinary school kid, what an idiot. I ran down the halls as fast as I could, my sneakers screeching with each turn and I tensed up as soon as I got remotely close. I could hear him well before I got to the room.

The door was open already when I walked in and I couldn't have painted a picture of a worse way to handle a situation. All the kids were out of their desks looking. Ms. Hatcher was holding Jack's arms down and a security officer had his arms around Jack from the back but he was unable to control him. Jack's face was so red it scared me. It always scared me a little when he got this way. His face looked like a tomato about to explode. He was screaming to the top of his lungs, obviously trying to free his hands. He fixed his eyes on me when I entered the room and although he didn't stop screaming and struggling, I could see the pleading that fell over his expression. When he saw me, he went from animalistic to just crazed rage, a small improvement noticed by no one but me. The first thing I had to do was get everyone to do what I said.

“Let him go,” I screamed but they both held on. Instead of fighting with the adults, which is what I used to do, I relieved them. This method worked much better in that people, even adults, respond to aggression with aggression. Actually, it was counter-productive. I grabbed Jack under the arms and hugged him as tight as I could. When they saw I had him, Ms. Hatcher and the officer slowly released him into my grasp and Jack sunk to his knees letting me take him to the floor then he squeezed my neck so hard I couldn't breathe but I just squeezed him tighter and we sat there until he stopped screaming. Everyone in the room just looked at us. Jack buried his wet face into my neck, mumbling now instead of screaming.

“Gib, Gibby,” he mumbled over and over, “Gibby, Gib,” until finally he was still.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>