

CHAPTER 1

Gear

Too early to get up, especially on Saturday. The sun peeks over his windowsill. Isolated footsteps from the street. Guys who have to work on Saturday. Boy! That's what they'll call you all your life if you don't stay in school. Forty-five definitions, two chapters in *Silas Marner*, and three chem labs. On Sunday night, he will sit in his room with the radio on, bobbing back and forth on his bed, opening the window wide and then closing it, taking a break to eat, to comb his hair, to dance, to hear the Stones—anything. Finally, cursing wildly and making ugly faces at himself in the mirror, he will throw *Silas Marner* under the bed and spend an hour watching his tortoise eat lettuce.

In the bathroom, he breaks three screaming pimples. With a toothpick, he removes four specks of food from his braces, skirting dangerously barbed wires and week-old rubber bands. Brooklyn Bridge, railroad tracks, they called them. Metal mouth. They said he was skinny. They said he smiled like someone was holding a gun to his head. Bent fingers with filthy nails. Caved-in chest with eight dangling hairs. A face that looks like the end of a watermelon and curly hair—not like the Stones, not at all like Brian Jones, but muddy curls running down his forehead and over his ears. A bump, smashed by a bat thrown wildly into his future when he was eight, a hunchback Quasimodo Igor on his head. A bump. Nobody hip has a bump or braces. Or hair like a fucking Frankenstein movie. He licks his braces clean and practices smiling.

Hair straight and heavy. Nose full. Lips bulging like boiling frankfurters. Hung. Bell bottoms and boss black boots. He practices his Brian Jones expressions. Fist held close to the jaw.

Ready to spring, ready to spit. Evil. His upper brace catches on a lip.

Ronnie walks past his parents' bedroom, where his mother sleeps in a gauzy hairnet, the covers pulled over her chin, her baby feet exposed and yellowed by calluses. Her hand reaches over to the night table, where her eyedrops and glasses lay. Ronnie mutters silently at her. The night before, there had been a fight—the usual fight, with Mommy shouting, “I’ll give you money . . . sure . . . you rotten kid . . . I’ll give you clothing so you can throw it all over the floor . . . that’s blood money in those pants of yours.” And him answering the usual “geh-awf-mah-bak,” and her: “Don’t you yell at me, don’t you . . . did you hear that [to no one] . . . did you hear that kid . . . and him slamming the door—the gray barrier—and above the muffled . . . disrespects his mother . . . he treats me like dirt under his feet . . . he’ll spit on my grave . . .” and finally Dad’s groaning shuffle and a murmured: “Ronnie, you better shut your mouth to your mother,” and him whispering, silently, the climactic, the utter: “Fucking bitch. Cunt. Cunt.”

He doesn’t know why he cursed, except that she did not like it. It was easy to make her cry. Though he shivers at the thought of her lying across the bed sobbing into a pillow, her housedress pulled slightly over a varicose thigh, he has to admit it was easy.

On the table he sees the pants she bought him yesterday. Her money lining his pocket, he had taken the bus to Fordham Road, and in Alexander’s he had searched out the Mod rack. Hands shaking, dying for a cigarette, he found the pants—a size small but still a fit. He bought them, carried them home clutched in his armpit, and deposited them before her, during prime *Man from UNCLE* time.

“Get away, I can’t see. Whatsamadduh, your father a glacier or something?” And when he unveiled the pants and asked for the usual cuff-making ritual (when he would stand on the ladder and she, holding a barrage of pins in her mouth, ran the tailor’s chalk along his shoe line and made him drag out the old black sewing machine), the fight had begun—and ended within the hour. The pants, sewn during *The Merv Griffin Show* as the last labor of the night, now lay exposed and sunlit on the table—\$8.95 pants.

They shimmer. The houndstooth design glows against the formica. Brown and green squares are suddenly visible within the gray design. He brushes the fabric carefully so the wool bristles. He tries them on, zipping up the two-inch fly, thinking at first that he has broken the zipper until he realizes that hip huggers have no fly to speak of. They buckle tightly around his hips, hug his thighs, and flare suddenly at the knees. He races to the mirror and grins.

His hips are suddenly tight and muscular. His waist is sleek and his ass round and bulging. Most important, the pants make him look hung. Like the kids in the park. The odor of stale cigarettes over their clothing. Crucifixes dangling out of their shirts. Belt buckles ajar. They are hip. They say, “Check out dat bike.” Get bent on Gypsy. Write the numbers of cruising police cars all over the walls. In the park, they buzz out on glue, filling their paper bags and breathing deeply, then falling back on the grassy slopes, watching the cars. Giggling. Grooving. High.

Sometimes they let him keep the models that come with the glue. Or he grubs around their spot until, amid the torn bags and oozing tubes, he finds a Messerschmitt or Corvair spread across the grass in ruins, as though it had crashed there.

He unzips the pants and lets them hang on the door, where he can watch them from the living room. He takes a box of Oreos from the kitchen, stacking the cookies in loose columns on the rug. He pours a cup of milk and turns on the TV. Farmer Gray runs nervously up and down the screen while a pig squats at ease by his side. His pants are filled with hornets. He runs in a cloud of dust toward a pond that appears and disappears teasingly, leaving Farmer Gray grubbing in the sand. Cut down.

He fills his mouth with three Oreos and wraps his feet around the screen so he can watch Farmer Gray between his legs. Baby habit. Eating cookies on the floor and watching cartoons on Saturday morning. Baby habit, Mommy called it. Like thumbsucking. They teased him about it until he threw imaginary furniture into their faces. A soft bulge on his left thumb from years of sucking. Cost them a fortune in braces. Always busting his hump.

He kills the TV picture, and puts the radio on softly, because he doesn’t want to wake Dad, who is asleep on his cot in the middle of the living room, bunched up around the blanket, his

face creased in a dream, hands gripping his stomach in mock tension. Dad snores regularly, in soft growls.

He brushes a flock of Oreos crumbs under the TV, and rubs a milk stain into the rug. Thrown out of your own bed for snoring. You feel cheap; like Little Bo Peep; beep beep beep beep.

Maybe he should go downstairs. The guys are out already, slung over cars and around lampposts. The girls are trickling out of the project. It's cloudy, but until it actually rains he knows they will be around the lamppost, spitting into the street, horsing around, grubbing for hooks, singing. He finishes four more cookies and stuffs half an apple onto his chocolate-lined tongue.

Marie Giovanni put him down bad for his braces. When she laughs, her tits shake. Her face is pink; her hair rises in a billowing bouffant. In the hallway, she let Tony get his fingers wet. Yesterday, she cut on him: called him metal mouth.

He flicks the radio shut, grabs the pants, and slides into them. He digs out a brown poor-boy sweater from under a rubble of twisted clothing (they dress him like a ragpicker) and shines his boots with spit. The heels are worn down on one side, but they make him look an inch taller, so he wears them whenever he can.

He combs his hair in the mirror. Back on the sides, over the ears, over the eyes to cover up his bump. Straight down the back of his neck, so it rests on his collar. He checks his bald spot for progress and counts the hairs that come out in his brush. In two years, he's convinced he'll be bald in the front and his bump will look like a boulder on his forehead.

He sits on his bed and turns the radio on. From under the phonograph, he lifts a worn fan magazine—*Pop* in bright fuchsia lettering, with Zal Yanovsky hunched over one P, Paul McCartney contorted over the other, and Brenda Lee touching her toes around the O. He turns to a spread on the Stones, and flips the pages until he sees The Picture. Mick Jagger and Crissie Shrimpton. Mick scowling, waving his fingers in the air. Crissie watching the camera. Crissie waiting for the photographer to shoot. Crissie. Crissie. Eyes fading brown circles, lips slightly parted in flashbulb surprise, miniskirt spread apart, tits like two perfect cones under her sweater. He had to stop looking at Crissie Shrimpton a week ago.

He turns the page and glances at the shots of Brian Jones, and then his eyes open wide because a picture in the corner shows Brian in Ronnie's pants. The same check. The same rise and flare. Brian leaning against a wall, his hands on the waist of his magic hip huggers. Wiiiicked.

He flips the magazine away and stands in a curved profile against the mirror. He watches the pants move as he does. From a nearby flowerpot he gathers a fingerful of dirt and rubs it over his upper lip, moustache-style. He checks hair, nose, braces, nails, and pants. He likes the pants. They make him look hung. He reaches into his top drawer and pulls out a white handkerchief. He opens his fly and inserts the rolled cloth, patting it in place, and closing the zipper over it. He looks bosssss.

In the elevator, Ronnie takes a cigarette from his three-day-old pack and keeps it unlit in his mouth. Marie Giovanni will look at his pants and giggle. Tony will bellow, "Check out dem pants," and everyone will groove on him. In the afternoon, they will take him down to the park and turn him on and he will feel the buzz they are always talking about and the cars speeding by like sparklers.

Brian Jones thoughts in his head. Tuff thoughts. He will slouch low over the car, and smoke with his thumb over the cigarette—the hip way. And when he comes back upstairs, they will finally get off his back. And even on Fordham Road, where the Irish kids crack up when he walks by, even in chemistry and gym, they will know who he is and nod a soft "hey" when he comes by. He'll get laid.

Because clothing IS important. Especially if you've got braces and bony fingers and a bump the size of a goddam coconut on your head.

And especially if you're 14. Because—ask anyone—14 is shit.

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