

Life in Caves

by

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Chapter One

psychosomatic: (adj) [< Gk. psyche, breath, spirit, soul + somatikos, symptoms] 1. Designating or of a physical disorder of the body originating in or aggravated by the psychic or emotional processes of the individual 2. an individual exhibiting a psychosomatic disorder

I remember the first time I saw the kid. I noticed him because he sat at Puker's table, which nobody but a new kid would do. He ate with his elbows down on his knees, his chin just above the table while his two hands fed a stiff, grey-brown grilled cheese into his face. Puker, tapping his lime Jello with a spoon, paid no attention him. I thought maybe I should warn the kid about Puker, but I really didn't want to get involved. A new kid's always a risk. You never know what kind of jerk he might be. I did a favor once for a kid from Connecticut - I showed him how to open his locker by whacking the lock with the spine of a history book - and for the next three months he stuck to me like wet toilet paper. Then I caught him and another kid in the gym locker room using my jock as a slingshot. When I told them to knock it off, somehow it ended up with them laughing at me and my jock dangling from the branch of a maple in back of the gym.

Besides, this kid, the kid sitting with Puker, looked like he might have deep psychological problems. One sign: navy blue pants that had creases down the front and back of each leg. Another: his shoes, shiny black leather jobs with thick shoe laces and a rounded bumper of sole

sticking out around the bottom. His shirt looked like the ones square dancers wear, plaid with fake turquoise buttons and fancy pointed flaps over the pockets. Something about the kid said, "Nebraska, born and raised" - nothing you'd want following you down the halls during the prime of your life. It's a reflection on your own lack of cool. I myself lacked enough cool already, and I knew it.

That was one of the two reasons I sat with Puker in the cafeteria. He didn't seem to mind it if I sat with him, and he was one of few kids I could ask for a pencil or something if I needed it. But he was the kind of kid nobody hung around with, especially at lunch, when he tended to need the little airplane puke sacks his father brought him from business trips. We sat at a four-seater in a corner where the janitor never swept. I often wondered what other kids thought when they saw me sitting there with Puker. They probably thought it was the most natural combination in the world. Either that or they didn't notice me at all.

I was chewing my fish sticks into a gummy wad when the kid from Nebraska did something so quick and so perfect I wasn't sure I really saw it. At first I thought he just brought a fist to his mouth to cover a cough. It even sounded like he coughed into it. But he had something in his hand, something as shiny as stainless steel and as long as a straw. An instant after the cough, I heard a sharp crack at the cafeteria clock, and in the next instant, Señora Wypychowski flinched. She was carrying a tray toward the table in back where the teachers sit when something seemed to hit her near the ear. She set her tray down and pawed at her hair until she found something. She held it between her thumb and forefinger. Somehow I knew it was a bean.

A kid coughs and a Spanish teacher pulls a frijole from her ear. Magic? Coincidence? I didn't believe it. By the time I looked back and forth between the kid and the target a couple of times, the kid had the grilled cheese up against his teeth again. But his eyes, still aimed at Señora Wypychowski, glimmered with secret amusement.

Something told me this kid and I shared common interests. Trying not to attract attention, I took up my tray, sauntered over to his table and slid in, smooth and low. Puker looked up from his Jello.

"You feeling all right, Puker?" I asked, ready to leap away. "You look great, you really do."

Puker had a weak stomach made worse by a patty of rancid butter a couple of years before, back in the sixth grade. But the nurse said the problem was psychosomatic, which I knew from my WordForce workbook, meant all up in his head. He vomited - by which she meant puked - because he thought he was going to vomit. After that, all he had to do was see a patty of butter. One kid found out we could set him off just by waving a softened patty near his nose. But that's the kind of joke that gets old fast. We saved it for emergencies.

He looked okay when I slid into the seat across from him, but not real okay. "Puker," I said. "Eat your Jello. It's good for the stomach. Very, very soooooothing. I just had some. It's great. They did it right this time. No surprises inside."

Puker said nothing - he hardly ever said anything, except to burp - but lifted a wiggly green cube to his thin, pale lips and slurped it in. Then he took a slow breath and didn't puke.

I leaned close to the new kid and said, "What just happened over there?" With my chin I gestured toward Señora Wypychowski. She held the little brown bullet between her thumb and forefinger in front of Mr. Mundt, assistant principal in charge of pupil mutilation. But they'd never figure out where it came from. Out of the hundred-odd kids in the cafeteria, they'd never suspect the one who looked so scientifically interested in a petrified grilled cheese, the kid with bumper shoes. With the tip of his pinky the kid picked thoughtfully at the congealed cheese and said, "It was just a practice shot."

"That was practice?"

"Ricochets are tough, especially on a snap-shot like that. You never know where they're going to land. I was aiming for her spaghetti."

The kid spoke with a sort of western drawl, kind of slow, as if he talked off the back of his tongue. I said, "Where are you from?"

"Iowa."

"I was close. I figured Nebraska."

"You call that close? Nebraskans are weird. Completely different from Iowans."

"How come you moved to New Jersey?"

"It's a long story. Suffice it to say I'm Japanese."

Well that was the first corn-haired, freckle-faced Japanese I ever saw who was taller than me, and nobody every called me short. And his name, it turned out, was Rusty - surely another first for the Japanese empire. Middle name, just what you'd expect on a kid out of Iowa: Earl. And also Entwhistle. The two middle names together sounded more like something you'd get with a kid from California. But then came the weird part, the Japanese part. Matsunaga. Russell Earl Entwhistle Matsunaga.

I said, "Matsunaga?"

He looked me hard in the eye and said, "Want to make something of it?" By the way he held his grilled cheese I knew he could fit it up my nostrils if I so much as cracked a grin. Entwhistle Matsunaga's a hard name not to crack up over, but I prefer to eat sandwiches the old fashioned way. So I made my forehead wrinkle with deep concern and said, "My name's Mario. Mario McSweeney. I'm Irish. And Italian."

Then neither of us knew what to say, so I introduced Puker and gave a little of his background, the stuff he's famous for. Rusty put down his sandwich and leaned back in his chair. When his eyes shifted focus to look over the cafeteria crowd, I got the same idea he had. I wanted to see him shoot another bean.

"I got a lima bean --a cooked lima bean - into a teacher's spaghetti once," he said. "It was great. When she bit down on it, she must have figured it was a cockroach because she spit it out real fast, along with a mouthful of spaghetti and this incredible sauce they used to put on it. The meat was ground up dogs and cats. This kid I knew said he saw one of the cooks carry a dead schnauzer into the kitchen, and this wasn't a kid who told a lot of lies. I mean, it might have been

a poodle mix or something, but for sure it was a dog from the side of the road somewhere. You could see the little bits of hair in the sauce. Sometimes you'd get a bone chip between your teeth."

"You shouldn't talk that way in front of Puker," I said. "And how do you shoot lima beans out a bean shooter? They're flat."

Keeping his eyes on the teacher's table, Rusty casually bent over and slipped two fingers into his sock. When he sat up, he kept his hand under the table but showed me what he had. Just like you'd expect a lima bean shooter to look, it was a flat tube, kind of oval shaped at the end. Not shiny like the other shooter, though. This one was just gray and crude-looking.

"A lima bean shooter," I said with total amazement. "Where'd you get that? "

"Made it in shop class. Back in Iowa."

"Too bad we haven't got any lima beans." Mrs. Wypychowski was talking so fast and hard at Mr. Mundt that I could see her teeth and tongue and half-chewed spaghetti from clear across the cafeteria. It wasn't a pretty sight, but it did make a tempting target.

Rusty said, "Lima beans? No sweat." From his shirt pocket pulled half a dozen beans, some brown, some black, some lima, even a few tiny lentils. "Limas are tough. They swoop around. Half the time they go the whole wrong way."

He lowered his chin to table level, slipped a lima bean into the six-inch tube, checked around for witnesses, and brought the tube to his mouth. With a quick, hushed toof, the bean took off. About halfway across, it sliced to the right like an F-16 showing off. It landed among some sixth graders who were giggling so hard they didn't notice. By the time I looked back at Rusty, he was coming back from his sock, hands empty.

I liked this kid. Very cool, very smooth. And he didn't have to talk about it, didn't have to make a big show out of being the best shot east of the Mississippi. Maybe west of the Mississippi, too, depending on whether every kid in Iowa could do what Rusty did so well.

Besides, I had this thing against Señora Wypychowski, who had some other thing against me. She hated me even more than she hated most of the rest of the English-speaking world. And not just the suckers who got stuck in her Spanish class. She refused to speak English with anybody. She'd talk to other teachers in Spanish. She talked to her dog in Spanish. When she passed me in the hall, she'd say, "Buenos dias, Mario. Como estás?" and smile with a wicked grin just daring me to come back with, "Oh, not bad, yourself?" She had fingernails, blood-red, grown long for kids who spoke English to her, and she had the kind of personality that could remove a kid's face with one swipe of her claws. Maybe that's what they put in spaghetti sauce in New Jersey. Kids' faces.

Not that she needed to go that far. She had us trained well enough. She had a way of making a kid feel like he'd had his face clawed off. Like if your dog ate your homework, she'd make you stand up and sing Silent Night. In Spanish. It was amazing how fast our dogs learned to stick to their kibble. We had to memorize dialogues, too - not for punishment but just for her majesty's pleasure. Thirty-odd lines of dull-witted discussion between teen-age Mexicans. Not that I have anything against Mexicans, but why do I have to know how to say, "Who's the toreador?" in Spanish? If Mexican kids never had to learn to say, "Who's pitching?" in English, it wouldn't bother me a bit.

I had that toreador line to say - that or "I love meatballs!" depending on who started the dialogue - right after lunch on the day Rusty Entwistle Matsunaga winged Señora Wypychowski with a turtle bean. There I sat in a puddle of sweat - it was late April and already hot - right behind the only person in the world who loved her Spanish teacher: Fluorine Dalwani.

Fluorine knew her stuff, be it Silent Night in Spanish or the chemical formula for photosynthesis or the geometric proof that a triangle has three sides. She was in the honors track because she was born too smart. I landed in the same fast-track because our school has a computer with a sense of humor. It put me in with the smart kids so it could watch me score low. Ha, ha, ha. Maybe it's just so the others would look better.

Fluorine ranked last among the five-point-two billion people on earth who I wanted to recite dialogue with. It was plenty hard enough without having to face an overfed female nerd in saddle

shoes and a granny dress. That's what she always wore. Always. For as long as I had known her, which was since about kindergarten, she'd worn saddle shoes and granny dresses. She probably slept in them. I can't imagine where her mother found shoes like that. They didn't get handed down from older sisters because she didn't have any. Nor could they come from friends; she didn't have any of those, either. The thrift shop over in Newton wouldn't have them. You'd have to go to an antique store, or maybe there was a special shop for weird people.

The señora always paired off her *estudiantes* for our moment in the sun. Depending on how many kids were absent between me and the left end of the back row, where she started picking the lucky pairs, I might have to face Fluorine at the front of the class. Or, in complete contrast, I might get to stand up there with the most beautiful girl in the world, Emily Fetschrift. I don't know what it was about that girl, but I loved her deeply. Also secretly. No one could possibly suspect because we had never exchange a word except in Spanish, which, of course, didn't count. Emily didn't have the kind of prettiness your normal person would call pretty. Basically she was a skinny chick with hair the color of dirt. But I liked the way one front tooth kind of leaned out around the one next to it, and the way her jaw was kind of wide in back but pointed a bit at the chin. And she had dimples - five, to be exact: one in each cheek, one in her chin, and two others you could see only when she wore a certain pair of white jeans. No other girl in the world had dimples like that and such a sassy tooth.

Fluorine and Emily both had eyes, but they did different things to me up there in front of the class. I'd be standing there, sweat running a trickle from armpits to waist, and my dialogue mate would flash glances at me. If it was Fluorine, the flashes were of disdain, impatience, and disgust. If it was Emily, the flashes hit me with quick sparks of sympathy. She wouldn't quite smile, but I'd see a flicker of dimples, a peek of her tooth, and I'd know she knew how I felt. I knew she knew because she, too, had damp stains under her arms.

With the cruel smile of a sadist who knew of my love of Emily, the mighty Mrs. Wypy said, "Señorita Flora Doreen, Señor Mario, por favor..." and gestured toward the front of the room and a map of Mexico pulled down for the occasion. Fluorine planted her saddle shoes in a spot that seemed perfect to her and gave me a grin I'd just love to drop into the cafeteria trash can. In the voice of a cheerful Mexican teenager who really cared, she rattled off the first line, a tongue-

twister I happened to know meant "Good afternoon, Pedro. ¿Would you like to go to the bullfight with me? I have some excellent tickets in the shady section."

New Jersey state law required me to say "Yes. ¿Who's the toreador?" but no law in the world could make me look like I wanted to go or to give a flying hoot who got to stab the bull. For all I cared it could have been the president of the United States in star-spangled glow-in-the-dark, red, white and chartreuse tights. In fact if I had known how to say that in Spanish, I would have. Not that our beloved señora gave extra points for creativity. No way. She wanted the R's to rattle like machine guns, the U's to sound like a pigeon's coo, the E's to come from where the top of the throat meets the back of the tongue, a kind of flat squeak, like Mickey Mouse in need of Pepto Bismol.

Worst of all, she wanted us to look like we cared. She wanted to hear those upside-down exclamation points and italics. If she heard murder in your throat, she'd make you say it again, and then again, louder. And in a day or two, for some minor infraction, you'd find yourself singing Silent Night before an audience of smirks.

But I'm the kind of guy who'd rather sing Silent Night in public than go to a bullfight with the likes of Fluorine. It was one of those lousy situations one could easily solve with plastic explosives, or even a beanshooter. I imagined an impossibly beautiful lima bean shot ricocheting out the door, swooping down the hall, around the corner and through the little glass plate of the fire alarm. The room clears, the fire trucks come. Before it's all over, it's time for gym.

I had no beanshooter, though, let alone the marksmanship to pull off a shot like that. Fluorine stood waiting for her answer, and Señora Wypychowski stood drumming the fingers of one hand on the knuckles of the other. I could stall no more. Being too honest for my own good, being the type who cannot resist going for the laugh, knowing I wouldn't make it to the thirty-fourth line anyway, and especially not wanting to get to "I just love meatballs!", I just answered Fluorine with the truth. I said, "No way, José."

The room guffawed, and poor miffed Fluorine let out with a bitter "Tcht!" that could have cracked concrete.

What did I get for my moment of truth and joy? An F for my recital and a two-hour detention for being an inconsiderate wise-guy.

That's inflation for you. I remember the days when you could be an inconsiderate wise-guy for only one hour of detention. Two hours was too much. It meant waiting for the high school bus that took the baseball and track teams home after practice. I wouldn't get home until after dark, about the time my father left for work and my mother disappeared into her bedroom for the night. Not that either of them bothered me much. I worried more about a certain snapping turtle I had chained to a tree at the side of a swamp in the woods. I also wanted to shoot some serious beans.

What exquisite happiness, then, to walk into Mr. Mundt's windowless chamber of boredom and see something besides cement block walls and half a dozen desk-chairs. What infinite joy to find a fellow cell mate in there, a freckled, yellow-haired, inconsiderate wise-guy with half a smile on his face and a general look of deep, deep thought. Nothing about him at all seemed in the least way Japanese.

"Rusty," I said. "It's good to see you here."

Chapter Two

sterile: (adj) [< L. sterilis < IE ster- barren] 1. incapable of producing others of its kind, barren 2. producing little or nothing, unfruitful [sterile soil, a sterile policy] 3. lacking in interest or vitality; not stimulating or effective [a sterile style] 4. free from living organisms

Rusty Earl Entwhistle Matsunaga had been sentenced to two hours of detention for a most exquisite crime: launching a wad of pink bubble gum so that it landed exactly on the corner of the desk where Mr. Mandia, crack health sciences teacher, tended to sit. Now Mr. Mandia had pink bubble gum in the center of his pinstriped pants, and Rusty had a running start on his Record. We could hear Mr. Mandia in Mr. Mundt's office arguing that the school should pay the dry cleaning bill. Mr. Mundt said school policy prohibited such expenses but that it was a valid tax deduction. Mr. Mandia said he didn't want a tax deduction, he wanted the gum removed from his pants. Mr. Mundt suggested squeezing it out of Mr. Matsunaga. That's when Mr. Mandia said, "I tried that. The idiot doesn't speak English."

When Rusty heard that he jumped up so hard he almost knocked his desk over. I grabbed his sleeve to keep him from busting down the door. Straining toward the invisible voices beyond the wall, he yelled, "That's my father you're talking about!"

"Easy boy," I said in a hard whisper. "Sticks and stones, right? They say that in Iowa, too, don't they?"

"We don't call people idiots," he said, "not for being foreign. What's wrong with being Japanese?"

I got him to sit back down, but he kept his eyes aimed through the wall into Mr. Mundt's office. "I'll get him," he said. "Gum's nothing."

"Looks to me like it did the trick. Listen to him!"

We crept to the wall and pressed our ears against the cement blocks. Mr. Mandia described the incident in detail. "Every kid in that room was laughing at me. It was the most humiliating experience of my life. It looked like I was pulling long pink tapeworms out of my butt. I felt like a clown at a two-bit circus. And it was slimy, like it had something on it."

I held my palm out. Rusty slapped it. "You're already even," I said. "He could call my father an idiot all he wanted if I got to watch him pull long, pink tapeworms out of his butt."

"We'll see."

"I got a question for you. How do you shoot gum out a beanshooter? Doesn't it get stuck?"

"You have to shape it like a little football and coat it with bacon grease. Then it slides right out. But for some weird reason, it sticks where it lands."

I shook my head with amazement. This kid knew his technology. I had a million questions for him. Where did he learn the bacon grease trick? From his grandfather! Was his grandfather Japanese? No, he was an Oakie, which does not mean from Okinawa but from Oklahoma, which is a whole different place from Iowa. Did everybody in Oklahoma coat their gum with bacon grease? Only when they had to. Where does one carry one's bacon grease? In one's socks. How did Rusty get a name like Matsunaga? He answered one syllable at a time, each as pointed as a dagger: "Be. Cause. My. Father's. Jap. Anese."

It sounded like on the one hand he didn't want to talk about it but on the other wanted the fact known. Or facts. Rusty had a story behind him, a good one. I couldn't resist. "Pray tell," I said, trying to sound funny, "wherever did you find a Japanese father?"

"He found me."

"What, were you floating down the Mississippi in a basket?"

Rusty, fiddling with a gum wrapper and not looking at me, tilted his head to one side. "Sort of," he said. "That's kind of what it felt like."

I waited a second before I said, kind of quiet, "What do you mean? You mean it was a raft or something?"

"I mean it was like being lost in a corn field, which is like drifting down a river in a basket. Ever been lost in a corn field?"

"Not really."

"It's about the scariest thing that can happen if you're five years old and the corn's twice as tall as you and you don't know which way to go and all you know is that there's a thresher out there and sooner or later it's going to bear down on you and you're going to get shucked, threshed, and blown out a pipe into a wagonload of corn. All you can see around you is stalks and leaves and the dirt under your feet and it's kind of dark. Home's one way and any other way is deeper into the field but you don't know which way's which. You can shout all you want, nobody's going to hear you, nobody's going to find you. So you start to run and run with all the corn leaves cutting at you but no matter how fast you run you're still in the field and everything looks the same. You can lie down and cry and cry and cry but nothing's going to happen and all the corn's just going to stand there."

For some reason I could imagine that pretty well. I could see how it was like floating down a big river in a little basket. Sort of.

Rusty was still looking down at something only he could see. I had a feeling he was going to start crying so I said, "And then along came a Japanese guy?"

"That was when I was little. Every kid gets lost in a corn field at least once. It teaches you something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know...kind of like there's no place like home."

I still didn't see what lost in a corn field had to do with a Japanese father. Rusty, looking like he had a sudden case of the sweats, pulled up out of his chair and flung himself back against one wall. "What do they have to lock us in a place like this for?" he said. "There ought to be a law against this."

I was feeling the same way, very closed-in, especially after imagining myself like Hansel lost in a forest of corn. I thought about my little lean-to out in the woods, how it was barely big enough to sit up in but somehow felt free and open. Tight, but open. Maybe it was because I could go there or leave there any time I wanted. Maybe it was because rain came in through the roof and wind swept in through the open sides. For a second I thought I might tell Rusty about the place. But in a second I decided no.

Then Rusty said, "This is what it's like in Japan," and held his arms away from his body, his palms pressed back against the wall. "Everything small, tight. You'd see a family of six living in an apartment this size."

"You've been there?"

"I saw a picture in National Geographic. A mother and father and three little nerds ate and lived and slept in one room. The kitchen was the size of a phone booth. Their dinner table was only six inches high. Can you imagine sharing your bedroom with your parents?"

The door opened and Mr. Mundt stuck his head in. "Russell," he said. "Could you step out here a moment?"

For a single hard second, Rusty didn't move from the wall. He looked kind of crucified there. But then he stepped to the door, opened it as wide as it would go, and walked into the late afternoon sun that filled the assistant principal's office. Mr. Mundt gave me a look of disgust before reaching way in to pull the door shut.

Alone in the concrete and linoleum cell, I thought about sharing a room with my parents. Actually it didn't sound too bad. They barely shared a bedroom with each other. They barely shared the same house. Dad worked all night and slept all day, seven days a week. Mom kept me outside until he woke up, around dinner time, which of course was his breakfast time. If you call meatloaf breakfast. So they barely saw each other and I barely saw both of them together. Sleeping in the same room with both, well, that didn't sound too bad, as long as they didn't fight, which of course they would, though of course maybe they wouldn't, being in the same bed and all.

For a while I wondered about being in the same bed with a girl, wondered how you could possibly get any sleep at all. I guess if the girl looked like my mother, or the guy like my father, you'd get plenty of sleep. Or you'd do like they did - use the bed in shifts.

Then I wondered again about sleeping in the same room with both of them. I imagined living in Japan, with the whole family of brothers and sisters and mother and father sitting around a table on the floor eating rice with chopsticks and then unrolling our straw-mat beds and going to sleep close enough to hear each other breathe. Having nothing else to think about, I threw in a little dog, imagined him curling up on my feet and snoring.

But then I wondered if Japanese had pet dogs. More likely they'd keep some kind of fancy bird with feathers that hung down to the floor. For all I knew, they ate dogs.

Rusty never came back into the detention room, not that day anyway. I later found out they took him home, presented him and Mr. Mandia's pants to his mother. She, poor thing, equipped with the courage and IQ of a squirrel, took ten minutes to figure out why they were pointing back and forth between a ten dollar bill and a sticky pink lump on a pair of pants. She thought they were offering her ten dollars to do Mr. Mandia's laundry. Rusty let her suffer for a while, then went to his bedroom and got a couple of tons of wrapped coins he'd saved up from left-over lunch money.

Rusty said she never figured out what it was all about. Blubbering out of control, she phoned Papa-san - they put san on the end of people's name, kind of like "mister" but nicer - and

explained it all in a stream of Japanese that sounded, in Rusty's words, like a toilet flushing backwards. When the old man came home, he sent Mama-san to the bedroom and sat Rusty on the couch. Then he paced around while he flipped through a Japanese-English dictionary in search of a phrase to fit the occasion. Finally he put the book on the coffee table, held out both hands and said, "Hrdusty-san, why?"

Stuck with no possible answer, Rusty would only fall back on that old favorite: "I didn't do it."

To his utter amazement, Papa-san bought it. "Ah, no?" he said, pressing his palms together. "Oh, sodly, Dlusty, vedly sodly!" (That's how Rusty said he said it.) And Papa-san hurried off to tell his wife, who burst from the bedroom to give her son a tearful hug of apology. After a brief discussion, they pulled a neat wad of dollars from her purse, examined several of them, and forked over a pair of fives.

"It was too easy," Rusty told me later. "I didn't like it at all. Like taking candy from two babes in the woods. I felt sorry for them. I can't imagine what they must be paying for rent."

Of course I didn't know any of this on my way home. I had my own problems, namely the Activities Bus that carried all kids from the middle school and from Central High, in Newton, who stayed late. That meant it was full of all-American jocks whose main joy in life was to hold eighth graders upside down by their ankles and shake the change out of their pockets. Sitting near the front didn't help because Bob-the-bus-driver, a former jock who actually managed to hold down a job, had the same sick sense of humor.

I escaped by dashing off the bus about five miles before my stop, which normally is the last one because it's way outside of town, the only place they'd let us put a trailer home. But where I got off the bus this time wasn't too far from home as the crow flies. Or as the kid runs through the woods. The first mile or so cut through an arm of Piddle Nature Preserve, which was nice. The trees in these woods - oak, beech, black birch, maple - had been growing since the Civil War, when a guy named Piddle left his fields and went off to free the slaves. He never came back. The government got to keep his land - 1,843 acres - and in time his fields became a forest, which is basically all mine because nobody else goes there.

I know this from a library booklet called "Historical Pottsville." It's a pretty thin piece of literature. Not much history has happened around in here. In 1778, George Washington's army snuck through, but they didn't fight any battles. (Myth has it they only stopped long enough to take a leak and pick up a few cases of poison ivy.) Marion Francis, Swamp Fox, may have hid gun powder somewhere up on Potts Ridge. (Myth says it's still up there.) Isaac Piddle left here but didn't come back. (The myth: he bought a steamboat and called it the Piddle Paddler.) Henry Phillips, inventor of the Phillips screwdriver, may have been born here. (Or maybe it was milk of magnesia.)

Anyway, the Piddle Preserve woods had huge trees growing in it, stone walls running all over the place, and enough poison ivy to hide the entire Viet Cong army and all their friends. It rose up into the trees in thick hairy ropes and covered the ground like a shiny green mat. People stayed out of the place, except for a few trails. I knew my way around, though, and could get just about anywhere. Down below the ridge, behind a no-man's land of poison ivy and pricker-bushes, was a little swamp. On the side of it was my little hut, and down in the swamp was Hercules, my killer turtle - a snapper, anyway. I suppose he could kill you if you sat there and let him chew on you long enough. Mostly he lived on bits of hamburger I snuck out of the cafeteria, bacon from home, and bugs I caught here and there.

The poison ivy had already leafed out that spring, but during the winter I had cut a well hidden passage way around the end of the ridge and under the thorns to my hut. There I found Herc's chain drooping down through the water. All I had for him was some dead flies I'd caught during gym - nothing worth waking a turtle up for. So I left them in a pile on a rock near the edge of the water and sat back to smoke a Marlboro Light and do a little reading. My library consisted mostly of illustrated human physiology publications. That's what I heard a kid in the locker room call his. To anyone else they were just filthy magazines. Mine were especially filthy, having been stored for a couple of years in a tattered plastic bag in a hole under a rock. I was pretty tired of them. The ladies, while practically flesh and blood when I first slid my eyes over them, had aged with exposure to the elements. Wrinkled and water-stained, they had become mere paper, mere memories of what they had been. And none of them came close to the tight, petite, innocent beauty of Emily Fetschrift. I often tried to imagine her in the place of the girls in the magazines, but it didn't work. Emily wouldn't show those parts of her body, at least not the way those girls

did. It was hard to believe she even had those parts or would know what to do with them if she did.

I forced down about half my smoke before flicking it into the swamp. Then I got up and did a little housekeeping. I hauled in a good length of dead tree for firewood and brought over some stones from one of Piddle's walls. I had this plan for building a stone foundation and laying logs across it and gradually building up a regular cabin. My lean-to was okay, but only in good weather. So far I had about twelve stones and a page from a Sears catalog that showed various chain saws I might mail away for if a couple hundred dollars fell out of the sky. I had certain technical questions about exactly how to assemble the whole thing, but I figured I'd know the answer when I had the logs.

I figured if I fixed the place up good enough, I could move right in. I could have a dog - a lot of dogs - and eat what I wanted for dinner and just hang out all day doing nothing. How to pay for it all? Easy. Frog legs. Right at my doorstep I had all the frogs you could eat. If I caught a dozen good-sized frogs a day, I'd have enough to keep myself in Spam and popcorn and of course dog food for my little family.

Little? Not so. I had plans to liberate the population of the Pottsville dog pound and bring them all here. Depending on how things went I thought I might go on to free dogs all over the state, a regular Bolivar of New Jersey. I could have ten thousand dogs living on Piddle's Preserve, all citizens of the Republic of Piddle. As long as nobody knew, we'd be safe from invasion.

Dumb idea? Maybe. But that's one of the nice things about being thirteen and having a hut in the woods. There you can think whatever you want. Nobody can stop you, nobody can laugh or call you dumb.

But you have to be out by dark. I crawled out through my perimeter of raspberry thorns and draping poison ivy vines and headed for home. Mother let me in as soon as I knocked but, as usual, didn't say a word. She had a sponge in one hand and ammonia in the other, which meant she was working on her spot.

Mother's spot was a spot only she could see. She'd been working on it, trying to scrub it out of existence, for as long as I could remember. It kept moving. One day she'd be on her knees on the kitchen floor trying to scrub it out of the linoleum. Then she'd find it on the refrigerator. Next thing you know, she's found it behind the toilet. If I happened to walk by, she'd grab me and point me at it and say, "Look at that!" Then she'd glare at me like it was my fault. It was only some time after the eighth grade that I figured out she wasn't telling me to look at the wet patch she'd made with her sponge. She wanted me to see a spot that wasn't there. In fact, there were no spots anywhere in the house. There was not a crumb on the counter, not a whisker on a sink, not a sock on a floor. At least not for long. Except for the few moments that some bit of Pop's dirtiness lingered out of place, the house was sterile.

That particular day, the day I met Rusty, Mother's spot seemed to appear on the back of my neck. Or a version of it, anyway. Just as I walked by her, she grabbed my collar and said, "Wait a minute, you little roach." She dropped her sponge and with her fingernails got ahold of a pimple on my neck. She squeezed it so hard it actually bled. Pain alarms went off in my head. She released me the way you release a used tissue and said, "If you washed yourself now and then that wouldn't happen."

Pop, just out of bed, was still stinking up the bathroom when she plunked three chicken pot pies on the table, and not for the first time that week. Or maybe it was turkey pot pies the last time. It didn't matter; they all tasted the same to me. I broke the crust with my spoon and let the steam swirl out for a while. Times like this a kid could use a good dog under the table. Or even a snapping turtle. But I dumped on enough salt to kill the taste and slurped it up like a good boy. By the time Pop came out in his green work clothes, she'd already rinsed out her little pie pan and crammed it into the garbage. She said nothing to him, and he said to me, as he always did, "Hey, buddy, how's it going?" and I said the usual "Okay," and he said, "That's good."

So much for conversation. Mother went to her bedroom (it was hers during the night), spraying lilac room deodorizer ahead of her as she went. The door closed behind her, shutting out me and the rest of the dirt of the world until morning. Pop slurped up his dinner like a good boy. I checked every channel on the TV twice and turned it off. Pop used his finger to wipe up the bottom of his pie dish clean before cramming it into the garbage. Then he put on his Mets cap

and Mets jacket, and tucked his Mets lunch box under one arm. Snapping the thermostat down to three degrees below zero, he said "Hey buddy, have a nice day, hear?" and left for a night with a metal lathe.

I sat in front of the dead TV for a while and finally turned it back on. I don't remember which rerun I watched except that it was not the second or third time I'd sat through it. More like the fifteenth. It was one of those shows about a family that argued all the time but with jokes. Every time somebody said something nasty, it was funny, though of course none of them laughed. I couldn't watch the whole thing. I preferred to read pages forty-nine through fifty-one of my history book, a heart warming tale of how the Visigoths, Ostrogoths and plain old Goths did to the Roman Empire what the Vandals in New York City would do if all their parents happened to go away on the same weekend.

But history, even good stuff like that, puts me to sleep. Even though I faced a quiz in the morning, I couldn't hammer into my head the difference between a Visigoth and an Ostrogoth. I fell asleep on the couch - I love to take a quick nap before I go to bed - and didn't wake up until the light in Mother's room was out and the house was dark and cold.

Chapter Three

sashimi (n) a Japanese dish of bite-sized pieces of raw fish eaten with soy sauce and horseradish paste

The next day, back at the cafeteria, back at the table with Puker, Rusty told me how Mr. Mandia had come to his home. Hearing the story of his parents' odd reaction, their amazing faith in their only son, I had to ask Rusty how he came to have Japanese parents. The answer was simple and predictable.

"I was adopted," he said.

"Just like that? Wham-bam and you're Japanese?"

"I'm not Japanese."

"Well, sort of, you are, aren't you? I mean, you did say that, didn't you?"

"I was kidding. I'm Iowan."

Even Puker was paying attention to this. For the first time in several years, he didn't look like he had his belly on his mind. He seemed to keep forgetting his spinach-noodle surprise halfway between his plate and his mouth. He'd dip his head toward the dripping spoon but then back off when Rusty dropped another bit of data, such as, "I think they bought me." Who could possibly stick spinach-noodle surprise into his mouth after hearing a line like that?

I said, "They bought you?"

"Well," he admitted. "I'm not sure. But how else can you explain it?"

"Explain what?"

"How people have to wait years and years to adopt a kid, but I'm an orphan for three weeks and presto, somebody's got me."

That didn't quite make sense to me, but before I could straighten it out, Rusty went on.

"My mother died of cancer, about five years ago. I was just a little kid then. I barely knew what was going on until it was too late. They never really told me she was going to die until my aunt came and said, 'Your mother's gone to heaven.' I can't imagine a dumber way to put it. Why didn't she say, 'Rusty, you're never going to see your mother again.'? What did she think, that I was just going to shrug my shoulders and say, 'Heaven? That's nice. She deserves it. She was a good mother.'? The next thing I know they've got me all dressed up in my Sunday suit and a red bow tie and we're down at the cemetery cranking her coffin into a grave."

"Cranking?"

"Yeah. It sits on a couple of straps and they turn a crank and the straps lower it down into the ground. Then everybody tosses in some dirt and we all go home for snacks. It's great." His mouth curled with irony.

I couldn't help but say, "Snacks?" Rusty had a weird way of cracking a joke but looking nasty, even mad, at the same time. I couldn't tell if he was serious. Did they really serve snacks? Did he stuff his face?

"Yeah, snacks," he said. "What, you never knew anybody who died?"

Actually, I didn't, except for a grandmother who died in Florida. I think I met her only once. I was about seven when it happened. There wasn't a funeral or anything. No snacks.

So Rusty's mother died of cancer. I'm not proud to admit it, but at the time, at the age of thirteen, dying of cancer meant nothing to me. I just sort of assumed people died like they did on TV - a few last words, a deep breath, suddenly the head leans to one side, and that's the end of that.

Time for a commercial. I was as touched by the death of a lady in Iowa as I was by the Ostrogoths sacking Rome. I'd probably be more touched if my turtle had a hangnail. I mention this to show how smart I was in the eighth grade.

Still, it made an awful good story. Puker kept turning his head every time Rusty trotted out a new fact. He had spinach-noodle surprise all over his chin.

"And your father," I said. "Did he die of cancer, too?" The words sounded perfectly stupid as they left my mouth. Rusty, I could tell, agreed. I think he answered just so Puker would get the next spoon of food into his mouth.

"He died in an accident," Rusty said. "Got run over by his own tractor. Nobody saw it happen, but they think it kicked into gear just as he was getting out."

I didn't know what to say. Rusty was trying to look unconcerned, like maybe he was really thinking about where to shoot a lima bean. But I could see the sadness behind his face. He wasn't going to cry, though. Somehow I knew that nothing would make Rusty cry. His crying department had already grown up.

Puker mopped up his spinach-noodle surprise and was poking through his tapioca by the time I got up enough guts to ask Rusty what happened next.

He told me how he got passed to a great aunt who smelled so bad of lilacs he could hardly breathe. Then a regular aunt and uncle got him, but the uncle's army reserve unit got called up and the aunt had to do jury duty so their six kids - Rusty's cousins - got passed around the remaining family. A social worker with a mustache said that was no way for a boy to live and besides, she had a couple of wonderful parents for him if he wanted to move to New Jersey. He said he didn't want to move to New Jersey or to anywhere else but she said oh yes he did, he'd be glad, and he had no choice anyway. So the day after Christmas they packed his bags, took him to the airport, and handed him over to a stewardess who looked like Marilyn Monroe. She hung a chain around his neck. On the chain hung a yellow tag. As the plane revved up and lumbered down the runway, Rusty read the tag. It said, in a combination of type and handwriting, "Hi! My name's Russell Earl Entwhistle. I'm going to Newark to meet my father, Yoshiyama Matsunaga,

who lives at 49 Wagon Wheel Lane, Pottsville, NJ. If I need help, please contact Westward Ho! Airlines or your local police department."

Rusty turned his head to look out the cafeteria window. "Then the plane took off," he said. "At first we were so low you could see cars on the roads and the tractors in the fields. I saw my school for about three seconds before we flew into some fog and it all got misty. Then we went into some clouds and everything was white. All I could think was, 'There goes the whole world.'

"When we landed in Newark, the stewardess took me through this place that was like a tunnel and then into the lobby. The place was huge. But somehow we knew right away Mr. and Mrs. Matsunaga were the Japanese man and lady all dressed up in navy blue. You could tell they were waiting for a kid from Iowa to come along and call them Mom and Dad."

"And did you?"

"No way."

"But didn't you kind of have to?"

Before he could answer, the bell rang. While it rang - all of two seconds - nobody in the cafeteria moved. Just like always. Then, just like always, everybody made one single move to grab their trays and stand up and surround the garbage cans like a bunch of cattle to a salt lick. Thirty seconds later, we were in the hall, automatically sorting ourselves out into the rooms where we belonged. This always amazed me. It reminded me of a science movie I saw once where a whole bunch of mice found their way through a maze to different nooks and crannies where there was food waiting for them. But they learned this by getting electric shocks when they screwed up, and kernels of corn when they didn't. And all the scientists said, Wow, aren't they clever? Somehow that applied to two hundred middle school students. Eight times a day they automatically rushed to their nooks and crannies - their study halls and science classes and whatever - without getting a candy bar for doing it right or a boot in the butt for screwing up, unless you count detention.

In the hall, before we split up, I had to ask Rusty one more question. "Did you?" I asked.

"Did I what?"

"Call them Mom and Dad. Just like that?"

"No way."

For some reason that made me feel good. Relieved. But then Rusty said something that really surprised me. He said, "It was worse."

"Why? What happened?"

He looked up and down the hall twice before he could say it, and then it came out as a whisper. He said, "I bowed."

My jaw must have dropped halfway to the floor because an instant later his knuckles were lifting it shut - gently, but, still, definitely knuckles nonetheless. "You bowed?" I said.

"Shhh! It isn't that simple." He pulled me in close so no one could hear. The hall was just about empty. "They bowed first. Then I bowed. Even the stewardess bowed. It was like we couldn't help it, like somebody had jerked our strings and down we went."

"And then what happened?"

"I realized what I was doing and stood up straight, real fast. So fast it made my nose bleed."

Then the bell rang. If I didn't get to my social studies nook within five seconds, a scientist was going to educate me with a cattle prod. But I had to ask again, "Then what happened?"

Rusty looked nervously up and down the hall and said, "Let's get out of here."

"What do you mean out?"

"I mean where do you hide in this school? Where do you cut class?"

I'd never cut a class before. Some kids did, but I had no idea where they went. I'd never even thought about it. Now classroom doors were closing fast. The hall was empty except for us. I felt like a cockroach caught in the middle of a kitchen counter when somebody snaps on the light. My urge, of course, was to head for the woods. I grabbed Rusty's arm and said, "Come on."

With a gesture of his hand he slowed me down to a calm walk. Unnoticed, we strolled past the administration office, through the big front doors, down the steps, along the windowless gym wall and around the corner to the vast open space of the ball field. A hundred yards away, behind the backstop, stood the thicket of trees and brush I was aiming for.

I doubt anyone saw us make the crossing. If they had, we'd still be in detention. They would have chained us to the wall and donated the key to the Houdini museum. For generations to come they would have paraded sixth-graders past us as an example of what happens if you attempt the unthinkable. As we walked quickly, stiff-legged across the lawn I was so scared I was shaking. The wind blowing across the grass still had a bit of the chill of winter, but it seemed to have a whiff of spring mixed in.

The area behind the bushes showed signs of high school kids: beer cans, a semi-gutted car seat, cigarette butts, charred sticks, a shoe, a beech tree all scared up with the initials of nature-lovers. Feeling myself in the midst of filth, I squatted with my back against the beech; Rusty sat on rock.

"So?" I said.

"So I bowed."

"Right. And then what?"

"Then I got a bloody nose. Right there in the lobby of the airport. And this lady - my mother, right? - starts squawking like her only son's bleeding to death. Dear old dad whips a snotrag out of his navy blue suit and lets her try to cram it up my nose. It ws all crispy so I pushed it away and tried to keep breathing in. Then the stewardess, who I'd let be my mother any day, pinched a nice fresh Kleenex over my nose and said to the poor lady, 'Would like me to call the infirmary?'

"Well of course for all this lady knows, the stewardess is saying, 'He's got thirty seconds to live. What shall I do with him?' so she has to wait for her husband to translate. There's tears coming out of her eyes. They have a big discussion about it, and by the time they're done, the bleeding stopped."

What a way to arrive in New Jersey. It must have seemed like the gates of hell itself. The kid's three minutes into his new family and he's already caused the biggest stir since Pearl Harbor. I myself, at that point, would have headed for the runway and thrown myself into the nearest propeller.

But Rusty was cool. When the stewardess produced a paper for Mr. Matsunaga to sign, Rusty showed him where to do it. The stewardess snapped out a yellow carbon of the form, whatever it was, and everybody shook hands. They all bowed, too - everybody but Rusty. Then the Matsunaga family got into a blue Buick and drove home.

On the way, Mrs. Matsunaga sat sideways in the front seat so she could watch her boy. She kept asking things in Japanese and making Mr. Matsunaga translate. "What you like?" he asked. Rusty said, "Corn-on-the-cob." "You like lice?" he asked. Rusty, having once gotten lice from another kid's baseball cap and not yet knowing that lice meant rice, said, "No. I hate lice." Mrs. Matsunaga's face collapsed like a tire losing air. She made the mister ask again, "What you like?" Rusty tried "Spaghetti," but that wasn't what Mr. Matsunaga wanted. "No," said Mr. Matsunaga. "Before, you say...what you say you like?" Rusty got it then and said, in his best Iowa slur, "Cornacob." His parents still didn't get it, so five minutes later they're in a Grand Union, Rusty leading the way to the fresh produce department.

They found corn, all right, but, as Rusty told me, "It was dead. Corn-on-the-corpse. All wrapped up in styrofoam and plastic wrap, like a body bag. We might give corn like that to the chickens, but we'd sure apologize for it."

But they bought it. All of it. Fourteen pounds of posthumous corn-on-the-cob. They they went back to the meat department and had a long discussion about a fish. By his mother's upturned

nose, Rusty knew the fish had died of mercury poison long before it hit the bed of ice next door to the pork chops.

At home, Mrs. Matsunaga hurried the corn into the freezer - "Just what it needed," Rusty said - and introduced Rusty to his bedroom. Apparently it had just about everything a kid could ask for: a TV connected to a computer beside a rack of electronic games next to a complete stereo system. On the walls, one baseball poster, one football poster, one basketball poster, a poster of Bozo the Clown, and a poster of "a skinny Japanese chick in short-shorts playing electronic drums."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, standing up to look across the lawn toward school. If somebody came out after us, I wanted a good head start into the woods. Rusty looking unconcerned, opened a penknife and whittled at a piece of vine.

"Nothing wrong with it at all," he said. "But there was one other thing, right there on my bed, lying across it at an angle like it was put there to have its picture taken."

"Not a teddy bear!"

"Worse."

The only thing I could think of worse than a teddy bear was navy blue pants and black bumper shoes. Rusty saw me looking at them and said, "Even worse."

I couldn't think of anything worse than that until Rusty said, "A violin."

A violin. Yes, indeed, that meant trouble. It meant double trouble when Mrs. Matsunaga took the suitcase from Rusty's hand and led him directly to the instrument of torture she had laid there with such care. She picked it up, placed Rusty's hand on it, and guided it to his shoulder.

"They both applauded." His knife sliced hard through the vine as he said it, lopping off a six-inch length. "I was just standing there holding the stupid thing while they clapped and smiled and bowed. It was like they were proud I could hold a fiddle on my shoulder. I didn't know what to

do. I wanted to smash it against the wall and run out and keep running all the way to Iowa. But they looked so happy. So I just stood there."

Mrs. Matsunaga, it turned out, had been a music teacher in Japan. Stuck in the United States, she had no one to teach because she couldn't speak English. So she vented her frustration on poor Rusty. One-on-one, hour after hour, again and again: Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. This was two days into the month-long Christmas break, so he couldn't go to school, didn't know anybody, didn't have anywhere to go.

"She wouldn't quit," he said. "She kept saying, 'Gooooood! Gooooood!' every time I did something. She kept adjusting my fingers for me, tucking my elbow down, straightening my back, lifting my chin. Once she got me in just the right position, she'd say, 'O.K. You go!' and I'd do it again. But every time it sounded like a barn door on rusty hinges."

I looked at my watch. We had seven minutes before the next class. Rusty went on whittling the section of vine like he had all day. He shaved at the stringy bark, gradually exposing the dull white wood beneath. I wanted to head back to school before we got into too much trouble. "So that's it," I said. "That's how you got Japanese parents. We'd better get back."

"That's not the whole story," Rusty said, looking up from his knife. "It's even worse than that."

"Worse than playing the violin all day? What did they do?"

"You mean besides the raw fish?"

"Raw fish? You can't eat raw fish. It'd kill you."

"It's a big thing in Japan. I forget what you call it. They cut it up and wrap it around a hunk of cold rice so it's about the size of a Tootsie-Roll, then dip it soy sauce and...down the hatch."

"A hunk of cold rice? I think I'd throw up."

"But that's not the worst part. The worst is that they're moving back to Japan in September."

"How come?"

"The old man's here just for a while, to help his company set up an office. Or something like that. I couldn't really understand. But he showed me the date on the calendar. September 1. He pointed to it with his skinny little finger and said, "Setembah fust, we go. Jah-pahn!" and gave me a great big smile."

Japan. Land of Many Contrasts. That's about all I remembered from our geography book. I remembered some pictures of a girl in a fancy robe and a very white face, a snow-capped volcano, and one of those houses with funny gutters. And I remembered what Rusty had told me about a whole family living in one room. I pictured myself with a sister like the girl with the white face living in a house with funny gutters and a dead volcano out back and everybody sleeping in the same room. All in all, it didn't sound too awful bad, depending on what the sister was like. Probably not much fun, but better than a turtle on a chain. I pictured the whole family rolling out their bed mats on the floor, and everybody saying good night to each other, and then hearing everybody breathing and sighing in their sleep.

"That wouldn't be too bad," I said to Rusty. "Except for the raw fish."

Rusty snapped his knife shut and smoothed the piece of vine with his fingers. "There's just one problem," he said.

"What's that?"

"I'm not going."

He didn't look at me as he spoke those words, and he said them with a smooth lightness that implied absolute seriousness. He wasn't going to Japan. Period, end of discussion. He seemed more concerned with this length of vine. He twirled it between his palms, rubbing off the last of its fuzzy bark, and held it out to admire how straight it was. Then he put one end to his mouth, closed his lips around it and blew. I could hear the air come out, thin and hard. With a little smile he looked at me through one eye and said, "Did you know these things are hollow?"