Cody was surprised to see Mr. Turner getting into a Toyota Tercel. He would have imagined Mr. Turner driving something more like his mother’s car, a Pontiac Bonneville, or maybe even a Town Car. But of course Mr. Turner couldn’t afford a Town Car on a teacher’s salary. Mr. Turner wore polyester-blend dress shirts and had a habit of taking large swallows of coffee from a Colonial Williamsburg coffee mug, a souvenir from last year’s disastrous field trip there. That was the day Cody had been sent home for fighting but hadn’t even thrown a punch. He’d cried in front of the entire seventh grade, a humiliation he couldn’t afford to think about now if he wanted to get home before his mother. Her shift at the supermarket ended at four-thirty.
Mr. Turner had already started the engine when Cody put his hand to the passenger window and knocked. A loose beard of snow fell from the window. “Mr. Turner?”

Mr. Turner rolled the window down. “Well hello, Cody,” he said. He was wearing the fake fur hat everyone made fun of behind his back. “Didn’t see you there for a second, then voila, there you were.”

“Sorry,” Cody said.
“Everything OK?”
“Uh-huh.”
“Did you miss your bus?”

Cody hadn’t missed his bus. He’d stayed late for band practice, then got off the activities bus when Jason Kiefer and Mike Rowe threw his snow boots out the window. “Yeah,” Cody said. The boots had landed right-side up on a plow-packed snowbank. “I guess maybe I need a ride. I’m really sorry about asking. I really am.”

“Don’t be,” Mr. Turner said. “Hop on in.”
“I’m really sorry,” Cody said. Again. When would he stop saying sorry so much?

“It’ll warm up in here in a minute,” Mr. Turner said. Inside, the car smelled faintly fusty, like a library book. The defroster sent widening half-moons of clear glass across the front windshield. “You can put that in the backseat if you want,” Mr. Turner said, indicating Cody’s clarinet case.

“That’s OK,” Cody said.
“Is that an oboe?”
“Clarinet.”

“Ah,” Mr. Turner said. “’The clarinet, the clarinet, goes doodle-doodle-doodle-det!’”

“Yeah,” Cody said.
“Don’t ask me how I remember that,” Mr. Turner said.

They pulled out of the parking lot, where Cody could see the snow already beginning to adhere to the highway. The sight of that always pleased him, since he felt in some way responsible for the snow, although he knew he really wasn’t. It
was amazing, all the dumb things he thought he might be responsible for.

“Everyone keeps telling me I’ll get used to this weather eventually,” Mr. Turner said. He reached across the wheel to pull the turn signal again. A car even smaller than Mr. Turner’s turned past them, an enormous Christmas tree stuffed into its hatchback. A yellow tag hung from the tree’s sappy stump. Although Christmas was less than a week away, Cody’s mother still hadn’t gotten a tree. He would have to remind her of that.

“What’s driving who, right?” Mr. Turner said.

“Yeah.” Cody tried to laugh, but nothing came out. The defroster had worked its way to the top of the window, Cody noticed. The noise of it offered comfort, the way his vaporizer did. That was a secret Cody was glad no one knew: he still slept with a vaporizer sometimes.

“I don’t miss the lightning, though,” Mr. Turner said. “That’s one thing I can say about this weather: at least there’s no lightning.” Mr. Turner was from Florida. “No hurricanes either.” An odd place to be from. It was embarrassing the way Mr. Turner wore leather sandals in the springtime, the way he cheered for incorrect sports teams like the Miami Dolphins, the way he pronounced lawyer as “law-yer” instead of “loi-yer,” the way everyone else did. Part of any respectable Mr. Turner impression included grabbing your crotch, saying, “Who would layk a Floorida oorange?!”

“—but Delaware is as far north as I could ever live. I’ve got a brother back in Tampa, says he could never imagine living north of the Carolinas, but I always say to him, You know, they get snow there too. Sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes.”

Cody nodded. He tried to think of something to say about Florida, but the truth was he’d only been there once, when he was five. His memory of the place was of a crowded beach where his bucket was dragged to sea, of the strange solitary cactus plant that grew in his grandparents’ stony lawn, of the alligator farm where his grandfather had encouraged him to
throw a fistful of feed from a fenced-in footbridge. The feed had dispersed in the air like chimney ashes and landed on the alligators’ backs, who neglected to lick it away. This depressed Cody.

“—but I’ve got a good little car.” Mr. Turner was telling Cody about driving the car from Florida to Delaware, all in one shot. Twenty-one hours.

“Wow,” Cody said.

“I tell you, by the end I was seeing phantom deer, if you know what I mean.”

Cody didn’t know what he meant. “I know what you mean,” he said.

The snow picked up enough that Mr. Turner had to use his wipers. Cody was glad to have the wipers, since they helped cover the silence that had sprung up between them. Again. It was horrible, trying to think of things to say. How did adults always manage to think of things to say?

“I’m glad, actually, that we ran into each other today,” Mr. Turner said. “I’ve been meaning to get back to you about your research paper.”

Cody felt his face grow warm. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m real sorry about that.”

“No need,” Mr. Turner said, then sneezed. Mr. Turner looked sort of sad when he sneezed. Cody wasn’t sure whether to say bless you or not. “Have you given any thought to our agreement?”

Cody nodded. “I’m real sorry about that,” he said. “I’ll get it to you after the break.” The paper had been about the moon, a topic of Cody’s own choosing, but he’d forgotten about it until the night before it was due. The only reference books around were the paperback dictionary his mother kept in her sewing table and his father’s old 1961 encyclopedia set, still smelling like aftershave, with its short but rapturous entry about the possibility of a manned moon landing. Cody had lifted most of his paper from the text—it was fun, figuring out how to reword things—using the dictionary for long, unnecessary definitions
like \textit{crater, atmosphere, gravity,} and \textit{galaxy.} His mother typed the paper up on his father's old Royal typewriter while the two of them watched \textit{Dallas.}

“That would be terrific,” Mr. Turner said. Outside, cars were slowing to a stop. Cody watched a white station wagon pull up alongside them. “I’d be glad to read your revision.” A woman sat behind the wheel. Cody stared at her, but she didn’t notice him. “I’d be glad to read anything you might like to write,” Mr. Turner was saying. “You’ve got quite a flair for words.”

“Thanks,” Cody said. The woman reminded him of something he hadn’t thought about until now: the year before, Mr. Turner had been engaged, but his fiancé had broken it off. Everyone knew. It wasn’t even a secret, really, except that Mr. Turner never said anything about it. Cody remembered the one time that the fiancé had come to school, sitting at the back of Mr. Turner’s classroom reading a magazine while Mr. Turner lectured about the Marshall Plan. The fiancé was pretty, clearly ten years younger than Mr. Turner, with a habit of tapping her pen across the edge of the page, then laughing when she read something amusing. “Does anyone have any questions?” Mr. Turner had asked, and the fiancé had raised her hand. “Does everyone know that Lawrence and I are engaged?” she said. Cody had joined the others in a low, sustained ooooh until Mr. Turner waved his hands, saying, “Gentlemen, \textit{please,} let’s give it a rest.” But it was too much to think about. Lawrence!

“Plus a vivid imagination,” Mr. Turner said.

Cody nodded. Everyone made jokes about Mr. Turner’s broken engagement, lousy puns about being turned down, turned away, turned off, and so on. Nothing too mean, by school standards. Pretty mild stuff. That was thing, Cody thought, you couldn’t really like Mr. Turner, but you couldn’t really hate him either. He was the kind of teacher your parents forgot to mention after parent-teacher night, drunk on Mr. Olsen’s good looks or praising Ms. Trent’s affability and
sly English accent. You saw Mr. Turner’s faculty picture in the yearbook and didn’t even think of cutting it out and gluing it to a bobblehead doll, a ritual reserved for Mr. Thomlinson and Principal Wallace. You didn’t think anything of Mr. Turner, really, not even the time last spring when he’d paused in the middle of his lecture and said, “Don’t you think I know that everyone in this classroom is smarter than me?” His voice had sounded on the edge of tears. A U of sweat showed through his shirt. “Don’t you think I’m aware of that?” Looking back, Cody realized, that must have been around the time his engagement had fallen apart. They’d done impressions of it anyway. “Don’t you think I’m aware of that?” someone would say, then everyone else would break out laughing.

Mr. Turner turned the radio on. Oldies. “The only music that makes sense to me anymore,” Mr. Turner laughed, as if they’d been talking about this all along. The traffic began to move again. Across the windshield, snow vanished into itself, over and over again. Cody watched, wondering if his mother would leave work early because of the weather. Sometimes her boss, Mr. Jackson, let her out early when the roads got slick. She’d show up at three-thirty with bags of day-old bread and overripe fruit, right in the middle of Cody’s after-school snack, cinnamon toast with double butter. It was awful when his mother came in, ruining it, spilling bruised plums onto the kitchen linoleum and telling him to wake her for dinner; she was going to take a nap. It was embarrassing to see her winter coat, twenty years out of style, with its fake fur hood and humiliating trim, still torn from the time she’d caught it in the car door. It would be a disaster if she was home by the time Mr. Turner dropped him off. What if she was waiting on the front porch, where she sometimes let the newspapers collect for days? What if she greeted Mr. Turner in her Phillies sweatpants?

“Is that your bus?” Mr. Turner said. Cody could see the bus ahead of them, stopped at a traffic light. He felt as if someone had casually handed him a refrigerator.
“I dunno,” he said.
“I think that’s the activities bus,” Mr. Turner said. “But I can’t read the insignia.”
Cody could see the back door they were biannually asked to jump from, the bus driver, Captain Leroy, shouting at them through a rolled-up *Sports Illustrated*. “You’re toast, Hitchens!” he’d say when Cody lingered at the door’s edge. “Toast!” “Too short,” Cody said.
Mr. Turner pulled closer. “Bluebird,” he said. “I think ours are Bluebirds, aren’t they?”
Cody saw the back of Mike Rowe’s head, the cowlick no one had ever thought to mock, not once, not ever. Rowe’s teeth wore the most awful chain of braces Cody had ever seen; these, too, were granted acceptance, as were Rowe’s sometime stutter and habit of saying “templat ure” for “temperature.”
“I dunno,” Cody said.
“I’m pretty sure,” Mr. Turner said. By now Mr. Turner had pulled so close that Cody could see Jason Kiefer, too, propped against his Eagles coat, its green and white logo pressed against the window. Jason had thrown the coat over Cody’s head while Rowe unlaced his snow boots. Its lining smelled like frozen butter.
“Wouldn’t mind having that kind of traction,” Mr. Turner said. “Those tires.” Cody reached for his clarinet case. If he had to, he could run. Sure, it would be awkward, explaining it later to Mr. Turner—there was no getting around that—but at least Cody had the Christmas holiday coming soon, a whole week in which he wouldn’t have to see Mr. Turner at all. He’d play his new video games, watch football, slice the gift fruitcakes that always became his holiday lunches. Fruitcake was sort of OK if you smothered it with grape jelly.
“But I could live without the manual steering.”
But what about the few days left before the holiday? Those would be excruciating, Mr. Turner greeting him in homeroom with a phony smile, not wanting to make him feel embarrassed. Perhaps pretending like nothing at all had happened,
the worst. Perhaps asking, after everyone else had left for re-
cess, how things were going at home?

“And the noise,” Mr. Turner laughed. “Right?”

They had pulled so close it seemed to Cody they were
now under the bus. The bus’s bumper held a ledge of dirty
snow. “Right,” Cody said. The bus pulled forward, then sud-
denly stopped with a rocking motion. Cody felt the Tercel
lurch forward. “What’s the prob, buddy?” Mr. Turner said,
but the problem was clear: they were inches from the bus’s
rear, where Jason Kiefer and Mike Rowe’s gleeful faces could
now be seen, laughing. Soon these faces were haloed by a
half-dozen others, fingers pointing at Cody and Mr. Turner
in their sad, brown car.

“It is one of ours,” Mr. Turner said.

Cody had looked away the moment Jason’s astonished
eyes met his, but now he chanced another glance, and saw
Rowe licking the window with his remarkably long tongue.

“Oh, boys,” Mr. Turner sighed.

Jason’s face, which always looked as if had just registered
horrible news, contorted itself into a pained kiss—an idea the
other boys quickly cribbed, puckering their lips and hugging
themselves like zealous lovers.

“Comedians,” Mr. Turner said.

Rowe pressed his hands and face to the glass, puffing his
cheeks. This distorted his usual expression, but Cody felt he
could still read its single, urgent question: should I imitate fel-
latio or not? Rowe’s imitation was pretty good, what with the
way he closed his eyes and made mmm-mmm sounds the way
everyone knew adults did, but part of its power was its infre-
quent use, judiciously saved for ripe moments like the time
Cody had accidentally worn his mother’s tennis socks, or the
time a bus of cheerleaders waved hello.

“Real jokesters,” Mr. Turner said, but Cody detected a
whiff of unease. “Aren’t we lucky?” The semester before, some-
one had nailed Mr. Turner’s roll book to a drafting table.

“Yeah,” Cody said. He wished he was one of those people
who could laugh whenever. The kind of person who threw back their heads after hearing a dirty joke and said, Good one. But he wasn’t. He was the other kind of person. He felt himself beginning to cry.

“I’ll tell you something,” Mr. Turner said. “Sometimes I think about all the things you kids are going through, all the teasing and peer pressure, and I just want to stop classes for a week and talk it out. Put it out there, in the open. You know?” Mr. Turner looked over at him. “What would you think about something like that?”

Cody nodded, but he was already going through his anti-crying mental exercise, envisioning a series of numbers collapsing into themselves, 1 through 10, like the ones his clock radio wore. He had failed to summon them the day at Colonial Williamsburg. “Okay,” he said.

“I mean it,” Mr. Turner said. “It’s something I’ve given a lot of thought to.” When Cody looked up, he saw the bus pulling away. His eyes met Rowe’s, which conveyed satisfaction in these unprecedented events, already shaping themselves into legend around them. Rowe would, his smile informed Cody, never let him forget.

“I’ve thought about it so often my friends say they’re sick of hearing about it,” Mr. Turner said. “Just do it,’ they say. Have it out with them. It’ll be tough, but the most important things always are. The things most worth doing—”

The problem was getting from 10 back to 1. If Cody imagined the 0 falling away, this left the 1 on the wrong side of things, requiring the 0 to acrobatically jump the 1 so that the numbers might ascend from 01 on.

“Cody? You OK over there?”

Cody gripped the clarinet case to his chest. “Sorry,” he said, but the sound of his own voice only made things worse. He began to cry. He couldn’t stop. When Mr. Turner pulled the car into a shopping center, he finally did.
“I was fat,” Mr. Turner was saying. “Do you know that? I was a fat kid.”

Cody, twirling a French fry in ketchup, said no, he didn’t know that.

“Honestly—do you want me to tell you something honestly?—I was a fat teenager and a fat twenty-something, too.” Mr. Turner made his eyes wide. “That’s right.”

They’d stopped at Howard Johnson the moment Cody told Mr. Turner he could walk home from the shopping center. It wasn’t far; he’d walked it a hundred times. But not in this weather, Mr. Turner had said. Not after a day like this, no. He wouldn’t think of it. They’d grab a snack, then Mr. Turner would drop Cody off at the front door. He’d even go inside with him, explain things to Cody’s mother, if that was what Cody wanted. If not, fine, he could just drop him off in the driveway. That was fine, too. He wanted Cody to know that whatever he chose would be fine with him. That was an important thing to know, he said.

“Do you know what it’s like being the only fat kid in a family of four boys? Four.” Mr. Turner held up four fingers. “One All-State track three years in a row, one the local high dive record holder, one model good-looking with a voice like Neil Diamond, and one, well,” Mr. Turner raised his hands, “one kid so flabby and pale and lonely-feeling he fell asleep on the beach one day and woke up in the hospital. The hospital.” Mr. Turner waited until Cody had registered the necessary look of surprise. “Nearly died,” Mr. Turner whispered.

“Wow,” Cody said.

“Exactly.”

A plate of salad greens sat between them, untouched. A fat fly toured its lone yellow raisin.

“You see? Those are things I remember about growing up. Feeling humiliated. Feeling alone. Feeling like I was somehow not allowed into everyone else’s happiness. That’s a state crime, by the way, in Florida. Not feeling tan and happy.” His look told Cody that this was a kind of joke.
Cody attempted a laugh. “Not feeling tan,” he said.

“In grade school they called me Lardwrence. ‘Lardwrence, how did you get to be so fat?’ or ‘Hey, Lardwrence, what’s shakin’—besides you?’ Go ahead, laugh. Some of it seems funny now, doesn’t it?”

Cody shook his head.

“Well, you better believe I laughed it off. What else could I do?” Mr. Turner forked a lettuce leaf without bringing it to his lips. “I imagine you know a little bit about that.”

Cody tugged at his coat sleeve. The one he’d used to wipe his stupid tears away. “I dunno.” That’s what he’d been, stupid; stupid to let the incident get to him; stupid to ask Mr. Turner for a ride in the first place; stupid to cry in front of his teacher, stupid to accept Mr. Turner’s offer of a quick meal.

“That’s something we have in common, isn’t it?”

Cody nodded, a gesture that felt required of him.

“I’ve seen the way they tease you,” Mr. Turner said. “Did you know that?” He took a bite of lettuce. “I’ve seen it for a long time now.”

Cody shrugged. “It’s not so bad.”

“No, Cody,” Mr. Turner shook his head. “Do you know what that is? Do you know what you just had?”

Before Cody could answer, Mr. Turner said, “A Junk Thought, that’s what. Do you know what a Junk Thought is? It’s all those thoughts in your head that keep telling you things are OK when things are definitely not OK. Because accepting things the way they are is hard to do. Really hard. But worth it, Cody, so, so worth it.” He gave Cody a look above the rims of his glasses. “Trust me. It took me most of my life to figure this out. A long, long time. My life was a series of Junk Thoughts. Had them every day. It was like I woke up in the morning feeling lousy about myself, spent most of the day feeling worse, went to bed feeling even worse than when I started. You see what I mean? Just like they say; it’s a cycle. Right? It’s like—”

Mr. Turner described a circle in the air. “You know? Like, ‘Help! I’m trapped! Who can help me? I’m all alone!’”
“Right.”

“Well, you’re not all alone,” Mr. Turner said, as if Cody had been arguing this. “No one is. That’s something Justine helped me to see. Justine helped me come to terms with my Junk Thoughts.” Mr. Turner nodded. “That’s something I’ll always owe Justine.”

“That was nice of her,” Cody said.

Mr. Turner went on as if he hadn’t heard. “Do you know that Justine was the first woman I was ever seriously involved with? I mean seriously involved with. In a mature, adult relationship. I never even went to my senior prom. I never really even went on a date until my senior year of college. That’s the truth. Do you know how old I was the first time I ever even kissed a girl?”

“Well—”

“Twenty-two!” Mr. Turner said. “Twenty-two years old and kissing a girl for the first time.” Mr. Turner clicked his tongue. “Tough to think about.”

The waitress brought them the bill, which Mr. Turner tucked beneath his placemat. “In college I was always hitting the library when my friends were hitting the bars. Most of them were in fraternities, partying it up, having a social life I could only dream about as I sat in the reading room and wished I was anywhere else.” He shook his head, ruefully. “Justine always said she couldn’t believe I’d spent my time that way. She was the complete opposite, of course. Studious, but fun.”

Cody understood that it was his job to nod.

“Oh, she knew how to have fun.”

Outside, the snow had stopped, but it looked deeper than Cody had realized. If it snowed tonight, maybe they wouldn’t have school tomorrow. A blizzard and Cody might not have to return until after the holiday.

“People say, ‘Sorry to hear about you and Justine,’ or ‘We’re sorry to hear things didn’t work out,’ and I always say ‘Why? There’s nothing sorry about it.’ Am I sorry we’re not to-
gether right now? Well, yes, I am. I admit that. I’d be lying if I said otherwise. But the fact is, Justine was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. Ever. And there’s just no way I can look back at having that kind of experience as—” he held his hands apart, “as, as anything to be sorry for.” Cody chanced a look; he saw that Mr. Turner had his eyes closed. When Mr. Turner spoke next it was in a whisper. “Do you know why I’ll get over Justine?”

Cody didn’t say anything.

“Because I’ve got self-respect,” Mr. Turner said, and brought his hands to his face. He made tiny whimpering noises. His shoulders shook. “That’s what I’ve got.”

Cody watched, imagining Mr. Turner telling his mother all about missing the bus, about the taunting. He imagined Mr. Turner telling her all about Justine. He imagined him saying he loved her. It was the idea of Mr. Turner sitting at their kitchen table, whose fourth leg sometimes fell off for no reason whatsoever, that informed Cody he had to decide something. That was certain. He would have to make a choice. But it wasn’t until Mr. Turner announced he’d left his wallet in the Tercel that the decision revealed something of itself to Cody. Mr. Turner said, “I’ll be back in a second,” and stood from the table. “You hold the fort, OK?” Mr. Turner donned his furry hat and pushed through the heavy glass doors to the parking lot.

It was cold outside; the wind was up. When Cody pushed through the side door, he found himself in the hotel parking lot. It was the lot he sometimes cut across coming home from Walgreens, his pockets stuffed with trading cards. The lot was bordered by a stand of pine trees, whose boughs hid the entrance to a dirt path that led to Cody’s neighborhood. The sight of virgin snow there pleased Cody, as did the view the path eventually afforded him: the front lot, Mr. Turner riffling through the Tercel, searching for his lost wallet. For a moment Cody wondered if he should call out to him. Should he? Should he let him know he was heading home? Should he
say thanks for the ride? Didn’t he owe that to Mr. Turner? He couldn’t decide. And that was the thing: even as Cody entered his neighborhood, even as he shook snow from the heels of his boots, even as he opened his front door, he felt like he was still deciding.