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SECRET
HISTORY

A NOVEL

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—*The New York Times*

Donna Tartt

The Secret History

For Bret Easton Ellis, whose generosity will never cease to warm my heart; and for Paul Edward Mc Gloin, muse and Maecenas, who is the dearest friend I will ever have in this world.

I enquire now as to the genesis of a philologist and assert the following:

- 1. A young man cannot possibly know what Greeks and Romans are.*
- 2. He does not know whether he is suited for finding out about them.*

– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, Unzeitgemdsse Betrachtungen

Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour in storytelling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes.

– PLATO, Republic, book ii

Prologue

The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. He'd been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. It was one of the biggest manhunts in Vermont history – state troopers, the FBI, even an army helicopter; the college closed, the dye factory in Hampden shut down, people coming from New Hampshire, upstate New York, as far away as Boston.

It is difficult to believe that Henry's modest plan could have worked so well despite these unforeseen events. We hadn't intended to hide the body where it couldn't be found. In fact, we hadn't hidden it at all but had simply left it where it fell in hopes that some luckless passer-by would stumble over it before anyone even noticed he was missing. This was a tale that told itself simply and well: the loose rocks, the body at the bottom of the ravine with a clean break in the neck, and the muddy skidmarks of dug-in heels pointing the way down; a hiking accident, no more, no less, and it might have been left at that, at quiet tears and a small funeral, had it not been for the snow that fell that night; it covered him without a trace, and ten days later, when the thaw finally came, the state troopers and the FBI and the searchers from the town all saw that they had been walking back and forth over his body until the snow above it was packed down like ice.

It is difficult to believe that such an uproar took place over an act for which I was partially responsible, even more difficult to believe I could have walked through it – the cameras, the uniforms, the black crowds sprinkled over Mount Cataract like ants in a sugar bowl – without incurring a blink of suspicion. But walking through it all was one thing; walking away, unfortunately, has proved to be quite another, and though once I thought I had left that ravine forever on an April afternoon long ago, now I am not so sure. Now the searchers have departed, and life has grown quiet around me, I have come to realize that while for years I might have imagined myself to be somewhere else, in reality I have been there all the time: up at the top by the muddy wheel-ruts in the new grass, where the sky is dark over the shivering apple blossoms and the first chill of the snow that will fall that night is already in the air.

What are you doing up here? said Bunny, surprised, when he found the four of us waiting for him.

Why, looking for new ferns, said Henry.

And after we stood whispering in the underbrush – one last look at the

body and a last look round, no dropped keys, lost glasses, everybody got everything? – and then started single file through the woods, I took one glance back through the saplings that leapt to close the path behind me. Though I remember the walk back and the first lonely flakes of snow that came drifting through the pines, remember piling gratefully into the car and starting down the road like a family on vacation, with Henry driving clenched-jawed through the potholes and the rest of us leaning over the seats and talking like children, though I remember only too well the long terrible night that lay ahead and the long terrible days and nights that followed, I have only to glance over my shoulder for all those years to drop away and I see it behind me again, the ravine, rising all green and black through the saplings, a picture that will never leave me.

I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.

Book 1

Chapter 1

Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs.

A moi. L'histoire d'une de mes folies.

My name is Richard Papen. I am twenty-eight years old and I had never seen New England or Hampden College until I was nineteen. I am a Californian by birth and also, I have recently discovered, by nature. The last is something I admit only now, after the fact. Not that it matters.

I grew up in Piano, a small silicon village in the north. No sisters, no brothers. My father ran a gas station and my mother stayed at home until I got older and times got tighter and she went to work, answering phones in the office of one of the big chip factories outside San Jose.

Piano. The word conjures up drive-ins, tract homes, waves of heat rising from the blacktop. My years there created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup. Which I suppose was a very great gift, in a way. On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history, full of striking, simplistic environmental influences; a colorful past, easily accessible to strangers.

The dazzle of this fictive childhood – full of swimming pools and orange groves and dissolute, charming show-biz parents has all but eclipsed the drab original. In fact, when I think about my real childhood I am unable to recall much about it at all except a sad jumble of objects: the sneakers I wore year-round; coloring books and comics from the supermarket; little of interest, less of beauty. I was quiet, tall for my age, prone to freckles. I didn't have many friends but whether this was due to choice or circumstance I do not now know. I did well in school, it seems, but not exceptionally well; I liked to read – Tom Swift, the Tolkien books – but also to watch television, which I did plenty of, lying on the carpet of our empty living room in the long dull afternoons after school.

I honestly can't remember much else about those years except a certain mood that permeated most of them, a melancholy feeling that I associate with watching 'The Wonderful World of Disney' on Sunday nights. Sunday was a sad day – early to bed, school the next morning, I was constantly worried my homework was wrong – but as I watched the fireworks go off in the night sky, over the floodlit castles of Disneyland, I was consumed by a more general sense of dread, of imprisonment within the dreary round of school and home: circumstances which, to me at least,

presented sound empirical argument for gloom. My father was mean, and our house ugly, and my mother didn't pay much attention to me; my clothes were cheap and my haircut too short and no one at school seemed to like me that much; and since all this had been true for as long as I could remember, I felt things would doubtless continue in this depressing vein as far as I could foresee. In short: I felt my existence was tainted, in some subtle but essential way.

I suppose it's not odd, then, that I have trouble reconciling my life to those of my friends, or at least to their lives as I perceive them to be. Charles and Camilla are orphans (how I longed to be an orphan when I was a child!) reared by grandmothers and great-aunts in a house in Virginia: a childhood I like to think about, with horses and rivers and sweet-gum trees. And Francis.

His mother, when she had him, was only seventeen – a thinblooded, capricious girl with red hair and a rich daddy, who ran off with the drummer for Vance Vane and his Musical Swains.

She was home in three weeks, and the marriage was annulled in six; and, as Francis is fond of saying, the grandparents brought them up like brother and sister, him and his mother, brought them up in such a magnanimous style that even the gossips were impressed – English nannies and private schools, summers in Switzerland, winters in France. Consider even bluff old Bunny, if you would. Not a childhood of reefer coats and dancing lessons, any more than mine was. But an American childhood. Son of a Clemson football star turned banker. Four brothers, no sisters, in a big noisy house in the suburbs, with sailboats and tennis rackets and golden retrievers; summers on Cape Cod, boarding schools near Boston and tailgate picnics during football season; an upbringing vitally present in Bunny in every respect, from the way he shook your hand to the way he told a joke.

I do not now nor did I ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except a knowledge of Greek and the year of my life I spent in their company. And if love is a thing held in common, I suppose we had that in common, too, though I realize that might sound odd in light of the story I am about to tell.

How to begin.

After high school I went to a small college in my home town (my parents were opposed, as it had been made very plain that I was expected to help my father run his business, one of the many reasons I was in such an agony to escape) and, during my two years there, I studied ancient Greek. This was due to no love for the language but because I was

majoring in pre-med (money, you see, was the only way to improve my fortunes, doctors make a lot of money, quod erat demonstrandum) and my counselor had suggested I take a language to fulfill the humanities requirement; and, since the Greek classes happened to meet in the afternoon, I took Greek so I could sleep late on Mondays. It was an entirely random decision which, as you will see, turned out to be quite fateful.

I did well at Greek, excelled in it, and I even won an award from the Classics department my last year. It was my favorite class because it was the only one held in a regular classroom no jars of cow hearts, no smell of formaldehyde, no cages full of screaming monkeys. Initially I had thought with hard work I could overcome a fundamental squeamishness and distaste for my subject, that perhaps with even harder work I could simulate something like a talent for it. But this was not the case. As the months went by I remained uninterested, if not downright sickened, by my study of biology; my grades were poor; I was held in contempt by teacher and classmate alike. In what seemed even to me a doomed and Pyrrhic gesture, I switched to English literature without telling my parents. I felt that I was cutting my own throat by this, that I would certainly be very sorry, being still convinced that it was better to fail in a lucrative field than to thrive in one that my father (who knew nothing of either finance or academia) had assured me was most unprofitable; one which would inevitably result in my hanging around the house for the rest of my life asking him for money; money which, he assured me forcefully, he had no intention of giving me.

So I studied literature and liked it better. But I didn't like home any better. I don't think I can explain the despair my surroundings inspired in me. Though I now suspect, given the circumstances and my disposition, I would've been unhappy anywhere, in Biarritz or Caracas or the Isle of Capri, I was then convinced that my unhappiness was indigenous to that place. Perhaps a part of it was. While to a certain extent Milton is right – the mind is its own place and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell and so forth – it is nonetheless clear that Piano was modeled less on Paradise than that other, more dolorous city. In high school I developed a habit of wandering through shopping malls after school, swaying through the bright, chill mezzanines until I was so dazed with consumer goods and product codes, with promenades and escalators, with mirrors and Muzak and noise and light, that a fuse would blow in my brain and all at once everything would become unintelligible: color without form, a babble of detached molecules. Then I would walk like a zombie to the parking lot

and drive to the baseball field, where I wouldn't even get out of the car, just sit with my hands on the steering wheel and stare at the Cyclone fence and the yellowed winter grass until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see.

Though I had a confused idea that my dissatisfaction was bohemian, vaguely Marxist in origin (when I was a teenager I made a fatuous show of socialism, mainly to irritate my father), I couldn't really begin to understand it; and I would have been angry if someone had suggested that it was due to a strong Puritan streak in my nature, which was in fact the case. Not long ago I found this passage in an old notebook, written when I was eighteen or so: 'There is to me about this place a smell of rot, the smell of rot that ripe fruit makes. Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death – those monstrous upheavals of life that the Greeks call miasma, defilement – been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty; have so many people put so much faith in lies and mutability and death death death.'

This, I think, is pretty rough stuff. From the sound of it, had I stayed in California I might have ended up in a cult or at the very least practicing some weird dietary restriction. I remember reading about Pythagoras around this time, and finding some of his ideas curiously appealing – wearing white garments, for instance, or abstaining from foods which have a soul.

But instead I wound up on the East Coast.

I lit on Hampden by a trick of fate. One night, during a long Thanksgiving holiday of rainy weather, canned cranberries, ball games droning from the television, I went to my room after a fight with my parents (I cannot remember this particular fight, only that we always fought, about money and school) and was tearing through my closet trying to find my coat when out it flew: a brochure from Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont.

It was two years old, this brochure. In high school a lot of colleges had sent me things because I did well on my SATs, though unfortunately not well enough to warrant much in the way of scholarships, and this one I had kept in my Geometry book throughout my senior year.

I don't know why it was in my closet. I suppose I'd saved it because it was so pretty. Senior year, I had spent dozens of hours studying the photographs as though if I stared at them long enough and longingly enough I would, by some sort of osmosis, be transported into their clear, pure silence. Even now I remember those pictures, like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child. Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in

the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow.

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Established 1895.

(This alone was a fact to cause wonder; nothing I knew of in Piano had been established much before 1962.) Student body, five hundred. Coed. Progressive. Specializing in the liberal arts.

Highly selective. 'Hampden, in providing a well-rounded course of study in the Humanities, seeks not only to give students a rigorous background in the chosen field but insight into all the disciplines of Western art, civilization, and thought. In doing so, we hope to provide the individual not only with facts, but with the raw materials of wisdom.'

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Even the name had an austere Anglican cadence, to my ear at least, which yearned hopelessly for England and was dead to the sweet dark rhythms of the little mission towns. For a long time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak, academic light – different from Piano, different from anything I had ever known – a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence.

My mother knocked on the door, said my name. I didn't answer. I tore out the information form in the back of the brochure and started to fill it in. Name: John Richard Papen.

Address: 4487 Mimosa Court; Piano, California. Would you like to receive information on Financial Aid? Yes. And I mailed it the following morning.

The months subsequent were an endless dreary battle of paperwork, full of stalemates, fought in trenches. My father refused to complete the financial aid papers; finally, in desperation, I stole the tax returns from the glove compartment of his Toyota and did them myself. More waiting. Then a note from the Dean of Admissions. An interview was required, and when could I fly to Vermont? I could not afford to fly to Vermont, and I wrote and told him so. Another wait, another letter. The college would reimburse me for my travel expenses if their scholarship offer was accepted. Meanwhile the financial aid packet had come in. My family's contribution was more than my father said he could afford and he would not pay it. This sort of guerrilla warfare dragged on for eight months. Even today I do not fully understand the chain of events that brought me to Hampden.

Sympathetic professors wrote letters; exceptions of various sorts were made in my case. And less than a year after I'd sat down on the gold shag carpet of my little room in Piano and impulsively filled out the

questionnaire, I was getting off the bus in Hampden with two suitcases and fifty dollars in my pocket.

I had never been east of Santa Fe, never north of Portland, and – when I stepped off the bus after a long anxious night that had begun somewhere in Illinois – it was six o'clock in the morning, and the sun was rising over mountains, and birches, and impossibly green meadows; and to me, dazed with night and no sleep and three days on the highway, it was like a country from a dream.

The dormitories weren't even dorms – or at any rate not like the dorms I knew, with cinderblock walls and depressing, yellowish light – but white clapboard houses with green shutters, set back from the Commons in groves of maple and ash. All the same it never occurred to me that my particular room, wherever it might be, would be anything but ugly and disappointing and it was with something of a shock that I saw it for the first time – a white room with big north-facing windows, monkish and bare, with scarred oak floors and a ceiling slanted like a garret's. On my first night there, I sat on the bed during the twilight while the walls went slowly from gray to gold to black, listening to a soprano's voice climb dizzily up and down somewhere at the other end of the hall until at last the light was completely gone, and the faraway soprano spiraled on and on in the darkness like some angel of death, and I can't remember the air ever seeming as high and cold and rarefied as it was that night, or ever feeling farther away from the low-slung lines of dusty Piano.

Those first days before classes started I spent alone in my whitewashed room, in the bright meadows of Hampden. And I was happy in those first days as really I'd never been before, roaming like a sleepwalker, stunned and drunk with beauty. A group of red-cheeked girls playing soccer, ponytails flying, their shouts and laughter carrying faintly over the velvety, twilight field.

Trees creaking with apples, fallen apples red on the grass beneath, the heavy sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground and the steady thrumming of wasps around them. Commons clock tower: ivied brick, white spire, spellbound in the hazy distance.

The shock of first seeing a birch tree at night, rising up in the dark as cool and slim as a ghost. And the nights, bigger than imagining: black and gusty and enormous, disordered and wild with stars.

I was planning to sign up for Greek again, as it was the only language at which I was at all proficient. But when I told this to the academic counselor to whom I had been assigned – a French teacher named Georges Laforgue, with olive skin and a pinched, long-nostriled nose like a turtle's

– he only smiled, and pressed the tips of his fingers together. 'I am afraid there may be a problem,' he said, in accented English.

'Why?'

'There is only one teacher of ancient Greek here and he is very particular about his students,' 'I've studied Greek for two years.'

That probably will not make any difference. Besides, if you are going to major in English literature you will need a modern language. There is still space left in my Elementary French class and some room in German and Italian. The Spanish' – he consulted his list – 'the Spanish classes are for the most part filled but if you like I will have a word with Mr Delgado.'

'Maybe you could speak to the Greek teacher instead.'

'I don't know if it would do any good. He accepts only a limited number of students. A very limited number. Besides, in my opinion, he conducts the selection on a personal rather than academic basis.'

His voice bore a hint of sarcasm; also a suggestion that, if it was all the same to me, he would prefer not to continue this particular conversation.

'I don't know what you mean,' I said.

Actually, I thought I did know. Laforgue's answer surprised me. 'It's nothing like that,' he said. 'Of course he is a distinguished scholar. He happens to be quite charming as well. But he has what I think are some very odd ideas about teaching. He and his students have virtually no contact with the rest of the division. I don't know why they continue to list his courses in the general catalogue – it's misleading, every year there is confusion about it – because, practically speaking, the classes are closed. I am told that to study with him one must have read the right things, hold similar views. It has happened repeatedly that he has turned away students such as yourself who have done prior work in classics.

With me' – he lifted an eyebrow – 'if the student wants to learn what I teach and is qualified, I allow him in my classes. Very democratic, no? It is the best way.'

'Does that sort of thing happen often here?'

'Of course. There are difficult teachers at every school. And plenty' – to my surprise, he lowered his voice – 'and plenty here who are far more difficult than him. Though I must ask that you do not quote me on that.'

'I won't,' I said, a bit startled by this sudden confidential manner.

'Really, it is quite essential that you don't.' He was leaning forward, whispering, his tiny mouth scarcely moving as he spoke.

'I must insist. Perhaps you are not aware of this but I have several formidable enemies in the Literature Division. Even, though you may

scarcely believe it, here in my own department. Besides,' he continued in a more normal tone, 'he is a special case. He has taught here for many years and even refuses payment for his work.'

'Why?'

'He is a wealthy man. He donates his salary to the college, though he accepts, I think, one dollar a year for tax purposes.'

'Oh,' I said. Even though I had been at Hampden only a few days, I was already accustomed to the official accounts of financial hardship, of limited endowment, of corners cut.

'Now me,' said Laforgue, 'I like to teach well enough, but I have a wife and a daughter in school in France – the money comes in handy, yes?'

'Maybe I'll talk to him anyway.'

Laforgue shrugged. 'You can try. But I advise you not to make an appointment, or probably he will not see you. His name is Julian Morrow.'

I had not been particularly bent on taking Greek, but what Laforgue said intrigued me. I went downstairs and walked into the first office I saw. A thin, sour-looking woman with tired blond hair was sitting at the desk in the front room, eating a sandwich.

'It's my lunch hour,' she said. 'Come back at two.'

'I'm sorry. I'm just looking for a teacher's office.'

'Well, I'm the registrar, not the switchboard. But I might know. Who is it?'

'Julian Morrow.'

'Oh, him,' she said, surprised. 'What do you want with him? He's upstairs, I think, in the Lyceum.'

'What room?'

'Only teacher up there. Likes his peace and quiet. You'll find him.'

Actually, finding the Lyceum wasn't easy at all. It was a small building on the edge of campus, old and covered with ivy in such a manner as to be almost indistinguishable from its landscape.

Downstairs were lecture halls and classrooms, all of them empty, with clean blackboards and freshly waxed floors. I wandered around helplessly until finally I noticed the staircase – small and badly lit – in the far corner of the building.

Once at the top I found myself in a long, deserted hallway.

Enjoying the noise of my shoes on the linoleum, I walked along briskly, looking at the closed doors for numbers or names until I came to one that had a brass card holder and, within it, an engraved card that read Julian Morrow. I stood there for a moment and then I knocked, three short raps.

A minute or so passed, and another, and then the white door opened just a crack. A face looked out at me. It was a small, wise face, as alert and poised as a question; and though certain features of it were suggestive of youth – the elfin upsweep of the eyebrows, the deft lines of nose and jaw and mouth – it was by no means a young face, and the hair was snow white.

I stood there for a moment as he blinked at me.

'How may I help you?' The voice was reasonable and kind, in the way that pleasant adults sometimes have with children.

'I – well, my name is Richard Papen '

He put his head to the side and blinked again, bright-eyed, amiable as a sparrow.

'- and I want to take your class in ancient Greek.'

His face fell. 'Oh. I'm sorry.' His tone of voice, incredibly enough, seemed to suggest that he really was sorry, sorrier than I was. 'I can't think of anything I'd like better, but I'm afraid there isn't any room. My class is already filled.'

Something about this apparently sincere regret gave me courage.

'Surely there must be some way,' I said. 'One extra student '

'I'm terribly sorry, Mr Papen,' he said, almost as if he were consoling me on the death of a beloved friend, trying to make me understand that he was powerless to help me in any substantial way. 'But I have limited myself to five students and I cannot even think of adding another.'

'Five students is not very many.'

He shook his head quickly, eyes shut, as if entreaty were more than he could bear.

'Really, I'd love to have you, but I mustn't even consider it,' he said. 'I'm terribly sorry. Will you excuse me now? I have a student with me.'

More than a week went by. I started my classes and got a job with a professor of psychology named Dr Roland. (I was to assist him in some vague 'research,' the nature of which I never discovered; he was an old, dazed, disordered-looking fellow, a behaviorist, who spent most of his time loitering in the teachers' lounge.) And I made some friends, most of them freshmen who lived in my house. Friends is perhaps an inaccurate word to use.

We ate our meals together, saw each other coming and going, but mainly were thrown together by the fact that none of us knew anybody – a situation which, at the time, did not seem necessarily unpleasant. Among the few people I had, not who'd been at Hampden awhile, I asked what the story was with Julian Morrow.

Nearly everyone had heard of him, and I was given all sorts of contradictory but fascinating information: that he was a brilliant man; that he was a fraud; that he had no college degree; that he had been a great intellectual in the forties, and a friend to Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot; that his family money had come from a partnership in a white-shoe banking firm or, conversely, from the purchase of foreclosed property during the Depression; that he had dodged the draft in some war (though chronologically this was difficult to compute); that he had ties with the Vatican; a deposed royal family in the Middle East; Franco's Spain. The degree of truth in any of this was, of course, unknowable but the more I heard about him, the more interested I became, and I began to watch for him and his little group of pupils around campus. Four boys and a girl, they were nothing so unusual at a distance. At close range, though, they were an arresting party at least to me, who had never seen anything like them, and to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities.

Two of the boys wore glasses, curiously enough the same kind: tiny, old-fashioned, with round steel rims. The larger of the two – and he was quite large, well over six feet – was dark-haired, with a square jaw and coarse, pale skin. He might have been handsome had his features been less set, or his eyes, behind the glasses, less expressionless and blank. He wore dark English suits and carried an umbrella (a bizarre sight in Hampden) and he walked stiffly through the throngs of hippies and beatniks and preppies and punks with the self-conscious formality of an old ballerina, surprising in one so large as he. 'Henry Winter,' said my friends when I pointed him out, at a distance, making a wide circle to avoid a group of bongo players on the lawn.

The smaller of the two – but not by much – was a sloppy blond boy, rosy-cheeked and gum-chewing, with a relentlessly cheery demeanor and his fists thrust deep in the pockets of his knee-sprung trousers. He wore the same jacket every day, a shapeless brown tweed that was frayed at the elbows and short in the sleeves, and his sandy hair was parted on the left, so a long forelock fell over one bespectacled eye. Bunny Corcoran was his name, Bunny being somehow short for Edmund. His voice was loud and honking, and carried in the dining halls.

The third boy was the most exotic of the set. Angular and elegant, he was precariously thin, with nervous hands and a shrewd albino face and a short, fiery mop of the reddest hair I had ever seen. I thought (erroneously) that he dressed like Alfred Douglas, or the Comte de Montesquiou: beautiful starched shirts with French cuffs; magnificent neckties; a black

greatcoat that billowed behind him as he walked and made him look like a cross between a student prince and Jack the Ripper. Once, to my delight, I even saw him wearing pince-nez. (Later, I discovered that they weren't real pince-nez, but only had glass in them, and that his eyes were a good deal sharper than my own.) Francis Abernathy was his name. Further inquiries elicited suspicion from male acquaintances, who wondered at my interest in such a person.

And then there were a pair, boy and girl. I saw them together a great deal, and at first I thought they were boyfriend and girlfriend, until one day I saw them up close and realized they had to be siblings. Later I learned they were twins. They looked very much alike, with heavy dark-blond hair and epicene faces as clear, as cheerful and grave, as a couple of Flemish angels.

And perhaps most unusual in the context of Hampden – where pseudo-intellec[t]s and teenage decadents abounded, and where black clothing was de rigueur – they liked to wear pale clothes, particularly white. In this swarm of cigarettes and dark sophistication they appeared here and there like figures from an allegory, or long-dead celebrants from some forgotten garden party. It was easy to find out who they were, as they shared the distinction of being the only twins on campus. Their names were Charles and Camilla Macaulay.

All of them, to me, seemed highly unapproachable. But I watched them with interest whenever I happened to see them: Francis, stooping to talk to a cat on a doorstep; Henry dashing past at the wheel of a little white car, with Julian in the passenger's seat; Bunny leaning out of an upstairs window to yell something at the twins on the lawn below. Slowly, more information came my way. Francis Abernathy was from Boston and, from most accounts, quite wealthy. Henry, too, was said to be wealthy; what's more, he was a linguistic genius. He spoke a number of languages, ancient and modern, and had published a translation of Anacreon, with commentary, when he was only eighteen. (I found this out from Georges Laforgue, who was otherwise sour and reticent on the topic; later I discovered that Henry, during his freshman year, had embarrassed Laforgue badly in front of the entire literature faculty during the question-and-answer period of his annual lecture on Racine.) The twins had an apartment off campus, and were from somewhere down south. And Bunny Corcoran had a habit of playing John Philip Sousa march tunes in his room, at full volume, late at night.

Not to imply that I was overly preoccupied with any of this. I was settling in at school by this time; classes had begun and I was busy with

my work. My interest in Julian Morrow and his Greek pupils, though still keen, was starting to wane when a curious coincidence happened.

It happened the Wednesday morning of my second week, when I was in the library making some Xeroxes for Dr Roland before my eleven o'clock class. After about thirty minutes, spots of light swimming in front of my eyes, I went back to the front desk to give the Xerox key to the librarian and as I turned to leave I saw them, Bunny and the twins, sitting at a table that was spread with papers and pens and bottles of ink. The bottles of ink I remember particularly, because I was very charmed by them, and by the long black straight pens, which looked incredibly archaic and troublesome. Charles was wearing a white tennis sweater, and Camilla a sun dress with a sailor collar, and a straw hat. Bunny's tweed jacket was slung across the back of his chair, exposing several large rips and stains in the lining. He was leaning his elbows on the table, hair in eyes, his rumpled shirtsleeves held up with striped garters. Their heads were close together and they were talking quietly.

I suddenly wanted to know what they were saying. I went to the bookshelf behind their table – the long way, as if I wasn't sure what I was looking for – all the way down until I was so close I could've reached out and touched Bunny's arm. My back to them, I picked a book at random – a ridiculous sociological text, as it happened – and pretended to study the index. Secondary Analysis. Secondary Deviance. Secondary Groups. Secondary Schools.

'I don't know about that,' Camilla was saying. 'If the Greeks are sailing to Carthage, it should be accusative. Remember? Place J whither? That's the rule.'

'Can't be.' This was Bunny. His voice was nasal, garrulous,, W. C. Fields with a bad case of Long Island lockjaw. 'It's not' place whither, it's place to. I put my money on the ablative case.'

There was a confused rattling of papers.

'Wait,' said Charles. His voice was a lot like his sister's **| hoarse, slightly southern. 'Look at this. They're not just sailing! to Carthage, they're sailing to attack it.'

'You're crazy.'

'No, they are. Look at the next sentence. We need a dative.'

'Are you sure?'

More rustling of papers.

'Absolutely. Epi to karchidona.'

'I don't see how,' said Bunny. He sounded like Thurston Howell on 'Gilligan's Island.'

'Ablative's the ticket. The hard on are always ablative.'

A slight pause. 'Bunny,' said Charles, 'you're mixed up. Tb S ablative is in Latin.'

'Well, of course, I know that,' said Bunny irritably, after confused pause which seemed to indicate the contrary, 'but ye know what I mean. Aorist, ablative, all the same thing, really...1 'Look, Charles,' said Camilla. 'This dative won't work.'

'Yes it will. They're sailing to attack, aren't they?'

'Yes, but the Greeks sailed over the sea to Carthage.'

'But I put that epi in front of it.'

'Well, we can attack and still use epi, but we have to use an accusative because of the first rules.'

Segregation. Self. Self-concept. I looked down at the index and racked my brains for the case they were looking for. The Greeks sailed over the sea to Carthage. To Carthage. Place whither, place whence. Carthage.

Suddenly something occurred to me. I closed the book and put it on the shelf and turned around. 'Excuse me?' I said.

Immediately they stopped talking, startled, and turned to stare at me.

'I'm sorry, but would the locative case do?'

Nobody said anything for a long moment.

'Locative?' said Charles.

'Just add zde to karchido,' I said. 'I think it's zde. If you use that, you won't need a preposition, except the epi if they're going to war. It implies "Carthage-ward," so you won't have to worry about a case, either.'

Charles looked at his paper, then at me. 'Locative?' he said.

'That's pretty obscure.'

'Are you sure it exists for Carthage?' said Camilla.

I hadn't thought of this. 'Maybe not,' I said. 'I know it does for Athens.'

Charles reached over and hauled the lexicon towards him over the table and began to leaf through it.

'Oh, hell, don't bother,' said Bunny stridently. 'If you don't have to decline it and it doesn't need a preposition it sounds good to me.' He reared back in his chair and looked up at me. 'I'd like to shake your hand, stranger.' I offered it to him; he clasped and shook it firmly, almost knocking an ink bottle over with his elbow as he did so. 'Glad to meet you, yes, yes,' he said, reaching up with the other hand to brush the hair from his eyes.

I was confused by this sudden glare of attention; it was as if the

characters in a favorite painting, absorbed in their own concerns, had looked up out of the canvas and spoken to me.

Only the day before Francis, in a swish of black cashmere and cigarette smoke, had brushed past me in a corridor. For a moment, as his arm touched mine, he was a creature of flesh and blood, but the next he was a hallucination again, a figment of the imagination stalking down the hallway as heedless of me as ghosts, in their shadowy rounds, are said to be heedless of the living.

Charles, still fumbling with the lexicon, rose and offered his hand. 'My name is Charles Macaulay.'

'Richard Papen.'

'Oh, you're the one,' said Camilla suddenly.

'What?'

'You. You came by to ask about the Greek class.'

'This is my sister,' said Charles, 'and this is – Bun, did you tell him your name already?'

'No, no, don't think so. You've made me a happy man, sir.

We had ten more like this to do and five minutes to do them in.

Edmund Corcoran's the name,' said Bunny, grasping my hand again.

'How long have you studied Greek?' said Camilla.

'Two years,' 'You're rather good at it,' 'Pity you aren't in our class,' said Bunny.

A strained silence.

'Well,' said Charles uncomfortably, 'Julian is funny about things like that,' 'Go see him again, why don't you,' Bunny said. 'Take him some flowers and tell him you love Plato and he'll be eating out of your hand,' Another silence, this one more disagreeable than the first.

Camilla smiled, not exactly at me – a sweet, unfocused smile, quite impersonal, as if I were a waiter or a clerk in a store. Beside her Charles, who was still standing, smiled too and raised a polite eyebrow – a gesture which might have been nervous, might have meant anything, really, but which I took to mean Is that all?

I mumbled something and was about to turn away when Bunny – who was staring in the opposite direction – shot out an arm and grabbed me by the wrist. 'Wait,' he said.

Startled, I looked up. Henry had just come in the door – dark suit, umbrella, and all.

When he got to the table he pretended not to see me. 'Hello,' he said to them. 'Are you finished?'

Bunny tossed his head at me. 'Look here, Henry, we've got someone

to meet you,' he said.

Henry glanced up. His expression did not change. He shut his eyes and then reopened them, as if he found it extraordinary that someone such as myself should stand in his path of vision.

'Yes, yes,' said Bunny. 'This man's name is Richard – Richard what?'

'Papen.'

'Yes, yes. Richard Papen. Studies Greek.'

Henry brought his head up to look at me. 'Not here, surely,' he said.

'No,' I said, meeting his gaze, but his stare was so rude I was forced to cut my eyes away.

'Oh, Henry, look at this, would you,' said Charles hastily, rustling through the papers again. 'We were going to use a dative or an accusative here but he suggested locative?'

Henry leaned over his shoulder and inspected the page. 'Hmm, archaic locative,' he said. 'Very Homeric. Of course, it would be grammatically correct but perhaps a bit off contextually.' He brought his head back up to scrutinize me. The light was at an angle that glinted off his tiny spectacles, and I couldn't see his eyes behind them. 'Very interesting. You're a Homeric scholar?'

I might have said yes, but I had the feeling he would be glad to catch me in a mistake, and that he would be able to do it easily. 'I like Homer,' I said weakly.

He regarded me with chill distaste. 'I love Homer,' he said.

'Of course we're studying things rather more modern, Plato and the tragedians and so forth.'

I was trying to think of some response when he looked away in disinterest.

'We should go,' he said.

Charles shuffled his papers together, stood up again; Camilla stood beside him and this time she offered me her hand, too.

Side by side, they were very much alike, in similarity less of lineament than of manner and bearing, a correspondence of gesture which bounced and echoed between them so that a blink seemed to reverberate, moments later, in a twitch of the other's eyelid. Their eyes were the same color of gray, intelligent and calm. She, I thought, was very beautiful, in an unsettling, almost medieval way which would not be apparent to the casual observer.

Bunny pushed his chair back and slapped me between the shoulder blades. 'Well, sir,' he said, 'we must get together sometime and talk about Greek, yes?'