

# Brutal Youth

Anthony Breznican

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P R O L O G U E :  
T H E B O Y O N T H E R O O F

**T**he kid had taken a lot of punishment over the years, so he had much to give back.

A steel hatch on the roof of St. Michael the Archangel High School shuddered, then burst open, and the boy crawled out and collapsed against the gritty tarpaper surface, kicking the lid shut again with one sock-covered foot. He wore only his uniform gray slacks and a wide-open button-down shirt, streaked with blood that wasn't his. A black canvas book bag hung over one shoulder, swinging back and forth as he scrambled to his knees. He pressed his weight against the closed metal door to stifle the hollering and pandemonium rising from beneath it.

Next to the steel hatch was a bucket, steaming with hot tar. The janitor had been using it to seal sections of loose shingle that had been leaking water into the school during every springtime rainstorm. A grubby tar mop leaned against the bucket. The boy shifted his heavy bag and scooped up the mop, wedging it between the handles of the hatch, locking it shut. Then he fled back across the flat roof toward the ghostly concrete statues lining the edge.

The row of saints had stood watch over St. Michael's for as long as anyone alive could remember. Thomas, the doubter; Joseph, the foster father; Anthony, finder of lost things; Jude, devotee to the hopeless; Francis of

Assisi, the lover of nature, who had a small concrete bird in his outstretched hand, and a real drip of birdshit on his concrete head. At the center archway of the ledge high above the school's main entrance stood an even larger statue of a warrior angel, St. Michael himself, wings spread and sword raised against the satanic serpent being squashed beneath his foot.

The boy on the roof was named Colin Vickler. Not that it mattered. This was the end. This was good-bye. There was nowhere else to hide. He climbed up onto the short ledge, first steadying himself on St. Michael's wing, and then hugging its torso as he tried not to stare into the bone-shattering drop below. Behind him, the steel hatch shook again—a rumble of thunder on a sunny, spring afternoon. He heard screams rise from the open classroom windows on the face of the school below. Even out here, on the edge, he was surrounded.

He slumped against St. Michael, pressing his open mouth against the concrete figure's arm to make himself stop crying, tasting the stone that had weathered away to dust. The statue lurched, as if withdrawing from him, and he fell back as pieces of the crumbling base tumbled over the ledge.

Peering over the side, he saw a small group of classmates in gym clothes lingering on the school steps. The bits of stone lay scattered around their feet, and they stared up at him, shielding their eyes against the sun.

One of them pointed and said, "Hey, I think that's Clink." Another shouted: "Jump, Clink!" and the rest of them laughed. A girl's voice rose up in a singsong: "Cliiii-iiiink!"

Vickler stood up straight, staring back at them.

He rammed his shoulder against St. Michael. He beat the saint's back. He grabbed the figure's sword-wielding arm and rocked him back and forth, cracking the mortar. The statue lurched, and the rusted shaft of pipe protruding through the base cracked loose, splitting the serpent free from the avenging angel's foot.

St. Michael tipped off the ledge and spiraled to the sidewalk, diving toward its own shrinking shadow. It detonated against the concrete steps in a crackling explosion of dust and rocks as the gym students leaped for their lives, shrieking and scrambling over each other.

For the first time that day—for the first time in a long while—Colin Vickler smiled.

As those fresh screams rose up, he stared over the streets ahead, to the shopping center across the road, the receding clusters of homes, the green springtime slopes of the valley rising in the distance, the wide curve of the Allegheny River, an industrial artery slouching along the steel mills and gravelworks as it bent toward Pittsburgh. In the busy street beside the school, traffic crawled past the gas stations, fast-food joints, doctor's offices, and other storefronts that lined Tobinsville's main strip. Up here, it all looked like some toy village in a model train layout. Tiny. Unreal. It seemed harmless to him now. And he felt so much bigger than it.

The hatch shook again, but the mop handle held. Vickler watched it. Waited. Then nothing.

He stumbled toward the next saint, dragging his heavy behind him.

The bag. That's what got him here. Thick, full glass jars clattered inside the canvas. The strap cut into his hand, but he wouldn't let it leave his side again, not that it mattered now. The other kids had discovered what he kept inside, though they wouldn't understand. They couldn't. Not even he did, really. A kid had the right to some secrets, if only the ones he could carry. But these had just been taken from him.

He heard voices in the parking lot. More of the gym students were gathered below. His classmates. *Former* classmates now, he guessed.

One kick. One kick was all it took, and that surprised Vickler. One kick sent St. Francis toppling end-over-end to the ground. But the statue didn't deliver the satisfying explosion the angel had. Instead of the sidewalk, it landed with its touchdown-raised arms now stuck in a soft flower bed, its head buried: patron saint of ostriches. The kids standing around the garden looked at it with confusion.

Vickler dragged his bag to St. Thomas. He rattled the saint's head. Jars clinked madly in Vickler's bag. *Clink*. That's what they called him. *Clink*.

Three kicks later, and St. Thomas became an arrow to the earth. He hit the brick wall along the grand front steps and fractured in two at the waist. This time the kids ran.

St. Barnabas. Decades of hard weather had already crumbled the base of this statue. Vickler heaved him over.

St. Anthony—three shakes, two kicks—pray for us.

Vickler had black dust on his hands now. The filth smeared his face as he wiped away tears.

A man's voice bellowed below the roof hatch. Vickler whirled. The contents of his knapsack clattered: *clinkclink*. The steel sheet rocked once, then twice, as someone ramméd it from the other side. The mop handle bent like rubber, flexing, beginning to crack. The next hit splintered it. The tar-bristled mop end flopped away from the jagged stick.

Vickler's hands crawled into his book bag and came out with a sealed glass jar. Trapped inside the clear fluid was a small swollen creature: a baby shark, curled in death, its little black eyes staring at him. He inched closer to the hatch, his shadow touching its edge.

The heavy steel door lifted. Below rose panicky shouts. A woman's voice barked, "Open it already!"

A little head, as white as a clover flower, rose up from the hole. Vickler arched his arm and hurled the jar into the face of Mr. Saducci, the school's mumble-mouthed elderly janitor.

Saducci squealed. One hand rose to shield his face too late. The other squeezed at the edge of the hatch for balance. The jar caromed off his brow and burst against the steel door, spraying the tumbling janitor's face in formaldehyde.

The old man's right hand grasped blindly as his eyes sizzled, and the steel lid slammed down, trapping his fingers. The janitor's wail echoed, seeming to plunge away in the distance as rounds of fresh screams erupted below.

Vickler dropped to the roof and scrambled forward on his hands and knees, pulling his bag after him. He picked up the sharpened end of the splintered mop handle and held it like a spear.

But the hatch didn't move. The janitor's trapped fingers didn't either.

Vickler's guts roared. His greasy black hair dangled around his eyes. He shifted his pack. *Clink. Clink.* His eyes darted. "Go ahead!" he yelled, his voice breaking. "Open it up. Pull in your hand. I won't hurt you!"

A thread of blood began to run along the hatch's crease.

Vickler waited. He lifted the mop handle and timidly poked at the fingertips.

They rolled off the ledge and bounced against the roof.

About twenty minutes before the saints began to fall, another boy, named Peter Davidek, was walking the crowded halls of St. Mike's and trying not to feel microscopic. His last name was pronounced *Davv-ah-deck*, which rhymed with "have a check"—and he had been repeating that all day. Still, most of the teachers got it wrong, even after he meekly corrected them. At first he thought it was on purpose, that they were messing with him. Then he realized they just didn't care enough to make the miniscule effort to remember. He wasn't sure which was worse.

Freshly fourteen years old and a foot shorter than most of the kids around him, the lost eighth-grader searched for the right place to be. It was St. Michael's annual open house for potential incoming students, and the stone halls of the Catholic high school were filled with miniature middle-schoolers like him, trying to make their way between the oafish St. Mike's guys, who seemed to be all shoulders wrapped in polyester blazers, and the equally intimidating sweet-smelling schoolgirls in their tantalizing navy blue sweaters and plaid skirts.

Davidek's heart pounded as he scanned the room numbers. He was supposed to be in Mrs. Apps's chemistry class, room 11-A, but had become separated from his group. There were no familiar faces here. All of Davidek's friends planned to attend Valley High next year, New Kensington's public high school. Only 316 kids in total attended St. Mike's, almost nothing compared to the thousands at Valley, where it was easier to lie low, and the students didn't have to wear stupid uniforms or go to church all the time or have weird priests and nuns watching every move.

Attending Valley was one of the few things Davidek and his parents agreed on. His father had attended St. Mike's for a year, though he hadn't graduated. The old man wanted to know why his son was even bothering to visit that school full of spoiled brats and know-nothings. For Davidek, it had seemed like a good excuse to escape regular class.

Three upperclassmen blundered by in the hallway, punching each other and swinging their book bags like maces. Davidek caught one behind the

knee and hit the ground. His wrinkled paper schedule fluttered out of his hand. A girl stepped on his ankle, but she glanced over her shoulder at the guy behind her and apologized to him instead. “No problem,” the guy said, stepping on Davidek’s ankle, too. Only he did it on purpose.

Legs pistoned at the floor all around Davidek. A hand hooked under his arm to help him up, and that person handed him his schedule before stepping back into the crowd. “I owe you one,” Davidek said, but the kid kept moving, giving Davidek a nod. The boy was a visitor, too, since he was wearing regular street clothes and not a St. Mike’s uniform. Davidek didn’t recognize him from his group, and he would have remembered—this boy had a band of scars on the left side of his face, with rosy tendrils linking the edge of his left eye to his neck.

Lockers slammed like gunfire. Every student seemed to be hauling both book bags and duffel bags as class changed. Some of them toted dirty sneakers. Gym class had just ended for seniors and was about to begin for juniors.

A chunky kid with greasy black hair staggered by Davidek and whacked him on the side with his black canvas bag. Glass jars clattered together inside. A smaller sack, a Pittsburgh Steelers gym bag, dangled at the greasy kid’s side.

“Clliiiiink!!” someone in the crowd shouted. A couple of girls giggled. Soon the hallway was a cacophony of voices muttering, whispering, and shouting the same word: *ClinkClinkClink*. All of a sudden, no one was moving. They were blockading him.

The greasy kid whirled around. “I got to get to my *locker*,” he barked.

“Umm, can you help me?” Davidek pleaded to the faces around him, but they were all too amused blocking in the increasingly frustrated Clink. It was Davidek’s first lesson at the school: When people didn’t like you, they got in your way. When they didn’t care about you, they let you get in your own way.

Clink clutched his clattering black bag like a battering ram, shoving through and disappearing as the change-of-class bell shrieked. Everyone still standing in the hall, including Davidek, was now officially late.

The students around him scattered, but Davidek had no one to follow. He had lost track of the scarred boy, but followed in that direction. He

found a room 11 on the second floor, but it was an elderly nun teaching French—not Mrs. Apps’s chemistry class.

In an empty stairwell, Davidek found a white-haired janitor hauling a hot tar bucket up to the roof on a retractable steel ladder. Davidek held out his paper schedule and asked, “Could you help me find where I’m supposed to be?”

The janitor glared at him, like he’d been tortured mightily by the children at this school, and was not now about to supply aid and comfort to the enemy. When he spoke, the Pittsburgh accent was so thick, it was almost another language: “Howen da’heckamye sposta know where yinz kids shubbee?” Davidek blinked. *How in the heck am I supposed to know where yinz kids should be.* Yinz. In the South, it was *y’all*, in New York it was *you’s*. Around Pittsburgh, *yinz* was the plural of *you*, the telltale sign of someone born and raised in Pennsylvania’s bottom left corner. The word was invisible most of the time, since everybody used it now and again.

“I’m looking for room 11-A,” Davidek said. “But I can’t—”

The janitor waved his free hand impatiently, counting out on fingers that would soon be separated from his hand. “A, B, C,” he said. “Three letters, three floors. Unnerstann?”

Davidek thanked him and descended the steps. The janitor muttered as he carried his acrid-smelling tar bucket up the ladder.

At the bottom of the stairwell, the eighth-grader pushed open the doors to the first-floor hallway. “Lost?” a woman’s voice said.

He turned to see a tall, plump woman in a long, royal blue dress, which swept the floor at her heels. She was pacing outside the closed door of the principal’s office, apparently waiting for entry. He smiled at her, and she smiled back—thinly. He couldn’t guess her age—anywhere from thirty to fifty. She was pretty in a sad way, a faded way. Once-delicate features had gone soft and round, slightly wrinkled, as if they had swollen and then deflated. “Are you a teacher?” Davidek asked. “I could use some help finding—”

“I’m the *guidance counselor*,” she said, as if *teacher* were a slur. “Why are you wandering the halls?”

“Uh, I’m Peter Davidek, I’m—”

“Daffy-*what?*” she said.

“Daff-a-deck,” he corrected, with a break in his voice. “I’m an eighth-grade visitor for the open house.”

“I didn’t ask your *name*. Why aren’t you with your group?” Her voice was sharp, annoyed by default. Her eyes narrowed, which with her chubby cheeks, made her look like a grown-up baby.

“I’m supposed to be in 11-A, chemis—”

“Right there,” she said, jabbing a finger down the hall. The nail was also painted royal blue. “You’re *supposed* to be there.”

Davidek was about to thank her and slink away when two boys emerged from the men’s bathroom, both wearing shorts, T-shirts, and tennis shoes. A stout man—completely bald, lacking even eyebrows—emerged from the stairwell, also wearing shorts and a T-shirt (though his was tucked in.) He had a whistle around his neck, and blew it as he tossed the first boy a football and shoved open the bathroom door: “Ten more minutes, guys, out on the field!” The boys with the football ran off, and the bald gym teacher looked Davidek up and down, then turned to the blue woman. “So what’s going on *here*, Ms. Bromine?” he asked, stroking his naked chin. *Bromine*. It was a name like chemicals in the mouth.

“I’m trying to get to the bottom of that myself, Mr. Mankowski,” the guidance counselor sighed.

“Ahhhh . . .,” the bald man said, acting like this was serious business. “Should I get Sister Maria?” Sister Maria was the principal, and had welcomed all the visiting students in the assembly hall that morning. She had seemed nice. Davidek actually hoped they *would* get her.

Ms. Bromine nodded toward the principal’s closed office door. “I’m waiting for Sister Maria myself—not that it ever matters for much. As you know,” she said, her lips tightening. With a marble-sized mole near the right corner of her mouth, the expression was like a sideways exclamation point. She turned back to Davidek: “We don’t appreciate visitors abusing the rules at St. Michael’s, young man. Tell me your name again?”

“Peter *Daff-ah-deck*,” the boy repeated, for the third time. “And I wasn’t—”

A swell of laughter and a loud, horrified “Oh, God!” echoed from the men’s bathroom, drawing a concerned look from Mr. Mankowski.

“All right,” said Ms. Bromine. “You can go—*this time*. But if you find yourself hopelessly confused again in this simple three-story structure—”

“*Stop!*” a boy yelled from inside the restroom.

Laughter erupted again and there was more shouting. Feet scuffled; voices rose. A boy cried out in agony. Mr. Mankowski ran forward and shoved open the bathroom door just as something massive collided against the other side, smashing the door into his face. A clear fluid popped from his nose as he collapsed.

The bathroom door whooshed open and Davidek saw the greasy boy named Clink shamble out, his eyes bulging beneath tangles of hair. His black duffel bag, clattering with off-key chimes, swung around his belly like a disembowled organ. His uniform gray slacks were unbuttoned, and there was a splash of blood on his open white shirt.

A boy with a gaping mouth of crooked horse teeth darted from the bathroom, holding a small glass jar over his head. “Have this back, you fucking freak!” Horse-Teeth hollered, heaving the jar against the wall just over Clink’s shoulder, spraying the brick with putrid yellow fluid.

A new figure emerged from the boys’ room, a kid gushing blood and yelping panicked screams as he pawed delicately at the blunt end of a click-button pen jutting from his right cheek. The tip of the pen, dripping ribbons of scarlet saliva, poked out between his lips like a strange lizard tongue, clicking against his teeth as he moaned for help.

The contents of Colin Vickler’s black bag had been a curiosity at St. Mike’s for months. People began noticing the unusual glass clanking sound around the start of the school year, but whenever teachers had taken him aside and forcibly searched him, they never found anything. The rumors got more and more elaborate: It was a portable methamphetamine lab. Or, maybe was he smuggling bomb chemicals. Sickening theories arose: He carried his own urine in jars, filling them at school and keeping them on a shelf in his bedroom. But for what dark purpose could any of this be happening: perversion, paranoia, witchcraft?

Colin “Clink” Vickler didn’t have a single friend at St. Mike’s, though he had been a student there for three years. As a freshman, he was a lightning

rod for the ninety-two-year-old school's hazing tradition, a yearlong, allegedly good-natured teasing of new students, which the school tacitly approved of as a "fun" bonding exercise for the newcomers. Vickler had carried a disproportionate amount of the torment, with even his fellow freshmen bullying him, usually to impress or distract their own oppressors.

When he was as a sophomore, the teasing hadn't stopped. In one of the worst instances, a group of seniors ambushed him in the bathroom one day, held his arms, and snagged the rim of his underwear, ripping them off from underneath his pants and tearing into his groin. While he rolled in agony, someone went outside and ran the tattered threads up the school flagpole. For weeks, Vickler's classmates saluted him and hummed "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

It wasn't the beautiful and so-called popular kids who did it to him, though they may have been laughing on the periphery. Everyone was, basically. The boys who had attacked him in the bathroom were the most worthless, aimless, and friendless in the school. The cheerleaders, basketball players, theater kids, and science geeks (among countless other cliques at St. Mike's) all picked on kids within their own circles, venting their frustrations on weaker versions of themselves. Sometimes the cliques turned on each other, but that was rare. When one group did need another to beat up on, they all tended to turn on the same niche—the losers. Clink just happened to be the one the losers picked on.

He became a junior, but even with upperclassman status, the teasing never stopped. The worst were the girls laughing at him, girls he thought were cute. And he was no help for himself—dropping his eyes, muttering, not clever enough to return the insults, not strong enough to fight back. It never stopped. It never would.

Vickler's only protection was to hide.

St. Mike's was a strange old building, full of narrow corridors and stairwells curling deep underground in a quiet labyrinth. To escape his jeering classmates when class wasn't in session, Vickler would sneak into the sub-basement and take sanctuary in the science storage room, where he would read comic books or video game magazines. There among the Bunsen burners and assorted carafes of chemicals, he found shelf after shelf of glass containers, each containing a preserved biological specimen: insects, birds,

snakes, worms, lizards, fetal pigs, fish, frogs, mice. They stared forlornly at the greasy-haired boy hiding in their midst. Vickler studied them in the darkness. Even the prickly-legged giant centipedes had a mournful appearance, floating lifeless and tangled together in their preservative stew.

These beings could not escape, had no future, and existed only as peculiarities.

Vickler began smuggling away the jars, one by one, taking them to a place in the woods near his home to release the poor deceased creatures for burial. His parents became suspicious about him going to the woods each night, so he had to slow down. He knew he couldn't explain. He also couldn't stop. There were hundreds of jars in the storage basement, and he committed himself to removing them all.

The earth around his shallow burials became blighted. Weeds shriveled to brown husks as they absorbed the toxic preserving chemicals. To avoid detection, Vickler began to spread the bodies around more broadly through the woods, which only slowed his progress. Then the science faculty noticed that half their biology specimens had disappeared. Suspicion fell on the janitor for carelessly disposing them, and new ones were ordered from the Nebraska Scientific company. Colin Vickler's smuggling campaign started all over again.

Throughout this time, not a soul knew what "Clink" really carried in his bag. Not until the day of the open house.

Gym class at St. Mike's happened only on sunny days. This was because the school no longer had a gymnasium, and phys-ed classes had nowhere to take place when the weather was unkind. The old gymnasium had been converted into the parish's church when the original chapel burned down four years earlier. There had been no money to rebuild the church, so the gym was made into a substitute house of worship—at first temporarily, though it had since become dismayingly permanent. The old locker rooms had become dressing rooms for the priest and altar boys, so for gym class, the students changed out of their uniforms in the school bathrooms. Their calisthenics and games of dodgeball took place in the grassy field where the burned chapel once stood. (In the winter, or if it rained, they earned gym-class credit at a nearby bowling alley.)

On the day of the open house, while Davidek stood outside in the hallway in the glare of Ms. Bromine, a junior in that boys' bathroom named Richard Mullen picked a fight with the only kid who was a bigger loser than he was. The bathroom was crowded, and Mullen was standing on one leg, leaning over at an odd angle, pulling at the tip of one socked foot as his open pants slipped down around his ankles. He stumbled backwards and landed hard on his ass, which drew loud laughs from the other boys—including creepy Clink Vickler.

Mullen had only one friend in the school, his dull, horse-toothed companion, Frank Simms—the only boy besides Clink whose existence was more pathetic than Mullen's. Since he was already so low in the pecking order, Mullen couldn't abide being laughed at by the shy, fat, fellow outcast.

In the hallway, Mr. Mankowski's whistle blew and his voice called out: "Ten more minutes, guys, out on the field!"

Everyone was still laughing as Mullen stood up, and he said to Clink, because he couldn't say it to anyone else: "Is that how your dad laughs when he's buttfucking you?" Mullen punctuated this with a swift kick to Clink's duffel bag, causing two glass jars, pregnant with fluid, to tumble out and roll slowly across the tile floor.

A handsome and popular boy named Michael Crawford lifted one of the jars toward the light, and a preserved fruit bat inside slid around to face him and his friends—its mouth open, wings undulating in the shaking water.

Horse-toothed Simms picked up the other jar. "Holy shit, this guy's pickling dead critters!" he cried, and Mullen shoved aside the layer of papers, books, pens, and pencils in Clink's bag to reveal a dozen more jars. He extracted one—an embryonic pig—and held it out. "Whatever this is, you're going to hell for it, sicko. . . ."

Vickler's mind went numb. An eternity passed. He had been trying to do something good, something merciful, but now he saw his collection with the same horror as the boys around him. There was nothing he could do, no explanation that would make sense. He heard the words *psycho*, *freak*, *disgusting*, and began to cry, squatting over his scattered papers, gathering them blindly.

Mullen stuck the specimen jar against Vickler's face. "Wait'll the girls find out what you did to P-p-p-porky Pig!"

That's when Vickler's groping hand found the ballpoint pen.

Before he even realized what was happening, Vickler was slicing it through the air, puncturing Mullen's cheek like a marshmallow.

Mullen screeched, and Clink seized him by the throat, shoving him backwards with blind fury and slamming him against the boys' room door as Mr. Mankowski pushed it open on the other side, crushing the teacher's sinus cavity and toppling him to the ground.

Clink tossed the bleeding, braying Mullen aside and grabbed his bag, yanking the strap over his shoulder as he fled out the door.

The first-floor hallway of St. Mike's yawned before Vickler like a giant stone throat. He was dimly aware of figures around him, two blurs—one giant and blue, the other small and insignificant—standing a few feet away, and a man—Mr. Mankowski—rolling in agony on the floor beside the lockers.

Horse-toothed Simms rushed out of the bathroom, hefting a jar with a floating tapeworm inside, and hurled it at Vickler, who shoved past Davidek and sprinted into the stairwell, up one floor, then another, until there was no one around him except the stunned-looking janitor standing beside a ladder leading to a square of blue sky.

He began to climb, terrified, thinking maybe he could hide, and realizing too late he was trapping himself.

With unwitting help from Ms. Bromine, Vickler soon learned he had trapped everyone else, too.

When the janitor became separated from his fingers, he plunged down like a pile of old clothes and smashed against the stairwell floor, squealing as he clutched the red nubs of his knuckles. He might have shattered his spine if Mr. Mankowski, staggering beneath the ladder with his bruised face, hadn't softened the fall.

Ms. Bromine tried to remain calm. She took a step back as the janitor's crimson-spritzing fingertips spray-painted the floor. The gym teacher was hysterical, whimpering beneath the crumpled janitor, his collarbone

fractured. Davidek stood with the crowd of other gawking students and faculty as the two wounded men gibbered madly at the foot of the ladder. "This is going to be bad for enrollment," Davidek heard one of the teachers say.

Ms. Bromine, suddenly aware of the audience, tried to clear people away, but the crowd was too large for anyone to go anywhere. People in the back were yelling, "Sister Maria is trying to come through! Clear a path!" and Davidek looked over the railing to see the old woman on the stairs below, poking through the mob.

Bromine drew back against the wall. She couldn't be seen presiding over this chaos.

The red handle of a fire alarm was beside her. "We need to get everyone *out of here*," she said as her fingers reached for the switch.

On the roof, Colin Vickler, also known as Clink Vickler, also known in grade school as Creepy Colin, seventeen years old, still without a driver's license, pale-skinned, a prospect-less virgin, and utterly friendless, felt power for the first time in his life as he listened to the electric howl of the alarm and watched waves of his schoolmates gush out of St. Michael's arched entryway.

They were afraid. Of him.

Some turned their faces up, squinting against the sunlight, their expressions bent into question marks as they tried to see him. A few who'd witnessed what had happened were crying, not looking back—others were spreading the news, passing along a contamination of lies: Clink had been murdering animals, dismembering them, and hiding the remains in glass containers. One of the boys from the changing room said he'd looked into the bag and saw a human hand in one of the jars. A few visiting eighth-graders overheard a teacher say the boy on the roof had cut the school janitor's throat.

The actual truth was bad enough. Vickler knew he wasn't coming down again. There was no crawling back through the hatch. There was no apologizing. There was no explaining. He was over. Colin Vickler was gone. Now, he was just Clink. Weird. Psychotic. Dangerous.

But he kind of liked that last part.

The boy lifted his bag onto the ledge and ran his grubby fingers over the tops of the remaining jars, counting ten. He hefted one in his hand, looked down into the parking lot, and surveyed his targets.

From the outside, St. Michael the Archangel High School looked like a building that might devour other buildings. The style of traditional collegiate Gothic architecture seemed to have been fused with primitive battle fortifications to create an imposing, redbrick edifice that bulged up from the earth like some thorny, stone-shelled titan. Davidek looked back at the building as he fled with the other students. "Rubberneck later, man. Now you better run!" someone said, pulling him forward. It was the boy with the scar on his cheek, the one who had helped him in the hallway earlier.

The boy on the roof heaved a jar toward the crowd, smashing a spiderweb into the windshield of a red Buick in the parking lot. Davidek and the scarred kid bolted together through the scattering mob as the second and third jar of scientific specimens exploded against the ground behind them.

Ms. Bromine stood in the center of the evacuation, conducting the mayhem to the street. A shuffling, heavysset kid, gushing sweat in his St. Mike's uniform, nudged in front of Davidek, huffing as he lurched forward, like a bull trying to run on its hind legs. A thin red tie drifted over his shoulder as a flash of light streaked out of the sky and exploded against the back of the chubby kid's skull. The glass jar had made a hissing sound as it cut the air, and the fat boy made the same noise as he faceplanted against the pavement.

Davidek tried to stop, tried to reach down and snag the fallen kid's shoulders, but the other students pushed him forward, with no time for anyone's rescue but their own. Davidek and the scarred boy reached the edge of school property, where cars cut back and forth along the street, honking furiously at the herd of students fleeing across the blacktop.

That's when Ms. Bromine began to yell, "Stop! Stop!"

For a moment, everyone did.

"No one . . . can leave . . . school grounds," she said, the crowd swirling around her as she turned. Her blond puff of hair was wilting with sweat. "No leaving without a . . . a . . . permission slip."

The students of St. Mike's gawped at her. They began to argue in discordant unison. Then another jar streaked from the rooftop and sent them scattering for cover behind parked cars.

The school principal, Sister Maria Hest, was among the confused and cowering. She crawled through the hiding crowd, demanding information. "What's happening? . . . Why is the school being evacuated? . . . Who is throwing things from the roof?" Everyone tried to tell her at once, so she understood none of it.

Ms. Bromine did not speak up right away. She was formulating justifications. She wondered who, if anyone, had stayed behind with Mr. Mankowski and Mr. Saducci.

A UPS truck squealed smoke from its tires and jerked to a stop inches from some scampering freshmen who'd decided to ignore the rules and run off the property. As the driver drowned out his own obscenities with the blast of his horn, Bromine and Sister Maria saw more refugee trails of students flowing across the street, out of range from the boy on the roof.

The guidance counselor snapped her fingers at two of the other teachers. "Grab those kids. Keep them on school property! We can be sued if they get hurt in this traffic!"

A blond girl in gym clothes broke away from the group and stood her ground in the middle of the street, right in front of Bromine. Her kinky hair was tied up in two madwoman pigtails. "Are you a total fucking idiot?" the girl snapped. "What if we get hurt *on* school property?"

Bromine became aware of many eyes turning toward her. Her throat tightened. "Don't curse at me," she said.

The blonde raised two middle fingers at the guidance counselor. "How about some sign language, then?" she said, turning her back to leave. Bromine darted into the street, seizing the girl by one frazzled pigtail and dragging her back to the sidewalk.

A smattering of rocks fell against the cars at the far end of the parking lot. The boy on the roof was throwing chunks of broken brick at them now. Bromine ducked behind the trunk of a beat-up green Plymouth, still gripping the blond girl's hair. At the other corner of the lot, a cluster of

boisterious seniors stood on the hood of a silver Honda, chortling piggishly as they pretended to shoot the projectiles out of the sky with invisible shotguns.

In the center of the parking lot, lying motionless in a widening pool of blood, was the unconscious boy who had charged in front of Davidek before getting beaned on the skull. With everyone else hiding, this still figure was now the easiest target for the boy on the roof.

*Thuck. Thuck.* Chunks of brick began to thwack against the facedown kid.

Davidek and his new friend with the scarred cheek were both crouched beside a Jeep, just a few spaces away. They could see glass mixed with blood on the back of the unconscious boy's head.

"Someone should help," Davidek said.

The scarred kid nodded. "You know, if that kid hadn't shoved us aside, maybe me or you would be lying there with our head split open. . . . You think he'd run out to save *us*?"

Davidek shrugged. "He's bleeding bad."

The scarred kid looked around doubtfully. "I'm not sure doing the right thing is the way to survive at this place." But Davidek was already edging out, getting ready to spring toward the wounded kid. "I could have grabbed that crazy kid in the hall, tried to slow him down," he said. "But I didn't. I just got out of the way. I was scared."

"Guilty conscience?" the scarred kid said with a laugh. "You're perfect for Catholic school." He put a hand out. "Hey, tough guy, before we charge into battle . . . my name's Noah Stein. My family calls me No for short. No Stein. That's weird, right?" Davidek said he guessed it was and shook the kid's hand distractedly.

A monstrous, skinny shape, tall and bent like a streetlamp, cast its long shadow over them. It was one of the teachers, a young guy with a stretched, gargoyle's face. "If you boys are planning a distraction, I could sure use one," he said, moving forward toward the school without stopping for a response. "Go, Mr. Zimmer!" the girl with the yellow pigtails screamed as Ms. Bromine's gripped loosened and she pulled free. Bromine staggered forward, watching her colleague steal the credit for saving the day.

. . .

Mr. Zimmer had been a student at St. Mike's more years ago than he cared to remember. He'd been a good kid, a quiet kid, one who never got in trouble—except once. Since he had long legs and stretchy arms, some guys had dared him to climb one of the brass waterspouts on the corner of the school building. The trick was to hold on to some of the brick outcroppings, but no one else could reach them. Nobody except Andy Zimmer and his praying mantis limbs.

Getting up through the rooftop hatch was impossible—the janitor had proved that—but that old waterspout was another fast way up, provided Vickler didn't notice until he was already over the ledge.

The sound of sirens rose in the distance. Police. Firefighters. Zimmer didn't want to think about what the cops would do if the boy on the roof started shoving statues over on them, too.

On the other side of the Jeep where Davidek and Stein were taking cover, a chubby black boy poked his head up. "Hey, I'm Hector. Hector Greenwill," he said, extending his hand, although neither boy was going to move from their hiding spot to shake it. "I'm another eighth-grade visitor, like you guys." He was dressed in tan pants and stuffed into an orange-and-black striped sweater. "When you do your thing, I'll help cause another distraction, try to draw his fire," he said.

Stein shrugged. "Perfect, dude. You *are* dressed as a bull's-eye."

Greenwill got into a squat, ready to run. "Just don't make someone else have to rescue *you*, all right?" he said, and lumbered off in the opposite direction from Mr. Zimmer, toward the grassy green field beside the school, where the burned-down church once stood.

"Okay, hero," Stein said, putting a hand on Davidek's back. "Let's go pretend we're the good guys."

A pair of sapphire-clawed hands seized them both by their collars. "You're too close!" Ms. Bromine growled, pulling them back. "Get down! Now!"

Davidek squirmed, pointing to the lifeless heap in the center of the lot. "We're going to help that kid!" Bromine peered in the unconscious boy's direction. "Carl!" she barked. "Carl LeRose! Stand up now and get over here!"

The boy was lifelessly disobedient. Davidek kept trying to pull away, but Stein was looking for something to distract her. In the same instant, the fat boy in the black-and-tangerine sweater made his move—running and yelling and waving his arms in the wide grassy field, drawing the attention of the boy on the roof, along with everyone else in the parking lot. On the opposite side of the building, Mr. Zimmer put one hand over the other and began to methodically climb the waterspout.

This was their moment. Stein watched Davidek struggle helplessly as the guidance counselor held him in place. He reached out and grabbed the blue lady's face between his hands, thrusting his face against hers in a smacking kiss.

Bromine opened her hands.

Davidek bolted free, his lungs gasping air as he dashed toward the unconscious boy, grabbing him by one arm and pulling him across the asphalt. It looked like the facedown kid had an urgent classroom question. Half of a brick cratered into the hood of a Volkswagen Beetle beside them. They'd been spotted again.

Davidek heaved the unconscious boy onto his own back and stumbled toward the sheltering cars, where Stein now rolled on the ground as a raving Ms. Bromine slapped him silly.

The wounded boy's head lolled, like his neck was a kitchen rag. One shoe fell off his foot. His eyes were open, drifting back toward the school. He raised a weak arm and pointed. "Fuckin' . . . *Spider-Man* . . .," he groaned.

Mr. Zimmer, his shirttail dangling free, had reached the top of the school, his ropy arms grabbing for purchase along the stone ledge. The boy on the roof hadn't seen him yet. He was instead watching with panic as dual fire engines pulled up to the curb and police cars squealed into the parking lot. Hector Greenwill and his bull's-eye sweater were now close enough to hit.

Clink had one jar left, and intended to make it count by hurling it directly into the fat kid's face. There was no fluid in it, so it was light, and he aimed it ever so carefully. He shook the jar slightly, but nothing rattled inside. Clink held out the glass container, turning it at an angle. The world got very quiet for the boy on the roof.

There was nothing inside this one. The jar was empty—except for the image of the boy he was targeting, who with his black-and-orange striped sweater looked like a very exotic trapped bumblebee.

Clink unscrewed the jar's metal lid. He spilled the nothing over the side, where he imagined it was captured by the silent wind and carried away. He put the empty jar back in his bag and adjusted the strap around his shoulder.

On the other side of the school, Mr. Zimmer had clawed over the ledge and was surging forward, arms outstretched, his feet making gritty pulse-pounds against the surface of the roof.

Vickler's eyes were closed. He never even saw the teacher coming.

Down below, Davidek was cradling the wounded kid as paramedics swarmed around them. A few cars over, Bromine was dragging Stein by the front of his shirt. Then a hush swept over the crowd in the parking lot.

Everyone looked up to see Clink slip backwards off the ledge.