

# GARY D. SCHMIDT

Winner of a Newbery Honor for **THE WEDNESDAY WARS**

**OKAY FOR NOW**



Okay for Now

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by Gary D. Schmidt



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C H A P T E R   O N E

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The Arctic Tern

*Plate CCL*

JOE PEPITONE once gave me his New York Yankees baseball cap.

I'm not lying.

He gave it to me. To me, Doug Swieteck. To me.

Joe Pepitone and Horace Clarke came all the way out on the Island to Camillo Junior High and I threw with them. Me and Danny Hupfer and Holling Hoodhood, who were good guys. We all threw with Joe Pepitone and Horace Clarke, and we batted too. They sang to us while we swung away: "He's a batta, he's a batta-batta-batta, he's a batta..." That was their song.

And afterward, Horace Clarke gave Danny his cap,

and Joe Pepitone gave Holling his jacket (probably because he felt sorry for him on account of his dumb name), and then Joe Pepitone handed me his cap. He reached out and took it off his head and handed it to me. Just like that. It was signed on the inside, so anyone could tell that it was really his. Joe Pepitone's.

It was the only thing I ever owned that hadn't belonged to some other Swieteck before me.

I hid it for four and a half months. Then my stupid brother found out about it. He came in at night when I was asleep and whipped my arm up behind my back so high I couldn't even scream it hurt so bad and he told me to decide if I wanted a broken arm or if I wanted to give him Joe Pepitone's baseball cap. I decided on the broken arm. Then he stuck his knee in the center of my spine and asked if I wanted a broken back along with the broken arm, and so I told him Joe Pepitone's cap was in the basement behind the oil furnace.

It wasn't, but he went downstairs anyway. That's what a chump he is.

So I threw on a T-shirt and shorts and Joe Pepitone's cap—which was under my pillow the whole time, the jerk—and got outside. Except he caught me. Dragged me behind the garage. Took Joe Pepitone's baseball cap. Pummeled me in places where the bruises wouldn't show.

A strategy that my . . . is none of your business.

I think he kept the cap for ten hours—just long enough for me to see him with it at school. Then he traded it to Link Vitelli for cigarettes, and Link Vitelli kept it for a day—just long enough for me to see him with it at school. Then Link traded it to Glenn Dillard for a comb. A comb! And Glenn Dillard kept it for a day—just long enough for me to see him with it at school. Then Glenn lost it while driving his brother's Mustang without a license and with the top down, the jerk. It blew off somewhere on Jerusalem Avenue. I looked for it for a week.

I guess now it's in a gutter, getting rained on or something. Probably anyone who walks by looks down and thinks it's a piece of junk.

They're right. That's all it is. Now.

But once, it was the only thing I ever owned that hadn't belonged to some other Swieteck before me.

I know. That means a big fat zero to anyone else.

I tried to talk to my father about it. But it was a wrong day. Most days are wrong days. Most days he comes home red-faced with his eyes half closed and with that deadly silence that lets you know he'd have a whole lot to say if he ever let himself get started and no one better get him started because there's no telling when he'll stop and if he ever did get started then pretty Mr. Culross at freaking Culross Lumber better not be the one to get him started because he'd punch pretty

Mr. Culross's freaking lights out and he didn't care if he did lose his job over it because it's a lousy job anyway.

That was my father not letting himself get started.

But I had a plan.

All I had to do was get my father to take me to Yankee Stadium. That's all. If I could just see Joe Pepitone one more time. If I could just tell him what happened to my baseball cap. He'd look at me, and he'd laugh and rough up my hair, and then he'd take off his cap and he'd put it on my head. "Here, Doug," Joe Pepitone would say. Like that. "Here, Doug. You look a whole lot better in it than I do." That's what Joe Pepitone would say. Because that's the kind of guy he is.

That was the plan. And all I had to do was get my father to listen.

But I picked a wrong day. Because there aren't any right days.

And my father said, "Are you crazy? Are you freaking crazy? I work forty-five hours a week to put food on the table for you, and you want me to take you to Yankee Stadium because you lost some lousy baseball cap?"

"It's not just some lousy —"

That's all I got out. My father's hands are quick. That's the kind of guy *he* is.

Who knows how much my father got out the day he finally let himself get started saying what he wanted to say to pretty Mr. Culross and didn't even try to stop

himself from saying it. But whatever he said, he came home with a pretty good shiner, because pretty Mr. Culross turned out to have hands even quicker than my father's.

And pretty Mr. Culross had one other advantage: he could fire my father if he wanted to.

So my father came home with his lunch pail in his hand and a bandage on his face and the last check he would ever see from Culross Lumber, Inc., and he looked at my mother and said, "Don't you say a thing," and he looked at me and said, "Still worried about a lousy baseball cap?" and he went upstairs and started making phone calls.

Mom kept us in the kitchen.

He came down when we were finishing supper, and Mom jumped up from the table and brought over the plate she'd been keeping warm in the oven. She set it down in front of him.

"It's not all dried out, is it?" he said.

"I don't think so," Mom said.

"You don't think so," he said, then took off the aluminum foil, sighed, and reached for the ketchup. He smeared it all over his meat loaf. Thick.

Took a red bite.

"We're moving," he said.

Chewed.

"Moving?" said my mother.

“To Marysville. Upstate.” Another red bite. Chewing. “Ballard Paper Mill has a job, and Ernie Eco says he can get me in.”

“Ernie Eco,” said my mother quietly.

“Don’t you start about him,” said my father.

“So it will begin all over again.”

“I said —”

“The bars, being gone all night, coming back home when you’re —”

My father stood up.

“Which of your sons will it be this time?” my mother said.

My father looked at me.

I put my eyes down and worked at what was left of my meat loaf.

It took us three days to pack. My mother didn’t talk much the whole time. The first morning, she asked only two questions.

“How are we going to let Lucas know where we’ve gone?”

Lucas is my oldest brother who stopped beating me up a year and a half ago when the United States Army drafted him to beat up Vietcong instead. He’s in a delta somewhere but we don’t know any more than that because he isn’t allowed to tell us and he doesn’t write home much anyway. Fine by me.

My father looked up from his two fried eggs. “How are we going to let Lucas know where we’ve gone? The U.S. Postal Service,” he said in that kind of voice that makes you feel like you are the dope of the world. “And didn’t I tell you over easy?” He pushed the plate of eggs away, picked up his mug of coffee, and looked out the window. “I’m not going to miss this freaking place,” he said.

Then, “Are you going to rent a truck?” my mother asked, real quiet.

My father sipped his coffee. Sipped again.

“Ernie Eco will be down with a truck from the mill,” he said.

My mother didn’t ask anything else.

My father brought home boxes from the A&P on one of those summer days when the sky is too hot to be blue and all it can work up is a hazy white. Everything is sweating, and you’re thinking that if you were up in the top—I mean, the really top—stands in Yankee Stadium, there might be a breeze, but probably there isn’t one anywhere else. My father gave me a box that still smelled like the bananas it brought up from somewhere that speaks Spanish and told me to put in whatever I had and I should throw out anything I couldn’t get in it. I did—except for Joe Pepitone’s cap because it’s lying in a gutter getting rained on, which you might remember if you cared.

So what? So what? I'm glad we're going.

After the first day of packing, the house was a wreck. Open boxes everywhere, with all sorts of stuff thrown in. My mother tried to stick on labels and keep everything organized—like all the kitchen stuff in the boxes in the kitchen, and all the sheets and pillowcases and towels in the boxes by the linen closet upstairs, and all the sturdiest boxes by the downstairs door for my father's tools and junk. But after he filled the boxes by the downstairs door, he started to load stuff in with the dishes, stuff like screwdrivers and wrenches and a vise that he dropped on a stack of plates, and he didn't even turn around to look when he heard them shatter. But my mother did. She lifted out the pieces she had wrapped in newspaper, and for a moment she held them close to her. Then she dropped them back in the box like they were garbage, because that's all they were now. Garbage.

Like Joe Pepitone's cap.

On the third day, Ernie Eco came down with the truck, and me and my brother and Ernie Eco and my father loaded the beds and the couch and the table and chairs—the stove and the refrigerator belonged to the guy we rented the house from. After that we loaded all the boxes. My mother had dug up the garden she'd worked on and put the plants into pots and watered them for the trip, but Ernie Eco said there wasn't any room for them and even if there were he might have to

make a quick turn and they'd flip over and get the truck all dirty and so my father said to leave them and we should all get in the car since we were ready to go.

"Not yet," my mother said.

We all looked at her, kind of startled.

She went back to the pots, all lined up on the front porch, and she took three in her arms and carried them to the McCall house next door. Then she came back, took up another three, and carried them across the street to the Petronis. When she came back again, I started up to the porch to help but my father smacked me on the shoulder. "If she wants to do it, let her do it herself," he said. Ernie Eco laughed, the jerk.

So my mother carried all the pots, three by three, and put them by houses up and down the street. People started coming out on their stoops and they'd take the pots from her and put them down and they'd hug my mother and then she'd turn away.

So that's what I was doing—watching my mother give away her plants—when Holling Hoodhood came up the street carrying a brown paper bag. I'd never seen him on this side of town before.

He waved. "Hey, Doug," he said.

"Hey," I said.

"Mr. Swieteck."

My father nodded. He watched my mother. He wanted to get going.

A minute passed. My mother was back up on the porch, gathering another armload.

“I heard you were moving,” said Holling.

“You heard right,” I said.

He nodded. “No eighth grade at Camillo Junior High.”

“I guess not.”

He nodded again.

Another minute passing.

“So,” he said, “I brought you something to remember us by.” He held up the bag and I took it. It wasn’t heavy.

“Thanks,” I said.

Another minute.

“Where are you moving?”

“Marysville.”

“Oh,” said Holling. He nodded like he’d heard of it, which he hadn’t since no one has ever heard of it unless he lives there, which hardly anyone does. “Marysville.”

“In the Catskills,” I said.

He nodded. “It’ll be cooler up in the mountains.”

I nodded. “Maybe.”

He rubbed his hands together.

“You take care of yourself, Doug,” he said.

“Say hi to everyone for me,” I said.

“I will.”

He held out his hand. I took it. We shook.

“So long, Doug.”

“So long.”

And he turned, walked across the street, said hi to my mother. She handed him one of her plants. He took it, and then he was gone. Like that.

“Go get in the car,” said my father.

I went over to the car, but before I got in, I opened up Holling’s brown paper bag and took out what was inside. A jacket. A New York Yankees jacket. I looked at the signature on the inside of the collar. You know whose jacket this was, right?

I put it on. I didn’t care how white the sky was, or how much the whole world was sweating. It felt like the breezes on the top stands of Yankee Stadium.

“What a stupid thing to give you in the summer,” said my father.

I zipped up the jacket.

“Get in the freaking car!”

Didn’t I tell you that Holling Hoodhood is a good guy?

When we got to Marysville, around noon, we found the house that Ernie Eco had set up for us past the Ballard Paper Mill, past the railroad yard, and past the back of a bunch of stores and an old bar that looked like no one who went in there went in happy. The house was smaller than the one we’d had, so I had to room with my

brother still—and there wasn't a bedroom for Lucas if he came home. My brother said he'd sleep on a couch in the living room at night so he didn't have to room with a puke, but my father said he didn't want him hanging around like he owned the place or something. So he moved his stuff up with me.

Terrific.

The first thing I had to do was find a place to hide the jacket, which my brother didn't know was Joe Pepitone's. If he had known, he'd have ripped it off me before we'd crossed the Throgs Neck Bridge. But he would find out. He always found out. So I kept it on, even though Holling Hoodhood was wrong and it was just as hot in Marysville as on Long Island and I was melting inside so bad that I was afraid I'd sweat Joe Pepitone's signature off.

My father said he was going with Ernie Eco to the Ballard Paper Mill to sign some forms so he could begin work on Monday, and my mother said she didn't think the Ballard Paper Mill would be open today, on a Saturday, and my father said what did she know about anything and left with Ernie Eco. So my brother and I carried all the furniture in, and I carried all the boxes in, except my mother told me to leave the kitchen boxes on the truck until she got the kitchen clean enough so a human being could eat in there without getting sick—which she hadn't finished doing by the time my father got home.

It turned out to be one of the wrong days. Again. Of course. My father couldn't figure out why my mother hadn't gotten the kitchen ready. He couldn't figure out why we hadn't gotten the kitchen boxes off the truck. He couldn't figure out why my mother hadn't gotten groceries yet. All she had to do was walk over to Spicer's Deli! He couldn't figure out why there wasn't food on the table for lunch. She had time enough to get the crucifix up in the hall, but she didn't have time enough to make a couple of sandwiches? It was already two o'clock! And he really couldn't figure out why Mr. Big Bucks Ballard was only going to give him a salary that was barely half of what Ernie Eco had promised.

I told him we didn't have lunch yet because how were we supposed to know where Spicer's Deli was and he had taken the car anyway and Mom had to clean up the kitchen because he sure wouldn't have wanted to eat in this dump before she did that.

My father turned to look at me, and then his hand flashed out.

He has quick hands, like I told you.

"Why don't you just stay here in your new jacket and get those boxes off the truck and into the nice, clean kitchen while we go out to find a diner?" he said. He told my mother to go get in the car, and my brother too—who smirked and swung like he was going to hit my other eye—and then they were gone, and I was left alone in The Dump.

I went down to the basement and looked around. There was only a single light bulb hanging, and it shone maybe fifteen watts. Maybe ten. A huge octopus of a furnace reached across most of the ceiling, and cobwebs hung on its tentacles, drifting up when I walked beneath them. Under the stairs it was open and dry and dark—a few old paint cans piled on top of each other, a couple of broken window frames, something dead that once had fur. I looked around and found a nail—you can always find a nail in an old basement—and hammered it in behind one of the stairs. That’s where I hung Joe Pepitone’s jacket.

Then I got those boxes off the truck.

And after that, I went out to explore the great metropolis of Marysville, New York.

Terrific.

Here are the stats for stupid Marysville:

*Eight beat-up stores and a bar out front of where we were living.*

*Four blocks of houses as tiny and beat up as ours.*

*Twelve blocks of houses that had grass out front, a lot with bikes lying on their lawns like their kids were too stupid to know that anyone could walk off with them.*

*Big trees along all the streets.*

*Eighteen houses with flags outside.*

*Twenty-four sprinklers going.*

*Fourteen people out on the stoops, sitting around because there wasn't any boring thing else to do in boring Marysville. Two who waved at me. One with a transistor radio on — except it was the stupid Mets and not the Yankees.*

*Two dogs asleep on their porches. One barked. One looked like it was too hot to think of chasing me, even though he knew I didn't belong.*

A girl rode by on a bike with a basket on the handlebars. She looked at me like the dogs did, and then went on. Probably she knew I didn't belong too.

I hate this town.

I hate that we had to come here.

I decided to take a left, then go back to The Dump along another block so people didn't think I was lost or something. And so I turned the corner and looked down the street. There was the girl again, putting her bike in a rack and getting ready to head up into this brick building that was trying to look a whole lot more important than it should because no matter how important it looked it was still in stupid Marysville.

I crossed the street like I'd done it a million times before. It was shadowy under the maples in front of the building.

The girl saw me coming. She reached into the basket and pulled out a chain with pink plastic all around

it. She looped it around the bike and the rack and clicked it all together and spun the combination lock before I had crossed the curb. Then she looked up.

I pointed to the chain. “Is that because of me?” I said.

“Should it be?” she said.

I looked over the bike. “Not for this piece of junk,” I said. “And if it wasn’t a piece of junk and I did want it, a pink chain wouldn’t stop me.”

She turned and picked up the books from the basket. “Is there something you do want?”

“Not in this town.”

Her eyes narrowed. She held her books close to her—like my mother with her plants. And then I knew something.

This is what I knew: I was sounding like Lucas when he was being the biggest jerk he could be, which was usually just before he beat me up.

I was sounding like Lucas.

“You must have just moved here,” she said.

I decided I wouldn’t be Lucas.

“A few hours ago,” I said. I put my hands in my pockets and sort of leaned back into the air. Cool and casual.

But I was too late.

“That’s a shame,” she said. “But maybe you’ll get run over and I won’t have to chain my bike anymore.

Now I'm going up into the library." She started to talk really slow. "A library is a place where they keep books. You probably have never been in one." She pointed to the street. "Go over there and walk down the broken white line with your eyes closed, and we'll see what happens."

"I've been in plenty of libraries before," I said.

She smiled—and it wasn't the kind of smile that said *I love you*—and she skipped up the six marble steps toward the marble entrance. You know how much I was hoping she would trip on the top step and scatter her books everywhere and she'd look at me like I had to come help her and I wouldn't but maybe I would?

But she didn't trip. She went in.

And so what if I've never been in a library before? So what? I could have gone into any library I wanted to, if I wanted to. But I never did, because I didn't want to. You think she's been to Yankee Stadium like I have? You think Joe Pepitone's jacket is hanging up in her basement?

I climbed the six steps—and she didn't see me trip on the top one, so it didn't matter. I pushed open the glass door and went in.

It was dark inside. And cool. And quiet. And maybe stupid Marysville was a dump, but this place wasn't. The marble outside led to marble inside, and when you walked, your footsteps echoed, even if you had sneakers

on. People were sitting around long tables with green-shaded lamps, reading newspapers and magazines. Past the tables was a desk where a woman with her glasses on a chain looped around her neck was working as if she didn't know how dumb glasses look when you've got them on a chain looped around your neck. And past her started the shelves, where I figured the stuck-up girl with the bike was, picking out a new stack of books to put into her basket and take back to her pretty little Marysville house.

Suddenly I wasn't sure I wanted her to see me.

So when I saw another staircase — marble again — circling up to the next floor, I took it. Its steps were smooth and worn, as if lots of people like the girl with the bike had been climbing up here for lots of years. Even the brass banister shone bright from all the hands that had run along it.

So what if everyone in stupid Marysville comes into the stupid library every stupid day? So what?

I got to the top and into this big open room with not much. There was a painting on the wall, a guy with a rifle across his chest looking as if he was having a vision or something. And in the middle of the room, there was this square table with a glass case on top. And that was it. All that space, and that was it. If my father had this space, he'd fill it with tools and boards and a drill press and a lathe and cans and stuff before you could spit twice. There'd be sawdust on the floor, cob-

webs on the ceiling, and the smell of iron and machine oil everywhere.

I went over to the table to see how come it was the only lousy thing in the whole lousy room.

And right away, I knew why.

Underneath the glass was this book. A huge book. A huge, huge book. Its pages were longer than a good-size baseball bat. I'm not lying. And on the whole page, there was only one picture. Of a bird.

I couldn't take my eyes off it.

He was all alone, and he looked like he was falling out of the sky and into this cold green sea. His wings were back, his tail feathers were back, and his neck was pulled around as if he was trying to turn but couldn't. His eye was round and bright and afraid, and his beak was open a little bit, probably because he was trying to suck in some air before he crashed into the water. The sky around him was dark, like the air was too heavy to fly in.

This bird was falling and there wasn't a single thing in the world that cared at all.

It was the most terrifying picture I had ever seen.

The most beautiful.

I leaned down onto the glass, close to the bird. I think I started to breathe a little bit more quickly, since the glass fogged up and I had to wipe the wet away. But I couldn't help it. Dang, he was so alone. He was so scared.

The wings were wide and white, and they swooped back into sharp rays. And between these, the tail feathers were even sharper, and they narrowed and narrowed, like scissors. All the layers of his feathers trembled, and I could almost see the air rushing past them. I held my hand as if I had a pencil in it and drew on the glass case, over the tail feathers. They were so sharp. If my hand had shaken even a tiny bit, it would have ruined the whole picture. I drew over the ridges of the wings, and the neck, and the long beak. And then, at the end, I drew the round and terrified eye.

On the table beside the display case was a printed card. I put it in my back pocket.

When I got home, Mom had brought two hot dogs back from the diner, wrapped in aluminum foil and filled with ketchup and mustard and pickle relish and sauerkraut like in Yankee Stadium, and I know because I've been to Yankee Stadium, which you might remember. She was moving around the boxes and still cleaning in the kitchen, and we could hear my father downstairs clanking away at his tools and swearing that Mr. Big Bucks Ballard wasn't going to get away with being such a freaking cheapskate and what did they take him for? Some kind of a jerk?

Well, he wasn't some kind of a jerk, he said when he came back upstairs.

He wasn't some kind of a jerk, he said when he told

me and my brother to carry all our stuff upstairs and sort it out, which I ended up doing by myself because my brother wouldn't.

He wasn't some kind of a jerk, he said when he hollered up at us to cut out the wrestling and turn out the light and go to sleep—which hadn't really been wrestling but my brother trying to find out where I'd put the jacket, which he still didn't know belonged to Joe Pepitone and which he didn't really want anyway so he wasn't half trying.

That night, I lay in the dark and drew the falling bird in the air: the wings, the tail feathers, the long beak. The eye. I drew them all again and again and again, trying to feel the wind through the feathers, wondering how whoever drew it had made it feel that way.

I fell asleep.

The terrified eye.

On Sunday, as soon as I woke up, I could tell it was going to be one of those days where the temperature is so high that you wonder how anything can still be alive. It was hardly morning, but already the room was sweating hot. If there had been curtains, they would have hung like they were dead.

When I came downstairs, Mom was already in the kitchen, sweating, trying to keep the pancakes warm in an oven that only kind of worked, and sizzling bacon in the frying pan over the one burner that

lit, and scrambling eggs in the bowl next to the frying pan, and timing it all so that when Dad came down he could eat the pancakes and bacon, and then the scrambled eggs cooked in the bacon grease and he wouldn't have anything to complain about. I guess Mom figured it was worth the sweat.

I went outside so that I wouldn't throw off the timing. Everything was white and glarey. The sun wasn't up that far, but you still had to squint, and the light gave everything that kind of droopy feeling that lets you know this is going to be a long and slow and drippy day and you better think about finding a pool someplace and how that first cold plunge is going to feel great.

Not that stupid Marysville would even think of having a pool.

I waited by the back door as the sun got hotter, staring at the hard-packed dirt of the backyard, wondering how even the few patches of crabgrass were still alive. I waited until after my father had eaten and gone off somewhere with Ernie Eco. I waited until after my brother came down and ate the rest of the pancakes and then went off somewhere, probably with whoever he could find who had a police record. Then I went inside. My mother was folding a wad of newspaper and putting it under the wobbly kitchen table.

"You've been in the sun," she said.

I nodded. "It's already pretty hot out."

"Can I scramble you some eggs?"

I shook my head. "I can do it." I broke two eggs into the frying pan. The bacon grease was still hot, and the eggs began frying up pretty quick.

"Do you think you're going to be happy here?" she said.

I watched the eggs start to turn white. "I guess," I said. "Here as anywhere. How about you?"

"Me?" she said. "Here as anywhere." She got up from underneath the kitchen table.

I'm not lying when I say that Hollywood actresses would kill for my mother's smile. You think Elizabeth Taylor can smile? If you saw my mother's smile, you wouldn't even let Elizabeth Taylor in the same room.

If Joe Pepitone saw my mother's smile, he would give up baseball for her. That's how beautiful her smile is.

She put some toast on for the two of us, and I searched through all the boxes still stacked in the kitchen until I found some strawberry jam, and by then the egg yolks were too hard but who cares and we each had one and split the toast and we sat there quiet in the heat, me looking up to watch her smile and wondering how I could ever draw it, it was that beautiful.

I felt my hand trying to figure out how to do it. But it was like trying to draw the feathers of the bird. It didn't feel like my fingers were going the way they should. I *knew* my fingers weren't going the way they should.

We finished breakfast, then cleaned up together. Afterward we unpacked all the dishes and pots and dry

food and stuff and put everything away. (I carried out the box of broken dishes without unwrapping them.) By then, it was almost 150 degrees in the kitchen, but when we looked around, everything was settled just the way she wanted it, and when I said, “I don’t think I’ve ever been in a room where you could fry eggs while holding them in your hand,” she went over to the sink, filled a glass full of cold water, turned, and—I’m not lying—threw the whole thing all over me.

She did.

Then she smiled again and started to laugh, and I started to laugh, and I took another glass and filled it up and she said “Douggye, you better not—” and then I threw the water over her and she laughed even louder until she started to snort and then we both laughed even harder and she filled her glass again and I filled my glass again and before long everything was dripping and it wasn’t because of the humidity.

Then my father came home with Ernie Eco. Walked into the wet kitchen.

My mother looked at him, then opened a cabinet door and pulled down the Change Jar. She handed me four quarters and told me that we needed a gallon of milk—which we really didn’t need but I’m not stupid. I left through the back door, crossed the hard-packed dirt, and was gone before whatever happened happened.

That night, I heard everything through the cardboard walls. The Dump wasn't a wreck like he said. And so what if Ernie Eco saw it? So what?

I lay in the dark, the criminal snores of my brother honking in the bunk beneath me, and I thought of my mother's sweet smile. Maybe she could take me to Yankee Stadium.

I felt my fingers moving again, trying to get that smile right.

I went back to the library on Monday, a little while after my father swore himself out of the house and headed off to the Ballard Paper Mill, where he was going to let Mr. Big Bucks Ballard know he wasn't some kind of a jerk. When my mother told him that maybe he shouldn't say anything and he should be happy to have a job, he said something to her that you don't need to hear but that I heard fine, since the walls in The Dump are, like I said, cardboard.

So I got to the library way too early because it was still dark inside, and I sat on the marble steps to wait, since what else do you think I'm going to do in stupid Marysville, New York? I mean, it wasn't like Horace Clarke was around to bat with.

So I guess I waited most of the morning. When people walked by, they'd look at me like I didn't belong there. You know what that feels like after a while?

I'm not lying, if Joe Pepitone had walked by, he would have stopped. He would have sat down next to me on the stupid steps and we would have talked about the season, like pals. Just talking. How maybe the season wasn't going as good as he wanted. How maybe he'd only had thirteen home runs last year, but so what? He had thirty-one the year before that. And even though he wasn't playing as many games this year, he'd probably get way past thirteen. Stuff like that.

And then someone would notice that Joe Pepitone was sitting on the steps of the library with me, and the news would spread all around stupid Marysville, and people like the girl with the stupid pink chain would start to gather and they'd all look at me and wish they were sitting on the steps with Joe Pepitone. And then Joe Pepitone would say, "Hey, Doug, it's getting crowded around here. What say we go someplace and throw a few?" And we'd get up and walk through the crowd, and the girl with the stupid bike would have to back away and everyone would look at us and they'd wish they were the ones walking someplace with Joe Pepitone to throw a few.

So I waited on the library steps.

But Joe Pepitone didn't come.

The girl with the bike did.

I looked at her. "You going to the library again?" I said.

“No,” she said, “I’m not going to the library again. What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like?”

“It looks like you’re waiting for the library to open.”

“That’s right.” I leaned back against the stairs. Pretty cool, like before.

She got off the bike and flipped down the kickstand. “Do you think I can trust you?” she said.

I wondered if this was supposed to be a trick.

“Sure,” I said. Kind of slowly. Probably not so cool.

“Then watch this for me.”

She walked down the block. I leaned forward and saw her turn into a store. After a minute, she came out with two Cokes in her hand. She walked back and handed me one. It was so cold, there was still ice on the outside of the bottle, and frozen air came out of the open top like fog.

She sat down next to me. “You didn’t steal my bike,” she said.

“This piece of junk?”

“You know, you might have to wait a long time,” she said.

“Where did you get these?”

“My father owns Spicer’s Deli.”

“So you just went in and told him to give you two Cokes and he gave them to you?”

“No, I didn’t just go in and tell him to give me two Cokes. I asked for a Coke for me and a Coke for the skinny thug sitting on the library steps.”

“The skinny thug?” I looked around. “Is someone else here?”

“The library is only open on Saturdays,” she said. “And since today is Monday, you’re going to be here for a while. So I felt sorry for you and got you a Coke.”

“How do you know it’s only open on Saturdays?”

She looked at me like I was visiting from Planet ZX-15. “Most people can tell when they read the sign posted on the door that says the library is open only on Saturdays.”

I took a sip of the Coke. “I didn’t see the sign,” I said. “And what kind of a library is only open on Saturdays?”

“Why do you care?” she said.

I pulled the card from the display case out of my pocket and showed her.

“Arctic Tern,” she read aloud. “You want to see an Arctic tern? Wouldn’t it be a whole lot more likely to find one in, say, a zoo?”

“A painting of one,” I said, and took another sip of the Coke.

“That’s not how you drink a really cold Coke,” she said.

“What?”

“That’s not how you drink a really cold Coke.”

“So how do you drink a really cold Coke?”

She smiled, raised the Coke to her lips, and tipped the bottle up.

She gulped, and gulped, and gulped, and gulped, and gulped. The ice on the bottle’s sides melted down toward her—and she gulped, and gulped, and gulped.

When she finished, she took the bottle away from her lips—she was still smiling—and she sighed, and then she squared her shoulders and kind of adjusted herself like she was in a batter’s box, and then she let out a belch that even my brother couldn’t match, not on his very best day.

It was amazing. It made birds fly out of the maples in front of the library. Dogs asleep on porches a couple of blocks away probably woke up.

She put the bottle down and wiped her lips. “That’s how you drink a really cold Coke,” she said. “Now you.”

So what would you do? I lifted the Coke to my lips, tipped the bottle up, and gulped, and gulped, and gulped. It was fizzing and bubbling and sparkling, like little fireworks in my mouth.

“You know,” she said, “it’s a little scary to see your Adam’s apple going like that.”

The fireworks exploded—and I mean exploded.

Everything that was fizzing and bubbling and sparkling went straight up my nose and Coke started to come out all over the library steps and it wasn’t just

coming out of my mouth. I'm not lying. By the time the Coke was done coming out of both places, my eyes were all watered up like I was about to bawl—which I wasn't, but it probably looked like I was—and there was this puddle of still fizzing Coke and snot on the steps, and what hadn't landed on the steps had landed on my sneakers, which, if they had been new, I would have been upset about, but since they had been my brother's, it didn't matter.

“If you—”

“Don't get mad,” she said. “It's not my fault that you don't know how to drink a really cold Coke.”

I stood up. I tried shaking the Coke and other stuff off my sneakers.

“Are you going to keep waiting for the library to open?” she said.

“No, I'm not going to keep waiting for the library to open.”

“Good,” she said. “Then do you want a job?”

I looked down at her. There was still a little Coke up my nose, and I was worried that it was going to start dribbling out, which would make me look like a chump.

“A job?” I said.

“Yes. A job for a skinny thug.”

“What kind of a job?”

“A Saturday delivery boy for my father.”

“A delivery boy?”

She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head. “Fortunately, you don’t have to be too smart to do this.”

“Why me? I mean, there’s got to be a hundred kids in this town you could have asked.”

“Because you have to deliver stuff out to the Windermere place and everyone’s afraid of her and no one wants to go. But you’re new and you don’t know anything about that so you seem like the perfect guy. What’s your name?”

“Thug,” I said.

She tilted her head back again.

“Doug,” I said.

“I’m Lil, short for Lily, short for Lillian. So finish your Coke—but don’t let your Adam’s apple do that thing.”

And that’s how I got the job as the Saturday delivery boy for Spicer’s Deli—five dollars a Saturday, plus tips—which, if you ask me, is pretty impressive for having been in stupid Marysville for only two days. Even my father said I’d done good. Then he added that it was about time I earned my keep around the place. When did I start?

“A week from Saturday,” I said.

“If they thought you were any good, they would have started you *this* Saturday,” he said.

Terrific.