

*

Little Torments

Bentley Forester unlocked the door to his family's brownstone off Park Avenue. Home from Starkfield for the Christmas holidays, he'd spent most of the vacation with his parents at their country place, enjoying a holiday admixture of clandestine cigarettes, unrequited hormones, and purloined scotch. The charter bus back to school was scheduled this afternoon on Vanderbilt Avenue, by Grand Central Station, so Bentley had returned to New York for a rare day in the city by himself.

In the pile of unopened mail waiting inside the door, Bentley found a letter from the school, addressed to his parents. The return address was Jasper K. Morton, Headmaster, Starkfield Academy; this immediately caught Bentley's attention. His grades had arrived weeks ago from the School Office, a gaggle of secretaries on the third floor of the Admin Building. This letter from the headmaster was something else entirely.

He tore it open and scanned the contents. To his amazement, it contained a brief but murky message suggesting circuitously that he had been expelled. Or might have been.

After the first pang of fear subsided, Bentley realized discretion was called for, and he phoned the country house to confirm permission to read the letter, since it wasn't addressed to him. *It must have something to do with tuition, or it's a ploy for more money.*

For several months, his father had been recovering from a stroke, so Bentley's mother answered the phone and immediately assumed the worst. Oddly enough, this time she seemed to be on target.

"Shall I read it out loud?" Bentley asked, rhetorically. She knew he had opened it; surely he had already read it, too.

“Yes, dear,” she said. Her voice was tight, clipped. She’d had enough surprises this year.

Bentley began reading.

Dear Dr. & Mrs. Forester,

I realize that your family is dealing with some difficulties at this time, but I felt it was important to communicate our concerns about Bentley’s continued enrollment at Starkfield.

“*Continued* enrollment?” said his mother.

“Yeah, I know,” Bentley said. “I don’t know. It goes on.”

Bentley’s teachers and I have been concerned about his behavior this past year. Although his grades are acceptable, there are matters which continue to cause concern. I’m sure he can explain these issues better than I can, but we feel that it may not be appropriate for Bentley to continue here this coming semester.

“It’s your senior year,” his mother said.

“Last semester, too.”

“I thought you said you were on the student council.”

“I am. I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Is he saying you’re expelled?” His mother’s voice was beginning to quaver in a way Bentley hadn’t heard before. He imagined his father sleeping in the upstairs bedroom, with his damaged brain.

“There’s a little more,” he said.

We have determined that Bentley should not come back to campus unless he is prepared to stop what he’s been doing and sincerely make an effort. If he’s not ready to do this, then it would be better if he does not return.

Regretfully yours,
Jasper K. Morton, Headmaster

“What in heaven’s name is he referring to?” said his mother.

“I don’t know. This is the first I’ve heard of anything. Nobody mentioned any problem last semester.”

“Well, it can’t be about nothing. Surely you must have done something. Some other student? Something you said? Did you hit someone?”

“No. Nothing. I didn’t do anything. And JKM knew perfectly well this letter would arrive just before the charter bus.”

“Oh lord,” she said. “What are we going to do? This will just kill your father.”

“I know.” *Pretty much anything I do might kill him.*

“Well, what? You should call him. Call Mr. Morton and find out what you’re supposed to do.”

“Call him? Two hours before the bus leaves?”

“What else can you do? You can’t just show up, not after this.”

Bentley thought hard. *What the hell was JKM referring to? Why expel me in a letter, without any warning? What if the letter had come tomorrow?*

“What if the letter didn’t come?” he said.

“What do you mean?” said his mother.

“If it came tomorrow, it would be too late. I’d already be back at school.”

“Bentley! You can’t just lie about it.”

“Why not? He isn’t telling me not to come. It’s some kind of ultimatum, is all.”

“But—”

“And it’s not clear what the problem is anyway. I think this is some kind of cheap shot.”

“Bentley! Don’t talk about your headmaster that way.”

“Well, it’s true. Why doesn’t he say what the problem is? And why is he leaving it open for me to come back anyway?”

“I don’t know,” said his mother. “I just don’t know.”

“Well I don’t either,” he said. “I’m all packed. I’ve got to go now if I’m going to get on the charter.”

“I won’t claim that the letter came after you left,” his mother said. “That would be lying.”

“Fine. But you wouldn’t have received it until you got back to the city.

And I'll bet he never calls you. He would have called already if he really wanted to talk to my parents about this."

"It doesn't feel right."

"Look, mom, I've got to go. I'll figure out what's going on when I get to school. I'll let you know."

She didn't say anything.

"Mom, don't worry. It's my last semester. I'm graduating in three months. They're obviously not really serious about kicking me out just before I leave. Besides, he didn't say I was kicked out anyway."

"Bentley," she began, on the verge of tears.

"Mom, really, it's gonna be alright. It's some kind of misunderstanding. I have to get down to Grand Central now. The charter bus."

"I suppose so."

"Don't tell dad, OK?"

"God no," she said. "It would kill him."

"I'll be fine. I've got to go. Bye, mom."

"Good-bye, dear. Call me as soon as you know, will you?"

"I will. Bye."

He hung up and stared at the letter. He read it over and over, trying to squeeze JKM's real complaint from between the lines. Each time he read it he became more angry. *What a cheap shot! A lame, vague threat in a letter timed to arrive just as I'm leaving. What the hell does that guy want? Why couldn't he just say it?*

Fuming, Bentley jammed the last few items into his duffel bag and stormed out of the house.



He was relieved to find a few of his classmates were also taking the bus. Most of the guys got driven back to school by their parents, but there were always a few who had to take the charter. Nobody thought much about being on the charter, really, although most of the kids were just weenies and fourth-formers.

Bentley occupied the back of the bus with his friends, joking and telling vacation stories. They all enjoyed the obvious deference extended them by the lower grade passengers. A few cold practiced glances established two rows of empty seats between the seniors and the untouchables.

He didn't mention the letter; these friends weren't his real friends, just classmates—peers, not confidantes.



Spring semester of senior year in an ivy-league prep school radiates giddy excitement, transcendent social status, and soul-crushing fear of college rejections. Against this emotional counterpoint, classes continue, grades still count, sporting events briefly distract, and in his way each senior begins to engage the looming Great Unknown.

Bentley told a few close friends about the letter. They were all suitably amazed, puzzled, offended, and dismissive.

“No way they're going to throw you out in your last semester!”

“They wouldn't dare.”

“They'd be afraid your parents would raise hell.”

“That's why they just tried to scare you into dropping out, instead of actually expelling you.”

“They're all chicken-shit.”

“Morton just likes to intimidate people who aren't jocks.”

“Or don't have rich parents.”

“He's trying to get you to admit to something.”

“Did you do anything last term we don't know about?”

The whole group stopped talking and stared at Bentley expectantly. Maybe something really cool had happened.

“Not a damn thing. I swear. I haven't got a clue what's bugging him.”



For three weeks, Bentley heard nothing from the headmaster. There was no suggestion of his having illegitimately returned for graduation. There weren't even any oblique references when he met routinely with his faculty counselor.

“Have you heard from Harvard?” Mr. Stanton said, with a marginal smile.

“Not yet,” said Bentley. “But the scout said I was a shoo-in. My dad did post-grad there, and my brother went there.”

“What about your fall-backs?”

“I never really got around to them.”

“Yale? You didn't apply?”

“No relatives there. And Yale’s hardly a fall-back.”

“Columbia?”

“I can always take a year off, if it comes to that.” Bentley looked out the window at the rapidly greening fields of Connecticut. Only two months left.

“What about Wisconsin,” said Mr. Stanton.

“Madison? What about it?”

“It’s a great school, but you’d have a much better chance there. Just in case. You don’t really want to take a year off, do you?”

“Yeah, no. I don’t know.” *I just want to get out of here.*

The meeting was over, so Mr. Stanton recited a few platitudes about not slacking off in the stretch, especially if the colleges were still deciding your fate. “I have a lot of faith in you, Bentley,” he said.

Bentley politely acknowledged his counselor’s advice and left for a quick set of doubles. His tennis was nothing to write home about, but it was better than standing around in the outfield all afternoon.



The headmaster’s unresolved threats completely slipped from Bentley’s mind by mid-April. The administration offices were across from the entrance to the library, so he had walked by a hundred times and become habituated to the little waves of adrenalin.

One Wednesday afternoon he didn’t get any mail, but there was a folded note in his box: *Mr. Morton will see you in his office on Thursday at 10:00 AM.*

The rest of Wednesday dragged. He confided with his friends that The Meeting had finally been announced. They all wondered what the hell Mr. Morton was going to spring on him, but nobody had any new ideas. Still, Bentley’s hands were cold and damp.

The next morning, after physics class, Bentley went up to the third floor of the Administration Building. His head was full of noise and his armpits were wet.

The headmaster intercepted him in the hallway.

“My office,” he said.

Now there’s a surprise.

Mr. Morton strode to his desk and sat down in a large maroon swivel

chair. Bentley sat in one of the school-monogrammed captain's chairs and looked up at the headmaster. *I wonder if they sawed an inch off the legs of these chairs. Or maybe JKM's chair is on a platform.*

"So," JKM said. "Of course you know why we're having this meeting?"

Bentley tried to shrug nonchalantly. "I guess it probably has something to do with your letter."

"Yes, exactly."

"OK."

The headmaster stared across his big cluttered desk with a strange expression.

"Well?" he said.

Bentley glanced around the paneled office. *Too far above the ground to jump out the window: no escape but the door.*

"You know we're not pleased with your behavior," the headmaster said.

"Well, I gathered that. But the letter didn't exactly mention what behavior."

The headmaster pressed his lips together. "I think you know what we're referring to."

Bentley did his level best to sound sincere. "I honestly really don't. Is it something I did last semester? I wasn't aware I'd broken any rules."

"You know full well it's not about breaking a rule."

"It's not?"

"Don't be clever."

Bentley shivered. This was already going badly. "Look," he said, "I'm not trying to be difficult. I actually, truly, don't know what you think I did."

"Bentley, this is not a matter of something you did."

"Then what is it?"

"You're obviously not living up to the School's standards, and it's got to stop."

"But what standards? What do you mean?"

"Your attitude doesn't just affect you, Bentley. You're a senior, and the things you say and do have an influence on other people."

"Did I say something I shouldn't have?" He racked his brain, trying to recall anything that could have triggered this inexplicable reaction. Something with an underclassman? His counselor?

The headmaster was becoming visibly frustrated. Bentley was equally frustrated, but the irony was overwhelmed by growing mistrust.

"It's not something specific that you said. You know perfectly well what I mean."

"But I—"

"I'm not going to let you force me into defining something you can just argue about. What about the letter?"

"What about the letter?"

The headmaster grimaced. Bentley knew his questions must seem uncooperative or insolent, but he couldn't defend himself if he didn't know what JKM was talking about.

"You came back."

"Yes, sir."

"So you're ready to cooperate?"

"Sure. What do you want me to do?"

"What do I want you to do?" Mr. Morton glared at him. "What do you *think* I want you to do?" He wasn't quite shouting, but his face had lost some color, and his voice was a little shaky.

Bentley began to fear that something explosive was about to happen. "Stop doing something?" he said. *Or start doing something? Or fucking cease to exist?*

"It's quite simple, Bentley," said Morton.

Bentley waited.

"If you want to graduate, then you'd better make up your mind right now."

"Yes, sir. I definitely want to graduate."

"Your parents wouldn't be very pleased if you dropped out in your last term, would they?"

"No, sir. Not at all. I promise I won't drop out."

"It's not your choice!" Morton was definitely yelling now. He slammed his hands on the desk and stood up. His face was white.

"You'll be out of here before I open the door if I say so," he snapped.

Out the window? Bentley realized there was a white iron fire escape he hadn't noticed before. *Maybe I could climb down.*

"Answer me."

"Yes, sir."

“Yes, what?”

Bentley shook his head, then realized Mr. Morton would read some horrible meaning into it.

“Yes, um, I’ll cooperate?”

“Jesus,” said Morton. “Do you agree to stop this behavior for the rest of your time at Starkfield Academy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And do you agree to adhere to the School Values for the rest of your time here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you’ll live up to our standards and set a good example?”

“Yes, sir.” Then Bentley added, “I’m vice president of the School Council, sir, and vice president of the Dramatics Society. And I’m on the Athletic Council, too. I’ll try not to do anything wrong.” *I better not mention the Steam Tunnel Spelunking Society.*

“I know you’ve fooled a lot of people,” said the headmaster, grimacing again. “But from now on, you watch your step.”

“I will, sir.”

“Then go ahead and stay and finish up your senior year.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“If I hear one report you’re reverting to your old ways, you’ll be out of here in a heartbeat. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” *Like hell I do.*

“Even if it’s the day before graduation.”

“I understand, sir.”

“I thought you did.” Mr. Morton sat down heavily, glaring at Bentley from a splotchy white face. He shook his head slowly from side to side. After a long moment, he said, “Why couldn’t you just admit it at the beginning?”

“Admit what?”

“Out of here!” Morton was back on his feet. “I’ve had enough of your evasions.” He was shouting again.

“I’m sorry, sir. I—”

“Out! Get out!”

Bentley quickly exited. The office door slammed behind him and the headmaster’s secretary looked up in alarm.

Bentley glanced at her, wondering what she could possibly think just

happened. Did she know what his crime against the School had been? Someone must know, but it sure as hell wasn't Bentley.

He cast her a sheepish smile and hurried out of the administration building. He continued on out to the tennis courts, and beyond into the seedy school golf course. The western edge of the course was lined with pine trees, and he lost himself among them.



The next few weeks were uneventful. Bentley replayed his surreal confrontation with the headmaster, to himself and to his closest friends, but no insight came. He felt like Kyle MacLachlan in *The Trial*, accused of some serious crime nobody would identify.

A month before graduation, there had been no further incidents involving JKM or Bentley's obscure transgressions. Bentley was relaxing into the concluding weeks of his secondary education. There was a great deal of light now at the end of the tunnel.

One afternoon in late May, his class adviser called a meeting in the Science building. It was time to elect a Valedictorian. Some schools just appointed the student with the best grades, but at Starkfield the position was filled democratically. Although he was not the most popular kid in his class, apparently a majority felt he was the one to sum up their collective experience at the school, and he was elected.

The next afternoon his mailbox held another invitation to meet JKM. He went to the headmaster's office, and had to wait almost half an hour. When the secretary finally let him in, Morton just looked up from his desk and said, "Nice. I don't know how you do it, Forester." His voice dripped with irony.

Before Bentley could reply, JKM dismissed him with a wave and turned back to his desk.

That was it? He called me to a meeting just to be an ass-hole?

His friends thought it was hysterically funny, but Bentley didn't. Mr. Morton was acting very strange, and there must have been something much more dire than just a vague discordance with school "values."

The semester wore on, spring bloomed and effloresced all around, and the seniors lost more and more of their connection with secondary education, school values and all. Starkfield was morphing into a wellspring

of nostalgia instead of an institute of intermediate learning, and colleges were usurping the seniors' allegiances.

When graduation day rolled around, Bentley's father was still too sick to make it, but his mother came with his brother and his maiden aunt. They sat in the parents' section under a blue June sky, fanning themselves with graduation ceremony handouts. The faculty were in their section, a grim body of academicians with varying degrees of legitimacy. Students, staff, and miscellaneous others occupied a third section. The seniors sat by themselves, like a collective ticking time-bomb.

The headmaster gave a very brief opening speech, followed by the doggedly devout new chaplain, who emitted a characteristically warped spiritual metaphor (*students are like Christmas presents*).

A distinguished guest speaker whom nobody had heard of spoke much too long about setting forth on the road of life. Parents beamed, trying to catch the eye of their respective offspring. The faculty endured the proceedings as they had always done, except this time there was a new veneer of anticipation: Bentley Forester was the Valedictorian, perish the thought, and he would have the last word.