

## YEAR OF THE PIG

There's a thin line between being idolized and hated when you're nine. Jeremy Schindeldraft is a spaz. He has thrown dictionaries at kids' heads who tease him. Chairs, also. It's not easy to aim a chair at a kid's mouth. The fact is, Jeremy is strong. He could be pushing kids down on the football field and be high-fived.

Not that I am some kind of Future Homecoming King either, but I can draw. Not people so much, but very good cartoon animals. This makes me in demand to decorate spirals, enough so to be picked for the teams at recess. Occasionally Corr (that's Bradley Corman) throws to me because nobody bothers covering me. That occasional pass is enough for me. If I can get that one touchdown a year and the guys cheer me, awesome.

For Jeremy it's harder because he's so smart. He was reading three books a day by third grade. For fun. Those small, dingy mystery paperbacks that would be in a cardboard box at a garage sale. He even reads his books during class under his desk. Some of the teachers confiscate them. The teacher will hand the book back to him

after class and ask sheepishly that he read at home. What more can they really do? Jeremy is hands-down the smartest kid in the class and teachers depend on smart kids.

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Our private school in Sunrise, Florida is small and the headmaster has taken to selling it as "creative" because we can't compete with the private school that is "academic" a half hour north off the highway, where they even wear uniforms.

The teachers are told to be creative, too, and instead of choosing existing plays they write their own school plays using things that are supposed to interest us more from our lives. For example, Strawberry Shortcake, a popular line of toys when we were in kindergarten. In the Strawberry Shortcake play, I was one of the dozens of blueberries swaying in the background.

Like recess, the stars of the school plays are almost always from a small pool of people and there are only two tiers: the stars and the rest, the chorus, I guess you'd say. The stars have to be reasonably presentable, showy enough not to develop sudden stage fright and sufficient at memorizing lines. The blueberries just had to show up.

I got an accidental chance to star in first grade. It was a production of Winnie the Pooh. I was chosen as Christopher Robin because I was the only one who could do an imitation English accent. My older brother watched Monty Python and he and his friends would always recite vaguely insulting lines to me that I didn't understand. I never tried it myself until the teachers went around the room asking us to do an accent. I guess I had picked something up.

My friend Aaron was chosen as Pooh because he is chubby. Just heavy enough to be called names. I am pretty good at remembering things I've read--my mother thinks I inherited my grandma's photographic memory, though my brother chortles when she says that--and the teachers were impressed with how quickly I got my lines down. I had to say things like "silly bear, don't put so much honey in your tummy!" on stage, and I felt bad every time I had one of those lines and so I mumbled them. By the second grade Aaron and I were both back in the chorus of the plays and that was fine with me, I can't speak for Aaron.

It is the Year of the Rooster when we start fourth grade. I saw that on a paper placemat at Wan's, a Chinese restaurant where my parents take me on Saturdays. Fourth grade has nicer classrooms and shiny blue lockers. There is

something dignified about saying you are in fourth grade. Third grade seems like a distant mistake. In fourth grade we don't just have history, we have world history. We are pretty grown up, more grown up than older people think.

School plays are not just a matter of impressing the other kids. Our parents come, and even if they don't admit it, they are happy the more lines you have, and hide their disappointment if you are just swaying in the blueberry thicket like an idiot. If I ever have a kid, I plan to encourage them to be a blueberry.

Speculation is thick about the fourth grade class play. We groan at the rumor in study hall that it is to be another "creative collaboration" by the teachers. The veterans among us remember Strawberry Shortcake with a hard shudder.

But word around the cafetornasium looks okay (the gymnasium and the cafeteria are the same place--that's why it's called the cafetornasium). The teachers are said to want something that the parents will really enjoy. Although our parents pay tuition, donations are requested several times a year. It's sort of like a restaurant, you're charged for your food but then you tip. At the beginning of this year, Palmcrest, our rival, lured away some of our better students, and now our headmaster desperately wants

to back up the creative angle. The class play is considered the key to exciting the parents.

The rumor is they want something that speaks to their hippie days, and it has been overheard by a reliable source, whose stepmother is a secretary for the assistant headmaster, that they are planning a pastiche of comedic scenes from the life of John Belushi. We don't know who John Belushi is, exactly, but Corr tells us it was the "cheeburger, cheeburger" guy from TV and somehow we all know that. We go around chanting "cheeburger cheeburger!" all day like a pack of Martians passing some secret code.

"Cheeburger cheeburger!" we order hysterically from the lunch lady, even though it is sloppy joes that day.

"Oh no," says Aaron when I get to the table. We are the first to sit down with our trays and he is talking in a jailhouse whisper.

"What?"

"Well, that Cheeburger guy we're doing the play about was fat, you know? Man... well, you know."

The other guys sit down so we don't talk more about it, but I understand. Aaron will without a doubt be cast as the fat Cheeburger guy. Honestly, I tell you Aaron is not obese. When I say he is chubby, I mean chubby. But our school is small and we only have one of every type, if

that. One dark-skinned kid, one disabled. That's the strange thing about Jeremy Schindelcraft. He is our genius, but he isn't just the genius-for-our-school smart kid. He is a general genius, wherever he had been it would have been that.

Aaron gets really uptight and a little annoying about these things. It is horrible to see him sweating all week about our class meeting, when the play will be announced. Finally, the day comes and the teachers are in the front of the cafetornasium. There is some suspense to the whole ceremony as we sit Indian-style on the floor. I don't know why teachers always feel the need to introduce each other, since we know all of them.

"The play this year will be announced by... Mr. Sampson. Mr. Sampson, there he is, will you come on up?"

"Everybody ready to be a 'thespian' again?" Mr. Sampson says. We respond obediently. "Good. Because this year's play will be an original production entitled 'Yesterday: Meet The Beatles.'"

It won't be John Belushi and Cheeburgers after all. It will be a compilation of skits and songs representing the life of the Beatles. This gets a pretty good reaction. Two of the kids start to sway and sing "Let's go surfin' now, come on and safari with me," but I think to myself that's

not the Beatles. We have a basic mental picture of the band, the kind that would be shown on a limited edition commemorative plate of the Beatles sold on TV: four skinny guys with floppy hair and silly suits, and pretty teenage girls swooning and crying.

Aaron deflates with relief, he has been storing up all this tension and anxiety for so many days. He chats profusely as everyone shows off what little they know about the Beatles. Aaron's cheeks turn a little pink and raw in pure happiness.

Then he shouts out something extraordinary at Mr. Sampson. There will be times later I'll wonder what things would have been like if he had just never said it.

"Hey, I know! Jeremy should be one of the Beatles! He already looks like one!"

Aaron scores. Everyone laughs and high-fives. Jeremy has a soup-bowl haircut; it is the same one that we all had until about second grade, but the rest of us have moved on to shorter, spiky styles. His hair is muppy and, by point of fact, is almost identical to the style worn by the Beatles. Kids around school say that Jeremy's mother has an actual wooden soup bowl that she puts on his head to cut his hair herself every couple of weeks because they can't

afford a hairdresser. I don't think it's true, but you can't help picturing it.

I think Aaron had become so worked up over the fear of being cast again as the fat role, of reliving his first grade Pooh humiliation--I think he rehearsed the insults that would be thrown out at him so many times in his head preparing for this class meeting ("Aaron can be the Cheeburger guy! He eats cheese burgers!")--that his taunt about Jeremy slides from his tongue as extra celebration of his relief. Jeremy has a mystery novel lodged in his lap, and glances up with a pained, crooked smirk, then ducks his head back down. For a second, I think he will chuck the book right into Aaron's eye.

The teachers give Aaron detention for teasing Jeremy but Aaron doesn't mind. He is so happy to have escaped his fate as the Cheeburger guy and he is on a high after getting a good laugh at Jeremy's expense. Kids who are mildly picked on don't have much empathy for the kids who are picked on more. They resent those worse off kids, like if it wasn't for their weirdness nobody would pick on anybody.

The next few weeks fill up with anticipation. Every guy who has any shot wants one of four things: Paul, John, George or Ringo.



The mood surrounding this play seems different than any other. For one thing, our parents are into it. My dad still has a 1960s ponytail. He has his Beatles record collection, too, which he says would be worth something if it were better preserved, but he'd rather listen to it than sell it. He still remembers the day Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club Band came out, he was fifteen and waited on line all afternoon to get it. He and my aunt sat by the record player for hours listening to it. I spend lots of time happily studying the amazing album cover, crammed with brightly colored pictures of famous people whom my parents identify for me. I get my drafting pad out and draw a version of it, except turning all the people into animals, mostly bears and hippos.

I like learning all the songs and looking at the lyrics. My dad gets me a book about the Beatles and one on rock and roll history; my mom plays a Beatles cassette everyday on the way to school, which annoys my brother, who just got into Led Zeppelin. My parents are impressed with my observations about the changing styles from the early to late Beatles, raving like I am some kind of prodigy. The truth is, I have never felt closer to my parents. There is a communal feeling that we are all in this together--the

fourth graders, the teachers, the parents--all for the Beatles, all for each other.

At school, we are on our best behavior. Everyone speaks extra crisply in class and is conscientious about doing homework. I don't really expect to be a Beatle, but the idea is exciting enough that I'm sunnier to the teachers too, just in case. You see, there were never any auditions for our school plays. The teachers have secret meetings to select who will play the parts. No asking what we wanted. I guess this is how Hollywood works too. I feel bad for the actors in boring movies like Out of Africa when I think about how they have no say in the matter.

You can hear every sneaker squeak on the linoleum floor at the next class meeting. At first there are no surprises: Michael Wolsky is Paul McCartney, Donnie Rudman is John Lennon. Mike has starred in every class play since kindergarten, and Donnie is one of the few athletes who also do well on stage. He is as loud and bossy as a grownup. Gary Barkin is chosen as George Harrison, which is a surprise, he is as nondescript as fourth graders come. But to whatever extent that was unexpected, it is nothing compared to this.

"And, finally, the part of Ringo Starr, the drummer of the Beatles," as if we all haven't spent three weeks

researching the Beatles, or at least as if I haven't, "... will be played by... Quiet please! Right this second! ... Jeremy Schindledraft."

I think Aaron is more shocked than anyone. He sits with his mouth hanging slack, not knowing what to say. "That's what I said," he pokes my shoulder. "That's what I said in the last assembly and I got in trouble! You heard! They listened to me!"

I try to imagine the conversation in the teachers' lounge:

"Maybe Aaron is right, Mr. Sampson. Jeremy should be a Beatle. His mother does cut his hair with a soup-bowl."

That doesn't seem plausible. But then again we never know what happens behind the sealed door of the teachers' lounge, where cigarette and cold cut odors trickle into the hall whenever a teacher walks in or out.

Everyone is staring at Jeremy when his name is announced as Ringo, but I can't see him from where I sit. I imagine he just glances up from a mystery book with a smirk. While everyone listens breathlessly for his or her name among the secondary parts--I am in the chorus again--I keep thinking about Jeremy.

Even when we were younger, and the teasing was more constant against Jeremy and the worst outcasts, I stayed

out of it. I didn't stick up for the victims while it was happening, true; that would have been physically risky; but I would say hello to them later and treat them like everything was normal, which I think they appreciated. When I see Jeremy the day after the assembly, I make sure to start a conversation.

"Hey Jeremy, what's up?"

He gives a shrug and crooked grin. You wouldn't know he is so smart just looking at him, he might easily be one of the skateboarding degenerates who cover their homework with skulls-and-crossbones. "I have to do the school play."

I am surprised he brings it up. I was going to avoid it, give him a break from the hard time he had no doubt been getting. "Yeah, I heard. At the assembly. Cool."

"Eh." He shrugs again and smirks. But I think I sense some actual pleasure underneath the smirk. Why not? So what if kids tease him? He is one of only four Beatles. He is, for once, where everyone else wants to be.

"Maybe it'll be fun," I say. "I'm stuck in the chorus, you know."

"Eh. I don't know."

Because I am in the chorus, I attend the lowest-level rehearsals. We mostly practice choreography. Like for "Ticket to Ride," we have to move our arms like the wheels on a train. On the line "but she don't care," you have to shake your head like you are sad about losing a girlfriend. I hate that song now.

The four guys playing the Beatles almost always have lunchtime rehearsals and sometimes miss class or stay after school. One day at lunch, Gary Barkin shows up and sits with us. Gary is playing George Harrison.

"Hey 'George,'" Aaron says, "don't you have rehearsal?"

"Just got out," Gary offers humbly.

"What's it like, 'George'?" Aaron worshipfully asks.

Gary just shrugs, his mouth filled with tater tot. Slowly, all these other kids who don't usually sit with us come to the table, athletes and prettier than normal girls. They are asking Gary lots of questions. I have one too.

"How's Jeremy? I mean," I say, "as Ringo. Is he doing okay?"

"Sure," Gary says. I am amazed. There is no sarcasm in his voice. It is like there is some kind of Beatles code of honor that extends even to Jeremy Schindelcraft.

"Well, they certainly won't need a wig for him," says Aaron, still milking his one joke. Several of the other kids add jibes at Jeremy. Gary's armor begins to crack.

"I mean, it's not who I would have chosen, for sure. I haven't decided yet who I would have chosen," he says, as though we are begging him to. "He's not the best Ringo Starr ever or anything. Like, he's having trouble with his accent."

"Accent?" I ask.

"He'll do," Gary continues. "Everyone knows Ringo was the least important Beatle, anyway."

I find this funny for Gary to say since maybe Ringo was the least important Beatle, but George Harrison was the second least important. Maybe Gary thinks twice about this, because he is talking more quickly now.

"Everyone thinks John and Paul wrote all the good songs. Uh-uh. Did you know George Harrison wrote 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps' by himself?"

"What?" someone asks. The others just sort of nod lightly at Gary's reference. Gary had read up on his character and is disappointed nobody knows what he is talking about.

"The White Album," I explain. "Eric Clapton playing lead guitar on it. Right?" I ask, though I know I am right.

"Right!" he says, grateful.

"That's cool."

Up until Gary had mentioned the accent it hadn't occurred to me that the Beatles had any. I know they were from England, so I guess it should have been obvious. But they sounded like they were real Americans when they were singing.

"Hey, Jeremy, how's it going?" I ask next time I see him by the lockers. His schoolbooks look untouched, and the locker is mostly filled with his paperback mysteries.

He nods. He seems a little worn out and pale, like he is getting sick. Or maybe up close, that's just how he looks.

"I heard you guys have to do accents for the play."

His face squishes up. "Eh. I'm not good at that. I'm supposed to be from Liverpool."

"You know I had to do an accent like that in first grade, when we did Winnie the Pooh."

"You were really good. I remember that."

"Thanks. You know what worked for me? You should rent Monty Python on tape."

"My parents won't get me a VCR."

"Oh," I say. I wonder if his parents can't afford one, or if it's some kind of philosophy, or if they just won't

let Jeremy use theirs. "Here, try this. 'Funny, isn't it, how your best friend can just blow up like that?'" It is a line from Monty Python.

"Huh?"

"Try to copy just how I do it. 'Funny, isn't it, how your best friend can just blow up like that?'"

He shrugs and does it.

"That's pretty good. Try more like this. Leave your bottom jaw loose. I think that makes it more British."

"Okay."

That is our first tutoring session on fake British accents. Jeremy has trouble not spitting when he is pronouncing 'r'. One day during lunch we're working on this when his digital watch beeps. He has to leave for rehearsal.

"Come with me," he says, while he taps at the buttons on his watch so it will alert him when the rehearsal is over.

"I'm not supposed to be at the main rehearsal. I'm just part of the chorus."

He gives me one of his ambiguous grimaces that looks like twisted-up tree branches. "Come anyway," he says and, though he has no official authority, he is one of the Beatles. I go with him and stand at the wings of the stage.



When he slips out of his accent, I coach him by reciting to him his line in Monty Python-speak. The teachers are appreciative. Whenever there is a main rehearsal during lunch, or my free period, or during a class of one of the teachers dedicated to the play, I come along to coach. Pretty soon, Jeremy is almost as good as Mike Wolsky and much better than Gary Barkin, whose version of an accent for George Harrison is to yell at the top of his lungs.

The teachers in charge of the play are starting to look anxious. Mr. Sampson might look like Beethoven when he was composing his big symphonies, all disheveled and maybe racing against time while he is losing one of his senses. His hair is uncombed and his underarms damp.

We have one Asian girl in our class, her name is Faith Lin. She is Yoko Ono. One day they are rehearsing a scene where Yoko is confronted by Linda Eastman about disrupting the band. Mr. Sampson seems really into this scene, and is irritated by Faith's drippy voice.

"More, Yoko, more! Passion! You are a succubus, a vixen minx from the vaults of hell! You are bent on breaking up the band, and this woman is calling you on it!"

Faith nods. I don't think Faith quite gets it, or maybe she is just sticking up for Yoko.

"Shouldn't this be Linda McCartney. I mean, the years don't make any sense."

I don't know why I say this, but Mr. Sampson looks down at his sneakers for a long pause, then looks over at me with astonishment and asks what I mean. I explain that Paul and Linda would already have been married a few days before.

For a minute I am nervous that my comment has landed me in trouble. But they take my suggestion and change it so Yoko, spitefully, calls her "Mrs. McCartney." I guess the teachers don't know as much about the Beatles as I had thought. I mean, they have memories of the era, but don't know the actual history. It makes me wonder. If he is sketchy on the Beatles, does Mr. Sampson know as much about Frederick Douglass as we think he does?

Also, when Ringo says goodbye to his parents when he's joining the band, they should call him Richard, not Ringo, emphasizing to the audience the difference between their musical personas and their real lives. I tell Mr. Sampson this.

After that, Mr. Sampson and the other teachers overseeing the play ask me what I think about certain scenes like I am some expert. I had read both books my dad got me twice. And he had bought me a VHS of a documentary

on the Beatles when I asked him what Ringo sounded like when he spoke. The accent isn't exactly like Monty Python, by the way, but it is in the same general ballpark. My dad now says I know more about the Beatles than he does.

There is one scene in our play where the Beatles are getting ready to appear on the Ed Sullivan show. Adam Shapiro is playing Ed Sullivan and has to say, "today we have a really big shoe." I point out that they should have George Martin there.

"He was their manager. He would have been there. This was their single most influential appearance of their early careers!" I say. That is word-for-word from the VHS documentary.

Mr. Sampson, who really looks like he is ready to be checked into a hospital, grudgingly nods. "Why the hell don't we have a George Martin, damn it?" he barks to another teacher, who does a sort of double take. I think she is genuinely scared. "You know a lot about the Beatles," Sampson says to me.

"Well, I read some stuff."

"George Martin. You."

I'm confused by this.

"Go on and ask Mrs. Ravelli to find a costume for you."

"Do I still have to sing 'Ticket to Ride'?" I ask, trying to sound neutral about it. "George Martin wouldn't be singing. He'd be busy with being the manager."

"Find Mrs. Ravelli. We have a show to put on, people! We open in two weeks! Shake your damn little tails!"

He keeps talking about the fact that we "open," like we have a two month run or something, even though we are only performing the play once; but like I say he is overtired by this point. Some of the guys notice when I start to go to all the rehearsals. "Oh, I'm playing George Martin," I reply to their questions, trying not to sound as excited as I feel, but nobody really cares about George Martin anyway.

"Wait, the Beatle?" someone will ask. "You replaced Gary?"

"He's George Harrison. I'm George Martin."

Jeremy is happy to have me around more. He doesn't say that outright, but here and there he checks his accent with me. My parents are ecstatic about my bigger part. Over crab-cakes at Wan's on Saturday, my dad says it is probably the first time in the history of the school they have made up a new role for a student in the middle of the play.

One day, I ask Jeremy if his parents are excited he is Ringo Starr. I mean, I'm just George Martin. George Martin

was not even a Beatle and look at my dad telling strangers at gas stations.

Jeremy shrugs. "That's rich." Sometimes he uses antiquated expressions that I guess he gets from his parents or his books. I once overheard him referring to someone as a rake.

I ask what his parents said.

"They don't like the Beatles. They think it's weird to do a play about the Beatles."

I had seen Jeremy's parents at various school meetings and functions. I had noticed that they looked older than my parents, and most of the other parents. They looked more like grandparents and my dad remembers my grandparents not getting the point of the Beatles. Later I hear that Jeremy's parents even complained to the teachers that he was being made to lip-synch certain songs that they felt had drug references. It must be hard for Jeremy, his parents being so old-fashioned, maybe that's why he had trouble fitting in.

"What music do they like better?" I ask.

"Swing. Big Band. I don't know."

"Oh," I say, futilely trying to think of examples of Swing and Big Band songs.

I want to ask Jeremy more questions, but you usually have a window of only a few seconds with him before he shuts off completely and stares in the other direction. What I wanted to ask is, don't you notice? Like Gary Barkin becoming the king of the cafetornasium whenever he waltzes in now--and he makes sure to walk through even when he has already eaten; like how the cool kids have been crowding Gary's table to ask him how it was going as a Beatle, people are suddenly talking respectfully to Jeremy. Don't get me wrong, it's not like people are treating him great, but it could be the start of something. There was a chance. Kids would say "Hi, Jeremy," in the hall, saying it quietly but without any double meaning. Even girls. Even some of the prettier girls. Hey, if Corr threw me a touchdown pass twice a year, instead of once a year, or if he threw to me every day, I would be that much happier. I would notice the difference and I would spike the ball amid its glory.

"Don't you notice it, Jeremy?" I want to ask. "This is your time. You can talk back to them, instead of just mumbling, talk to them, say 'hi' back, you're Ringo, they'll talk back, and then maybe things will be different from now on..."

I can't talk about my thoughts with anyone else or they would think I'm weird to care what happened to Jeremy

and would ask if we are homos and getting married. I try to bring it up indirectly with Aaron one day at recess playing handball.

"Jeremy's doing really good with the play. I think he's really matured since we were little, you know, he isn't as weird."

"It's so stupid," replies Aaron.

"What do you mean?" I hit the ball on an angle and Aaron can't get it. My point. Handball is one of my few good sports.

"It's just stupid, that he's in the play. It's like wasting his time."

"What do you mean?" I ask, getting more annoyed.

"He's just different than us, you know? I mean you're a good drawer and all. You're really good at drawing bears especially. But Jeremy, he's going to cure cancer or invent a new seatbelt or something. He's just different."

"Yeah, well, he can still be in the school play!" I slam the ball and he pants hard as he goes tumbling after it.

The first full dress rehearsal wows me. Jeremy looks perfect because they all had to wear wigs and he didn't. He's authentic. He is Ringo Starr on the drums. They lip-synch to "I Want To Hold Your Hand" on the Ed Sullivan set, which the art teacher is halfway done painting like a 1950s television studio. I feel proud--as George Martin, the Beatles' manager, as Jeremy's friend.

One day, I bring in my dad's original Sgt. Pepper's album so my friends can see the cover. I also bring in the version I drew of it with cartoon animals, which I think they will like.

"Cool!" Then there comes this request: "Hey, draw a picture of our play--you know, draw Donnie and Mike and them being the Beatles."

I agree, carefully tearing out a page from my spiral.

"Except make them actual beetles."

The idea is seconded.

It probably sounds difficult to the average person to draw a beetle that is also Mike Wolsky and is also John Lennon. But that is my peculiar specialty, making cartoon animals with features of real people. I put the mopy hair on top of the insects' heads, with the antennas poking out.



"Wait," comes the suggestion after I draw a drum set and I'm about to add in the beetle qua Jeremy. "Draw Jeremy as a pig."

I have to say, the drawing looks great, one of my best. The Beatles, the three insects and the pig, are in mid-song and leaning in around two stand-up microphones while various other animals stand cheering. I sign at the bottom with the usual flair of a curly line after my name. The drawing is passed around to be admired.

"Look! Jeremy's a pig in it!" "Awesome!"

"Hey," I say, trying to get it back from a circle of grabbing hands. "Can I have it back for a sec?"

I didn't mean anything by making Jeremy a pig. I draw pigs all the time, I really like smart animals and pigs are as intelligent as whales or chimps. The year before, I did a popular Bruce Pigstein, in ripped blue jeans and a white tee, with the caption "Born in the M.U.D." My Beatles drawing gets passed around half the school and, much as I ask, I can't find out where it ends up.

"Hey, awesome drawing," Aaron says to me as I stand in line for the diving board at the swimming pool during Physical Ed.

"Which one?" I ask, hoping he meant the animal version of the Sgt. Pepper's cover.

"With Jeremy as a pig!"

"Oh, right."

"I heard Jeremy looked like he was going to puke out his guts when he saw it."

"He saw it? Who showed it to him?"

Aaron slaps me on the shoulder with a wet hand.

"Awesome. You're really an awesome drawer."

I worry all day about Jeremy being upset with me; I am even a little nervous he'll throw something at me in the rehearsal. He is looking over at me fewer times for approval of his accent. On the other hand, maybe that is just because his accent has improved enough that he doesn't need my coaching. I have trouble concentrating. I mess up one of my few lines in the last dress rehearsal and Mr. Sampson takes me aside and gives me a long speech about how important our performance will be for the fiscal future of the school.

Every day I wait for Jeremy to say something to me about the pig drawing. There are a few times that I almost apologize to him, but chicken out. Maybe he gets it, maybe he understands it wasn't meant to tease him. He is smarter than everyone else. No reason to think he would harbor the average, unimaginative reaction. He must know pigs are the smartest.

I want to make it up to him somehow, to remind him that I, of all people, I am on his side. My big chance comes during the performance of the play. The cafetornasium is packed. We even get some parents from Palmcrest whom the headmaster has been baiting to switch their kids to our school. It is a real rush to know everyone will see us on stage!

The first half is a hit. The teachers had this great idea that during "Twist and Shout" Donnie Rudman as John Lennon would point the microphone to the audience for the parents to sing along. It works. Most of the parents stand and twist, throwing up their hands and screaming on cue as if they are transported back to 1962. Meanwhile, I am trying to think ahead and remember each scene that will come after intermission. The curtain would open on the medley of songs played at the first Ed Sullivan appearance. That's when I have my idea. I find Kevin, who has been put in charge of the cassettes. I lie to him. I tell him that Mr. Sampson has made a change and that the last song in the medley, instead of "She Loves You," will be "Octopus's Garden." Kevin has all the Beatles tapes at his station and I help him cue it up, and then I tell Corr, the spotlight operator, about the change.

"Bro," he said. "You got it."

"Octopus's Garden" was one of the Beatles songs that Ringo wrote and did the lead vocals. Not only that, it feels different than other Beatles songs. It is lighter, funnier, like what I think of as swing or big band era stuff that Jeremy's parents prefer.

I only have a few minutes before the curtain will go up again. The parents are in the courtyard buying sodas. Adam Shapiro, who is Ed Sullivan, is harder to convince than Kevin. I need him to change his introduction to include "Octopus's Garden."

"I never heard of it. Octopus Gardens?"

"It's a great song."

"Why didn't Mr. Sampson tell me?"

"Adam, he's a little busy directing the play. Anyway, I'm George Martin! Who would know what songs the Beatles should sing better than George Martin?"

He frowns at my logic.

"The Beatles' manager," I remind him.

"Okay, whatever, I guess."

Three minutes before curtain. The problem is, I can't find Jeremy. I ask everyone for him.

"I'm worried about him, too," Faith Lin says. She is dressed in her Yoko Ono costume, a white plastic mini-skirt

and sunglasses twice the size of her head. I ask her what she means that she's worried. "He's sick. Poor boy."

"What? How do you know?"

She points to the water fountain. Jeremy is crouched beside it. He does look sick crumpled up like that, but he is actually just bent over reading a mystery. His skinny tie is loose around his neck, and his dark blue suit jacket is across his lap.

"Jeremy! What are you doing?"

"Is it time?"

"Yeah. Also, you need to change one of the songs on the Ed Sullivan set!" I am out of breath.

"Huh?"

"'Octopus's Garden,' you've heard it, right?"

He shrugs.

"Okay, look, it's going to be the last song in the medley. Ringo's the lead singer on it, okay? You have to sing with it."

He shrugs again, then leaps to his feet. "Okay."

"You know it, right? 'I'd like to be, under the sea, in an Octopus's Garden in the shade...'"

He sings it with me and seems to know most of the words.

"Jeremy, get over here!" someone yells. It's time.

You should see Jeremy's parents as the spotlight falls on their son and he lip-synchs perfectly. They had sat there grudgingly in the special seats reserved for the parents of the Beatles, and they had cringed during Twist and Shout while the rest of the Beatles' parents made a show of themselves. But when the soothing chords from Octopus's Garden begin, I swear there is a sparkle in both of their eyes and their postures relax. It is the highlight of the best play our little school ever produced. It is even said later that a Broadway theater producer was in our audience that night and had designs to bring the show to a real playhouse with us as the cast. Turns out the real story is that it's the brother-in-law of the manager of a local dinner theater who is in the audience, and what he says is that we should come to the dinner theater on a class field trip. Of course, if it ever were a real play they'd need permission from the Beatles. Not us. What Beatle in their right mind would sue fourth graders?

Mr. Sampson is really angry when he finds out that I was the one who switched the song. He sits me down for twenty minutes in the headmaster's office the next day and lectures me that I have jeopardized my whole future and the future of the school and that would be reflected on my permanent record--forever. It ruined the whole play, he

says, because Octopus's Garden wasn't a song that they actually played on Ed Sullivan. There is good reason for what I did, I just can't explain it to them. I am given four days detention.

It's not that I tried not to get detention all the years before this, I've just never been in trouble. Now that I am, I am really upset about it. More upset than I thought I'd be. Strange, before this I always sort of envied the kids who were in and out of detention. They were experiencing something different, dangerous, something that would be in a movie. It gave them power, it meant they take risks, get in trouble, and the threat of detention would never be so frightening again. Yet here I am, and I can't stop the sting I feel inside of me.

It's not like the punishment is cruel. It just means that you spend your free period in a supervised room where you can't talk. But you might feel a suffocating stigma that will stay with you the rest of your life, like a third degree burn. Some kids can do detention, and some can't.

On the fourth and last day of my detention, Jeremy comes into the room. Apparently, Donnie Rudman chanted "Go Ringo!" to him during class when Jeremy was at the chalkboard, and Jeremy chucked an eraser into his ear. From what I heard, Donnie said it in a mocking voice, but

nothing extreme--sort of like when Donnie would give you a friendly punch in the arm. It hurt, and sometimes left a yellow mark, but you accept the gesture. Not Jeremy. He picked up an eraser and flung it right at the meanest kid in school.

I guess it has been building up over the four days of detention. And now Jeremy sitting two desks down. I don't know. We were Ringo Starr and George Martin just a few days ago, now look at us. I just have this uncontrollable burn inside me, like the time I got my finger smashed in a car door. I will myself to hold back, but can't keep it all in. Not tears exactly, but there is fizzing at the corners of my eyes. I sniff and then scratch my throat loudly like I am allergic.

"Here," says Jeremy without looking up, holding out a handkerchief.

"Allergies." He will understand. He has bad allergies and always keeps handkerchiefs in his bag.

I spot my eyes quickly.

"Hey," I say. "Hey, Jeremy. What happened last week..." I stop myself. I don't know how to say it.

He is reading a mystery book under his desk.

"Hey, did you know next year is the Year of the Dog in China?" I ask. "We were all born in the Year of the Rabbit.



That means we're Rabbits." He is nodding, but he seems to know I that I'm babbling to delay saying something else.

"Listen, Jeremy, I didn't have a chance to say, about that drawing I made. It wasn't meant to be anything."

Jeremy shrugs and gives his ambiguous smirk, which is somehow comforting.

"Shhhhh!"

The teacher watching the room isn't a real teacher. She is the wife of one of the other teachers, and just a substitute fill-in, assigned to unpopular duties like detention. She is always mean, because otherwise she'd have nothing to do all day.

"No talking!" she says. "You. This is detention. You think you're punished so you can talk to one another? You, what's that?" She grabs Jeremy's book from under the desk, looks at it like it is obscene and takes it.

I have pretty much recovered by now from that weird stinging feeling, and want to prove it by talking casually. I whisper really softly.

"Hey, what about your parents? Were they happy? About your solo in the Ed Sullivan scene?"

Jeremy shrugs. "Don't know."

"Didn't they say anything?"

The sub looks up from her glossy magazine and glares at us. What could she do? We are already in detention, and I don't think she even has the power to give us another day. She can't even remember our names.

"They didn't say anything?"

Jeremy shakes his head no.

He just sits there, sighing under his breath and looking forlornly at his paperback--which he is almost finished reading--sagging uselessly on the sub's desk up front.

"Well, it was cool, though. The play, I mean," I say.

Shhhhhhhh!

"Glad it's over," Jeremy says.

He keeps staring at the front of the room, like he can finish the last twenty pages by osmosis. That's when I realize, watching him, that he isn't just saying that. He really is. Glad it's over. Glad it is all over. He hadn't wanted anything to do with it at all, hadn't wanted the spotlight, hadn't wanted the kids to talk to him differently. He didn't want his big chance this year. He certainly didn't want Donnie to greet him or give him a punch in the arm. He doesn't really care that much about talking to me, or that I am nicer to him than other kids, or that I would be his friend if he wanted.

I guess he doesn't really care whether or not he is drawn as a pig, either.

He wants his mysteries to read to get through the time here. He had been throwing dictionaries and chairs not just at kids who teased him, but at all of us, at the whole school, at the whole damn thing, not because he wants to be a part of it and can't be, but because he has to see any of us at all. It will pass, then there will be something better for him, incomparably better.

"Yeah, at least it's over," I say, and I don't even try to keep it to a whisper.