

Joyce Carol Oates published her first book in 1963, and has since published 58 novels, a number of plays and novellas, and many volumes of short stories, poetry, and non-fiction. She is the recipient of numerous awards for her writing, including the O. Henry Award (1967 & 1973), the National Book Award (1970), and the National Humanities Medal (2010). The following story was published in *The Atlantic* Fiction issue in 2005.

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- 1           The strangeness began shortly after his eighteenth birthday. A time when, he'd wanted to think, his life might have begun to be more fully his own.
- 2           The new, veiled way in which people were looking at him. Or looking away from him.
- 3           Got to be imagining it. Weird!
- 4           Nothing about him had outwardly changed, he was sure. He'd been growing steadily since the age of twelve, and he was now five feet ten, weighed approximately 135, had to be normal, average for his age. Sometimes he cut himself shaving out of carelessness, but that didn't seem to be what anyone was looking at, or not looking at. He wore his usual clothes: baggy khakis, longsleeved black T-shirt, size 11 running shoes. In cold weather he wore his purple school jacket, emblazoned with the bronze letters MT. OLIVE VARSITY TRACK, and Army-surplus combat boots. Much of the time he wore his Walkman, and his mind was totally elsewhere. When he removed the headphones and the heavy, throbbing music faded, the world, which was a world of adults, a world designed and controlled by adults, rolled in over him like an avalanche.
- 5           It wasn't Danny's friends and classmates who behaved strangely with him, just adults. And not all adults, only a few. His foster parents, the Stampfels—Ed and Em, they wanted to be called. Two or three of his teachers at Mt. Olive High. The track-team coach, Hal Diedrich. The principal, Mr. Bernard, and the faculty adviser to the student newspaper, Mr. Fackler. And Mrs. Jameson, the guidance counselor.
- 6           He'd thought he knew Mrs. Jameson. Thought she knew him.
- 7           Two years before, when Danny Neuworth was a sophomore, a new transfer to Mt. Olive High, he'd had a difficult time adjusting; he'd been lonely yet not very sociable, poorly motivated in his studies yet anxious about grades, and so he'd been referred to Mrs. Jameson. She had let him talk without interrupting him, had asked him questions that showed she was sympathetic, genuinely interested in him, and so he'd come to trust her. She'd given him good advice he'd tried to follow. But now, so strangely, in November of his senior year, when Danny was considering where to apply to college, eager for advice and encouragement, Mrs. Jameson answered his questions in a distracted manner, smiling faintly in his direction without seeming to see him. Open before her on her desk was a manila file inscribed, in stark black ink, NEUWORTH, DANIEL S. '05. "CONFIDENTIAL."
- 8           When he first entered Mrs. Jameson's office, she was frowning at a document in the file. She glanced up at him then with a look—veiled, startled. "Oh, Daniel. Come in."

Their conversation was stiff, awkward. If he didn't know better, Danny would have thought the guidance counselor didn't know him at all. Finally he asked if there was something in his file: "I guess you couldn't tell me, huh?"

9 Mrs. Jameson said quickly, "There's nothing wrong, Daniel. Of course. What could be wrong?" A deep flush rose into her face. Her voice was oddly flat, toneless.

10 Danny had friends who'd conferred with the guidance counselor, students whose grades were no better than his, and they'd come away with lists of colleges to apply to, even catalogues and brochures. But Mrs. Jameson didn't seem to have any ideas for him. He said he'd like to study mechanical engineering, maybe. His foster father, Ed Stampfel, had thought that might work for him. Yes, that might work for him, Mrs. Jameson said vaguely. "If you have the math. Engineering requires math, you know." Repeatedly Mrs. Jameson blew her nose in a tissue, apologizing for "sinus allergies." Out of a crammed bookshelf she pulled dogeared catalogues for regional New Jersey colleges—Warren County, Cape May, Hunterdon Community, Rutgers-Camden. "Maybe one of these. Let's see."

11 Strange—Mrs. Jameson wasn't meeting his eye. Wasn't calling him Danny, as she had in the past.

12 Adults! You couldn't figure them.

13 Since kindergarten, Danny's teachers had encouraged him, presumably knowing of his foster-home background. Pursue your goals, follow your dream, everyone in America is special, you have only to be you. Now, when he needed encouragement and advice, Mrs. Jameson couldn't seem to think of anything to tell him. Her sleek, slender laptop was open on her desk, and in the lenses of her glasses he saw a faint reflection of mysterious darting movements on the screen, like secret thoughts.

14 Something in my file. That must be it.

15 Yet what could it be? He'd never gotten into trouble at school, or anywhere else. He'd been a sulky kid for a while in high school, but came out of it gradually and became an earnest, diligent, if not very imaginative, student. In easy subjects like communication arts, social studies, health and fitness, he'd earned A-minuses, but mostly his grades hovered at B-/C+ no matter how hard he worked. He had a small circle of friends, mostly guys like himself. This year he'd finally made the varsity track team, by driving himself mercilessly and earning the respect of Coach Diedrich for his effort if not for his actual accomplishments ("Not every guy can be a star, Danny. You're a team player"). His only distinction was that since the second semester of his sophomore year Neuworth, Daniel had been listed on the Mt. Olive Good Citizenship Roster, initiated by the school district to boost morale by "honoring" those students who attended classes regularly, did their schoolwork, and caused no trouble. But the honor had become a joke, because so many names were listed.

16 Belatedly, in the way of a coach giving a pep talk to a paraplegic athlete, Mrs. Jameson had begun to extol the virtues of small colleges, technical schools, to say how much more suitable they were for some students than universities, let alone the

"prestigious" Ivy League universities, which in her opinion were "undemocratic and overrated." Mrs. Jameson was speaking now with a strange vehemence, as if someone had dared to argue with her, an invisible presence in her office toward whom she felt animosity. Danny listened uneasily. He saw a thin blade of sunshine ease onto the framed diplomas on the wall behind Mrs. Jameson's desk. Her master's degree was in education and psychology from Rutgers-Newark.

17 Rutgers-Newark! No wonder Mrs. Jameson was so contemptuous of  
"prestigious" schools.

18 When Mrs. Jameson fell silent, blowing her nose, Danny reverted to the subject  
of his file. "I guess there must be something bad in it, right?" Mrs. Jameson said quickly,  
with a frown, "No, not at all, Danny. Everything is fine."

19 "Not so great, not outstanding, but 'fine.'" Danny smiled to show that he  
understood. Dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, Mrs. Jameson said, like a mother gently  
rebuking a child, "Not everyone can be outstanding, Danny. In our American republic  
everyone is created 'equal,' but only politically—as citizens. Not in other respects. At  
your age, you must know that."

20 Danny nodded yes, he knew. How could he not know!

21 "Not many of us at Mt. Olive are 'outstanding,' I can assure you. Or we wouldn't  
be here, you see." This was meant to be lightly playful, provocative. But something in  
Mrs. Jameson's face seemed to crack. Clumsily she rose from behind her desk, a fleshy  
middleaged woman with a flushed face, saying, "I think I have, in the outer office, a  
brochure for—I'm not sure. Excuse me."

22 The guidance counselor left her office, pointedly shutting the door behind her.  
Danny was baffled. Was she leaving him alone with his file, giving him the opportunity  
to look into it? Or was he misinterpreting the gesture? Was he being videotaped? Was he  
making a terrible mistake?

23 He listened for her footsteps returning. His heart began to pound with  
excitement as, leaning over Mrs. Jameson's desk, he tried to read upside down the  
document lying on top of the manila file. Not hearing footsteps, he dared to go behind the  
desk to peer at it; it had the letterhead \*BIOTECHINC\* at the top and "NEUWORTH,  
DANIEL S. \*BD\* 11 1 86" heading a pagelong column of densely printed information  
that appeared to be a mixture of scientific terms and mathematical symbols,  
incomprehensible to him. Danny had to suppose that this was coded data having to do  
with his grades at Mt. Olive High and the results of the numerous tests—IQ, "cognitive,"  
"psychological"—he'd taken over the years. His ranking in his class, possibly statewide,  
even nationwide, was probably indicated too. At the very bottom of the page was a  
mysterious numeral of a dozen digits followed by a blank space and "\*BD\* 11 1 86-6 21  
05."

24 What "BD" meant, Danny didn't know. But 11/1/86 was his birthday and, he  
recalled after a moment, 6/21/05 was the date of his high school graduation.

25 They expected him to graduate, then. This was good news!

26           Something else in the file must have distracted Mrs. Jameson. Teachers' confidential reports on Danny Neuworth. Information about him he wasn't allowed to know, beyond the blandly positive remarks invariably noted on his report cards: "Danny works hard," "Danny is cooperative," "Danny is promising," "Danny is reliable." But Mrs. Jameson would be returning; Danny couldn't risk looking further.

27           He was sitting very still in the chair facing Mrs. Jameson's desk when she reentered the room briskly. She didn't appear so distracted now. Her face was less flushed, as if she'd dabbed cold water onto it. She had catalogues for Danny to take away with him: "Stockton College, Fallsburgh State, Atlantic Cape College. Tuition is low for state residents, and these colleges don't demand high SAT scores." Danny took the catalogues from her gratefully. Maybe Mrs. Jameson liked him after all.

28           As he prepared to leave, the guidance counselor called after him, as if this were an old joke between them, "Remember, Danny: you have only to be you."

29           This strangeness. Like invisible, odorless gas seeping into his life in the fall, winter, spring, of his senior year.

30           When he'd thought that nearing graduation, he had a right to feel good about the future.

31           After Mrs. Jameson's perplexing behavior there was Coach Diedrich, who became embarrassed and uneasy when Danny asked if he would write letters of recommendation for him, laying a hand on Danny's shoulder with a warning not to be disappointed if he didn't get accepted: "The race is not always to the swift." (What did that mean? No one had ever suggested that Danny Neuworth was the swiftest runner on the track team.) Ms. Beckman, Danny's history teacher, gazed at him for a long, startled moment as if trying to recall who he was, and finally agreed to recommend him for college if he applied to regional state schools. Mr. Fackler, who'd often encouraged Danny as a reporter on the school newspaper, smiled strangely, sighed, and said yes, he supposed he could recommend Danny—"If you really want to go to college." (What the hell was the alternative? Danny wondered. A job at McDonald's, Home Depot, Wal-Mart, at the minimum wage? Enlisting in the U.S. Army and getting his legs blown off in an Iraqi desert?) And Mr. Lasky, Danny's biology teacher, shut his eyes, shaking his head slowly as if Danny's request were beyond him. Lasky was known for favoring only a few brainy students with what he called "natural genes" for science. "Hey, I know my grades aren't the highest," Danny said, trying to smile, though his heart was beating with resentment, "but colleges want to know about other things, too—how hard a person works, good citizenship, and like that." Danny's grades in biology were B-/C+, and he felt that he was learning a lot; he'd thought that Lasky knew this, and liked him. On a school expedition to BioCorpLabs, in Princeton, where the class was given a guided tour, Danny Neuworth had been one of the few guys who hadn't cracked up at the sight of some of the "donor animals" in their clean, fluorescent-lit cages: a normal-size but immobile gray mouse sprouting a human ear out of its back, like a grotesque tumor; a glum-looking baboon with several human noses growing out of its face; chimpanzees

with human fingers and toes instead of chimp fingers and toes; a dozen sheep genetically altered to allow human embryos to gestate in their wombs, all in their eighth month of pregnancy; enormous hogs altered to grow human hearts, lungs, livers, kidneys, even eyeballs, which would be "harvested" to benefit needy human beings. Danny had been struck by the sadness in the animals' eyes, as if, though lacking language, they did not lack the intelligence to guess at their fates. But he was canny enough not to include such a naive, unscientific observation in his report, and only stuck to the facts. Lasky had given him a B on the paper and scrawled Good work! in red ink; but now he seemed to have forgotten, confounded by Danny's request for letters of recommendation. The biology teacher had removed his glasses and was rubbing his watery eyes with the fingers of both hands, as if he was very tired, and murmuring what sounded like "Good citizenship' we can do for you, Danny. The least we can do."

32           Bastard! Danny thanked him, and went away shaking with anger.

33           They don't have any hope for me. They don't like me. It couldn't be true. Yet it seemed to be true.

34           Danny's friends, with whom he shared some of his misgivings, said he had to be imagining it—why would anybody turn against him? "You're just not that special, Danny. C'mon." It didn't reassure him that none of his friends, not even the messedup guys, seemed to be getting such signals from the adults in their lives; he'd have liked it if everyone he knew, everyone his age, every senior in the Mt. Olive Class of 2005, was having the same weird experience with the same weird adults.

35           All that had happened was that Danny had turned eighteen. But so had half the senior class. And how would most of his teachers have known? Or why would they have cared? Officially Daniel Neuworth was no longer a minor, no longer a ward of the State of New Jersey, though provisions had been made by Passaic County Family Services to allow him to continue to live with the Stampfels until he graduated from high school, began his summer job, and was able to support himself. Beyond that Danny hoped to be going away to college.

36           Except now he wasn't so sure. He had to wonder what kind of letters of recommendation his teachers were writing for him. Had to wonder what was in the confidential file locked away in the guidance counselor's office.

37           Even his foster parents, who'd always seemed to favor Danny over the others in their crowded, noisy household, no longer seemed as relaxed with him as they had been. Their smiles were fleeting, their manner with him jovial but strained. The Stampfels were not individuals of subtlety or sensitivity but a burly, ruddy-faced husbandandwife team who'd been foster parents to a succession of luckless parentless children under the auspices of the New Jersey State Children's Welfare Agency. Ed Stampfel was a part-time prison guard at the Passaic County Men's Correctional Facility, and Em had been a kitchen worker there before she married Ed. Together the Stampfels weighed in the vicinity of 350 to 400 pounds. Their usual mode of speech was shouting. Yet from time to time Danny caught the Stampfels looking at him in a way difficult to define. Like they

feel sorry for me. Like they see something in my face that I can't. Ed had praised Danny for making the varsity track team but hadn't been very sympathetic when they both realized that Danny wouldn't be one of the team stars. So what if you rarely win a race—plenty of other guys are slower than you, Ed argued, even if a few are faster. Danny's grades were only average—well, slightly better than average; and slightly better than average is a hell of a lot better than slightly worse than average, let alone flunking. Ed Stampfel's homegrown wisdom was "Plenty of sonsabitches are worse off than you, kid. Keep in mind you could trade places with them any time."

38           This was meant to be a cheering thought. Ed Stampfel was what he called a "practicing optimist."

39           The Stampfels liked kids, most of the time. Different skin colors, races. Different personality types. He had to suppose that over the years they'd favored others, numerous others, as they seemed to favor him. On a cork bulletin board in the kitchen were snapshots of boys and girls who'd lived with the Stampfels before being adopted into "real" families or growing up and going out into the world—too many snapshots to count, in layers like rock strata, curling, yellowed like artifacts from a previous century. When Danny graduated into the world, his snapshot would be tacked on the board, covering an older snapshot. The Stampfels were goodnatured and often kind, but they weren't sentimental. Processing kids into and out of their lives was like clipping toenails. As soon as a resident left the household, his bed was stripped and any "personal effects" left behind were dumped into the trash. A few days later, if you asked Ed or Em about him, you'd most likely be greeted with a blank stare: "Who? Nobody here by that name."

40           Sometimes Ed would wink to signal Hey—just joking. Sometimes not.

41           Before the Stampfels, in Mt. Olive, New Jersey, Danny had lived in a smaller household with the Hursts, Will and Martine, in Kittatinny. He'd been younger then, and hadn't yet grown to his current height. Nor had he acquired his runner's lean, hard-muscled physique. (One thing Danny could be happy for: he was in excellent physical condition—heart, lungs, blood, etc. As a ward of the State of New Jersey, he was examined by a physician for Family Services annually, like clockwork.) He'd been close to Martine Hurst, who'd broken his heart by informing him, just before his sixteenth birthday, that she and Will were retiring—leaving New Jersey to live in St. Petersburg, Florida. Seeing the look on Danny's face, Martine quickly assured him that he, like the other foster children in the household, would be provided for, placed with "wonderful, devoted foster parents" in Mt. Olive, less than forty miles away. Of course, he'd have to transfer to another school, be "temporarily uprooted." When Danny began to cry, Martine drew back. She seemed fearful of touching him or of being touched by him, as if something in Danny had wounded her. It's me. She can't stand to see me.

42           So really, the strangeness had begun a couple of years before.

43           He'd been living with the Hursts since the age of eight. He'd been told that the identity of his "birth mother"—his "biological mother"—was unknown. The circumstances of his birth were also unknown. As a day-old infant he'd been found in a

municipal building in Newark. Martine believed that Danny's mother had been a young, terrified girl who'd left him in a public place so that he'd be found and saved. In Martine's voice the account had the air of a fairy tale. Danny said, as if pleading, "I don't care about her, I care about you. You're my real mother." It made him anxious to be told about his very young self, before he'd had consciousness or memory. Whoever his parents were, they'd abandoned him. But the Hursts abandoned him too.

44           Before the Hursts he'd lived in a group home in Newark. His memory of those years was clouded. The singular fact of Danny's early life was that he had never been adopted. Other children in the Newark home had been adopted, even children with disabilities, but Danny Neuworth had not. He seemed to recall that he hadn't even been interviewed by prospective parents. "Why not me?" he'd asked repeatedly. "What's wrong with me?" No explanation had been given. At the time, he'd supposed that the reason had to do with him, and in subsequent years he would ponder the strangeness of it. Several other children in the facility hadn't been available for adoption. These were boys Danny's age and size. In fact, Danny learned, they had one thing in common: their birthday.

45           Jimmy, Bobby, Frankie, Mikey. They'd been like brothers to Danny. But so long ago that he could scarcely remember. After Newark they'd been placed in different foster homes in New Jersey. Danny had rarely given them a thought in the intervening years. Except now, with this strangeness entering his life, making him think strange thoughts, he had to wonder where they'd ended up, where they'd gone to school, what their prospects were for the future.

46           "Well, Danny. Here is good news."

47           Mr. Bernard's voice quavered with emotion. After months of seeming not to see Danny, staring through him with a vague fixed smile if they happened to pass each other in the school corridor, the principal of Mt. Olive High summoned Danny into his office to inform him that he'd been named a recipient of a Good Citizen Scholarship to enable him to attend any college to which he'd been admitted, even provisionally.

"Congratulations, son. You'll be Mt. Olive's only Good Citizen Scholar at graduation."

48           "Good Citizen Scholar? Me?"

49           Danny stared at the smiling middle-aged man, who held out a hand to him to be shaken. Weird! This had to be the weirdest development yet, shaking Mr. Bernard's hand.

50           Not one of the state colleges and technical schools to which Danny had applied had accepted him outright, but several had granted him provisional status, meaning that his application would have to be supplemented by a transcript listing his grades for the final semester of his senior year. Honors and awards at the time of graduation would count in his favor. Now Mr. Bernard was explaining that the Good Citizen Scholarship would cover Danny's tuition, room and board, even travel expenses. "It's a new program, funded for the past two years by a private sponsor. The aim is to honor young citizens like you, Danny, whose school records don't fully represent their 'quality of spiritual being.'"

51 Mr. Bernard was speaking rapidly, as if reciting prepared words. He smiled at  
Danny in the tense and oddly animated way he smiled into the audience at school  
assemblies, calling for attention from three hundred restless teenagers. His bifocal glasses  
winked with a kind of febrile excitement that Danny understood he was expected to  
share. Danny had become breathless with this good news; the very floor seemed to be  
tilting beneath his feet. He, Danny Neuworth, singled out for an honor for the first time in  
his life. Such good news! Yet somehow difficult to believe.

52 As if reading his thoughts, Mr. Bernard said, "I can't give you this document,  
Danny, since it's addressed to me as your principal. But I can allow you to read it."

53 Danny took from him a sheet of stiff cream-colored paper with the embossed  
bronze letterhead \*BIOTECHINC\*, which informed Henry Bernard, principal of Mt.  
Olive High, Mt. Olive, New Jersey, that NEUWORTH, DANIEL S. was one of fifty  
recipients in New Jersey of the 2005 Good Citizen Scholarship. "A news release will be  
issued just before graduation, Danny. But you may inform the college you'd like to  
attend, for certainly you'll be accepted now. Such very good news, Danny! Again,  
congratulations. We are very proud of you, son."

54 Danny went away stunned. He'd expected a different sort of reception in the  
principal's office.

55 Because of the strangeness that had entered his life, the past several months  
hadn't been very happy. He'd become reconciled to not going to college. He'd drifted  
away from his small circle of friends, resenting their talk of college acceptances and their  
ease in contemplating the future. He'd overheard Ed and Em discussing the "new boy"  
who'd be moving into their household in mid-June, obviously to take Danny's place.  
Now, within the space of a few minutes, as if in a fairy tale, everything was changed.  
Now he'd been singled out for an honor. Mr. Bernard had shaken his hand. Mr. Bernard  
had called him son.

56 \*BIOTECHINC\* he'd seen somewhere before, but where he couldn't remember.

57 \*BIOTECHINC\* glowed in his brain like the afterimage of a very bright star.

58 \*BIOTECHINC\*, powerful as a sonic boom.

59 Where he couldn't remember.

60 Following Mr. Bernard's news, things happened swiftly for Danny Neuworth.

61 He completed his spring courses, took final exams, and passed each. His final  
average was B-/C+. By graduation he hadn't decided which college to attend, Fallsburgh  
State or Stockton. He'd been accepted at both.

62 "Danny, sure you're special. I knew."

63 One of the girls in Danny's graduating class, who'd been only casually friendly  
with him previously. And now!

64 These final weeks. Anticipating graduation and the start of a new life. Weeks,  
days, hours, passing in a kind of delirium. Time felt accelerated, not entirely real.  
Continually Danny stopped short, realizing that he'd been singled out for an honor. He'd  
become privileged. He was still Danny Neuworth—but also someone more. He needed to

see himself not as the sadhearted boy nobody wanted to adopt but as the eighteenyearold Good Citizen selected for a special destiny. (Maybe it was a sign of privilege that you didn't really feel very different? Look in the mirror: you're still just you?)

65 Two days before graduation Danny was required to have another physical examination, in the office of a Mt. Olive internist who was a medical consultant for \*BIOTECHINC\*. It was the most painstaking exam Danny had ever endured, involving hours of x-rays, cardiology tests, blooddrawing, internal probes of a kind he'd only imagined with a shudder. The doctor seemed impressed. "Doesn't surprise me you're a runner, son. Your heartbeat is slow and strong. Your lungs are in excellent condition. Your blood pressure as well." Smiling, the doctor shook hands with Danny. "Your foster parents must have taken good care of you." It seemed an odd thing to say, but Danny thanked the man.

66 What he liked least about the experience was being photographed in the nude— front, back, sides. "For \*BIOTECHINC\* archives exclusively, Danny. Confidential."

67 "Neuworth, Daniel S.? Come with me."

68 On the morning of graduation Danny had arrived early at the high school, as he'd been directed, but instead of entering the school gymnasium to be given his black cap and gown with his classmates, he was escorted by a uniformed security guard to a small yellow bus waiting in the parking lot. The bus had dark-tinted windows and was marked PRIVATE. A \*BIOTECHINC\* representative cordially explained that recipients of Good Citizen Scholarships were to be honored at a more important ceremony elsewhere, which would be broadcast on PBS, and to receive, in a five-minute taped segment, personal congratulations from the president of the United States. Though he supposed it was a foolish question under the circumstances, Danny asked, "But won't I be graduating with everyone else? Won't I get a diploma?" The \*BIOTECHINC\* rep, a woman who appeared to be of youthful middle age, said, "Why, Danny, of course. Everything your classmates will receive you will receive, except more."

69 The small, smartly gleaming yellow bus, which held seats for only twelve passengers, was already two-thirds filled with Good Citizen Scholars from neighboring townships, most of them boys. Danny took a seat beside a boy from Lake Isle High, a school Mt. Olive had competed against in track, sometimes winning, sometimes losing. The boy admitted to not having paid much attention to sports. Though Danny had never seen the boy before, he was reminded of someone he knew, or had once known: Frankie, from the Newark foster home. Or was it Jimmy?

70 The bus made several more stops on its ninety-minute journey on Route 15 to central northern New Jersey, outside Hardyston. There, in an enormous hilly parkland of hundreds of acres, protected by ten-foot electrified fences, was \*BIOTECHINC\* headquarters. The bus pulled up behind a building, and its occupants filed out. Nearby another small bus was unloading its passengers, and Danny saw one of them, a tall, lanky boy with a familiar face, tentatively raise a hand to wave to him: "Hey, Danny, is that you?" But \*BIOTECHINC\* reps, smiling cordially, urged the boys on.

71 Jimmy! That boy was Jimmy. Danny had had time for only a glimpse, but he  
was sure it was so.

72 "Neuworth, Daniel S.? Come with me."

73 Once inside the chilly, air-conditioned building, which had the sterile look and  
disinfectant odor of a hospital, Danny was sorry to be separated from his fellow Good  
Citizen Scholars and taken into a small, windowless cubicle with one opaque glass wall.  
Danny had the uneasy sensation that the glass was oneway, and that he was being  
observed. Fluorescent tubing cast a strong shadowless light downward. His heart had  
begun to beat in childish apprehension, as it had when he'd been summoned to Mr.  
Bernard's office the previous month. The cubicle walls were covered with thick, spongy  
squares, like soundproofing. In the center of the cell-like space was what appeared to be a  
physician's examination table with stirrups, and a small aluminum table and a single  
vinyl chair were close by. The humming of a ventilator mixed with a pulsebeat in  
Danny's head. Thoughts came flying at him like alarmed birds. Though he'd mailed a  
card to Martine Hurst telling her his good news, he worried that she might not receive it,  
because it was the Stampfels who'd given him Martine's address in St. Petersburg, and  
could he trust them? Already they were forgetting him, he knew. Already another "foster  
son" was moving into Danny's room.

74 Danny was thinking he might have given up the distinction of the Good Citizen  
Scholarship if he'd known how homesick he would be for Mt. Olive. He'd been taken  
from the high school parking lot only a few hours earlier, but time was so strangely  
accelerating in his life now that it seemed like days. Soon it would seem like weeks.  
More painful yet, Danny had missed his high school graduation. He'd always felt like  
something of an outsider at the school, yet in the final weeks of his senior year he'd  
suddenly become more popular, and he'd been invited to several graduation parties this  
weekend. He wondered if anyone had missed him at commencement. If his name had  
been called, and the scholarship announced. If the audience had burst into applause.

75 Abruptly the door to the cubicle opened, and a burly young man in a white lab  
coat and cord trousers, a lightskinned black man in his late twenties or early thirties, with  
deepset ironic eyes, stepped inside. He was taller than Danny and heavier by perhaps  
thirty pounds. On his lapel was a plastic ID with an unsmiling photo and the single  
word CALE. He was carrying a clipboard, and his mood was scattered, sullen. "Sooo,  
Dennie. No: Danny. Birth date 11/1/86. Status BD." These remarks were uttered rapidly,  
not questioning but stating. Before Danny could reply, Cale urged him to sit at the end of  
the examination table, adjusted a stethoscope around his neck, and listened to Danny's  
heartbeat. Next he wound a bloodpressure cuff around Danny's upper left arm, tight.  
Danny protested faintly, but Cale prevailed. The young intern or attendant loomed over  
him, breathing huskily through wide, very dark nostrils in a blunt snub nose. On his  
sturdy left forearm was a small but striking tattoo in bronze: \*BIOTECHINC\* 75.

76            Danny asked why he was being examined. Where was the TV ceremony? He was beginning to be frightened. Cale was making notations on his clipboard, irritably. Clearly, whatever Cale's job was, he wasn't in a good mood.

77            "BD. 'Body donor.' That's why you've been brought to our Hardyston headquarters."

78            "Body donor? What's ... that?"

79            "A body donor is a specimen who has been conceived, born, and cultivated for harvest. Your body was contracted for by a client of \*BIOTECHINC\*. Presumably a male whose brain will be transplanted into your head and attached to—well, the body that comes with it."

80            Danny smiled uncertainly. What was this? He understood that Cale was joking; the deadpan expression would dissolve with laughter in another moment.

81            There were guys at Mt. Olive High like Cale. Big guys who said weird things, insulting things, punched you on the upper arm, ran their knuckles over your head and called you dude, just kidding around, joking. You had to show that you could take it; then they'd accept you. Danny wasn't exactly friends with these guys, but they liked him, he thought. In their crude way they respected him as an athlete.

82            Cale said carelessly, "This is high-tech science—it won't hurt. You'll be put to sleep by a colorless, odorless gas. It's one hundred percent humane. It's been tested in \*BIOTECHINC\* labs globally. I'm not supposed to clue you in, but what the hell, why not? The client is on the other side of that glass." With a derisive wave, Cale indicated the plate-glass wall. His skin glowed with a fierce, smoldering heat. Danny had to wonder if the man was high on a drug. Methamphetamine? He had seen guys on this drug—the pinprick pupils in their eyes, and their air of pitbull aggression. In proximity to someone on meth you could feel your heartbeat accelerate with his. "You've got a great body, kid. Lean and hard-muscled, but no steroids, no body-building, just the classic American-boy body. Eighteen is the optimum age. A great crop of you were born in '86. A world-class neurosurgeon will saw open your skull, remove your brain, and insert the client's. I'm guessing he's an old fart who claims to feel eighteen 'in his heart.' Or he's terminally ill in his worn-out crap body. Or he's just turned fifty, megamillionaire getting paunchy, slow reflexes, losing his hair and his wind, can't depend on his dick. Your dick—that's worth the \$1.8 million just by itself. Client wants a new body, and if he can afford it, who can blame him? Hey, man, not me."

83            All this while Cale was standing uncomfortably close to Danny, breathing on him. His dark hair was nappy and rough-rippled, as if it had been shellacked. The bones of his large, heavy head seemed to push tight against the singed-looking skin, outlining the eye sockets so that the eyes were recessed, glistening with angry mirth. Danny laughed feebly. It was like one of these guys to say outrageous things and push close, practically in your face, daring you to back off. You didn't expect it from an older guy—especially not someone in a position of responsibility. "Know what, Danny? I'm going to take a blood-pressure reading again. It was a little high, I'm thinking. You breathe in,

breathe out, relax. Like I say, and Cale is programmed not to lie, you will not feel any pain when the procedure begins. Your days of pain are finished. That's good news, eh?"

84 "You're kidding, right? What's actually happening here? This is some kind of joke?"

85 "Kind of a joke, yes." Cale squinted at the instruction sheet on his clipboard. "I guess you could say so. 'Good Citizen.' 'Birth mother unknown.' See, it isn't as if your body was ever yours, Danny. You were planned, engineered, copyright \*BIOTECHINC\*, just like me."

86 Birth mother? What had Cale said?

87 Danny wasn't comprehending much of this. His face was frozen in a perplexed smile. Though maybe, yes, he was comprehending in a way, for something here made sense. Mr. Lasky would be nodding and encouraging Danny. Engineering, made to be harvested, "donor." Yet Danny was thinking of course this was a joke; in a minute Cale would relent and tell him what all this was about. (The Good Citizen Scholars were being subjected to a kind of initiation rite? Their reactions were being televised by hidden cameras?)

88 Danny said, "What you're saying—if it was so, it would be murder. Murder is against the law."

89 "No. You and your siblings are the property of \*BIOTECHINC\*, and not independent entities. Without \*BIOTECHINC\* you'd never have been born. You've had eighteen years, Danny, and more. That's a hell of a lot longer than many millions of human beings have lived. Now your brain will be shut down, as planned. Deprived of oxygen, it will simply fade out. I've been promised the same myself, only I don't know when. My contract is renewable. They renew me if my services are wanted. But you, Danny, your body will survive for decades. As a body donor, you're one of the elite."

90 Danny shivered. In the distance he heard a sound as of amplified voices, or muffled thunder. He laughed. This was so weird! His throat was sore with laughing. "Okay, I get it. You're joking? This is some kind of weird initiation, and people are laughing at me on TV?"

91 Cale said, relenting, "Sure, Danny. I'm joking. That's my job here, to joke. Prep you for TV. Next thing, you'll want to lie on this table. Just relax, stretch your legs, and the makeup girl will be coming in. On TV your natural skin tone bleaches out. Guys don't like makeup on their faces, but believe me, you need it. Even you." Cale laid a warm, consoling hand on Danny's shoulder. In that instant Danny felt comforted. Cale likes me. Cale is my friend.

92 Perhaps Danny Neuworth was on TV. A taped segment to be broadcast on Channel 13. Not many people Danny knew watched Channel 13, the PBS station, and that was disappointing. But the Hursts might catch it, and somebody in Mt. Olive who knew him might watch, and speak of it to Danny's friends, and to the Stampfels. That was one way it might be. But a second way, which was beginning to be exciting to

contemplate, was that Cale would defy his \*BIOTECHINC\* employers and help Danny escape from the compound into the hills of north central New Jersey.

93           A buzzer sounded in the corridor outside. Cale turned to leave. His expression was less belligerent now. His dark, glistening eyes skidded onto Danny in a way that reminded Danny of the way Mrs. Jameson and the other adults looked at him, not looking at him, as if the sight of Danny was searing in their vision, and they had to protect themselves from him. "You're a nice kid, Danny. All of you are. Congratulations."

94           Cale didn't offer a hand to shake. Before Danny could thank him, he was gone, the door shut and locked behind him.

95           Danny cried, "Hey, wait! How long ..."

96           Danny could hear air hissing into the cubicle. A high, thin whistling noise of a different texture from the ventilator's. He was anxious, shivering. A tinge of nausea of the kind he felt before a race. But some of the best runners on the team, like the best swimmers on the swim team, threw up before their races. That was nothing to be ashamed of, Coach said. You could make a joke of it, almost. Danny would make a joke about this experience when he saw his teammates again. When he saw his friends again back in Mt. Olive. He was trembling with cold but beginning to feel less anxious. He sat on the edge of the examination table and stretched out, as Cale had suggested. He had missed his own graduation. That was a loss. But news of his Good Citizen Scholarship would be on TV and in the local papers. And in the St. Petersburg paper. Ed and Em had been proud of him for winning the scholarship. They'd put his picture on the bulletin board.

97           He wondered how much they'd known about—what was the name?—\*BIOTECHINC\*. Whether they were contracted too. And his previous foster parents?

98           He smiled to think that a plan, a purpose, had always been in place. He had not known that. Thoughts came now in slow, rippling streams. He placed his feet in the stirrups at the end of the table. They were made of sturdy metal, and held when he pushed against them. It was like pushing off when the practice gun was fired. One, two, three, go. Coach was smiling at him. Coach was proud of Danny. His eyelids were heavy. He covered his eyes with his forearm, to shield them from the fluorescent lights. On the far side of the glass wall, invisible to him, someone was observing him. Someone was waiting for him. He had never been alone, evidently. All his life someone had been keeping an eye on him. And now he was going to be adopted. This time someone would choose him. A voice warm and comforting in his ear. Danny?