



Reformed



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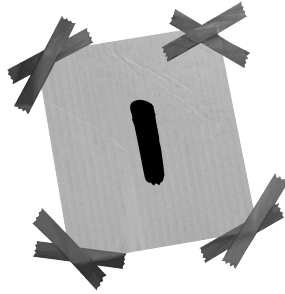
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The Freak

Big gobs of summer have been splashing down on East Huron faster and faster. Ice-cream trucks, swimming pools, shouts from kids playing games out in the neighborhood after dinner—every gob is a meteor smashing into the ground just over the next hill, but still we have to pretend that we don't notice for two more days.

"Ian," says Mr. Dunford. "You want to read the next passage, please?"

"Um, what?" I say.

Giggles come from the girl behind me. *Don't turn around, I tell myself. Just ignore it . . .*

"Page four thousand eighty-seven, bottom paragraph," Mr. Dunford directs.

"Four *thousand*?"

"Bottom paragraph."

“My, uh—my book doesn’t . . .” The giggles spread and I realize how gullible I am. “Oh . . . I get it.”

“Ah,” says the teacher. “Well then. There’s hope for him yet.”

I feel my cheeks getting redder.

“Tan, buddy, I know it’s the end of the year. But if you want to go to Field Day tomorrow we need to finish strong, okay? Page twenty-one.”

“Yes, Mr. Dunford.”

I can feel everything in my guts tighten up as I try to read this passage about Thomas Edison.

Reading in class is one of my least favorite things to do. Oh, I can read like a fish can swim—but as soon as someone makes me do it out loud, it’s a completely different thing. I just stammer and get embarrassed, which makes me stammer worse . . .

It’s so much easier to get people to like you if you stay quiet and let them talk until you can figure out what they want to hear.

As I read about Thomas Edison, I wonder what he was like as a kid. He probably worked hard *all* the time, even if it was really nice out. Closed all the curtains and lit some candles, so he could fool himself into thinking it was cold and rainy and easier to concentrate on homework.

Maybe one day his candle went out and he didn’t have any more and that’s when an idea for a great new invention hit him.

A lightbulb sparked in his head, and then he yanked it right out of his imagination and all of a sudden it was real. Chainsaws, Sputnik, the Internet . . . all because this one kid focused on school, even though his friends were probably having a sleepover without him.

“Thomas Edison dropped out of school after only three weeks.”

The girl who giggled, Amy, picks up reading where I left off.

A murmur rolls around the room.

“Don’t get excited,” Mr. Dunford warns us. “Even though he didn’t go to school he studied hard on his own. Very hard. Point is: For Thomas Edison to really get his brain going, he needed to find a personal *reason* to work hard.”

Amy’s hand goes up. “What was it?” she asks, like she’s about to hear a secret trick to being smart.

“I don’t know,” says Mr. Dunford.

She deflates.

“More importantly, Amy, what engages *you*? What gets you excited to learn?”

Maybe we need to drop out of school and find out! I should say. Why can’t I just raise my hand and do it?

“Everybody’s passions are different,” Mr. Dunford goes on. “Your job, guys, is to figure out what makes the world come alive for you. It’s tricky, though. And it never gets easier. And sometimes it’ll change, or you’ll lose it for a while and then find it all over again . . .”