

TWO

Ferguson Peach leaned forward and tapped the taxi driver on the shoulder. “Pardon me, sir, but after you let us off, you should go straight to a repair shop and see about your motor supports. They’re very weak.”

The man glared at him in the rearview mirror. “Who are you — Mr. Goodwrench? Mind your own business, kid. I’ve been a cabbie for twenty years, and there’s nothing wrong with this car.”

Don Champion nudged me. “Is he going to do this all summer?”

Ferguson and Don were both best friends of mine, but they weren’t really friends of each other. Now, in the cab headed for 1 Pitt Street, seemed a stupid time for me to notice it.

“I mean, we made it!” Don continued, motioning all around us. “Downtown Toronto. Bright lights, big city, and the best summer of our lives!”

The Peach shrugged. “We’ll be working. If we stayed in Owen Sound, we could spend our summer on the beach.”

I couldn't help laughing. "You'd die of boredom lying on the beach, Ferguson. You can't fix a beach."

"You can dredge."

"Joe's the greatest guy in the world to let us move into his place this summer," said Don. "Let's face it, Owen Sound is okay, but we're not babies anymore. We need to see the world."

Don is a pretty confident guy. Back home in Owen Sound, he's kind of like Mr. Wonderful. He's the best hockey player in town, and high school president two years in a row, and he dates all the greatest girls. With a record like that, who wouldn't look forward to each new day?

"There's a difference between the world and the inside of a plastics factory." If life was a picnic, Ferguson Peach was rain. And ants.

"We'll do a lot more than just work," I argued. "When school starts again in September, all those other bozos who spent the summer hanging around home will be like ten-year-olds compared to us. We'll be men!"

Don challenged Ferguson. "If this whole thing is so lousy, why are you here?"

Ferguson cocked an eyebrow. "Because everyone I know is going to be at Joe's place."

In a way, Ferguson and Don were in perfect agreement about our summer plans. Ferguson didn't really want to come along, and Don didn't really want him to, either. But we needed a third to split up the rent. And, to Ferguson's credit, he gave the most spectacular performance of any of us on the day we hit up our parents for permission to go out into the world.

We all tackled our folks at the same hour on the same night, so that when they stopped yelling at us and went to

phone each other, the lines would be busy. That's when we could say "Well, ——'s parents are letting *him* go." Because of Ferguson's artistry, the Peaches caved in first, followed by the Champions. The Cardones, my pair, held out to the end.

"You're too young," was my mother's big argument. When I'm eighty and she's a hundred and nine, this will still make sense to her.

"If I trust Jason, you should, too," said my brother Joe, who would have to find another tenant if the deal fell through. "I mean, it's *my* apartment."

Then my mother shifted into overdrive, and by the time the dust cleared, not only was *I* too young, but so was Joe. And she expected him to cancel his trip to Europe, give up his apartment, and move back home. Joe bailed out on me there, but by that time, the Peaches and the Champions had both said yes. Mom didn't have a leg to stand on.

Mr. Wonderful put his arm around my shoulder. "Jason, I refuse to let this guy spoil our trip. I happen to know that it is mathematically impossible for this summer to be anything but perfect."

Ferguson snorted. "Mathematically? How does that work?"

Don was smug. "One, everybody knows that Joe Cardone is the coolest guy ever to come out of Owen Sound. He wouldn't live in just any old dump, so the apartment is going to be amazing. Two — Toronto is an awesome city for young single guys. Three — my uncle's going to treat us great in his factory, so the jobs'll be fantastic. That's three for a good time, zero for a bad time; we've already got a hat trick, and we haven't even moved in yet."

As we made our way through the traffic, a very weird feeling started to take hold of my stomach. It wasn't fear;

I didn't want to go back. I was just so pumped up about the summer that I was operating at double speed while the rest of the world was in slow motion. When the guy at the Indy 500 says, "Gentlemen, start your engines," all the drivers at the line feel exactly like I did in that cab.

Don was going to Toronto to have fun and, knowing him, he would have lots of it, every day. Ferguson was going mostly because of me, and Toronto wouldn't make much difference to him. Neither would Mars. But for me this summer was the only game in town. With my overprotective parents, this was my one chance to prove I could make it on my own. Screw up, and I'd be lucky to see the light of day before I started university.

Most parents baby their first kid, and then learn to let go with the others. My folks got it backwards. They allowed Joe a lot of independence, and when he quit college, moved to the big city, and became a bodybuilder, they said to themselves, "*Mistake!*" Since then, Mom and Dad have been all over me like a cheap suit. They hadn't even let me come to Toronto to *visit* Joe. The fact that I was now on my way to *live* in his place was a major miracle.

"You'll be back in a week, flat broke, with your tail between your legs." This was my father's parting shot on the platform in Owen Sound. I knew right then that, even if I died in Toronto, my last act would be to take a magic marker and write across my chest, *Do Not Return Until September 1st*.