

Mr. Morrison beamed at his homeroom class of twenty-eight students. “Okay, are all the autobiographies finished?”

A vague, indifferent hum rose from the group.

“Good. When you bring your papers up to me, I can also check your class schedules to make sure there aren’t any problems. I’m going to do the class in rows, starting from the left.”

The entire class stood and began a lackadaisical shuffle toward the front of the room. Paul Abrams looked around in bewilderment. He was the only student still sitting. Hadn’t the teacher said “starting from the left”? Maybe he’d heard the instructions wrong. He grabbed his schedule and his half-page autobiography and joined the swarm.

Mr. Morrison regarded the first person in line. “Well, where’s your schedule?”

The girl dug through her pockets. “I didn’t bring it. Maybe I didn’t get one.”

“But everybody got one. It was mailed to your house during the summer. You’ll have to go to the office after homeroom and have a new one made up.”

The girl looked dubious. “You think so?”

“Of course. How are you going to know what classes to go to if you don’t have a schedule?”

“I figured I’d just sort of wing it.”

Paul stared in disbelief. The second person in line didn’t have a schedule either. The third had a schedule but it was somebody else’s. The fourth was in the wrong homeroom. Paul was fifth, and the first to be checked through. He handed in his autobiography and returned to his seat, noting that Mr. Morrison was already covered in perspiration.

“What kind of schedule is this?” the teacher was exclaiming in agitation. “You’re supposed to have six classes and a lunch! You have six lunches and a class!”

“Yeah?” The boy looked vaguely pleased. “That’s pretty good.”

“And you!” Mr. Morrison was already on to the next schedule. “You have no lunch at all! And you’re going to the same Spanish class five times a day! You’ve had this for at least a month! Why didn’t you check it over?”

“Maybe I didn’t notice it.”

Before Mr. Morrison could go on to the next student, she announced, “Mine’s blank.”

By the time the exercise was over, less than half the class had been checked through. The others were instructed to go to the office after homeroom and stand in the Problem Line. Paul couldn’t believe the vacant, disinterested expressions on the faces of even those with serious class schedule conflicts, or no schedules at all.

Mr. Morrison had turned his attention to the autobiographies.

“Now we’ll all get to know each other. I’m going to read them out loud. This first one here is by — ” he glanced at the paper “ — it looks like Wayne Stitsky. Stand up, Wayne.”

In the very back row, a tall, slim boy with long blond, flyaway hair raised himself three inches from his chair and settled back down again. Mr. Morrison smiled and read:

“Hi. I’m Wayne-o. I’m in the tenth grade at Don’t Care High — ” Mr. Morrison put the paper down. He looked up sternly. “Now, this is one thing I want to get straight right here on the first day of school. This is *not* Don’t Care High. This is Don Carey High School. That awful nickname has been haunting this fine old school for years, and this is where it ends. We have pride and school spirit, and the maintaining of that self-destructive attitude of not caring is an insult to the memory of Don Carey, one of the most civic-minded public works commissioners this city has ever had. He was, as you all know, the designer and builder of our modern sewer system, and that is a remarkable contribution indeed.”

Another hum rose just like the first.

“Now,” Mr. Morrison went on, “we’ll read a paper that doesn’t have quite such a defeatist attitude.” He began to shuffle through the stack, his brow clouding over, his mouth hardening into a thin line. “Don’t Care’ ‘Don’t Care.’ Ah, here we go. ‘My name is Cindy Schwartz, and I’m fifteen years old, and it’s been seven years since I started shopping at Bloomingdale’s. I like Bloomingdale’s because . . .’” He stopped reading and skipped his eyes down the page. “All right, where’s Cindy? You didn’t mention a word about school. This is all about Bloomingdale’s.”

There was an awkward silence, then someone called, “She left.”

“Left? Why?”

“You told her to go to the office to get her schedule changed.”

“But I said *after* — Oh, never mind.” He returned to sifting through the autobiographies. “Here it is again. ‘Don’t Care High . . . Don’t Care . . . Don’t Care . . . It looks like this group is going to take a lot of deprogramming. Ah, here’s one. Paul Abrams. Where’s Paul?’”

Timidly, Paul raised his hand.

Mr. Morrison beamed anew. “Okay, let’s see what you’ve got here. ‘My name is Paul Abrams, and I originally come from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. My family moved to New York over the summer, and I enrolled this morning at Don Carey High School. I’m in the tenth grade, and it’s my ambition to — ’”

“Hey!” came a surprised voice from the back of the class. “Get a load of the guy with the ambition!”

The hum swelled again as Paul felt scarlet red creep up the back of his neck and flood his face.

Mr. Morrison rapped on his desk with a ruler. “Quiet down, everybody. I’d like to finish reading this paper. Then maybe you’ll find out what a real Don Carey student should be like. This is exactly — ”

Just then the public address system came alive with a voice that resembled the lower register of a bassoon.

*May I have your attention, please. Welcome to another year of school. Just a few announcements. As you may or may not have noticed, this year’s welcoming committee did not convene due to lack of interest.*

*A request from the cafeteria staff asks me to remind you that there are garbage cans strategically placed in the dining area.*

*It has been brought to my attention that,*

*while some students must do without, some of you have as many as eight or nine lockers. This seems excessive.*

*Also, we'll be accepting nominations for student body president as of today.*

*Normally this process would have taken place last spring, but again, due to lack of interest, no names were entered, rendering the election redundant. In a fit of optimism, we have decided to try again.*

*Finally, due to the disrepair of clocks in this school, I would ask that everyone synchronize watches. It is now fifteen seconds to first period. That's all. Have a good day.*

Paul watched as the class stood up and began to file out the door. He looked for a signal from Mr. Morrison that class was dismissed, but the teacher had returned to some paperwork. Tentatively, he rose.

“Hey, Ambition, aren't you coming?”

Paul's attention shifted to the doorway where a husky, sandy-haired boy stood watching him. Paul scowled. Only an hour into the school year, and already he was the butt of jokes.

The boy laughed. “Don't look at me like that. I'm harmless. It's just that anyone with ambition is going to need a guide around this place. At this time of the year, everyone's ambition is Christmas vacation. After that, they wait till June.”

Still wary, Paul picked up his notebook and followed the other boy into the hallway.

“The name's Sheldon Pryor.” He looked at Paul intently. “You do talk, don't you?”