



A D A M R A P P

FUM

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ADAM RAPP



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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First edition 2018

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number pending
ISBN 978-0-7636-6756-6

17 18 19 20 21 22 BVG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Berryville, VA, U.S.A.

This book was typeset in Baskerville.

Candlewick Press
99 Dover Street
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

visit us at www.candlewick.com

For Hallie Bananas

“O God that madest this beautiful earth,
when will it be ready to accept Thy saints? How long,
O Lord, how long?”

—George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan*

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In the guidance counselor's office of Lugo Memorial High School—a ten-by-twelve-foot bunker situated in the basement of the stout three-story rectangular limestone building—sits Corinthia Bledsoe, elbows on thighs, her wood splitter's hands cradling her face, her mosquito-bitten knees trembling only as infinitesimally as knees this large can tremble.

As advised by the adult sitting across from her, Corinthia is inhaling and exhaling through her nose, the troubled breaths sluicing through the great caves of her nostrils, tainting the tenaciously humid late-August air of the sublevel public-school office.

“In and out, through the nose, just like that,” she hears.

Corinthia was escorted here by the firm, resolute, not to mention hairy-in-a-storybook-ogre-way hands of Virgil Task, Lugo Memorial's varsity football coach. Coach Task, stalwart as a fire hydrant, with dark tufts swirling through the open collar of his knit cream-and-crimson athletic-department shirt, was aided by Gene

Hauser, the algebra II teacher and JV math team mentor. Mr. Hauser trailed behind them in a gymnastics-spotting fashion, ready to help should anyone collapse, blow out a knee, or sprain an ankle. Yes, that was indeed Gene Hauser, rarely seen beyond the confines of his classroom (which doubles as the math lab), whose personal scent Corinthia found to be suspiciously mulchy, as if he'd been spending all morning in a garden, digging up cabbages.

Guidance Counselor Denton Smock's office, which is painted the color of cougar eyes, boasts a phantasmagoric lavender-and-cotton-candy-colored aquarium; a kind of undulating liquid brain, which is home to, among an assortment of underwater wisteria and banana plants, a lone striped clown fish, whose almost staggeringly inactive floating state is the one thing Corinthia relates to at this moment.

"Is it alive?" Corinthia finally asks, referring to the fish.

Mr. Smock has been waiting for her to speak for twelve minutes. He knows that it's been precisely twelve minutes because he measures such things. There is a small digital clock on his desk that reports minutes and seconds in pulsing blue numerals. He keeps all of his "waiting" data logged in a little spiral notebook of lima-bean-green graph paper: minutes, followed by a colon, followed by seconds. Row

upon row of “waiting” statistics with student initials beside each entry. If one were to find this notebook on, say, the pilling wool sofa in the Wallace Keebler Faculty Lounge, one might mistake Mr. Smock for the Lugo Memorial track and field coach. The meticulously gathered data could easily be misconstrued as recorded relay splits. He’s especially interested in student silences and their accompanying behavior: how a body leans away from the steady, relentless thrum of the overhead fluorescent light; what the shoulders do during one of his unblinking, half-smiling stare-downs. Do a student’s shoulders disappear into the back or seize up and crowd the neck? Does the left shoulder sit higher than the right, or vice versa? As far as Mr. Smock is concerned, he doesn’t need language to make student assessments. The anxious body of the fourteen- to eighteen-year-old says it all.

“Rodney is very much alive,” Mr. Smock replies about his clown fish, whose stripes alternate between blood-orange and white so perfectly, it’s like a thing that’s been painted with great care. A forgotten heirloom found at a garage sale. “After his lunch, he likes to float.”

Speaking of fish, not quite an hour ago, at precisely 2:23 p.m., in Bob Sluba’s life sciences class, in the middle of Lugo Memorial’s oldest and most-beloved teacher’s articulation of the marine-life relationship

between bottom-feeding krill and phytoplankton, Corinthia Bledsoe, in an impassioned, heraldic one-part move, rocketed up from her custom-made desk and announced to Mr. Sluba and her seventeen fellow life sciences students that a family of tornadoes—three in total—was making a beeline toward Lugo, directly toward the small community’s high school, in fact, and that everyone, students and teachers alike, should get to a safe place and assume the proper tornado position: hands clasped at the back of necks, knees on the floor, rumps kissing heels, chins tucked into chests. It’s a vaguely religious-looking position, a supplication, even, as if a mass bowing of heads will somehow turn away God’s angry weather beasts.

It is late August, after all, and the stubborn, insufferable humidity—that thick southern Illinois air that coats the skin like gelatin—often coincides with extreme weather alerts, especially in this part of the state, where tornadoes touch down as often as lightning along the fairways of certain Florida golf courses. Which is to say that tornado paranoia is not uncommon here. There were three warnings in July alone, although no funnels actually materialized in Lugo.

“Horn’s gonna wail,” Corinthia simply states, still catching her breath. Her deep voice is unusually high and reedy.

She's referring to the tornado horn, of course, whose earsplitting siren is so loud, it sounds as if it's being blown from some fabled, invisible Midwestern mountain. The actual horn, as unthreatening-looking as a chipmunk cleaning its paws atop a fence post, is attached to a one-hundred-foot aluminum rod at the outskirts of town and spins 360 degrees while blaring Federal Signal 2001-130, which warns that a tornado has been spotted at a dangerously close proximity and that one and all should seek immediate shelter, preferably underground.

"Why the need to personify a municipal warning system?" Mr. Smock says. "Children wail. Children and emotionally distraught widows in wagon train movies."

Corinthia is well aware that he is dismissing her prediction, which she is smart enough to know seems ludicrous—in her very large heart, she truly understands this—but to be scorned with such mockery, to drag wagon train movies into it! It makes her want to kick the front of his desk, but she resists the impulse and continues wiggling her knee.

"You'll see," she warns solemnly.

Mr. Smock nods and smiles. His job is to be sympathetic, after all. His lips sort of disappear as he thinks. For some reason this look makes Corinthia wonder

whether or not he possesses nipples, or, rather, if under his clothes he is some other kind of being: a fish person with gills. Instead of a penis, does he possess a little hidden ventral fin? A spout? Mr. Sluba might be able to diagram such a thing on his life sciences whiteboard.

“And you claim these tornadoes were something you *saw*,” Mr. Smock says, still trying to make sense of the matter.

“Yes,” Corinthia replies.

“Out the window?”

“In my head,” she says.

“So you were asleep,” he says. “I know how your medication can make you drowsy.”

“I was about as drowsy as a wet dog caught on an electric fence.”

The image seems to cause Mr. Smock’s face to twitch, just at one corner of his mouth. It’s barely perceptible, but it’s certainly a twitch—indeed it is. At this moment, very little slips past Corinthia Bledsoe. Glimpsing those tornadoes has somehow tweaked her entire sensory system. According to Mr. Sluba, the normal human being possesses five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. But today Corinthia is keenly aware that something beyond this arrangement is at play. She can *feel* the ozone in the air, *hear* the humidity creeping through Mr. Smock’s little moldy office, and

practically *taste* the cheap, yeasty foot powder whose scent is wafting up from under his gunmetal desk.

“So then your eyes were open when you *beheld* this trio of tornadoes?”

“To behold something carries with it a connotation of beauty,” Corinthia says.

Mr. Smock appears to be stumped. What little color lives in his face has gone away. That tan he worked so hard on this past summer while vacationing in the Michigan sand dunes has turned a pale, waxy blue.

“I suppose you’re right,” he finally admits.

“And *trio*?” Corinthia says, almost bitterly. “It’s not a singing group.”

He asks her what word she would use to qualify the three tornadoes. “A trinity?” he suggests before she can answer.

“A triumvirate,” she replies in a beleaguered voice. “A trinity refers to a Christian godhead. Triumvirates are solely about power and destruction.”

“Well,” he says, “there’s apparently nothing wrong with that vocabulary of yours.”

Corinthia won the past two Lugo Memorial spelling bees. Last year, as a sophomore, she defeated senior valedictorian Sophia Bristol-Soffit, and as a freshman, in the final round, she wowed everyone by spelling

aerenchyma without skipping a beat. For that bee, she defeated junior Junior Zobrist, who is rumored to be headed to MIT next year.

It's important to point out that Corinthia Bledsoe's desk is custom-made because when she stands at her full height, she is seven feet four and a quarter inches tall.

And she weighs 287 pounds.

Regular school desks just don't work for her. By all definitions, be they medical, standard, mythical, or otherwise, Corinthia Lee Bledsoe of Lugo, Illinois, born in the birthing ward of St. Joseph's Hospital up north in Joliet, just off Interstate 55, is a giant. She built the desk in shop class. Fashioned from pine and featuring a meticulously sanded, lacquered finish, whose sloped lid contains grooves for pens and pencils, it emits a faint, pleasant smell of resin and wood glue, collapses conveniently at its hinged, outermost edge, and folds in half for easy transport.

Although she is broad-shouldered, with enormous hands and equally enormous feet (size 22, men's), she has penetrating deep-brown eyes that not only balance her face, but also radiate a loving warmth and at times a generous, childlike vulnerability. These eyes belie her Paul Bunyanesque skull and monumental chin. And despite her teeth, which are as long, wide, and dimpled as dominoes, Corinthia possesses a full,

attractive mouth. She has learned to maneuver her lips in such a manner as to reveal only a portion of this haunting, epic dentition.

At the onset of her puberty—at around age eleven and a half—a tumor attached itself to Corinthia Bledsoe’s pituitary gland and caused her condition, gigantism, to manifest with nothing less than an undeserved, almost biblical tenacity. By her fourteenth birthday, she was a staggering six feet nine and a half inches tall, larger than most professional basketball players.

And she’s grown almost seven inches since then.

Yes, she is a giant.

She is gigantic.

Because of those magnetic pupils and lovely mouth, her face defies the usual clichés ascribed to the monolithic storybook ogre, the grotesque monster with the cauliflower brow and sunken Beowulf eyes. Corinthia possesses a girlish, nicely positioned nose, unblemished skin, and cinnamon-colored hair, which she often pulls back into a classic ponytail.

But despite this beauty, by medical definition, Corinthia Lee Bledsoe, daughter of Brill and Marlene Bledsoe, sister to senior star wide receiver Channing “The Lugo Heat” Bledsoe (who is a mere six two, 185 pounds), is still a giant.

Thus, the very large heart and need for a special desk.

She and her shop teacher, Dolan Yorn-Pamutmut, whose hyphenated name is as mysterious as his missing left ear, chose pine because it's both a lightweight and extremely sturdy wood.

So, to say the least, the act of Corinthia Bledsoe reaching full verticality—exploding up from her custom-made portable desk—is nothing less than a thrilling event and a celebration of the genetic mysteries of the human race, certainly more thrilling than microscopic phytoplankton and nonexploding krill and Mr. Sluba's glabrous Benjamin Franklin face, especially when everyone else is sitting down at standard-size Illinois School District-issued desks, collectively fighting through post-lunch digestion comas (pizza pockets, lima beans, and fruit cups [which were mostly green grapes and little wedges of room-temperature melon]), everyone except for Mr. Sluba, who, at a modest five nine, often assumes a slightly bowlegged southwestern rancher's stance, perpetually within arm's reach of the science department's archaic manually operated overhead projector.

Some say he dates it like he would a woman.

As Corinthia sits across from Guidance Counselor Smock, whose thin, smooth face defies age and whose outward patience verges on ecclesiastical, her pine desk, which was collapsed and brought to the

basement by Mr. Sluba himself, leans against the wall beside her.

“Do you think you’re making the most of your junior year, Corinthia?” he asks. It’s an oddly general question, considering the circumstances.

“Yes,” she replies, although the past few days haven’t been easy. Not because of any one incident or her health challenges. Not because Corinthia has grown more and more aware of the acute feeling of not caring. *Ineffectual* is the word she’s heard before. Or the phrase *lack of affect*. Her schoolwork has been excellent. Based on her grade point average, she’s currently ranked third in her class, and her attendance is impeccable. And yet this lingering blankness has been metastasizing somewhere deep inside her, like a small, cold stone slowly gaining mass, perhaps the phantom cousin of that tumor that attached itself to her pituitary gland some five and a half years ago.

“Have you thought more about where you might want to go to college?” Mr. Smock asks.

About a month ago, Corinthia was drawn to Northland, a small college in Wisconsin’s remote upper hinterlands. The thing that grabbed her attention was the expanse of tall trees featured in their modest four-color brochure. Ancient black spruces, seemingly hundreds of feet high, an endless forest of them. Corinthia

could see herself walking among these trees, drunk with the smell of pine, not a care in the world, no cumbersome door moldings or low classroom archways to negotiate, striding out in the open air, where hawks and eagles soar.

The campus of Northland College, home of the LumberJacks and LumberJills, is located in Ashland, Wisconsin. Its curriculum is geared toward the environment and sustainability. Corinthia likes the fact that their student population isn't mentioned in any of their marketing materials, which probably means that it's very small. The campus is located a mere ten-minute walk from the shores of Lake Superior.

Corinthia daydreams about shedding all her clothes and wading into this Great Lake, swimming out an impossible distance and just floating there on her back while staring up at the endless night sky, the stars wheeling above her as she waits for some prehistoric creature to emerge from the depths and lead her to the next phase of her life.

Floating in Lake Superior like Mr. Smock's little striped clown fish, Rodney.

"You continue to generate keen interest from Northwestern, Marquette, even the University of Chicago," Mr. Smock says, clearly attempting to keep the conversation focused on practical matters. "Those

scores of yours are piquing real interest from the big boys.”

The scores that he refers to are Corinthia’s SATs, which she took at the end of her sophomore year, along with three other accelerated classmates. She found the test so stultifyingly easy that it actually bored her. And it was also just plain absurd. The idea of one’s immediate future being dictated by the act of filling out endless arrangements of ovals with a number two pencil makes Corinthia want to pursue a vocation as a cashier at, say, the local gas station (Pewman’s Gas and Go), just to spite all the career-crazed adults in her life. Wouldn’t she be something to behold? After filling up the SUV, one would enter the little kiosk and—*KA-BLAM*—there she’d be, all seven feet four and a quarter inches of her, a veritable mountain of customer-service flesh, the crown of her head practically scraping the ceiling.

“I’ve spoken with your parents,” Mr. Smock continues, “and I think they’re coming around to the idea of Northwestern.”

Her parents have mentioned no such conversation, and the fact that her guidance counselor is going behind her back to speak to them makes her want to snatch his notebook off his desk and tear it in half.

“Your mom seems quite taken with the North

Shore of Chicago,” he continues. “Northwestern boasts a legacy of extraordinary alums.”

“The Wildcats,” Corinthia utters.

“The purple-and-white,” Smock adds, citing the university’s colors.

“What exactly is a wildcat anyway?” Corinthia asks.

“I believe a wildcat is any cat that is wild.”

“Wild meaning feral?”

“Sure,” he answers. “Feral.”

“A state of savagery,” she adds, “especially after escape from captivity or domestication.”

Mr. Smock asks Corinthia if she’s thinking of college as an escape.

She doesn’t answer.

“Have you been feeling trapped?” he adds.

Corinthia is suddenly aware of the buzzing overhead fluorescent; the whirring, burbling aquarium; and another mysterious tremor that seems to be emanating from somewhere deep under the school building.

“Do you feel that?” Corinthia asks.

“Feel what?” Mr. Smock says.

Corinthia squints, trying to home in on the source of the tremor. Is she the only person who can feel this? Does the tremor have anything to do with the tornadoes? Is it coming from *inside* her?

“Look, it’s hot,” Mr. Smock offers, fanning himself with a pamphlet that reads SMARTPHONE DEPENDENCY: *Is a Device Ruling Your Life?*

Corinthia recently gave up her large-format smartphone. Despite its bigger dimensions, it was still too small. Whenever she’d arrange it against her face to speak, the mouthpiece barely cleared her cheekbone. Communicating with anyone effectively required her to toggle the device between her ear and chin, which made it look like she was using a man’s electric razor. She tried a set of earbuds, but even the largest ones kept falling out. Now the phone, not much smaller than a standard-size digital tablet, lives in a shoe box on her dresser at home.

After a pause, Corinthia says, “You don’t want to talk about the tornadoes.”

“You’ve made it abundantly clear that there are three of them,” Mr. Smock says. “A *triumvirate*.”

“They’re gonna pull the roof off the field house.”

“Corinthia . . .”

Lugo Memorial’s guidance counselor is clearly tiring of this absurd subject, not to mention Corinthia Bledsoe’s newfound maverick attitude.

“It’s going to wind up in Brainard,” she says, “in a half-harvested cornfield.”

“Do you realize how silly you sound?”

“And in the field house, there will be a cow at half-court,” Corinthia continues willfully. “Not a thing wrong with it. Like it’s been there its whole life.”

Everyone on the faculty is well aware of Corinthia Bledsoe’s various medical issues. The hypothyroid condition and blood sugar problems. The terrible shoulder acne and sore gums and the perpetually sweaty palms. The excruciating joint pain suffered as a freshman when she couldn’t get out of bed for two days and was prescribed an anti-inflammatory powerful enough to soothe an ailing racehorse. The various medications and their side effects: shortness of breath; wobbly balance (“Don’t Operate Machinery . . .”); nausea; the seemingly irreversible dehydration.

Despite these challenges, Corinthia has always been known to be polite, courteous to her peers, and especially so to the faculty and staff of Lugo Memorial.

Mr. Smock passes her a paper cone of water, the second one he’s given her, dispensed from his upside-down jug, which glugs like a creature with uneasy bowels. Corinthia downs the water and inadvertently crushes the paper cone into a piece of damp popcorn.

Entire faculty meetings have been called to discuss Lugo Memorial’s physically unique student’s special needs. At one such meeting, urged by the kindhearted

choir director, Dolores Slenderschundt, it was decided that a special private bathroom should be built for Corinthia, approximately ten feet west of the normal girls' second-floor bathroom, the thinking being that placing Corinthia's bathroom there would split the difference of the three-story building, and in order to make use of it, she'd never have to negotiate more than a flight of stairs on those big ailing knees.

In terms of contractor specifications, her size would require more porcelain. The reason for a personal bathroom was that she'd already broken two toilets; the first episode occurred when Rinna Buss, the student council president and co-captain of the varsity cheerleading squad, was urinating discreetly, if not beautifully, when a tremendous crash occurred in the stall beside her. Rinna was the one who brought the delicate matter to Principal Margo Ticonderoga and her devoted vice principal, the soft-spoken, bowling pin-shaped Doogan Mejerus.

The broken toilet caused a flood in the girls' bathroom from which Corinthia emerged as though she'd survived an epic shipwreck, soaked from head to toe, her cinnamon hair pasted to her broad, stunned face.

After breaking her second toilet, which happened on the final Thursday of her sophomore year, Corinthia carried the porcelain remains down the hall to the principal's office as if it were an offering. To the

few students loitering by their lockers, it looked like she was carrying an otherworldly candy dish.

At the final faculty meeting of the school year, thanks to Dolores Slenderschundt's impassioned appeal to civic kindness, the faculty unanimously approved the private bathroom after a quick vote, and a local contractor from nearby Benton arrived three weeks into the summer break to complete its installation. It took nearly five days to get the project going because the custom toilet had to be made from a special ceramic-and-graphite arrangement, with a thicker porcelain and reinforced stainless-steel buttresses to support Corinthia Bledsoe's considerable weight.

At one point, the facilities manager, Shoreland Splitz, had to interrupt Corinthia's summer break and ask her to come back to school and sit in a large vat of chalk dust and then sit again on a retired, repurposed chalkboard so they could have a proper measurement for the toilet seat.

"Sit in that," he said, clearly uncomfortable with the unusual request. "And then sit on that."

Shoreland "The Lamp" Splitz, a tall, bony man with hands like hawk talons, had to help Corinthia out of the vat of chalk dust, and the action aggravated a hernia he'd suffered some years back. For the rest of the summer and into the first few weeks of

the new school year, he had to wear his old, ill-fitting double-spring truss with scrotal pads.

With regard to Corinthia's special toilet, the faculty took into account the sensitivity issue, God bless those benevolent adults, and decided to splurge for a soundless flushing mechanism, so that students passing by in the hallway wouldn't be able to easily identify when their prodigious peer was partaking of the customized services.

Despite fire code regulations, Corinthia was given a key and the bathroom was outfitted with a simple, easy-to-turn bolt-action lock. Again, the faculty was willing to bend on certain student handbook matters.

Corinthia's bathroom was never discussed with the Lugo Memorial student body, but when it (the bathroom) materialized, it was Facebooked, Instagrammed, Tweeted, Foursquared, WordPressed, Tumblred, Snapchatted, and so thoroughly digitally disseminated that it was as if pictures of Rinna Buss's breasts had been leaked. And they (the student body, not Rinna Buss's breasts) knew *why* and *for whom* the oversize latrine had been created, boy, oh boy, did they ever. How could they not? It came to be known as "The Rinth's Rectal Recliner," which Corinthia found to be discursively lazy, as neither her private toilet nor her personal rectum—a comparatively straight, terminal section of

the intestine (as taught to her by Belinda Hnath, Lugo Memorial's willowy, allergy-prone anatomy teacher)—cantilevers in any direction.

One sophomore boy, Jordan Sheehey, even posted a smartphone movie of himself washing his dog, Demetrius, a 117-pound black Lab, in Corinthia's toilet. He'd planned with great care (miniature smartphone tripod and all), as he knew it would be all but impossible to sneak a dog of that size and unabashed enthusiasm into Lugo Memorial during normal hours. (As evidenced by the sudsy footage, Demetrius obviously loves getting baths.) How Jordan Sheehey got into the bathroom in the first place is anyone's guess. The only other key in existence lives in a metal strong-box down in Shoreland Splitz's office.

In any event, the first two years of high school haven't, to put it mildly, been easy for Corinthia. She never seems to fit anywhere, meaning literally, a cruel facilities fact she has accepted with self-effacing grace and at times a mock-woeful sense of humor. And this difficulty has extended beyond the entryways and corridors of Lugo Memorial. Once, after receiving the standard-issue P.E. clothes from the girls' phys. ed. instructor, Carla "The Human Birdbath" Snells, Corinthia—all seven feet four and a quarter inches of her—came bounding into the girls' locker room theatrically head-banging and rocking an air guitar.

Her extra-large shorts, which looked absurdly miniature on her frame, were riding so high they were practically thonglike. In order to span the width of her shoulders, her T-shirt was so stretched that the letters LUGO PHYS. ED were distorted into a blown-out Milky Way of unrecognizability. It was as if someone had forced an infant's onesie onto some prehistoric infant pterodactyl.

Yes, these moments have endeared Corinthia to her peers, but the continuous ducking under doorways, the edging sideways through entrances, the twisting her neck to avoid lamps, projection screens, hanging 3-D mobiles of RNA/DNA helices, and the wooden dowels of anatomy charts, not to mention the five- to seven-part move of negotiating her legs under the cafeteria tables, has caused a scourge of knots to settle up and down her spine. She has walked into the third-floor clock three times. Once, its hard plastic facing came crashing to the marble floor and went spinning down the locker-lined corridor like a runaway hubcap.

Mr. Smock utters something inane about the unbearable humidity and the tenacity of this year's mosquitoes and the upcoming standardized tests (Corinthia will again be taking the SATs). He, of all people, knows about Corinthia's medication, about the thyroid and blood sugar problems, about the

crippling Osgood-Schlatters (oh, those awkward NFL knee braces she had to wear *outside* her pants during her entire freshman year!), inflamed arches, the awful bunion on the joint of her left toe, and the sudden waves of fatigue; how the faculty has had to be very forgiving of her occasional midclass nap. Despite his somewhat impenetrable demeanor, Lugo Memorial's guidance counselor has mostly been a steady voice of understanding.

One faculty member, girls' varsity basketball coach Wilbon Von Treese, has been less sensitive. When Corinthia wasn't interested in trying out for the basketball team, he called her parents immediately.

"There could be a HUGE future in this for her."

Corinthia could hear Coach Von Treese's voice wheedling through the phone's handset. Her father, Brill, listened politely, if not generously, rolling his eyes and smiling patiently at his daughter, who was lying on the kitchen floor with her knees tented and a phone book under her head (the "constructive rest" position intended to relieve lower back pain).

"Just *HUGE*," Coach Von Treese squawked repeatedly, insensitive to the angst this particular four-letter word might cause the Bledsoe family. "*HUGE, HUGE, HUGE!*"

Mr. Smock polices a few sesame cookie crumbs from the surface of his desk, brushes them into a

cupped hand, and disposes of them into the trash can below. He rubs his palms together in a slow, priestlike manner and asks if everything is okay at home.

Corinthia replies, “Everything at home is dandy, Mr. Smock.”

“Denton,” he corrects her, reminding her of their first-name-basis “friendship,” intended to transcend faculty-student formalities.

But the truth is that Lugo Memorial’s only guidance counselor doesn’t seem to exist beyond the four walls of his austere, eucalyptus-scented room. It’s as if the office itself willed him into existence. He’s rarely seen walking the halls. Oh, sure, he’ll occasionally show up at a boys’ basketball game or be clapping it up at the finish line of a cross-country meet, but these sightings are few and far between. Although he encourages the students to trust him — “*You can tell me anything. You really can!*” — few actually do.

One thing that can be said for Mr. Smock is that he exhibits admirable hygiene and style. He is so clean-shaven, his face appears to have been painted on with acrylics. He sports slightly-cooler-than-Clark-Kent-style-glasses, in that they’re the tiniest bit cat-eyed, as well as skinny rockabilly pants. And basically the most stylish black leather shoes in southern Illinois. They have two-inch soles and big brass buckles.

His iPhone case boasts a zebra-print pattern.

He's as asexual as the stunted ceramic donkey featured in the annual Lugo Memorial holiday Nativity scene.

"Things at home are only 'dandy'?"

Corinthia brings the pads of her index fingers to her temples, which are suddenly throbbing again.

"*Dandy* can also mean lonely. Or sad. Or difficult," Mr. Smock adds, shoveling forth the clichés like clumps of steaming asphalt from the back of a truck.

He goes on to say something about how *understanding* everyone has been about Corinthia's various medical and physiological issues during these past two school years and reassures her that he knows—or at least he *thinks* he knows (as surely he can only *imagine* it)—how difficult it must be for her to face them on a daily basis. Again, the voice contains about as much music as a newly installed refrigerator. Corinthia gets the sense that he's ticking off some prescribed line of questioning he learned from a training manual.

"And now you're a junior," he adds. "One's junior year can be a time to turn the corner. . . ."

What specific figurative corner is he referring to? Corinthia wonders. *The social corner? The student-as-citizen corner? The corner of mentally sound behavior? The corner of college candidacy?*

For some reason, Corinthia sees herself manning the popcorn wagon in Lugo Memorial's Connie and

Dillard Deet Field House, dressed like a toy soldier, a red wool parade uniform complete with yellow piping and bright brass buttons, a black egg-shaped bearskin hat atop her head, little balloons of rouge enlivening her cheeks. The legendary field house packed to capacity for a boys' varsity basketball game, cheerleaders cartwheeling through the air like hairless cats flung by larger creatures.

The upside-down water jug gurgles.

The aquarium whispers and pulses with brain light.

Mr. Smock's eyes twitch behind the lenses of his designer glasses. He opens his mouth as if to impart more wisdom, then closes it, then opens it and leaves it open. *He has nothing left to say*, she thinks. *He's finally run out of clichés*. Corinthia notices a dull, chalky stripe down the center of his tongue and wonders if he sometimes keeps the clown fish in there as some perverse exercise in oral pleasure.

The air-conditioning system at Lugo Memorial—all those convoluted tin ducts and chutes—seems to be a thing that only makes noise, as there isn't anything remotely cool issuing from it. In her American literature class, Corinthia sits under the terminal vent of one such duct. Sometimes she imagines she is basking in the breath of a great African lion—just her and a hundred-year-old jungle king with a colossal, radiant

mane, lying together in the long grass, breathing each other in.

And then, just like that, the sweltering heat seems to be a thing that is coming from *within* Corinthia, a cauldron that bakes not only her body but also the landmark limestone school building, the pond of recently refinished asphalt ringing the flagpole, the stunted neighborhood cottonwoods, and the sad tar paper-shingled roofs crowning the mostly one-story homes that make up the town of Lugo; roofs that, once the tornadoes hit, will fly off toward Arkansas and Missouri and Kentucky like the wings of weakened blackbirds.

The sky will turn brown, green, yellow.

Confused crows will skitter across the ground like lost rickety men.

Dogs will scamper in circles, their faces crazed.

Cats will slink backward down the trunks of ancient sycamores.

Trees will lean away from the sky.

The air will grow as thick as maple.

After Corinthia had urged her fellow life sciences juniors to get to a safe place, in an effort to alert the rest of the school, she exited as fast as she possibly could, bursting through Mr. Sluba's classroom door, literally rocking it off its hinges, and then went bounding from classroom to classroom like some wild-eyed

WWE wrestler, pleading with teachers and students alike—“We **MUST**, we absolutely *MUST* get to a safe place!”—the words hissing through her teeth.

These deranged visitations included Linda Lister’s English class and Harden Mlsna’s calc II class and Pru Tenderloin’s European history class and Nola Heck-Burden’s sophomore speech, drama, and journalism class at the precise moment when senior ingenue Skyler “Don’t You Dare Call Me Sky!” Montreal was bringing the back of her perfect Virgin Mary hand to her finely concaved alabaster forehead while performing Desdemona’s final speech in *Othello*.

Corinthia didn’t have time to explain anything in detail; her objective was to use her enormous, masculine, often congested French horn of a voice to sound an alarm, to trigger nervous systems and make people *MOVE*.

She basically looked like a very large, crazy monster person.

It was a strangely uncomfortable scene when she had to be physically coerced by Coach Task, Mr. Hauser, and Doris Dabaduda, the head librarian with the thick varicose ankles and koala-bear eyes, who just so happened to be in the hallway. As they got Corinthia prostrate to the floor, Doris Dabaduda cried out like a creature caught in the jaws of a trap, having severely pulled her left hamstring.

The most disturbing moment, though, was when Coach Task had to deploy a full nelson and wound up riding Corinthia to the ground with his knee planted between her shoulder blades. He literally rode her like a bucking bronco or, say, a felled, mechanically failing alpaca fighting for its final breaths in the Andes.

Coach Task couldn't help imagining what an effective offensive lineman—or *lineperson*—Corinthia Bledsoe would make. Her great strength seemed most powerful when her hips were engaged. How incredible would it be if a *girl* started at left guard on the varsity football team! A *girl*! She would protect quarterback Drake Sirocco in a kind of mercenary *maternal* fashion, and Drake would have that much more time to survey his receivers and unleash a laser beam to Corinthia's older brother, speedster wide receiver Channing "The Lugo Heat" Bledsoe, who would be jetting down the right sideline, sprinting the way only God can make sprinters sprint, and the ball would be caught just shy of the thickly padded goalpost stanchions like a loaf of freshly baked bread—it would seem that miraculously soft—and the band would strike up the chorus of some eighties pop song, likely the title track to a classic Sylvester Stallone movie, the brass and strings and woodwinds dulcet and beautiful, the timpani drum rolling out end-zone thunder, causing the

reinforced aluminum bleachers to shudder and spasm, the cream-and-crimson pom-poms airborne and plump with halos of halogen stadium lights, this particular Friday night in Lugo delivered like a southern Illinois sacrament to all 4,208 of its citizens.

Even those who weren't able to make it to the game—those less fortunate housebound few—would feel the tradition and beauty practically pollinating the air, and all would be gilded in the annals of Lugo Memorial gridiron legend.

Yearbook dedications would never be the same.

It wasn't easy getting Corinthia facedown on the marble floor, especially while students were spilling into the hallway and trying to digitally capture the incident.

“Smartphones down!” Becky Lujack cried, doing her absolute darnedest to corral her freshman boys and girls back into her American Government and the Founding Fathers classroom.

Coach Task, in the later stages of middle age, is still strong as a blue-blooded ox and, post-full nelson, was forced to deploy some incapacitating judo involving Corinthia's neck/shoulder relationship. Once he got her prostrate, he spoke to her in a direct but calming fashion, the same way a dog owner might admonish a misbehaving beloved German shepherd.

A few minutes later, after Doris Dabaduda was carried off to the gymnasium to have her leg tended to by the athletic trainer, Coach Task and Mr. Hauser helped Corinthia off the floor, which was like trying to right some toppled medieval iron throne. They then escorted her to the infirmary—Coach Task gently but ever so firmly guiding her by her enormous elbow—where she was administered to with several conical paper cups containing an electrolyte solution and calmed by the school nurse, Oona Kleinschmidt, who offered Corinthia aloe-and-eucalyptus HandiWipes.

After Corinthia's heart rate returned to an acceptable level and it was determined that a hospital visit wasn't necessary, she was deposited at Guidance Counselor Smock's office, where he offered herbal tea and sesame cookies, which, per usual, Corinthia refused. She simply sat across from him, physically spent, unblinking, and tried to *not think* about those tornadoes for some twelve minutes.

Finally, Mr. Smock speaks again.

“So we were talking about your junior year,” he says. “What lies ahead?”

But before she can answer him, it happens again—that dreaded family of tornadoes overtakes her. The image seizes her mind: a triumvirate of bulging, undulating funnels, spinning and contorting improbably toward Lugo.

Corinthia's chin collapses into her Adam's apple. A fault line emerges in her broad, smooth forehead. Her unblinking eyes are as wide as ostrich eggs.

"Corinthia . . . ?"

When she opens her mouth to speak, she bellows a kind of human dial tone. She closes her mouth, opens it, and tries to speak again, but only a dirgelike sound issues forth. Guidance Counselor Smock removes his black-framed glasses. His brows gather at the center.

This will be the last thing Corinthia recalls from her visit to the guidance counselor's office in the basement of Lugo Memorial High School: Mr. Smock's tense, gathering brows. It doesn't occur to her that she's walked away until she's halfway up the basement stairs.

"Corinthia!" Mr. Smock calls after her, in perhaps the most emphatic version of his voice she's ever heard. "Corinthia Bledsoe, you're not walking away from your guidance counselor's office! You are NOT doing that!"

But she is. And she doesn't even bother answering, because she's too busy taking the stairs, four at a time. When Corinthia's trying to get somewhere fast, she'll usually take them in threes, like when she's escaping the gaze of speech team captain Swinta Folger, who sits behind her in Great Books class and whose disapproving eyes are like a pair of warm beetles crawling

on the back of her neck, or when her stomach is funny from her thyroxine/anti-inflammatories cocktail and she has to get to her special second-floor bathroom like five minutes ago.

It takes her only a few strides to reach the first floor, where she bounds across the sun-stroked, locker-lined hallway toward the school's main entrance. She isn't aware of any pain in her knees, or in her feet or wrists or hips or lower back, for that matter. No, no, no, there is no pain anywhere in her body, none whatsoever.

She extends her stride, really opens up, digging the heels of her custom-ordered size 22 Pony low-tops into the marble floor, *woomf-woomf-woomf*, and bursts through the double doors of Lugo Memorial High School as if something's chasing her.

"Everything okay?" grounds supervisor Barrett Bacon, who the students call "The Milkman" because of his unusually waggly male breasts, calls to her from atop a loud, clattering riding mower. He's just completed a long row of mowed grass.

But Corinthia doesn't answer. She just charges ahead, shielding her eyes from the bright late-August sun.