

WORSER

Margaret Ferguson Books

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for Erica Eynouf

Contents

one:	Rally	1
two:	Bear	11
three:	Outlet	25
four:	Accommodations	33
five:	Occupation	48
six:	Courtesy	57
seven:	Appeal	73
eight:	Revealing	81
nine:	Reflection	97
ten:	Trip	110
eleven:	Perfect	123
twelve:	Belongings	136
thirteen:	Offense	155
fourteen:	Patronize	170
fifteen:	Representation	178
sixteen:	Admission	190
seventeen:	Storm	201
eighteen:	Loss	213
nineteen:	Limbo	224
twenty:	Restore	236
	Acknowledgments	245

WORSE

ONE

Rally

“I understand that you had quite a difficult summer, Will.”

Worser remained still and silent, refusing to even blink. Principal Ludlum knew nothing about him, no matter what the official records showed. For one thing, Mr. Ludlum kept referring to him as Will. No one called him that. To his mother and his teachers, he was William. He was called Worser by everyone else in school—including, once, accidentally (he hoped), the school secretary.

Mr. Ludlum appeared to be what Worser’s mother called a *standoffishial*—one of those administrators who hides in an office all day avoiding people. It was Mr. Vaccario, the assistant principal, who was the perceived figure of authority. He was the one who stalked the hallways of Oak Valley Middle School threatening students and had a face that was rough and red like a meatball.

Throughout sixth grade, Worser had rarely seen Mr. Ludlum. And he’d certainly never been in his office, not until ten minutes ago, at the end of his first week of seventh grade.

And Worser was not impressed.

Mr. Ludlum's stooped posture, rumbled suit, and unchanging expression of surprise-bordering-on-panic—as if he couldn't remember how he came to be in his current location—didn't exactly inspire fear. To believe that the title of *principal* gave him instant authority would be like believing a uniform gave a Boy Scout the ability to lead troops into battle.

“You probably think that what you did wasn't that bad. You probably think that because the school year has only just begun, we are going easy on offenders. You probably think that because you are an honor student”—the principal lifted the file that lay open on the table in front of him, making its sides flap like wings—“we won't take any serious action.”

Worser waited for the eventual thesis statement. For all their talk about productivity, educators were some of the worst time-wasters on the planet. Being the son of a university professor—two when his father was alive—Worser knew that better than most.

“But,” the principal continued, “I'm afraid that's *not* how the system works.”

There it was. The main point—although not clearly stated. He'd padded it with the phrase *I'm afraid*. Then again, Mr. Ludlum looked a little afraid, so perhaps he accidentally let slip his true feelings. He also used the word *system* instead of *school*. This made Worser imagine himself and all the other students passing through a giant digestive tract toward the inevitable end. The metaphor, he decided, was apt.

“Will?” Principal Ludlum's voice lowered and took on weight—the same weight it had when he announced disaster drills over the intercom. “Why will you not answer me?”

Worser lifted his left eyebrow. “Because you haven't asked me any questions. You have used only declarative sentences.”

The principal's expression grew slightly more startled. He made a few random vowel sounds before clearing his throat. "Do you know why you were sent in here this afternoon?"

"Yes."

Worser's brief reply seemed to disappoint the principal. "Perhaps you would like to explain your misbehavior in your own words," he said with a sigh, his back sliding a couple of inches down his office chair.

"I was in the library reading, and apparently that went against school policy."

Principal Ludlum took off his glasses and rubbed the space between his brows. "It was not that you were reading. That was not the problem, was it? The problem was that you were supposed to be somewhere else. Do you remember where we asked all students to be at three o'clock, per today's special schedule?"

Worser disliked this practice of asking obvious questions. It served no real purpose and succeeded only in making people feel like kindergartners.

"Yes," he replied. "Students were asked to report to the gymnasium at three o'clock. I felt that reading would be a better use of my time than watching cheerleaders spell *Oak Valley* with their bodies. I already know how to spell both *oak* and *valley*, as well as many other words."

"There is no reason to be snide, young man."

"I'm merely frustrated. I would think that in this age of video games and cell phones that school administrators would reward a student who wanted to read or write—not send him to the office."

Again, the principal let out a series of incomprehensible sounds before deflating with a long sigh. "You appear to

be...good with words,” he said. “Do you know what *rally* means?”

Worser, who had been occupying the chair across from Mr. Ludlum like a jellyfish in a teacup, suddenly leaned forward and elongated. He forgot his plan to be as unmoving and close-mouthed as possible.

“*Rally*,” Worser began. “I suspect you are referring to the noun form of the word, which means ‘a gathering of people with a common interest.’”

“Correct. Today we held a pep rally, a gathering designed to boost pride in one’s school community. I think you would agree that a sense of unity among you and your peers is important—at least as important as the words in the book you were reading.”

Worser’s hand clenched. “My peers? The same people who have teased me and kicked my backpack to the rear of the bus so often that I’ve decided to walk to and from school instead? The same people who delight in placing vile things on my chair and referring to me by a hateful and ungrammatical nickname? Do I think that a sense of unity with *them* is equal in value to words? No, I do not. Words elevate our species. They are the basis of civilized society. There is nothing more important than words.”

Worser knew this was the wrong answer, but he didn’t care. He would much rather report to in-school detention and sit between two future armed robbers than say that a school pep rally was worth as much as the written word. Principal Ludlum might not have realized it, but his question went right for Worser’s jugular. Worser had to defend himself.

The principal studied Worser, and Worser studied the

principal, waiting for the verdict. Would Mr. Ludlum dole out the sentence himself or call in that thug of an assistant principal? He hoped it wouldn't come to that. Not that he feared Mr. Vaccario's sweaty, vein-popping rants. He'd just had enough of school for one day and was eager to get home and work on more important things.

"Well—" Mr. Ludlum began in his lackluster voice. But he never got to complete his sentence, because right then the door opened, and a woman dressed from head to toe in purple stepped into the office.

"There you are, Potato," the woman said to Worser.

The school secretary's apologetic face peered around the doorframe. "Excuse the interruption, Mr. Ludlum. The boy's mother is here."

Worser winced. "She's *not* my mother."

Worser sat in the passenger seat of Aunt Iris's rattly, lima-bean-colored Volkswagen Squareback. Every bump bounced him hard enough to strain against his seat belt and was accompanied by a high-pitched, almost rodent-like squeak from somewhere in the machinery—but he didn't mind. His detainment in the school office had been demoralizing and pointless, and the ride was an assault on his senses, but at least he'd been spared the walk home.

"My, my," Aunt Iris kept repeating. She also appeared to be shaking her head, but that could have been due to the jostling motions of the car. After a half dozen *mys*, she regarded him with a saintly smile and said, "Well now, I suppose there's no good reason to tell your mom about your little disturbance, especially since that nice principal decided not to discipline you."

Before they'd left the office, Mr. Ludlum explained that he felt his "stern talking-to" was punishment enough and that—in a reversal of his earlier statement—he could be lenient because Worser was an honor student.

"But you are lucky Ms. Lucretia was home and able to sit with her. I really don't like leaving your mom in the care of others—even for just a little while. So no more monkey-shines, okay?"

Worser replied with a sound like *mmm*.

"Your mom is having such a terrific day, and I don't want to ruin it. She did wonderfully at her therapies, ate lots of lentil soup for lunch, and took a nice nap. It has definitely been a purple day. Deep and serene. Isn't that wonderful?"

Worser acknowledged Aunt Iris with a new sound—part sigh and part grunt.

"And she just loves listening to music on the radio. She wants me to keep it on that classical station. She particularly enjoyed that one song that went *ya DA da-da daaaaah...*" Aunt Iris continued warbling a melody with nonsense syllables, her right hand letting go of the steering wheel so that she could conduct an invisible orchestra.

"She does not like listening to music," Worser said. "You just think she does."

Aunt Iris was imagining things. His mother had always said music was a waste of time. Silence was her favorite background noise, as it was with him, too. Professor Constance Orser and her late husband, Professor Reginald Orser, twenty years older than she, had never owned a sound system, a television, or a cell phone. They had also, according to his mother, been the last in their respective departments at the university to own and operate a computer—and had only given in due to

pressure. Bound books had been their preferred methods of gathering information as well as entertainment.

“Oh, but she does enjoy it,” Aunt Iris said. “I know so.”

“How? Did she tell you she likes it?”

Aunt Iris stopped singing. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

Worser closed his eyes—his best strategy for dealing with Aunt Iris. He was not used to interacting with someone of her nature for extended periods of time. Aunt Iris was emotional, expressive, eager, ebullient. A walking string of *e* modifiers. *Eeeeeeee!* Worser, meanwhile, was bookish and standoffish, and preferred hushed tones—all words with *shhh* appropriately enough. Opposite sounds, opposite personalities.

He supposed he should feel guilty for what he’d said, but he didn’t, especially since it rewarded him with silence from his aunt. For the next few minutes, all he heard were the screeches and rumbles of the car. When he opened his eyes again, the Volkswagen was pulling onto the cracked cement driveway next to his mom’s Nissan.

Aunt Iris met his gaze. “Please be patient and kind, okay?”

Worser wasn’t sure if his aunt wanted him to be patient and kind to her or to his mother, but he nodded.

This seemed to appease her, because she simultaneously switched off the car and switched on her singing. “*Ya DA da-da daaaaah...*”

As she and her scarves fluttered up the walkway and through the front door, Worser pretended to fumble with something in his backpack in order to lag behind on the porch—another way of coping. He needed a brief pause—a semicolon, or perhaps an ellipsis—so he could transition. Not from school to home or outside to inside, but from what was to what now is.

He bounced on the loose boards and studied the shadows cast by light straining through the contents of five hanging baskets. Spider plant had begotten spider plant, which had begotten more spider plants—hundreds of the spindly spawn—most of them now shriveled and dead from the Texas heat, creating a thatched curtain over the porch front. Aunt Iris often bemoaned that they were probably beyond saving, and that she'd one day get rid of the poor carcasses. But Worser hoped not. He actually liked the cover they provided and admired the stubborn way they remained tethered to one another.

“Oh, here he is.” Ms. Lucretia, their next-door neighbor, was stepping onto the porch. “We were just wondering what was keeping you.”

“You still out there, Potato?” Aunt Iris poked her head around the front door.

Worser was annoyed at being interrupted, annoyed that his aunt would ask about the obvious, and annoyed that she persisted in calling him Potato. He already felt as if he were the only seventh grader in town who hadn't launched into puberty—and being referred to by the nickname she'd given him as a baby didn't help. Then again, as he studied his rounded shadow on the porch floor, he had to admit his short, stout shape did look rather potato-like. Perhaps she couldn't help herself.

Ms. Lucretia crossed her arms. She never smiled—at least at him. Normally, he was fine with that, as he despised it when grown-ups gave condescending smiles. She also didn't give him wide-eyed pitying looks like most of the adults he'd recently interacted with—another plus. She'd been his neighbor his entire life and usually just said things like “Hello” or

“Tell your mother I accepted a package for her” or “Don’t you dare step on my flowers.” All acceptable in his view. But in that moment, as she stared at him, he felt entirely too seen.

“You should go on in,” Ms. Lucretia said as she headed toward her house.

Worser sighed, shouldered his backpack, and stepped through the open front door.

His mother was standing in the foyer, waiting for him. “Be! Be! Be!”

“Hi, . . . Mom.” Worser heard the pause in his greeting and hated himself for it.

He wondered when he would get used to thinking of this person as his mother. It had been three months since the stroke—a bursting blood vessel that laid waste to a section of his mother’s brain the same way a bomb could level a town and cut off key supply routes.

Everything about her had changed. She held her head at a new sideways angle, more upturned than before. Her brisk trot had turned into a shamble. Her eyes were wider, her mouth a tilde—higher on her left, slack on her right. The hair she’d always kept in a no-nonsense bob was growing out shaggy and wild, except for a section of very short hair above her left ear where she had been shaved for the operation. And her power of speech was gone.

“Be!” She smiled at him and held up her thin, shaking arms. Dr. Constance Orser, professor of rhetoric, had lost all her words.

Worser had spent his summer waiting in rooms: actual waiting rooms, plus hospital rooms, Aunt Iris’s apartment, and the lobby of the rehab facility. First, he waited to learn whether his mother would survive. Next, he waited for her

to regain consciousness. After that, he waited for her to be transferred to the rehab facility. Now he waited for her return. She had been back at home for three weeks, but she herself had not come back.

Every morning he expected his mom to talk to him again, to share an interesting tidbit from the *New York Times* or read aloud a laughably incongruous sentence from a student's paper—or even criticize him. But at present all she could manage were random syllables beginning with *b*.

Rally. In verb form it meant to recover, bounce back. Worser's mother had not yet rallied.

TWO

Bear

After a snack of leftover lentil soup and more talk from Aunt Iris about how purple a day it had been, Worser finally made it up to the comfort and privacy of his room. Here there were no distractions. No bright colors, taped whale songs, or strange herbal fragrances. A smell did, in fact, emanate from his room—a sour odor, like lunchmeat a few days past its expiration date. But Worser couldn't detect it anymore, having become desensitized to it over the years.

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a large loose-leaf binder. It was battered and cracked, and the seam in the front was starting to give way. Tucked inside the clear plastic pocket on the cover was a yellowing piece of notebook paper that read, in nine-year-old Worser's careful lettering, *Masterwork by William Wyatt Orser*.

The binder was full—perhaps a bit too full, which contributed to the strain on the cover. Not counting the 17 empty pages in the back, there were 321 pages of writing—all lists of important observations Worser had made over the past three and a half years. Observations about words.

Worser took the pile of folded, freshly laundered shirts

that Aunt Iris had placed on the foot of his bed and transferred them to the floor. He sat on them as he settled into his usual at-home work spot: on the carpet with his back against his bed. As he stared down at the clean blue lines of the paper, he felt the usual quiet excitement—that subtle fizzy sensation surging through his body, concentrating in his fingertips.

He tapped his pen against his lips a few times as his thoughts whirred into a higher, smoother gear. Then he hunched over the notebook and wrote at the top of the page “Word Contradictions.” He had Aunt Iris to thank for this latest entry. Their conversation in the car had spurred the idea.

“If *terrific* can mean the opposite of *terrible*, why isn’t *horrific* the opposite of *horrible*?” he wrote.

Good. What else? He knew that *flammable* and *inflammable* meant the same thing, even though they looked like opposites. Also, there were other words that seemed as if they should be antonyms but were actually synonyms, like the nouns *caretaker* and *caregiver* and the verbs *bone* and *debone*. *Reckless* sounded as if it meant “disaster-free” when, in fact, it meant “careless and prone to accidents.” And *last* could mean, as an adjective, “belonging to the end of something” or, as a verb, “to endure.”

Yes, this was a worthy topic for a new entry. As he wrote down his observations, his tongue absently tapped the corners of his mouth, and the lingering annoyance over the events at school and the drive home ebbed away. The sounds of recorded marine animals and Aunt Iris’s prattling disintegrated into easy-to-ignore static. He was, finally, alone with his thoughts.

As Worser leaned against his bed and stared up at the

dingy spray-acoustic ceiling, his hands slid backward beneath the bed frame. He was just pondering how *clip* can mean both “to adhere” and “to cut off” when he felt a sharp pain in his left hand.

“Ow!” He glanced under the bed and found Seersucker (Seer for short), one of his aunt’s cats, glaring at him. Ears back, pupils like shivs. Worser cupped his throbbing hand in his other and noted four thin red stripes across the knuckles.

For as long as Worser could remember, his bedroom door wouldn’t completely shut. Seer had apparently decided to take advantage of this and make himself Worser’s antisocial, homicidal roommate. While the other cat, Gingham (Ging for short), was skittish, ghostlike, and rarely seen, Seer always seemed to be lying in wait around corners and under furniture.

Worser scrambled to his feet and opened the door all the way. “Get out, you sadist!” he shouted.

Seer made a demonic noise, part growl, part shriek, that culminated in a fang-bearing hiss before running out of the room—a blur of fluff, stripes, and malevolence.

After making sure there were no other lurking creatures, Worser slammed his door—which, except for the satisfying noise, made no real difference since the door immediately reopened. He then plunked back into his spot and tried to regain that highly charged focus. But it was no use. The fizzy feeling was gone, and so was his concentration.

Grumbling, Worser packed up his Masterwork. He needed to escape to somewhere peaceful, private, and cat-free.

Luckily, he had a place.

Worser had discovered his secret hideout a year ago while searching for a shortcut to middle school. The bus had become

unbearable. Loud and jam-packed, full of hurled insults and projectiles—with sixth graders the special targets. Worser couldn't get a seat to himself—no one could—and whoever ended up sitting with him teased him relentlessly. Even the band kids picked on him.

At first, it seemed he had only two alternatives, neither of them appealing. One would involve crossing a terrifying intersection where his neighborhood's main street met the highway, just as it became part of the new tollway. The number of dead skunks, possums, and armadillos at the intersection was a powerful enough warning to prevent him risking it. The second would involve a more tortuous route that would avoid the deadly juncture but require him to get up twenty minutes earlier to allow enough time.

When he consulted a map, Worser noticed a peanut-shaped green space marked MESA SEGURA NATURE PRESERVE that hugged the northern edge of his neighborhood. From the looks of it, if he cut diagonally through the green space, it would lead him to another group of residential streets—one of which led to his school. The entire walk would probably take ten minutes, tops. Determined, he set out to find this route.

The green space turned out to be lovely. It was full of trees—some tall and sturdy, others dark and twisty—that strained the sunlight and muffled the noises of the nearby roads. The ground was cushiony, dotted with occasional rocks, feathery ferns, and big green plants with long, tentacle-like leaves. Unfortunately, the space was also divided lengthwise by a limestone bluff approximately two stories deep, something that hadn't been apparent on the map. Worser had held tight to one of the gnarled trees and peered over the edge. Immediately below, the land was flat and scrubby, with

smaller and far fewer trees, and it appeared to be in the process of turning into residential lots, given the coral-colored tape dividing it into rectangles. This open land ended at a road and the neighborhood of split-level, ranch-style homes that led to his school.

He figured there had to be a safe way down. For the next half hour, he searched for a path—to no avail. It was becoming increasingly clear that he'd have to wake up earlier and use the more circular, time-consuming route, as the only way he could use the green space would be via hang glider in one direction and climbing gear in the other.

That's when a miracle had happened.

As Worser leaned defeatedly against a tall red oak, he'd noticed a timeworn piece of wood nailed into the tree. He discovered another roughly twenty inches above it. Then another and another—a set of seven rungs total, all leading up to a wooden platform. Worser, who detested physical activity, including rope climbing in gym class, nonetheless found himself clambering up.

He had no idea how old the tree house was, but it was in good enough shape to make him feel safe. The platform was weather-beaten, yet solid, and only one of the rungs near the top was slightly wiggly. Everything else appeared to be sound. After carefully checking for any exposed nails or hidden hornets' nests, he leaned back against the tree trunk, feeling strangely exhilarated.

And that was when a second miracle happened.

From his perch, he could see over the trees and down the bluff to the road with ranch-style homes, well-kept lawns, and minivans in the driveways. One house, gray brick with creamy white trim and shutters, seemed familiar

to him. He couldn't quite place it at first. But not five minutes later, a dark green Volvo pulled up and four people got out. He knew them immediately. A father, mother, daughter, and son. The tree house had provided him with a clear, albeit faraway view of Donya Khoury's residence.

Donya—daughter of Dr. Jasar Khoury, professor of poetry and a colleague of his mother's at the university. Donya—who was basically the same age, in the same grade, and had shared three classes with him in elementary school and Advanced Language Arts with him in sixth grade. Donya—the only person outside his family about whom he spent time thinking. Worsen felt it was a coincidence too wondrous to ignore and decided then and there to claim the tree house as his own.

Now, almost a year later, he glanced over at Donya's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He visualized her completing her homework at the dining room table. Or maybe flopped on the sofa with her cell phone cupped in her hands. Or doing whatever it was ordinary twelve-year-old girls did at home after school.

Of course, Donya wasn't ordinary. Donya was a being so extraordinary, he counted himself lucky to regularly inhabit the same building she was in. Eight years earlier, four-and-a-half-year-old Donya had handed four-year-old Worsen a doughnut in the break room beside her dad's office and said, "You're smarter than other kids, aren't you?"

"Yes," he'd replied.

From then on, he'd revered her, usually in silence and from a distance, but with the same indescribable urgency that compelled monarch butterflies to migrate to Mexico and drove king salmon thousands of miles upriver.

His feelings hadn't lessened by the time they started

middle school. Worser thought Donya had the most stunning and exquisite face of any human—the way her eyes lit up and her eyebrows pushed against each other while she read; the way she glared at the heavens whenever she observed asinine behavior at school, as if cursing an invisible god for filling her world with such stupidity; the way she never seemed to wear that expression while observing him.

Daylight was dimming, and shadows were stretching. If Worser wanted to use this time to work, he had to put aside all thoughts of Donya. For the next twenty minutes he tried to write about contradictory words and phrases, but he was too fidgety to think straight. He was still mad at Principal Ludlum, and mad at his aunt for fussing over his mom and swirling about his home. Emotions were pesky things that got in the way of the ordered thinking he needed for his Masterwork. Since his mom’s stroke, he’d been especially bad at managing them.

Worser had just started ruminating on how *fine* can mean both “high-quality” and “ho-hum,” when he heard the steady crunching of dry leaves. Someone was coming. It happened occasionally. Hikers passing by or stopping to check out the view from the top of the bluff. The first few months after he’d discovered his secret place, he worried someone would show up, claim the platform as their own, and order him down. But no one ever did. And no one else ever seemed to see it. The red oak was well hidden among other trees and plants, and the rungs were the same gray shade as the tree trunk. Besides, people so rarely glanced up.

Judging by the sounds, the person was coming closer. Now, in addition to the tramps and snaps, he could hear low grunts. Maybe an animal? A wild boar or mountain lion? He knew the former couldn’t climb trees, but he wasn’t sure

about the latter. He grasped his pen like a knife and waited for the creature to reveal itself.

And then, twelve months since miracles one and two, miracle number three happened. The creature turned out to be Donya, marching through the trees grumbling to herself. He recognized her dark wavy hair against the Day-Glo green hoodie she always wore—even on late-summer days like today.

Worser was so stunned by the sight of her, he let go of the pen he'd been holding as a makeshift weapon. It bounced off Donya's head just as she passed underneath.

"Ow!" She frowned up at him.

"Sorry."

"Worser?"

"Hi."

"Is this your pen?"

"It's all right. I have another."

"What are you doing here?"

"Just sitting and writing. I have my algebra homework with me, too."

Donya wandered around the tree, looking it up and down. "I had no idea this was here. Is this your spot?"

"My... spot?"

"Yeah. You know. Your place to get away from it all."

Worser nodded. "Yes, *refuge* is the term I'd use."

Donya knelt and peered over the edge of the steep bluff—an action that made Worser vibrate with worry.

"I used to have a spot," she said, gazing down. "There was an empty field across the street from our house, and I'd go sit under this big pecan tree and clear my mind. But last year they built our new neighbor's house and fenced in the tree. I wish I were under it now."

“You c-can...” Worser’s voice shook. He took a breath and restarted. “You’re welcome to come up here. I’ll share my spot.”

She shook her head. “Can’t. I’m afraid of heights.”

“Actually, that’s a misnomer. Fear of heights is really a fear of falling. Just like fear of the dark is a fear of what might be *in* the dark, not the darkness itself.”

Donya stood and clapped dirt from her hands. “I should go. It’s been a bad day. I really don’t feel like talking or getting lectures on word usage.”

Worser watched as she crashed through the nearby thicket, the vivid green of her hoodie fading into the celadon-and-olive tones of the surrounding foliage.

He wished he’d thought of something else to say. He could have told her she could keep the pen. He could have complimented her on her fluorescent hoodie. He could have praised her on her correct usage of the verb *to be* in the subjunctive form: *I wish I were under it now*. His comment about fear of heights wasn’t meant to be critical; he just wanted people to say what they meant. It wasn’t Donya’s fault those inaccurate terms had found their way into the lingo.

Worser decided to head home. He’d been in the tree house for an hour and hadn’t made any real progress on his Masterwork. The only thing he’d accomplished was to do to Donya what Seer had done to him: Though by accident and without drawing blood (thankfully), he’d driven her away in frustration.

“Beh?”

Worser ignored his mother and turned to a new page in a book titled *Forgotten English*.

“Beh?” his mother said again. She kept shifting against the pillows that propped her up in her hospital bed, her eyes staying on him the whole time. “Beh?”

He realized he should be happy she’d progressed to a new sound—a short *e* syllable rather than her usual long *e*—but it still didn’t make sense. Also, her rising pitch made it come off like a question. Regardless, he couldn’t understand it and felt it would be best to carry on as if nothing were happening.

“*Thruffing*,” he read aloud. “Lincolnshire dialect for ‘the whole matter.’ *Thruff*—I wonder if that’s related to the word *through*? Or perhaps *thorough*?”

Over the years, this was how they’d usually spent their after-dinner hours, reading to each other. His mother would read lists of the most commonly misspelled words or passages from grammar textbooks—grammar being her favorite subject, even if she did say it was a Sisyphean effort to try to teach it to hormonal college students. Etymology was another interest, and Latin, to an extent. She felt that conjugating Latin verbs was a waste of time, but she did want Worser to grasp common roots and see how English sprouted out of them—not unlike the way a thin green runner would shoot from a half-dead spider plant on the porch. In turn, Worser read to her, graduating from picture books to more complicated fare. He liked to try to stump her with rare words and phrases—those that were used only in particular regions or industries, or that had fallen out of favor over the years.

Now their evening reading time was considerably shortened. Instead of taking place in the living room, it took place in the study—which was being used as his mother’s bedroom since she couldn’t yet handle the stairs. And now it was only

Worser doing the reading, although he still chose the same subject matter.

“*Throttlebottom*,” he went on. “A shrewd—”

“Potato?”

Worser glanced up. Aunt Iris’s head—all unruly hair, woven earrings, and sheepish grin—was poking into the room.

“What?” he asked.

“I don’t think she’s enjoying this. Why not read *Alice* to her?” She pointed to a leather-bound edition of *Alice in Wonderland* that had been pulled off the shelf, dusted clean, and set on his mother’s nightstand. “She loved hearing me read the first chapter today.”

“Nonsense.”

“Why do you doubt me?”

“I’m saying that book is full of silly nonsense, not to mention written by a suspected pedophile,” he said. “You don’t know what she likes.”

“I’m her sister. I grew up with her. I can tell when she’s happy and when she isn’t.”

“I’m her son, and I’ve lived with her my whole life. I know how she feels about Lewis Carroll. The only reason we have that book is that some clueless acquaintance gave it to her years ago.”

“I gave it to her.”

“I rest my case,” Worser mumbled.

Aunt Iris’s sigh seemed to defy normal lung capacity. “Fine,” she said. “Then why not read her a different story?”

“She doesn’t like stories. She likes words.”

“That doesn’t make sense. If someone likes words, they like stories.”

Worser squeezed his eyes shut. “You’re not like us. You wouldn’t understand.”

The curl of Aunt Iris's brows showed him he'd hurt her feelings. He tried to enjoy it, ignoring the heaviness that seeped over him like cold mud.

"I refuse to fight," she said. "I truly hope you two enjoy yourselves. Just remember that she had a long day today and that you'll have more time with her tomorrow and Sunday. She'll need to go to sleep soon."

After Aunt Iris closed the door, Worser grumbled, "What a chuffy snollygoster."

"Beh?"

"Sorry you had to witness that. I was only saying—" Glancing up, he noticed his mother had stretched out her hand, reaching for a framed photo on the side table. It was of Worser as a two-year-old, wearing only a diaper and hugging a stuffed bear. His aunt must have had it framed and placed it there. For all her complaining about clutter, she sure brought in a lot of it herself.

A new thought tugged at him.

"Wait. You want the bear? Is that what you're saying? *Beh* means 'bear'?" he asked.

His mother grinned back at him. It was weak and slightly lopsided, but clearly a smile. "Beh," she said again, raising both arms.

"I'll have to go and get it," he said. "I'll be right back."

He set down *Forgotten English* and hurried upstairs to his room.

The bear. Other than the books he had teathed on, ripped, and covered in drool, the bear was his only memorable toy from childhood. He wasn't sure where it had come from, or if it ever had a name, but he dimly recalled carrying it around. Sometime during his grade school years, he'd abandoned it,

setting it on top of the high bookcase in his room. Now and then he spotted it as he lay sprawled on his bed, but otherwise he never gave it any thought. Why his mother wanted it was a mystery.

The bear was slumped despondently against an unused Battleship game. The bookcase was tall, and Worser couldn't remember how he'd gotten the bear up there. Maybe his younger self had tossed it several times until it landed.

He fetched a chair from his mother's bedroom, which was now his aunt's bedroom. Standing on the seat and stretching out his arm, he was able to grasp one of the bear's paws between his fingers and pull it down.

By the time he got downstairs, his mother was lying back in apparent sleep. Her face had gone completely slack and her eyes were closed, though her right eye tended to stay open a tiny bit ever since the stroke. His errand had taken too long—and she was exhausted after her triple shot of speech therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy that day. He'd have to give it to her tomorrow.

As Worser turned to leave, his shoulder accidentally hit the doorjamb.

"Ow," he muttered.

"Be?"

His mother's eyes were open, watching him. Again, she smiled, and again he focused on the slight tilt and felt guilty.

"Sorry I woke you. I brought him down like you asked." He walked to her side and tucked the bear under her left arm. "See? There he is."

His mom glanced down at the bear then up at Worser again. "Beh?" she said, her voice low and crackly.

"Yes. Bear." He stood there, unsure of what else to do.

She seemed more confused than happy. Then again, he wasn't confident in his ability to read her lately. He decided she was probably just tired and that he should leave so she could sleep.

“Beh?” she said again, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Yes. I got you the bear. Rest now, Mom.” He watched her image slowly disappear as he closed the door—and was ashamed of the relief he felt when it clicked shut.

THREE

Outlet

“Sorry.” Herbie spoke with the same matter-of-fact tone he used with everything he said, without even a hint of embarrassment. Worser squinted up at the glowing tube lights in the school’s ceiling and blew out his breath as slowly as possible.

It was Monday morning, and he and Herbie Nestor were standing in their usual pre-start-bell spot—a nook in the wall of the student center. It was safer there, away from all the noise and activity taking place at the tables set out in front of them. The nook was also right next to the school’s main office, and only the most dedicated and inspired bully would dare pick on someone within clear view of Mr. Vaccario as he stood at attention, arms crossed, frown in place, watching from the window-walled office a few feet away.

This morning, however, Worser was considering venturing out of this zone of safety. Mainly because the nook kept filling with Herbie’s farts.

“Dear god, Herbie. You really put the *scent* in *adolescent*.”

“Sorry,” Herbie said again. “Nanna says I need to gain

weight, so she's started making me these potato-and-egg scrambles in the morning."

Worser didn't respond. He was too busy holding his breath. It was coming time to inhale again, and he wasn't sure if he should use his nose or mouth. Mouth breathing would likely lessen the smell, but would it also be, in a way, like eating the farts?

He chose his nose and regretted it.

"Have you ever noticed how different people's farts sound?" Herbie asked. "Like how, whenever I fart, it sounds like a question, and whenever you fart, it sounds like a statement?"

"No," Worser said, although, because he was holding his breath, it sounded more like *dough*.

"Do you think people's farts could tell us something about their personalities? Take Nanna's farts, for instance. They're just little pops. Kind of meek—like her. Could the two things be related?"

Worser didn't respond because he was still avoiding inhaling.

"Anyway." Herbie made one of his signature shrugs. "Can I just point out that this conversation mirrors the differences in our fart sounds?"

Worser found Herbie's ramblings a little more inane than usual that morning. That plus the polluted air would have been plenty of reason for him to go elsewhere. But he wouldn't. The fact was, he'd grown dependent on Herbie's presence—especially because Herbie was his only friend.

Their alliance began one day in sixth grade when Herbie approached him in the locker room after PE class and complimented Worser's shirt—a faded Calvin and Hobbes

tee. This bold move of Herbie's shocked Worser for two reasons. One, because no one ever approached him voluntarily unless it was to harass him and, two, because he was, at the time, *only* wearing the Calvin and Hobbes shirt. He'd been so taken aback that not a single snappy retort had occurred to him and he ended up saying simply "Thanks"—mainly to get Herbie, who kept on standing there awaiting his reply, to move on.

After that incident, Herbie sought out his company at lunch and fell into step with him whenever he spotted him in the hallway. At first, it annoyed Worser that Herbie would assume they were friends when Worser had never asked him to be one. Then again, Worser wasn't exactly sure of the protocol.

As a roly-poly kindergartner, unaccustomed to conversation with anyone under the age of forty, overwhelmed by social situations, and still unskilled at such practices as blowing his nose, Worser had approached kid after kid on the playground during recess to ask each one to be his friend. Every time he was turned down. Sometimes the kids would kick pea gravel at him. The next year, as an equally awkward and boogery first grader, he had tried it again with the same results. By second grade, he'd come to accept his status as a loner. By third grade he preferred it.

Worser quickly discovered that Herbie had fairly interesting tastes in conversation topics—though not including today's. Also, Herbie never challenged any opinion of Worser's. In fact, nearly everything Worser said was approved of and adopted. But mainly, having someone stand beside him and sit with him in the cafeteria brought a sense of belonging at school he hadn't realized he'd been lacking.

Worser had never spent time with Herbie outside of school. What would they have done? Worser preferred doing homework on his own, and he doubted Herbie was the crossword-puzzle type. Plus, his mother would have found Herbie's questions insufferable. There had been a couple of times when Herbie invited him to his house, but Worser had always politely declined. He hadn't even told him what had happened to his mother.

As Worser stood in the nook and contemplated how to attain oxygen, a flash of fluorescent green caught his eye. It was Donya's hoodie—attached to Donya. She was standing in the office talking to Principal Ludlum.

Just the sight of her seemed to lift Worser out of the noxious cloud he was standing in. He no longer worried about respiration. Instead, he focused on her. Her intense expression, her flailing arms. Whatever she was saying, she certainly believed strongly in it. Even Mr. Vaccario broke his sentry stare to glance over at her. It was difficult to tell, but the slight evening of the vice principal's corrugated face seemed to indicate silent approval. Principal Ludlum, on the other hand, kept glancing at the wall clock, as if hoping for the start bell to rescue him.

Donya said something and made one final grand gesture, her wide brown eyes both angry and pleading. Principal Ludlum's shoulders rose and fell in a sigh, and he answered while shaking his head. With one last furious flash of her eyes, Donya turned and stormed out of the office.

As she stomped past Worser and Herbie, she paused and looked at them.

"Hi," Worser said, raising his left hand.

Donya scrunched up her nose, said, "Eww, what smells so

awful?” and continued on her way, cupping her hands over her face as a makeshift gas mask.

Herbie’s problem seemed to clear up by the end of the school day when he and Worser had geography together. It was the only class they shared, and the air in the classroom had had its usual stale aroma of old books mixed with nervous sweat and lemon-scented floor cleaner.

“It’s a disgrace that they’re having us memorize the states again,” Worser said as he stalked out of the classroom with Herbie. “We did that in third grade. What a flagrant misuse of time and resources.”

Worser took note of his own increased volume. He was, as his aunt would say, “in a state.” It then occurred to him to make a pun about being in a state over the states, but he was too indignant for wordplay.

“Yeah. Probably because most students still can’t recognize them on a map,” Herbie said striding into place beside him. “I kind of like it, though. Have you ever noticed that Montana’s west side looks like a sad man? And New York is a munched-on nacho chip?”

Worser had not noticed, yet he knew he would the minute he studied a map again. Herbie was constantly sharing offhand observations that would forever alter Worser’s view of reality. Like his comment about electrical outlets resembling two scared faces, one on top of the other. Now, anytime Worser needed to plug something in, he saw a terrified expression and felt rather violent shoving prongs into its eyes and mouth.

Someone passing by let out a sneering laugh. Worser wasn’t sure if it was coincidence, or if the person was laughing

at what Herbie said—or at the general sight of the two of them.

He tried to imagine how he and Herbie must look to others. More than once, Worser had been made aware of his resemblance to an overgrown baby, with his protruding belly, round cheeks, round nose, and two chins. Herbie, meanwhile, was all thin tall lines, bony angles, and a scribble of curly hair. They were two cartoon styles, a little-known member of the Peanuts gang walking alongside a Ralph Steadman drawing.

“Where are you going?” Herbie asked.

“To the library.”

“The school library?”

Considering the school library was a mere ten yards down the corridor and the closest public library was three miles away, Worser figured the answer was apparent. Still, he replied, “Yes.”

“You can’t. They’re locking it up after school now.”

Worser stopped in the middle of the hall, causing the current of students to divide in half and go around. Herbie had to double back to him.

“Are you serious?” Worser asked.

Herbie nodded. “Yep.” He glanced up at a clock on the wall. “Aw, man. Nanna’s probably already here. Last week I was late leaving the building and we got in trouble for blocking the pickup lane. See you tomorrow!” He turned and jogged down the hallway, his figure becoming a curly-haired silhouette as he approached the sun-drenched glass doors.

Worser continued toward the library. Sure enough, the interior windows revealed it to be dark and empty. A note printed in large, Arial Black font had been taped to the door:

ATTENTION STUDENTS:
THE LIBRARY WILL BE LOCKED AFTER SCHOOL
UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.
IF YOU NEED TO RETURN MATERIALS, PLEASE USE
THE BOOK DROP ON THE WALL TO THE RIGHT.

A boy stood reading the sign—a boy for whom *boy* would not quite be the correct term. He was obviously an eighth grader, although he looked even older, with his broad shoulders and smatterings of pencil-mark-like whiskers on his cheeks and chin. He was also over a foot taller, so Worser found himself staring straight at the individual's Adam's apple—both spellbound and unsettled by the knotty protrusion and the way it jutted outward, as if it were a dowel connecting the head to the neck. It made Worser swallow reflexively.

He knew this man-boy in that vague way of having shared the same educational institution with him for a year. He'd noticed him before, possibly had a class with him, or maybe he'd been tormented by him. If Worser wasn't feeling so intimidated, he could probably recall the male creature's name. He knew it was some single-syllable moniker with lots of saliva-producing consonants. Kurt? Mac? Brock?

"Man. This sucks," the man-boy said, gazing at the sign on the door.

Nick? Rick?

"Total tyrannage," the teen titan continued, shaking his shaggy head.

Worser couldn't help himself. "Tyrannage?"

"Yeah, man. Like tyranny. They're keeping us down." He began loping away.

That's when the name came to Worser. "Turk."

Turk turned. "Yeah?"

"Um..." Worser hadn't meant to say it aloud. He quickly scanned his memories but couldn't come up with an instance of past harassment by this person—although he knew that most males of this age and size were capable of it. "Just... sorry. About... the tyrannage."

Turk smiled. "Fist bump," he said, and punched the air between them.

FOUR

Accommodations

Worser had hoped to kill some time at the school library before he headed home. He knew the therapists had emphasized how important it was to stick to a routine, to help facilitate his mother's memory, but sometimes it was hard to stay on a schedule, especially if it meant going somewhere you weren't always happy to be.

Aunt Iris had purchased an enormous monthly calendar with tear-off sheets and hung it in the dining room. In each day square, she would write scheduled activities in large print and pair them with cartoon figures of each person involved. Next to the three regular therapy appointments on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., she drew a stick figure with straight hair for his mom and one with curly hair for herself.

On school days, next to the times Worser typically left home and returned, she always drew a baseball-cap-wearing boy (which he found both ludicrous and misleading, since he'd never in his life worn a baseball cap). And at the end of each day, Aunt Iris would routinely, and somewhat ceremoniously,

X out the square with a maroon marker to help his mother grasp the passage of time. Worser hated the sight. All those red slash marks—all those bloodshot reminders of time spent in this new upside-down reality.

That morning he'd noticed Aunt Iris had written in today's square, "Take Potato clothes shopping?" She had been on him for some time about the worn condition of his clothing and insisted it was tradition to buy new back-to-school outfits—a tradition Worser felt was nothing but manipulative commercialism. Why should he care if his pants and shirts were faded or had loose threads? All that mattered was that he was adequately covered. And he was.

He wanted to grab a snack and go relax in his room—but the note made him wary. No doubt the second he arrived he'd be pressured into some traumatic shopping trip, with Aunt Iris's hooting laugh drawing attention to them and strangers shooting pitying looks at his mother.

It infuriated him that his aunt kept trying to parent him. Of course, these efforts weren't new, since she'd often brought or mailed him clothes over the years (including the Calvin and Hobbes shirt that Herbie so admired last year), but at least her gifts had spared him the indignity of having to shop with her.

As Worser stepped onto the porch past the thicket of half-dead spider plants, he could hear . . . music? And . . . laughter? Careful to avoid the loose, creaky planks, he made his way to the window.

Music was blaring from some unseen spot, no doubt one of his aunt's gadgets. An irritating mesh of noise—all *blang* and *crash* and *bombitty*. He couldn't even make out the words the singer was screeching. Of course, if he could understand

them, he'd almost certainly find them maudlin and clunky, rhyming *kiss* with *missed* or *heavenly* with *seven seas*.

Aunt Iris was holding onto his mother's hands, making her arms sway back and forth, giggling like a child one-sixth her actual age. Together they shuffled their feet, turning in a slow circle. Eventually, his mother's face came into view. Mouth in a wide-open smile—higher on the left side. Head bobbing, not because of the rhythm of the song, but because of her lack of muscle control.

He wasn't sure what he was seeing at first, but then it came to him: dancing. Aunt Iris was making his mother dance!

Worser felt embarrassed for her. Dr. Constance Orser, dancing and grinning like a buffoon? He was ashamed to have even glimpsed it. A wave of fury took him over, and he visualized himself racing into the house, breaking the offending gadget, and yelling at his aunt for subjecting his mom to this degradation. Instead, he turned and ran away.

If he'd had his wits about him, he would have headed to his secret spot in the tree. But, alas, that handy part of his mind that managed planning and reason wasn't operating. All control had been handed to a smaller, less sophisticated part of his brain that simply urged him to *go*—to put as much distance between himself and the house as possible.

While such an instinct to flee might impel other creatures for miles, Worser gave out after a couple of blocks. He was tired. He was sweating. His backpack was heavy. He needed a snack. The urgency that powered him was waning, but he still didn't want to turn around and trudge back to his house.

He slowly spun in a circle, scanning his surroundings, and recognized the obnoxious orange neon U-BAG'M sign

in the shopping center not far from his house. Generally, he and his mother avoided places that butchered spelling, grammar, or punctuation (and this establishment achieved the trifecta), but he was feeling desperate. Ten minutes later, Worser was stepping out of the U-Bag’M with a large Gulpee drink—flavor unknown. The crushed ice was covered in an electric-blue liquid that at times tasted like coconut and other times tasted like bubble gum. It was refreshing nonetheless and went nicely with his “grande”-sized cheese stick.

Soon, he was done eating and all that was left of his drink was a small mound of aquamarine-colored slush. Noisily slurping through the straw, he pivoted once again in a slow circle. He knew he should go home, and yet he couldn’t. Literally. The mere recollection of his mother dancing like an unsteady, wide-eyed toddler locked his limbs and prevented him from even facing in that direction for longer than an instant.

It was Aunt Iris’s fault. Talk about “tyrannage”! Over the past weeks he’d come to understand why he and his mother used to see her just on holidays and birthdays—even though she only lived fifty miles away in Denton. Once, when he’d asked his mother about their relationship, she’d replied with a sigh, “Iris is better in small, infrequent doses.”

Now Aunt Iris was with his mother all day, every day. To make matters worse, she appeared to be trying to remake his mother into a second version of herself under the guise of helping her heal. She, the younger sister, was suddenly the one in charge and was claiming the right to reorder their house and their lives. And Worser felt out of place everywhere—even on his own premises.

But if he couldn’t face home, where could he go?

And just like that, the instant the question entered his mind, Worser got a sign from above—in the form of an actual sign hanging over his head. He was standing at the base of a tall metal pole, the top of which listed the stores in the shopping center, and his eyes locked on to one beloved word: BOOK. Somewhere nearby was a place called Re-Visions Used Books. Tossing his cup and wrapper into a metal trash bin, he located the storefront and made a beeline across the parking lot toward it.

Worser stepped into the store, his arrival announced by a strip of bells hanging on the opposite side of the door. Once inside, he paused to take in the surroundings, a strange calm seeping over him.

The store was laid out in the shape of a capital *L*. For *Literature*. Or *Learning*. Or *Lair*. The bottom part of the *L*, where he now stood, held racks of children's books, paperbacks, and magazines facing the windows. On his right was a sales counter with a man sitting atop a high stool behind the register. Behind that was a dim hallway with an EMPLOYEES ONLY sign over the doorway. But it was the other part of the *L* that made up most of the store and captivated Worser. He could see bookcases lined against the wall on the left and more that stretched out in rows facing him—each filled with books of every color and thickness. Countless numbers of words in countless combinations. All of them beckoning to him.

He wondered if this was how explorers felt when they stumbled upon unfamiliar lands.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to the man behind the counter, “has this place been here long?”

“What are you? A reporter?”

“I’ve just never heard about it.”

“What every business owner wants to hear.”

Worser wandered up and down the aisles with his hand out, enjoying the feel of his fingertips gliding over the little speed bumps of the book spines. As he rounded the third and final row of bookcases, he came across a rectangular oak table, neatly hidden in the back of the store. His mouth curved into a small smile.

He returned to the man behind the counter. “Sir? Could I sit at the table in the back and work on a project?”

“Kid, this isn’t a library. If you’re going to read a book, you have to buy the book.”

“Actually, I’m going to be writing. Might I sit there for that?”

“That table is for paying customers only.”

Worser cast his gaze about until he spotted a worthy item. “I’ll buy this pocket dictionary.”

The man let out a long sigh. “Fine. But don’t be a nuisance, all right? I like things quiet.”

“There won’t be any problems.”

Again, Worser realized he was smiling. He found the place comforting. The bookcases overflowing with stock, some books stuck on top of others, oversized or odd-shaped tomes leaning every which way on the bottom shelves. The way dust toned down the colors and swirled in the sunlight angling in from the front window. The musty, woody smell. He even delighted in the gruff disposition of the store owner. It reminded him of home—the way home used to be before Aunt Iris showed up with her bright clothing, incense, and proclivity toward cleaning.

Worser studied the store owner as he rang up the purchase. The man was compact and slightly hunched. He was bald on

top, but his bushy brows and the thick hair on the sides of his head stuck out in all directions—especially the coarser gray hairs. That plus the dark blazer he wore over his faded blue button-down made Worser think of a crested penguin.

“Thank you, sir,” he said as the man handed him his new-used pocket dictionary.

“Meh.”

Worser trotted back to the table, sat down, and started to pull items from his backpack. Newspapers were strewn all over, some folded, some untouched.

“Sir?” he called out. “Is it all right if I move these papers so I can spread out my materials on the table? I won’t take up the whole surface.”

The man uttered a syllable that sounded like *gah*. “Quit calling me *sir* like I’m some Knight of the Round Table. It’s Mr. Murray. In fact, just quit calling out, period. You promised to be quiet, and I expected that to take hold immediately. I’ll let you know if you do anything wrong. Sheesh.”

Worser stacked the newspapers in a corner of the table and finished unloading his backpack. Figuring he’d get his assignment out of the way before starting on his Masterwork, he pulled out his geography homework. Just as he suspected, he immediately noticed the sad man in profile when he looked at Montana’s western border—and figured he probably would from now on.

He had just started to fill in the states on the unmarked map when inspiration struck. He grabbed his Masterwork binder and turned to a blank sheet. At the top of the page, he wrote out a new title: Words Comprised of State Abbreviations. Below that, he added the abbreviations in alphabetical order, followed by a brief list of ground rules.

He quickly noticed that some abbreviations were words unto themselves, like HI, ID, IN, OH, OK, the musical term MI, and PA. Fingertips sparking, he began to combine the abbreviations into larger words. As he worked, the physical world receded, replaced by words, paper, patterns, and the excited whirl of his nervous system.

After a ninety-minute stretch, he'd compiled a fairly long list:

AL AK AZ AR CA CO CT DE FL GA HI ID IL IN IA KS KY
LA ME MD MA MI MN MS MO MT NE NV NH NJ NM NY
NC ND OH OK OR PA RI SC SD TN TX UT VT VA WA WV
WI WY

Rules:

1. State abbreviations must be used whole; they cannot be divided.
2. State abbreviations must remain in their correct order. No reversing CA to AC, etc.
3. No other letters may be added to the words—they must *only* be made up of the abbreviations.
4. It is permissible to repeat a state abbreviation in a word, as in DECODE.
5. No proper nouns, abbreviations, or new slang.

AL

alarms
alms
almond
alpaca

AK

akin

AZ

AR

aria
arid
arms
arcade
arcane

CA

came
candid
candor

cane

CO

coal
code
coil
coin
cola
coma
come
condor
cone
cook

CT

DE

deal
dear
decade
decode
demand

deny

deride

FL

flak
floral
florid

GA

gain
gala
game

HI

hind

ID

IL

IN

inky
income
inlaid
inland
invade

IA

KS

KY

LA

laid
lain
lame
land
lane
late
lava

ME

meal
memorial
mend

MD

MA

maid
main
mane
many

MI

mica
mime
mind

MN

MS

MO

moor
moms

MT

NE

near

<u>NV</u>	pail	<u>VT</u>
<u>NH</u>	pain	<u>VA</u>
<u>NJ</u>	pane	vain
<u>NM</u>	<u>RI</u>	vandal
<u>NY</u>	ride	<u>WA</u>
<u>NC</u>	rims	wade
<u>ND</u>	rind	wand
<u>OH</u>	rite	wane
<u>OK</u>	<u>SC</u>	wail
<u>OR</u>	scar	wend
oral	<u>SD</u>	wind
ordeal	<u>TN</u>	<u>WV</u>
<u>PA</u>	<u>TX</u>	<u>WI</u>
pact	<u>UT</u>	wide
		<u>WY</u>

It had been weeks since he'd been this productive. He felt breathless, almost light-headed, and his lips were wet from his habit of distractedly pushing his tongue against the corners of his mouth.

Worser took a moment to think of a word that might describe his emotional state. *Satisfied?* Not strong enough. *Elated?* Not quite right either.

Contented. That was it. *Con* for *concentration*, *contemplation*, and the *control* he felt over his situation. *Ed*, a suggestion of past tense and an expression of hope that the tension he'd been experiencing could be left in the past. And right in the middle of the word, *tent*, a shelter—protection from conditions and creatures that might thwart him. He was so grateful for this austere and secluded workspace, the thought of leaving pained him.

Worser packed up his belongings and trotted to the

counter. “Mr. Murray? Could I work out an arrangement with you? I’d like to rent this worktable a couple of weekdays after school—on Mondays, Wednesdays, and occasional other days with prior notice. What hourly rate would be appropriate in your view?”

Mr. Murray fixed him with the same expression from before. Not so much angry as cramped.

“You’re kind of a weirdo, aren’t you?”

Worser wasn’t sure how to respond. It seemed more like an observation than a question.

“But you work quietly. I like that.” The man rubbed the fuzzy patch of gray whiskers that stood out on his chin like dandelion spores. He seemed in favor of the idea—judging by the minor smoothing of his brow—so Worser was surprised when he finally said, “Nah. That sounds like the sort of deal that could get me in trouble. I got enough problems, kid.”

“We could write up a contract.”

“Ah, who wants to mess with something like that? What a nuisance.”

“Then how about...” Worser’s gaze bounced around, looking for an answer. “How about I purchase at least ten dollars’ worth of books for every hour I’m here? And since I likely won’t need them or have room in my backpack, I’ll immediately donate them back to the store. That way you’ll make sales but not lose stock.”

Mr. Murray raised his bristled chin and frowned off into the distance. His lips moved ever so slightly, as if counting to himself. Worser, meanwhile, was practically hopping in place. He *had to* make this work.

Finally, Mr. Murray leaned forward and stared Worser right in the eyes. “And you’ll be quiet?”

“I will.”

“Then I guess we have ourselves a deal.”

Worser nodded and headed out the door. Once again, a sense of peace came over him, magnified by the knowledge that this would not be a one-time event. And it would only cost him a minor rental fee each time.

Thank goodness he had some money: funds kept in an interest-bearing account at the local bank. His parents had set it up for him when he was born and had a percentage of their pay automatically deposited each month; then, ever since his father died, some Social Security money had been put in every month. When he was old enough, his mother had given him a prepaid debit card, and because he only used it for supplies and infrequent binges on junk food from the corner gas station, his balance had grown considerably.

In fact, the last time he'd checked—before the purchase of his after-school snacks and the dictionary—Worser's account held \$57,343.72.

As soon as he walked through the front door, Aunt Iris pounced on him.

“Where have you been? We've been frantic with worry!”

“I was shopping.” He walked past her into the kitchen.

Aunt Iris followed. “Shopping? For what?”

“A book.”

“A book?”

Worser was becoming increasingly annoyed at his aunt's insistence on repeating his responses in a high-pitched, grating voice. “Yes.”

“A book,” she said again. “For this whole time? What kind of a book?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Aunt Iris turned away from him, both hands raised, her head shaking back and forth making her earrings jingle. “Your mother is asleep, probably because she was worn out from being so distressed. We were worried you’d been hurt on your walk home from school! I was about to call the hospitals.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“How can you say that? You should have been here two hours ago. Why didn’t you call?”

Worser could only blink at her. It hadn’t occurred to him to call. His mother had never questioned him when he stayed late at the library after school or disappeared to his tree house. And if his mother didn’t worry about such things, why should his aunt?

“You didn’t check the calendar, did you?” Aunt Iris’s voice was back to her regular tone of disappointment. “Oh, Potato. You’ve got to get into the habit of checking it every morning.”

Worser didn’t want to tell her that he had, in fact, checked the calendar and saw her plan to purchase him new clothes, but it had not motivated him to race home.

“Your mother’s physical therapy appointment was canceled—just for today while they finished up some repairs. So instead, she and I did a little movement therapy after her nap. Oh, we had lots of fun.” Aunt Iris’s smile slowly vanished as she heaved one of her lengthy and, in Worser’s opinion, highly theatrical sighs. “We’d been hoping to all go to the department store as soon as you got home, but then you never showed up.”

Worser also didn’t want to tell her that he actually had made it home on time, but the sight of Aunt Iris and his mother dancing had driven him away.

“We waited and waited and worried and worried,” she went on. “This is why you should have a cell phone.”

“Never.” Worser crossed his arms over his chest and straightened up as high as his fifty-four-and-a-half-inch frame could go. “They’re responsible for the deterioration of language. Besides, they’re radioactive. Mom agrees with me on this.”

“I know she does.”

“Also, I’ve told you several times that I don’t need new clothes. And I don’t appreciate your keeping tabs on my whereabouts. Mom never did as long as I was home for dinner. It isn’t any of your concern as far as I can see.”

“Actually . . .,” Aunt Iris began, then let the word trail off. “Potato, I promise, this isn’t me being nosy. I would like to know where you will be in case anything happens with your mother that you should know about.”

“Like what?” A dull panic rose up inside him.

“Nothing in particular. But if your mother needs you, I’d like to be able to find you.”

Worser realized, reluctantly, that his aunt had a point.

He exhaled in defeat. “Fine,” he said. “Then you should know that if I’m not here on Mondays and Wednesdays, I will likely be at Re-Visions Used Books at the shopping center. The library is now closed after school, so I made an arrangement with the proprietor. He’s letting me write and read at a table there on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. That environment is far more conducive to studying than this house, with all the constant interruptions by you and your belligerent animals. But no cell phone.”

He braced himself for an argument. He was prepared to

yell if he had to—to stomp and curse and toss things onto the floor.

His comings and goings were none of her business. She was not his mother.

“Very well, then,” Aunt Iris said breezily. “Please add it to the calendar.” And she whirled out of view.