

Hand Jive · Andrew Cozine

I WALK NORTH ON Campbell Avenue away from Jefferson Park Elementary School and Mrs. Hansen's third grade class. I am walking the half mile to Grandma's house. Heat waves shimmer up off the four lanes of asphalt to my left. Off on my right, toward the park, the steady, buzzing hum of cicadas electrifies the afternoon. It is a hundred degrees out, give or take, unusual but not too unusual for the middle of May in Tucson, Arizona. I am taking care not to step on the cracks in the sidewalk. When I step on a crack, I do the thing: I count out loud from one to five, over and over, until it is safe to stop. *One, two, three, four, five . . . one, two, three, four, five.* The hum of the cicadas is drowned out by the engine noise from a wave of cars travelling southbound; the cars pass, and the hum picks up again right where it left off. The white heat of the sun burns into my skin. I walk past the Catalina movie theatre and into the shopping center parking lot just as a group of older kids comes out of the Walgreens. I don't know these kids, I've only seen them around on the playground. They are laughing and shouting, making me nervous. I'm afraid they'll try to make me cry. The heat and the buzzing and the shouts of these kids makes it hard to concentrate. I know I'll slip up. I slip up. *One, two, three, four, five . . .*

I wait at the stoplight at Grant Road, hoping the other kids won't come my way. I don't want to wait with them. I don't know what they'll do. If they did try anything, my dad would do something about it. He would call their parents or call the school or go and have a talk with somebody. He would protect me. But what if something happened to Dad? I see my father spread out on the ground, red-faced, an oily, bloody wound spreading out across his chest. Eyes glazed, mouth wide open. Dead. That's a bad thing to think you're a bad boy what if something really happened because you thought a thing like that? I do the thing, the other thing, to stop it from coming true: *I remember my E.S.P. I remember my E.S.P. I remember my E.S.P. I remember my E.S.P. I remember my E.S.P.*

The kids go off a different way. I am all alone at the curb, watching and waiting, still not sure after dozens of crossings when I'm allowed to go. The cars hiss and swish as they pass. Radios blare from open windows. I wait for five minutes, ten minutes. Sweat trickles down my cheeks and my clothes are sticky and wet against my skin. I am thinking, When I get across the

street I will get a Baskin Robbins. When I get across the street I will go to The Book Stop and buy a book by the man who wrote *James and the Giant Peach*. When I get across the street I will go to Lown's Costumes and get some snap pops or a plastic dog barf, but I can't spend my whole allowance. I stare at the cracks in the sidewalk in front of me. The white glare begins to blur and the world gets foggy at the edges. *When I get, but I can't, I can't, what did I forget, what what did I oh no oh no what did I forget what did I forget I'm bad I'm bad what now what now oh no oh no oh no*. The pavement bucks up under my feet; I am swaying side to side. My heart is pushing up against my throat *heart attack heart attack like Grandpa* and my throat gets tight like my heart is trapped there blocking the air *I can't breathe I can't breathe help help I can't . . . help. . .*. The cars are close, too close, there's a horn honking and my feet are tripping forward *what did I do what did I do?* I know I did something, something very very bad. I know I'll pay for it, they'll say, What's wrong with you, William? My body is stopping short, lurching back the other way. I make a list: one, you didn't leave your sister at school, Grandma picked her up early; two, you weren't supposed to ride the bus home; three, you didn't forget a note for a field trip; four, you didn't have Spanish class after school; five. . . . It helps.

When I can see and breathe and move again, I shut my eyes and pray and run.

I am not crazy because of the words I say, and I am not stupid because I don't know how to cross the street. Brad Hubert and I are the smartest boys in the third grade. He does math a little better and I am the better reader. They separated us, put Brad in Miss Horner's third grade class, even though we are friends. I am glad. I don't like competition; it makes me too nervous. I suspect they think we are the smartest boys in the whole school, that we could do sixth grade work if they let us. Brad would want to move up to the sixth grade, I bet; I would not. I like to be where I'm supposed to be, where it's easy to be the best. The other kids come to me for help, even in math; one day I told them all to leave me alone, I was falling behind, and Mrs. Hansen called me up to her desk and told me to help them. She told me I had to, because I was smartest.

On the first day of third grade, I had to get up and go to the bathroom three times. I just get nervous a lot. Mrs. Hansen looked down at me the

third time and said, “What’s wrong with you, William? Do you have a problem?”

I still go to the bathroom a lot, but not three times. Not counting recess. Mrs. Hansen never asks what’s wrong with me anymore. I think she thinks I’m okay.

I’m okay.

I walk down our driveway in the late afternoon to get the mail for Mom. She didn’t work at the hospital today, so we didn’t go to Grandma’s house. The sun has fallen behind the big hill across the street, so the driveway and the house and the desert behind the house are painted in cool blue, quiet shadow. It is more peaceful here in the foothills, miles away from school and town. The only sounds are the cooings and twitterings of doves, Gambol quail, cactus wrens. And the voice, of course. The voice is a pain in the butt. It is me, but it’s not me. I never do what it tells me to do, it’s only trying to get me in trouble, but the voice is smarter and older than me, and sometimes it tricks me. It speaks with authority, so I listen.

Throw the mail away.

“No.”

Throw some of the mail away. Throw away that, and that.

“No. Shut up.”

If you won’t throw out the mail, you have to ride your bike off the end of the driveway.

“Shut up. Lalalalalalalalalalal shut up shut up shut up I’m not listening lalalalala.”

I pass gas. Just a little. It slips out accidentally. Just in case God is watching, I do my other thing: *Excuse me, excuse me, excuse me, excuse me, excuse me.* Five times, ten times, twenty-five times. Always in multiples of five. I don’t want any trouble.

Good, the voice says. Now: the mail or the bike.

The bike, I decide.

You have to ride as fast as you can. You have to start back up the road there to build up speed.

Okay, I decide. I take the mail in and ride my bike out to the designated starting line. It is a Schwinn Spirit of Seventy-Six, red, white, and blue. I take three deep breaths and start pedaling. Faster, faster. Forty yards, thirty yards, twenty, ten, don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t think, don’t think . . . go!

The end of our driveway, the part the voice refers to, is a concrete structure built up over a dry riverbed that runs parallel to the road. It is a five or six foot drop from the top of the concrete to the sand and rocks below. There are palo verde and mesquite tree limbs scattered over the surface of the riverbed, heavy and covered with thorns, but the rocks, some as big as pumpkins, are the real danger. I try to aim as I fly off the end of the concrete and feel the bike falling away below me, but the momentum I've built up is more powerful than I've figured on and I sail past the spot where I'd hoped to land. I close my eyes and let my body go limp, and I'm already crying from fear as I hit the rocks and dirt on my side and roll, roll. Sand scrapes at my face and forces its way into my mouth. My head hits a rock and I hear popping noises in my neck; pins of light swim up out of darkness and swirl in dizzy patterns. Sharp sticks like pencils jab into my arms and legs and, in the second before I stop moving, I sense a deeper shadow over me, something moving at me, heavy and powerful, at great speed. The bike. I throw my arms up over my head just as it hits me, a blow that knocks the wind out of me all over again. The handlebars jab into my ribs and I still, seventeen years later, carry the scar where a spinning pedal dug into my forearm. Thirty seconds of panic follow as I struggle to regain my breath; then, purple-faced, I limp back to the house with a sprained ankle and cuts and bruises everywhere.

I hope you're happy, I think. The voice is silent.

That night, Mom and Dad and I are sitting in the family room, listening to classical music, and I start to cry. What's wrong with me, they want to know. I tell them that the classical music makes me feel strange. I try to explain it but I can't find the right words, and I just get more and more confused. There's no way to tell them that I feel sad and hollow and empty inside because I know the music should make me feel happy, but I don't feel anything at all. People say it's beautiful like they say a sunset is beautiful, but to me it's just music, it's just a sunset. The sunset and the music are just there, they're not anything. Like me. I can't explain it. I feel numb.

Mom and Dad look at me curiously. That's a funny thing for an eight-year-old to be thinking, they say. And they're thinking more than that. They're wondering what's wrong with their son, what they did to deserve this, what they will do with me now. I'm ruined. I'm a bad egg. I'm a freak.

I go to bed and lie in the dark, staring at the top bunk. The voice comes and I tell it, beg it, will it to go away.

It stays.

In fourth and fifth grade things are worse. The voice is louder now and harder to control. Everything has to be repeated in five multiples of five, at the very least, to keep bad things from happening. Sometimes I have to excuse myself one hundred and twenty-five times for a single belch or fart. I try to convince the voice to let me just think out the repetitions in my head, but usually it makes me recite them out loud. Even then, I mumble in my smallest whisper. I try to convince myself that nobody notices. But I am cheating. The voice knows I am cheating; Grandpa Kiel, my mother's father, has another heart attack. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry.* At the hospital, the doctor comes into the little white room and tells us Grandpa is dead, and everyone is crying but me. I try to think about Grandpa. Grandpa used to tell me stories. He used to play his old jazz records for me: Bix Beiderbecke, Charlie Parker, the Dukes of Dixieland. I know this is sad, I see the word, SAD, hovering in the air before me, but all I feel is numb. Numb, empty, a little bit guilty, but not too guilty because I know it's only partly my fault. I did all my repetitions, every time, just like the voice told me. I only cheated a little. *Only partly only partly only partly only partly.*

Ryan Brooks is my best friend now, and my sister Nancy and I go to his house after school instead of Grandma's. Mom pays Ryan's mom to watch us. I like it at Ryan's house because it's more comfortable than school. At school my old friends, Joey and Mike and John, don't hang out with me anymore; they like to play football and I don't. My girlfriend, Celia Parks, breaks up with me because she wants me to be a Christian, and I tell her I was raised a Presbyterian and I'm staying a Presbyterian, and that's that. The break-up makes me sad but I can't break with God. God would make me pay. My teacher, Mr. Peltier, looks at me funny because I'm losing my smartness; I'm not living up to the things I'm sure Mrs. Hansen and Mrs. Ek told him about me. All of it makes me nervous. Everything makes me nervous. But afternoons at Ryan's go by in the same pleasant way, day in and day out. We watch TV, we play superheroes, we walk to the schoolyard and play softball. We visit a girl down the street, Sarah, who has a retarded brother. The retard sits in front of the television and says, Fuck you fuck you fuck you shut up shut up shut up. "Family Feud" is his

favorite show. *Treat him like you would anybody else*, Sarah's mom tells us. Sometimes the retard goes swimming with us, and I try to stay away from him so his freak germs don't swim through the water and soak into my skin. It's like when I had to stay at the weird family's house when Mom and Dad went out of town and they told me to take a shower. I pretended to take a shower but I really just turned on the water and sat on the toilet. I stay away from freaky people's water; I've got troubles of my own.

One day Ryan's little brother, Petey, decides he's in love with a little girl named Robin. We sing "Rockin' Robin" because it's fun to watch him turn red and go into fits. I can do it more than Ryan because Petey hits Ryan but he doesn't hit me. One time, though, I take it too far. We are out in the front yard, Ryan, Petey, Sarah, my sister Nancy, and I. I am singing the song and laughing and Petey tells me to stop, he begs, he pleads, but it's too much fun, too, too funny, and even when I try to stop I can't. *You'd better quit it*, he warns me, like he's got something up his sleeve. Some secret weapon. I keep on. *You better watch out*. I laugh. Petey chases me around but he doesn't hit me. He starts imitating me, this little second grader, he hangs his head and shuffles around and starts to mumble: *Excuse me excuse me excuse me excuse me excuse me*. . . . I feel my face go red and start to burn. I feel shaky all over and dizzy, light-headed. Ryan's mom comes out of the house at a fast trot. *Peter*, she yells. *Stop it. Stop that right now*. She grabs her son and shakes him. *I never, never want to hear you do that again*.

Ryan's mom drags Petey inside the house. But it's too late. We stand on the lawn in a little circle, heads down, silent. I can't pretend anymore that nobody knows, that everybody thinks I'm normal. *Treat him like you would anybody else*. I am just like the retard. I am a freak and I think it's a secret. They let me go to school, they let me read my books, go to friends' houses, ride my bike. But the whole time, they are watching me. They are letting me think I am just like anybody else.

But I am not the same. Not the same at all.

Everything changed in the summer before sixth grade. We moved to a new house a couple of miles away, and this meant a new school district and a new school, new teachers, new friends. I had a new routine: I could bike to my new school, and after school I could walk to friends' houses or invite them over to mine. The distance between school and home was no longer prohibitive. At around the same time, the voice went away. It just

vanished, so mysteriously and unobtrusively that I didn't notice its absence for nearly a year. And, in much the same way, I stopped needing my verbal repetitions, my chants, my prayers, whatever they were. I was free. There was suddenly much more time in a day to get things accomplished: I formed a secret club with my friends; I competed in speech competitions and spelling bees; I started listening to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones a lot; and I watched "M*A*S*H" every afternoon, curling up calm and serene before the television with no unpleasant voices or compulsions to distract me.

But my problems weren't over, not by a long shot. Something had to replace the voice and the behaviors, and it turned out to be something worse and more freakish by far.

In sixth grade I rediscovered the hand jive.

The hand jive actually originated when I was around five years old, in an amusing and fairly harmless way. I was a big Mister Rogers fan; I wanted to be just like him and to have my own television program when I grew up. When I had to go to the bathroom, number two, I played out this fantasy: I would sit on the toilet and, watching myself in the bathroom mirror on the opposite wall, I'd play talk show host. My *nom de guerre* was The Superdoozie Man, after the code word my parents had developed for bowel movements:

"Hello, welcome to The Superdoozie Man. I'm The Superdoozie Man, William Samuels. I hope everyone out there is having a great day. You should feel very special because you are a very special person. A lot of you kids send letters to me and call me up and you want to know, Are superdoozies bad? Should I feel bad for having superdoozies? No, superdoozies are totally natural. They are also called stools, or BMs. You should never call them poops, because you might get spanked. The Superdoozie Man never says bad words. Sometimes bad words just come out by accident, though, and you can't help it. Yesterday I called my uncle a bad word, but I didn't mean to. I said, 'Uncle David, you gucking, lucking, chucking, bucking . . . ' and then I said a bad word by accident. F-U-C-K-ing, in case you didn't know. But don't ever say that word. After Uncle David left, Dad spanked me. But your parents don't spank you because they hate you. They spank you because they love you. They love you very much because you are a very special person." Et cetera.

I believed I could see all of my viewers through the TV camera, just like the lady on “Romper Room” said she could. I believed I was the Voice of Authority. I believed I would be a great role model. I believed that parents would admire me and that I would make God and my family proud. The more I became immersed in my role, the more excited I became. I began to duck my head down and let my eyes fall out of focus, imagining my adult self on a television screen. One day, I felt an urge to hold my breath and constrict my vocal folds, i.e. to push the air trapped inside me up against my throat and hold it there, feel it burning my lungs. It is the thing people do when they lift something heavy, when they push out a bowel movement, when a woman has a baby. At the same time, I began to bend my arms at the elbows and flap them wildly, very very quickly, and then pull them in tight against my chest until the knuckles of my hands were pressing against my mouth. Flap out, pull in, flap out, pull in, alternating every five or ten seconds and keeping that air pressing tight against my throat. Occasionally, I would let loose with a sound effect or a tiny, excited squeak.

Before long, I was making up stories, movies, TV shows, cartoons, whenever I went to the bathroom. And the arm-flapping and constriction of my vocal folds helped me to simulate the same kind of excitement I imagined the viewer of my special programs might experience. For as long as I kept it up, I was lost in a totally private, totally satisfying world. I squeaked out theme songs, mood music, as I watched the images and narratives play out in my head, all the while pumping my arms furiously and sending blood racing to my brain. I was escaping into outer space, and it was as if all that body motion was required to launch my imagination and hold it suspended in those dark, isolated dream worlds.

I was fascinated. I was terrified.

The hand jive was born.

Back to third grade. Some of this may seem unrelated, but in my mind it all fits perfectly together:

Gina Betts, the neighbor girl who babysits us sometimes, is leading me out to our clubhouse in the desert. There’s a growing feeling of excitement, but I don’t know why. Gina is in the eighth grade at a private Catholic school, Saints Peter and Paul, and she is in love with a boy named Phil. All of her problems would be solved if she could just talk to Phil but, no, this is impossible. I only know the facts; I do not attempt to understand them.

“Gina, look, there’s a tarantula.”

“Come on.”

“You told me to show you if I found a tarantula.”

“Just come on. Hurry up.”

Gina leads me under the branches of a palo verde and we skid on our butts down Slide Rock to the riverbed and the fort. I am getting really excited; anything better than a huge, hairy spider has got to be pretty good. As it turns out, Gina just has to go to the bathroom; she moves off into the weeds and drops her jeans and panties. Tinkles. “Don’t you want to look?” she asks me finally.

I look. I look closer. I touch. Not as good as a tarantula, maybe, but hey, it’s something new.

“Now you,” she tells me. I eagerly strip down and let her look, look closer, touch.

“It’s a lot smaller than my dad’s,” she says.

“It gets bigger,” I tell her. “And it’s going to grow.”

“It’s supposed to have hair.”

I look down. “I don’t know,” I say, skeptically.

Gina leads me back over to the shade of the palo verde and we sit together. She shows me how to kiss like a movie star, with our mouths open. Her mouth is exciting and strange, especially the tongue. I like it. When she gets bored, we pull apart and head back home. “We have a secret now,” Gina tells me as we walk through the deep sand of the riverbed. “Don’t ever tell anybody our secret. If you don’t, we can keep on doing it.”

“Okay,” I tell her.

A few weeks later, Gina and I have all kinds of new secrets. We are going steady, for one, and she has given me a little silver going-together ring. I am not supposed to tell anyone what it means. We go on a date together to see “Return of the Pink Panther.” Nobody knows it’s a real date but us. Her mom drives; the movie is good. I like the way Peter Sellers kung-fu fights with his Oriental cook. Gina has told me how people make babies, she has told me about “rubbers”; we have make-out sessions in my closet when she babysits. She gives me all her older brother’s *Mad* magazines and makes me promise never to tell anyone anything. I like having secrets with her; I am tired of my own secrets. I know we are doing something wrong, something that is not normal, but, God knows, I’m used to that. It’s good to have a little company.

The hand jive is driving me crazy. It has spread to my bedroom, where I hand jive while I draw superhero comic books. I am Colossal Kid, Joey Carroll is Super Star, Joey's friend Jerry is Black Lightning. Brad Hubert is Boy, a stupid name, and his Boy character is too powerful, has too many superpowers. But everyone got to make up their own name and powers, so what can I do? It is hard, though, coming up with supervillains who can give us a run for our money while Boy's around. I draw pages and pages of stories, adventures we will act out on the playground tomorrow, and when Dad walks in I am deep into the hand jive, squealing and flapping my arms.

"Son," he says. "Time for dinner. What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I say. "Drawing comics."

My voice sounds funny. Dad sees the embarrassment, the shame, in my face, and he leaves it alone. This happens every time Dad or Mom catches me at the hand jive; there is uncomfortable silence and then both parties act as if nothing was happening at all. This time, he turns without a word and marches back to the kitchen. Soon they will learn to knock before entering; they don't want to catch me any more than I want to be caught.

Weeks pass, and one day Gina and I are out playing in the driveway. "I see you from my bathroom window," Gina says. "I see you when you stand in front of your garage."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I tell her, but already I'm getting nervous.

"You stand there and flap your arms around. You make funny noises."

It is getting hard to breathe. My heart moves up and pushes against my throat. "No, I don't," I say.

"I watch you," Gina says. "I think it's funny."

I deny it again, but she's got me dead-to-rights. Mom had suggested that I spend more time outdoors, so I have moved the hand jive to the front yard. I only do it a couple of hours a week, maybe, and I had thought no one could see me. The houses on top of the hill looked so far away, fifty yards at least, and Gina's bathroom window, the only window in her house facing ours, is fogged over with a special kind of glass. I had thought I was safe.

"I'm going to tell your mom," Gina says.

"No, no," I tell her. "No, don't, Gina, please." Gina is angry because I lost her brother's *Mad* magazines, and now he's back from the Army and he wants them. Gina only smiles and walks up the driveway and into our

house. I turn and run through the backyard and out into the desert. I run through the first line of trees and saguaros and out into the riverbed, the “wash,” as we call it, and I keep running the half mile through it to the big hill and up it and onto the dirt road that leads deep into the foothills at the edge of the mountains. The sky is dark and grumbling. A slight rain begins to fall and I keep running. I run one mile, another half mile. I will run forever. I am not wearing shoes, I almost never do, and as I head up the steepest incline in the dirt road I step on a nail and it drives up into my foot. I shriek and fall into the weeds at the road’s edge and lie there, sobbing, soaking wet. Every few minutes, I reach down and try to work the nail loose, but it won’t come. I try to imagine growing up in my house, with them knowing about me, about my problem, my condition, and I can’t. I know I will never go back.

An hour passes and the rain falls harder. I stop crying because it starts to hurt. Through the sheets of rain, I see Mom walking up the dirt road a hundred yards off. She is calling for me, and when she sees me she runs up the incline to where I am. Nancy, my little sister, told her when I ran off, and she has come to get me. I show her the nail and she pulls it loose. I am crying again.

“What’s wrong, William? What is it?”

What’s wrong, what’s wrong. Everything’s wrong. I can’t feel a sunset, I can’t feel music. I hear a voice in my head, and it pesters me and tells me to do bad things. I have to excuse myself fifty times when I belch or pass gas. I have to remember my E.S.P., over and over, all the time. I play hand jive with myself. I’m tired. I’m tired.

“You know, Mom. You know what’s wrong with me.”

“Tell me, honey.”

Gina didn’t really tell her at all. She was just scaring me.

“I said ‘goddamnit’ to Nancy,” I tell Mom. It’s true, too; I did say this, but it was several days before. “Gina said she was gonna tell on me.”

Mom smiles. “It’s okay, honey. It’s okay. Just don’t do it again.”

I was going to tell Mom about Gina and me, about how we are engaged now and how we’ve been going steady for a month. But Gina has protected my secret and now I will protect her secret. Our secret. Because the hand jive is a lot like sexual feeling to me, and it will stay that way as I grow up. It is forbidden, exciting, disturbing, wrong. I know I’m strange for wanting

to do it, but I can't stop wanting, I can't stop doing it. I am sick and awful, but I am the only one who knows just how sick and awful I am.

The skies are cracking, bellowing, and sheet lightning breaks across the clouds to the west of us. I stand and lean against Mom's shoulder, and she walks me home.

Around this time, my parents go to a Marriage Encounter to examine their marriage and discover ways to strengthen their family unit. It is a two- or three-day retreat, the one where I stay with the weird people and only pretend to use the shower, and when they return some changes are made. One of the changes involves Mom and Dad taking each of us kids out, individually, on family nights. Mom and Dad alternate with each child; Dad takes me out one week, and two weeks later I go out for a night with Mom. We do fun things together each time. I don't remember any of the things I do with Mom, though. Dad and I go miniature golfing one night, but we can't go to the go-cart place because Dad hears it is prohibitively expensive. One weekend Dad and I go camping together: it rains on our hike, we get lost, I get a bee sting on my hand that provokes an allergic reaction, and it rains so much during the night that we have to ditch our tent and sleep in the back of the car. I laugh a lot. I love my dad; he is always very funny when these things happen, and I have a great time. It is one of the best weekends of my life.

A few weeks or months later, Dad is driving me home from someplace. I am still in the third grade. We are on Speedway Boulevard, in the middle lane, and I watch the Magic Carpet miniature golf course go by on our right. Dad is telling me about sexual love, because it is *time*, and he is telling me about heterosexuals and homosexuals. He tells me that people get diseases from sexual love, that they grow lumps on their sexual organs and that, eventually, their brains can melt from these diseases. These are things that Gina didn't know. Suddenly afraid, I tell him that my friend Joey and I have touched each other's organs and rubbed them against each other. I tell him we were pretending to be a man and woman, that I don't think I sexual-love Joey. My father gives me a curious, worried look, and then he tells me it is probably okay, that I probably don't have any diseases, but that I should never do that kind of thing again. I ask him to examine my penis for irregularities anyway (I have suspected for some time that the shape, size, and color of my penis are extremely abnormal—Gina let me know it

was too small and bald—and now my worst fears are practically confirmed). I also ask him not to tell Mom about everything, and he says he won't, and I ride home next to him thinking about how much of my brain may have already melted and oozed down into the rest of my body. At home, Dad spends a lot of time wandering around the kitchen, talking to Mom, doing other things before getting around to the examination, and I sit in front of the television watching a show about Digby the Giant Dog and not even seeing it. Everything is a foggy, anxious blur. *Come on, Dad, come on*, I think. I listen to my brain sizzling away; I listen to it drip, drip, drip. Finally he takes me to my bedroom and examines me and tells me I am just fine, and then he reminds me not to do that sort of thing ever again, and that if I want to I should come talk to him. I am relieved. But then he gives me that look again, that curious, worried look, and I almost wish I hadn't said anything and taken my chances.

What was he thinking when he gave me that look? I know what he thought, what he still thinks, what he thinks all the time. He thinks I am growing up to be a very strange boy, a boy he doesn't know and doesn't really want to. A boy who plays naked with other boys. A boy who sits around in his room drawing comics, flapping his arms and making strange noises deep in his throat as he plans out the action and creates sound effects. That stuff, especially. A boy who doesn't like sports, who only plays soccer because he's told to, a boy who likes to go out in the desert by himself and do God Knows What. A boy who says *excuse me* fifty times in a row, for nothing. A very strange boy, indeed.

I stay in my room after he leaves and shut and lock the door. I close the blinds and sit down with my comics, and I hand jive my funny feelings away.

In sixth grade, I've forgotten all about the hand jive. Everything is better, everything is fine. I play with Jay Hardtke and Adam Zele. Mr. Thompson is angry because I don't take things seriously enough. My report card shows almost straight Cs. I have to go in for parent-teacher-student conferences. I'm having too much fun. I have so much potential, and I'm frittering it away. When am I going to grow up and take some responsibility? I'm always late to class in the mornings. It's as if I don't even care.

I love the word "frittering." It just sounds like a lot of fun. It sounds just like what I'm doing. And I don't hear the voice. I don't have to excuse

myself or remember my E.S.P. five or twenty-five or a hundred and twenty-five times. I ride my bike on the moto-cross trail some bigger kids have made in the desert near my house. I go swimming at Skyline Country Club and watch the pretty, tanned older ladies in their tiny swimsuits. I tell jokes and make everybody laugh. And I don't care. I don't care. I don't care.

Near the end of the second quarter before Christmas break, I start thinking about Ronnie Newman. Ronnie is the biggest loser in the school. He is skinny, loaded with acne, ugly and stupid, and he's failed sixth grade five times. *Five* times. He is the sort of kid you know is headed for prison or worse. Not a tough, delinquent kid, just a weirdo. A Ted Bundy in the making. A Jeffrey Dahmer, Jr. The last kid you'd want to end up being like. Mr. Thompson calls me into the classroom during break one day and has me sit up close to him at his desk. William, he tells me, I like you a lot. I *like* you. But you're blowing it. And you know what I mean. I know how smart you are, you can't pretend with me. I've talked to you and talked to you, and I've given you more chances than anybody else. And I'll give you one last chance. But if you don't get your act together, I'm going to put you in the remedial learning classroom after Christmas break, and they'll hold you back this year. I mean it. You'll be in there with Ronnie Newman. You'll be held back with Ronnie Newman. Do you want to be like Ronnie Newman?

The Cs on my last report card, it turns out, have become Ds and, some of them, Fs. Mr. Thompson really is going to ship me out. I pedal home as fast as I can, crack all of my books, some of them for the first time, and I start to study. My chest constricts and my breathing quickens. My heart is back up there, beating against my throat. I study five and six hours a night to catch up on a semester's worth of social studies, reading, English, geography, math. I ace every test, every one, from that day forward. I contribute to classroom discussions, I volunteer for the toughest reading list in the sixth grade. I take make-up exams and ace those, too, and Mr. Thompson smiles and squeezes my shoulders and makes me want to go at it even harder.

At semester's end, I've earned myself five As and two Bs, and one of those Bs is a B+. Mr. Thompson makes a speech to the class with tears in his eyes. Dad and Mom take me out for dinner. Not knowing what else to

do, unable to stop, I start diving into my assignments for the next semester. I study on Christmas Eve.

And, just like that, the hand jive is back.

I begin high school at Amphi High in the fall of 1981, and the hand jive is still with me. It is actually getting worse. I walk home from the bus stop with Ray Farley, a funny, popular kid, but he is too cool to hang out with the likes of me. We laugh and joke while we walk, but then he walks up his driveway and disappears. When Ray transfers out of Amphi, Geyr Greve transfers in, and I walk home with Geyr instead but the situation is the same. We throw rocks at each other as we walk, and that's fun, but then he walks on up his driveway and leaves me to my afternoon. I go to the kitchen and get a snack, and then I go to my bedroom and lock the door. Then I go into my bathroom and lock that door, too. And I hand jive. Hours pass. Outside the bathroom window, there is an old, rotting saguaro cactus skeleton. The skeleton's grey, weathered ribs rise up to a black, knobby point, and I imagine sometimes that Dad and Mom have allowed scientists to install a hidden camera in the knob so they can observe me. I always wonder why they haven't confronted me about all the time I spend in the bathroom, and this scenario provides some explanation, at least. I imagine turning on the television one day and seeing a PBS documentary all about me and my abnormalities. I know this is a paranoid, ridiculous notion, but I close the blinds on the window just in case. I crouch in the near darkness, shut out the world, and do my thing.

Amphitheater High School is a massive public school, population twenty-two hundred. I feel lost there; I am quiet, shy, unsure of myself most of the time. I feel I am five or ten different people crammed into a single body. My sharpest high school memories, in fact, read like the memories of a cross-section of Amphi's population, like the recollections of a whole student body. I am highly active in drama class and more or less asleep everywhere else. I win the Best Actor award for my role in "You Can't Take It With You," but I'm called into the assistant principal's office and threatened with suspension for cutting classes. I test into the "genius club" at Amphi, but I never attend a single meeting. I am sarcastic, cynical, sometimes mean. I submit to an underground humor magazine. I work out at the gym every day and make fun of Lippy Ford, the wrestler who lights cats on fire for fun on Saturday nights. Once, during squat reps, Lippy pulls

the pin out of my Nautilus machine for a joke and the metal, unpadded footbar at the end of the leg extension bars swings back at me to carve permanent grooves in my shins. Another time he throws me up against my locker and sticks a loaded gun in my chest, cocks it, rubs the trigger with a greasy finger, laughs and walks away. I keep making fun of him. I know I'm fairly good-looking, and I am willing to screw anything that moves. The really popular and pretty girls, though, look at me with a kind of wistful pity. I don't realize it's my seventies, "retro" look: dirty blue jeans, cheap button-down oxfords and a "disco hair-do," parted straight down the middle. So I resign myself to dating wrestling cheerleaders instead of football cheerleaders, voluptuous freaks instead of pretty nice girls. Louise Chandler is both wrestling cheerleader and voluptuous freak; she smokes, listens to punk bands and sneaks out her window at night to hang out in gay bars. One night, while I'm nibbling on her boobs in a back room at a party, she begs me to rape her; I try my best, but I break down when she screams and cries and really struggles. She dumps me, disgusted. I am chosen to dance the senior jitterbug with our homecoming queen, the prettiest girl in school, and we take first prize. I throw a party at my boss's real estate office late one night and end up spread-eagled against the wall outside, ten police officers surrounding me with loaded assault rifles and barking dogs. I join the choir. I learn the trick of dating girls from other schools, nice, pretty girls who think I'm cute and sweet and don't have to worry about what their friends will think. Because their friends will never see me. This trick also makes two-timing easy and worry-free, for me and probably for them as well. I join the advanced Madrigal choir. I smoke grass. Disgusted with cheesy yearbook photos, I pose in the back of a convertible with a gorgeous brunette who feeds me grapes and strokes my hair. In our yearbook I am voted Best Actor in the Senior Class and, in the category of Class Clown, or so goes the rumor, I take second to Paul Potts. The ultra-popular Rawls girls drive me to school in their cherry red Mustang, but I am so intimidated by their glamour that I never, in nine months of twenty-minute rides, ever utter a word. Everyone looks at me the same way I look at myself: I'm a lot of bodies and a nobody, a funny, impressive kid who's almost-but-not-quite worth getting to know.

I avoid my parents. I keep that door locked. I read underground comic books and jerk off. The hand jive is my very best friend. No matter how hot

and uncomfortable it gets at school, on the worst “nobody” days, I know it’ll be okay.

I can come home and hand jive, hand jive, hand jive all night long.

The last hand jive I remember hits me in the spring semester of my freshman year at college. I am sharing a room with Phil Green, an ultra-conservative straight-laced kid from Fort Collins, Colorado. I have just bought the new R.E.M. album, *Fables of the Reconstruction*, and as I listen I get more and more excited. R.E.M. is the greatest, man; I love those murky mixes, that anxious, hard-driving beat and Michael Stipe’s tentative growls and murmurs. I kneel down on the hard tile floor beside my bed and my arms start in with their tight, fast flapping. I grow red in the face, and I envision myself up on the stage singing unintelligibly just like Stipe. I have Stipe’s voice, I am in Stipe’s body. I am ultra-cool. I just know I’m wearing black, and all the women love it. I am jiving, I am jiving, all, of course, to the most thunderous applause.

Phil Green opens the door and walks in and stares. Our eyes meet. I am kneeling there beside the bed, my arms frozen in mid-flap. He mumbles an apology, I say, “Oh, Jesus, Phil, you scared the hell out of me.” And then there’s nothing more to say. Phil grabs something off the desk, whatever he came in for, and leaves. And I realize, as I kneel alone in the dark, quiet room, that I can never, never do this thing again. I can’t stand letting other people see it, and I can’t stand to see it in myself.

When I was a little boy Dad told me that, when he was growing up, he liked to make strange, high-pitched squeaks when he was excited, too. That was the closest he ever came to discussing the hand jive with me. I wonder whether it is genetic; I wonder how my own kids will turn out. Mostly, though, I think about Dad. Sometimes, when he gets really excited about something, he shakes his arms a couple or three times and lets out a little yelp and gets red in the face. I wonder if he had the one hard moment, at some point, that I had, when he realized the world just wouldn’t accept a hand-jiving man. I always thought his frenetic little bursts of excitement were sort of silly and stupid, but that was before I stopped my hand jive. I see them now for what they are, or what they are to me, anyway: a surrogate, a substitute. I find myself firing off these crazy yips and yelps more and more often these days. I get these strange little bursts of energy, and I’ve just got to let them loose. Smoking also helps a little.

I think, too, about all the time I lost to hand jiving while I was growing up. By my estimate, I spent a good year of my life, all told, doing the hand jive. It got me nothing. I imagined whole movies in my head, but I never got a good idea for a story or a play or a film script out of any of them. During junior high and high school, I mostly only envisioned short scenes of extravagant action and violence, the Hollywood formula: big guns, exploding cars, hot babes, and careless expletives. It did foster in me, though, a very active imagination, a very large and very real dream world, and I feel sometimes when I'm writing as though I'm tapping into that world, that feeling, again.

It feels good, but I can't explain why. That was sort of the point; hand jiving took me to a world beyond judgment, beyond reproach, beyond criticism. It was the ultimate passive, illusory escape. I don't know where the hand jive came from, where it went, or what it was, really, other than a nearly total waste of time and an embarrassment. And I've tried to discover why I needed such an absolute, self-annihilating escape, but I believe now I may never come close to the truth.

But it made me different, it made me special, it made me freakish. Like Prince Randian, the quadriplegic who rolled and lit his own cigarettes, or like Martin Laurillo the Neck-Twistin' Man or Legless Alvina Gibbs, I was different from everyone else in the world. Like any of those old Coney Island or Barnum & Bailey freaks who continue to fascinate me today, I carried with me everywhere a lonely, secret pride. I knew the whole truth about myself and believed I would horrify and repulse anyone who glimpsed that truth. The faces of those old human misfits, in the aging photographs I collect and in the 1932 MGM film *Freaks*, stare at me with that knowledge that I hid for so long from the rest of the world. Or I wish and pretend they knew, because they were kindred spirits who might have welcomed me into their fold. *We accept you, we accept you. One of us, one of us.* I live in Brooklyn now, and it's an easy ride on the F train to Coney Island. It's as far away from New York City as you can get on the B, D, F, and N subway trains, the end of those lines, and I go there some afternoons and listen to the barker at the freak show. Sometimes I pay to see the freaks: Painproof Man, Elastic Lady, the Human Blockhead. They are different from me, these people who have imposed freakishness upon themselves, but they are the only kinds of freaks allowed by law to hop on a stage. I like their easy-going pride and arrogance. I like the way they share their

freakishness with the world as if it's a miraculous, beautiful secret, and assert at the same time their normalcy, their humanity, through the very fact that they're standing there before us, flesh and blood. Living, breathing people, like all of us but slightly different. Slightly special.

So here I go, mounting the stage for the first time, if only in print. I can hear that barker now, and he annoys me:

So here he is, folks, the Hand-Jiving Man. An exhibitionist by nature, he can no longer hide his strange, twisted secret from the world. It is yours to see, ladies and gentlemen, live onstage and absolutely uncensored. He has spent years of his life on other worlds, and now you can see what his body does in his absence. A freakish, uncontrollable explosion of energy, folks, for your eyes only. He wants your sympathy, he wants your understanding, he wants to witness your wonder and pleasure, and if he can make a few bucks by exploiting his condition that is just fine by him. The man with no shame. Come on in, folks. Step right this way.

The barker annoys me because everything he says is true. I could never hop on a real stage, though, willing or no. It would not be much of a show. I cannot physically simulate the hand jive. Friends who have read parts of this piece have asked me to try, and I do, but I feel odd, self-conscious, and my arms will not react properly. My heart and mind must lead; my body follows. And I do not want to make an authentic leap into that world again. It is a mindless void, a stupid habit, but for me it obviously has its attractions. I have made my break from it, and I don't want to be seduced again.

For twenty years, it has been my proud, beautiful, odd, horrific secret. And sometimes, when I'm feeling awfully normal, awfully lonely, or awfully anxious, I have to admit that I almost miss it.