2

Our absence from dinner had been noticed. The following morning—the clean-washed shine of summer mornings in the north country—Mr. Prud'homme stopped at our door. He was broad-shouldered, grave, and he wore a gray business suit. He did not have the careless, almost British look of most of the Devon Masters, because he was a substitute for the summer. He enforced such rules as he knew; missing dinner was one of them.

We had been swimming in the river, Finny explained; then there had been a wrestling match, then there was that sunset that anybody would want to watch, then there'd been several friends we had to see on business—he rambled on, his voice soaring and plunging in its vibrant sound box, his eyes now and then widening to fire a flash of green across the room. Standing in the shadows, with the bright window behind him, he blazed with sunburned health. As Mr. Prud'homme looked at him and listened to the scatterbrained eloquence of his explanation, he could be seen rapidly losing his grip on sternness.

"If you hadn't already missed nine meals in the last two weeks . . ." he broke in.

But Finny pressed his advantage. Not because he

wanted to be forgiven for missing the meal—that didn't interest him at all, he might have rather enjoyed the punishment if it was done in some novel and unknown way. He pressed his advantage because he saw that Mr. Prud'homme was pleased, won over in spite of himself. The Master was slipping from his official position momentarily, and it was just possible, if Phineas pressed hard enough, that there might be a flow of simple, unregulated friendliness between them, and such flows were one of Finny's reasons for living.

"The real reason, sir, was that we just had to jump out of that tree. You know that tree . . ." I knew, Mr. Prud'homme must have known, Finny knew, if he stopped to think, that jumping out of the tree was even more forbidden than missing a meal. "We had to do that, naturally," he went on, "because we're all getting ready for the war. What if they lower the draft age to seventeen? Gene and I are both going to be seventeen at the end of the summer, which is a very convenient time since it's the start of the academic year and there's never any doubt about which class you should be in. Leper Lepellier is already seventeen, and if I'm not mistaken he will be draftable before the end of this next academic year, and so conceivably he ought to have been in the class ahead, he ought to have been a senior now, if you see what I mean, so that he would have been graduated and been all set to be drafted. But we're all right, Gene and I are perfectly all right. There isn't any question that we are conforming in every possible way to everything that's happening and everything that's going to happen. It's all a question of birthdays, unless you want to be more specific and look at it from the sexual point of view, which I have never cared to do myself, since it's a question of my mother and my father, and I have

never felt I wanted to think about their sexual lives too much." Everything he said was true and sincere; Finny always said what he happened to be thinking, and if this stunned people then he was surprised.

Mr. Prud'homme released his breath with a sort of amazed laugh, stared at Finny for a while, and that was all there was to it.

This was the way the Masters tended to treat us that summer. They seemed to be modifying their usual attitude of floating, chronic disapproval. During the winter most of them regarded anything unexpected in a student with suspicion, seeming to feel that anything we said or did was potentially illegal. Now on these clear June days in New Hampshire they appeared to uncoil, they seemed to believe that we were with them about half the time, and only spent the other half trying to make fools of them. A streak of tolerance was detectable; Finny decided that they were beginning to show commendable signs of maturity.

It was partly his doing. The Devon faculty had never before experienced a student who combined a calm ignorance of the rules with a winning urge to be good, who seemed to love the school truly and deeply, and never more than when he was breaking the regulations, a model boy who was most comfortable in the truant's corner. The faculty threw up its hands over Phineas, and so loosened its grip on all of us.

But there was another reason. I think we reminded them of what peace was like, we boys of sixteen. We were registered with no draft board, we had taken no physical examinations. No one had ever tested us for hernia or color blindness. Trick knees and punctured eardrums were minor complaints and not yet disabilities which would separate a few from the fate of the

rest. We were careless and wild, and I suppose we could be thought of as a sign of the life the war was being fought to preserve. Anyway, they were more indulgent toward us than at any other time; they snapped at the heels of the seniors, driving and molding and arming them for the war. They noticed our games tolerantly. We reminded them of what peace was like, of lives which were not bound up with destruction.

Phineas was the essence of this careless peace. Not that he was unconcerned about the war. After Mr. Prud'homme left he began to dress, that is he began reaching for whatever clothes were nearest, some of them mine. Then he stopped to consider, and went over to the dresser. Out of one of the drawers he lifted a finely woven broadcloth shirt, carefully cut, and very pink.

"What's *that* thing?"

"This is a tablecloth," he said out of the side of his mouth.

"No, cut it out. What is it?"

"This," he then answered with some pride, "is going to be my emblem. Ma sent it up last week. Did you ever see stuff like this, and a color like this? It doesn't even button all the way down. You have to pull it over your head, like this."

"Over your head? Pink! It makes you look like a *fairy!*"

"Does it?" He used this preoccupied tone when he was thinking of something more interesting than what you had said. But his mind always recorded what was said and played it back to him when there was time, so as he was buttoning the high collar in front of the mirror he said mildly, "I wonder what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone."

"You're nuts."

"Well, in case suitors begin clamoring at the door, you can tell them I'm wearing this as an emblem." He turned around to let me admire it. "I was reading in the paper that we bombed Central Europe for the first time the other day." Only someone who knew Phineas as well as I did could realize that he was not changing the subject. I waited quietly for him to make whatever fantastic connection there might be between this and his shirt. "Well, we've got to do something to *celebrate*. We haven't got a flag, we can't float Old Glory proudly out the window. So I'm going to wear this, as an emblem."

He did wear it. No one else in the school could have done so without some risk of having it torn from his back. When the sternest of the Summer Sessions Masters, old Mr. Patch-Withers, came up to him after history class and asked about it, I watched his drawn but pink face become pinker with amusement as Finny politely explained the meaning of the shirt.

It was hypnotism. I was beginning to see that Phineas could get away with anything. I couldn't help envying him that a little, which was perfectly normal. There was no harm in envying even your best friend a little.

In the afternoon Mr. Patch-Withers, who was substitute Headmaster for the summer, offered the traditional term tea to the Upper Middle class. It was held in the deserted Headmaster's house, and Mr. Patch-Withers' wife trembled at every cup tinkle. We were in a kind of sun porch and conservatory combined, spacious and damp and without many plants. Those there were had large nonflowering stalks, with big barbaric leaves. The chocolate brown wicker furniture shot out menacing twigs, and three dozen of us

stood tensely teetering our cups amid the wicker and leaves, trying hard not to sound as inane in our conversation with the four present Masters and their wives as they sounded to us.

Phineas had soaked and brushed his hair for the occasion. This gave his head a sleek look, which was contradicted by the surprised, honest expression which he wore on his face. His ears, I had never noticed before, were fairly small and set close to his head, and combined with his plastered hair they now gave his bold nose and cheekbones the sharp look of a prow.

He alone talked easily. He discussed the bombing of Central Europe. No one else happened to have seen the story, and since Phineas could not recall exactly what target in which country had been hit, or whether it was the American, British, or even Russian air force which had hit it, or what day he read it in which newspaper, the discussion was one-sided.

That didn't matter. It was the event which counted. But after a while Finny felt he should carry the discussion to others. "I think we ought to bomb the daylights out of them, as long as we don't hit any women or children or old people, don't you?" he was saying to Mrs. Patch-Withers, perched nervously behind her urn. "Or hospitals," he went on. "And naturally no schools. Or churches."

"We must also be careful about works of art," she put in, "if they are of permanent value."

"A lot of nonsense," Mr. Patch-Withers grumbled, with a flushed face. "How do you expect our boys to be as precise as that thousands of feet up with bombs weighing tons! Look at what the Germans did to Amsterdam! Look at what they did to Coventry!"

"The Germans aren't the Central Europeans, dear," his wife said very gently.

He didn't like being brought up short. But he seemed to be just able to bear it, from his wife. After a temperamental pause he said gruffly, "There isn't any 'permanent art' in Central Europe anyway."

Finny was enjoying this. He unbuttoned his seersucker jacket, as though he needed greater body freedom for the discussion. Mrs. Patch-Withers' glance then happened to fall on his belt. In a tentative voice she said, "Isn't that the . . . our . . ." Her husband looked; I panicked. In his haste that morning Finny had not unexpectedly used a tie for a belt. But this morning the first tie at hand had been the Devon School tie.

This time he wasn't going to get away with it. I could feel myself becoming unexpectedly excited at that. Mr. Patch-Withers' face was reaching a brilliant shade, and his wife's head fell as though before the guillotine. Even Finny seemed to color a little, unless it was the reflection from his pink shirt. But his expression was composed, and he said in his resonant voice, "I wore this, you see, because it goes with the shirt and it all ties in together—I didn't mean that to be a pun, I don't think they're very funny, especially in polite company, do you?—it all ties in together with what we've been talking about, this bombing in Central Europe, because when you come right down to it the school is involved in everything that happens in the war, it's all the same war and the same world, and I think Devon ought to be included. I don't know whether you think the way I do on that."

Mr. Patch-Withers' face had been shifting expressions and changing colors continuously, and now it settled into fixed surprise. "I never heard anything so illogical as that in my life!" He didn't sound very indignant, though. "That's probably the strangest tribute

this school has had in a hundred and sixty years." He seemed pleased or amused in some unknown corner of his mind. Phineas was going to get away with even this.

His eyes gave their wider, magical gleam and his voice continued on a more compelling level, "Although I have to admit I didn't think of that when I put it on this morning." He smiled pleasantly after supplying this interesting additional information. Mr. Patch-Withers settled into a hearty silence at this, and so Finny added, "I'm glad I put on *something* for a belt! I certainly would hate the embarrassment of having my pants fall down at the Headmaster's tea. Of course he isn't here. But it would be just as embarrassing in front of you and Mrs. Patch-Withers," and he smiled politely down at her.

Mr. Patch-Withers' laughter surprised us all, including himself. His face, whose shades we had often labeled, now achieved a new one. Phineas was very happy; sour and stern Mr. Patch-Withers had been given a good laugh for once, and he had done it! He broke into the charmed, thoughtless grin of a man fulfilled.

He had gotten away with everything. I felt a sudden stab of disappointment. That was because I just wanted to see some more excitement; that must have been it.

We left the party, both of us feeling fine. I laughed along with Finny, my best friend, and also unique, able to get away with anything at all. And not because he was a conniver either; I was sure of that. He got away with everything because of the extraordinary kind of person he was. It was quite a compliment to me, as a matter of fact, to have such a person choose me for his best friend.

Finny never left anything alone, not when it was well enough, not when it was perfect. "Let's go jump in the river," he said under his breath as we went out of the sun porch. He forced compliance by leaning against me as we walked along, changing my direction; like a police car squeezing me to the side of the road, he directed me unwillingly toward the gym and the river. "We need to clear our heads of that party," he said, "all that talk!"

"Yes. It sure was boring. Who did most of the talking anyway?"

Finny concentrated. "Mr. Patch-Withers was pretty gassy, and his wife, and . . ."

"Yeah. And?"

Turning a look of mock shock on me, "You don't mean to infer that *I* talked too much!"

Returning, with interest, his gaping shock, "You? Talk too much? How can you accuse me of accusing you of that!" As I said, this was my sarcastic summer. It was only long after that I recognized sarcasm as the protest of people who are weak.

We walked along through the shining afternoon to the river. "I don't really believe we bombed Central Europe, do you?" said Finny thoughtfully. The dormitories we passed were massive and almost anonymous behind their thick layers of ivy, big, old-looking leaves you would have thought stayed there winter and summer, permanent hanging gardens in New Hampshire. Between the buildings, elms curved so high that you ceased to remember their height until you looked above the familiar trunks and the lowest umbrellas of leaves and took in the lofty complex they held high above, branches and branches of branches, a world of branches with an infinity of leaves. They too seemed permanent and never-changing, an untouched, unreachable world high in space, like the

ornamental towers and spires of a great church, too high to be enjoyed, too high for anything, great and remote and never useful. "No, I don't think I believe it either," I answered.

Far ahead of us four boys, looking like white flags on the endless green playing fields, crossed toward the tennis courts. To the right of them the gym meditated behind its gray walls, the high, wide, oval-topped windows shining back at the sun. Beyond the gym and the fields began the woods, our, the Devon School's woods, which in my imagination were the beginning of the great northern forests. I thought that, from the Devon Woods, trees reached in an unbroken, widening corridor so far to the north that no one had ever seen the other end, somewhere up in the far unorganized tips of Canada. We seemed to be playing on the tame fringe of the last and greatest wilderness. I never found out whether this is so and perhaps it is.

Bombs in Central Europe were completely unreal to us here, not because we couldn't imagine it—a thousand newspaper photographs and newsreels had given us a pretty accurate idea of such a sight—but because our place here was too fair for us to accept something like that. We spent that summer in complete selfishness, I'm happy to say. The people in the world who could be selfish in the summer of 1942 were a small band, and I'm glad we took advantage of it.

"The first person who says anything unpleasant will get a swift kick in the ass," said Finny reflectively as we came to the river.

"All right."

"Are you still afraid to jump out of the tree?"

"There's something unpleasant about that question, isn't there?"

"That question? No, of course not. It depends on how you answer it."

"Afraid to jump out of that tree? I expect it'll be a very pleasant jump."

After we had swum around in the water for a while Finny said, "Will you do me the pleasure of jumping out of the tree first?"

"My pleasure."

Rigid, I began climbing the rungs, slightly reassured by having Finny right behind me. "We'll jump together to cement our partnership," he said. "We'll form a suicide society, and the membership requirement is one jump out of this tree."

"A suicide society," I said stiffly. "The Suicide Society of the Summer Session."

"Good! The *Super* Suicide Society of the Summer Session! How's that?"

"That's fine, that's okay."

We were standing on a limb, I a little farther out than Finny. I turned to say something else, some stalling remark, something to delay even a few seconds more, and then I realized that in turning I had begun to lose my balance. There was a moment of total, impersonal panic, and then Finny's hand shot out and grabbed my arm, and with my balance restored, the panic immediately disappeared. I turned back toward the river, moved a few more steps along the limb, sprang far out and fell into the deep water. Finny also made a good jump, and the Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session was officially established.

It was only after dinner, when I was on my way alone to the library, that the full danger I had brushed on the limb shook me again. If Finny hadn't come up right behind me . . . if he hadn't been there . . . I could have fallen on the bank and broken my back! if I had fallen awkwardly enough I could have been killed. Finny had practically saved my life.

3

Yes, he had practically saved my life. He had also practically lost it for me. I wouldn't have been on that damn limb except for him. I wouldn't have turned around, and so lost my balance, if he hadn't been there. I didn't need to feel any tremendous rush of gratitude toward Phineas.

The Super Suicide Society of the Summer Session was a success from the start. That night Finny began to talk abstractedly about it, as though it were a venerable, entrenched institution of the Devon School. The half-dozen friends who were there in our room listening began to bring up small questions on details without ever quite saying that they had never heard of such a club. Schools are supposed to be catacombed with secret societies and underground brotherhoods, and as far as they knew here was one which had just come to the surface. They signed up as "trainees" on the spot.

We began to meet every night to initiate them. The Charter Members, he and I, had to open every meeting by jumping ourselves. This was the first of the many rules which Finny created without notice during the summer. I hated it. I never got inured to the jumping. At every meeting the limb seemed higher,