

READY
TO
FALL

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PUSHKIN PRESS

BALDWIN

THE ACCEPTANCE LETTER COMES IN A THICK ENVELOPE with the school crest stamped on the front. Inside is a note of congratulations from the dean of students, a course catalog, and a load of different forms that we have to fill out ASAP, including an elective-request form, a financial-aid form, a health form, a family-information form, a booklet of rules and regulations, and a tour-request postcard to be filled out and returned immediately.

Dad lets me skip school to go on the tour. Our guide tells us that her name is Felicia Santacroce, but everyone around here calls her Fish. She has long pink hair. When I say pink, I don't mean cherry pink, like the girls at my school who sometimes dye a lock of their hair with Kool-Aid for a psyche before a soccer game or something. I'm talking about

hair the color of cotton candy, a pink so wonderfully pink that it's hard to notice the campus, especially since Fish is whirling breathlessly from one place to the next so fast we have to hustle to keep up with her.

Fish whisks us up a brick walkway, past a line of ancient bare trees, up a set of granite steps, and onto the landing of a huge stone building, past clusters of students who move out of the way as they argue amiably about some book they must be reading for class. There, next to the door, is an engraved plaque. She brings us close and then stands back to speak her script while we watch.

"This is Trowbridge Hall," Fish recites dutifully. "Trowbridge is the main building, which houses most of our academic subjects at the Baldwin School. Trowbridge Hall was erected in 1880 by Thomas A. Trowbridge the First. It was originally set up as a seminary for Episcopalian boys who were interested in becoming priests. Every student had to take Greek and Latin. They studied the classics: Ovid, Homer, Plato, and Marcus Aurelius. Carved on this plaque by the front door is our time-honored motto: *Ipsa scientia potestas est*, which means *Knowledge Itself Is Power*. Wise words, don't you agree?"

"I do," says Dad, right on cue.

Fish smiles at him and then goes back to her script.

"In the early 1960s, Baldwin expanded and became known as a progressive school, adopting a more relaxed but

still rigorous whole-child approach. Now there's more student freedom. More hands-on learning. More discussions. Less memorization. Now the school is known for its commitment to the arts. Students are encouraged to express themselves through drawing, creative writing, painting, dance. There are several different art studios on campus, music groups, theater programs, and a student radio station that plays awesome alternative rock. Sound good?"

"Sounds great," says Dad. "What do you think, Max?"

"I like it," I say, but my stomach is twisted in knots because it sounds glorious, it sounds fabulous, it sounds perfect, and this makes me nervous because nothing is perfect.

"Are you interested in any kind of art, Max?" Fish asks.

"Yeah," I say. "I like drawing. Actually, I take a sketchbook with me wherever I go."

"Me too," says Fish. "Ever think of taking an art class?"

"Nah," I say. "Taking a class would ruin it."

"How long have you been drawing?"

"As long as I can remember," I say. "I started my first sketchbook when I was five."

"I remember that one," says Dad. "Seems to me it was filled with dragons."

"Mine had unicorns," says Fish.

We keep walking, slower now. We pass more Baldwin

students talking with each other in animated voices. A few kids wave to Fish and she waves back. One guy, this extremely tall dude with John Lennon glasses, grabs her waist, twirls her toward him, and kisses her cheek. Then he pushes her away and continues to his class.

“Sorry about that,” says Fish, blushing. “He’s in the drama club. Theater kids are pretty demonstrative around here. But don’t worry. Even if you’re shy, you’ll get along fine. This is a good place for all kinds of people.”

“Glad to know it,” says Dad.

I don’t say anything. I’m thinking about how it would feel to take Fish by the waist and kiss her too.

Fish walks us up a wide stone staircase to a building with stained glass windows and a carved wooden door.

I whip my sketchbook out of my jacket pocket and do a quick drawing of the doors. There are ghosts of a mother and child escaping from the cracks. The mother has a thin face and willowy arms reaching upward. Her hair rises from her head like smoke. The child is floating above her head, reaching down for her.

“Whoa,” says Fish, watching over my shoulder as I sketch. “That’s amazing.”

“Thanks,” I say. I draw the building rising up behind the doors, filled with spires and gables and ornate nooks and crannies.

“What’s the name of this building?” I ask.

“Skinner Hall,” says Fish, her eyes still fixed on my sketch. “It’s my favorite.”

I write the words *Skinner Hall* on the bottom of the page in twirling letters like ivy. “Now it’s my favorite too,” I say.

Fish smiles. “I love that,” she says. “I really do.” I tear out the picture and give it to her. She holds it against her heart for a moment, and then folds it neatly and puts it in her pocket. “In the seventies and eighties, Skinner used to be the administration building. Now it’s where they store the records and the old black-and-white photographs of the first headmasters and the founding families. Sometimes I go down there and rummage around in the crates. I like to pull them out and look at the pale faces. They kind of freak me out. But between you and me, I sort of like being freaked out.”

“Being freaked out is actually a permanent state of affairs for me,” I say.

“This is true,” says my dad.

“Well, I’m glad I’m not the only one,” says Fish. “Most people think I’m a total lunatic. Maybe it’s the hair. I don’t know. So what else do you have in that sketchbook? Can I see?”

“Sure,” I say. And then I surprise myself by handing it over without even wondering if it’s such a good idea, and Fish starts skimming through the pages and looking at my

bizarre imagination. Here is an emaciated woman lying in a bed with her hands folded over her chest. Here is a grinning tumor in a top hat with its tendrils reaching out in all directions. Here is a white face with one red eye bulging, all the veins detailed. Here is a boy cradling his own brain. His mouth is open and his eyes are closed. The brain is in a swaddling blanket. It nuzzles against the boy's chest. It wants milk, but he has none to give.

"Oh my gosh," says Fish. She gazes at that last one. "Oh my gosh, that is so twisted."

"Sorry about that," says Dad. He takes the sketchbook from Fish and hands it back to me, frowning. "Max is a bit dark."

"No," says Fish. "It's okay. I'm dark too, actually. Don't worry. Lots of kids are kind of intense here. I mean, this school is known for attracting complicated people. I guess that's why everyone is assigned a faculty advisor and a student fellow. That's one of the things that makes Baldwin so great. They really take care of you. Even if hard things are going on. Someone's gonna watch out for you here."

My dad doesn't say anything. He wipes his eye with the back of his jacket sleeve.

"You okay?" asks Fish.

"Oh yeah," says my dad, clearing his throat. "I'm fine. Just an eyelash in my eye."

But I know there wasn't an eyelash.

Fish leads us all around campus. From the dorms where the boarding students sleep to the playing field, which was once destroyed by locusts, and inside Trowbridge Hall to the dining room with its long tables where students carve amusing titles into their lunch trays with paper clips (*The Tray of Existential Angst*, *The Tray of Hideous Incurable Diseases*) to the possibly haunted library with its stained glass windows and, finally, to the place she calls her “sanctum sanctorum,” the auditorium, with its polished stage and its long, black velvet curtains that smell like dust and sweat and standing ovations.

“Want to go up onstage?” Fish asks us.

“You guys go,” says Dad.

“Okay,” says Fish. “But don’t get upset when we’re having a ton of fun without you.”

She grabs my hand and drags me up onstage.

That’s when I notice the white scar that snakes below her thumb, across her wrist, and down the inside of her arm.

She sees me noticing it and smiles. “Long story,” she says, as though she were reading my mind. “If you decide to come here, maybe I’ll tell you one day.”

Then she pulls me center stage, gets up on her toes, and spins.

Dad slumps into a chair in the front row and watches us.

“This place has amazing acoustics,” Fish tells me. “The drama director just announced we’re gonna do *Hamlet*. We

always do a Shakespeare play right before spring break. I'm completely psyched. You want to hear something cool?"

"Yeah," I say.

Fish stands on her tiptoes, spreads her arms to either side, and screams, "TO BE, OR NOT TO BE: THAT IS THE QUESTION!" at the very top of her lungs. The whole auditorium fills with her voice and you can hear the words bouncing around on the ceiling, echoing faintly at the back of the room.

"Cool," I say.

"Now you try it," she says.

"Oh," I say. "No thanks. I'm not really into being loud."

"Come on," says Fish. "No one's here but me and your dad. Come on. It'll feel good. Just do it. Really. It'll make you happy. I promise. Come on, Max."

"Okay," I say. "But I'm not going to be as loud as you."

"That's okay," says Fish.

So I spread out my arms and I stand on my tiptoes and I scream, "TO BE, OR NOT TO BE: THAT IS THE QUESTION!" at the top of my lungs, only my voice cracks and I end up sounding like a drunk donkey reciting Shakespeare, which, I suppose, would have been appropriate if it had been a line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but it's *Hamlet*, and as far as I know, there are no donkeys in *Hamlet*, so when the words reverberate in the auditorium it sounds ridiculous and silly and hilarious and really strange, and

all at once I start laughing, without even knowing why. I feel like I might shatter because I haven't laughed in a million years, and soon Dad is chuckling from the front row and Fish closes her eyes and throws back her head and starts laughing this amazing, alarming, contagious, rollicking belly laugh that makes me and Dad stop short for a second to look at each other, because if we close our eyes, we could almost imagine that Mom is with us, but instead, it's this strange girl with pink hair, and we look at each other, startled and heartsick, but Fish is still laughing, and her laughter rises to the ceiling like sunlight.