

## 1b1- Introducing Robert Billings

Robert Billings was trying to sneak past Ben's desk.

"Robert," Ben said. "Wait a minute."

The boy froze, but could not look his teacher in the eye.

"Are you getting enough sleep at home?" Ben asked.

Robert nodded dumbly.

Ben sighed. All semester he had been trying to get through to this boy. He couldn't stand seeing him picked on by the other students and it dismayed him that Robert didn't at least try to participate in class. "Robert," his teacher said sternly, "if you don't start participating in this class I will have to fail you. You'll never graduate at this rate."

Robert glanced at his teacher and then looked away again.

"Don't you have anything to say?" Ben asked.

Robert shrugged. "I don't care," he said.

"What do you mean you don't care?" Ben asked.

Robert took a few steps toward the door. Ben could see that he was uncomfortable about being questioned. "Robert?"

The boy stopped, but he still could not look at his teacher. "I wouldn't do any good anyway," he mumbled.

Ben wondered what he could say. Robert's case was a tough one: the younger brother wallowing in the shadow of an older brother who had been the quintessential model student and big man on campus. Jeff Billings had been an all-conference pitcher in high school and was now in the Baltimore Orioles farm system while he studied medicine in the off-season. In school he'd been a straight-A student who excelled at everything he did. The kind of guy even Ben had despised in high school.

Seeing that he could never compete with his brother's achievements, Robert had apparently decided it was better not even to try.

"Listen, Robert," Ben said, "no one expects you to be another Jeff Billings."

Robert glanced quickly at Ben and then started chewing nervously on his thumbnail.

"All we're asking is that you try," Ben said.

"I have to go," Robert said, looking down at the floor.

"I don't even care about sports, Robert," Ben said. But the boy had already begun to move slowly toward the door.