

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.

1b2- Talk about strange

David Collins was sitting in the outdoor courtyard next to the cafeteria. He had already wolfed down half his lunch by the time Laurie arrived, and he was beginning to feel like a normal human being again. He watched Laurie put her tray down next to his and then noticed that Robert Billings was also headed for the courtyard.

“Hey, look,” David whispered as Laurie sat down. They watched as Robert stepped out of the cafeteria carrying a tray, looking for a place to eat. True to form, he had already started eating and stood in the doorway with half a hot dog sticking out of his mouth.

There were two girls from Mr. Ross’s history class sitting at the table Robert chose. As Robert set his tray down, they both stood up and took their trays to another table. Robert pretended he hadn’t noticed.

David shook his head. “Gordon High’s very own Untouchable,” he mumbled.

“Do you think there’s something really wrong with him?” Laurie asked.

David shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s been pretty strange for as long as I can remember. Then again, if people treated me like that, I’d probably be pretty strange too. It’s just weird that he and his brother could come from the same family.”

“Did I ever tell you that my mother knows his mother?” Laurie asked.

“His mother ever talk about him?” David asked.

“No. Except I think she told me once that they had him tested and he really does have a normal I.Q. He’s not really dumb or anything.”

“Just weird,” David said and went back to eating his lunch. But Laurie only picked at hers. She seemed preoccupied.

“What is it?” David asked.

“That film, David,” Laurie answered. “It really bothers me. Doesn’t it bother you?”

[...]

“Talk about strange,” Brian whispered, nodding toward Robert Billings.

They all looked. Robert was sitting alone at his table, engrossed in a Spider-Man comic book. His lips moved as he read and there was a red streak of cat-sup on his chin.

“You see him sleep through the whole movie?” Brian asked.

1b3- Belonging

At lunch that day all The Wave members who were in the cafeteria sat at a single long table. Brian, Brad, Amy, Laurie, and David were there. At first Robert Billings seemed tentative about joining them, but when David saw him he insisted he sit at the table, telling him they were all part of The Wave now.

Most of the kids were raving about what was going on in Mr. Ross's class, and Laurie really had no reason to argue with them. But still she felt odd—all that saluting and chanting. Finally, during a pause in the conversation, she said, "Does anyone feel kind of strange about this?"

David turned to her. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Laurie said. "But doesn't it feel a little weird?"

"It's just so different," Amy told her. "That's why it feels weird."

"Yeah," Brad said. "It's like there's no in-crowd anymore. Man, the thing that bugs me the most about school sometimes is all these little cliques. I'm tired of feeling like every day's a big popularity contest. That's what's so great about The Wave. You don't have to worry about how popular you are. We're all equal. We're all part of the same community."

"Do you think everyone likes that?" Laurie asked.

"Do you know anyone who doesn't?" David asked.

Laurie felt her face grow flushed. "Well, I'm not sure I do."

Suddenly Brian pulled something out of his pocket and held it up to Laurie. "Hey, don't forget," he said. He was holding up his Wave membership card with the red X on the back.

"Forget what?" Laurie asked.

"You know," Brian said. "What Mr. Ross said about reporting anyone who breaks the rules."

Laurie was shocked. Brian really couldn't be serious, could he? Now Brian started to grin, and she relaxed.

"Besides," David said. "Laurie isn't breaking any rule."

"If she was really against The Wave she would be," Robert said.

The rest of the table became silent, surprised that Robert had said anything. Some of them weren't even used to hearing his voice, he usually said so little.

"What I mean is," Robert said nervously, "the whole idea of The Wave is that the people in it have to support it. If we're really a community, we all have to agree."

Laurie was about to say something, but she stopped herself. It was The Wave that had given Robert the courage to sit at the table with them and to join in the conversation. If she argued against The Wave now, she would really be implying that Robert should go sit by himself again and not be part of their "community."

Brad patted Robert on his back. "Hey, I'm glad you joined us," he said.

Robert blushed and then turned to David. "Did he stick anything on my back?" he asked. Everyone at the table laughed.