

After school, you bike to your best friend's house. It has been a long day, and you are looking forward to playing video games with him. But when the front door opens, it is your best friend's little sister, Iris.

"Is Gerard there?" you ask.

"*Mom, is Gerry here?*" Iris shouts at the top of her lungs, leaning into the shadows of the house. "I don't think he's here," she says. You are annoyed, but you do not say anything. Iris used to keep her distance from you, but then she found out how young you are. She is in sixth grade and you are already in eighth, but because you started school early and skipped a grade, you are actually only a year older than her. Now she bothers you all the time.

"Maybe he's in the underground room," she whispers, like someone who knows a secret.

"What?"

"You know."

"What underground room?"

She pauses and squints. "You *know*. The underground room."

Gerard has never told you anything about an underground room.

"Come on," she says. "I'll show you." She yells back into the house. "*Mom, we're going to look for Gerry.*" Then she grabs your hand and shuts the door. "I betcha that's where he is."

You let her lead you through the quiet and empty streets of the subdivision. She keeps telling you that you are going too slow. She tugs you by the hand, but when a car passes, she lets it drop. She looks at you, laughs again, and covers her face. "You're so weird," she says.

You keep wondering what the underground room could be. You and Gerard have walked this way many times before, but he never said anything about an underground room. Maybe it is a hiding place, like a tree house. But what kind of tree house is underground?

Iris picks a tall weed from a crack in the sidewalk and runs it across her nose. "Betcha didn't know I was in the gang," she says.

"Of course I did." You have never heard of any gang.

She smirks. "No, you didn't. I bet you didn't know I got... *inducted*." She says it like someone who is proud to have learned a new word but is still not one hundred percent sure about how to use it. She frowns and looks away.

You wish that Gerard had been home. The two of you would be playing video games and drinking sodas by now.

After a while, you and Iris come to the edge of the houses. There are wooden frames and empty lots full of sandy soil and weeds all around. It feels like you have been walking for a very long time, even though you know it could not have been more than half an hour. She leads you through one of the empty lots and points at a ditch behind it. "Come on," she says. "There it is."

You stare at the ditch. "That?" you ask. But when you walk closer, you see that there is a flat concrete channel inside the ditch. The channel is a few feet deep and about two dozen feet long. At one end is the entrance to a concrete tunnel.

Iris hops down into the channel and peers inside the dark opening. When you go to stand beside her, you feel a cool breeze coming out of it. It makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck. In the darkness, you think you can see some kind of phosphorescence glimmering far ahead on the tunnel walls.

"Wanna go inside and look for him?" Iris asks.

If the two of you crouched down and walked single file, you could explore the tunnel. But you have no flashlight or matches. "I don't know," you say. "Maybe we should go back." You suddenly feel nervous. You are not sure that you are supposed to be here, and there is something gross about the tunnel. There is a thin trail of slimy water that trickles out of it and down the middle of the channel between your feet. It goes all the way to the other end, then disappears into the rocks and dirt there.

"*Re-tard!*" Iris yells into the tunnel, crouching at the entrance. "*Re-tard Gerard!*" Her voice echoes in the darkness. Then she giggles. You wonder if there is anyone in the empty housing lots who heard her. Maybe there is someone watching you.

"Let's go in," Iris says. "He's probably in there." She takes her hand out from the kangaroo pouch of her sweatshirt and points inside

the tunnel. “Unless you’re afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who’s a fraidy cat.”

You roll your eyes. “I’m not a fraidy cat.”

She continues to stare at you, then laughs again and covers her face. “Come on,” she says. She grabs your hand and tugs you toward the tunnel.

But this time, you resist.

“Oh my God,” she says. She looks away. “It’s just like Gerry said. You’re such a faggot.”

“No, I’m not,” you say. “And he wouldn’t say that.”

“You’re such a faggot.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Prove it.”

“I’m not going to—”

But before you can say anything, she has crouched and disappeared into the tunnel. You can hear the echo of her footsteps.

Then, after a while, you cannot hear anything. When you call after her, she does not respond.

If you follow Iris into the tunnel, turn to page 8.

If you stay outside, turn to page 19.

Carried forward in the wave of bodies, you eventually surface at a collapsed section of the fence. The chain link bounces and shakes beneath your feet. Then you stumble across the coils of barbed wire and onto solid ground.

On the other side of the fence, the protesters disperse like particles drawn into a vacuum, circulating at random, pulled into the empty space. It is oddly peaceful. Some of the men continue to run this way and that in the faint illumination. Others mill about. A window shatters nearby, and you can hear the rattling of a closed door.

Then the first sirens. A few brief squawks. When you turn, you see spinning red reflections on the small storefronts in the distance. Some of the men start to push back toward the breach in the fence, forcing their way against the oncoming bodies.

Within an hour, the police have dispersed the crowd. A few of the protesters refuse to leave and are arrested.

You are reminded of the crowd when, three months later, another mob gathers in another state. This one, flown in at private expense by Republican campaign organizers, stages a riot at the meeting of a county canvassing board. A short while later, the Supreme Court decides to bring the counting of votes to an end.

You must ask yourself then: did your actions make any difference?

The clear answer is no.

Choice, you conclude, sitting at the dinner table across from J.P., already tipsy from the third beer of the night, might not matter as much as you had thought. You chose to work for the campaign, the volunteers chose to work for you, the voters chose Al Gore, the nation chose a president, and despite all these choices, these acts of freedom, another man will enter the Oval Office. It was as though the fabric of space and time contained endless possible threads, but all of them, in the end, spun back to a single, incontrovertible point: the election of George W. Bush.

“It all seems so pointless,” you tell J.P. “You try to do the right thing. But your choices don’t matter.” You pause and take another sip

of beer. “Maybe the stoics were right. Maybe it’s all beyond our control, and the only reasonable response is to detach yourself. Take the bad with the good like there’s no difference. Because in the end, there’s no point in struggling. The result is always the same.”

“Right. Like with Bush and Gore,” J.P. says, tilting back his own beer. “No matter who you choose, you’re going to get the same thing. Someone bought and paid for by corporations.”

You look at him. “Well, I don’t know about that.”

“Tell me one difference between Dick Cheney and Joe Lieberman.”

You consider for a moment. “I can’t picture Joe Lieberman eating a baby.”

“I can,” he says. “He wouldn’t enjoy it. He’d struggle with it, you know, like a leader. But if it was what was right for America, Joe Lieberman would eat a baby.”

“I guess so,” you say. “But Al Gore wouldn’t.”

“Al Gore is a pompous ass.”

You set down your fork and stare at J.P. as he slices into a bean fajita. After a moment, you rise from the table, walk upstairs and shut yourself in your room. Only later in the evening, when you grow thirsty again, do you return downstairs. Ida is watching TV in her old blue bathrobe, her hair still wet from a shower. There is a small pile of foil candy wrappers beside her on the couch.

“What are you watching?” you ask.

“Oh,” she grins, “there’s something on the other channel. It’s got that boy...”

“Which boy?”

She continues to stare at the television. “The one from the show...” she says. “Everyone’s on a boat. You know.”

You wait for her to continue, but instead she sets down her comb, unwraps another candy and places it in her mouth. Watching her perform this perfunctory motion somehow causes you pain.

On the television, there is a commercial for something about sunlight. The branches of an animated tree grow and split into other branches and push out bright green leaves.

“One of J.P.’s moles was bleeding,” she says.

She says it matter-of-factly.

You look at her.
“And?” you ask. “Is he okay?”
Suddenly your heart is pounding.

Standing by the couch, you watch the branches of the animated tree split and grow.

Life endlessly reproducing.
Cancerous cells dividing.

You read somewhere that cancer cells can divide endlessly. But nothing is immortal. The malignant cells choke off a liver, pool through the blood, metastasize in tissues and veins. The host dies. Somewhere there is a final branch.

You look at Ida and wait for her to speak.

Awake, awake...

Beholde, thou art yet in the faire garden: and there is no new thing vnder the sunne. The plants which blossomed, blossom still: and the trees which put forth fruite, put forth fruite still: and the wings of the butterflies which daunced, daunce still.

And I am yet before thee.

So, you've made your choice, I say. That was it.

I laugh and shew thee againe my teeth with yellow staine.

But I don't want you to spend eternity with a case of buyer's remorse. So I'm going to give you one last chance to reconsider. You know, hell is where the heart is. You're a free man, and you deserve a choice. One last chance, my friend.

Now. Do you choose the side of God, or do you choose me?

If you choose hell, turn to page 270.

If you repent, turn to page 305.