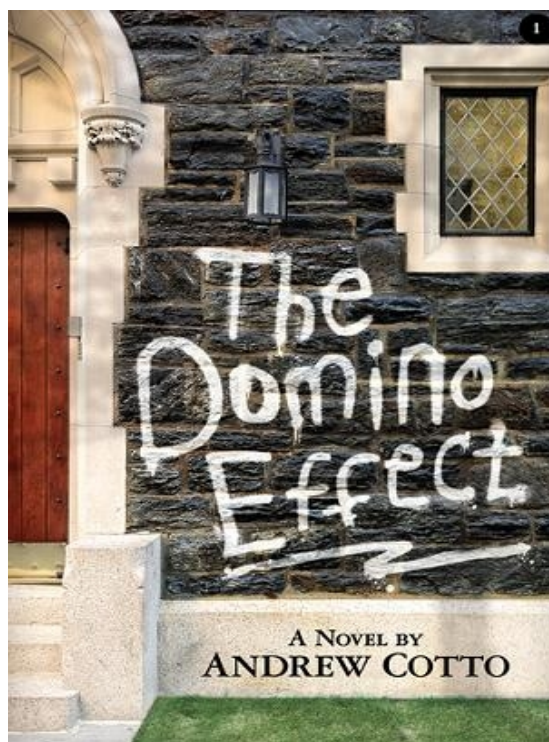


THE DOMINO EFFECT

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Prologue

A famous writer once said that anybody who survives childhood has enough stories to tell for the rest of their lives. I survived, barely, and high school was the hardest part. Especially the last year. And to tell the story of my last year of high school, I have to start with the first year. Then the second. And the third. These first three parts will be quick and painful. I promise.

First Year

I had a lot of things going for me before high school started. I had friends, kids I'd grown up with, kids that met every morning on the sidewalk in front of my place. Everyday I'd take the lead by doing something nuts, like grabbing a watermelon from the fruit stand so the owner would chase me down the block. Or I'd have a seat at the sidewalk cafe and make like the big guys drinking little cups of coffee with their pinkies in the air. Once in a while, out of nowhere, I'd drop a pack of firecrackers in the gutter and let the morning explode for a minute. Stuff like that. Harmless stuff. But good stuff anyway, and the guys always laughed and followed me to the schoolyard where they didn't mind when I picked the worst guy first.

We'd play all morning with just a stick and a ball and a strike zone spray-painted against the wall. The same wall that held our names. Up top, higher than the rest, was my name: Domino. Everybody called me that even though my real name was Danny. Danny Rorro. I'd lived in that Queens neighborhood my whole life. My mother grew up there, too. She'd come from Sicily with her parents when she was eight years old. Same house that we lived in. My father was from an Italian background, too, but from all over New York. His mother died when he was a kid, from Tuberculosis or something, and he spent his childhood being shipped off to different relatives and foster homes. He was into music, mostly drums, and at 18 he joined the service and spent the next four years touring the world with the Air Force band. After he got out, he met my mother at the Roseland Ballroom in Manhattan, and she brought him home to Queens.

Everyone liked my father. He was funny and smart and what people around called a stand-up guy. He always talked to me about doing the right thing. About looking out for other people and helping them whenever I could. He talked a lot about his heroes, like Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. I listened. I always listened because Pop was *my* hero. And I wanted to be like him, talk like him, act like him, and everything. So that's why they called me Domino, because my father's name was Dominick, and in Italian 'ino' kind of means little, so "Little Dom" translated into Dom-ino. Everybody called me Domino, except my mother who called me Daniel, and my father who called me Pal.

And by the time Pop called me home for dinner, the summer before high school started, I'd been out on my own for most of the day with my friends. After playing ball all morning we'd go to the pizza parlor and get slices with the money in our pockets, and afterwards we go back to the school yard or maybe, if it was real hot, we'd go down to Spaghetti Park and watch the old timers play bocce, or maybe we'd kick around the Italian Ice stand, under the awning, licking ices and talking a million ways around what was going on with our bodies, our muscles growing and our veins pumping with this crazy energy that lead to the kind of things we knew next-to-nothing about, but wanted more than anything in the whole world.

And even after my father called me home, and I had dinner with my parents, I kept thinking about those things me and my friends talked about under the awning of the Icey stand, and that taste of watermelon stayed with me through dinner. And the best part, the best part of the whole summer, was that after dinner I got to walk down to Geenie Martini's house.

Geenie Martini was the cutest girl in my class. She was short and brown-eyed, had what people around called a great set of lungs. Her father was a plumber and into the races, so he'd be out most nights at the track. Her mother wasn't around at all, so Geenie's grandmother came downstairs most nights, and Geenie and I would share a love seat in the front parlor while Nonna watched her programs in the next room. Under the glare of the television and the switching of the scenes, Geenie and I would whisper in the fake light and touch each other best we could until her father came whistling up the stairs. I felt kind of invincible back then, untouchable, like the superheroes in the comic books I collected.

But all summer long there'd been signs that something was coming. Darker kids with darker hair started to appear on their bikes, riding through the neighborhood in the middle of the day. And this was a problem because this was our neighborhood, and our neighborhood was supposed to be all Italian, so strangers weren't welcome. When someone yelled "Spic" we dropped whatever we were doing and chased that dark stranger back under the bridge.

The elevated trains ran through our part of our Queens, and our neighborhood was separated from the next neighborhood by an overpass, that every couple of minutes, rattled over our heads. This was the border, and I, in all my life, had never set foot on the other side of that bridge. Stupid stuff, I knew even then, but the bridge was kind of sacred. So much so that all my guys supported this great

idea I had to spray paint an Italian flag on the other face of the bridge, just so those from that side would know not to pass over into our side.

With a spray can in each back pocket, and one in my hand, I skipped Geenie Martini's house one night, and, before it got too dark, I climbed the stairs to the train station, slipped under the turnstyle and sized-up the nearly empty platform. Down at the far end, with no trains in sight and no one looking, I jumped down to the track, high-stepped over the electric rail, and crossed to the other side. I ran down to the bridge, listening and looking for an oncoming train. I could see all the rooftops, and the clothes hung between the buildings, and the skyline of Manhattan in the distance. My heart pounded and the sooty-air stung my eyes as I leaned over the railing and, as quickly as I could, sprayed, wide as I could, a red rectangle, a white rectangle, and a green one, too. I was so panicked and distracted and desperate to finish that I wasn't even sure if I got the order of the colors correct.

I dropped the cans and ran fast, fast as I could, down and across the tracks. It was hard to breathe after getting up onto the platform, but I kept running all the way home. Pop was waiting for me on the stoop. "Geenie called, Pal," he said. "Wondering where you been." He looked at my hands and forearms dusted with fresh paint and my shirt lined with filth from leaning over the bridge. So now he was wondering where I'd been, too. I told Pop everything back then, so I told him about the flag and the bridge and the kids we called "Spics." And he kept me in the house for the rest of the summer.

Pop taught music at a high school in Brooklyn, and he spent his vacations listening to the radio and reading books, tending to fig tree that filled our patch of a backyard. Sometimes, one of his musician friends would come over and they'd play songs together. He cooked dinner most nights, too, because my mother had been going to college at night, summers, too, for the past couple of years. She liked it so much that when finished, she started up again, this time for a degree in law, which made sense because she could argue with the best of them.

Pop wasn't much for arguing. He stayed calm and listened when other people spoke and spoke nice and slow when he had something to say in return. He had plenty to say to me after that deal with the bridge. Not too nice and not too slow, either. I'd never seen him so mad. He spent the rest of the summer hammering me about the stupidity of my stunt and the stupidity of what he called 'bigotry'. He talked about history and the danger of us vs. them. He talked about Kennedy and King, those guys he liked so much. He said, over and over, people were people no matter what we looked like, and that

he'd been all around the city and all around the world and knew this to be true, and that it was our responsibility to look out for each other no matter what we looked like and where we come from. No matter what. This went on for weeks, pretty much the same speech, over and over, so I was happy for school to finally start and to get out of the house.

Turns out the flag I painted was a tribute to some African country, and, in my absence, Geenie Martini started going with an older kid named Tommy Destafano. The big high school had big hallways and lots of strange faces. A couple of my friends went to a Catholic school and the others, still with me, seemed smaller and a little scared in the crowds between classes and in the noisy cafeteria that was about the size of a football field.

In the school yard things were quieter. There was space and sky and games to play. But there was also something obvious, and that obvious thing was sides. There was an Italian side and a Spanish side. I guess there had been some Latin kids at the high school before, but this year, everyone said, those numbers had changed. A lot. And those kids riding their bikes in the summertime weren't cutting through, they were going home. Immigration from Puerto Rico was on the rise, big time, and places I'd never thought of, like Dominican Republic and Colombia, were sending tons of people, too. And where they were sending them was Queens, and the neighborhood in Queens where most of the Latins lived was right next to ours and running out of room because of all the new people. So, they spilled. They spilled into our neighborhood and the kids set up sides in the schoolyard.

Like I said, the schoolyard was quiet, but not a calm quiet. Lots of stares and whispers, fingers pointed and posing. It seemed stupid to me, maybe because I'd made a fool of myself and then lost my girl and my summer from that painted bridge move, and maybe, probably, because of what Pop had said, over and over, during those summer days I spent in the house. Either way, I wasn't having it, so I set out on my own to do my own thing. And that, I figured, was the right thing, too.

With a couple of our guys missing we hardly had enough for a game, so I found the Latin kids who threw balls against the wall. Turns out those kids liked ball as much, if not more, than we did. They were some players, especially the Dominicans, and we had to divide the teams to keep things fair. Afterwards we all went our separate ways, but in the schoolyard we came together, during recess and after school almost every day. No big deal. Just kids playing ball without sides.

The older kids, though, weren't into ball like we were. They stood their ground, on their sides, and kept inching towards each other. This went on, slowly, for months. Things began in the hallways, where shoulders collided and pushes followed, and, eventually, fights began to break out. Fights in the bathrooms, the hallways, and the cafeteria happened all the time. I stayed out of them, and kept doing my thing.

Pop did his thing, too. He talked with the new neighbors in Spanish, welcomed them with handshakes. People from around started to talk about Pop, and some stopped talking to him altogether. I guess they didn't consider him a stand-up guy anymore; or, maybe, they didn't like the fact, anymore, that he was a stand-up guy. Either way, Pop didn't care.

The school year went on and the holidays passed. Winter was long and cold and, for the most part, quiet. But things got noisy when spring showed up and the school yard suddenly had two sides again. The difference was that the Spanish side had grown over the winter. Real fights broke out. Fights with chains and pipes and sometimes knives. Kids were getting hurt, for real. Vincent Martino, from across the street, got his neck nearly busted and wound up in the hospital.

This was all older kid stuff, for the most part. Sometimes they'd throw our ball on the roof, and once in a while they'd take our bat and keep it for a fight, but they left us younger guys out of it. But that was before Vinnie Martino got hurt. And before the day Pop had this little concert on our stoop.

I'd come home that day from the schoolyard and saw this crowd all around our house. Little kids and their parents or grandparents spilling out onto the sidewalk. All Spanish. They were watching Pop, sitting on top of the stairs with some bongos, next to one of his musician friends with a guitar. They were doing that Simon and Garfunkel song about 'Mama Pajama' and 'Rosie the Queen of Corona' and everybody seemed so happy. I never liked that tune. I especially didn't go for it that day because while Pop and his buddy and everybody else were having a ball doing their thing, Vinnie Martino's friends were across the street, staring over at Pop with disgust.

Of course, they couldn't do, or even say, anything to Pop since he was an adult and we had rules for respect. But when they turned their eyes on me, standing on the corner, watching just like they were, I knew, for sure, that I was in for trouble.

Starting that very next day, trouble came. Every day these older kids would spit on me in the halls and scratch clever things on my locker like “dead man” and “traitor” and “Spic lover.” Real geniuses. And these bright guys waited for me after school; and most afternoons, around 3:00 in the school yard, I took a pretty good beating. The worst part wasn't the beatings since I got used to them; the worst part was knowing the beatings were coming, and even worse than that was not knowing what kind of stuff would appear on my locker and who, exactly, was doing those things. It felt like *everyone* was against me. My friends disappeared, either moved away or afraid to be seen with me. My mother went crazy, talked to the people she knew, but no one put a stop to what they were doing to me. My father cleaned me up most afternoons and talked about sticking up for what I believed in. So I did.

I did my own thing, until I was walking home one day towards the end of the year and these kids come up from behind on bikes, but I didn't turn around. A few of them rolled past and I started to relax, thinking they were gone, when all the sudden, out of nowhere, something caved in the back of my head. There were bright lights for a second until things went black. I thought it must of have been the bus or something, but I found later it was somebody swinging a tire iron.

I remember lying on the filthy sidewalk, blood running across my face and into my mouth. It tasted like pennies. Dirty pennies. And that, for the most part, ended of my first year of high school.

Second Year

The run in with the tire iron got me a week in the hospital and a shaved head. The wound was more like a gash than a cut, so they had to clear all my hair away to help keep things clean as it healed. Good look, especially for a kid, though I didn't feel all that young anymore. I felt numb, more than anything, and had this feeling that something important had been taken from me, but I didn't know what.

From home, I took all my tests and finished the school year. My mother finished law school around the same time, and Pop, the teacher, was done for the summer, too, so we got a bungalow at the end of Long Island, in a village called Montauk where the locals fished for sharks and rode the waves.

It was a long, hot summer of nothing. No fun with friends, no crazy excitement pumping through my veins. I felt the opposite of invincible (vincible?). My folks kept trying to get me to talk about what happened. And to understand that I hadn't done anything wrong. They wanted to know how I felt, but I couldn't really tell them that I didn't feel like a comic book hero anymore. Besides, I didn't really know. When I thought about it no words came. So we spent our days at the beach where Pop floated past the surf and I sat on the sand, unable to swim and afraid of sharks I couldn't see. I felt afraid of other things, too, like the packs of kids kicking around town. They looked at me funny, in my sneakers and jeans and a hat I had to wear to cover my scar.

My mother took the train into the city most days, to interview for law jobs. She came back soon enough with a position that started in the fall. But she kept taking that train out of Montauk, and she came back another day with news of a new house in Queens. She'd given up on the neighborhood where she'd lived since she was eight years old. At first, she wanted to fight. I'd hear her argue with my father at night, dropping names of the guys from around that she knew – guys that she'd grown up with who were nice to us, but maybe not so nice in general. She said they could find out, easily, who did this to me and then they could make things right. But Pop wasn't having that. He was no pacifist, and he taught me, all my life, to defend myself. We had a heavy bag in the basement and he showed me how to punch and move, protect myself, which I did, best I could, for as long as I could. Pop just wasn't into the idea of payback, of sending someone else's kid to the hospital. He wanted all this to

end.

So when summer was over we went back to Queens, but to a new neighborhood and a new house. It was a big place, too, looked like a castle, Tudor or something, three floors, stand alone, with a driveway and a one-car garage and a shaded patio out back. We were separated from the neighbors by bushes instead of alleys. The neighborhood reminded me of towns I'd seen outside the city, with tall trees and green grass. People passed, but didn't stop to talk.

I took a room on the very top floor, with slanted walls, a little stained-glass window and a spot to sit under the widow's peak. I'd be in the window most of the day, slouched with my feet on the opposite wall, playing my Springsteen discs and reading comic books in the colored light. My parents would come up, once in a while, to check on me. Make sure I was OK. I wasn't. But they didn't know how bad it was. They kept saying things would be normal for me again once school started.

I went to a Catholic school, pretty close to home. I hated the place right away - way too strict and the only girls around were nuns - and those nuns could give those bullies from the old neighborhood a pretty good fight. I kept to myself. At some point, in the middle of the first semester, I stopped speaking all together, which drove the nuns crazy. They'd ask me questions in class and I'd just sit there, silent. So, after school, they'd put me on the roof to clean out garbage cans as punishment for *not* saying anything. Nuns. One day, after throwing everything I could get my hands on from the roof into the teacher's parking lot, I ran home, straight to the garage. Pop had band practice that day, and Ma worked late, everyday. We'd moved the heavy bag there, to the one car garage, and I punched it with my bare hands, moving the weight around pretty good. Through heavy breathing, I could hear the tear of my knuckles across the canvas. Pale spots began to show up on the bag, and I decided to cover the thing with my blood.

After the canvas bag was good and polka-dotted, I sat on a crate and ripped off the stupid sweater and shirt they made us wear at school. Sweat dripped off my chin. My knuckles throbbed and burned red like they'd been dragged over sandpaper. It felt kind of good, but not good enough.

I walked up to the garage door and punched out a window pane. The sound of shattered glass, and the slashing of my hands, got me what I wanted. I punched out all the rest of them, too, sending glass everywhere. Afterward, it looked like my fist had been rammed in a blender.

My hand gushed and I watched it bleed, letting the blood drip to the floor. For some reason, I'd wanted to feel and see myself bleed again. I licked a wound and tasted the dirty pennies. A puddle of blood formed on the floor between my feet. Then I wrapped my hand in the school sweater and went inside. With a pack of my mother's smokes, I went to the attic, sat in the colored window and sucked cigarette after cigarette until my tongue blistered.

Later, I heard the sound of someone coming upstairs. Pop showed up in the doorway and wiped away the air. "Have you been smoking in here, young man?" he asked in this hokey voice. Then he saw my hand.

He dragged me to the hospital. Afterwards, I ended up at a different kind of doctor's. But not at first. At first I went ballistic at home. All that I'd been holding in came pouring out, and I was a long way from silent. Pop and I fought almost every night, nearly coming to blows on a couple of occasions. I'd cost him his cool, and there was something satisfying in that. Something small, though, I had to admit.

Eventually, I cooled down and cursed him quietly, letting him know through silence that I hated him. I blamed Pop for everything that happened. It had sort of come to me slowly over the summer and then through the school year and in the silence of my room; then in a rush as I sat there bleeding in the garage. The words I couldn't find came out in anger towards Pop. I figured if I hadn't gone along with his helping-people-routine, if I hadn't listened to him and been his son, if I hadn't put so much faith in him and in doing the right thing, and told him the truth about the Spics and the bridge, I'd still be back in the old neighborhood, with my old friends, and Geenie Martini with her great set of lungs, instead of being alone in the attic, attending *All Saints Catholic School for Torture* where there were no girls and not a friend in the world. I'd finally figured out what was bothering me, what had been taken away, and the fact of it was this: Pop had cost me my chance at being a kid. Not a runny-nosed kid with untied shoes, but a real kid that did all the things I had been doing, with girls and friends and whatnot, until Pop and his philosophy of doing the right thing took it all away.

My mother was in the middle. Pop railed at her that I needed to get straightened out, but she worried about her son. Usually, growing up, she was the tough one, but with this noise between me and Pop she tried to stay calm, begging me to behave before Pop did something crazy like toss me out

of the house.

I think the counseling was her idea. I fought it, of course. Un-uh. No way. Un-uh. But they gave me two choices: the psychologist or military school, and while the idea of going away was tempting, it wasn't going to be some place with all guys, where you get your head shaved at night (my hair had just grown back) and your face chewed off all day. I'd rather stay at home with Pop and the nuns, so I passed on the Drill Sergeant and took the head doctor instead.

Not a bad guy, Dr. Defuso. His house off Queens Boulevard had an office around the side. It was very brown in there, with slanted shades and a wooden desk and lots of books on shelves. We sat across from each other in cushioned chairs and he held a note pad and pen across his thighs. He asked me little questions that were supposed to have answers worth writing down. At first, I hardly said anything. But then I started giving him something to put on his pad, nothing monumental or nothing, but enough to keep me out of another crew cut.

This guy Defuso was no miracle worker, but talking to him once a week for a few months made things easier at home. Pop and I still had our moments, but we had our peace for the most part. The best thing about going to the shrink was his suggestion that boarding school might be good for me. He talked to my parents and one night they came up to my room with these brochures with pictures of nice looking kids studying and playing sports, posing with their arms around each other's shoulders. It seemed so safe. So easy. I remember holding the brochures and thinking, *yeah, yeah, I can do this.*

So we went out for a visit. Took the car straight across Jersey, past fields and rolling hills, exit signs for towns called 'burg' or 'ville.' We glided down a winding road into a half-assed place called Hamdenville. Past town, we went through a high gate and up a higher hill onto the campus of Hamden Academy. Ivy covered the stone and brick buildings, and tall, tall trees shaded the road. The air smelled new.

Some happy kid named Brian gave us a tour, and, more than anything, I remember him saying 'hi' or 'hello' to a lot of the people we passed; Hi, Scott. Hi, Stephanie. Hi, Karen. Hello, Mr. Taylor. I wondered which ones would be my teachers, my friends. When we went into the underclass dorm, on the floor for juniors, I picked out a room that I hoped would be mine.

There were some meetings with admissions people and a guidance guy. I met the baseball coach, too. But my mind was made up before any of them even opened their mouths. On the car ride home to Queens, I fell asleep and dreamed of myself somewhere else.

Third Year

That next year, on my first day of school at Hamden Academy, I walked around like I already belonged. I didn't really know where I was going or anything, but it felt like I did. It must have been all the time I spent that summer imagining myself there. And, once there, for real, I liked it right away. *These private school kids got it made*, I decided, walking under the high ceiling of the academic building, amongst all the fresh faces.

One face, in particular, stood out right away. I remember seeing her, from across a classroom: deep auburn hair and a freckled nose, eyes that glowed green. Her eye-brows were the color of caramel. Her mouth was wide and, I could tell, easy to make smile. There wasn't this "Ah, Ah, Ah..." soundtrack playing or anything, and she didn't cruise up like a vision of the Venus on a clamshell painting they had at Catholic school, but the sight of this girl was like a miracle to me. I swear. I gave her a nickname on the spot: "Bella Facia" for her beautiful face.

Each day I moved closer and closer, row-by-row, desk-by-desk. I felt like a secret agent. After a week I settled in, right next to her. I sat up straight, caught my breath, and started to think of something clever to say. When I turned to deliver, she was staring right at me.

"So," she said. "You finally made it."

I almost fell over.

Through class, I tried and tried to keep my head straight ahead, but couldn't help but sneak a thousand peeks. Afterwards, on the way to next period, I worked the little routine I had used for charming the girls back in Queens:

"So," I began, "tell me your name." (Brenda Devine)

Where are you from, Brenda Devine? (Connecticut)

Do you like it there? (Yes)

Do you like it here? (So far)

Do you like me so far? (*giggles*)

Who's your favorite singer? (Prince)

What about Bruce Springsteen? (Well, only "Thunder Road," but I've listened to it about a thousand times).

What do you want to be when you grow up? (A doctor or a teacher)

Where do you want to go to school? (NYU)

Whose your favorite player on the Mets? (Umm...pass)

"All-right, one last question," I said, leaning into the door frame of her next class.

"OK," she giggled some more, hugging her books.

"What are we doing Saturday night?"

She smiled, but there was this eking thing with her mouth that cut that grin in half. "Well, actually," she said, "I'm taking the bus to meet my parents in the city, and, my my boyfriend's coming, too."

"Ohhh!" I cried from the boyfriend-bomb, but still managed to keep my cool. "Can I come, too?" I asked. "I'm from the city. I could show you around."

"Maybe some other time," she laughed and walked into class.

She had a bouncy step and her right foot pigeon-toed a little, giving the impression she might be clumsy or something until you saw what a jackrabbit she was on the soccer field (I never missed a game that fall). I watched her skinny legs moving in fresh blue jeans. As she turned to slip into the seat, I envied the fuzzy sweater that hugged her slender body. Once seated, she tilted her head toward the doorway, blinked a few times, then smiled at me with surprise.

"How about next Saturday?" I asked. "You free then?"

There was something in her dimpled smile. Something I didn't know for sure, except that it was something I needed more than anything in the whole world. I swear.

Boyfriend or not, I sat next to her in class every day, taking the same walk down the same hallway afterwards. We hung out after school and in the evenings, too.

I met other people. My roommate was a good guy named Sam Soifer, a sort of a pale kid, always in need of a shave, with a body that drooped towards the floor like the bazoombas of a big old lady. Sammy had been at Hamden Academy for a year before me and he took a real pride in showing me around. He made it his job to point out everything and everyone he knew. It was kind of nice, at first, but it got old fast, especially after some kid asked him, as we walked through the common area of the dorm, "Hey, Soifer. When you crap does he wipe?" *Good one*, I thought, but I also thought that I should find some other people to hang out with besides Sammy.

The guys next door seemed kind of cool. They played music and talked all the time about "Betty's" (which I figured out soon enough to mean girls.) One was a loudmouth kid, skinny with freckles and red red hair and a ton of confidence, like he didn't know he was a skinny, freckled kid with red red hair. His roommate played the guitar and played the part of musician with a piled-up hair-style, sand-paper stubble on his cheeks and chin, and the right clothes faded and unbuttoned in all the right places.

Those guys, Geoff Meeks and Johnny Grohl, started talking me up in the bathroom and in the halls. Then they would knock on our door, sometimes, and ask me to come over and "hang". They knew Sammy, like a lot of people, but, like a lot of people, they didn't seem too crazy about him. And they never asked him to come over with me.

One day, on my way next door, Sammy whispered "Don't go." It nearly broke my heart, hearing him beg me like that, but I wasn't the same kid anymore who brought everyone along and picked the worst guy first. A lot of good that had done me. It had cost me everything and got me nowhere. And I had some catching up to do, with a lot of things, so, when Sammy begged me to stay, my heart might of stopped, but I kept walking.

Meeks and Grohl had another friend. A real cool guy named Todd Brooks. He was a Prefect on the underclass floor of our dorm, and always upstairs with Meeks and Grohl. Todd had some serious manners, wavy hair and broad shoulders, too. If we had a football team, he'd have been the quarterback; instead, he destroyed people in soccer and lacrosse. I'd learned, soon enough, that ours was a school of small circles, with no real center, but I was pretty happy to be in with those guys: they were about as cool as it got at Hamden Academy.

And Todd Brooks was the coolest of all. He wasn't just any old student. He'd been there since freshman year – which was something on its own, since kids came and went all the time – but he also served as the big man around campus, at least of the non-wrestlers - our only big sport - which made this guy Todd even more important because the wrestlers were about as charming as vomit. And with Todd Brooks in the lead, the four of us made our presence known around campus.

“Here comes your girlfriend,” Meeks would crack whenever Brenda Devine approached my new group of friends. I loved the way she would slide into our booth in The Can (the make-shift soda shop on campus), help herself to a handful of French fries and join the conversation. She was smarter than all of us put together. Sometimes she'd challenge me to foosball in the little game area up the stairs. And we'd play for hours, spinning those little plastic men.

“You score there yet, Paesano?” Grohl would ask when I came down for more quarters.

“Get bent, all of ya,” I'd say every time, but I wasn't talking to Todd.

Todd knew my plans for Brenda. I waited for her and her boyfriend to break-up. That's it. There were other girls around, but she was my Springsteen: I didn't like anybody else. We talked about it all the time, Todd and I. We talked about everything. I even told him about what happened to me back home. He was my guy, my buddy, my friend. My pal. We hung with Meeks and Grohl, but when it was time to divide, they went their way and we went ours. Until Todd went away with Brenda. And that hurt a hell of a lot more than getting run out of Queens by a tire iron to the head.

It had to have been lacrosse in the springtime. They both played, and the teams traveled together. So somewhere, I figured, on those bumpy bus rides through the Jersey countryside, with the windows open and the spring pouring in, they must have found each other and forgotten about me.

I had no idea, not a clue about any of this until an early evening in the end of spring. Crossing campus after a late baseball game, I saw my best friend and my best girl come giggling out of an empty building. The air got punched right out of me as I staggered behind a tree and watched them disappear into the twilight.

Nearly as painful as that torturous moment was watching Todd and Brenda fall for each other.

Over the last few weeks of school they became the pets of campus, and if we had a prom they'd have been the King and Queen. As it was, everyone just fawned as they pawed each other in public. The thought of what they might be doing out of public was too much for me to think about.

Knuckling some salt into my gaping wound was the fact that neither of them said a word about this whole relationship. Not a word. Brenda and I were officially "only friends," but great friends, all year; and it was more than that, too. We spent a ton of time together, and chemicals, or something, bounced back and forth when we were alone. I was funny with her like nobody else, and she had a special smile just for me. I'd never been close to love before, but I knew when it was happening to me.

And I knew when it wasn't happening anymore, too. Brenda and I stopped hanging around alone together. And she stopped smiling at me like she had before. We had conversations, I guess, about things, but nothing important. Like normal friends, I guess. Todd, on the other hand, disappeared altogether. Spring was busy, with sports and everything, and we only had a few weeks left before summer, but he never came to our floor in the dorm; and when he saw me around campus, he'd just go the other way or walk right past. He'd walk right past with this smirk on his face. I swear.

So another school year ended with me lonely and let down. And another summer was spent at home in Queens, mostly in my room, hoping for better days to come my way in the next year of high school. My last year. My last year and my last chance to make all those things I dreamed about real. They would come, and they would hurt, and it would all be worth it. I swear.