On November 11 Lowboy ran to catch a train. People were in his way but he was careful not to touch them. He ran up the platform's corrugated yellow lip and kept his eyes on the train's cab, commanding it to wait. The doors had closed already but they opened when he kicked them. He couldn't help but take that as a sign.

He got on board the train and laughed. Signs and tells were all around him. The floor was shivering and ticking beneath his feet and the bricktiled arches above the train beat the murmurings of the crowd into copper and aluminum foil. Every seat in the car had a person in it. Notes of music rang out as the doors closed behind him: C# first, then A. Sharp against both ears, like the tip of a pencil. He turned and pressed his face against the glass.

Skull & Bones, his state-appointed enemies, were forcing their way headfirst up the platform. Skull was a skinny milkfaced man, not

much to look at, but Bones was the size of a MetroCard booth. They moved like policemen in a silent movie, as though their shoes were too big for their feet. No one stood aside for them. Lowboy smiled as he watched them stumbling toward him: he felt his fear falling away with each ridiculous step they took. I'll have to think of something else to call them now, he thought. Short & Sweet. Before & After. Bridge & Tunnel.

Bones saw him first and started pounding on the doors. Spit flew noiselessly from his mouth against the scuffed and greasy glass. The train lurched then stopped then lurched forward again. Lowboy gave Bones his village idiot smile, puckering his lips and blinking, and solemnly held up his middle finger. Skull was running now, struggling to keep even with the doors, moving his arms in slow emphatic circles. Bones was shouting something at the conductor. Lowboy whistled the door-closing theme at them and shrugged. C# to A, C# to A. The simplest, sweetest melody in the world.

Everyone in the car would later agree that the boy seemed in very high spirits. He was late for something, by the look of him, but he carried himself with authority and calm. He was making an effort to seem older than he was. His clothes fit him badly, hanging apologetically from his body, but because he was blue-eyed and unassuming he caused nobody concern. They watched him for a while, glancing at him whenever his back was turned, the way people look at one another on the subway. What's a boy like that doing, a few of them wondered, dressed in such hideous clothes?

The train fit into the tunnel perfectly. It slipped into the tunnel like a hand into a pocket and closed over Lowboy's body and held him still. He kept his right cheek pressed against the glass and felt the air

and guttered bedrock passing. I'm on a train, he thought. Skull & Bones aren't on it. I'm taking the local uptown.

The climate in the car was temperate as always, hovering comfortably between 62 and 68 degrees. Its vulcanized rubber doorjambs allowed no draft to enter. Its suspension system, ribbonpressed butterfly shocks manufactured in St. Louis, Missouri, kept the pitching and the jarring to a minimum. Lowboy listened to the sound of the wheels, to the squealing of the housings at the railheads and the bends, to the train's manifold and particulate elements functioning effortlessly in concert. Welcoming, familiar, almost sentimental sounds. His thoughts fell slackly into place. Even his cramped and claustrophobic brain felt a measure of affection for the tunnel. It was his skull that held him captive, after all, not the tunnel or the passengers or the train. I'm a prisoner of my own brainpan, he thought. Hostage of my limbic system. There's no way out for me but through my nose.

I can make jokes again, Lowboy thought. Stupid jokes but never mind. I never could have made jokes yesterday.

Lowboy was five foot ten and weighed 150 pounds exactly. His hair was parted on the left. Most things that happened didn't bother him at all, but others got inside of him and stuck: nothing to do then but cough them up. He had a list of favorite things that he took out whenever there was a setback, ticking them off in order like charms on a bracelet. He recited the first eight from memory:

Obelisks.
Invisible ink.
Violet Heller.
Snowboarding.

The Brooklyn Botanic Garden.
Jacques Cousteau.
Bix Beiderbecke.
The tunnel.

His father had taken him snowboarding once, in the Poconos. The Poconos and the beach at Breezy Point were items nine and ten. His skin turned dark brown in the summer, like an Indian's or a surfer's, but now it was white as a dead body's from all the time he'd spent away.

Lowboy stared down at his deadlooking arms. He pressed his right palm hard against the glass. He came from a long line of soldiers, and was secretly a soldier himself, but he'd sworn on his father's grave that he would never go to war. Once he'd almost killed someone with just his two bare hands.

The tunnel straightened itself without any sign of effort and the rails and wheels and couplings went quiet. Lowboy decided to think about his mother. His mother was blond, like a girl on a billboard, but she was already over thirty-eight years old. She painted eyes and lips on mannequins for Saks and Bergdorf Goodman. She painted things on mannequins no one would ever see. Once he'd asked about the nipples and she'd laughed into her fist and changed the subject. On April 15 she would turn thirty-nine unless the rules changed or he'd miscounted or she died. He was closer to her house now than he'd been in eighteen months. He had these directions: transfer at Columbus Circle, wait, then six stops close together on the C. That's all it was. But he would never see his mother's house again.

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Slowly and carefully, with studied precision, he shifted his attention toward the train. Trains were easier to consider. There were thousands of them in the tunnel, pushing ghost trains of compressed air ahead of them, and every single one of them had a purpose. The train he was on was bound for Bedford Park Boulevard. Its coat-of-arms was a B in Helvetica type, rampant against a bright orange escutcheon. The train to his grandfather's house had that same color: the color of wax fruit, of sunsets painted on velvet, of light through half-closed eyelids at the beach. William of Orange, he thought, giving himself over to the dream of it. William of Orange is my name. He closed his eyes and passed a hand over his face and pictured himself strolling the grounds of Windsor Castle. It was pleasantly cool there under the boxcut trees. He saw dark, paneled corridors and dust-covered paintings, high ruffled collars and canopied beds. He saw a portrait of himself in a mink pillbox hat. He saw his mother in the kitchen, frying onions and garlic in butter. Her face was the color of soap. He bit down hard on his lip and forced his eyes back open.

A self-conscious silence prevailed in the car. Lowboy noticed it at once. The passengers were studying him closely, taking note of his scuffed Velcro sneakers, his corduroy pants, his misbuttoned shirt, and his immaculately parted yellow hair. In the glass he saw their puzzled looks reflected. They think I'm on a date, he thought. They think I'm on a field trip. If they only knew.

"I'm William of Orange," said Lowboy. He turned around so he could see them better. "Has anybody got a cigarette?"

The silence got thicker. Lowboy wondered whether anyone had heard him. Sometimes it happened that he spoke perfectly clearly, taking pains with each word, and no one paid him any mind at all. In fact it happened often. But on that day, on that particular morning, he was undeniable. On that particular morning he was at his best.

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A man to his left sat up and cleared his throat. "Truant," the man said, as if in answer to a question.

"Excuse me?" said Lowboy.

"You're a truant?" the man said. He spoke the sentence like a piece of music.

Lowboy squinted at him. A dignified man with an elegant wedge-shaped beard and polished shoes. His face and his beard were exactly the same color. He sat very correctly, with his knees pressed together and his hands in his lap. His pants were white and sharply creased and his green leather jacket had a row of tiny footballs where its buttons should have been. His hair was bound up in an orange turban. He looked stately and unflappable and wise.

"I can't be a truant," said Lowboy. "They've already kicked me out of school."

"Is that so," the man said severely. "What for?"

Lowboy took his time answering. "It was a special sort of school," he said finally. "Progressive. They sent me home for good behavior."

"I can't hear you," said the man. He shook his head thoughtfully, letting his thin mouth hang open, then patted the seat next to him. "What did you say?"

Lowboy stared down at the empty seat. It had happened again, he decided. He'd been moving his lips without actually speaking. He stepped forward and repeated himself.

"Is that so," said the man. He heaved a gracious sigh. "You aren't coming out of prison?"

"You're a Sikh," Lowboy said.

The man's eyes opened wide, as though the Sikhs were a forgotten race. "It must be a *very* good school, to teach you that!"

Lowboy took hold of the crosspole and let himself hang forward. There was something melodramatic about the Sikh. Something contrived. His skin lightened slightly where his face met his turban, and the hair behind his ears was platinum blond. "I read about you in the library," Lowboy said. "I know all about you Sikhs."

They were coming up to the next station. First came the slight falling back of the tunnel, then the lights, then the noise, then the change in his body. His left side got light and his right side got heavy and he had to hold on to the pole with all his strength. The fact that he'd met a Sikh first, out of everyone in the tunnel, signified something without question but its meaning refused to come clear to him. I'll think about him when we stop, Lowboy said to himself. In a little while I'll think about him. Then I'll know.

The platform when it came was narrow and neglected-looking and much less crowded than the one before had been. He'd expected to find everyone waiting for him—his mother, Dr. Kopeck, Dr. Prekopp, Skull & Bones—but there was no one on the platform that he knew. The doors slid open and closed on nothing.

"The capital of the Sikhs is the city of Amritsar," Lowboy said as the C# and A sounded. His head was clear again but he still wanted to smoke. "Amritsar is in Punjab. Sikhs believe in reincarnation, like Hindus, but in a single god, like Muslims. A baptized Sikh never cuts his hair or beard."

"A fine school." The Sikh smiled and nodded. "An extraordinary school."

"I need a cigarette. Let me have a cigarette, please."

The Sikh shook his brown face merrily.

"The hell with this," said Lowboy.

The train gave a lazy twitch and started rolling. Both seats on the Sikh's right side were empty. Lowboy sat down in the farther one, mindful of the Sikh's bony elbow and his legs in their pressed linen pants. He took a deep breath. It was reckless to get close to another body just then, when everything was so new and overwhelming, but the empty seat between them made it possible. It was all right to sit down and have a talk.

He checked to see who else was listening. No one was.

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"The Sikh religion is less than seventy years old," Lowboy said. His words fluttered before him in the air.

The Sikh pursed his lips and bunched his face together. "That is not so," he said, enunciating each word very clearly. "That is not so. I'm sorry."

Lowboy put his hand on the seat between them, where the Sikh's hand had just been. It was still slightly warm. "Can you say definitely that it's older than that?" he said. He drummed against the plastic with his fingers. "You're not seventy years old."

"I can say so," the Sikh said. "I can say so absolutely."

Why does he have to say everything twice, thought Lowboy. I'm not deaf. It was enough to put him in mind of the school. The way the Sikh was looking at him now, trying hard not to seem too curious, was exactly the way the doctors did it there. He forced his eyes away, fighting back his disappointment, and found himself staring down at the Sikh's feet. They were the smallest feet he'd ever seen on a grown man. Those look like shoes a doll would wear, he thought. Sikhs are supposed to be the tallest men in Asia. He looked from the shoes to the Sikh's face, flat and pleasant and unnatural as a cake. As he did so he began to have his doubts.

Here they come, Lowboy thought, forcing his mouth and eyes shut. His throat went dry the way it always did when the first doubts hit. The train braked hard and shuddered through a junction. The air grew warmer by exactly six degrees.

"All right, then," he said cheerfully. But it wasn't all right. His voice sounded wrong to him, precious and stilted, the voice of a spoiled English lord.

"All right," he said, feeling his skin start to prickle. "It's perfectly all right, you see."

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When he let his eyes open they were back inside the tunnel. There was only one tunnel in the city but it was wound and snarled together like telephone wire, threaded back on itself so it seemed to have no beginning and no end. Ouroboros was the name of the dragon that ate its own tail and the tunnel was Ouroboros also. He called it that. It seemed self-contained, a closed system, but in fact it was the opposite of closed. There were openings spaced out along its length like gills along the body of an eel, just big enough for a person to slip through. Right now the train was under Fifty-third Street. You could get off at the next station, ease your body through the turnstile, and the tunnel would carry on exactly as before. The trains would run without a single person in them.

Two men got off at the next station, glancing back over their shoulders, and a third man moved ahead to the next car. Lowboy could see the man in question through the pockmarked junction doors, a middle-aged commuter in a rumpled madras jacket, Jewish or possibly Lebanese, flipping nervously through a giltedged leather datebook. Soon the Sikh would switch cars too and that was perfectly all right. That was how you managed in the tunnel. That was how you got by. You came and sat in a row and touched arms and knees and shoes and held your breath and after a few minutes, half an hour at the most, you separated from each other for all time. It would be a mistake to take that as an insult. He'd done the same a thousand times himself.

Lowboy patted himself on the knee and reminded himself that he hadn't gotten on the train to talk to little grandfatherly men about religion. He'd gotten on the train for a reason and he knew in his heart that his reason was the best one that anyone could have. He'd been given a calling: that was what it was called. It was a matter of consequence, a matter of urgency, a matter possibly of life and death. It was as sharp and light and transparent as a syringe. If he got careless

now he might lose track of his calling or confuse it with something else or even forget his calling altogether. Worst of all he might begin to have his doubts.

He turned toward the Sikh and nodded sadly.

"I get off at the next stop," he said. He coughed into his sleeve and looked around him until the people who'd been watching looked away. "Next stop!" he repeated, for the benefit of all present.

"So soon?" said the Sikh. "I haven't even asked—"

"William," said Lowboy. He gave him his bankteller's smile. "William Amritsar."

"William?" the Sikh said quaveringly. He pronounced it *Well-yoom.*

"But people call me Lowboy. They prefer it."

A long moment went by. "Pleased to meet you, William. My name is—"

"Because I get moody," Lowboy said, raising his voice. "Also because I like trains."

The Sikh said nothing. He looked Lowboy over and ran two bird-like fingers through his beard. Trying to make sense of me, Lowboy decided. The idea made him feel like a hermit at the top of a cliff.

"Underground trains," he said. "Subways. Low in the ground." He felt his voice go quiet. "Does that make sense to you?"

The train started braking and Lowboy got to his feet, still keeping his eyes on the Sikh. The Sikh kept motionless, propped up straight in his seat like a nearsighted little old lady on a bus.

"You're not a doctor, are you?" Lowboy said, squinting down at him. "An MD? A PhD? A DDS?"

The Sikh looked surprised. "A doctor, William? Why on earth—"

"Can you prove to me that you're not with the school?"

The Sikh gave a dry laugh. "I'm past eighty, William. I once was an electrical engineer."

"Bullshit," Lowboy said, shaking his head. "Balls."

Everyone in the car was looking at him now. There were times when he was practically invisible, monochrome and flat, and there were others when he gave off a faint greenish glow, like teeth held up to a blacklight. When that happened his voice got very loud very fast and the only thing he could do was keep his mouth shut. The air outside the glass got darker. There were things he wanted to explain to the Sikh, to apprise him of, but he held his breath and pressed his lips together. He could keep himself from talking when he had to. It was one of the first things that he'd learned to do at school.

"Who was that chasing you?" said the Sikh, propping his elbows on his beautiful sticklike legs. "Were they truancy officers?"

Lowboy shook his head fiercely. "Not sent by the school. Sent by—" He caught himself at the last moment. "By a *federal agency.* To frighten me. To try and make me follow their itinerary." He looked at the place on his wrist where his watch should have been, but there was nothing there, not even a paleness. He wondered if he'd ever had a watch.

"You'll have to excuse me," he said. He turned measuredly around to face the doors. It was too warm in the car for sudden movements.

The train seemed to hesitate as it came into the light. Its ventilators went quiet and its mercury striplights flickered and it rolled into the station at a crawl. The station was a main junction: six lines came together there. Its tiles were square and unbeveled, lacquered and white, like the tiles on a urinal wall. The only person on the platform was a transit guard who looked ready to fall down and die of boredom any minute. Lowboy frowned and bit down on the knuckle of his thumb. There was no good reason for the platform to be empty at 8:30 on a Tuesday morning.