

FELL BACK

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Fell Back

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*Heavenly shades of night are falling—
it's Twilight Time.
Out of the mist your voice is calling—
it's Twilight Time . . .*

1

ABOUT TWO WEEKS AFTER I returned to Gardner, one cold Wednesday afternoon, there was a crowd gathered down by The Tower. I jogged that way to see what all the excitement was about. There were snowdrifts all around. We'd hit a record for bad weather in January.

"Fell. Hurry, Fell!" Dib shouted at me.

I pushed my way toward him, and before I got to the front of the crowd, Dib said, "It's Lasher! He jumped from the top!"

Someone else said, "He finally did it!"

Dib turned and told me, "He's committed suicide, Fell!"

I stood there beside Dib, looking down at the cold pavement.

Beside Lasher's body, I saw his thick glasses with the panes smashed.

Then in less time than it takes a paper clip to inch over to a magnet, I said, "No. He didn't kill himself."

Those five words were going to get me into a lot of trouble.



"No one who knows he is about to get a new Porsche for his birthday kills himself," said Lasher's father.

His sister said, "Oh, come on, Daddy! He gave his VCR away, his watch, the Mont Blanc pen you bought him for Christmas. He was planning it!"

I watched the snow fall outside my window in Sevens House.

"Why didn't he even leave a note?" Dr. Lasher shook his bald head sadly.

"Because he wasn't in control of himself, Daddy. You saw how he was at Christmas—never smiling, always sleeping."

"He said nothing about suicide, however."

"He said nothing. Period. He wouldn't talk to anyone."

"Paul was often moody and melancholy."

"Not like that, no, never."

"Are you listening, Fell?" Dr. Lasher asked.

I glanced across at him. He bore a faint resemblance to his late son. He had the same bad eyesight, too.

"Yes, sir," I said. "You don't think it was suicide. I heard you."

"I know it was," his daughter said. "I knew him better than anyone."

No one would argue with that. Lauren was Lasher's twin. "Poised" would not describe her adequately. "Conceited" would be going too far. She was somewhere in between. Miss Tyler's School, over in Princeton, New Jersey, specialized in this type. Seventeen . . . but the kind of seventeen who had stopped reading the magazine by the same name at twelve.

She was blue eyed and beautiful. It was that sort of beauty helped a lot by great-looking clothes—a soft, black cashmere suit the same color as her straight, shoulder-length hair, and the kind of sophisticated makeup that looked natural until you realized eyes weren't outlined in black, lips weren't glossy, and cheekbones against olive skin did not have pink tones.

She was thin and tall. If she wasn't rich, she looked

it. She wasn't poor. Both her parents were Philadelphia shrinks who cost upward of one hundred dollars an hour.

"We didn't know him at all, apparently," said the doctor.

Just where his blazer buttoned, I could see the bulge of his potbelly, fighting the alligator belt holding it in. He was the blue-blazer (gold buttons), gray-flannel-pants type—Bean boots (the kind that lace), a storm coat (with a Burberry lining) tossed on my couch.

Lauren's coat was the female version of his, but her boots were high-heeled ones with fur tops.

"Fell," she said, "unless you have some definite information, you'd save Daddy a lot of agony by simply saying you know less than we do." She was one of those girls who called her father "Daddy," as my old girlfriend, Keats, always did. She treated him the same way Keats treated her father, as though there was no way he'd ever know as much about life as she did, but she was going to be patient with him just the same.

Girls like that can usually wrap Daddy around their little fingers when they want to. Me too.

I told them what she wanted to hear. "I know less than you do." I was glad to comply. I hadn't asked for this meeting. It was my only free period before lunch, then on to English class and the bad news probably awaiting me on my paper about Robert Browning. You don't think I understood "Fra Lippo Lippi," do you?

"No, no, no, no," Dr. Lasher said. "We came here to hear what you have to say, no matter how vague and

uninformed. I'll listen to hunches at this point."

I told him my major reservation about Lasher's death being a suicide wasn't a hunch, exactly. My feeling was based on something my dad had told me about suicide: that a person who wore eyeglasses removed them before he jumped from a high place. He left them behind or put them in his pocket. I told him my father'd been a private detective, and a cop before that; it was just something he'd pointed out to me.

Lauren said, "My brother couldn't see his fingers in front of his face without his glasses. He'd have worn them."

"What else?" her father asked me.

I lied. "Nothing." The last thing I wanted was to get involved.

What I had to do was stay out of trouble that term. I'd been in enough last term to hold me for a lifetime, living up to my father's prediction that I'd head for trouble like a paper clip to a magnet: It was my nature.

I'd opened my mouth without thinking when I saw Lasher's body, and his broken glasses beside it. Someone had told Dr. Lasher what I'd said. Maybe even Dib, my best friend on The Hill. Dib had his own reasoning about Lasher's leap from the top of The Tower. Why had Lasher screamed? Does someone scream when he's planned to jump . . . or does he scream when he's *pushed*?

"What can you tell me about this fellow named Creery?" Dr. Lasher asked.

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Dib had decided Creery'd pushed Lasher. He'd overheard a fight between them just before Christmas vacation. During that fight Lasher had threatened to kill Creery. Dib had theorized Lasher'd tried to do it, and Creery had pushed him while he was defending himself.

Both Lasher and Creery were in The Tower that fatal afternoon.

Lauren jumped in to answer her father's question herself.

She said, "Cyril Creery is just a goofball." She laughed a little, as though there was something really cute about being just a goofball. "Cyr wouldn't harm a fly."

I noticed she was wearing a gold 7 around her neck. Only a member of the secret Sevens could buy one of those. I'd never heard of a Sevens giving one of those to his sister, not even Outerbridge, whose sister, Cynthia, looked like Madonna and sometimes came over from Bryn Mawr to be his date at dances.

Usually Sevens gave these things to their girlfriends, or their mothers, the same as Air Force men did with their wings.

I'd always known that Lasher had a thing about Lauren. He'd brought her name up any chance he could, and her photographs were all over his room.

Often, on weekends, Lasher'd disappear, telling us later he'd gone away with his sister. He'd never say where.

I was remembering that while Lauren sat there sigh-

ing, saying in a somewhat exasperated tone, "Cyril and Paul didn't like each other, that's for sure. But Cyril's no killer. Mon Dieu, Daddy."

I thought about someone blithely saying Mon Dieu, Daddy, dangling one great long stockinged leg over another while right that moment in chapel they were festooning the walls with black-and-white-striped mourning cloths for that afternoon's memorial service. Black for sorrow. White for hope. Her brother'd been buried only a few days ago.

"Fell?" said Dr. Lasher. "Is there anything you're not telling me?"

"If you've spoken to Dib, there isn't."

"To whom?"

"Sidney Dibble," said Lauren. "The one we took to breakfast."

I thought so.

"He knows what I know," I said.

Dr. Lasher said, "Tell me about Twilight Truth, Fell."

"We've gone all over that, Daddy."

"I want to hear Fell's version."

I said, "Damon Charles, The Sevens' founder, seemed to have a fondness for twilight. Sevens get married at twilight, and buried at twilight. No one knows why. . . . Then there's Twilight Truth, on the second Wednesday of the month. Any Sevens who feels honor bound to confess he's done something to make him unworthy of the privileges of Sevens leaves a written statement in the top of The Tower. The officer of the

day rings the tower bell and reads it over the bullhorn."

"And then?" the doctor asked.

"We come up with an appropriate penalty. If it's serious, we ask him to live and eat at the dorm, or we give him the silent treatment. . . . If it's not that serious, we suspend certain privileges. We whistle 'Twilight Time' in his presence. . . . Sometimes we whistle that to force Twilight Truth on him, if he doesn't seem likely to step forward on his own."

"So ridiculous!" said Lauren.

"It's just ritual," her father said. "All clubs, including sororities, have their rituals."

"Which is why I'd never join one!" she said.

The doctor passed me something Xeroxed.

"Have you seen this, Fell?"

I hadn't. It was signed by Cyril Creery.

CREERY: *That Wednesday afternoon Lasher said he left a copy of a letter I'd written up in The Tower. He said it would be read at Twilight Truth. We had a fight about it. I punched him. Then I took the elevator up, but of course there was no letter. He was going crazy—I knew that. We all did. . . . I took the elevator down and went into Deem Library in The Tower. . . . About ten minutes later he jumped from the top.*

LT. HATCH: *Did you think he'd made up a letter, or was there a real letter?*

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CREERY: *My father had a stroke two years ago. Ever since, my stepbrother's been running our paint factory.*

Right before Christmas I wrote Lowell a letter. There was a lot of personal stuff in it. I was talking about changing my behavior and being more help to him.

I kept a copy. When Lasher mentioned a letter, naturally I thought of it. I was afraid he'd gone through my desk and found it. He wasn't above that sort of thing. . . . I wouldn't have wanted it read over a bullhorn. . . . So I went up to look, but he was bluffing.

LT. HATCH: *When you came back down and went into the library, who was there?*

CREERY: *No one was around that I could see. . . . I'd never kill anyone, not even Paul Lasher. I don't have it in me.*

*Cyril Creery
Cottersville Police Report*

I handed it back to Dr. Lasher.

"I didn't know about a letter," I said, "just that they had a fight."

"There wasn't a letter, apparently," said Lauren.

"It sounds like something Lasher'd do," I said. "They were always baiting each other. Lasher thought Creery was selling drugs. Lasher said you could get any kind of pill you wanted from him. He called his room 'The Drugstore.' "

Lauren said, "But Paul had become so paranoid! He

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made up lies about everyone. Remember, Daddy? He said Mother hadn't asked him a personal question in five years."

"Both your mother and I neglected Paul."

"Oh, Daddy, I heard her with my own ears. How are you? How's school? How're things at Sevens?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "Very general questions. Hardly personal."

"What was she supposed to say?" said Lauren.

Her father answered, "We both should have said, 'Sit down, Paul. Tell us what's going on in your life.' "

"Stop blaming yourself, Daddy! *Please!*"

The noon bell rang.

"Fell has to eat now," said Lauren. "I'm hungry too. And Mother's waiting for us."

Maybe a death in the family didn't make Lauren lose her appetite. Mine was missing for weeks after my dad died. So was my mother's. My little sister's. As good a cook as I am, I couldn't even tempt them, and everything from my spaghetti carbonara to my Chinese chicken wings had tears in it.

Dr. Lasher didn't want to leave. "Your mother is with the headmaster," he said. "She's not waiting for us."

Lauren was already putting her long arms down the sleeves of her Burberry.

"What do you know about Rinaldo Velez?" Dr. Lasher asked me.

"Not much. He works in The Tower, waits table and stuff."

Lauren said, "My brother gave *him* the VCR and the

Mont Blanc pen. We think he might have given him his good Gstaad watch, too."

Was there such a thing as a bad Gstaad watch?

"Why?" I said.

I meant why Rinaldo of all people? He was a townie. He'd be someone who'd really value those gifts, of anyone on The Hill—someone unlikely to be able to afford anything like them; but Lasher hadn't ever had a reputation for being friendly, charitable, or even thoughtful. He'd called Rinaldo "*Flaco*" because of how skinny he was. *Flaco*, Lasher'd say, you know I don't eat beef—take this back. *Flaco*, he'd say, this spoon has soap film on it—get me another.

Lauren didn't get my drift. "My brother gave them to him because my brother was preparing to leave this life."

"No," was all Dr. Lasher said.

He didn't say it loudly.

Softly, he said it.

But he did say it emphatically, as though there was no possibility that Lasher was preparing to leave this life.

I felt the same way he did. No . . . no way.

2

TRY READING "Fra Lippo Lippi" and see if you understand it.

This poem by Browning, I'd written on my test paper, tells a rather disgusting story about the famous martyr St. Laurence, and about the painting Fra Lippo Lippi did of him roasting on a gridiron in 258 A.D.

After my father became a private detective, my mother started calling him "The Martyr" because of all the hard work he put in on the job.

But my father couldn't hold a candle to St. Laurence, famous for telling the men who had him on a spit over hot coals, "One side is done; now you can do the other side."

The only thing I could really remember the day of the test on Browning's poetry was this fellow getting off that zinger while the Romans were cooking him.

I didn't understand the poem.

John Fell, you don't understand this poem, Mr. Wakoski wrote in red ink across my paper. It is not about St. Laurence. It's about the monk who painted him. You make it sound as though Fra Lippo Lippi was being roasted. Painting while he sizzled. Neat trick. Reread this poem. It is also a defense of artistic realism. . . . What's wrong with you, Fell? It's not a hard poem, no more so than "Andrea del Sarto."

Einstein's theory of relativity might not be any harder

than Newton's law of gravity either, but you'd never prove it by me.

I was standing in the hall between classes reading Wakoski's remarks with a sinking heart, the D- at the top of my paper making my stomach turn over.

"Another A+?" Dib asked me.

"Look again," I said. He was already glancing down over my shoulder. He let out a surprised whistle and tried pushing back his blond hair from his eyes.

I'd roomed with him before I became a Sevens. We were both blonds, but there the resemblance ended. He was taller and younger and he lived on junk food, proving that metabolism may have more to do with weight than calories, because Dib was almost a skeleton. If I ate all the Hostess Ding Dongs and Drake's golden creme cups he put away in an afternoon, I'd be ten pounds heavier.

"Browning is hard." Dib tried to make me feel better.

We started walking along together. I hadn't seen him in almost a week. When I first got into Sevens and he didn't, I made a point of looking him up at the dorm nearly every day, to try and let him know things weren't going to be any different.

But things *were*. Once a Hill boy made Sevens, the others treated us differently . . . and I guess we contributed to the change too, because we were on our honor never to tell the secrets of Sevens, and never, never to let anyone know how we got into the club.

That was the big mystery: How did someone get invited to join Sevens?

I wished I could tell Dib. He would have howled. He was right beside me our first day of school, when all of us had to plant little evergreen trees. That was the first thing you did when you arrived at Gardner School: You got into a line with other new kids, and all of you planted your tree . . . and named it something. . . . Anything. . . . I remember Dib named his after his dog: Thor.

I named mine "Good-bye," on a whim. My old girlfriend, Keats, lived in a house called Adieu. I'd tease her about the French, tell her it was pretentious. What's wrong with plain old good-bye? I'd ask her. . . . It was good enough for me. Good-bye to her, and to Long Island where I'd met her. Good-bye to public high school. Hello to Pennsylvania and preppydom!

Nobody but a member of Sevens knows that what you name your tree is the most important thing you do at Gardner School. If you name it something with seven letters in it, you are automatically a Sevens member.

There's no more to it than that. No one ever makes the connection. Everyone thinks you've done something special, or are someone special, to get asked to join, but it's a fluke. Mere chance, as The Sevens like to sing. And from the moment you are initiated into Sevens, you live in the luxurious Sevens House, and eat in the Sevens clubhouse at the bottom of The Tower. . . . You get a lot more privileges, too. . . . The other kids resent you, and envy you . . . and like Dib, they can't believe you won't even give them a clue about how you got to be a privileged character overnight.

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