

Excerpt from *The Headmaster Ritual*

by Taylor Antrim

*Prologue*

*July*

DYER MARTIN CURLED his fingers through the chainlink and stared at the empty field of shrub. Riverside County sunlight found shards of glass among scattered rocks and twinkled in his direction. Tufts of foot-high desert grass waved gentle hellos in the Santa Ana's hot breath.

Jim Simon, Dyer's boss at Virgenes Development Corporation, had ordered him to take a look at the twenty-five acres he'd claimed for the company, to look at the stalled housing developments that surrounded it, to crouch down and sniff the chromium VI- and perchlorate-saturated soil. So Dyer had taken the 91 east, driving through a desert landscape of malls with empty parking lots, vacant glass-and-steel office parks, and windmill farms stretching to the Santa Ana mountains. Off the freeway exit just west of Perris, Dyer passed Palm Crest, a checkerboard of exposed foundations and roofless homes.

"That's a slice of wasteland you bought us," Jim Simon had said with something like satisfaction, guiding Dyer out of the glass office doors and into the parking lot, squeezing his shoulder in a kind, fatherly way. They both stood beside Dyer's car, and

Dyer enjoyed the weight and warmth of Simon's hand. "But don't worry," Simon had said, smiling and letting him go. "This is why we have lawyers."

From the time Dyer came on as a junior associate, Jim Simon had told him to be aggressive and creative in exploring opportunities—and to liaise only with him, not any other partner at Virgenes. So on a week when Simon was golfing in Maui, a broker named Jimmy Veltramo rung his extension, and Dyer took the call. Veltramo had described the Inland Empire plot's proximity to Palm Crest, a community of luxury homes, median price 500K, average owner age 29.9, average income high 80s. There was a dearth of shopping in the area, Veltramo said; perfect opportunity for a commercial developer like Virgenes. Timing was a problem; Dyer didn't want to call Simon on his vacation, and Veltramo needed a letter of intent signed by Friday, or he'd take the offer to another company. LOIs were standard practice—and nonbinding; Simon signed them all the time. A signature would pull the property off the market for thirty days. Veltramo could courier the LOI right then; Dyer could always let the period expire without a deal.

But Dyer hadn't caught the clause nestled in a block of type on the back side of page three. The \$500,000 Veltramo required for failure to negotiate a purchase and sale agreement. Nor had he checked a Phase 1 environmental report on the land. Nor had he checked the zoning. Now there was half a million due on a zoned-residential plot with groundwater contamination in the middle of nowhere.

A bad blunder, a job-ending blunder. Dyer stood at the chainlink fence that surrounded the property, his ulcer throbbing deep within him, his mouth dry and sour,

and he felt the guilt and embarrassment he'd been carrying around all week. He counted the things he could call his own—a dirt-colored Honda, a suitcase's worth of clothes, the rising knowledge that he had never really wanted to work in real estate for his girlfriend's father anyway.

Escape would be natural, a matter of Dyer's patrimony, of DNA, of blood-borne instinct. And there was his Honda, parked behind him, the driver's door ajar, the key-in-ignition tone pinging.

But Dyer was determined to stay in California and make it up to Jim Simon. He told himself that he loved Alice and didn't want to lose her.

Dyer put a foot in the chainlink and began to climb. The spiked top raked his thigh, tearing his suit pants as he swung a leg over. His knees buckled on the hard-packed sand. Stepping over bent lengths of rebar and miniature, thorny cacti, Dyer began to walk the boundary. The air wobbled with heat. Jim Simon had said wasteland, and yet with a little optimism, Dyer thought, with an eye for potential, you could imagine the sturdy geometry of a multi-level parking garage out here, or a retirement community of fountains and palm groves.

He blinked hard, then blinked again, playing peekaboo with the view. The visions kept coming; a twenty-five screen Cineplex, *blink*, a petting zoo.

He knew his ideas were impractical—there wasn't another person for miles. And yet to Dyer they felt like guy wires streaming off his body, digging into the earth, steadying

him. A black snake, like a discarded bicycle tube, lay down the fence line. He felt behind him for the fence, for its reassuring grid of hot steel.

Dyer took a long breath, more visions flaring within him. He thought of Alice at her desk, lit by her laptop screen—her thick auburn hair, her gently curving upper lip, her little belly, those things that made his heart race. Sunlight blinded him, bulleting off a broken bottle of Miller Lite. He felt his hot ulcer prodding him in the stomach. He felt the half-million dollars clinging to his back. He felt the wires fray and snap.

*Fall Term*

*September*

“WE WERE SUPPOSED to meet this morning?” asked Dyer, standing in the shaded portico of Headmaster Wolfe’s residence, the humid Massachusetts air on him like a quilt.

“Agreed,” said Edward Wolfe with his hand on the door’s brass knob. He moved out of the way. “Come in.”

Dyer dipped his head and passed inside. The air had a still, musty smell, as if the windows hadn’t been opened all summer. The hardwood floor in the wide foyer was bare except for a coarse straw mat and an Oriental rug rolled up like a sausage along the wall. Muddy running shoes sat on a radiator; a loose stack of mail covered a table by the door. An ornately framed portrait—old, Dyer thought, the paint webbed with cracks—of a black-suited couple in twin wooden chairs was propped against the wall. In its place hung

a framed sheet of yellow paper with a typed list of names. Curious, Dyer took a closer look. Halfway down the page, he stopped: “Edward Wolfe; Boston, MA; Harvard; SDS.”

Dyer felt Wolfe at his side and realized the headmaster had him by a good half inch. His jaw was block-shaped beneath coarse gray stubble, his lips, fish-white and thin. Body heat came off him in waves, mingled with a clean, soapy smell. Dyer told himself to look at Wolfe directly, to find his eyes in their deep-set sockets.

Even though Roberta O’Brien, dean of faculty, had offered him the job, even though he’d signed tax forms, even though there’d been a welcome letter for him in his Bailey House faculty apartment, this morning could still be some sort of final interview, a chance for Wolfe to judge for himself, to make up his own mind. In late July during his interview with O’Brien, she’d said that Britton’s headmaster had left a tenured post in Harvard’s History Department to run the school. “He was looking for a more institutional role. To bring a progressive approach to the classroom,” she’d said. “So he wants young, less traditionally trained teachers, candidates with higher academic degrees, not graduates of education programs.” Dyer, with no prior teaching experience, with his Oxford M.Phil. in History, was “just the sort of candidate he’s looking for,” she’d said.

A reassuring memory—but Headmaster Wolfe had never met Dyer. And there had to have been more qualified candidates vying for the position. Lots of them. A teaching post at Britton was something of a coup, and they could probably get a replacement for Dyer, even with classes only a week away. Dyer straightened his back, rising on the balls of his feet.

“Nineteen sixty-eight,” said Wolfe, nodding at the framed page of names on the wall. “An enemies list from Hoover’s COINTELPRO files. An old friend of mine at the Justice Department copied the original for me.”

“You were SDS?” asked Dyer.

“Don’t kick our founders,” said Wolfe, nodding toward the narrow-faced puritans at Dyer’s knee.

Dyer stumbled back a step.

“Warner and Constance Britton. Suppose I’ll have to find another place for them eventually,” said Wolfe. “Maybe the john.” The headmaster’s clothes were casual, a little ragged: an old Harvard sweatshirt stained yellow at the neck, felt letters puckering from loose thread. Jeans belted with a length of rope. The getup calmed Dyer a little. On his walk this morning, the Britton School had appeared dauntingly correct; now, its headmaster didn’t. Dyer tried to smile. Wolfe tipped his head toward a living room.

“Shall we?”

Dyer followed him down a short hallway, along a threadbare Oriental rug, its red faded to rust, through an open doorway into the living room. The room was formal and grand, with crown molding, a plaster school crest in the ceiling, and a carved stone hearth. The windows went up above Dyer’s head, the antique glass in their leaded panes distorting the view, letting in a weak, gridded light. It was a little cooler here, thanks to an air-conditioning unit gurgling in one window. Wolfe made for a shabby, squat armchair that seemed out of place in the room, settling down with a contented sigh,

rocking his head back. He sank lower in the chair until he lay nearly flat, his legs straight out, one crossed over the other.

An oil portrait, the room's only wall decoration, hung directly above Wolfe's head. It took Dyer a moment to recognize the man in it as a younger, shaggier-haired, black-bearded Wolfe, sitting in the same armchair. In the painting he wore a thick tie and a brown jacket with wing-wide lapels. Surrounding him were swirls and licks of red and orange, as if Wolfe was the source of an enormous fire. His hands curled over the arms of the chair like catchers' mitts.

If Wolfe noticed Dyer staring—if he read Dyer's mind (narcissism? any other interpretation?)—the headmaster didn't let on. Wolfe gestured toward the navy corduroy sofa in the middle of the room, the cushions worn to a shiny indigo, another piece, like the armchair, that could have been dragged in from a yard sale.

Wolfe spread his arms. "Welcome to Britton," he said.

"Thank you," Dyer said, breathing out with real relief, lowering himself, a long way down, into the sofa. Change funneled out of his pockets into the cushions.

Wolfe dug at the chair's frayed stitching with a thumbnail. "You come to us from California," he said.

"L.A.," said Dyer. "I drove out last week." He thought of eastern Colorado, the prairie empty to the horizon, the white lane blinking beside the car like a reset clock. "I wanted to say how excited I am to be joining you here."

"Why's that?"

Dyer had to think. “I’ve always wanted to teach. I can’t imagine a better place.

Britton’s reputation—“

Wolfe waved that away. “Our reputation’s a handicap.”

Dyer waited; no elaboration came. The Britton School was the oldest, most selective prep school in the country. Dyer had noted the 8 percent admit rate on the website. He’d focused on the other number, that staggering 92, the rowdy group of rejects he’s surely have been in, had he ever applied. The country’s current president, at least two senators he knew of, the secretary of state: all Britton alumni. On Dyer’s walk around the school grounds that morning, sweating, waving gnats out of his face, he’d passed brick and white wooden buildings with names and dates carved into stone plaques. Thomas Ramm Hall, 1924. Jordan Eccleson Hall, 1819. Holbert Weiss Hall, 1880. The neat, crisscrossing paths, the terraced lawns, the school’s museum stillness, delivered the impressions Dyer had been expecting—prestige, privilege; both intimidating. But there was also this: a hushed refuge, a ringed enclave of quiet. A fresh start.

“I understand you were working real estate.”

“It was sort of an experiment.”

Wolfe leaned forward expectantly, but Dyer didn’t want to talk about Virgenes, so he shrugged like a teenager, then tried to think of some way to change the subject. What he did want to talk about, he realized, was Alice. *I was trying to make a relationship work.* But he couldn’t say it. Not to his new employer, a man he hardly knew.

Dyer suddenly wanted to call Alice, hear how her screenplay was coming. They hadn't broken up, not officially. After he'd accepted Dean O'Brien's job offer, they had agreed to defer the question, though Dyer knew this stalling was just to save their last weeks together. Which hadn't worked: "You knew that LOI was a mistake," Alice had told him one night, lying in bed. "You signed it on purpose."

"I didn't," Dyer said.

"Everyone acts out," she said. "It's just a question of scale."

"Your dad said to be aggressive. I was being aggressive," he said.

"You're being aggressive right now," she said.

Dyer told himself he was still young, younger than his father had been when he left his mother—and Dyer and Alice weren't married. There was no comparison, in fact. Taking the Britton job meant following a career path he'd always wanted (as opposed to, say, real estate). It also meant accepting responsibility for his future, holding himself accountable—two things his father had never done.

"You're probably wondering why I chose you for this job," Wolfe said, breaking the silence.

Well, yes. But Dyer answered quickly: "Roberta O'Brien told me you wanted someone without traditional training. That you didn't care about an education degree."

"Here's what I care about," said Wolfe. He took a newspaper that lay folded on the floor and tossed it to the couch.

Dyer read the headline: “U.S. Intelligence Agencies Fear Imminent North Korean Nuclear Test.” He said, “I heard about it on the radio this morning.”

“What did you think?”

Dyer hesitated. What was the right answer here? “We’ve been calling their bluff for a long time.”

“We’?”

“The U.S.”

“The most heavily nuclear-armed country in the world.” Wolfe raised his eyebrows at Dyer.

Dyer looked back down at the paper, searching for something else to say. “I suppose it serves them to be provocative.”

“Why, do you think?”

A few seconds slipped by. “What do you mean?”

“Put it this way: Don’t capitalist nations tend inevitably toward war?”

*Christ*, though Dyer.

“No?”

At Oxford, Dyer had taken a term’s tutorial with Howard Phelps, a conservative economist at St. John’s College. They’d done a study of the American New Left in the sixties and seventies, including the Students for a Democratic Society, the Port Huron Statement, the Progressive Labor Maoists, the Weathermen. In a series of essays, Dyer had described the New Left as naïve apologists for third world dictatorships, drawn more

to revolutionary violence than coherent political ideology. He'd written that, historically, even those exploited by capitalism had more to hope for than the communist poor. Dyer certainly wouldn't be rehashing those arguments to an ex-member of the SDS. Wolfe would know, anyway, about his tutorial with Phelps. His name was on Dyer's transcript, included with his original application for the position.

"Historically speaking," Dyer finally said. "It's a good point."

Wolfe nodded toward the paper again: "Meaning you don't think we're headed for war right now?"

Dyer managed a nervous shrug. Footsteps crossed the hall outside the room. A thin boy with short wavy hair, carrying a green duffel bag, passed the open living room door. He looked in and said, "Okay. Bye." *Good timing*, Dyer thought.

"James," Wolfe said, beckoning him in. "Dyer, this is my son. James, meet Mr. Martin."

The boy dropped his bag and took a reluctant step through the doorway.

Dyer pushed himself out of the couch, crossed the room, and shook James's hand.

"Hello," said Dyer.

"Hi," said James in a quiet voice, glancing at Wolfe. Dyer saw the likeness in the deep set of their eyes, their thin, white lips.

"James will be in your 250 class," Wolfe said to Dyer.

The boy took a long breath as if the prospect depressed him. He dropped Dyer's hand, returned to his duffel.

“See you in class,” said Dyer, trying to sound cheerful.

“Bye, Dad,” said James, pausing at his father’s side.

Wolfe patted him on the back but said nothing. James looked reluctant to leave—but eventually he did, dragging his feet as he moved into the hall. Wolfe frowned at him over his shoulder. The front door opened and slowly shut. Wolfe panned his attention back to Dyer. “I’m sort of throwing him to the wolves.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve sent him to live in the dorms. Staying here keeps him isolated. Sets him apart.” He looked briefly out the window. On the far side of the street, James crossed the quad toward Elson Road, weaving under the weight of his bag. “Boarding school wasn’t a happy time for me, either,” he said. “I spent four fairly miserable years at Hawkins Prep. In Connecticut?” Dyer shook his head. “The social hierarchy was a little severe.”

“Teenagers can be cruel,” said Dyer.

“The elite can be. The popular kids.” Wolfe studied Dyer. “Were you popular?”

“Not really,” Dyer said quickly, finding his seat, trying to shake off a familiar gloom. Twenty-five years old, and it still depressed him to catch the resemblance between fathers and sons. “You had to be an asshole to be really popular,” he said. Oops. But Wolfe didn’t seem bothered by the word. “I had decent grades, but North Richmond High was no Britton School. Ran cross-country. Yearbook staff.”

Wolfe scratched his cheek with a fingernail—a low, rough sound. “You know Britton’s motto?”

Dyer's mind raced. "Not by heart, I'm afraid."

" 'Youth from Every Quarter.' Sounds nice—except when you consider that for the last two hundred years we've been a game preserve for New England Wasps. 'Youth from Every Quarter' means no power class, no hegemony of thought. No *elite*. The word itself should be meaningless."

Wolfe paused. Dyer sensed a clue. "That's what is exciting about teaching—"

"But our elite is alive and well," said Wolfe, interrupting. "Last year we had Henry Fieldspar in the upper form. You recognize the name?"

"Son of Angus?" Angus Fieldspar was a Republican senator from Tennessee.

"Major donor to the school. Or ex-donor, I should say. Henry thought his name could get away with anything, but then he was caught drinking and what they call 'cruising' in the same night. We give you two strikes here. Those were his."

"What's cruising?"

"Leaving the dorm after sign-in."

"Got it."

"Discipline is a question for the collective. You'd call that a radical cliché, perhaps."

Wolfe thought for a moment, then held his hand flat above his stomach. "Think of the school as a balanced seesaw. Privilege one class of student over another..." He tilted his hand up and down, then let it drop to the arm of the chair. A puff of dust rose like smoke.

Outside, in heavy, syncopated tones, a carillon began to ring. Dyer felt a headache coming on, a bunched feeling in his forehead. He tried to assure himself that he'd made

no major missteps, that they were still building a rapport. “Do we have many senators’ sons?” Dyer asked, smiling.

“I’m getting rid of them one by one.” Wolfe deadpanned a stare, then smiled and leveraged himself up from the chair. “Good to have you, Dyer. I told Roberta to give you a light schedule this fall,” he said. “While we break you in. Come winter term, we’ll load you up with more.”

“Great,” said Dyer, standing. The meeting was over.

Wolfe followed Dyer to the front door and set a hand on his shoulder. His grip wasn’t warm and soft as Alice’s father’s had been; it was more like a leather strap. “I do a sequence of choson do forms in the morning here in my backyard.”

“Is that a...?” Dyer couldn’t think of the word.

“It’s a Korean exercise technique. Six in the morning on Wednesdays. Optional of course.”

*Six in the morning.* “Sounds terrific,” Dyer said.

Outside, the carillon bells in the bell tower rang some tumble-down melody Dyer didn’t recognize. The heavy notes hummed the air.

Wolfe shook his hand, holding his gaze a second too long, a stare that felt like a warning. “They’re not bluffing,” he said. “The North Koreans. Take my word.”