

Name: _____

Class: _____

Cheboygan Day

By Brittany Allen
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Brittany K. Allen is a New York-based playwright, prosewright and actor. In this short story, two new students move to a small town and are greeted by others in very different ways. Their treatment reveals the power of group behavior in a school community. As you read, take notes on how the narrator views and interacts with the Cheboygans.

- [1] Kookaburra, our New England town, prides itself on its traditions. Every March we have Founder's Day to celebrate Saul Berringer, the pioneer who stole this land from the Mohegan and Pequot Native tribes.¹ And when other, normal-er cities are celebrating Easter, the Kookaburrans participate in a city-wide scavenger hunt for Sasquatch footprints, because some sap fifty years ago claimed to see a monster in the marsh. We call that one Kook's Day. Or at least, my mother does.

But worst of all is the Seafood Festival, the ten days out of every summer when out-of-towners in electric cars drive in and fill up our bed and breakfasts. They buy overpriced foam lobster claws and pretend-Navy hats, then leave their pop cans and shells all over the street, which my mother has to pick up. Unlike our other traditions, locals basically hate the Seafood Festival, but we tolerate it because everyone turns a profit — from the restaurant workers to the parasailing instructors. Even me, Jumi, and Arpan are in on the action. We make “authentic Kookaburra friendship bracelets” and sell them for five dollars more than they take to make. We're not rich in our town. In fact, our parents have a saying: *Everybody has to serve somebody. You do what you do to get yours.*

It was the first day of Seafood Fest when the Cheboygans moved to town. I remember because me, Jumi, and Arpan saw their trucks barrel past us down Main Street, slightly over the speed limit. An unfamiliar company with an orange and obvious logo: *GUYS IN A VAN*. “You think they did any brainstorming?” said Arpan, when he read the name aloud. “Or just went with the very first idea that came to mind?”

“CARS FOR THINGS,” said Jumi, in a flat, bored voice. “STUFF ON WHEELS?”

- [5] “WE HAUL?” I offered. But she dismissed my joke with a wave of her hand.



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1. Native American tribes indigenous to present day Connecticut.

"Nah, that's too creative. GUYS IN A VAN is as dumb as it gets." Arpan sucked his teeth. "Whoever's in there, 'Honor roll, they are not.'"

I recognized 'Honor roll, they are not' as a quote from Otis Greeley — the new guy on SNL.² Arpan had recently gotten into the habit of repeating his favorite comedians. His plan after high school was to move to the city and become an entrepreneur slash media mogul. He already had a huge Instagram following for the secret videos he took of his parents saying silly things in their heavily accented English.

"#FirstGenProblems,"³ he called it. The three of us had been best friends since second grade, when we all bonded over Mrs. Paley's inability to pronounce our names during roll call.

"Honor roll, they are not," Jumi repeated, and made a visor of her hands. We watched the badly named trucks make the turn toward Old Sycamore, the neighborhood we trick-or-treated in, and fell silent. Just like our parents, we walked through town with everybody's business in our back pockets. Gossip was a life force in Kookaburra. At least it gave us something to do in between goofy festivals.

- [10] Three days later, high school started. Signs saying "Fresh Meat" were taped to every ninth-grade locker, like something out of an eighties movie. But this was mostly for show. Kookaburra isn't big enough for bullies. Our town is so tiny that the high school and middle school share a building and a science teacher (Mr. Pevin taught Chem and Bio and Physics). In the thirty minutes before classes started, groups from all grades would co-mingle in the Student Activities Center (or SAC for short) and race to finish their homework. Just like in eighth and seventh and sixth grade, me, Arpan, and Jumi took up our usual spot by the pillar, and started divvying⁴ up the profits from our bracelet business. "It doesn't feel any different," Arpan was saying, meaning our new status as freshmen. "I mean, I thought I'd feel older? But I don't."

That's when the Cheboygans sailed in, coming through the front doors as if on a tide of light. Everyone, from sixth grade to twelfth, turned to stare at the new kids.

It was hard to make sense of the picture they made. The boy was tall, with long auburn hair tied in a pony-tail at the nape of his neck and a smattering of freckles across his nose. While most of us wore ripped jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies, the boy Cheboygan wore slacks like our fathers and older brothers wore to weddings and funerals, and a crisp white button down with a tweed blazer on top. The only young thing about him was his black, immaculate Converse sneakers. The girl was even stranger. She had Jumi's dark complexion, but short hair, buzzed close to the scalp. She wore jangly gold bangles on each wrist, and a shapeless blue shift-dress. Her light gray eyes reminded me of the color the ocean turned at dusk. The boy was smiling, widely. But the girl looked wary and timid.

"That's got to be the honor roll," said Jumi, yanking an AirPods out of her ear. Her eyes were wide with curiosity. "Where do we think they come from? The city?"

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2. SNL refers to Saturday Night Live, a late-night sketch comedy show on NBC.
 3. First generation refers to someone who is the first in their family to be born in a country. It implies that the person's parents are immigrants.
 4. Dividing

"Gotta be the city."

- [15] The city, in our world, could refer to several nearby places — Hartford, New York, Boston — but mostly, we meant it as a code. Meaning, "Wealthy," or "Impressive," or "Not Like Us."

When I walked into Mrs. Bleyer's homeroom, the girl Cheboygan was sitting at my usual desk. I hovered dumbly above her until she glared at me.

"Um, can I help you?"

"Nope," I replied, easing into the adjacent seat that was usually Tommy Dorfman's. His mom and mine both worked for the sanitation department. Sometimes Tommy and I would ride our bikes home together, to our neighborhood on the South side by the dunes. We never spoke about our mothers at school. I couldn't say why, exactly. Tommy had a left-handed desk that was awkward to sit in, but I realized it let me look over the girl Cheboygan's shoulder. She had a comp notebook open and was doodling, dark angry scribbles. Her whole body hunched over the paper, like the act took her entire self.

"Hello hello!" sang Mrs. Bleyer, skipping into the room with a tray of Stop n' Shop Cupcakes. She was one of those young teachers who worked hard to make school fun. "How was everyone's summer? Take one and pass the box along!" She also spoke very quickly, leaping from thought to thought like a frog. "I hear this year is especially exciting because we have some new students." She glanced at a notecard in her hand and scanned the room. "Now, where is Adele Cheboygan? And am I pronouncing that correctly, Adele?" The sound of the name filled me with a warm feeling, like I felt looking at fireflies.

- [20] The girl who'd stolen my seat slowly raised her hand and nodded: yes. Mrs. Bleyer waited for her to say something else, but when it was clear Adele had no intention of giving a speech, Mrs. Bleyer turned her smile up a notch and spread her arms wide. "Guys, let's everyone make Adele feel at home, okay?" Then she fixed her gaze on me. "Sweet Owen! Will you be my welcome ambassador? Show our new friend the ropes around here?"

By now the cupcakes had made their way over to our corner of the classroom. Nodding to our teacher, I held the box up to Adele, and did a little pretend bow like I was her lowly servant. That got a smile. I saw a brilliant flash of her white teeth as she dove her hand into the box.

As I walked Adele to Mr. Pevin's class, she was surprisingly chatty, in abrupt contrast to her first impression. She told me her family had just moved here from Hartford, mostly so her mom — a marine biologist — could study humpback whales at the conservatory two towns over. Her dad drew a comic strip for The Boston Herald, and had taught her everything she knew about art. And I'd probably seen Claude, her brother, that morning —

"Wait, so the red headed kid is your brother?" This was Blake Kettleman, whose locker we'd just happened to pass. Blake's Mom taught swimming lessons and led the Girl Scouts. It was considered a great irony⁵ that Blake was the most insensitive loudmouth at our whole school, when his mom was such a feminist.⁶

5. the opposite of what is expected

6. a person who believes in the equality of the sexes

"Never mind this guy," I said. "What were you saying about your brother? Are you two close?"

[25] "Well, kind of. We used to be..." Adele started. But Blake interrupted.

"You two don't look alike. What's that about?"

Though I tried to hustle us on, Adele stopped in her tracks. I watched her face close like a flower, returning to the defensive scowl she'd worn before accepting my cupcake.

"How is that even remotely your business?" she asked.

"It just kind of seems like a lie," said Blake. "And here in Kookaburra, we hate liars."

[30] By now, a small crowd had begun to gather by the lockers, and a few doors down I could see Mrs. Bleyer moving toward us on hallway patrol. But before I could intervene,⁷ Adele had wheeled on Blake.

"Not that I owe you an explanation, townie,⁸ but I'm adopted. My biological mother is from Cape Verde.⁹ Which is an island just like this one, only prettier."

Blake's mouth fell open, just as Mrs. Bleyer sailed back into earshot. "Whoa, Adele. We don't speak to each other that way here," she said, looking way more hurt than I thought the situation warranted. "Did anyone give you the Code of Conduct at registration?"

Adele shook her head as Mrs. Bleyer launched into a speech about the importance of "respecting our fellow students" and "proceeding from a place of compassion." I saw that Adele had turned beet red. When the late bell finally rang, she left my side abruptly, shooting off down the hall. Mrs. Bleyer sighed sadly, but Blake looked pleased with himself.

By lunch, we had more information. Jumi and Arpan had Claude Cheboygan in their homeroom, and apparently his introduction had gone over much better. "He's really funny," said Jumi, biting into an apple. "He plays sax and loves *Star Wars*. Umm, and he's allergic to shellfish? So he's worried about fitting in around all these fisherman kids. But seems like a cool dude."

[35] "He's cool because he's allergic to shellfish?"

"No, he just seems like a cool guy." As if on cue, Claude walked into the SAC with three of the most popular sophomores — Ian Pilar, Ricky Sanchez, and August Ellington. They sat down on the steps of the stage where Mr. Gloucester conducted assemblies. I saw that since this morning, Claude had loosened his ridiculous tie, and untucked his shirt. Now he didn't look like a dorky kid playing dress-up so much as a cool young teacher, relaxing with his students. When he leaned forward to speak, the boys would all respond with deep belly laughs.

7. **Intervene** (*verb*) to become involved with a conflict in order to influence its outcome

8. slang term that refers to a person who lives in a town with a university or heavy tourism

9. an island country located off the west coast of Africa

"But what's the deal with the sister?" said Arpan. "People are saying she's kind of a freak."

"And that they're like, not really related?" Jumi added. "Tanya Bearling said she's a foster kid." A flash of anger burbled in my gut, but I didn't know what to do with it, or who it was meant to be for. Jumi, unaware, kept fiddling with her phone. She'd moved to the island, too, but as a baby. Her father was in the Coast Guard, but he'd left her and her mom before she could form memories.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

[40] "She told us in the hall that she's adopted. Don't believe everything you hear."

"Adopted, foster kid. What's the difference? She's clearly the black sheep in the family."

"Wow, I wouldn't have expected you to be so close-minded," I said.

"You mean because we look alike, we should be besties? Is that really what you're saying, O?"

"Of course not!" I sputtered. But then I had to wonder if that wasn't what I'd been thinking, after all — just a little bit. Was it so messed up to assume that Jumi and Adele would have something in common, simply based on their shared skin color? I sometimes got the feeling that people thought me, Arpan, and Jumi were friends for this very reason. That our difference from the others — our names, our parents, our backgrounds — was what made us similar to one another. But then, that wasn't the whole picture. Arpan and I had actually bonded over hours of playing MarioKart and binging SNL, and I'd looked up to Jumi ever since I watched her shimmy up the ropes in gym class, hitting the bell before any of the boys. We were a trio like *The Wizard of Oz*, with each of us bringing something the others didn't have — Arpan was witty where Jumi was bold. Which I guess made me the Tin Man. I couldn't deny being sensitive. My friends still liked to tease me because the movie *Up* had made me cry.

[45] "Owen, I can see you're spinning. Chill out," Arpan said. Then — "Claude's great, you'll see." He was half in his phone, too, editing one of his #FirstGen videos. Jumi reached out a hand for a high-five, to let me know things were cool between us. The rest of lunch passed normal, with us plotting out our weekend, and gossiping about who'd changed the most over the summer. It didn't occur to me until sixth period that I'd completely abandoned my mission to show Adele "the ropes."

Over the next few weeks, a strange thing happened. Namely, Claude Cheboygan was crowned unofficial king of the ninth grade. In the morning, he'd roll into the SAC and everyone would take note — jock kids, middle schoolers, Mathletes. Special attention was paid to his wardrobe. He was still overdressed by a mile, but people had decided to like his grown-up slacks and blazers. Some kids even started imitating his look. One day Tyson Bretter came to school in tweed pants, which he'd clearly borrowed from his dad. Alex Gamarsky, who usually wore a fishing vest, showed up to lunch in a piano key necktie. Teachers approved — to Claude they said things like, "looking dapper!" and "Nice duds, junior!" And even Arpan, who made fun of everyone's clothes, referred to Claude's "brand" as "classy chic."

And you started to see his name everywhere. Like literally everywhere. Inscribed in hearts, on bathroom stalls, or stabbed into the soft metal skin of the bleachers. The sand of the beach. Walking through the hallways, every overheard conversation seemed to involve Claude:

Claude Cheboygan learned to drive in a Ferrari. It's his dad's, and they keep it on the mainland in a special garage.

Claude Cheboygan is best friends with Timothée Chalamet. ¹⁰*They met at a summer camp for kids who play jazz.*

[50] *Claude Cheboygan and his mom scuba dive with the humpback whales. He can understand whale songs. Ask him!*

Some of the rumors were too ridiculous to be believed, but people repeated them anyway, kids from sixth to twelfth grade. On the boardwalk, you'd hear the syllables of his name uttered in a tone of wonder. Even teachers were complicit. ¹¹His first Friday, I saw Ms. McCarthy hand him a flyer for drama club. They were having *Romeo and Juliet* auditions in a few weeks, she said, and he'd make a wonderful Mercutio. We hadn't read that play yet in my English class, but something in her voice made me suspect it was the best part.

Despite all this, I couldn't seem to see Claude as everyone else did. To even get the impression of his awesomeness, I had to squint. We had only one class together — Horticulture, with Mr. Pevin — and in the greenhouse he made a big show of not wanting to get his nice clothes dirty, letting girls do his planting assignments while he stood off to the side and made snarky comments. And while everyone laughed when he spoke in a certain voice, it wasn't like with Arpan. I never got the joke.

As Claude's stock rose, Adele's sank. Even though she and Claude continued to arrive at school together every morning, hopping out of the same silver Prius before separating at the door, kids flat out refused to believe they could have come from the same house, let alone the same family. Nasty rumors circulated about Adele with the same speed and enthusiasm as the good gossip about her brother. Blake Kettleman brazenly ¹²told everyone she was the housekeeper's daughter, and that the family kept her around because they didn't want a scandal getting out. He took to calling her a "townie" behind her back.

I never again got a glimpse of that sunnier, chattier self Adele had briefly shown me in the hallway in the few minutes before her first science class. Now she walked through the school with her shoulders slouched, clutching her notebook to her chest, eyes cast down. I figured some part of her preferred being a loner because she didn't exactly make an effort to get to know people. But I knew this was also something I told myself to feel better about how spectacularly I'd failed at being her "welcome ambassador."

[55] I remember seeing her once in the art room as I was on my way to lunch with my friends. She was sitting alone at an easel, her back to me as she painted. I could hear her bracelets jangling as her hands moved from palette to paper. She'd made a beautifully detailed, professional-looking watercolor of two Black women — one old, one young — having a picnic lunch on the beach. There were red lobsters and a pitcher of lemonade between them. This picture struck me as much cornier than her usual scribble-tornados, but there was something painful about it, too. The colors were so vivid they reminded me of what the world looked like right after you stepped from a dark room into sunlight.

Meanwhile, the end of Seafood Fest was in sight. Predictably, our parents griped about the mess the tourists had made of our beaches and storefronts while turning around and taking their money straight to the bank. Arpan and Jumi had joined the stage crew in anticipation of the empty autumn weekends, but I was no good with tools. On the nights they stayed late in the auditorium, building the balcony for *Romeo and Juliet*, I rode my

10. An American actor

11. **Complicit** (*adjective*) helping to do wrong in some way

12. **Brazenly** (*adverb*) done in a shocking way without a sense of shame

bike home with Tommy. Our mothers sometimes played dominos together on one or the others' front porch before their shifts started. One Wednesday as we were riding up, my mom stood to greet us, holding up a pitcher of iced tea.

"Boys!" she called. "Come meet Mrs. Cheboygan!" I saw her wave at an unfamiliar woman who stood on the lawn between our houses. The stranger wore a blue linen shirt, Mom jeans, and...bangles. Both wrists. A red and white striped kerchief was casually tied over her brown, curly hair. I didn't have to get any closer to see that she was the spitting image of Adele.

"You must be Owen," Mrs. Cheboygan said. When she spoke, I got the warm, slightly prickly feeling I'd gotten the first day of school, when Adele had smiled at me. I nodded and looked at the ground.

"My daughter's told me so much about you."

[60] "Hear that, sweetie?" said Mom. "You've got a fan!" I blushed a horrible, hot red. I loved my Mom, but sometimes she was so embarrassing I wanted to row out onto the ocean and never look back.

"I was just telling your mom that Adele would love to spend some time up here," Mrs. Cheboygan continued. "She wants to draw Kookaburra from every possible vantage point, and I know she hasn't seen the dunes yet."

"Did you know that Adele was an artist, Tommy?" This was Tommy's mom, Pam. Pam was the friendliest mom, probably in all of New England. She baked cookies for no reason, and watered people's plants when they went out of town without even being asked to. Behind closed doors, my friends and I wondered if she was too nice. If maybe that explained why Tommy was sometimes a little slow on the uptake

Case in point: "I heard she drew all the time at the orphanage," said Tommy, throwing his bike on the grass. "Didn't the nuns make everyone?"

Mrs. Cheboygan pursed her lips. "What orphanage?" she said.

[65] Tommy looked a little uncertain as silence collected around us, but still he continued: "The one on Cape Verde?" Honor roll, he is not, I imagined Arpan muttering.

"I'm from Cape Verde, but there's no orphanage," said Mrs. Cheboygan. Her brow furrowed. "I'm confused. Why would you think Adele came from an orphanage?"

"Well, she told everyone she was adopted, didn't she? Right, Owen? That first day, in the hallway? With Blake?"

All the eyes suddenly spun around, to pin me like a butterfly. My mom fixed me with one of her explain-this-to-me-immediately faces, like she wore when one of my friends said something vaguely dirty in her presence. My throat suddenly felt scratchy and hot. I was as confused as anyone else, and already resented the worried look on Mrs. Cheboygan's face. "She did say she was adopted," I said, slowly. "But I don't know anything about an orphanage. You shouldn't repeat every rumor you hear, Tommy."

"Nothing wrong with being adopted," said Pam. She was trying to smooth over the situation, but I could tell that we'd said something terribly wrong. Mrs. Cheboygan looked at the ground, seeming so like her daughter at that moment that I had to do a double take.

[70] “No, of course not. But Adele and Claude were both born at Mass General. October 6th, 2003. They’re fraternal twins,” ¹³ she said. “It’s strange. I don’t...I don’t know why she would lie about that.”

I watched Mrs. Cheboygan’s face, with its high cheekbones and light smattering of freckles, go through several contortions. She looked like she was trying to solve a riddle. After a long beat she seemed to remember where she was, and waved a distracted goodbye to our mothers. “I’ll see you around, boys,” she said in our direction, but was back in her silver Prius before we could reply.

After Mrs. C’s car had disappeared up the causeway¹⁴ and the Dorfmans had retreated into their own house, we headed inside and my mom started getting ready for her evening shift.

“Why would someone lie about being adopted?” I wondered aloud.

“Maybe she thought it was an easier explanation than the truth.”

[75] “But her brother’s so popular. You’d think she’d want people to know they’re real twins.” Staring out the window at the beach below, I was suddenly reminded of that first day, when Adele had said she and Claude “used to be close.” What had happened to drive them apart?

“Some people have a lot of shame about where they come from, sweets,” said my mom. “I know you know this. And imagine what it feels like to have kids not believe you when you tell them who your parents are. Maybe she was protecting herself.”

I thought about this for a long time after my mother had driven away.

The next day, a Friday, was the last day of Seafood Fest. After the tourists left, a lull usually settled over the island. Things fell into a calmer rhythm without so many strangers around. I personally had never been so relieved at the prospect of change. I guess in my mind, I was hoping that we would replace the summer gossip with new stories. That the Cheboygans and all the buzz around them would settle, like everyone who stuck around had to eventually. But alas, ‘twas not to be.

When I walked into homeroom, Tommy’s voice met me like a tidal wave. “Bro, did you hear? Claude got taken away in an ambulance. Someone tried to poison him in homeroom.”

[80] “Poison?” said Mrs. Bleyer, who’d come up behind me. She was wearing a pink dress patterned with green sailboats, and carrying a box of donuts to celebrate “Quarter Term”—her own invented festival. *Once a kook, always a kook*, I thought, then made a mental note to repeat this to my friends at lunch.

“Well not *poison-poison*,” said Tommy. “They’re saying someone slipped him lobster meat. Like, in his breakfast.” We must have looked confused, because Tommy made a face and elaborated. “Claude’s allergic to shellfish!”

Reflexively, I scanned the room. But Adele’s seat in the back was empty.

13. Twins who developed from different ova, leading to different appearances and possibly biological sex.

14. a raised road across low or wet ground

My stomach was in knots even before I heard the rumor, the ugliest yet, drifting through the hallways. At lunch I found Arpan, eating a samosa and chewing with his mouth full. “Oh, she definitely poisoned him. It’s so messed up. Byron Bellicotte was there when the ambulance came and took him away. He saw the whole thing.”

“Since when is Byron Bellicotte a reliable source?” I said. Byron Bellicotte was a super-senior, not even in our grade. People said he slept through tenth grade the first time, and to this day left little puddles of drool on his desk like disgusting monuments to his poor attention span.

[85] “I dunno, man. But it’s probably like a vengeance thing. To get into the will.”

Jumi sidled up.

“You guys talking about Awful Adele?”

“You guys, be reasonable. She’s not even in school today. How could she have poisoned him in homeroom? And why would she poison her own brother?”

“Adopted brother,” said Jumi. I realized then that she was wearing a blazer, the black one all the jazz kids were given for concerts. Even though it was way too warm. “Think about it, O. Claude gets all the attention. She probably couldn’t handle it.”

[90] “She’s not even really adopted!” I said, raising my voice. “I met their mom. They’re actual biological twins.”

“Um, sure, O,” said Arpan, rolling his eyes. “And I’m Lakeith Stanfield.”¹⁵ Also, gullible is written on the sky.” Then he lowered his voice. “Did you guys even see that painting she made in Art class? With the lobsters?”

“Dude, I can prove it!” I wheeled around and there was Tommy, kicking a hacky-sack at his lunch table. “Tommy, remember when we met Mrs. C? And she told us the truth about the Cheboygan twins?”

Without my noticing, our area had gotten crowded. I knew Tommy was aware of the eyes. He started laughing his nervous hyena laugh. “Um, sure I do, Owen,” he said, eyes darting around the SAC. Then he spun his index finger around next to his head, the universal gesture for “kooky.” Inspired, Arpan and Jumi launched into a bit where they pretended to be related, and a bunch of townies laughed. *Townies* — that was the word I thought of then, looking at my classmates’ faces, all twisted up and mean.

In that moment, with the laughter, everything took on a warped quality — like the fun house mirrors at the corny old haunted houses on the boardwalk. Everywhere I looked, people were dressed like Claude. They had his old-timey blazers and sneakers, his crisp white shirts. The whole school, I realized, had picked a side, sure as if we were at war. And it all seemed to proceed from a twisted logic: Because Claude was so *awesome*, his sister had to be jealous. Because Claude was anointed, his sister had to be cruel. But as I walked away from my friends, I pictured Mrs. Cheboygan, who was probably worried sick over her son at some hospital. In my mind’s eye, I could see both of her children in her face — the smattering of freckles that belonged to Claude, and the serious brow that belonged to her daughter. Adele.

15. An American actor and musician

[95] Next Monday, both the twins were out of school. Tuesday, ditto. Then on Wednesday, halfway through homeroom, Adele slumped into class. She looked exhausted. There were heavy bags under her eyes, and her wrists were naked — no bangles today. Mrs. Bleyer nodded a wary welcome, and gestured at an empty seat near me.

"Here she comes, boys," Blake murmured, from the corner. "The Wicked Witch of the East." Adele shut her eyes and slid into the desk, opening her notebook with a thud.

"Don't eat anything she gives you," Blake said, a little louder. Mrs. Bleyer sighed a loud and pointed sigh.

"What kind of witchy spell did your mom have to cast to get you into the family?" hissed Blake. "Huh? Huh? Look at me when I'm talking to you, *housekeeper's daughter*." Then, a ball of wadded paper sailed through the air and, with a soft thud, hit Adele on the back.

"Honor roll, you are not," Adele growled. Her eyes were still fixed on her paper.

[100] "What was that?" Suddenly, Blake was standing. He'd filled out over the summer, and didn't seem to know how to hold his new muscular arms, or the excess energy that came with them. His eyes were so wide you could see whites all around his pupils. Finally, Mrs. Bleyer glanced up. "Alright, you two. That's enough," she said.

"Adele didn't do anything!" Every neck turned. I was as shocked as anyone to realize I was standing; that it was my wobbly voice that had spoken. Mrs. Bleyer stared at me like she was trying to remember how I'd wound up in this class. Adele, beside me, sat up straight in her chair. She looked at me, for the second time ever, with something like kindness. As the bell pinged for announcements, forcing Blake and I out of détente,¹⁶ I saw her mouth the words "Thank you." I smiled back.

But at lunch, Adele came up to me, Jumi, and Arpan, just as Arpan was telling a long-winded story about his parents' latest faux pas.¹⁷ It'd been a while since the three of us had been together, with no stage crew or Cheboygan-specific gossip. We'd heard from Mr. Gloucester that Claude was "out of the woods," and would be back in school at the end of the week. I wasn't glad that Claude was ill, but I was secretly pleased that his drama was happening in another building. It was like the end of Seafood Fest — how you could appreciate what someone symbolized, but still be pleased when they were gone.

I don't know how long Adele was standing there before she made her presence known, with a big belly laugh that seemed like it had come out of her brother. "That's cray," she said breezily. "That reminds me of my mom. You know Claude and I are technically first-gen, too," she said. Arpan just stared at her.

"Yo, Owen," she said, suddenly turning to me as if it wasn't totally weird to creep on people's conversations without introducing yourself. "Word on the street is our moms are friends. You think I can come by your house sometime and sketch the water from your beach?"

[105] Behind her head, Jumi pantomimed choking, bugging out her eyes and clutching at her throat. Arpan shook his

16. Refers to a hostile disagreement between countries. Here, it is used metaphorically.

17. an embarrassing social mistake

head ferociously, waving his hands in mock terror. There was no one around the pillar but us three right then — but that was all it took. “Yeah, maybe,” I said, but I directed my words to the ground. A part of me hoped that Adele would hear the “Yeah,” and not the smirk I shot my friends, but another, larger part of me felt like I didn’t deserve this. Hadn’t it been enough, to be her defender in homeroom? Didn’t she know our rules, our timetables? *Everybody has to serve somebody.*

Adele was nothing if not observant. She quickly took the hint, shrugging goodbye and moseying off to the far corner of the SAC, where she’d started having lunch by herself. The next day, Claude was back at school. People dubbed his return ‘Cheboygan Day!’ In Gym, I watched a bunch of kids hoist him up on their shoulders like a Caesar.¹⁸ But the following Monday, Adele was gone. We learned later that she was doing homeschool with her Dad. I liked to picture them drawing together, all around the island. Seashells, crabs, sunsets, picnics — whatever sweet or angry subjects felt right.

Later that fall, in biology class, Mr. Pevin explained how the twins were, in fact, biologically possible. He explained how some genes, like the ones for red hair or blue eyes, were recessive, while others, like the genes for brown eyes and darker skin tones, were dominant. Then he drew a Punnett Square¹⁹ to show how our inherited genes can lead to vastly different appearances, even in siblings. “The genome is a masterpiece! Take our friends, the Cheboygans,” he said, looking around the room before remembering that only Claude was still with us. Only Claude had been invited to stay.

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18. reference to the title given to Roman emperors

19. A Punnett Square is a term for how biologists understand the genes a person inherits. The combination of recessive and dominant genes a person has impacts many things, such as their appearance.