

Phantom World

June 2003

Toby

“Give it back, Mackenzie! Now!” I yelled.

“*Give it back, Mackenzie! Now!*” repeated my little brother, mocking me.

I shook my head. I *hated* it when he did this, when he repeated everything I said. He could keep it up for hours. He was the most annoying fifteen-year-old in the entire world—no, in the entire universe.

“Give it to me or I’m gonna be late! Mom!”

“*Give it to me or I’m gonna be late! Mom!*” repeated Mackenzie, in his approximation of a sissy voice.

Mackenzie could’ve been the poster child for contraception. I could just see big posters of his smirking face with the words, “Don’t Let This Happen to You,” printed under it. I bet such posters would solve the overpopulation problem in a generation.

“Why do you always have to call Mom?”

“Why do you always have to be a little shit?” I shot back.

“Language, Toby,” said our mother, as she stood in the doorway. Mom was beautiful, with curly dark hair and a real pretty face. She looked like a model, only shorter.

“*Shit* isn’t bad language, Mom. I was just telling Mac he’s a little turd.”

Mackenzie crossed his arms and glared at me. Mom chose to ignore my words.

“Mackenzie Riester, give Toby his shirt back right now!”

“Mom!”

“Now, Mackenzie!”

“Here,” he said, “it’s a freakin’ ugly shirt, anyway.”

I ignored my little brother and slipped on my shirt, happy to cover my puny torso. I looked in the mirror. I liked the shirt. It was jack-o-lantern orange with black panels on the sides. Over the left breast were spooky embroidered letters that read, *Phantom World*. It felt like it was too big, but I knew that was only because I was too skinny. If I had muscles, it would fit just fine.

“You ready?” asked Mom.

“Yep.”

“I’m so proud of my little boy,” she said, having a go at my cheeks.

“I’m not a little boy. I’m sixteen.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m proud of my young man.”

I grinned and shook my head.

I was a little nervous about my first day at *Phantom World*. My last few weekends were devoured by training sessions, but I still wasn’t sure I was up to the task. At the same time, I was

psyched about working there.

Mom and Dad used to take Mackenzie and me to *Mystic Gardens*, and I was bummed when I'd heard it was closing down. The old park had been there forever. My grandparents had taken my mom there when she was a little girl, and grandfather's parents had taken him. It was a special place to a lot of people. I wasn't the only one who cried when the local TV news reported the whole place was going to be demolished with a wrecking ball. I couldn't believe it was going to be replaced with a massive shopping center. Like, anyone needed another mall! Then, just as the old theme park was set to be auctioned off piece by piece, the news hit that it'd been purchased lock, stock, and barrel and was going to be restored, expanded and turned into *Phantom World*. I think everyone in southern Indiana breathed a huge sigh of relief when that news hit. It was definitely cause for celebration. The park was closed for more than a year while renovations and construction was going on, but it was reopening—today!

I'd dreamed about performing in one of the shows, but I'd applied too late, and all the acting and singing spots had already been snatched up. Those had been the first to be filled because there needed to be lots of practices before the reopening. I'd trained for the last four weekends, but the singers and actors had easily spent twice that long preparing for their first performance before I'd even started to train. *Maybe next year*, I thought.

Yesterday, I'd been in school. Was I glad to be outta *there*! I liked school okay; it's just that by the end of May I was tired of sitting on my butt in a classroom. Working in *Phantom World* would be so much more exciting, and I'd get paid.

"What time should I pick you up?" asked Mom as she pulled the Cavalier out of the drive.

"I get off at eight tonight," I said.

"I don't like you working such long hours—9-8 is too much."

"Most days it will be less, but today's opening day, Mom. Besides, I get breaks and an hour for lunch. I'm workin' at an amusement park not in a sweat shop making overpriced sneakers."

"Okay. I just don't want you pushing yourself too hard."

"I won't, Mom. In the training sessions they said we'd rotate jobs a lot, so no one will get too bored. They do that for safety reasons. You gotta stay sharp when you're operating something like *The Poltergeist*."

"Is that where you'll be starting?"

"No, I may get a chance later, but they're starting college kids on *The Poltergeist* for the first day. It's the biggest coaster in the park, after all. This morning, I'm starting out on *The Phantom World Railroad*. You gotta see it sometime, Mom. It goes all around the park and even through three tunnels. One of 'em goes under *The Poltergeist*."

Mom drove into the huge parking lot that was already filling with cars and buses, even though the park didn't open for another hour. I'd seen a lot of commercials for the park on TV, and there was stuff about it on the national news. MTV even did a special on it because the owner was *Phantom* (which was another reason I was dying to work there). I'd had a crush on Jordan, the lead singer, since I was thirteen, or was it twelve? Now there was a *hot g!* Mmmm.

"Here's fine," I said, when Mom got up fairly close to the Main Gate. "I can walk from here."

"Give me a kiss," she said and I obediently complied. She kissed my cheek in turn. "Break a leg, Tiger."

"Uh, that's for plays, Mom."

"Well, good luck, then," she said.

Mom drove away and I walked toward the entrance, passing between cars and buses that were trying to find a parking space. When I got my own car, which I hoped would be soon, I'd go through the employee entrance near the back.

As I neared the gate, I could see the forest of huge, creepy trees that surrounded the entrance. They were made out of some kind of concrete or something, but they looked absolutely real. They made me think I was entering some kind of spooky woods, like *The Old Forest* in the *Harry Potter* books. It was difficult making my way through the vast crowd that was already forming, but since I was wearing my *Phantom World* staff shirt and had my ID tag, I walked right on past the ticket booths and through the main gate. It made me feel kinda important. On the left of the asphalt path there was a graveyard, complete with a mausoleum and ancient-looking, moss-covered tombstones. Like most of the spooky stuff in the park, it had been put there recently, but it looked for all the world like it'd been there for years and years.

A tall trestle for the *Phantom World Railroad* made kind of a U around the entrance to the park, enclosing the graveyard and an information booth. The tracks went right over the path. The railroad station was off to the right, but I had to go back near the rear of the park to clock in. I wondered if maybe I shouldn't have had Mom drop me off around back, because it was quite a walk across the park. I hoped I didn't get lost, but then again, there were maps at various locations, so surely I could find my way.

The train passed overhead just as I walked under the trestle. I loved the sound of it chugging along. The whistle blew, and I looked up to see a cloud of steam billowing from the engine. I just knew I was going to love working here.

The calliope music of the old merry-go-round drew my attention away from the train. I'd read in one of the papers that it was real old, like from the early 1900s. It'd been brought in from another park that had closed. Some of the old *Mystic Gardens* buildings and rides were still around, too, but most of *Phantom World* was brand new. I was relieved that *Phantom World* had kept so much of the old park. It would've been sad to see the old *Ferris Wheel* carted away. Instead, it was still where it'd always been. *Mystic Gardens* lived on within *Phantom World*. I was amazed at how well the new mixed with the old. Anyone unfamiliar with the old park wouldn't have a chance figuring out what had been around for decades and what was built just the last year. Looks were deceiving, like the ancient-looking cemetery by the entrance that had only been there for a few weeks.

I walked past the merry-go-round and a huge skull. Just as I was about to pass the skull, its eyes flickered and it moaned at me. I jumped and then looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but the park was nearly empty since the gates hadn't opened yet. I walked on past the bumper cars and then followed the path to the right. I was surer of myself now, for a long section of the path ran nearly straight from the front to the back of the park. This was the main path that had most of the food booths on it.

I walked by another information booth where they sold park maps and umbrellas. Off to my left, I could hear the roar of *The Poltergeist*. It was the largest wooden roller-coaster in the world. I loved the sound it made, although it kinda freaked me out. I dunno why. I tried to fix each of the booths in my mind as I passed them, because I'd be working in a lot of them sooner or later. First, there was the souvenir booth, then sunglasses, followed by an iced-tea booth, chicken nuggets, drinks, the first-aid booth, a cotton-candy stall and then a restroom. Just beyond the line for getting on the *Ferris Wheel* were the booths for balloons, more souvenirs, hats, lemonade, coffee and t-shirts. I followed the path that jogged to the right. There was a donut stand just in front of another

spooky graveyard, and then the path turned left and went straight again. On this strip, there were another drinks booth, a seafood booth, a funnel-cake booth and a restroom. Up on the hill to the left was *The Graymoor Mansion*, the huge haunted house and centerpiece of *Phantom World*. I could hear moans and screams coming from it, as well as the sound of thunder. I couldn't wait to get inside it on one of my days off.

There was yet another information booth coming up, and there I made a left turn and followed the path off to the right. There were yet more booths, these selling popcorn, pizza, cappuccino, hot dogs, ice cream and more drinks. I finally reached the staff building, went inside and clocked in.

On the way back toward the *Phantom World Railroad*, I tried to memorize all the booths again. I was getting confused. There were just too many of them! *Phantom World* wasn't a huge park, not like *Disney World*, or *Six Flags*, or *Busch Gardens*, but it looked plenty big to me. It had *The Poltergeist*, *The Twister* (a smaller steel roller coaster), as well as the *Splashing Specter*, which was a water roller coaster. There was all the stuff you'd expect to find, like bumper cars, a merry-go-round, *Ferris Wheel*, *Skee-Ball*, tilt-a-whirl, and a scrambler. There was plenty of other stuff too, like a raft ride, a water slide that used huge inner tubes, old-timer cars, a Pirate-themed raft ride and more. And then, there were a couple of places where they would present shows—one of 'em was kinda a musical-fantasy story thing and another was all singing with pop music—most of it *Phantom* songs, of course.

I thought about Jordan for a moment. I wondered what it would feel like to just up and decide you were gonna buy yourself an amusement park. How incredible is that? I guess he must've made a ton of cash from CDs and concerts and stuff to be able to afford it. I read somewhere that *The Poltergeist* cost \$2.8 million to build and the *Graymoor Mansion* cost \$1.2 million. I was sure none of the new rides was cheap, and then there were all the buildings, not to mention what he paid for *Mystic Gardens*, which I heard was something like \$16 million. I guess that wasn't a bad price for it, but still...I wondered how much he was going to be paying out each week in salaries. It kind of boggled my mind. Oh well, I didn't have to worry about that. I just had to get where I was supposed to be before ten.

I made it with plenty of time to spare. The *Phantom World Train Station* looked like the real thing, with a long covered platform where the passengers embarked on their journey around the park. A beautiful red locomotive with the name *Frightful Express* painted on the side sat there with steam billowing out of its smokestack and along the sides near the wheels. It looked like an antique from the Wild West or something, but from its shiny appearance, I'd say it was new. It had gold and chrome along its sides which had been polished until it sparkled. It was one of the two locomotives that pulled cars around the park. The *Banshee Express* was identical, except it was bright blue.

"Wanna take a ride?" called down the engineer as I was admiring the locomotive.

"Um, I don't know if I should."

"I can have you back before the park opens," he said. "Hank and I are running the trains around a few times for a last minute shakedown." I supposed Hank was the engineer of the *Banshee Express*.

Krista, whom I'd met during training, was standing on the platform gazing at the train. "Go ahead, Toby, I'll keep an eye on things here. I went earlier. It's a blast. Charlie'll have you back before you know it."

I grinned and looked up at the engineer, who was apparently called Charlie. "Okay, Charlie, let's go!" I said.

I climbed on one of the cars, which was open on the sides, but covered on the top. Charlie powered up the engine and the chug-chug became louder. There was a hiss of steam and we began to move, very slowly at first, but then a bit faster. The train climbed a gradual incline then made its way around the park on a raised trestle. I felt like I was high in the air, but we were only a few feet above the ground. Soon, a big hill loomed into view and we passed into a narrow tunnel. The bright sunlight disappeared and I was in complete darkness for a moment. Then, off to one side and then another, I saw silvery-blue ghosts and skeletons. I jumped at the sight of the first one. It looked so *real*. It wasn't like a sheet thrown over something or anything cheesy like that. I could see right *through* the ghosts! And they moved! I couldn't hear anything, because of the noise of the train, but I could just imagine them moaning. Off to one side, there were old miners who looked like they were trapped in a mine cave-in. Then, the tunnel got a little wider and we passed what looked like the scene of a train accident. There was a big ghostly locomotive with its passenger cars, twisted and turned on their sides. There were ghosts climbing out the windows, and a phantom engineer pulling himself out of the locomotive. Part of it looked solid, but some of it looked kinda transparent, too. I had no idea how they made it look so real, but it was awesome! I was just expecting there to be a dark tunnel. I didn't know there'd be stuff like this inside! It was like a train ride and a haunted house combined.

I blinked rapidly at the sudden brightness of the sunlight as the train rolled out of the dark tunnel. I looked down as we traveled along the raised trestle, passing the *Ghost Pirates* raft ride on the right and the *Splashing Specter* water roller coaster on the left. Then, we went through a covered "bridge" and the steam from the engine wafted down around the cars. We passed into another tunnel, and, once again, creepy things were inside. About halfway through, I looked ahead and was terrified to see the tunnel collapsing, huge boulders falling around and nearly onto the *Frightful Express*. My heart lurched in my chest and my pulse raced, and the thought raced through my head that this terrible accident was going to spoil the opening day, and maybe endanger the park's existence. But I realized almost immediately that it was just a part of the ride. How awesome is that?

My pulse slowly returned to normal as the train chugged along into the sunlight once more. We passed near *The Scrambler*, and I could see the *Fatal Falls* log ride and the *Water Demon* water slide in the distance. Off to the left was the rear of the *Graymoor Mansion*, which stood almost in the center of park, and to the right was the towering latticework of wooden beams that was *The Poltergeist*. We entered the third and last tunnel, which went right under part of *The Poltergeist*. Inside this tunnel, giant spiders sat on webs and some even lunged for the cars or came down nearly on top of the train on thick, sticky-looking strands. I jumped when a huge amount of what looked like steam shot right through the car I was riding in. There was a roar and I jerked my head to see a vast, green-golden dragon spouting flames toward the train. It looked freaking real!

We came out of the tunnel and slowly climbed a steep incline near the lake that was located beneath and behind *The Poltergeist*. The track took a sharp turn and passed by the old-timer cars and the bumper cars that I'd walked near earlier. The train reached the U around the entrance to the park and I could see a ton of people waiting to get in. There must've been thousands of 'em. We went down a sharp incline where the train traveled faster than ever and then pulled back into the station, behind the *Banshee Express*.

I got off, thanked Charlie, and then joined Krista on the platform.

"That was awwwwweee-soooooommmee!" I said. Krista and I exchanged grins. She made me feel happy and comfortable. If only she was a guy...

It was just before ten and soon the very first guests of *Phantom World* would be entering the park. I thought I might just have the best job in the entire world.

Mackenzie

I rolled my eyes as Mom left with Toby. He was so pathetic. I was pretty sure he was queer, which made me a little uncomfortable sharing a room with him. I didn't know, of course, but he didn't like sports, he was *always* reading or writing in his journal (which I'd never been able to find), and he'd performed in every school play I could remember since he was ten. And then there was his music, if you could call it that. It was all boy-band stuff—*Phantom*—eww, *Hanson*—gimme a break, *The Backstreet Boys*—yuck, *N'SYNC*—double-yuck, *Aaron Carter*—barf, and all those other faggie groups. He had a big poster of *Phantom* hanging on his side of the room as well as another of that long-haired homo from the group. If that didn't prove he was queer, I didn't know what would. The shirtless Aaron Carter photo was a pretty good tip off, too. I hated that cutesy freak. If I ever met him, I'd pound his face.

I'd searched Toby's stuff for porn, as well as for his journal, but had never come up with anything. He probably had a secret stash somewhere I was yet to discover. Mine was under the carpet in the corner behind my bed. I only had a couple of old *Playboy* magazines and a *Penthouse*, but I kept 'em hidden flat under the carpet 'cause Mom would freak if she found 'em. Yeah, I could just hear *that* lecture—*these magazines are degrading to women, Mackenzie Riester; you're too young to be looking at something like this*—and on and on. I wondered where Toby's stuff was hidden away. Since I had nothing else to do, I decided to take another stab at finding it. I figured it had to be in our room somewhere.

I searched under his dresser drawers and came up with nothing, although it was a good hiding place I'd have to remember. I looked under the desk drawers, too, but still nothing. I got on my back and looked under his bed, thinking he might've stuck something between the boards holding it up and the mattress. All I found under the bed were old socks, *my* baseball mitt that had mysteriously disappeared, candy wrappers and some dust-bunnies that were huge enough to attack. I pretended one pounced on me and was going for my throat, like that bunny in *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*, "Oh no! It's just a harmless little bunny! I told you!" I giggled until I smacked my head on the bed—ouch!

I dug into the closet, but wasn't turning up anything. Toby was a neatness freak and even kept his shoes in the boxes they came in. Can you believe it? He organized everything. His shirts were hung according to color and type. He even separated and folded his socks! Sometimes I liked to slip one of his green shirts in with the blue ones or put a white pair of socks in his black pile. It drove him crazy, which is what I'm all about.

I finally got lucky when I checked Toby's anally organized shoe boxes. I noticed his old pair of cowboy boots didn't fit in the box quite right. For some reason, the lid didn't fit on. That would've meant nothing if it belonged to anyone other than my anal brother, but it was a red flag since it was Toby's. I checked it out and there was a piece of cardboard in the bottom, cut out to the same size as the box. I lifted it up and, *oh yeah*, Toby's stash!

It figured. There was no actual porn, but there were a couple of *Undergear* catalogs filled with pictures of nearly naked guys, a teen magazine devoted to *Phantom*, and a few pages torn out of catalogs showing guys in *Speedos* and underwear. Yeah, big bro definitely had somethin' to hide. If he wasn't queer, he would've had *Playboys* like me, or at least pages ripped outta catalogs with

pictures of girls in bras or somethin'. Here was clear-cut proof Toby was bent, although it came as no surprise. I'd suspected Toby of being queer about as long as I could remember. There was always somethin' not quite right about him.

I carefully put everything back as I found it. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with my evidence yet. It would be fun to pull it out and shove it in Toby's face and listen to him fumble for some excuse, but maybe I could think of somethin' better. There was no use in rushing into things. Besides, planning to torment Toby was nearly as fun as actually doing it.

I thought about calling Billy, but was it too soon? He'd only taken notice of me in the last couple of weeks of school, and I didn't want to blow my chances. I couldn't afford to look desperate. Billy had taken a liking to me right after I punched out Simon Girard for calling me a wuss, and I'd been playing it cool since then, being friendly with Billy, but not too friendly. When he'd asked me to start sitting at his table at lunch I'd agreed, but only after pretending I was a little reluctant to give up my old place near the wannabe jocks. Billy's table was definitely a step up.

Billy didn't fit in with any group. He wasn't a jock, a punk, a nerd or an Abercrombie & Fitch clone. He was a...I don't know the word for it, but he had a presence that didn't match his appearance. Billy dressed in worn shirts, worn-out jeans and scuffed, unfashionable combat boots that'd obviously been purchased at someplace like *Goodwill* and had then been worn until they were close to falling apart. Anyone else who dressed like that would've been put down, but not Billy. No one dared to mess with him. It's not like he went around acting all tough or threatening people, though. He wasn't a bully. He just had a presence, like I said. Even the jocks who ruled the school didn't give him any shit. He wasn't one of them, but he kind of had jock privileges without being one. Billy wasn't popular, either, but... It's hard to explain, but it was like he was popular without being popular, just like he gave off this jock vibe without bein' a jock. Billy seemed to disapprove of just about everything, and, for some reason, it made people respect him.

Billy was my age, but it didn't seem that way. He seemed older. He never pulled rank on me, although something in his eyes said he was in control. He was like that with everyone around him, such as the little group who sat with him at lunch. Billy was the obvious leader, but it went unsaid. If someone got smart with him, he punched them hard in the shoulder or glared at them, but that was the extent of it. He stayed on top by reputation.

Most of the time when I saw Billy he was alone. Other guys only hung with him when *he* wanted. He had control like that without even seeming to try. That's what I wanted. He did beat someone up now and then, but, like I said, he didn't fit the bully mold. Billy was in a class by himself.

Just two days after he asked me to join his table, we both almost got caught smoking behind the gym. Billy did get caught, but he convinced the P.E. teacher I hadn't been smoking with him. I admired the way he protected me. He was loyal like that. He didn't nark on anyone, no matter the consequences, and he wasn't afraid to take the fall for someone else. Billy was fearless. No one scared him. Maybe that's why the jocks respected him. Billy had attitude.

I grabbed my baseball, bat, and mitt and headed for the park, hoping for a chance encounter with Billy. If he wasn't around maybe I could at least find someone to play with. It was early June and nice and warm—a perfect day to spend outside. I realized when I was halfway to the park that I hadn't left a note for Mom saying where I was, but she'd probably figure it out. I'd be back in time

for lunch anyway—probably.

There were a few guys from school at the park—no one especially cool, but at least we could play catch. A little later, some more guys showed up and we got a game going. We didn't have enough people, but at least we could field two teams of five. It was way better than nothing.

My thoughts went back to Toby and what I'd found in our room. It was a bit disturbing to have my suspicions of him confirmed. It just figured I'd get stuck with a homo brother. I wished I could trade him for Billy, or at least someone else who was straight and cool.

I wondered if Toby had anything interesting written in his journal. I knew he had a regular journal and a computer journal. I'd never been able to find his handwritten journal. He carried it with him most of the time, but he couldn't do that with his computer journal, so maybe I'd give finding it another crack. He'd probably have it guarded with a password, but there were ways around that. I bet there'd be lots of interesting things written in there. I smiled. Maybe I had something to do after all. Once the game was finished, I'd go home and see just what else I could find out about my big brother.

Orlando

The park was crowded with cute girls—eye candy specifically designed to torment me with what I couldn't have. I was lucky enough to start my day working the *Water Demon*, a ride with huge round rafts that rode a series of rapids. I was lucky, because by the end of the ride, just about everyone was soaked to the skin, and I was able to see some interesting sights. Especially intriguing were the girls who wore white or yellow shirts and no bras. It was almost as good as seeing them naked. I had to readjust myself a few times so no one would notice my, uh...interest.

There were a few good looking guys, too—the competition. I sometimes looked them over just to see what I was up against. It was easy on the *Water Demon*. Their wet shirts clung to their bodies, revealing the swell of their chest muscles and the bulges in their arms. Sometimes their wet shorts revealed bulges, too. And then, there were the guys who stripped off their shirts to show off their bodies—advertising. Those were the guys who had the most to show. Those were the boys who beat me hands down. I liked my body, but I wouldn't have minded to be even more muscular, like some of the guys getting off the ride.

My breath was coming a little fast and I knew I had to get myself under control. The *Phantom World* shorts were a bit revealing and I feared my arousal was obvious. I tried to force my mind away from the girls and back to business. Maybe I wasn't so lucky in my morning assignment after all. It was a little like being tortured.

I was in charge of supervising the exit. It was my job to make sure no one stayed on the rafts, either because they wanted to ride again or because they couldn't get their seat belt undone. I was also there to make sure no one slipped and fell and to hand back valuables that had been left behind for safekeeping. It was a pretty easy job really. It beat the crap out of the job I had last summer working in a fast-food place. Flipping burgers and mopping floors—yeah like that was a blast. I don't think so!

I grinned or winked at the girls who flirted with me as they got off the rafts. They made me feel good about myself. I knew I was kinda cute, which sounds immodest as hell, but it's not like I thought I was hot stuff—just kinda cute, not *real* cute. There was a big difference. I was no model or anything, but I liked my short, spiked hair and I was in pretty good shape, too. A lot of girls liked my voice. Thanks to my Mom, who came to the U.S. from Spain just before I was born, I had a bit

of an accent—not much, but I'd been told it was sexy. Sometimes I exaggerated it on purpose, especially when a girl seemed to like it. Kids used to make fun of my accent in grade school, but that came to an end right after I kicked Davy Robinson's ass for teasing me about it. My year round natural tan came from my family, too. Dad was Spanish, just like Mom, even though his side of the family had been in the U.S. for a couple of generations, so I looked like I'd been tanning, even in the dead of winter. The girls liked that even more than my accent. Mom said I sounded a lot like my dad, but I didn't know about that, because he ran off with a younger woman when I was four, so I didn't remember him very well.

I know Dad hurt Mom, but she didn't say much about him. She always said that if you couldn't say something nice about someone, then you shouldn't say anything at all. Maybe that's why she never talked about Dad. When he left, it was kind of like he'd never existed. I used to ask where he'd gone and why he'd left, until Mom finally told me the truth when I was eight. I didn't like it. Finding out my dad had just up and decided to abandon Mom and me made me feel like I'd just been punched in the heart.

I noticed a boy looking me over as he got off the raft and I had a pretty good idea he liked what he saw. It made me feel kinda funny. Sometimes that happened. Sometimes a guy looked at me the same way the girls did. When it was a guy, it felt sort of...odd. I gazed at the boy for a moment, wondering if he was one of the boys I'd heard about—a queer. There were harsher names for it, but that didn't quite seem right. The boy smiled at me. I smiled back, not knowing if I meant the smile, or if I was just doing “guest relations.”

Phantom World was going to be a good place to work, I could just tell. I was getting \$8 an hour, which was way more than I could get anywhere else. On top of that, I got a free season pass and a fist full of passes good for one day that I could give away to friends. I was going to give Mom one and maybe one to Gene, the guy who'd been taking Mom out for the last couple of weeks, although I wasn't sure how I felt about him yet.

Drinks were free in the park, so I could guzzle soft drinks until I overflowed, which was cool because I had a real addiction to root beer. All employees got 50% off of food and a food allowance of \$10 a day on top of that. We all carried ID cards that were kind of like credit cards, only they were good for food. As long as I didn't spend more than \$10 a day I wouldn't be out a dime for meals. And, after getting 50% off, \$10 bought a lot of food. The prices in the park weren't bad either. They were about the same as most fast-food places. I liked that. A lot of parks charged outrageous prices for stuff, but not *Phantom World*.

Most guys my age were saving up for a car, but I was helping Mom with the bills. Dad had been a pretty successful lawyer, which was unfortunate for Mom and me, because Mom didn't get much in the divorce. The house, one of the few things she got in the settlement, wasn't paid for yet when Dad left, so Mom had to sell it and buy a much smaller one. Mom had to handle a lot of things. I'm not complaining about my life or anything. It's not like we were real poor; it's just that it would've been cool if I could've saved my money and bought a car or something, instead of paying the electric bill. It would've been kind of nice to shop in a real store, too, instead of *Goodwill* and the resale shop on Oak Street. I bought all my own clothes. I liked *Structure* stuff, which I mostly got on eBay. I'd never had much money, so I'd learned to make the most of what I did have. It was sort of like it was God's compensation for my lack of funds. I wore a lot of the same stuff as my friends but paid much less for it, like the cool *Gap* sweater I snagged last Christmas at *Goodwill* for three bucks. Chase Simmons from school had one exactly like it, and he said he paid \$80 for it in the mall. I didn't say where I got mine, but I was laughing inside.

By noon, I was starving, but my “lunch” wasn’t until 1:30. Lunchtimes had to be staggered, otherwise there would be no staff working the rides in the middle of the day. I didn’t mind too much, but I made a mental note to carry some candy bars or something to snack on so I wouldn’t get too hungry. I could buy those in the park, too, with my ID card. That thing was sweet.

I was scheduled to switch from the *Water Demon* to *The Poltergeist* at 11:45. We were told to keep our watches in sync with park time and leave exactly when we were supposed to. Duties were staggered as well, so that all the park employees wouldn’t be switching jobs at one time. That would’ve been chaos. Instead, just a few of us were switched every fifteen minutes. It was a complicated schedule, but apparently necessary.

I couldn’t wait for my day off. I’d spent a lot of time in the park, but hadn’t actually gotten to ride anything or just explore. We’d gone through a lot of training sessions, but it wasn’t the same as getting to ride the *Fatal Falls* or the bumper cars or whatever. Walking through the park was a little like being tormented—just like the girls on the *Water Demon* whom I could see, but not touch. I was surrounded by all this cool stuff, but I couldn’t experience any of it—not yet anyway.

I did derive a sort of vicarious happiness from the smiling guests who were enjoying the park. I loved the scent of corn dogs, French fries, funnel cakes, and freshly baked cookies that forever wafted on the air. I loved the sounds of the park, too—the squeak of bumper car pedals, the rushing roar of the roller coasters, the powerful whirl of the scrambler, and the music of the carousel and *Ferris Wheel*. I was surrounded by a world of fun and excitement.

I reminded myself the time would soon come when I could enter the park as a guest. I thought about the free day passes I had. I wondered whom I should invite to come with me. I’d give one to my best friend Eddie for sure. He was working at the *Marathon* in town, but he had a couple of days off a week. Eddie was kind of a burnout. He smoked weed, and I was pretty sure he did harder stuff sometimes. His bloodshot eyes were a sure giveaway. Eddie offered me pot once when we were fourteen, but I turned him down and told him I didn’t do that stuff. That was one thing cool about Eddie; he didn’t try to pressure me into anything. When I told him I didn’t do weed, that was that; he never offered it to me again. He smoked it around me sometimes, but he didn’t try to get me into it.

When we were fifteen, I lit up a cigarette in front of him and he smacked it out of my hand. *Don’t start that shit*, he said. *It’s way worse than weed. You get started on that and you’ll never be able to stop. The fuckin’ tobacco companies wanna get everyone hooked. There’s only two reasons tobacco’s legal and weed isn’t. The tobacco company’s own the government, and pot’s easy to grow on your own, while tobacco’s not.* I figured Eddie knew what he was talking about, since he definitely grew his own. I’d seen his little farm in the basement under grow lights. His dad didn’t care, as long as he shared. Eddie might be a burnout, but he’d kept me from smoking and he was a good friend.