

WADE

Wade Farney awakes. It's 2:30 a.m. His parents and brother Lyle are asleep; the house is absolutely silent, so much so that his ears buzz. Is it the light? The previous day's echoes? Or is it the electrical currents in his "fidgety brain," as one of the gas station guys says? Whatever, the silence threatens him even as it soothes him with its (temporary) order.

Wade is famished. He didn't want dinner last night; his mother hovered over him until he finally ate three bites of pork chop. He knows she means well, but he feels smothered by her and oppressed by his father.

He gets up and goes to the kitchen, counting his steps as he goes. Twenty-three steps: a prime number. He opens the fridge; all he can find is leftovers, but some cheese, too. He carefully slices eight pieces of mild cheddar. Then he takes some saltines out of the cupboard, and as carefully as he sliced the cheese, he takes out eight crackers, trying not to break them, marveling at their fragility. But he breaks two, and he feels sorry for them; he hears them crying out, and is sad. "Poor crackers, poor little crackers. I didn't mean to hurt you." He grieves silently for a moment, and then, just as carefully, puts the six unbroken crackers back in their package, leaving just the broken crackers and the cheese to nibble. He carefully places the broken crackers in the trash and is left with just the cheese. Chaos, anxiety threaten. So he plans how to eat the cheese in an orderly manner. One nibble of cheese equals one quarter of a slice of cheese. Four bites per slice, at eight slices, equals thirty-two bites. Thirty-two is a good number: each of its digits is a prime number. Order is restored. He no longer feels like crying.

But when he counts his way back to his bedroom, he gets twenty-six steps; the number isn't the same: why? And it's a bad number, divisible only by two or thirteen, both primes, but one unlucky. He feels threatened again. He wants to scream, and does so silently; his ears ring. Then he crawls under the covers, his blanket over his head, and takes some comfort in the ultimate darkness it affords. He tries to sleep.

Wade is twenty three, same as the number of steps from his bedroom to the kitchen. He's been living with his parents, Amy and Winston Farney, ever since he dropped out of high school. He knows he shouldn't have; he should have finished and then gotten a job and his own place. But high school was chaotic, both in and between classes. And Wade felt invisible: people—students, teachers, administrators—didn't see him and walked all over him. And he had only one

“sort of” friend, Stuart Marilley. They’d been in the same classes all their schooling lives, and Wade felt that Stuart was kind and understood about Wade’s counting as he did things, and his attempt, when he did so, to find some livable order.

Stuart Marilley lived one road over and one field down from Wade’s house, so starting in third grade, they would sometimes walk together to school and back. Wade would count, timing his breaths and steps, trying to coordinate the two, and Stuart Marilley would talk. He knew Wade was talking and, in a weird sort of way, sharing in his own manner, too, and didn’t press him for a more regular kind of conversation. Wade knew this, yet didn’t know it, but he felt that Stuart Marilley was his best friend, if he could have such a thing. But he didn’t tell anyone; it was a secret part of his life that his mother couldn’t smother and his father oppress. And even though Stuart Marilley lived nearby, on the Tillman Road, Wade never invited him to his house; he couldn’t fathom the chaos bringing a stranger home would create. And he never went to Stuart Marilley’s house: he didn’t know his family and was frightened at the thought of being there with strangers whose ways he didn’t know. Wade wondered if Stuart Marilley thought of him as a best friend. He had no way of knowing, and at the risk of more chaos and invisibility—ultimately by the whole world—he didn’t ask. He loved Stuart Marilley and didn’t want to lose him.

He loved Stuart Marilley as only young boys do, before girls enter the picture or other boys and the tight camaraderie of sports teams come crashing in. Wade didn’t do sports and, except in school or in the store with his mother, didn’t see girls. They were incomprehensible, and they laughed at him—why?—and he was afraid and not interested, and felt hollow in their presence. His father had given him “the talk” when Wade was in the sixth grade, but it scared him, revolted him with its messiness and invasion of privacy and the need, his father said, to “take charge of, or at least respond to the girl.” Wade’s father didn’t realize the chaos he was suggesting, as though it were normal, and after all, “that’s how your mother and I made you, son. So get out there and ride some ponies!”

After his father left, Wade cried silently, alone in the garage. Did Stuart Marilley know about this? What did he think about it? If Stuart Marilley started “riding some ponies,” would Wade be invisible again? Would he, Wade Farney, still be Stuart Marilley’s best friend? Or

would Stuart Marilley drift away, abandoning Wade to what was becoming an increasingly unlivable world? Twenty-six divided by two equals thirteen.

Eighth grade. One day, on the way to school, Stuart Marilley was excited and proud. “I jerked off three times last night and it was great!” Wade didn’t know exactly what he meant and didn’t ask, but Stuart Marilley kept talking, and even mentioned a girl at school he’d like “to do it with.” Wade was sick; he stopped, still counting just to keep breathing, and realized that Stuart Marilley was talking about was what Wade’s father had talked to him about in the garage. How could Stuart Marilley do this to him, or was Wade, even now, beginning to disappear again, becoming invisible even to Stuart Marilley? And then, sickened even more, he realized what the wet spots in his bed had been: part of his father’s talk.

This was too much. He wanted to get away from Stuart Marilley and his dirty talk, and dropped back, still counting, but no longer listening to his friend (?). Wade had touched himself—sometimes it was necessary—but never the way his father had described to him “as he approached manhood.” At least, anyway, as far as he knew, except maybe in his traumatizing dreams. And there were no signs of girls around, except in some faint, gauzy way. Was Wade invisible there, too?

Eighth grade was a difficult year for Wade generally: he felt increasingly misunderstood by his parents, and although he and Stuart Marilley continued to walk to school together, Wade began to feel that Stuart Marilley had other interests, and was not quite as into Wade as Wade was into him. This frightened Wade—the thought of losing his only friend (they still were friends, weren’t they?). So he decided that, misunderstood or not, he would consult his brother Lyle, whom,

Wade knew from his silent observation, had many friends, both boys and girls, and was deeply involved in the ways of early manhood.

Wade cornered Lyle in the garage (the garage, of all places) before dinner, while his father was drinking a bourbon and water in the living room and reading the paper and his mother was in the kitchen, also enjoying a drink while she fixed dinner. Wade shuffled his feet.

“Uh, Lyle, how, um, how do you know if someone, if uh, someone likes you as much as, uh, you like them, I mean . . .” and Wade trailed off. He wasn’t used to doing much talking that didn’t involve counting, and he was afraid, maybe even terrified.

“You just hang around together, doing things, meeting their other friends, getting together, talking, watching TV at each other’s houses. Stuff like that. If you’re included, you’re friends. Why?”

Wade was silently counting even as he listened. Lyle homed in. “Like, I know you’re friends with Stuart, but you guys never do anything except walk to school together. That’s not much of a friendship, if you ask me. You ought to have him over sometime and do something nonschool together.”

Wade marveled at Lyle’s virtuosity with words. Yes. Yes. Have Stuart Marilley over sometime. But what would they do? He began to have trouble breathing.

Lyle broke into Wade’s thoughts. “Like maybe you could do some work on my car for me and see what develops. And there’s girls, you know; you could talk about—“

Lyle stopped short. Wade’s eyes were closed and he was whispering to himself. Lyle knew Wade had reached his conversational limit. “Just have him over. See how it goes.” At that moment, Winston Farney came to the doorway and said, “Time’s up, gentlemen. Dinner’s ready.” And he disappeared.

Wade pondered Lyle’s words for weeks as he and Stuart Marilley went back and forth to school. Finally, in mid-spring, Wade and Stuart Marilley were walking home when Wade stopped short, took a deep breath and, trying to be as smooth and calm as Lyle had been, directed some words to Stuart Marilley. “You wanna come over to my place today, uh, have a Coke?”

First question; not bad. He tried again. “I could show you my brother’s car he’s working on.

That might be kinda, uh, cool.” Wade could go no further. He began to count the time until Stuart Marilley responded. “Yeah, sure. I’d like to see your brother’s car. Got any music?”

This last question threw Wade off. Music? What music? He didn't listen to music, although he knew Lyle did. Well, maybe Lyle would lend him his transistor radio and they could listen to that. If Stuart Marilley wanted music, then he, Wade, his best friend, would give him music.

So Stuart Marilley walked with Wade to his house instead of splitting off on the Tillman Road to his own place. Wade was counting furiously, anxiously, almost skipping, almost stumbling. When they got to the house, they stood on the porch; Wade realized he needed to talk again. "You want a Coke? I think there's some in the fridge. You want a cold Coke? If there isn't any in the refrigerator, I can put ice in it. Do you like ice? I can—"

Lyle, who happened to be on the porch, said, "Shut up, Wade, and get the guy a Coke!" Stuart Marilley said, "Yeah, that'd be good." Wade felt his eyes well up and fled to the kitchen, almost unable to count, he was so discombobulated, and got the Cokes, including one for Lyle.

When he got back to the porch, he found Lyle and Stuart Marilley deep in conversation about cars and girls. He couldn't speak, but just handed the Cokes around and sat, half-listening, counting, his ears ringing. Stuart Marilley was at his house, talking like an old friend to his brother, and they seemed perfectly at ease. Wade didn't know what to do; he couldn't talk about these things, but this apparently was what friends did. And what Stuart Marilley, his one and only friend, was doing. So Wade took a leap. "Lyle, can we see your car? I mean, if it's, uh, OK. We'll be careful, I promise." Lyle and Stuart Marilley looked at him, and Lyle said, "Sure, why not? You interested?" Stuart Marilley seemed genuinely interested. "OK. Cool." The three boys took their Cokes into the garage, where Lyle's Ford Fairlane sat, a work in progress. Lyle showed them around for a while, speaking car-talk, which Stuart Marilley seemed to follow, but which was incomprehensible to Wade. Still, Stuart Marilley was at his house, talking to his brother, and this was what, according to Lyle, friends did. Wade, not much given to emotion, suddenly felt joy, utter and overwhelming joy and love. If he weren't so careful about things, he could have hugged not only his brother, but Stuart Marilley too.

For a moment, he stopped counting, and just breathed, admittedly panting a bit, but living in the moment, in a numberless world. What was happening to him? Who was he? He had never thought about this before.

For the rest of the year, Stuart Marilley and Wade would hang out at his house, two or three times a week, sometimes with, sometimes without Lyle. They'd drink Cokes, work on the car with Lyle's help, and listen to the Beatles and the Monkees on the radio. And Wade began to engage in snippets of conversation, which would interfere with his counting, and frighten him a little. But Stuart Marilley seemed to intuit this (after all, they'd been schoolmates for years), and was gentle with Wade, responding to Wade's snippets and occasionally trying to have a short conversation. Eventually—it had to be; after all, they were about to start high school—the talk would come around to matters of manhood. Wade never started these conversations, Stuart Marilley did, and he didn't push Wade. He'd talk about a senior's muscles, or a cute girl, or who was going out with whom, and who'd "done it," and things he and Wade ought to do some time, "just for fun."

These conversations unnerved Wade; he knew this had to happen. Stuart Marilley was getting a little bored with doing the same old things, and he thought he ought to help get Wade out a little more, broaden his horizons. So one day Stuart Marilley invited Wade over to his house. Wade was hesitant but thought he could try. Maybe it would be OK; maybe no disaster would ensue. So he went.

And it was OK. They looked at the Marilley family cars; they played with the fishing tackle; they examined the hunting rifles in their cabinet in the garage. Slowly, over time, Wade got more comfortable. Yes, maybe they could go fishing at Chase's Lake. Yes, maybe they could go target shooting if Stuart Marilley's dad would take them.

And gradually, the two friends seemed to be comfortable together: guys doing guy things back and forth between the two houses. Comfortable enough that Stuart Marilley could clap Wade on the shoulder over a joke, or touch his arm while showing Wade how to handle a rod and reel. Wade never returned the gestures, but he saw Stuart Marilley do it at school with the

other guys, and even sometimes with a friendly girl, so Wade figured it was OK, even though the invasion of his space bothered him. But he could always regain his equilibrium by repeating sentences in his mind and counting the number of words. He didn't know if Stuart Marilley knew, but he didn't mind too much: the numbers were always there.

Then one day, while the boys were in the Marilley garage, Stuart Marilley was talking about kids at school, and asked Wade if he'd ever kissed a girl. Wade, stunned, started reciting the prime numbers out loud, and Stuart Marilley knew he'd pushed Wade too far, even though he hadn't meant to. So he put his arm around Wade's shoulders and tried to reassure him. "It's OK, man, it's OK. I didn't mean anything"—Wade was trembling all over now—"I mean, it's a big world with lots of girls and lots of time. You'll know when you're ready. Easy, big boy."

And Wade burst into tears. Slowly, Stuart Marilley got Wade, still crying, to sit down on one of the lawn chairs stored in the garage, and then, to distract him, to calm him down, took two rifles from the cabinet, one for Wade and one for himself. "Do you know how to clean a gun? These are beauties; I'll show you." So he got the cleaning oil, cloths, and rods, and the two boys, Stuart Marilley leading, worked. It was now silent in the garage except for clicks while cleaning, and then, almost as an afterthought, loading them so, Stuart Marilley thought, they could ping some cans off the backyard fence, and settle Wade. As added comfort, Stuart Marilley offered some help. "You know, when you're getting ready to fire at a target, counting is really helpful as you go through the steps for aiming and firing."

Wade stopped, caught short and thankful: Stuart Marilley did understand him after all; yes, they were best friends. And, throwing all his phobias about personal space and touching aside, while holding the rifle down at his side, went to hug—yes, hug—Stuart Marilley. And even though they were boys, they were close. Wade leaned in—and Mr. Marilley came around the corner of the garage and roared, "What the hell are you guys doing?" Wade and Stuart Marilley jumped away from each other, Wade dropped the rifle, and it went off, hitting Stuart Marilley in the leg.

He would have kissed him. But now he'd never know.

Twenty-six divided by two is thirteen.