

[As a high school dean of students, I've worked with thousands of students over the years and have addressed all types of student issues. Linda Foster (pseudonym) was a memorable student. Her life and her troubles live with me still. This is her story. It's the story of a girl whose truancy started because of home problems. The events in the story are true, and the characters in the story are real.]

THE GRAND DELUSION

by

Dan L. Miller

Linda Foster hates school. Well, at least, now she does. She had always enjoyed working with her friends on school projects and assignments that interested her. But that was in elementary school. Things started to change in junior high, and now that she was in high school, she was miserable. For one thing, her parents had gotten a divorce. She and her mother had moved in with Grandma back in Illinois, while her father stayed in California. Linda used to lie awake nights with a knotted stomach and shattered emotions as a result of the terrifying, brutal fights her mom and dad used to have. She hated her dad during the terrible fights because of what she felt he was doing to her mother. But now, back in Illinois with only Mom and Gram, it was lonely. It would be nice to have a dad—even one that was not so perfect.

And now in school, Linda's mind wandered more than it used to. She had no friends and wasn't that interested in making any. New schools were always hard, but this one was strange. Most of the kids were cliquish, and they pretty much ignored Linda. She was a cute girl with a slim figure. She had also once possessed a beaming smile and a bouncy personality. The smile had given way to a drawn, forlorn expression, however, and the exuberance had been replaced by listlessness. She simply no longer cared about school and friends. Her future seemed uncertain, and her thoughts often centered on her family and her immediate plans for the future. Would she stay with her Grandma in Illinois? Would she and her mom return to California? Would they ever reunite with her father? Would she ever see him again? Would she ever see her friends again or know the good times she'd once had? That was all in the past, and what her future held, she didn't know.

Linda had settled into a routine of lounging in bed in the morning until after her mom had yelled at her and her Grandma had physically pulled her out of bed. She then, with a great deal of effort, pulled on her clothes, washed up, skipped breakfast, and walked to school. More and more often she was arriving at school late, often missing her first period class completely. Linda would then sit in class and daydream more than she would listen to the teacher. For some reason she could just not handle listening to some old buzzard droning on about prepositional phrases and adjectives and adverbs. What a bore. She rarely communicated with the other students and often ate alone at lunch. If she did sit near other students at lunch, they seemed not to even notice her. After school she

would walk home, drop on the couch and watch TV until dinner. Mom came home before dinner and rarely had a pleasant word for anyone. Her work was hard and boring and exhausting. She had time only to relax when she was at home. She nowadays kept to herself more than when they were at home with Dad. Linda was losing touch with her mom, or perhaps she was being shut out. She really didn't care. In fact, there wasn't much she did care about anymore.

Whereas Linda had always been a good student in elementary school and junior high, her report cards now flashed failure. Linda returned home from school early enough, however, to intercept the mail. Her mom never received the letters from school, and, apparently not caring, rarely even inquired as to Linda's progress at school. Grandma was so busy with her sewing and shopping and talking with her friends that she rarely even noticed that Linda was around.

School started promptly at 8:00 a.m., and as Linda plodded sleepily along the sidewalk on her way to school one day, she noticed a group of about five boys standing in a circle and smoking behind the football stadium. With head lowered and eyes downcast, she felt the searing gaze of unwanted attention. All eyes were on Linda as she walked near the group.

"Hey, Linda, How's it goin'?" She was shocked that anyone even knew her name. She turned her head to look at the boys, but continued to walk toward the school, "Hey, what's your hurry? Come on over." Linda didn't know why, but she walked over to the boys. "Want a drag?" asked the boy who had been talking to her as he offered her his cigarette. She accepted the butt and puffed lightly on it. "I'm Tom," stated the boy. He then proceeded to introduce the other boys in the group.

"Shouldn't you guys be in class?" Linda stammered as the boys smiled and snickered.

"Hey, are you kiddin? Why should we be crampin' our legs behind some desk in some stinkin' classroom, when we can be out here in the fresh air and sunshine. My tan's more important to me than some old biddy recitin' poetry in that prison. You're lookin' kinda pale yourself. Your tan could stand a little work, too."

"Yeah, I guess it could. Don't you guys get in trouble for not goin' to class?"

"Are you kiddin? The stiffs in there care even less about me than my old man does. What do they care if I ain't in class? They probably like it that way. I can be a real bastard to some of those horror stories."

"Well, what do they do if you don't go to class?"

"They don't do nothin' if they think you're at home sick. All you gotta do is have a friend call the old bat at the attendance desk, have her pretend to be your old lady and say that you're home sick for the day. Now take myself, for example. I should probably be hospitalized. I been *sick* twelve days this semester, and we're still in the first month of school. You oughta try it sometime. It's painless."

"Yeah. I might do that. Well, I better go."

"O.K. See ya." Linda made it into the building in time for her third period class, where she was supposed to take a test. She hadn't done any homework for weeks and certainly hadn't studied for the test. She made an attempt at the exam, but she could

barely understand the questions much less think of logical answers. Frustrated, she laid the pen down on the desk, and her head soon followed. She simply slept away the rest of the period.

On the way to school the next morning Linda saw the same group of boys in the same place, but this time there was also a girl with them. "Hey, Linda. How's it goin'? This, is Michelle. Hey, we're all gonna go over to Michelle's house in a little while. You wanna come?"

"Well, I don't ..."

"Aw, come on. Her mom goes to work at 8:30, and we've got the whole place to ourselves after that. Once we get to Michelle's house, she can call in and excuse you from school. Whata ya say?"

"Sure." Linda took a cigarette that was offered to her and began to chat with her new-found friends. They were easy to talk with, and she felt comfortable with them. They accepted her and showed a genuine interest in her. She felt good when she was with them and even began to smile again.

At Michelle's house Michelle made the phone call to school. "This is Mrs. Foster calling in for Linda. She'll be home all day today. I think she just has a cold, but I feel that I'd better let her get some rest." Michelle hung up, and everyone had a good laugh at having once again conned the system. Everyone made themselves at home. The music blared, the shades were drawn, and the pipe made the rounds. Although guilt tugged at that little voice in her head telling her what was right, Linda was having a great time and soon forgot that she was even supposed to be sitting in a classroom. At about the time school was to let out for the day one of the boys at the party drove Linda to her home in his van. She was happy and high when she went into the house. She breezed by her grandmother without saying a word when she saw her in the kitchen. She locked herself in her room, put her earbuds in place, and lazed on the bed, lost in thoughts more pleasant than those she had had over the past year.

Linda woke up late the next morning and rushed to get to school. She wasn't anxious to get to class but was curious about what her friends would be doing that day. When she passed behind the stadium. she didn't see her group. It's true she was over a half hour late, but she didn't think they'd have left this early. Maybe they had something special planned. She continued on to school and reported to the attendance office to pick up her admit. She noticed the admit was an *excused* admit, and she smiled as she proceeded to her second period class. She sat through classes which now meant nothing to her. She was lost in math class. She'd done none of the homework and had read none of the lessons. There was no way she would ever catch up or even catch on. She started thinking about what a waste it was for her to even attend the class. Why did she come anyway? It was simply a habit she had developed since first grade. She had *always* gone to classes. Her mind wandered to yesterday's party and never wandered back.

Later that day in the hall, she noticed one of the guys she had seen at the party yesterday walking toward her. Rather surprised, she said, "Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Whata ya mean? I go to school here."

“I mean—well, I kinda thought you didn’t go to classes.”

“Well, I gotta go to some of them. I usually go to Autos, and I have to go to Driver’s Ed. They drop you outta there if you miss Range three times.”

“Oh. Are you going to a class now?”

“I don’t know. I was thinking of going out to the forest preserve. A lot of the guys are partying out there this afternoon. Hey, you wanna go out with me? We can get a ride with Steve.”

“Sure.” There were only a few hours of school left. She had come to school late. She might as well leave a little early.

The party at the first preserve was great. Plenty of people, plenty of laughs, and plenty of dope. Linda didn’t feel at all comfortable with dope at first. If she acted weird though when they offered it, they might think her odd. She wanted to be liked by these people. She was having more fun than she’d had in years. Why blow it?

Everyone sat around on the picnic tables smoking, drinking and laughing. A couple hours into the party a squad car rolled up. A cop stepped out and walked over to the group. “O.K. Pack it up and move on!” Linda’s heart was in her throat as she trembled at the prospect of what might happen. The others around her, though, simply laughed it off. In fact, they mumbled curses at the cop and openly made obscene gestures at him. Linda was kind of puzzled. The cop simply stood there with his hands on his hips and watched everyone pack up. He didn’t react to anything anyone did.

Linda asked Tom. “Why doesn’t he say anything?”

“I think he’s trying to control himself. His only job’s to keep us outa here. He’d only bother us if we had hard stuff. Besides, what can he do to us? Call our parents? Ha!”

Linda slept late the next morning and got to school about third period. Her day went all right until she went to her afternoon classes. One teacher wouldn’t let her into class without an admit. The lady really gave her a hard time and refused to even listen to her. She had to go to the attendance office to get her admit and found when she got there that they had no admit for her. She was told to see Dean Aarons.

“Linda. You missed a lot of classes yesterday. What’s the problem?”

“Well. I felt sick yesterday and had to go home.”

“When you’re sick, you go to the nurse. She takes care of you here and sends you home if it’s necessary.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know that.”

“It’s important that we know where you are during the school day. Does your mom know you went home?”

“Yeah. Sure. I talked to her last night.”

“Why didn’t she call to excuse you?”

“You mean she didn’t call? She told me she would”

“What about your first period class yesterday?”

“What about it?”

“Why weren’t you there?”

“I was. You can ask anybody in the class.”

“I asked the teacher. She said you weren’t there.”

“Well, she’s so senile she probably don’t even know my name.”

“Linda. First of all, Ms. Kramer is only forty-years-old and hardly senile. Whatever kind of problem you’re having here, I hope you get it straightened out soon. If you don’t understand the rules, read the student handbook. If you have a personal problem, there are plenty of people here willing to talk with you and help you out. Your teacher would be more than willing to help you with your school work. If there’s anything you need, you only have to ask. Now about the absences. You’ve got four detentions to serve. Do you understand how to take care of these?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Take these admits. They’ll get you back into classes.”

Linda took her admits but didn’t return to class. She went to the cafeteria instead to see who she could find. Michelle was at a table with a couple of other girls.

“Hi Linda. Whada ya look so down about?”

“I just got nailed by the dean.”

“So?”

“So? They’re kinda hard on the kids here, aren’t they?”

“Hard? Are you kiddin’? What can they do to us?”

“Well, I got some detentions.”

“So what? You don’t go to classes.. Why should you go to detention hall?”

“Won’t I get suspended or something?”

“Maybe. But then you don’t have to go to classes at all. Right?”

“They call your parents when you get suspended, don’t they?”

“Yeah. So what’s a little heat at home? You’re used to that, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Hey. We’re having a little get-together at Turner Park tonight. Ya gonna make it?”

“I don’t think so. My mom won’t let me out at night?”

“What?” Are you kiddin’? What kinda mom you got?”

“She wants me to do homework and help with housework and stuff at night.”

“Since when do you do homework?”

“Well, Mom thinks I do it.”

“Look, if you’re smart, you’ll tell your mom where to get off. Nobody, but nobody, stays home nights.”

Linda went home after school, but, thinking she’d avoid a confrontation with her mom, she left the house before her mom got home from work. She then headed for the park. The night was a mix of the usual beer, dope, and happy friends. Linda didn’t feel a tinge of guilt until she headed home. Would her mom still be up? She found out as soon as she opened the front door.

“Where in the hell have you been?”

“Just out.”

“Just out where? You know I expect you to be home at night. And if you do go out you had damned well better let me know where you’re going.”

“Ma, everybody goes out at night.”

“Without letting their parents know they’re going out? I don’t think. . .”

What followed was the biggest fight Linda had ever had with her mom. She had never really fought with her mother before and had always accepted what her mom had told her to do. She now felt confined and frustrated when her mom told her what to do. A heated feeling came over her when her mom gave her orders. Nowadays she felt more like rebelling than she did following what her mom told her to do. Linda began to develop an attitude that she was going to do only what was important to herself. Besides, her friends now meant more to her than a mother, who was never around anyway.

The argument ended at last with Linda’s mother warning her that she’d have to suffer the consequences of her actions. She was grounded for two weeks, and her allowance was cut to lunch money only. It didn’t make a great deal of difference. Linda had already decided that she was going to do as she pleased. What could her mom do, anyway? Chain her to her bed?

Linda got to school early for a change. After a fitful sleep she’d decided that things might be a little easier for her at home if she didn’t have problems at school. She met with the dean before school and got her admits, her detentions and her lecture. She told the dean what he wanted to hear and she half-believed what she said herself. She kind of did want to try to attend classes. She went to her first period class and listened for a change. What she heard however was completely foreign to her. She didn’t have the slightest idea what the teacher was talking about, and when it came time to do the exercise, she was completely lost. She could have used some help but the teacher pretty much ignored her. It’s true that she hadn’t been to class for a while, but the least the teacher could do would be to help her as much as she was helping the other kids. Linda left the class discouraged. She felt the teacher was prejudiced against her because she’d been cutting the class. How could she ever get ahead if the teacher was against her? Her other classes weren’t much better. She was totally lost in all her subjects, and by the end of the day she realized how much she didn’t know and how it would be nearly impossible to catch up.

Linda didn’t even bother to go home after school. She went to Michelle’s house and found most of the gang there. Tom’s parents were out of town and wouldn’t be back for several days, and the group had been planning a three-day party at Tom’s house. At this point Linda had given up on school and couldn’t have cared less about her home. She was ready to leave with the group for Tom’s house and party hearty.

Linda had the time of her life over the next several days. There were no restrictions, no one nagging at her, no boring classes, nothing to bother her. It was great. Her mother, in the mean time, was going out of her mind. The police had been able to give her no information as to Linda’s whereabouts. The school wasn’t much better. They could only tell Linda’s mom that Linda hadn’t reported to any classes. Linda’s mom didn’t go to work for three days while Linda played. She spent most of her time cruising the

streets in her car looking for Linda. She also spent time near the school asking kids who might know Linda where she might be. She drove through the parks and forest preserves where the kids hung out. She hounded the police and the hospitals for any word of Linda.

Tom's parents were due home soon, and the party had to break up. Most kids were returning home to parents who had long ago given up on them. They had at one time put so much time and energy into trying to discipline their children without success that they had finally given up. Linda's mom had not yet given up on Linda. She loved her daughter, and, although she realized that she hadn't been spending as much time with Linda as she should have, she didn't want to see Linda hurt.

Mrs. Foster had hardly slept over the last several days and broke down entirely when Linda walked in the door. She sobbed endlessly as she hugged her daughter. The hugging and sobbing ended, though, as Linda broke away from her mom and went to her room. Her mom followed, and a long discussion ensued. Her mom, of course, wanted to know where she had been and what she had been doing. The only response she could get out of Linda, however, was that she had been with friends. Linda just lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. She didn't want to talk with her mom. She just wanted to be left alone. When her mother, out of frustration and rage, grabbed her daughter and shook her, Linda jumped up from the bed, shoved her mom away, and let the profanity fly. She screamed at her mom as she'd never screamed before. Linda's mom simply cried and stared at her in shock as she realized the change that had come over her once quiet and once cooperative daughter.

The night passed with Linda simply staying in her room listening to music before going to bed. Her mother woke her early the next morning and ordered her to get dressed. When Linda was ready, they got in the car and drove to school.

"You don't have to take me to school, Ma. I can handle it myself."

"You certainly haven't handled it so far. I had no idea you'd been missing so much school. We're going to get you straightened out with the dean right away."

"Oh, sure. What can he do?"

"We'll see."

In the dean's office Linda simply folded her arms, hung her head and stared at the floor.

"Linda, your mother brought you here this morning because she wants to help you. I also want to help you. I'd like nothing better than to see you succeed in high school and come to enjoy it. Before we can work to solve your problem, though, we have to know what it is. It's obvious that you miss a lot of school. That's certainly a serious problem, but it's usually just an indication that there is something more serious at work. There's a reason why you're truant, or possibly several reasons. If we can discover why you're truant, we may be able to help you. Can you give us a hint? Can you tell us why you don't go to classes?"

Linda sat silently and continued to stare at the floor.

“Linda, we sincerely want to help you, but we need your cooperation to do that. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t be able to talk with me. What do you do when you aren’t in classes?”

Linda bolted from the chair and strode toward the door, “I ain’t stayin’ here! You can talk all you want....”

The dean jumped up to block Linda’s exit. “Sit down! You’re not going to leave here until we’ve come to an understanding. I said sit down!”

Linda’s head drooped again, and she slumped into her chair.

“Linda, do you know why you cut classes?”

“Yeah, sure. But you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Um.”

Linda’s mother spoke up, “Linda, we’re only trying to help you. Please talk with us.”

“Where do you go when you’re not in classes, Linda?” the dean asked.

“Just around.”

“Where specifically do you go?”

“I go to the library.”

“Why the library?”

“Classes are boring. I’d rather just study on my own in the library.”

“You mean you’re studying in the library on your own?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you know what to study?”

“I talk with my friends. I’m caught up with just about everything.”

“What kind of grade do you think you’ll get in English this marking period?”

“Oh, probably a C, maybe a B.”

“I talked with your English teacher yesterday, and she’s been wondering where you’ve been. You’ve missed several quizzes, haven’t turned in your daily homework, and haven’t completed one major project this semester. Your grade in that course now is as low as it could possibly be. You’re fooling yourself if you think you’re teaching yourself.”

“Mr. Aarons, I haven’t seen any of Linda’s books at home. I don’t think she’s...”

“I do all my work in school!” Linda shouted angrily.

“Let’s stop fooling around, Linda. You don’t spend your days in the library. I think it’s important, though, that you and your mother sit down later and discuss this. Your mom deserves to know where you’ve been spending your time. Wherever it is, it certainly can’t be to your benefit. Now look. I’d like to get you back into school and help you salvage some of your credits. You have a lot of time to go yet this semester, and there’s no reason why you can’t at least pass your courses and, with a little hard work, you may still even get some decent grades. You know if you fail a lot of courses this semester you’re simply going to have to make them up next semester or next year.

Almost all the courses you're taking are required, and you're gonna have to pass them sooner or later. You might as well get them over with now so you can take some more interesting courses next year. How do you feel about going back to classes now? Do you feel you'll have any problems?"

Linda didn't respond.

"Linda? What do you see as your problems when you return to classes?"

"Other than the fact that my teachers all hate me, none."

"Your teachers are there to help you learn. They don't hate you. You've got to understand though that they help those students most who are making an effort. If you're in class and making an attempt to do the work, they'll help you just like everyone else. Ask questions. Ask your teachers if you can meet with them after school. It will be very hard to go back to some of your classes after you've been out for so long, but once you've been through a complete day of classes, you'll feel that you've accomplished something. And the longer you continue to go to classes regularly the easier it will become for you. You've got to get into the routine of attending. Do you understand?"

"Sure."

"There's a lot of help available for you here, Linda. Your teachers will be more than willing to help you with your schoolwork. You've got to make the first move, though, and ask them for help. There also are three social workers in the building. Their only job is to talk with students who are having problems. If you have a personal problem or school-related problem you want to talk about, stop in and see one of them. If you like, I can take you down and introduce you sometime. It's also possible that another academic program may be more appropriate for you. There are a lot of alternative programs in the district. If you can't make it on your own in regular classes, it may be best that you take some tests so we can place you in another program. You've got to understand, too, Linda, that this is your last chance. You've got an opportunity to help yourself and go to classes regularly. If you can't do that, and your mother can't get you to go to school, and I can't get you to go to classes, I have to file a truancy petition in court, and then the juvenile authorities will see that you do go to classes. Do you understand what that means, Linda?"

"What can they do to me?" Linda scoffed.

"It's possible they could take you out of your home and place you in a detention center for girls. Then you wouldn't have a choice as to whether or not you went to school. I hope you can make it on your own, Linda. You've still got a chance to pull yourself together."

Dean Aarons took Linda to her first period class and explained to her teacher that she would be attending on a regular basis in the future. Linda stayed in class and, in fact, went to all of her other classes that day. It was a long day and a frustrating day. She didn't relate well to the kids in classes. She daydreamed of her friends. They were probably out having a good time. Here she was stuck in crummy classrooms listening

to boring garbage. She couldn't understand what the teachers were talking about and didn't feel like reading the textbooks or doing the exercises. The day was miserable.

Linda walked home slowly that day. She stopped by Michelle's house to see if she was home. "Michelle, the dean was telling me about going to court. Is he straight?"

"Court? What can they do to ya? Look, I went through that crap last year, and you'll be O.K. if you play the game."

"Whata ya mean 'Play the game'?"

"Well, you don't have anything to worry about until you go to court. The first time you go to court they don't do nothin' but have a hearing before a judge. The judge'll probably yell at you, but that's good. It makes it easier for you to cry. If you cry and tell them what they want to hear, you're home free. Just tell them you're sorry and that you want to go back to classes. Say 'yes' to anything they want you to do and act as though you mean it. The worst they ever do is assign you to a probation officer. That's no big deal either. They're supposed to watch your attendance at school, but half the time they don't even check with the school. Just lie and tell them you're going to classes. That should get you by. If not, you might have to go to some classes sometime so it looks like there's still hope for you. If they think you're making progress, they leave you alone."

"The dean mentioned something about a detention center. Does anybody ever go there?"

"Well, sometimes, but if you're cool, you can beat that rap. Hey, there's a party at Cindy's tonight. You gonna make it?"

"You kiddin'? If I don't get home today, my ma'll have the F.B.I. out lookin' for me."

"Yeah. Ya better play it cool until the heat's off."

"See ya."

"Take it easy."

Linda continued to attend classes for several days, but then began to slip back into her habit of getting up late and missing her morning classes. She missed increasingly more classes each day, and within two weeks was attending only one or two classes on the days she even went to school at all. She happened to be sitting in the cafeteria one day when Dean Aarons walked through and noticed her. "Let's go to my office, Linda."

In her conference with the dean, Linda was suspended from school, and her mother came in for a conference a few days later. They talked with the dean about the suspension and about the court proceedings Linda was now to go through.

The dean did file a court petition, and Linda found herself sitting in a courtroom a week after she had been suspended from school. She and her mother sat on a bench waiting for Linda's name to be called. A large woman wearing a police uniform was standing at the front of the courtroom and seemed to be in charge of everything. This lady called Linda's name after Linda and her mother had been waiting for over two hours. They were ushered in to a small conference room where they met a pleasant-

looking middle-aged woman. She introduced herself and explained that she was the juvenile officer who would be working with Linda. She then began to ask both Linda and her mother a lot of questions about their home life. She also wanted to know about Linda's attitudes toward school and what she did with her time—both in and out of school. The conference lasted only fifteen minutes and ended with the warning that Linda now had to attend school regularly or there would probably be further action taken against her.

All the way home in the car, Linda's mother yelled at her. She couldn't understand Linda's behavior and demanded that she turn herself around, get rid of the friends that she had, and attend all of her classes at school. Rather than yell back and argue with her mom, Linda simply turned her back to her mother and ignored her as she folded her arms and stared out the window. Linda's thoughts and emotions were confused. She was beginning to hate her mom for always getting on her case and for always yelling at her. She had a strong desire to do just the opposite of what her mom was telling her to do. On the other hand, she felt kind of guilty about running around all day when most other kids her age were in school. She also, however, didn't want to miss out on what her friends were doing during the day. At the back of her mind also was the thought of what may happen to her in court. Oh well, if Michelle didn't seem too worried about the court situation, why should she be worried? What could they do anyway?

Linda's school attendance continued in the same pattern as it had in the past. She was good about going to classes for the first few days after her suspension and court appearance, but then she slid back into going to fewer and fewer classes. Linda was spending most of her time out of school while at the same time lying to both her mother and her probation officer about the fact that she wasn't going to classes. Linda's dean at the high school, however, was in contact with Linda's probation officer and her mother about her attendance. Linda's mother had a hard time believing that Linda, after all the trouble she had been in, still wasn't attending school. She still wanted to give Linda another chance, however.

Regardless of her mother's wishes, Linda and her mom were sitting in court again a week later. They were seated on a bench waiting for Linda's name to be called. The whole morning passed without Linda hearing her name, and the court recessed for a lunch break. Linda's mother went to get some sandwiches, and Linda stayed in the courtroom chatting with some of the kids that she knew who were also waiting for their hearings. There were at least twenty-five other kids in the courtroom with their parents. They had been referred to court for such offenses as vandalism, shoplifting, drug possession, assault, car theft, and truancy. Linda was having a great time talking and laughing with her friends and was even making a great deal of progress at making new friends. One of the girls she was talking with was having a party that night, and Linda was planning with her how she'd be able to get out of the house so that she'd be able to attend. Linda was interrupted when her name was called by the court officer.

She chucked her half-eaten sandwich under the bench and smilingly strode over to where her mom was sitting.

Together they walked in to the judge's chambers. The judge sat at one end of a long conference table while Linda and her mom sat at the other. There were many other people crowded around the table, but Linda knew only two of them—her probation officer and Mr. Aarons, the dean. The judge, rather indifferently, asked for a summary of the case. Some person near him recited a bunch of nonsense having to do with dates and case numbers and other details of which Linda was not the slightest bit interested. The judge then asked the dean to give a summary of Linda's attendance at school. The dean handed the judge some papers and then went on to summarize Linda's attendance from the beginning of the year. He also described what the school had been doing to try to get Linda to go to school. The probation officer then gave her report. She stated that she'd met with Linda once before and after that had made several appointments to see Linda again. She also stated that Linda had failed to show up at many appointments. To Linda's surprise her probation officer also reported on several incidents that Linda had been a part of that involved the police. She knew that she and her friends were often hassled by the police, and they'd even been taken to the station several times. She had no idea, however, that her probation officer knew of these incidents.

The judge then asked Linda why she didn't go to school.

"It's so boring."

"You're obviously aware of the fact that under the law you must attend school. Why have you so openly disobeyed the law?" Linda simply hung her head and sort of shrugged her shoulders. "You realize that your getting off to such a bad start at such a young age is almost a sure sign that you'll have a pretty miserable life later on. In order to ensure that you at least have a chance to straighten yourself out, attend school on a regular basis, and prepare yourself adequately to be capable of leading a responsible life, I'm going to assign you to the Avalon School for Girls. Please take Linda downstairs, Matron."

A large woman in a police uniform walked over to Linda, and, gently tugging at her arm, lead her out of the room. The tears were welling up in Linda's eyes and the lump in her throat prevented her from speaking at all. Her mother was sobbing uncontrollably and hugging Linda close. The police matron said softly that she could bring Linda some night clothes and a toothbrush. She'd be at the courthouse for a few more hours. She then gently pulled Linda from her mother. Linda reached out for her mother and began crying hysterically. The matron took her down several flights of stairs. They ended up in a basement full of jail cells. The matron opened the door of the closest cell and led Linda in. "You'll be here for a few hours until one of the ladies comes to take you to your new home. In a while I'll bring the things down to you that your mother brings over."

Linda simply sat on the cot and sobbed, wishing she were anywhere else but sitting in that cell. The matron came an hour later with a paper bag containing a night

gown, toothbrush, and a few other personal items. Shortly after, a lady she had never seen before came and led her outside to a van driven by a man wearing a brown uniform and a cap. The lady got into the back seat with Linda, and they then drove on for hours. Linda slept for most of the ride but woke up when they arrived at a gate guarded by a uniformed man. He looked into the van and then opened the gate. The car drove up a long, winding lane and then pulled up to an old, red brick building. The lady led Linda out of the car, into the building and down a long, lonely and dimly lit hallway. Linda was shown into a small room with only a cot, a desk and a small bathroom.

“You’ll spend the night here, Linda. I’ll bring you a sandwich and some milk in a little while. I’ll come to pick you up at 6 a.m. tomorrow. I’ll take you over to the shower room, and we’ll get you cleaned up. For the next several days you’ll be going through a series of tests. After your shower, you’ll receive a complete physical exam. After that you’ll have a session with our school psychologist, and then I’ll introduce you to our social worker. In three or four days you’ll be transferred to one of the dormitories, and you’ll be meeting some of the girls. You’ll also be assigned to a job. Here, before you go to sleep you might want to read over these rules. Basically it tells you when you’ll sleep, when you’ll get up, when you’ll eat, what classes you’ll attend in the school, and what hours you’ll work on your job.”

“What do the girls do on their free time?”

“Well, Linda, you’ll find that you don’t have much free time here, especially at the beginning. Most of your free time will be spent in a supervised study situation where you’ll be doing your homework. We do have a recreation room where some of the girls spend their time, but we consider that a privilege. Here, Linda, you have to earn the right to be able to decide how you’ll spend your time. You’ll learn in a hurry. Well, I’ll go get that sandwich.”

Linda lay back on the cot, put her arms across her forehead, and stared at the ceiling. Her thoughts drifted to what her friends would be doing about now. She wished that she were anywhere else but locked in this hole of a room. Maybe, she thought, one of her girlfriends would be transferred up here soon. But no, they were probably too smart. They had been around and had learned to play the game. Here Linda had no choice. There was no game to play. She simply had to follow the established routine.

She wondered now what her mom would be doing. She was probably lying on the couch watching TV. Linda could see her mom eating a bowl of popcorn and watching an old movie. Her Grandma was undoubtedly sitting in her chair working on an afghan.

What time was it, anyway? Linda thought. She really had no idea what the time was. She could only tell by glancing over at the single window that it was awfully dark outside. Her locked door swung open, and the lady walked in to give her a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk.

“See you at six, Linda.”

“Goodnight, Ma’am.”