

a bear in human form

In the chapter, the narrator spends Monday mornings in a large house with a group of energetic children, overseen by Cora. Despite being there to teach music fundamentals, the narrator realizes that the true aim is to provide a distraction for these demanding children, many of whom rate high on the Feral Comportment Continuum. The narrator amusingly recounts their past, mentioning that until the age of ten, they believed their grandfather was a Kodiak bear, which parallels the chaotic energy of the children.

One day, Tonio, a "high eight" on the behavioral scale, appears unusually withdrawn. Normally exuberant, he simply sits alone while the others bellow requests for songs. The narrator recalls Tonio's unique demeanor; he usually doesn't speak but seems to have his own internal world. Trying to reconnect with the children, the narrator shares vibrant stories of legendary musicians, but they remain restless, throwing snacks at Tonio, who cowers for protection.

In an attempt to shift the atmosphere, the narrator plays music and encourages participation. However, as chaos escalates and snacks fly, Tonio finds himself targeted. The narrator's attention shifts to the power dynamics at play; Cora not only fails to protect Tonio but appears to incite the children's meanness. This observation stirs anger within the narrator, leading to a visceral response that intimidates the children temporarily.

After the hour concludes, Tonio stumbles out, followed by a pack of classmates who shove him down. As Tonio scrambles for safety, the narrator feels compelled to offer protection, proclaiming a bond of friendship. However, the sincerity behind this promise unravels as the narrator reflects on the complexity of such vows: protection is a fragile assurance that often cannot withstand reality.

This chapter captures the tumultuous interaction between the narrator, the children, and their behavioral struggles, highlighting themes of innocence, safety, and the nature of promises understood within the fragile realm of childhood.