Our absence from dinner had been noticed . . . We had been swimming in the river, Finny explained; then there had been a wrestling match, then there was that sunset that anybody would want to watch, then there’d been several friends we had to see on business—he rambled on, his voice soaring and plunging in its vibrant sound box, his eyes now and then widening to fire a flash of green across the room. . . . As Mr. Prud’homme looked at him and listened to the scatterbrained eloquence of his explanation, he could be seen rapidly losing his grip on sternness.

“If you hadn’t already missed nine meals in the last two weeks …” he broke in.

But Finny pressed his advantage. Not because he wanted to be forgiven for missing the meal— that didn’t interest him at all, he might have rather enjoyed the punishment if it was done in some novel and unknown way. He pressed his advantage because he saw that Mr. Prud’homme was pleased, won over in spite of himself. The Master was slipping from his official position momentarily, and it was just possible, if Phineas pressed hard enough, that there might be a flow of simple, unregulated friendliness between them, and such flows were one of Finny’s reasons for living.

“The real reason, sir, was that we just had to jump out of that tree. You know that tree …” I knew, Mr. Prud’homme must have known, Finny knew, if he stopped to think, that jumping out of the tree was even more forbidden than missing a meal. “We had to do that, naturally,” he went on, “because we’re all getting ready for the war. What if they lower the draft age to seventeen? Gene and I are both going to be seventeen at the end of the summer, which is a very convenient time since it’s the start of the academic year and there’s never any doubt about which class you should be in. Leper Lepellier is already seventeen, and if I’m not mistaken he will be draftable before the end of this next academic year, and so conceivably he ought to have been in the class ahead, he ought to have been a senior now, if you see what I mean, so that he would have been graduated and been all set to be drafted. But we’re all right, Gene and I are perfectly all right. There isn’t any question that we are conforming in every possible way to everything that’s happening and everything that’s going to happen. It’s all a question of birthdays, unless you want to be more specific and look at it from the sexual point of view, which I have never cared to do myself, since it’s a question of my mother and my father, and I have never felt I wanted to think about their sexual lives too much.” Everything he said was true and sincere; Finny always said what he happened to be thinking, and if this stunned people then he was surprised. Mr. Prud’homme released his breath with a sort of amazed laugh, stared at Finny for a while, and that was all there was to it.

This was the way the Masters tended to treat us that summer. They seemed to be modifying their usual attitude of floating, chronic disapproval. During the winter most of them regarded anything unexpected in a student with suspicion, seeming to feel that anything we said or did was potentially illegal. Now on these clear June days in New Hampshire they appeared to uncoil, they seemed to believe that we were with them about half the time, and only spent the other half trying to make fools of them. A streak of tolerance was detectable; Finny decided that they were beginning to show signs of maturity.

It was partly his doing. The Devon faculty had never before experienced a student who combined a calm ignorance of the rules with a winning urge to be good, who seemed to love the school truly and deeply, and never more than when he was breaking the regulations, a model boy who was most comfortable in the truant’s corner. The faculty threw up its hands over Phineas, and so loosened its grip on all of us.

But there was another reason. I think we reminded them of what peace was like, we boys of sixteen. We were registered with no draft board, we had taken no physical examinations. No one had ever tested us for hernia or color blindness. Trick knees and punctured eardrums were minor complaints and not yet disabilities which would separate a few from the fate of the rest. We were careless and wild, and I suppose we could be thought of as a sign of the life the war was being fought to preserve. Anyway, they were more indulgent toward us than at any other time; they snapped at the heels of the seniors, driving and molding and arming them for the war. They noticed our games tolerantly. We reminded them of what peace was like, of lives which were not bound up with destruction.

Phineas was the essence of this careless peace. Not that he was unconcerned about the war. After Mr. Prud’homme left he began to dress, that is he began reaching for whatever clothes were nearest, some of them mine. Then he stopped to consider, and went over to the dresser. Out of one of the drawers he lifted a finely woven broadcloth shirt, carefully cut, and very pink.

“What’s that thing?”

“This is a tablecloth,” he said out of the side of his mouth.

“No, cut it out. What is it?”

“This,” he then answered with some pride, “is going to be my emblem. Ma sent it up last week. Did you ever see stuff like this, and a color like this? It doesn’t even button all the way down. You have to pull it over your head, like this.”

“Over your head? Pink! It makes you look like a fairy!”

“Does it?” He used this preoccupied tone when he was thinking of something more interesting than what you had said. “I wonder what would happen if I looked like a fairy to everyone.”

“You’re nuts.”

“Well, in case suitors begin clamoring at the door, you can tell them I’m wearing this as an emblem.” He turned around to let me admire it. “I was reading in the paper that we bombed Central Europe for the first time the other day.” Only someone who knew Phineas as well as I did could realize that he was not changing the subject. I waited quietly for him to make whatever fantastic connection there might be between this and his shirt. “Well, we’ve got to do something to celebrate. We haven’t got a flag, we can’t float Old Glory proudly out the window. So I’m going to wear this, as an emblem.”

He did wear it. No one else in the school could have done so without some risk of having it torn from his back. When the sternest of the Summer Sessions Masters, old Mr. Patch-Withers, came up to him after history class and asked about it, I watched his drawn but pink face become pinker with amusement as Finny politely explained the meaning of the shirt.

It was hypnotism. I was beginning to see that Phineas could get away with anything. I couldn’t help envying him that a little, which was perfectly normal. There was no harm in envying even your best friend a little.