E.D. didn’t know how she could have been born an Applewhite. She wasn’t anything at all like the rest of them. Even her mother and Aunt Lucille, who were only Applewhites by marriage, were more like them than she was. Applewhites were enormously talented. She was not. Applewhites thrived on chaos. E.D. wanted organization and sense. Applewhites loved spontaneity. E.D. wanted a schedule and a plan she could count on. Applewhites craved freedom. E.D. wanted structure.

It was way too early for her to be up, but she’d wakened before dawn from nightmares she couldn’t quite remember, except that Jake Semple had been in them. She hadn’t been able to get back to sleep. This was the day he would be moving in.

The Applewhites were determined to find the good kid under the bad exterior. It didn’t seem to occur to them that the kid might be bad all the way through. His own grandfather, a man who looked a little shell-shocked, seemed all too eager to get rid of him. Hadn’t anyone noticed that? . . .

The point of the family meeting had been to outline The Plan for Jake’s assimilation into the Creative Academy. It was worse than she feared. He was going to be in her class.

This ought to have been an impossibility. The Creative Academy did not have classes. One of the main reasons the Creative Academy had been started in the first place was to avoid what her father called “clumping.” Applewhites, he said, shouldn’t be required to do what other people did just because other people did it—Applewhites weren’t like other people.

It had all started when Cordelia was in the seventh grade at Traybridge Middle School and was told by a teacher that she wasn’t allowed to paint a zebra black and purple, because zebras were really black and white. The fact that the zebra in question was part of a science report, not an art project, hadn’t made any difference to Randolph Applewhite. “Real science demands creativity and individuality,” he had told the principal when he withdrew his three older kids from the school district the very next day. “Without creativity and individuality, there would be no scientific discovery. No Galileo, no Newton, no Einstein.” . . .

Within a week the creative academy had been registered with the state department of education and was up and running. It had turned out to be quite easy to start a home school in North Carolina. All that was required was a guarantee that the teachers had high school diplomas. That was no problem. The academy teachers were the Applewhite adults, and all of them except Uncle Archie had finished college . . .

It hadn’t been necessary to file a curriculum with the state, which was a good thing, because the Applewhites didn’t believe in telling the children what to study and when. The Creative Academy wasn’t so much a home school as an unschool. Its students were supposed to follow their own interests and create their own educational plans.
Separately. Individually. Creatively. That meant that, except for E.D., nobody had any sort of educational plan at all. And, of course, nobody was ever doing the same thing as anybody else at the same time.

Until now. Now Jake was to follow E.D.’s plan. She didn’t want him to. She had created her plan just for her. She had thought it up for herself and she wanted to accomplish it by herself. She might not have talent, she might not have a creative bone in her body, but she wasn’t half bad at learning. She had reminded the family about the academy’s philosophy. About individuality. The case against clumping. But she could have saved her breath. She and Jake Semple were to be in a class.

Part of the reason was math. Up till yesterday, she’d liked math.

Nobody else in the family did. Two and two added up to four no matter who added them, and they went right on adding up to four month after month and year after year. It’s what E.D. liked about it. Everyone else found it boring. If home-schooled kids didn’t have to take standardized tests once a year—tests that included math—E.D. felt sure there wouldn’t be any math learned at the academy at all. Since they did have to take those tests, they took math online. . . .

She had told them that she was willing to be clumped with Jake for math—just not everything else. But it hadn’t done any good. Jake Semple needed to do “cooperative learning” so he could become better socialized, they said, and she was the only genuinely cooperative member of the family. Besides, he wasn’t the sort of person—yet—who could be expected to come up with his own structure and organization. “He needs to begin, at least, with yours,” Zedediah had said. And that had been that.

E.D. thought of the fat three-ring binder that held her curriculum for the first half of this year. It gave her life order. Stability. Predictability. It had taken her a whole week in August to plan it out. There were sections for each subject, and for each one she had written down her goals and listed every project she planned to do to meet those goals. Then she’d made charts and time lines with squares to check off each step as it was completed. So far, she was right on schedule. If she had to catch Jake Semple up on what she had done in each subject so far, it would throw everything into chaos.