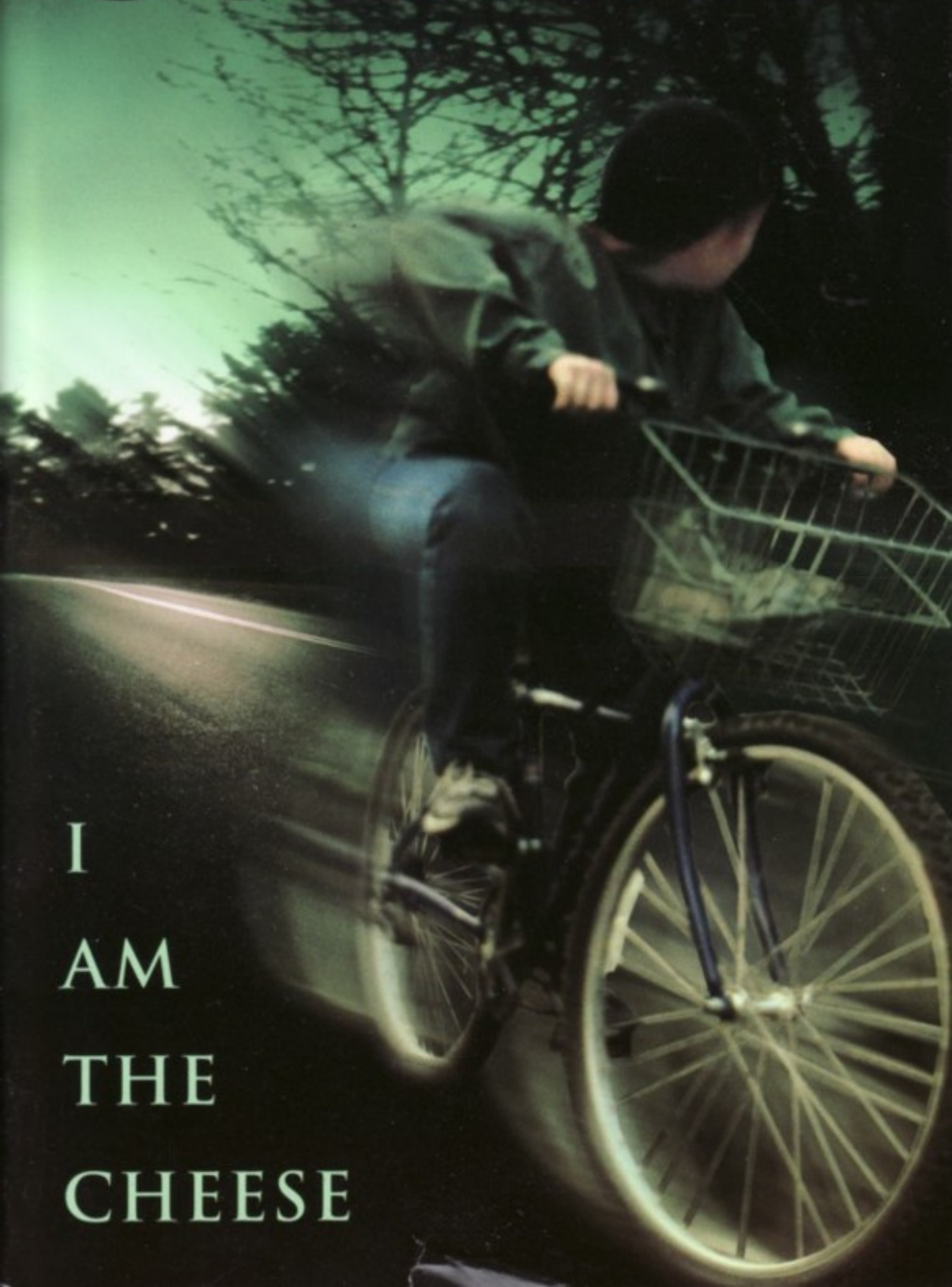



# ROBERT CORMIER

I  
AM  
THE  
CHEESE



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I am riding the bicycle and I am on Route 31 in Monument, Massachusetts, on my way to Rutterburg, Vermont, and I'm pedaling furiously because this is an old-fashioned bike, no speeds, no fenders, only the warped tires and the brakes that don't always work and the handlebars with cracked rubber grips to steer with. A plain bike—the kind my father rode as a kid years ago. It's cold as I pedal along, the wind like a snake slithering up my sleeves and into my jacket and my pants legs, too. But I keep pedaling, I keep pedaling.

This is Mechanic Street in Monument, and to my right, high above on a hill, there's a hospital and I glance up at the place and I think of my father in Rutterburg, Vermont, and my pedaling accelerates. It's ten o'clock in the morning and it is October, not a Thomas Wolfe October of burning leaves and ghost winds but a rotten October, dreary, cold, and damp with little sun and no warmth at all. Nobody reads Thomas Wolfe anymore, I guess, except my father and me. I did a book report on *The Web and the Rock* and

Mr. Parker in English II regarded me with suspicion and gave me a *B*- instead of the usual *A*. But Mr. Parker and the school and all of that are behind me now and I pedal. Your legs do all the work on an old bike like this, but my legs feel good, strong, with staying power. I pass by a house with a white picket fence and I spot a little kid who's standing on the sidewalk and he watches me go by and I wave to him because he looks lonesome and he waves back.

I look over my shoulder but there's no one following.

At home, I didn't wave goodbye to anybody. I just left. Without fanfare. I didn't go to school. I didn't call anyone. I thought of Amy but I didn't call her. I woke up this morning and saw an edge of frost framing the window and I thought of my father and I thought of the cabinet downstairs in the den and I lay there, barely breathing, and then I got up and knew where I was going. But I stalled, I delayed. I didn't leave for two hours because I am a coward, really. I am afraid of a thousand things, a million. Like, is it possible to be claustrophobic and yet fear open spaces, too? I mean, elevators panic me. I stand in the upright coffin and my body oozes sweat and my heart pounds and this terrible feeling of suffocation threatens me and I wonder if the doors will ever open. But the next day, I was playing center field—I hate baseball but the school insists on one participating sport—anyway, I stood there with all that immensity of space around me in center field and I felt as though I'd be swept off the face of the planet, into space. I had to fight a desire to fling myself on the ground and cling to the earth. And

then there are dogs. I sat there in the house, thinking of all the dogs that would attack me on the way to Rutterburg, Vermont, and I told myself, This is crazy, I'm not going. But at the same time, I knew I would go. I knew I would go the way you know a stone will drop to the ground if you release it from your hand.

I went to the cabinet in the den and took out the gift for my father. I wrapped it in aluminum foil and then wrapped it again with newspaper, Scotch-taping it all securely. Then I went down to the cellar and got the pants and shoes and jacket, but it took me at least a half hour to find the cap. But I found it: the cap I needed, my father's old cap. It would be cold on the road to Vermont and this cap is perfect, woolen, the kind that I could pull over my ears if the cold became a problem.

Then I raided my savings. I have plenty of money. I have thirty-five dollars and ninety-three cents. I have enough money to travel first class to Vermont, in the Greyhound bus that goes all the way to Montreal, but I know that I am going by bike to Rutterburg, Vermont. I don't want to be confined to a bus. I want the open road before me, I want to sail on the wind. The bike was waiting in the garage and that's how I wanted to go. By bike, by my own strength and power. For my father.

I looked at myself in the mirror before I left, the full-length mirror on the side of the closet door in my parents' bedroom upstairs. I inspected myself in the mirror, the crazy hat and the old jacket, and I knew that I looked ridiculous. But what the hell, as Amy says, philosophically.

# ROBERT CORMIER

## I AM THE CHEESE

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*It's cold as I pedal along, the wind like a snake slithering up my sleeves and into my jacket and my pants legs, too. But I keep pedaling. . . .*

A boy's search for his father becomes a desperate journey to unlock a secret past. But it is a past that must not be remembered—if the boy is to survive.

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