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MISPLACED BOYS

by

Shori Matsumoto

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
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Approved by:

Janet Peery (Director)

Blake Bailey (Member)

Sheri Reynolds (Member)

ABSTRACT

MISPLACED BOYS

Shori Matsumoto
Old Dominion University, 2016
Director: Janet Peery

The stories in *Misplaced Boys* present characters deeply affected by parental relationships. The stories are set in locations across the U.S.—Baltimore, New York, Kansas; an elementary school, a suburban home—and feature characters grappling with the question of how to live in the absence of a parental figure: a young and inexperienced teacher trying to reconcile the gaping disparities between expectation and reality; a successful voice actor selling his voice and dealing with the consequences; a delusional man who becomes obsessed with self-reliance after his father's death and clambers to get to his funeral; an elementary school boy trying to raise his brothers after their mother enters a coma.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents.

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GOODBYE, MS. B

Fifteen minutes after the Mount Valhalla Elementary School's morning announcements and daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance had been broadcast over its PA, Julie Borbonhauer sat in her idling sedan counting train cars. This, a quarter mile from the third-grade classroom it was her charge to teach, where she'd have been had she taken into account the local shipping firm's rail schedule. She searched behind her eyelids for *inner-peace* or something, finding instead fragments of scenes from the inspirational teacher movie she'd watched last night before bed. This had proved to be a mistake—it'd been her father's favorite of the twenty-three-title collection they shared, and the viewing had evoked a juggernaut of memories that'd kept her awake long past her intended bedtime.

The train's final car passed. She drove ten over the limit and left her car at a haphazard angle in the teacher's lot. She power-walked from the lot to the school's front door and couldn't help but picture herself through some faceless spectator's lens at a middle distance near the tree-line tracing her frenetic movements, in her trail a confetti of papers with lesson plans and homework assignments blown from the plastic milk crate she carried. A wide-faced clock tower at the yard's center read either 7:42 or 7:43. She climbed the entrance's granite stoop and rang an intercom button. There was a muted click, a door opening, a gust of dry indoor heat. A voice startling Julie back into her skull saying

“Get to class, you little shit.”

Didn't take long for the security guard to read Julie's confused expression and get that she'd mistaken a teacher for a student. The guard offered a facile apology and returned to the copy of *Self* she'd been flipping through. This rattled Julie in a way she could not account for,

though the shock dissipated the moment she stepped into her—*her*—classroom.

The chinless administrator who'd been supervising the class shot a rankled look at Julie before ceding her chair and quasi-stomping out. Julie profusely apologized and thank-you'd.

The kids looked like good kids. That's what you were supposed to think, or say, about your students. Good kids, in an intrinsic but nurtured kind of way. At least that's got to be your baseline attitude or you're fucked, one of her grad school teachers had said, Good will is the bedrock of a productive student-teacher dynamic. Then she and her cohort had broken up into small groups for a round of "Who's the Oppressor?"

The kids looked like good kids, but alien somehow. Their desks in neat rows, they sat and watched Julie. Their stares' blankness reminded her of meerkats, in certain students' cases possums. One girl's eyes in particular evoked in Julie a sensation of being very cold and falling. Maybe it was because this girl sat so far to the front that Julie noticed her. She tried to stop thinking.

She marked *Ms. Borbonhauer* onto the room's whiteboard and underneath it wrote *Ms. B*, taking a moment to offer them her surname's correct pronunciation.

"Now that you know my name," she said, "It's time for me to learn yours."

She asked they reorient their desks to make a large circle. The girl with the vertigo eyes was the only student Julie had to ask twice.

The desks' rearrangement took much longer than she'd anticipated. At one point, two of the more energetic boys had begun stacking their desks and were working on their fourth level when Julie, who'd been preoccupied helping three other children unknot the shoelaces they'd all decided it was a good idea to tangle, finally noticed. By the time they were done the class only had twenty minutes before the 8:30 start-of-the-year assembly. Twenty students, one minute per

student.

“OK, then. Why don’t we go around in a circle and say our name, one neat fact about us, our favorite animal, and what we want to be when we grow up. We don’t have a lot of time, though. So let’s make a game out of it. Everyone has one minute to speak, and then we move on to the next person, OK?”

She realized after the second kid, at which point seven minutes had passed, that she’d made a mistake. She couldn’t find the moral justification to stop Kevin Gillis as he described his top-eight dream jobs in significant detail.

“And so as long as that works out, I figure I could have a solid portfolio by the time I graduate from college, then I’ll have my pick of a big-8 firm,” Kevin said.

“Wonderful, Kevin. Well, I think we only have time for one more,” Julie said, suddenly realizing how often she’d been looking up at the clock. “We can do the rest after the assembly.”

It was the ice-eyed girl’s turn. She seemed reluctant, but finally said, “Kimiko. My name’s Kimiko. A neat fact is my grandfather’s a Japanese war criminal. He lives with us because he can’t take care of himself anymore.”

“Oh, ah, uh,” Julie said, disarmed.

“My favorite animal is the cymothoa exigua,” Kimiko said.

“Could you repeat that, Kimiko?” Julie said.

“Cymothoa exigua. Not technically an animal. It’s a parasite. An ocean critter. Floats around in the ocean water pretending to mind its own business, though secretly it’s looking for a snapper. That’s a kind of fish. The cymothoa, or tongue-eating louse, slips in through the snapper’s gills and works its way up to the tongue, where it latches on and starts sucking blood until it, the tongue, atrophies and falls to the ocean floor. Then it replaces the tongue and lives

there until its host dies.”

The class said, “Ewww.”

Julie wanted to scream, but instead she said, “That sounds very scary, Kimiko.”

“It’s creative. That’s an original species, no?”

Julie desperately tried to conceal her nervousness. There was something very tricky and paradoxical about it.

She said, “I can’t argue that. Is that why it’s your favorite?”

“No.”

“Really, then why is it?”

“Well,” Kimiko said coyly.

“Yes?”

“It’s, well, it’s just that,” Kimiko looked down at her desk. Black hair fell, concealing her face from Julie.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that…”

Julie leaned in slightly and said, “Mhm?”

Kimiko lifted her head slowly, the hair that had fallen forward now parting to each side to show her face. Her eyes had been closed. She opened them widely now and said, “I *am* the tongue-eater.”

Some of the other students hissed and snickered. A few of them appeared genuinely frightened. The assembly bell rang, and Julie, her head kind of spinning, instructed her class to line up. Just to be sure, she counted their heads, avoiding looking into their eyes for fear of what the looking might yield. They walked to the cafeteria where representatives of the school’s

departments welcomed the students, assuring them that they should look forward to the upcoming semester.

[Minutes/transcript re: Emergency faculty/staff meeting Aug XX (first day of academic year) 16:01-16:07]

“No, that is *definitely* a vagina.”

“I mean but how can you be for sure?”

“This is bad. This feels bad.”

“I’m telling you, it’s a vagina. Look here. That’s the you know.”

“Do we have to *say* it? The word?”

“Vagina vagina vagina vagina.”

“Susan. Cut it out.”

“Appears to be prepubescent on account of there’s no hair.”

“Are you serious? There’s other explanations for a bald vagina.”

“I mean how can you tell *that*? It’s so *blurry*.”

“Look, we’re getting off topic here. As Mount Valhalla’s head administrative figure, I’m going to officially declare this photograph vulgar, regardless of whether we can be one hundred percent sure about the subject’s true identity.”

“You mean identity as in what body part it is or who it belongs to?”

“Both. Whatever. I’m executively deciding that the photograph’s circulator is driven by malicious intent.”

“I wonder who it is.”

“No shit, Tommy. That’s the whole point of this meeting.”

“Susan, please.”

“Not one of the nine-hundred-seventy-two parents and teachers who received the text message were familiar with the phone number.”

“Who has access to the school’s contact info log, though? I mean, we keep that fucker safe. No way a student could’ve gotten access?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I wish that were true. But I’m having trouble thinking of who else’d do a thing like this.”

“No duh it’s a student.”

“Could we call the police?”

“What would they do? What could they do?”

“And they’re elementary students, besides, for crying out loud.”

“Were it up to me, I’d do mandatory stop-and-searches.”

“Remind me never to vote for you should you run for public office, Hal.”

“Everyone, calm down. We’re just going to have to be vigilant, OK? Be on the lookout for any form of cellphone use. Students aren’t allowed to have them. OK? It’s not a soft ban anymore. We’re cracking down. This has got to stop. The message was sent during classroom hours. So, vigilance. Especially in secluded areas. We can’t watch them in the bathrooms or anything but you know. Try to have a general consciousness about it. This’s got to stop.”

“Right.”

“Right-o.”

“Of course.”

“Sure.”

[Transcript truncated]

That evening, Julie sat at her den's coffee table in front of a movie about a teacher for two and half hours, drinking glasses of red wine, vetting miscellanea submitted that day by the children.

When she felt the room begin to turn and sink, she phoned her mother. This had not been planned.

Her mother asked, "So, pumpkinseed, how was your day?"

Julie sighed. She searched for words that might communicate the weird kind of vacantness billowing inside her. Tongue-eaters, meerkats, brittle little children's heads pitching back and forth.

She said, "Challenging. Wish I had better news."

"It's *your* news, chickadee, so I'm glad you're sharing it. What challenged you?"

"I'm not sure I completely know, yet. I do have this kid, this kind of problem student.

Scary smart. But she seems to hate me, and I don't know why."

"I'm sure she doesn't hate you. Hate you how?"

Julie explained Kimiko's thing about the fish parasite.

"The worst part is I think I'm terrified of her. Of them. It's just none of it is how I imagined."

"It sounds like it was just a weird and hard first day, lily pad. It's all going to be just fine."

"I know."

"You know. Your dad is so proud of you."

Julie tried to ignore the unexpected swell of emotion. It gathered in her throat.

She said, "Miss him."

“All the time. I don’t think that quits, meerkat.”

“Sometimes I feel like he’s the alivest person I know.” Julie stared blankly into a corner.

“I don’t know if I have the language to explain this feeling I got today. This bitter and austere and hard aspect to the life of things.”

“How you mean?”

“I mean I’ve student-taught for my practicum, I’ve volunteered in classrooms since I was a junior in high school. At first it was for resume lines, you know, when it could have led to anything. When it could have been like law schools or business schools I was augmenting the resumes to impress.”

“But you finally realized you loved teaching. That’s what you knew would make you happy.”

Julie refilled her glass. “Yes. Happy. Mom, I look at some of these teachers’ faces.”

“You can’t think of it that way.”

“What I’m trying to explain to you is that nothing could have prepared me for the air in that room. It’s different now that I’m not working toward a degree or deciding which profession I’ll commit to. It’s different now that I’m committed. I had this horrible sensation of this being *my life now*. It’s not one of many possible outcomes anymore. I’m living the outcome. The kids. I look at them and it’s like holding something cold-blooded and scaly.”

“You’re going through a phase. It’ll pass. And you know, I’m not saying you should be thinking in this direction at all, but should it come to it, you could always do something else. That’s more normal than not normal these days. You’re still very young. But you need to give this a proper shot first, right?”

“I think I’m getting why it’s normal. The feeling like *this is it*. Some of those teachers

have been there twenty years. I like to think I see what it's done to them, now that I'm an actual teacher, now that there really is no difference between me and them."

"Hm."

"And I kept looking up at the clock. I felt so terrible each time I did. I kept looking at the clock and thinking some of these teachers have been here twenty years."

"You'll connect with your students. Then it'll turn around for you. Just wait and see."

"Hope you're right."

Her mother said, "Any other news?"

Julie sighed, "We think one of the students is texting around photographs of her vagina to the parents and teachers."

"Oh."

After hanging up with her mother, Julie swallowed a sleeping pill, tucked herself into bed, and switched on an inspirational film about a young and inexperienced but bold and stubborn teacher entering a low-performing public school in an at-risk community and, against all apparent odds (including a series of bureaucratic hurdles introduced at the end of the first act and throughout the second), and at the expense of her personal relationships, convincing the students (as the film implies all authority figures theretofore involved in their lives had failed to do) of their inherent worth, practically shepherding them out of the ghetto, burning in their hearts this deep-seated love and admiration for their teacher, their shepherd.

Julie had adored and cherished inspirational teacher films as far back as her memory reached, and though she'd always acknowledged the necessary fictionalization of certain elements, she still managed to walk away motivated by the film's core. Now she wasn't sure.

She semi-secretly maintained an ever-growing collection of these films in DVD-form,

many of which she'd inherited from her father, with whom she'd spent many evenings viewing the genre's films, developing what would become a deep, long-lasting set of impressions that would come to shape how she understood things around her. On nights like this when she felt raw and frail, she'd slide the plastic storage container out from under her bed and run her finger along the DVD cases' spines and deliberate over which movie. After her father's death, these viewings became a way of revisiting his memory. Beyond the sounds and images that composed them, the films over the years had acquired an additional track of private meaning specific and special only to her and, she liked to think, him. She could hear his laugh's precise cadence at the juxtaposition of Meryl Streep's severe violin pedagogy with a classroom of unruly children. And the inveterately rancid odor of his socked feet she'd massage at his request struck her nostrils once more when Morgan Freeman gets busted by the fire marshal and thrown into jail. Or the corny *hmm* and *mm-mm-mmm* sounds he'd emit whenever stricken by a profound or gut-wrenching moment, like when Hilary Swank chooses her students over a frustrated and needy Patrick Dempsey, or Edward James Olmos reaching his kids.

When she got older, she had berated her father for neglecting his feet's hygiene and eventually refused touching them altogether. And during a fit of teenage angst, she'd scolded him for the little idiosyncratic *hmms* and *mm-mm-mmms*. And he'd stopped. Over the years she'd tried to apologize and convince him it was OK, go ahead, Dad, make sounds, but it wasn't ever really the same.

Julie's mind hovered over this for several minutes before drifting to arenas of thought she'd been trying to avoid. Insubordinate students and burnout peers and the unreal and cartoonish feel to the place awaiting her arrival the next morning. She felt herself plummet, overwhelmed by a sense of disappointment at her failure to meet nebulous expectations. And as

she lay there in bed the last solid fragments of the sleep-aid tablet dissolved in her stomach, causing little vertigo-esque flickers in consciousness—a feeling like falling—and this horrible skepticism emerged, maybe more like a suspicion, that maybe the faults she found emerged from a viewer error on her part. Or worse: these seemingly spiritually barren planes of drudgery signaled not some failure to understand or perceive, but the red dawn of adult life. And now she couldn't tell whether she was sleeping, and the rational parts of her dimmed by at least three quarters, and in that darkness she began to listen to a voice whose shouting she hadn't known she'd been hearing, mouthing things that would have sounded silly if said aloud, outrage at parents inculcating their children with this religious conviction in their own interminable specialness and potential. This feels like some terrible line we all must cross.

The film continued to play, and blue lights jumped around the room when the credits rolled and the disc skipped back to Main Menu.

Those first weeks Julie clung to her mother's assurance that she and the kids would soon warm up to each other. Yet even with this lingering hope she continually caught herself looking out the window, at the clock, out her classroom's door—perhaps as a lifeline to the world outside those walls. She blasted through her entire Inspirational Teacher Film catalogue, which, combined with the sleeplessness, nightly sedatives, and more-than-usual drinking, had the effect of exacerbating her tendency to daydream, even when it was inopportune.

Like on Wednesday, week two, Julie was nodding off at her desk, grading a geography quiz during her class's gym period, when the TV in her brain spontaneously switched on: There they would be—the children—celebrating their recent 98th national percentile score on the standardized test their *own administrators* had expected they'd fail. The children would be

consuming giddily the sugar-free juice boxes and store-brand chocolate sandwich cookies with which their beloved teacher had rewarded them, when a glare in the class door's observation window would catch Julie's eye. The glare, as it would turn out, would be from the reflective aviator sunglass lenses of the Department of Education lackey tasked to find out just how the students had performed so well, assuming, of course, that either they or Julie had cheated. The Fed goon's knock would fill the room and the children's ears, disquieting little Maria Czezik—sweet, shy Maria Czezik—who would ask if they were the men from her nightmare. Julie would smile and tell her to always believe in herself, and never to let fear into her heart. She would tell her students what an honor it'd been to teach them, and in unison they would stand and rush to hug her, all together. The G-men would then escort her out of the room. Indignant, Julie would fight the injustice, and even after her *own administration* abandoned her, even after the police imprisoned her for violating the fire code, she'd persist in her plight. Eventually the power of karma and willpower and sheer Hollywood logic would win out. The children would be exonerated. How happy they would be, how affirmed their worth—why else would an authority figure go to such lengths for them? She'd walk into the classroom after her release from prison—something in her now changed, perhaps weary or experienced—and the students would rush to embrace her Welcome Back. They'd finally know it: All she wanted to do was enrich their lives, alter their perspectives, encourage their dreams, pique their curiosity. How they would love her!

A real-life knock at her open door's jamb startled Julie from this fantasy. Assistant Principal Gomez was standing there.

'Ms. B? What's going on? Your kids have been waiting for you to pick them up in the gym for ten minutes.'

Julie's attention snapped to A.P. Gomez, then to the clock. 'Shoot!'

The next morning, Julie, staring hung over and raccoon-eyed in the bathroom mirror, felt strangely alienated from her own reflection. She of course knew it was her face's image, but on some instinctual and pre-thinking level she felt it could have belonged to someone else. Her face—this part of her she'd always considered essential to her very existence and nature—now felt like a mask, like some arbitrary thing she wore and that had nothing to do with who she really was. And perhaps the worst part about it was this mounting horror that perhaps she did not know herself as well as she had thought. How unsure she felt about what lay behind the mask. She found herself frequently asking how people lived.

She reached for her phone to call her mother, but the clock on its display reminded her it wasn't even six a.m. yet. She replaced the phone on the nightstand, a terrible emptiness swelling inside her. It was like she'd been dropped off at softball practice and no one had come to pick her up.

As she was squeezing a gob of toothpaste onto her toothbrush, her phone beeped with a new text. Julie bolted for the phone—perhaps her mother had sensed her need and was checking up. But it was an unknown number, and Julie opened it to find another photograph of a vagina.

"Fffuuh," Julie said, spewing small mint-flavored foam spots onto the mirror. She'd blocked the number from the original text, meaning the sender was using a new phone.

She rinsed her mouth, applied her extra-extra-waterproof eyeliner, fixed her hair; prepared coffee, poured cereal, peeled a banana; chewed, sighed, wept.

In the parking lot she applied eye drops to rinse out the red and took a series of deep breaths before exiting her vehicle.

As her students filtered in, Julie arranged folding card tables along the room's back wall in preparation for the science lesson that would later take place.

At 8:30 the bell rang and the morning announcements began, prompting Julie to take roll. Everyone was there but the one she'd immediately noticed missing: Kimiko.

The PA's voice said, "And now please stand for the Pledge of Allegiance."

The room filled with the groans of 19 chairs' legs across linoleum. The kids' rote drones grated on her. Most of them looked to the flag hanging at the room's corner, but a handful had developed the habit of staring directly at her during the Pledge, which irritated her for reasons she failed to understand.

Tommy Kwang, one of the gawkers, shifted his gaze to the door, his jaw still flapping—*and to the republic*. Julie frowned, looked where he looked. Nothing. Tommy then tapped Manhal Wetzstein's arm and pointed to the door. Manhal's face—mid *under God*—smiled before twisting into something not quite a smile. Julie looked to the door again: Again, nothing. By the time their mouths closed around *justice for all*, the entire class was staring out the door, some of them smiling, some of them apparently frightened.

"*What?*" Julie asked.

"Um," said Manhal, "There's someone outside."

She walked to the empty doorway, marginally crept out as she peered left. As she looked to the right, a creature—a wrinkled, hollow-eyed thing—emerged suddenly as if from nowhere. Julie screamed, jumping backward and knocking her head against the doorjamb.

The rubber-masked face, as it turned out to be, was attached to a girl's body, whose arms now flailed above its owner's head as it screamed, "Reform!"

Julie stared startled, bewildered at the mask, a Hillary Clinton caricature in the style of the Reagan or Nixon masks popular among bank robbers in films.

Julie snapped back to attention. "Take that off! Take that off *right this instant*."

The wearer hunched forward until its hands touched the ground. Mask looking up at Julie, it began to hiss.

Julie frowned, stepped toward the child, and said, “Now.”

The wearer stood, her shoulders slumping in ostensible disappointment, and removed the mask, letting it plop on the ground.

“Kimiko. Why did I have a feeling? Pick it up and give it to me right now.”

Kimiko complied, appearing crestfallen.

Julie poked her head in the classroom, summoning what she hoped was a smile. “Open your science books to your lesson and start reading. I’ll be in in one moment.”

“But which page?” one of the kids asked.

“Just...*read something*.” She shut the door—harder than intended, judging by the slam that echoed ominously down the pale hall.

She returned to Kimiko. “What...what *is* this? What are you thinking?”

“You didn’t like it?”

“Are you kidding? Of course I didn’t *like it*.”

“But it was Hillary.”

“What difference does it make what mask it was? You aren’t supposed to be out here, and you aren’t supposed to scare people. It’s not nice.”

“Sorry.” Kimiko’s eyes began to water. “I just thought you’d like the Hilary mask. I wore it because you remind me of her.”

“I what?” This flattery was not expected. Perhaps there was hope.

“Remind me of her. You remind me of her.”

“I see, well, that’s nice, Kimiko, but...”

“There’s something about you middle-class white ladies. Maybe it’s the neuroticism?”

Julie’s face went hot. She was probably scowling—it had grown increasingly difficult to gauge her own face’s expressions without the aid of a mirror. Her face ached, as if from overuse.

Kimiko pressed the back of her wrist into a jutted-out hip. She dangled the other hand limply before her, finger pointed at her teacher, running vertically back and forth in conspicuous judgment.

“Maybe it’s the bolted-on smile, or the discontent and insecurity the smile’s employed to conceal.”

Julie said, “Hueh,” through the gob of phlegm that had lodged in her esophagus. She wanted to speak yet felt far from her own mouth. Where was the wind in her belly?

“I bet you *really* like chardonnay.”

Julie did not hear her own voice until the third or fourth “Stop!” Several teachers emerged from their rooms to investigate what the fuss was about.

Julie cleared her throat and straightened her posture, as if suddenly conscious of the roles she and the young human before her were supposed to play.

“Kimiko. Principal. Now.”

Julie watched the scrawny girl round the corner, then returned to the stifled cloister where 19 pairs of eyes followed her to her desk, the children casting their gazes across the room like fishing line, sharp hooks sunk into her skin, constantly yanking.

She stared absently at her own name on the whiteboard, a vestige from the first day she’d intentionally left up for the children’s reference. She wiped the board clean.

Tommy Kwang cleared his throat. “So, who was that?”

Julie turned around. “Tommy, you need to raise your hand before you speak.”

“I was, but you weren’t looking at…”

“Do *not* argue with me.”

The children’s rabbit-ish eyes bulged from their small heads. Tommy Kwang raised his hand.

Julie sighed. “What, Tommy.”

“So, who was that?”

“It doesn’t *matter*.”

“Oh.” He appeared to deliberate this before raising his hand again.

“Yes?”

“Well, I have another question.”

“One more question. Then we have to get started.”

“Okay. Why did you set up those tables in the back of the room?”

Julie’s chest depressurized. She explained they’d find out about the tables soon enough, but that first they were going to have to get through their lesson on the scientific method. Julie explained about predictions, hypotheses, observations, etc.

The lesson went much better than Julie could’ve predicted. The principal kept Kimiko for just over two hours. This gave the class plenty of time to complete their experiment, which involved cooking oil, candy corn, vinegar, and a couple other supplies that Julie suspected Kimiko had the in-born tendency to abuse and make messes with. And aside from a little light grinding on a couple of the boys during their afternoon Hamster-Dance brain-break, Kimiko restrained herself for the rest of the day, though in some ways it had started not to even matter.

By mid-October, Julie’s faith in a breakthrough had grown so abstract it was

meaningless. She felt so mired in the insufferable and inescapable-seeming moment-by-moment slog her life at the school had become that the very thought of hope began to cause physical pain—mostly in her abdomen and chest. She wasn't zoning out so much anymore, but when she did, the subjects of her fantasies were starting to look less like an I.T.F., and more like the biopic of a serial killer.

She could not comprehend the students. It was like they had little on/off switches: one day they'd be peaceful, would listen and follow instructions and finish their work on time—the next day they'd be incapable of keeping their attention fixed on any single subject for more than two or three minutes, would be moody and temper-prone. They seemed to smell worse on these days; their blemishes and facial incongruities were more noticeable. Even *if* their motivations weren't malicious or directed at her, she had to remain watchful on a constant basis.

She rearranged their desks and instituted a reward/penal system based on popsicle sticks with the students' names inscribed on them. She started bringing candy to class. She significantly relaxed her restrictive attitudes toward the television monitor as a teaching instrument. She tried to have fun, to be fun.

But still, they had that hollow quality to them. Still felt alien. They accepted the new penal code. They ate her candy. They watched her movies. And yet still no clear sense of where this was all headed.

At the center was Kimiko, who since the semester began had spoken out of turn thirty-seven times. Twice one day she burst into the chorus of Pat Benetar's "We Belong." Julie had caught her before lunch one day trying to steal her cell phone. She'd brought dead animals to class on two separate occasions. She'd mellowed out for a couple days after the Hillary mask incident, but after the weekend it was like someone had injected her brain's weirdness center

with steroids.

She wrote a short story set in medieval Africa about a giant flying horse with a penis for a head that galloped across the continent terrorizing villages. Entire families were hooved to death or drowned in viscous torrents of sperm. A tribal princess named O, separated as a young child from her parents and tribe after an attack by the penis horse, trains with the help of the shaman who'd found and raised her to become a powerful warrior. O travels from village to village, rallying support for her cause. Her efforts result in wide-reaching political unions, organized militaries. She and the village's leaders strategize a promising ground assault against the horse and spend the eve of the great battle celebrating. Hours pass, and O decides she must prepare and rest. She retires to her tent. The leaders are waiting there. They rape and murder O, fearing she might one day rise to power and threaten their kingdoms' sovereignty. That night, the penis horse surprises the encampment, and nearly everyone dies.

The standard thing for lunch was to eat in the break room with the other teachers. Julie had done this each day. Today, she sipped coffee and ate a turkey sandwich as she sought council on Kimiko's short story from Anise, a fourth-grade teacher she'd come to befriend.

Anise folded the loose-leaf sheets, handed them back to Julie, and said, "That's heavy, man."

"You aren't joking."

"I'd call the parents."

"I know. Especially at this point."

"That story's going to give me nightmares, Julie. You've got to do something."

"I'm going to. I should've long ago. It's been three weeks. She's constantly derailing our

class agenda. I mean, how many times did I send her to the principal's office?"

"It makes sense you waited this long. First-time teacher. You got book learning but no street-smarts, kid."

"God, shut up." Julie sipped her coffee. "I just don't see how you've done this for how long?"

Anise said, "This is year six."

"I feel like crows will be eating my body in six years."

"I felt that way. Give it a chance."

Julie sighed, "That's what people keep telling me, but it's only gotten worse."

"It's been, what, six weeks?"

"Exactly."

Anise used her fork to stab an olive and said, "Boy."

"I don't understand them. I feel no connection whatever. I'm like that dad who looks down at his newborn and feels nada."

"Sometimes that takes time."

"I just want them to love me. How hard is that?"

Anise spat out the olive's pit and said, "Hey, what's that expression? If you look hungry, you'll starve?"

"And."

"And I mean it sounds like you're waiting for them to make their move or something."

Julie was hurt by this. "I've been trying everything! Nothing is enough! I'm not waiting for anything! I'm doing all I can!"

"Come on, bring it down a notch. I just mean you said you wanted your kids to love you.

I think you should be careful hoping for that kind of thing.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant that I want things to...*feel* different.”

Julie dropped her forehead melodramatically into her hands. She looked up and scanned the room. Her eyes stopped on Mrs. Drummond, a vaguely mountain-shaped 45-year teaching veteran. She’d been at Mt. Valhalla longer than anyone else. Julie’d seen this on a plaque hanging around the school, though she could not recall exactly where.

Julie whispered, “I mean, look at Mrs. Drummond.”

They looked over.

She continued, “I mean, *cod*. Forty years? *Forty?*”

“She’s just showing off.”

“Psh,” Julie said.

She felt like a child. The clock’s second hand swept creepily. Just over half the lunch hour remained. She sipped her coffee.

Anise said, “I get it. It was bad for me when I started out, too.” She used her pinky’s fingernail to pick at something in her teeth, shielding the excavation with her other hand.

“I was one of four new hires, all of us recent college grads. All through training week the other three seemed so...composed, collected. Enthusiastic, even, talking about how they couldn’t wait to meet their students, how excited they were to be getting started.”

She wiped a strand of something white and pulp-like off her pinky onto a paper towel lying in front of her.

“Their shit seemed *together*. Meanwhile I was barely dragging myself into the building two minutes late every day. That week was a mind-bender. Half the time I felt guilt and self-hatred over my inability to get psyched and on-board like them. The other half of the time I was

too emotionally worn out to care.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“They kept asking me what’s wrong, kept telling me to *smile*.”

Julie said, “Ew.”

“Anyway, that first week after orientation wipes the little type-A smiles off those bitches’ faces. Let me tell you. One of them lasted only three weeks. The other quit after her first year.”^a

“Wow. And the third one?”

“Mrs. Trebuchet. She’s still here. You know her.”

“With the...thing?”

“Indeed. Anyway, the girl who quit after three weeks is selling real estate now. The other one went back to school, I think.”

“Right.”

“Do you see what I’m getting at here?”

“Um.”

“You’ll do this job or you won’t do this job.”

Both their phones buzzed. They looked at each other, then down at their phones.

Anise said, “The Unitexter strikes again. I’m just deleting them now.”

Julie deleted hers, too. “Gotta jet, Anise. Thanks for the talk.”

As she stood, the coffee hit her bladder hard. Her phone buzzed again. En route to the cafeteria, she stopped in the bathroom.

She relieved herself. As she washed her hands, she heard the granular crunch of a digital camera’s faux-shutter click. She straightened and swiveled to look at the bathroom’s other stall, clutching her purse out of instinct.

Julie said, “Who’s there?”

When no one replied, she stepped closer, “Who is that in there? Answer me.”

She heard movement. The latch turned. The door opened. Julie stood at a distance.

Kimiko was sitting on the seat, redoing her fly. She had her one hand behind her back.

Julie turned away and said, “What are you doing?”

Kimiko, appearing nonplussed to Julie for the first time since they’d met, slammed the stall back shut and said, “Nothing!”

“Do you have a phone in there?”

“Hold on a sec. I just gotta...” The sound of panicked shuffling emerged from the stall. Fabric rustled softly, a zipper zipped.

“Fix yourself up and get out here. Now.” The bathroom’s acoustics made Julie’s voice sound all hollow and washed out.

The door popped open. Kimiko stood. She walked to Julie, holding the phone out in front of her.

Julie turned to face her. She grabbed the phone and held it in one hand, tapping it against the palm of the other. She knew an opportunity when she saw one: if she handled this in a delicate and politic way, if everything played out right, Kimiko would have pretty much no choice *but* to love and trust her teacher. This was Julie’s chance to break through.

The bell was right about to ring. They had minutes.

Julie rested her hands on her hips. “Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s not a good enough answer, Kimiko. I need to know why you’re doing this.”

“You’ll be the first to know when I do.”

Julie shifted her purse to the other shoulder and knelt down.

“Listen, I’m here to help you, understand? I know things haven’t been so great, but I only want to help you. I want you to know that.”

“Everybody always wants something from me.”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

“You do.”

“I want you to give your best. To ask questions and care about things. All that’s only for you.”

Kimiko sighed through her nose. “Are you going to tell my parents?”

“Kimiko.”

“I already got in trouble twice this week. You can’t tell them now.”

Julie paused, looking down at the black top of Kimiko’s lowered head. “Listen, Kimiko. I won’t tell them immediately. But this weekend, we’re all going to have to sit down and talk about this. I can’t keep this concealed, though I’ll hold off telling the school until we sit down with your parents. But you have to promise me you’ll behave in class. We can’t keep having you act out.”

“Okay.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Julie felt what she believed she’d been waiting for all this time: commiseration, understanding—agency, clout—and with her most antagonistic student no less, her least hopeful of cases.

The bell rang. Julie and Kimiko left the bathroom and walked to the cafeteria to meet the

rest of the class. Julie had to keep tamping down the urge to hug her student right there in the hallway. A sliver of hope had finally emerged amidst all this conflict and troubling behavior, and it left Julie almost giddy with anticipation. She'd remember this day publically during her acceptance speech at the nationally televised Teacher-of-the-Year-Awards twenty or so years from now. She'd sweep a lock of her elegantly graying hair from her mildly wrinkled forehead as they announced the award's winner: *Julie Borbonhauer, who, after over two decades as a third-grade teacher at Mount Valhalla Elementary School, has touched the lives of hundreds of children, most of whom, up to the point of becoming a student of Ms. Borbonhauer—or Ms. B as she's fond of being called—were almost certainly destined for a life of failure and disappointment.* In her speech, Julie would talk about all the trials that had arrived with her first year of teaching, and her consciousness would flit back and forth between then and now. In between bursts of audience laughter she would find it uncanny how time had transformed that nightmare into a preamble for the unimpeachable Good her career had become. At the podium, clutching the award statuette and looking seasoned yet dignified, humble yet chic, and without the least bit of forehead sweat glistening as the show's producers cut to her close-up—clutching that award statuette, she'd be shocked and delighted when grownup Kimiko emerged from behind the stage's curtains to hug her and offer a personal, heartfelt thanks.

Julie and Kimiko rendezvoused with the other kids and returned to homeroom. As the students shuffled in, Julie pulled Kimiko aside and offered her best approximation of a stern look.

“Remember?”

“Yes.”

Amid the chair-leg moans and knocks of the students' clumsy reseating, Julie locked the

confiscated phone in her top desk drawer and gave a knowing look to Kimiko, who watched from across the room. Given their history, Julie was skeptical. But Kimiko just sat there, her spine kinked, hands braided in front of her, switching her gaze between the desk's surface and a spot about one foot to the right of Julie's head. And this she continued for the rest of the mini-lecture on multiplication. In fact, for the rest of the afternoon there weren't any interruptions from Camp K. No minute-long coughing fit anomalies; no daring Tommy Kwang to snort smuggled cayenne pepper; no tarring-and-feathering (Elmer's glue and glitter) papier-mâché effigies of Julie; no cracking open a can of fermented herring in the middle of class immediately after lunch, causing four students and Julie to vomit; no crotch-grabbing, nipple-twisting, drama-making, hair-pulling, face-painting, gum-chewing, booger-flicking. No fucking with Julie's head.

And then the day was over. As the kids filtered out of the room, Kimiko stopped in front of Julie's desk.

She spoke timidly "So, when are you telling them?" Her head hung. She had this deflated look. She wouldn't look Julie in the eye.

An image flashed in Julie's mind: a sword-wielding woman-knight standing with her foot on the carcass of a recently slain dragon. This immediately caused her to feel guilt. How wonderful this improvement in her mood; how unfortunate the expense at which it had come.

Julie said, "Day after tomorrow. Friday. That gives you one more full day." She was having trouble not smiling.

Kimiko's breathing quickened. Still looking at the floor, she placed a hand on Julie's desk, roughly one foot from where Julie's hand lay.

Julie tensed. Neither of them spoke. Julie's attention momentarily flickered to the hum of

the overhead fluorescent tubes, then returned to Kimiko's breathing. A wet snuffle emerged.

Julie leaned toward Kimiko. "Are you crying?"

Kimiko erratically placed her hand on Julie's. Droplets fell from behind the cascade of black hair. Kimiko's hand was clammy and soft. They sat like this until Julie started feeling uncomfortable. As warmly and tenderly as she could, Julie removed Kimiko's hand and placed it some inches away from hers so that each had a palm on the desk's surface. Kimiko did not budge.

"Kimiko, I know you're going to get in a lot of trouble. I know things stink right now, but they don't always have to. You can change. You're so young! You can behave in class, and boy are you gifted! You can even help the kids who are struggling with their work. You won't get punished then, will you?"

"Probably."

"No, because you'll be doing good, not doing bad."

"You can't control my parents."

"Well, that's true, but I'm sure they'll..."

Kimiko looked up, her eyes bloodshot and staring into Julie's. "You don't know."

Julie leaned forward and, breaking a rule, took Kimiko by the shoulders. "I promise. You...will...be...*fine*."

Julie released her grip and looked up at the clock. "Now you better get to your bus. You don't want to miss it."

Kimiko broke eye contact and closed her eyes. A few more tears streamed.

"Kim..."

Kimiko slowly pulled her hand away, returning it to a pocket. Silently, she turned to face

the door and exited without further words.

As Julie parked her car the next morning, she remembered her first day, bringing on a wave of nostalgia. It had only been a few months before, but she felt fundamentally changed. She remembered seeing the front courtyard's clock for the first time, the day's brisk wind's blowing the papers from her crate, the smell of fumes and ripe flora in the air, her insomniac grogginess, her naïve excitement. She wanted to go back in time and send a warning.

Julie's daze broke the moment the front doors slammed behind her. The security guard looked up from her magazine, ignoring Julie's wave. The main office felt eerily *off* somehow, and it took Julie a few seconds to notice that every head was engaged in some sort of surreptitious or not-so-surreptitious staring at her. She looked up at them, frowned, swiped her card at the check-in terminal, looked up again, turned to leave, then turned back once more and finally said, "God, *what?*"

Assistant Principal Gomez emerged from behind a bookcase, looking like she'd had a busy morning. She already had her sleeves rolled up, and the day hadn't even begun.

She said, "Julie. Hi. Good morning."

Julie frowned, scanned the faces watching her, and said, "Good morning."

"Would you sit down with me for a minute?"

Julie wondered whether they could hear her heart beating. "Sure. But, well, my class."

"Don't worry. Mr. Yi will be there to greet your class."

"Mr. Yi will..." Julie set her crate down on the counter and walked to A.P. Gomez.

"Okay."

Gomez shut the door behind them, hardly making a sound. She sat behind her desk and

closed her eyes.

“Julie,” she said, opening them. “It’s about your student, Kimiko.”

It felt like a fist was squeezing Julie’s intestines. She said, “What happened?”

“It’s awful. Just nauseating.”

“What *is* it, Tammy.”

“Kimiko’s mother took her to the hospital last night. She was in some kind of coma.”

“What?”

“And the doctors, they found some very troubling stuff. Bruising. *Down there*. And *tearing*.”

“Jesus.”

“The mom turned the dad in. Said she had no idea, but how could you not?”

“This isn’t...”

“And she called me this morning to tell me all this. Strange.”

“I should have seen.”

“Now, don’t start.”

“Kimiko is the texter.”

“Sorry?”

“The person sending vagina pictures. It’s her.”

“How...”

“I caught her yesterday and confiscated the phone. I was holding off on telling her parents.” The idea actually sounded ridiculous now that she had heard it aloud.

“You...why would you do that?”

“I felt sorry for her. She keeps getting into trouble. I wanted to give her the chance to

spend a few days reflecting and preparing...”

But the reasons didn't matter. The room felt like it was swirling. Gomez mildly went off on Julie about how she'd dealt with the phone, but Julie's attention was diverted by the volume of the beeps coming from the machines monitoring the child's bodily processes. She would set the vase of flowers down on the table beside the other gifts and weep. She would take the girl's hand and stroke it, holding it to her face, caressing. The incident would strengthen Julie's resolve to become a better teacher and instill in her the grit and toughness she'd always seemed to lack. Nothing, then, would impede her. The children would see it in her eyes, this spark or glow, and they'd know to listen. And so would she. She would pay closer attention, working each day to dissolve the barrier between herself and her students, watching not herself, but them—always them.

MUFFLER

After more than three months of negotiations, the sale of Rasmus Serigawa's voice was transacted on the 44th floor of Brickhouse Media's Lower East Side national headquarters on a high-skyed Tuesday afternoon. Rasmus had been seated in the conference room—the first he'd ever been tempted to describe as “grand”—nearly two hours with his lawyer Richard and over a dozen Brickhouse legal staffers and interns. He shook cramps from his hand as Richard pointed at more things to sign.

“And here, here, and here.”

Rasmus paused. Everything was kind of wobbling. “Could I have a banana or something? I'm feeling a little woozy.”

One of the Brickhouse lawyers dipped back in his chair and scowled at an intern standing by the door. The intern scooted out, flickering like a hologram.

Richard edged forward. “You alright there?”

“Yeah, fine. Just didn't sleep too good last night.”

“I see. Well, take your time.” Richard edged back.

A banana—what an obvious stall. He'd been so cool and businesslike about this whole thing up until last night, when a barrage of unexpected, nebulous last-minute thoughts had left him sleepless. He kept looking at the door like it was a crashing jetliner's escape hatch.

The primary moral crisis here arose out of one important fact: By any honest account, his voice had been a gift and was therefore, in a way, not really his to give away:

As a child—after contracting strep throat four times in three years—Rasmus had had a tonsillectomy, which at the time had been the most physically distressing and uncomfortable

experience of his life. He was tired and sluggish all the time, his throat felt like he'd swallowed bees, and it sounded all choked out and raspy when he spoke.

It was then that his grandmother Obaachan, who'd recently moved into his parents' home from Japan, gave him a scarf—she called it a muffler—that she had spent hours hand-knitting for the occasion of his suffering. Obaachan had been, and would continue to be for the next decade or so of Rasmus's life, a critical authority figure. She was a benefactor of his map and compass, provided his way of relating to others and seeing the world. She was the voice in his head.

The intern glided back in. "Here's your banana. I brought you a muffin and some pretzels, and here's some water." The intern set the items down on the opulent conference table, causing its glossy surface's reflections on the wall to shift and wobble.

"Thanks," Rasmus said, slightly embarrassed. He felt they were all watching him but could not bring himself to confirm this. He peeled the banana and ate half, took a sip of water.

"Thanks," he said again.

He scrawled his signature on more laser-jet lines. Richard continued to hover, pointing. Despite the fact that Richard had already marked all the documents with little red 'SIGN HERE' tabs, he still found it necessary to guide Rasmus through every signature. Rasmus rubbed his neck.

The muffler had been a huge hit for the young Rasmus. It was unbelievably comfortable and kept his neck warm, dry, and shielded from the wind. It was navy blue—his favorite color—and was adorned with intricate orange sea creatures. He wore it for weeks straight until his mother noticed the smell, removing it as he slept to give it a scrub in the sink.

Anyway, after Obaachan gave him the muffler, Rasmus's voice changed. And it wasn't just the tonsillectomy, either. Something else had happened to him, though it wasn't clear until

he returned to school. The change was gradual, but the other kids—and even his teacher—seemed to be going out of their ways to be kind to him. They grew interested in his opinions and having him around. Mid-year, the student responsible for making the morning PA announcements was, for mysterious reasons, asked to step down so that Rasmus could do it. And after that, the music teacher began pestering his mother to sign him up for chorus, which later became vocal lessons, competitions, etc. His grandmother was especially supportive of the music and never once missed a performance.

“OK—great.” Richard removed his reading specs and picked up a stack of freshly signed papers, which he tapped against the table. He opened an accordion file on his lap and laid out *another* manila folder.

He said, “Now, just to go over it once more. Brickhouse Media will remit half the total payment for your voice via wire transfer directly to the account you’ve designated, which you’ll see reflected in your balance by the end of the day. The other half’ll be remitted upon the surgery’s completion.”

“Sounds good,” Rasmus said, his throat closing on his words. He leaned forward to produce more signatures indicating he understood this.

Obaachan died the month before Rasmus graduated from high school, which had eradicated his interest in music and singing, though in college he ended up pursuing voice acting. He narrated a bunch of plays for on-campus productions and, by the time he graduated, had actually developed an impressive portfolio of commercial work. Chances are that if you owned a television or radio in the U.S. during the height of Rasmus’s voice-over career, you heard his voice many times.

The big bucks really started rolling in when ad agencies got wind of his voice's selling power. It became widely known that ad campaigns featuring his voice performed, on average, at their height, 23% better. He didn't have to audition for jobs anymore—employers were calling *him*.

For nearly a decade, he performed easy, non-time-consuming work in exchange for exorbitant fees. He'd made a living and then some. So why was he selling his voice?

It's just time to retire. I've gotten over the whole voice-acting thing, is what he told whoever'd ask. But this platitude concealed the true reason: the fact was Rasmus had, for as long as he could remember, felt alien in relation to his peers. He'd grown up in a suburb of a mid-size Midwestern city, where he was the only kid who looked like he did or, for that matter, had a name like his. This hadn't presented itself as a problem most of the time, but occasionally little frictions would crop up. He braced himself when meeting new kids, hoping his name wouldn't evoke the cruel reactions he'd learned it could. When he played "X-Men" or "Star Wars" with the other boys during recess, Rasmus could never be Wolverine or Cyclops or Luke or Han or any of his favorites, because he didn't "look right."

And yeah, maybe these instances seemed insignificant and harmless. After all, kids will be kids—they'll make fun of each other's names, they'll invent petty, annoying rules in the games they play. But the funny thing was that even as Rasmus's peers outgrew X-Men and Star Wars, they never seemed to outgrow the concept—unconsciously as it likely operated in their thinking; in fact, it probably happened *without* their thinking—that his name and skin signaled some unknowable thing that made him fundamentally different.

Yes, yes—but why his voice?

Well, the new voice had brought sea changes with it, of course. These changes even seemed like solutions to his problem, at first. The new voice had endowed him an unprecedented special power over other people, which, yes, did for some time give him the impression that he'd finally achieved some kind of culture-wide acceptance, which, yes, at first brought Rasmus huge joy.

But as he passed into adulthood, as he grew accustomed to and eventually bored by his power, a rift developed in his mind. He began suspecting peoples' fondness was for his *voice*, not *him*, which presented all kinds of ugly conclusions about Rasmus's place in the world.

A few years ago, as an experiment, he spent two weeks not speaking, just to see what, if anything, would happen. The result? He practically became invisible. And when during those weeks people *did* notice him, they certainly treated him differently. No free croissants at the coffee shop, no one letting him cut in line at the convenience store. Exactly zero women volunteered their phone numbers.

Rasmus etched his last signature on the fourth or fifth stack of documents, which Richard slid into the accordion file with the others. His voice was somewhere in there. He could almost feel it dissipate. He felt a mild sense of panic twitching just above his stomach.

"Just one more packet to sign, Rasmus." Richard leaned forward over his copy. "This document says you agree to undergo the voice extraction at a voxological specialist tomorrow, that you understand your appointment has been set for tomorrow, and that, if for whatever reason you change your mind between now and then, Brickhouse reserves the right to exact a breach-of-contract fee of a minimum of five-hundred thousand dollars."

Rasmus nodded, his pen hovering over the small lines. He didn't have to sign this. He could back out.

That morning, frazzled and thin-brained from a sleepless night, he told himself that if he began to doubt this decision, that he'd think about the incident that had finally pushed him to make it: About a year ago, Rasmus had attended the corporate Halloween party for FizzyPop, a dining-related smartphone app for whose advertising campaign Rasmus had provided voice work. FizzyPop's CEO Brandon Holm, while blackout-inebriated, had strong-armed Rasmus into standing onstage and singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas." It might not have been so bad had Mr. Holm not been so drunk and demanded three encores. Rasmus didn't know why he did it, but he could practically feel his self-regard withering away. He felt like a clown, those pale faces watching, each of them seeming now so different from his. He was standing on a stage but remembers feeling physically below. He finally walked off when someone shouted "Now with an Asian accent!"

Remembering this turned Rasmus's face hot. He shook his head as if to dislodge the memory and signed the day's final line, pressing so hard this time that the fountain pen he'd been using burst all over the sheet. They reprinted it, and he signed it, this time with no hesitation.

"How you doing?" Richard asked Rasmus out in the antechamber.

Rasmus slid his pea coat's top button into its corresponding slit. "Doing fine, I guess."

"No regrets?"

"Zero. It was a long time coming," he said as he wrapped the muffler around his neck.

"Good. Well, I've drawn up all the paperwork for your name change. Here." Richard handed him a black folder. "You picked a name yet?"

"Still working on it."

“Well, I’ve included instructions in that folder for when you do. Just a couple things for you to fill out, then you take it to a Social Security Office with a photo I.D. and you’re good to go.”

“Thanks, Richard. For everything. I’ll see you around.”

“Sure thing.”

Outside the lobby, Rasmus clicked around on his phone for directions to the Starbucks where he’d made plans to meet Cecelia, the girl he was seeing. It was one big block up, four small blocks over. He had time, so he decided to walk, plugging in his earbuds and hitting play on The Cure’s *The Head on the Door*, which he’d played nonstop the past week.

Rasmus had dragged his feet about the new-name decision. So much to consider. He liked John, Thomas, Gabriel, William, or Samuel for first names. They signaled masculine virility and strength. These were names that had at various times belonged to people important to Western civilization. They were names you said to girls at bars before shaking their hands, buying them drinks, and taking them home to fuck their brains out. Best of all, they were names so deeply imprinted in the cultural imagination that no one would ever pause or raise an eyebrow or crack jokes about them.

Last names? He liked Meriwether, Karnowski, Breitlberg, Fulton, Schenk, Byrne. Nothing too vanilla, of course, but nothing that might stand out like the name whose alienating different-ness he’d endured for thirty-one years.

“Rasmus Serigawa, Rasmus Serigawa,” he said, as if saying goodbye. He could not hear himself over the music gushing from the earbuds.

He arrived at the Starbucks early and drew out a list of names, crossing some off, uncrossing them again. It was overwhelming, and the more names he looked at, the less

significance any of them seemed to have. He closed his eyes and free-wrote whatever came to his mind, hoping maybe his thrumming subconscious would find a combination that'd fit in with some objective ideal arrangement.

Someone tapped his shoulder from behind. He pulled an earbud out and turned.

Cecelia was looking down at his paper. "Jackson, Wallace, Melvin, Terrence? Is that your shit-list? Have you finally snapped?"

"Ha-ha." Rasmus said, leaning into her cheek-kiss.

Cecilia sat beside him, typing something into her phone. "How are you? How did the meeting go?"

"Yeah, you know. It was a meeting. No hitches, etcetera."

"That's good." She glanced at her phone and placed her phone down.

"But I felt so nervous."

"Well, of course you did. It's kind of a huge thing."

"But it was supposed to be a relief, you know."

She picked up her phone. "Oh, you've just got some adjusting to do. Give it some time. Better to start thinking about how you're going to enjoy all that money."

"You're right," he said, though he felt the opposite.

She finished whatever she was typing and pointed at his brainstorm sheet. "So, what's up with this?"

"I'm trying to pick a new name."

"New name?" She kept looking at her phone, which kept chiming.

"I'm selling my voice and changing my name. I told you this."

"But why?"

“I told you last week,” he snapped.

She leaned back, looking startled. “Wow, sorry. I don’t remember that. I’m sorry.”

“Because you don’t listen. Because you’re always on your goddamn telephone.”

Her disengaged and clamped posture broke, and she turned to face him. Her voice softened. “I *said* I’m sorry, Razzie. Or, whatever your name will be. Let me look at the list?”

“Fine,” he said, sliding the sheet over.

“Jackson is kind of cool.” She peered, running her index finger along the entries.

“Seymour is a little dorky.” She laughed “Melvin? Really?”

He tried wrestling the sheet from her, but she was too quick. He felt like a disrobed patient in front of an absent, careless doctor, and was seized by an unexpected and horrible loneliness, suddenly aware of the disparities in his and Cecilia’s view of the occasion’s importance.

“Oh, I’m kidding,” she said, holding the sheet just beyond his reach. “One thing, though. These are all white-guy names.”

Rasmus groaned and reached for his phone. “Look, I’ve got to get to the Social Security office before it closes. Gonna have to cut this short.”

Cecilia frowned. “We just got here. Can’t you do it tomorrow? You haven’t even decided.”

“I’m doing the operation tomorrow, and then Decklan’s thing’s after. The costume party.”

“Fine. We’re still going to that, right?”

“Yes,” he said, turning to leave.

“Oh, and Razzie. Next time you come over to my place, I’ll patch that scarf up for you.

He looked down. Loose yarn dangled five or six inches from one of the muffler's ends. The fabric was warped around it, as if it'd gotten caught on something on the way over.

"That's nice. Thanks," he said, and stepped out.

He considered taking a cab but needed time to pick a name. He commenced listening to *Head on the Door* where he left off, and walked.

Cecilia's injured expression hovered in his mind, inducing a bout of unpleasant compunction. She was right—they *were* "white-guy names." It was precisely the point, but it embarrassed him to have it so blatantly stated. It'd long been a meek dream of his to have a non-eyebrow raising name, but Rasmus understood his facial features and skin tone betrayed an ethnicity no name could conceal. It'd actually be *less* conspicuous if he'd choose to go by Takeshi Yokoyama or Kunimasa Watanabe or Eiji Morimoto, or what the hell: Nguyen, Lee, Lin, Yang, and Fong would also do the trick. For this matter, Muhammed and Abulafia and Bakkali were also sound candidates, as were Juan-Carlo Vasquez or Raj Patel or Dancing Bear.

The contradictions seemed to multiply, and then there he was: Standing at the foot of the SSA office's front steps.

He hit pause on the album and, in a moment of sudden clarity, a name came to him.

"Robert Smith," he said aloud. It had a kind of stately ring to it. Maybe a bit on the generic-sounding side, but it was a name he felt comfortable with, and at the very least, he was certain it would draw no unwanted attention to itself.

"That's it," Rasmus muttered. Yes, yes, he thought. He fantasized about tomorrow's party. He fantasized about how few conversations he'd have about "where that name comes from," or not having to repeat himself several times during introductions ("wait, what was that? wait, one more time?") He smiled as the burden of the decision disintegrated in the air,

dissipating to nothing like a smoker's puff in a wind tunnel. He adjusted the muffler, which he just noticed had started to unravel at one end and pulled on the heavy wooden door.

Robert hung his jacket and muffler on the waiting room's coat rack. He checked in, found a seat, and withdrew from his pocket the new driver's license he'd picked up that morning. The DMV had reused the photo from the old license, but he swore his face looked different beside the new name.

The only other people in the room were a man and a boy seated at the opposite side. The boy was screaming at the top of his lungs; the dad had a hand over his face and was slumped so low in his chair his neck nearly touched the seat.

Robert studied the wall's many hangings. A majority of them were framed posters with affirming phrases like "you can do it." One was a large photo of a man Robert assumed to be Dr. Day and his team, all wide-stanced, arms folded, looking at the camera—which sat at an elevated position—in an either triumphant or arrogant manner. Several of the hangings assured patients of the physician's credentials and achievements.

Robert leaned over to read the framed Bugler piece about Dr. Day's work:

NEW YORK City's first voxological practice will open this month in Manhattan under the leadership of Dr. Wendell Day. Voxological surgery is an emerging field involving the removal, replacement, and modification of the human voice.

Dr. Day described his work: "We first scan the larynx, vocal cords, diaphragm, esophagus, and other organs of the human speech system in order to establish a

relationship between each organ's physical characteristics and the unique vocal qualities they lend themselves to produce.”

Voxological surgery is an unprecedented phenomenon in the world of medicine, as it was the first medical specialty to arise in direct response to commercial demand. To illustrate: the nation's first voxological research center at Mt. Sinai, where Dr. Day completed his fellowship, has received a majority of its funding from a subsidiary of Sony Corporation.

“People feel a little funny about it sometimes. I get into philosophical tiffs at cocktail parties and such,” Dr. Day said. “But ultimately I provide a needed service, and the field has established renown and integrity in the few years it's been around. We have checks and balances. We have peer review.”

Though a majority of voxological patients are in the entertainment industry—singers, actors, commentators—there have been other applications, including accent modification for foreign diplomats.

Dr. Day, one of the nation's leading practitioners of this specialty, described his holistic approach to the discipline: “The larynx's shape and surface are inscribed with the patterns of speech. These patterns, which are physical expressions of neurological function, actually shape the organs related to speech. So, voxology is a bit like archaeology in that you study the physical reality of a given subject—in this case, a person—and by this you can see how the subject lived, and what it thought, and what it believed.”

A nurse opened a door. “Ras...Rasmus...Sera-gowi...Segrega...Sag...”

Robert stood and approached her. “It’s Smith now, actually.”

“Rasmus?”

“Robert. But yes.”

She looked blankly at him. “Rasmus Seri—“

“OK. Yes. That’s me.”

She rolled her eyes “Right this way.”

She led him down a bright, carpeted corridor to an exam room. She barraged him with medical questions, then handed him a saran-wrapped taupe hospital gown before leaving him alone.

Someone tapped on the door—it immediately swung open, letting in a tall and angular man in a white coat. He plopped himself into an office chair. They exchanged formalities.

“So, let’s run over a few things,” Dr. Day said. “It’s mostly stuff we went over in our meeting last week. I’m just going to review it now for good measure.”

“Got it.”

“So, the operation will take roughly one hour to complete. We’ll place you under a general anesthetic and will conduct most of the operation using an endoscope and scanning equipment.”

“Got it.”

“The operation will be painless, but, as I’m sure you remember, the scanning process *will* alter your speech organs. You won’t sound *exactly* the same, and though I’ll do all I can to maintain the integrity of your voice, there’s always some deviation.”

“I understand.”

“Great, great. This is an outpatient procedure, so you should be out of here in no time. You have someone to pick you up?”

“No. I took the subway.”

“That should be fine, but please be aware that you’re not allowed to drive or operate heavy machinery for 24 hours.”

“No problem there.”

“Well, let’s get going then.”

“Razu-chan. What did you do?” a familiar voice asked.

Robert couldn’t open his eyes, but he knew the voice. Hearing it shot electricity through his body. His fingers and toes tingled. “Obaachan?”

“Did you get lost, Razu?”

“Lost? No, I know where I am. But Obaachan, what are you doing here? I thought you were...”

“You can change so much about you, Razu. Change your name and your voice. Even your face. You can change everything on the outside, Razu. But don’t forget about what’s inside. Inside can change too.”

“Do you hate me? Do you think I’m horrible for doing this? For changing my name?”

“Razu. This is a silly question. Please don’t ask again. My concern is for you. Are you so sure you want to erase yourself?”

“I’m not erasing. I’m making room for something newer, hopefully better.”

“Will always be new things. Things that seem better. Not always good to have them. Sometimes best be you. May not be perfect, but at least it’s you.”

“I was just...tired of feeling on the outside, Obaachan.”

“Maybe things not so great on the inside, either.”

“I *needed* to do this.”

He felt a hand brush his cheek. “Razu, no need to explain. Love not change.”

Another familiar voice—though in his post-op delirium he couldn’t immediately tell exactly whose it was—said, “Hey, are you crying?”

Robert opened his eyes. The room was a wet blur.

“You okay?”

He wiped at his eyes with his robe’s shoulder. Cecilia sat beside him.

Rasmus, confused, said, “You’re here. That’s nice.”

“I decided to meet you. And *man* does your voice sound different. I felt bad about how yesterday went. They let me in because I’m your emergency contact.”

“Oh.” Rasmus only half-heard what she was saying. The dream of Obaachan lingered like a fresh memory. His cheek’s skin tingled where the hand had touched it.

“I figured we could grab dinner, then head over to the party.”

“I’m not sure if I’m feeling like it anymore.”

“Wow, it’s so *weird*. Your voice.”

“It’s supposed to adjust. It’ll take a few weeks. But really, I think you should just go on.”

“Oh, come *on*. It’s *Halloween*. I have a feeling you’re going to love my costume,” she said, winking.

“I’m really feeling like shit. I think it’s the anesthesia.”

“Let’s just get some dinner. We’ll see.”

“Fine.”

Robert dressed himself, and the two of them left. He wrapped the muffler around his neck more tightly than usual.

Cecilia chose an Ethiopian restaurant a couple blocks—incidentally, Robert was sure— from where the party would be held. During dinner, nausea teetered between moderately severe and severe, and it only got worse when, against his better judgment, he let Cecilia order his food. He gagged at the myriad dishes as they arrived, which the waiter—justifiably appearing offended—noticed before basically slamming the last plate of curried lentils down on the table.

Rasmus leaned forward, rubbing his face in exhaustion. “I think I should probably get home and sleep.”

When Cecilia did not respond, Robert looked up to see the crown of her head. Her face was washed in the pallid glow of her phone’s screen’s light.

“D’you hear me?”

Nada.

“Cecilia!”

She jumped. “Sorry. What?”

“Can you not *hear* me or something?”

“No, sorry. I think I just need to get adjusted to your voice. It’s like...harder to hear or something.”

How depressing, though he was unsure why. Was this not what he had wanted?

Cecilia asked, “What’s wrong?”

Robert gave a weak smile. “I just need to go.”

Cecilia pouted, half-hyperbolically. “Text me tomorrow?”

“Sure. Hopefully I’ll feel better.”

Indeed, hopefully. He just needed to close his eyes, to not be awake, to let it all sink in. It’d be okay. It’d be okay.

“What will?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

When the waiter came by with the check, Robert apologized, putting on his best sincere face, speaking with his sincerest timbre, which had always worked—*always*—but which now only seemed to irritate the waiter further. Robert paid, leaving an exorbitant tip.

They peeked outside the restaurant and departed in opposite directions, the city growing veiled in its building’s early-evening shadows, street lamps and neon signs coming alight. None of it seemed to have anything to do with him.

Robert found a seat on the subway car and buried his head in his muffler. Measured, conscious breathing.

The nausea had subsided, but he still felt like someone had taken a melon-baller to his mind. He wanted to kill this unresolved feeling that some horrific epiphany lurked.

The subway doors closed. The PA *bing-bonged* and played a message: “Stand clear of the closing doors, please.”

Robert looked up, deeply freaked out to hear his—or, not his—voice saying this phrase he had never said. A Slavic-looking elderly woman sat across from him, staring blankly into his face.

He said, “God. That was quick,” with feigned glibness.

But it was disturbing. Where else would he hear his voice? Who else would use it? How many sets of grabby hands would it pass through? It didn't concern him anymore.

By the time the train reached the next stop, Robert understood that tonight he did not want to be alone.

Predictably, the party was over-crowded with people Robert did not know. Still. Better than being alone at his apartment. Not to mention Decklan's place—a \$10,000-a-month loft in Bedford-Stuyvesant—was huge, well furnished, and had roof access. Not to mention the costumes were surprisingly effective at diverting his thoughts from himself. There were worse places Robert could have been.

A band was setting up. He poured three fingers of vodka into a plastic cup and downed it. He refilled the cup with double the amount and wandered to find Cecilia.

He bumped into someone dressed as a *Chinaman*: complete with a too-small conical straw hat, a chin-length Fu-Manchu moustache, and a garish, and a clumsy imitation of a Chinese long shirt. Also, *eyeliner*. And was this actually man *squinting*? Robert felt his pulse rise. He sipped his drink.

The man spoke first. “Hey, Razz-o! It's me! Greg! I haven't seen you since we did that Tropicana commercial last month!” This had been Robert's final job as a voice actor.

“Oh, yeah. What's up.” The room slipped as the vodka mega-shot took hold.

Greg, visibly and olfactorily drunk, said, “I'm great! You get any good gigs lately?”

“Actually, I'm not doing voice work anymore.”

“Oh? Giving up the dream?”

“Something like that.”

A tinge of confusion muddled the Greg's grin. "So, what you been up to, Razz-o?"

"Well, for starters, that's actually not my name anymore. I changed it."

"Oh yeah?" The Chinaman smirked.

"No, seriously, I changed it. Today." How strange this was to hear aloud.

"So, what's your name now?"

"Robert. Robert Smith." He felt suddenly as if he were donning an item of clothing he wasn't quite sure he could pull off. Some part of him understood he was supposed feel vulnerable and self-conscious in this moment, but the booze was working.

The Chinaman's frown slowly broke into a grin of understanding. "Oh, I get it. So you're singing with the band tonight?"

"Excuse me?"

"Robert Smith? Like from The Cure? And there's a Cure cover band playing tonight, which you're..."

Robert felt his face twist.

The Chinaman said, "Oh." Then he said, "*Oh.*"

Robert emptied his cup into his mouth. "No, I'm not playing. Just a crazy coincidence." He felt embarrassed and so smiled, but this only seemed to intensify the embarrassment. *How* had he not realized?

"Dude, yeah, whatever. I should have known. It'd be weird for you to play in a Cure cover band anyway. Duh."

"Weird? How?"

"Yeah, you know. Because you're—you know. Nevermind"

"I see."

“Anyway.”

“Yeah, anyway. I should probably find my girlfriend.” He turned to leave.

“Oh good. Nice to hear you’re seeing someone new.”

Robert turned back around. “New?”

“Yeah, man.”

“Wait. What are you talking about?”

Greg rubbed his neck. “Wait. That girl you brought with you to the Tropicana gig last month—you’re not still with her?”

“I am. Why.”

“God,” he said. “*God.*”

“Greg, what is it?”

“No, I probably got it wrong, but I thought I saw her up on the roof macking on some dude about twenty minutes ago.”

Robert’s face went hot. Pushing through the party’s throng, he ran to the stairwell and found the roof access. He scanned—there were roughly a dozen people out there. He walked closer to the ledge to get a better look but saw her nowhere. As he turned back to the door, though, he saw a couple—a Dracula and a sexy cat—intensely kissing and fondling each other.

“Cecilia.”

No response.

He shouted. “Cecilia!”

Nothing, still.

He walked up to her and tapped her shoulder. Cecilia turned, wiping her mouth, her face soft, flushed, wet with desire. Her face broke in horror.

She said something then, but he did not know what, because he was already stumbling his way to the ground floor, going anywhere but this place. Some voice in his head reminded him that the alcohol was probably making everything in this moment worse, but this voice was quickly drowned out by a chorus of angry, injured, confused voices. He thought he heard Obaachan behind him and turned but saw no one. He walked into a tree, which scratched his face and caught on his coat and muffler. He yanked himself free, snapping the tree's branches in an incendiary rage, continuing his walk for three blocks until his throat began feeling cold. He clutched at his neck for the muffler. It was still there—or, some of it was.

Behind him trailed a single piece of yarn.

“No. No no no no no no no.” He grabbed the yarn, winding it around his fingers as he backtracked.

“Dammit, Obaachan,” he said. He had not said the word in years. Hearing it broke something in him. He began to sob. “I’m sorry. I messed this up. I can’t believe it.”

What had Obaachan said in his dream? Love not change? If only he could speak with her. *She* would hear him, even without the muffler. It seemed as if she were the only one. But she was gone.

He sat on a concrete stoop, the yarn in his hands. It wasn't a muffler anymore, like a cadaver isn't a person.

He felt sleepy and overpowered. It was as if she'd died again, and as Robert began to drift into a sleep right out there on the stoop, he began to understand how little any of this had to do with the muffler.

He lay down and shut his eyes.

It was day when he woke, and the yarn was no longer in his lap. Dazed, he stood and shuffled stiffly toward the subway. As he reached the end of the street, a crow cawed loudly from a tree.

Robert stepped back a few paces and looked directly above. What appeared to be all the yarn was up there, repurposed into a nest. He took the subway, walked the rest of the way home, and fell asleep in his bed.

D.I.Y.

The year Dad got sick, he worried about what would remain when he was gone. He worried about Mom and seriously doubted I'd be able to take care of her. He worried about the drinking, that my prospects were as grim as they seemed, that loser-ish way I'd spent my life absently perfecting would wind me up in a ditch somewhere.

I was working as a front-desk guy at the BWI La Quinta Inn, the job that'd financed the long-awaited exodus from my childhood home into the finished attic space of a two-bedroom house belonging to a slightly post-middle aged woman named Luanne.

Six months into my tenure here is when Dad's situation goes to shit. I'm deeply asleep at seven a.m. when Mom calls to tell me he's just taken a bad turn, and could I please come to the hospital. Her voice's shriller and more grating than usual because I'm hung over from the night before. I'm trying to listen to her thin voice as she says "It's happening" and asks me to please, please drive carefully but come now and quickly. I say OK and such, and I'm throwing on some clothes when I feel it: Last night's pizza's vindictive redux. All eight steaming, cheesy slices seem to be at work de-wallpapering the interior of my stomach in post-digestive rebellion. A bloated cramp swells behind my groin amid the abdominal whining.

So I waddle down the staircase toward the house's sole toilet, shortly finding even the slightest of leg movements yield discharge. I have to go so bad it feels spring-loaded or something. Effectively paralyzed waist-down, I hold the handrails and hand-walk my way down like a gymnast on parallel bars.

And Luanne, *of course*, is in the bathroom. This whole thing is looking real bad. I'm hunched and crossed and clamped, ass cheeks sweating liberally, and slowly I surrender to the slow-blooming epiphany that I'm just not going to make it.

I won't drag you through the details, but let us say I had cleaning up to do, which I do in the shower. My head's still throbbing despite the liter or so of water I sipped from the showerhead, but I'm ready to go in minutes.

The car's fuel gauge is right on the little hash mark at the E, which sadly is not so unusual for me. I pull up to the gas station's pump and pop the gas tank door. The air's so dry and cold it feels like someone's smashing light bulbs in my head. I reach for my wallet to prepay but this *oh shit* feeling knocks into me because I've left my wallet at home.

And I have no other choice so of course I drive back home, except now my key's not getting me in the door. I shake and yank at the handle for what feels like minutes. I backward-walk away from the house to get a view of the number over the awning, which is pointless, but I'm completely baffled. I insert the key into the handle for one more go when it occurs to me the handle's completely different than the one that was there yesterday. I have this surreal moment where it feels like I'm in a dream, but then I realize what it is I've done.

I squat on the porch step and play it over in my head: Luanne a week ago warning me she'd soon be changing her locks; Luanne three days ago reminding me to please, to ahead, grab the new key; Luanne last night reminding me for the third time to please take my key with me, she doesn't want me to get locked out, which I had only kind of half-acknowledged because I was already a liter of zinfandel in at that point.

I call Mom and recount. She sighs, patience long since beginning to wear, but sends a taxi anyway, and soon I'm en route.

But then there's some confusion about money at the hospital's drop-off loop where the cab parks, and the driver, whose name placard reads 'Garrison,' sits twisted and glaring through the bullet-proof looking window partition. Money—right. I grab my phone and click around for Mom's number when the screen stops responding to my thumb's frantic taps and swipes, the network provider's red-logoed splash-screen wiping laterally to black. The power button does as much as you'd expect it to do on a phone with a dead battery.

My lower viscera start churning again, and with everything that's going on I can't tell whether it's that lingering and nauseous weightlessness that comes with not knowing how things will end, or a supplementary round of wine shits. I keep telling Garrison to please let me go up and grab some cash real quick from my mother, she's up in room whatever, but this only seems to rankle him further. I can tell by his uneven breathing and bulging eyes and facial blood vessels that he's at level like *up-to-here* emotions-wise. I can tell he's eaten something heavy on garlic in the last several hours. And coffee. His breath has its own weirdly stark presence. In the last thirty seconds, his voice's volume and cadence have shifted to better match the look on his rage-twisted face. He sputters in rapid-fire clauses about police police police, says something about this being the third time *this week* and that this was why he had to build the special lock.

It's apparent I've run out of new things to say, so I repeat what I already have, which has little effect. The impasse begins feeling like some looped bad dream, and I can't even set my attention fully on the circumstances at hand because my thoughts keep gravitating to the subject of my father, who's dying, feet away.

I yank at the silver L-shaped interior handle, but it's locked. I look at Garrison with this *are-you-serious* look. He stares back with this *like-a-heart-attack-bitch* look. I'm really starting to lose it, both in terms of patience and bowel control. I tell him if he doesn't unlock the door or

hand me a bucket he can expect property values to seriously go off a cliff in here. Jiggling the handle does little more than raise his DEFCON level. By now it smells like his breath has fully *replaced* the air—I can *taste* it, dammit—which is something like bad to very bad news for my gastro situation. My bowels shift in a way that feels inevitable, like weather or tectonic movement.

And suddenly he shuts up. Just like that, mid-sentence, and then he's gurgling and wheezing, clutching his arm. His head's jerked down spastically so that his neck's skin gathers in rubbery folds at its slackest point. He's saying hospital hospital hospital.

I'm no medical guy, but it seriously looks like Garrison's about to eat it unless I intervene, which I don't know how I'm going to do considering all I can think about is relieving myself. He seems tenuously conscious, rigidly bent across the front seats so his body's upper half's stretched across the passenger seat.

I scan for options. He's been silent some seconds now. Froth spews at his mouth's pinched corners. His eyes clamp shut. I say hey buddy hello come on wake up Garrison. I grab at the door handle and realize again. My torso'll only fit a third of the way through the partition window, but I squeeze enough to reach his wrist and feel for a pulse, which I keep searching for without luck. My own pulse's rattling like a drum roll. My adrenaline's like *wow*. Time's appreciably slower. I can't reach his door-lock controls and hyperextend my shoulder trying.

Wrapping my scarf around my face to protect it from shards, I start pounding my boots against my door's window. It doesn't even crack at first, but I kick with increasing strength, the abdominal pressure mounting with each blow. Finally, the pane shatters and my feet follow their course through the window.

I assume it was a combo of my body's straightening-out motion and the general exertion that did it, but anyway, my gastro problem solved itself right there. I look out the window and see several bewildered pedestrians. I tell them don't look at me, there's a hospital *right there*, go *get* someone, this man is having a heart attack. Most scowl and walk on. Others keep staring.

I feel weirdly heroic with the authoritative shouting and all. They don't, after all, know what's just happened to my pants.

Thank God the door's outer handle works. I step out and stand with my back to the cab. I consider abandoning the scene and running straight to Dad's room, but the thought of facing him soiled pants reeking like shit deters me.

Garrison's pants look fresh enough. The man hasn't budged, so it's doubtful he'll miss them. His hand falls limply out when I open the passenger door to set him upright again amid much squishing and sloshing. A crowd has gathered at the hospital's entrance, yet still no one's called for help. I'm suddenly self-conscious that it's going to look really incriminating if I just start taking this guy's pants off, so as I unclasp his belt buckle I assure the now-murmuring onlookers that this man is experiencing deep-vein thrombosis, that I must gain access to his thigh, that don't worry, this is all approved medical procedure.

First the shoes, which when I pull them from his feet make the same noise Scotch Tape makes when it's peeled from a surface. Removing the pants is trickier—the guy must've weighed a good two-fifty—but after some deeply uncomfortable shifting and lifting, I get the damn things off. I fold them up, tuck them under my arm, and enter through the hospital's doors.

I mention Garrison to the personnel bustling about the hospital lobby's front desk and head straight for the bathroom, where I toss the soiled pants and clean up best I can. On my way out, I shrug apologetically at the man waiting for the horrible thing he's about to experience.

The attendant at the info desk takes forever to find my father's room. While I'm waiting, a crash team wheels Garrison by on a stretcher. The outside scene appears to have escalated. There's at least fifty people out there. A giraffe-looking guy in a jogging suit speaks to a police officer.

I'm beginning to feel nervous. I ask the info attendant if there's a problem, but he keeps giving me vague non-responses like "Well, let's see if" and "Now if we just" without looking away from the screen, using a tone of voice that seriously suggests he's not paying attention.

Giraffe-guy is now staring directly at me, making a pants-removing gesture. The officer also stares.

I'm pretty much sprinting for the elevator the moment the attendant tells me it's nine-oh-seven, but a man barks domineeringly from behind. All I'm thinking is that I want to see Dad before he dies. I'm supplicating to some faceless listener, saying please, please.

"Excuse me, sir," the man's voice keeps repeating. I continue on, pretending I haven't noticed, though his heels' pounding indicates he's closing the distance between us. A hand taps my shoulder.

I imagine the officer would not have been able to prove the pants weren't mine, but I'd forgotten to remove Garrison's wallet, so it looked really bad when he asked to see my I.D. I can't even blame him for arresting me, for not knowing it wasn't him I was talking to when I said please, please.

Some hours later I'm in a concrete cell—where I'm told I'll spend the night—reclined on an austere, over-firm cot, trying not to think. I've repeatedly begged to use the phone to no useful end, which leaves me feeling stranded and helpless. I could really use someone to talk to.

However shitty I feel over missing Dad—who I hope by some miracle is still alive—today is infinitely compounded by the fact that it’s completely my fault. I feel trapped in my own body. Fragmented thoughts bulldoze around in my head. The more caustic ones are like little suns too painful to look straight at.

I can’t stand myself. I’m trying not to think about what being locked up in here will mean with respect to Dad. Time nurses minutes from some out-of-view clock until I nod off, nebulous memories floating and sinking to the surface of my consciousness.

I start feeling the little body tremors and sweats I get when it’s been awhile since my last beer. I can’t trust a thought in my head, which I know because I can’t stop thinking of killing myself. Too much in too many directions at once. I roll onto my other side and curl up, groping for sleep.

And this night, where I am half-alive, I dream—hallucinate, maybe—about a day at my childhood home, back when I was twelve or thirteen, logging my sixth or seventh hour that day of the *The Sims* at the computer Mom and Dad had been kind and permissive—if naïve—enough to purchase and allow me to use alone in my room. If you’re not familiar with the mechanics of the game, it doesn’t matter. Let it suffice to say I had found a fun and addictive way to waste time.

So, on this particular day—it was a weekend or summer early afternoon—I as usual couldn’t have given two shits about my family and what they were up to, as my relationship to the game had long since become compulsive, and I had effectively stopped caring about everything else. Like I said, it was my sixth or seventh straight hour.

Then Dad taps on my doorjamb and asks, “Do you want to learn to change the oil on the truck?”

I tell him, “No, Dad. Think I’ll pass.”

“Why not?”

I can just see the little bead of drool gathering at my mouth’s sagging corner, the monitor’s pale glare on my eyes glossed with inertia.

I reminded him: “There’s people who do that, Dad. I mean it’s their whole job.”

He says nothing for a while, which I don’t notice immediately. But then the room’s occupied by his silence—filled, even—which is shortly palpable to whatever reptilian part of me’s responsible for the feeling of being watched. Without diverting my gaze, I swivel my chair forty-five degrees. Just enough to see him from the corner of my eye haunting the doorway. I swivel back, relatively sure he’s just going to leave me alone when he gets how important this is to me. It was only a matter of us reverting to standard operating procedure, of him walking away and both of us pretending we’ll do this some other time, because that’s how I thought about things before I knew there wasn’t, after all, so much time.

But on this particular day he didn’t just walk off.

He stood there long enough for me to feel his standing, and finally he said, “If you spend your whole life letting other people do things for you, you’re going to spend your entire life knowing how to do nothing.”

He walked off. He only said it once, but the sentence has changed the barometric pressure of the air around my head. The words swirl around the room like some shoddy CG eddy. I commence play, but now there’s a small hole in the screen’s corner where the game clock used to be. That’s odd, I’m thinking. Outside the window there’s the metal clatter of an aluminum pan tossed on concrete. I peek through the blinds. Dad’s out there, and my brother has decided to join him. The two walk to the Toyota pickup. My brother’s imitating the stance Dad makes when he’s

thinking about something. I say, “Whatever,” though I’m choked by jealousy. The tiny hole in the screen’s corner is now hissing pneumatically. I can’t tell if air is coming in or out. I place a sheet of paper over it, but immediately an identical hole forms in the paper. I ignore it and keep playing, but I’m not even enjoying anymore. The hissing grows louder. Its quality has changed. It’s not a steady stream of noise anymore, but a series of rapid clicks and whooshes. I swivel in my chair, because I can still feel Dad standing there, even though I know he’s outside. There’s a black space in the shape of his body where he’d been standing. The monitor’s hole’s growth makes no sense—it seems to have expanded past the physical end of the monitor’s frame’s plastic. The noise the hissing’s been changing to has begun making the discernible sounds and patterns of human speech. I try to check outside again, but the blinds won’t move. So much sunlight’s pouring into the room, and I can hardly see. I keep saying, “Whatever” but no sound comes. I keep looking to the screen because I’m sure I’ll be able to squeeze out of it just a few more little moments of pleasure, but the screen’s not even there, it’s just a void in space. I can tell what the hiss has been saying, all along, and it’s my name in his voice.

I wake sweat-drenched, panting, and for a few moments swear I can hear the echo. Not in my head, but in my ears. And the heavy reality of where I actually am right now comes down over me. I play the memory over and over in my head like an old favorite tape. I’m in the weeds with death, and in this kind of skinless moment my entire being is warped around one regret: I should have just gone out and changed the fucking oil with him.

Maybe it’d’ve changed the course of my life. Maybe I’d own a chain of auto repair shops or restaurants or a bike shop. I’d own a house. I’d have a wife and family. I’d have control. It’d all be so *substantial*. If I’d changed the oil, if I’d done it myself, who knows what else I could have done?

I shiver and fidget under a flannel tarp, searching for a comfortable position that just isn't there, when—just like that—I can't see or hear him. He's just gone.

Citing a shortage of cell space, the cops let me go at about five the next morning. They still won't let me use the phone, and I'm of course still without money, so I figure I'll call Mom collect. Pathetic.

Pre-rush-hour downtown seems to hold its breath. Sparse traffic, a handful of pedestrians, apartment windows yellow rectangles in the dim blue sky. The harbor—the only place nearby I've seen a payphone—is a half-hour away. I walk fast, thinking maybe I can outpace the thoughts about Dad. Can't doctors be wrong about these things? Maybe he survived the night?

I head to the first payphone I see, but I'm intercepted by this haggard guy in a threadbare pinstripe suit jacket asking for two dollars. I tell him I'm sorry, that I have nothing to give him.

He hobbles off with no response, leaving my words to hang in the air like a mission statement on a banner. I have nothing to give—him, anybody. I look back to the payphone, nauseated at the prospect of asking again for help, of another collect call, cab ride, can't-make-rent cash infusion.

My body won't take another step toward the phone. The part of me that's tired and aching and depressed compels me: Come on, pick up the phone. But some new emerging force makes this impossible. I need to get home, but I need to do it myself.

That's when I learned it was an actual thing. It was on a poster taped to the payphone: "Do-It-Yourself Club." The club's description inspired me—a whole group of people dedicated to doing it themselves!

I think about him standing in the doorway, how I was always looking at him from the corner of my eye. I know I'm getting home, and I know I'll be doing it myself. Even if I have to walk.

Which it turns out I do. No one picks up a hitchhiker, and what else was there?

It's three in the afternoon by the time I get home. Luanne's not back from work yet, and of course I still don't have the key. I check the house's door and windows, hoping futilely one's unlocked.

Not a problem. It's DIY-time. I could call a locksmith or wait around for Luanne to get home, or I could solve this problem myself. I pick up the only suitable looking object in the yard—a battered garden gnome—and heave it through the large-paned front window.

It shatters; glass is everywhere. Not a problem. I clean that mess right up, DIY-style.

Back in my room, I plug my phone in to charge. Mom's sobbing when I call her.

"He's gone," she says.

We feel the white-hot silence.

She says, "Where were you? He wondered."

Some part of me wants to explain or excuse, wants her to know the night I've just had. Sentences form in my head. I practice each internally, but they all seem false: I spent the night in jail! I've had a reality-altering epiphany about the path my habits have me on! I feel so terrible, but it's all going to be different from now on!

"Hello?" she says.

"I'm sorry," I say, which feels like the wrong thing, but I know words now can only fail.

She sighs.

I tell her, “I’ll probably spend the rest of my life regretting this.”

“But where were you?”

Yesterday’s events flash through my head. It’s clear the answer’s too ridiculous sounding to recount. It seems made up, an excuse, though this doesn’t change that I want to tell her. Some part of me’s sure it’ll win her sympathy and make her understand. But the real underlying truth amounts to the circumstances that culminated in that absurd day: it’s been years since I’ve fallen asleep without some kind of help; I get my meals through fast-food windows; I’m incapable of making or keeping plans. My world ends at my nose’s tip.

It’s all so depressingly not worth telling, so I say, “I can’t talk about it right now,” which feels cryptic in a manipulative kind of way, like I’m shifting blame to her for pressing me to talk about some terrible thing. It makes me feel shitty, but it works.

She sighs. “Fine. Well, I’m planning the funeral. It’ll be next week.”

“Where?”

“Wamego. He said it’s what he wanted.”

There’s a nervous edge to her voice. She’s half-expecting me to gripe. Wamego, Kansas is Dad’s hometown. Mom and I both know well I’ve never liked the place, that I’ve applied my knack for complaint to ruining just about every trip we’ve taken there. Her voice is taut, and I’m hyper-aware of the vast disparity between the new self I’m developing and the one she’s used to seeing. It reminds me I’m still a piece of garbage until I make moves to change this, that it takes time for action and image to coalesce.

I say, “Oh? Kansas? Kansas!”

This flops—she sighs. “Yes, Kansas. Please don’t make a fuss.”

“Fuss?”

“Don’t be coy. Just show up, please, if you could.”

“Oh, I’ll show up.”

“Without making any kind of *deal* about it. Just be there.”

What a depressing conversation. It’s like staring into a fitting-room mirror post-holiday and feeling that final levee of denial break at the knowing: you have become this.

Mom says, “Though it’d be nice if you said something. You children should say something.”

I say, “Of course. Sure.”

“It’d be nice. Thank you.”

In my head, there’s a pounding: DIY...DIY...

I say, “There’s nothing else I can do, though? There’s like a million little things you’ll have to handle. Let me do something. I want to help.”

“It’s fine. My sisters are helping.”

“I could pick up catering? I could pick up flowers? I could fly in a couple days early?” I feel DIY surging through my head, heart.

She says, “By the way, can you manage your fare? Let me help. I’m getting first-class tickets for Terry and Sheila. Let me buy yours, too.”

This is so difficult to turn down I’m having trouble believing what I’m saying: “I can’t let you do that, Mom. I want to...”

I search for the right arrangement of words and find: “Be different.”

On her end, silence.

I say, “From now on. Different. Better.”

“Well. OK?” Her tone doesn’t say whether she’s skeptical or perplexed or both.

“Let me do the flowers. Come on.”

“Right, OK. Fine. That means you have to be here a day early. Which means you need to be in town Friday morning. I’ll email you details.”

Some kind of joy fills me. A kind of hot, interminable light funnels into the empty spots in my head and body. All I can think: DIY! I have not felt this strongly about anything for as long as I can remember, and it leaves me feeling exhilarated and vaguely uncomfortable. The logics of DIY feel large and celestial, a thing with gravity pulling my long-adrift body into orbit.

I feel warm as I hang up with Mom. The feeling stays with me as I turn on the shower to wash yesterday off of me, even as awful feelings about Dad’s death pool at the edges of my mind. I mitigate these thoughts by believing, as I’ve believed many times in the past, that if I could be different and better now, all the squandered time and opportunity might be retroactively imbued with meaning, transformed in the reflection of the present and future. And in the dull heat of this hope, I’m convinced this new way will somehow vindicate that I missed Dad’s dying.

After showering, I tidy my room (because how can you take care of anything else if you can’t take care of yourself?), then head back downstairs to have a look at that empty window frame. I find a tape measure in Luanne’s junk drawer and jot down measurements. I Google instructions on window repair, bookmark a page on someone’s DIY site, and head for the hardware store.

I cringe at the register as I hand over my bankcard and watch the purchase tear a fat hunk out of my checking account.

The pane’s 6x4 and wrapped in this wood-girder-reinforced cardboard packaging that makes it hard to handle and impossible to fit in my car, so I mount it to the roof. The store

employee asks me whether I've done this before. She follows me as I wheel the clumsy and hard-to-control shopping truck out into the parking lot. We lift the box up onto my car's roof's little plastic supports. I begin to tie the thing down, which is a two-person job, but she's not helping as she's busy reminding me of their home delivery service, that it's more typical for customers to let professionals handle this kind of installation, that it's actually a lot harder than you probably imagine.

Frustrated, I finish the knot I'm tying and say, "Did you ever stop to consider that if we don't do things ourselves, we end up just *ambling* through life, knowing how to do absolutely *nothing*?"

Her face looks worried, almost scared. The lack of inspiration is frustrating.

En route, the cardboard shifts around on the roof. It makes me nervous, but it's worth it when I get home, safe. The actual task of installing the pane is, actually, much harder than I'd thought. I'm still working to clear out the last of the old window's shards when Luanne pulls into the driveway. She bursts from her car and runs to me, screaming, demanding explanation.

I watch her, silent and removed, until she calms. I explain about the window and why I need to fix it myself. She isn't moved.

"Absolutely not," she says.

"But this is important."

"It's important you not cause any more damage."

"Luanne, I can do this."

"This is my home, Victor."

"Look, if I can't do it, then I'll call the window guy myself. But I'm telling you, I can."

"What are you not understanding?"

“Don’t you understand the whole point is I do it myself?”

“Stop it!”

We’re both yelling. She extends her palms frontward and emits something like a scream. I give up, backing away. Together, we cover the empty window frame with a tarp from her backyard shed, affixing it with duct tape. She books an appointment with a window guy for the next day.

The whole thing’s flustering, but I have to get to work. My shift’s not for an hour, but an early arrival is in keeping with the spirit of these new times. I run to my room and slip my button-front work shirt over my head. I snap the magnetic clasp of my La Quinta Inns & Suites Concierge nametag onto the shirt’s breast pocket.

I get in my car, anticipating the tremendous challenge my imminent shift promises to be. This kind of job puts go-getters like me in a tough spot because it curtails your ability to do things yourself. When all you do is sit behind a desk and wait for people to ask you for stuff, it starts to feel after awhile like you have little control over your situation.

Historically, I’ve handled this boredom by dousing it. I’d bring a box of wine or a flask with 151, or something. So now, naturally, I consider picking something up. But something about it feels wrong, self-betraying. Hitting the onramp, I begin to re-evaluate my entire relationship to alcohol. How was it affecting me? There were the muted feelings, the diminished motivation and drive, the gaps in memory, the arbitrary and overabundant feelings. The ubiquitous fog; the decaying capacity for human contact. Not to mention that I’d soiled myself twice and missed the last chance to see my father, all in a day, because of drinking. This doesn’t quiet the urge, but it gets me safely to work without a stop. The DIY paradigm doesn’t accommodate intoxication. Somehow this protects me.

Khaled's on shift. He waves from the desk, seems confused that I'm early. I tell him to go ahead and take off early—I'll cover the last hour of his shift, no problem. He seems pleased.

I organize the front desk's materials, refill the business-center printer's paper tray, restock pen and notepad receptacles, straighten the lobby's furniture, vacuum carpets, polish all polishable surfaces, but soon there's nothing left for me to do. My scalp starts to tingle and sweat. I return to the desk and watch the closed-circuit system monitor, twelve little wobbling panes monitoring static, silent hallways, rooms, elevators. I stand watching with my arms crossed, sweating hailstones. My fingernails click on the counter's polished surface. I stretch, pace, step out the front entrance's automatic sliding doors and to watch the distant traffic. I idle and hum. Dark, webbish splotches spontaneously form on my shirt's fabric. The outside air's humid, warm, and faintly chemical-smelling. I'm sparring with this lonesome feeling: It's the hour, the place, the circumstances. Some tide's receding. I feel like a two-liter bottle someone's emptying onto the sidewalk. I keep forgetting not to think about fucking up. My hands jitter.

Voices through unsupervised back channels in my head have begun debating whether I should just go ahead to the liquor store right now, in case, for later, and that I'll only have to leave the desk unmanned for like ten minutes, when the phone rings. I head back inside to answer it.

“Front desk? How can I serve you?”

It's a woman's voice—a throaty, worldly voice that says, “Hello. It's Room 445.”

“Hello,” I say. “Can I do something for you?” I dab a paper towel on my soaked shirt, my torso's skin clammy and prune-like in the lobby's over-conditioned air.

“Yeah, can I get a grilled cheese sandwich?”

I wince. “I’m sorry, but we’re a limited-service hotel chain and don’t have the facilities, sorry.”

“That’s too bad,” she says.

I apologize once more and hang up, shuddering, probably, because I’m so agitated and disappointed. I wipe the sweat that’s gathering by my eye sockets and look to the lobby’s opposite side where in the morning guests drink coffee, make toast, cook waffles, microwave packaged sausage sandwiches, empty tiny boxes of cereal into weightless Styrofoam bowls. Room 445 *could* sleep hungry tonight, but fuck *that*. I’m thinking: *grilled cheese; grilled cheese; hmm*, when it occurs to me I have access to all the ingredients in one form or another.

In the quasi-kitchen, where in the morning Olive mixes the orange juice concentrate and feeds the waffle batter into its dispenser, I grab two slices of white bread, carve the cheese off several of the frozen sausage sandwiches, empty onto the bread the contents of two of those mini packets of butter with the little corner plastic tab that snaps off to ease removal of its peel-away foil top. I cook it in the waffle iron.

I have to knock at 445’s door twice. A confused-looking woman opens the door. I smile wider—thinking this will help her unease—and slowly extend the sandwich to her. She looks at the space to my left and right, like she’s not sure we’re alone. She takes it and seems to regard it tentatively, as if I’ve asked her to hold it while I tie my shoe. She has the kind of smile people have when opening a birthday present they hate.

I wipe the sweat from my face and say, “We do have sandwiches after all.” She thanks me and closes the door.

I walk from her door down the hall toward the pool, pockets of dense heat radiating in my skull. It's a kind of high. A DIY-high. I wash my face in the pool bathroom, where my reflection grins, looking like some other person. I'm improving the world one hotel room at a time.

The thought of returning to the desk fucks my mood, so I make rounds. I check the pool, the vending and laundry areas, the utility closets, the little outdoor pavilion area, the patio with the barbecue grills. Everything's quiet and dim and outer-space empty.

But something looks off as I return to the lobby. I run to the sliding doors, which when they open puke out fat billows of opaque smoke. An alarm I assume to be the fire alarm begins to cry. I remove my shirt, tying it around the breathing parts of my face as I dart into the lobby, where the waffle iron and surrounding equipment swim in flame. I head toward the guest rooms' halls, where sleepy-looking heads have begun to emerge rankled from doors. I run down each hall, screaming and banging on all doors to ensure we all make it out of here alive.

My boss—a thickheaded, myopic automaton—can't seem to comprehend my heroism. Forget I'd successfully addressed a large-scale emergency and evacuated every last one of the hotel's guests. He's pissed. A fireman emerges from the building with the warped, smoking remains of a waffle iron dangling from his gloved hand.

"I think that's our culprit," he says.

My boss looks at me—doesn't even give me a chance to explain—and shit-cans me right there.

Driving back from work that night, reeking of fire, I couldn't feel down. How could I? DIY put me in control, gave me a reason.

It was morning, but it was still dark. I didn't feel like going home. I drove to the harbor. Minutiae trickled into my head. I thought about money and started to worry. I phone-checked my checking account and found I had barely enough saved to make it to Kansas for Dad's funeral.

I pocketed the phone and slammed my head back against the headrest, anxious not to know what I'd be returning home to.

"DIY. DIY. DIY," I said aloud, though I wasn't sure why I was saying it.

I felt hungry. I dug through the cup holders and map pockets for loose change I used to buy a coffee and a breakfast sandwich from a deli. I sat on the harbor wall eating my sandwich, intermittently sipping the too-hot coffee. I burnt my tongue, but the sunrise was nice, and for no particular reason other than what you might call pure faith, I felt unimpeachably confident that I would get through all this.

The next day, I purchased a bus ticket for a redeye. A thirty-hour trip, the itinerary said.

My mind keeps vacillating on the refusal of Mom's first-class-ticket offer—I mean, *first-class*—but no. I spend the day packing and board the bus at midnight, expecting to arrive at six a.m. the next day. Dad's funeral will be the following day, so I should have plenty of time to pick up the flowers and help Mom with whatever.

The bus ride's a bus ride, at least initially. Bouts of boredom and claustrophobia knot up from time to time, but I try not to complain too much in my head, even when the shaking and sweating become noticeable, drawing dubious looks from my neighbors. We make our second and final transfer in western Illinois, at the journey's twenty-four hour point. I spend the fifteen-minute break waiting outside the bus I'll soon board, addled, weirdly, by both exhaustion and restlessness. I feel like I'm standing atop some high and narrow platform. I pace figure-eights

across the lot in the miasma of diesel fumes, a cluster of city lights glowing dull at the horizon miles beyond the crops.

I bump shoulders with some guy. I'm all loopy and diminished from lack of sleep, so the clash nearly knocks me over. No *excuse me*, or anything, just keeps walking. He's wearing a driver's cap. He's a driver. He blows a snot rocket into his hand and wipes it on the doorframe of the bus I've been waiting on, and boards. He's *our* driver.

The behavior only gets worse. He smokes out the window, listens to conservative talk radio at a disconcerting level, never seems to drive faster than ten MPH below the speed limit, and stops the bus pretty much whenever he feels like it, which at one point results in a forty-five minute stop at a Pottery Barn near the interstate. He cuts in line at rest area bathrooms and, outside a Roy Rogers, hustles me for a tip. Whenever the passengers re-board the bus, he sits in his driver's seat facing the door, staring predatorily, mumbling slurs as we embark.

Two of the bus's braver women confront him at one of the stops. He responds by unloading their bags from the bus's belly.

We're already four hours behind schedule when the driver makes a *fourth* Cinnabon stop, which just does it for me. This guy's worn my patience to zero, and I'm thinking something's got to be done, that the lateness he's causing's completely unacceptable.

I'm thinking I can't fuck up again. I imagine Mom peeking at her watch as the pastor or whoever drools rote phrases over a casket. She'd wonder, but she wouldn't.

The intercom crackles alive: "Folks, I'm-a get Bon on. See y'all in 15-20 or whatever."

My fellow passengers' faces signal morale has bottomed out. No one will challenge him. I guess it's hard to forget that image of the two women through the rear window.

But watching the driver swagger across the asphalt, I'm thinking there's got to be something I can do.

I follow him. I've been watching him guzzle his coffee and figure correctly he's probably toilet-bound.

He steps into a stall. His belt buckle jangles and smacks the hard tile floor with a plunk. A couple guys finish pissing at the urinals. I lock the door behind them and walk over to the driver's stall, slowly. I tap on it.

He doesn't answer, so I tap again.

"What?" He seems confused.

I tap again.

"What the," he mumbles. His belt jangles. "Who's there?"

I draw a leg deep into my chest and kick the door in. He squeals, wagging his hands in front of his face, but I've already got him by the shirtfront. The struggle's intense but brief—thankfully the guy's way out of shape and can't maneuver to defend himself. I pull him toward me, smashing the crown of my head into his nose. He goes limp, spewing blood. I leave him on the floor curled up, half-nude, unconscious, but still breathing, and slip on his uniform.

I settle into the driver's seat and acclimate myself to the buttons and levers. I pick up the little rectangular PA mic and tell the passengers the previous driver had been relieved of his duties, that this was standard operating procedure. They sit idly, unresponsive with looks of capitulation on their faces. I can't tell whether they can believe me.

The first hour, I keep the *eHow* explanation of commercial vehicle controls open on my phone, but after a jerky few miles, I'm confident and have us flying down I-70.

Finally, a sign reading *Welcome to Wamego*. I realize anyone could be waiting for me at the station authorities-wise, so I stop the bus about a quarter-mile down the road from the station. I doff my hat to the passengers, grab my luggage from the cargo bay, and ditch the uniform in a Denny's bathroom.

I take a cab to the pancake house where I'm supposed to meet up with Mom and several aunts for brunch. The aunts keep asking about my "life," whether I've got a "girlfriend," what kind of "job" I'm working. Banal chitchat. Most infuriating.

Finally, Aunt A asks what are my "plans" for the future, which is too irritating for me to even pretend to answer, so I ask, "Right—so what time should I pick up the flowers?"

Aunt A seems affronted, but who cares. Mom's looking down at the tablecloth.

I say, "Remember? I'm doing the flowers?"

Aunt C tells me, "Oh, it's fine, sweetie. Don't worry about it. I already told your mom I'd take care of it."

Aunt B says "Don't worry about it."

Aunt A says, "It's fine. It's fine. It's all taken care of."

Aunt C says, "You should enjoy the town for a night. Your cousins'll be around shortly. You all should catch up, get some drinks or something.

This is vexing, but I'm sure they can be convinced.

I look to Mom, "But I came here early. The whole point was to help."

Mom says, "I wasn't sure you'd be here."

My stomach's floor caves. I don't know what to say, so I say, "But I'm here to help."

The aunts look around at each other, as if the solution to this tension is inscribed on the others' faces.

Mom says, "How are you feeling? You don't look well."

Aunt B says, "You seem a bit pale. Have you been sleeping?"

Aunt D says, "Ought to check in your room, maybe, huh. Get some rest. Big day tomorrow."

Everyone else nods.

They must be mocking me. They seem to consider me incapable, helpless, dependent. Mom seems worried, her forehead bunched in creases. The whole bus hijacking thing keeps cropping up in my mind with accompanying waves of anxious nausea. Only reason I'd done it was to get here in time so I could *do something* to help. Fuck's sake. My face gets hot. I'm so embarrassed I can't even taste my pancakes.

My head feels heavy. I beckon for the check and pay for everyone's meals. Who's paying this bill? That's right—DIY, fuckers.

I sign the check without looking, drop the pen, and exit, bags in tow.

It's a ten-minute walk to the Holiday Inn, where at check-in there's some confusion about payment. I tell them to swipe the card again, that this doesn't make sense, no, try it one more time, when my phone's banking app tells me brunch had cost nearly a hundred dollars, that I've got thirty-seven dollars left.

So, I sink my travel-weary body into a stain-covered couch in the lobby, deliberating. I'm not as panicked, oddly, as I usually am when I have this little money in my bank account so far from the next paycheck.

The staff hectors me, emerging every few minutes or so to ask whether I'd like to check in or perhaps seek accommodations elsewhere. I remember a nice-looking park across the street from the hotel in the town center. It's about the size of a baseball infield and has a gazebo and playground. I sit on a bench there, feeling ridiculous with all that luggage, and make the mistake of closing my eyes, which causes me mind to flutter back to the bus. It then occurs to me I won't be able to pay my return fare.

This must be when DIY is put to the real test. I can't call for help, not now at this crucial, decisive moment that will determine everything.

The Kansas autumn is arid but temperate. The sun's low; everywhere smells like dead leaves, and I feel this as a mild but insistent pain in my whole body. I wipe sweat droplets from my pulsing temple and slump forward, elbows on knees, face in hands. I couldn't even get the damn flowers. I feel like I'm missing a part of myself.

It's too quiet. I need something to fill my ears, so I mutter under my breath—*DIY, DIY*—like I'm invoking some spirit or god. It seems corny, but I feel a vague smoldering hope it'll occupy and accompany me the way it did before. But there's nothing. The air swallows me.

I'm wary of all the relatives that'll be swarming about and don't want to be found, so I scope for spots to crash. There's alleyways, park benches, dumpsters, utility grates—all satisfactory enough, but then I'm walking over to the gazebo. It's a kind of stage, raised three feet or so above ground level. On the side there's a door leading to a crawlspace. I peek in. It's dark, but I can see the floor's dirt and it's empty aside from some electric apparatus in the center. Perfect.

I shut the door behind me. The buzzing electric thing's producing heat, which feels lucky, because despite all the sweat I'm shivering it feels so cold. I pull a sweater from my bag, pull it over my torso, and curl up by the generator, falling asleep to its mechanical hum.

I wake sweat-soaked. I peek outside but quickly draw my head back in. There are several police cars parked at the Holiday Inn's front. I figure they finally reviewed the passenger manifest and put the pieces together. Found my hotel reservation. Part of me feels the protection of my higher belief in DIY, but another part feels fucked. I can't tell anymore why I'm shaking. My phone's clock reads 8:01, giving me fifty-nine minutes to prepare for and get to the funeral.

The cop cars depart after some minutes, luckily. I figure I better hurry. It's hard enough squeezing myself out of the tiny doorway. The nerves makes it even harder. And so I'm clambering out, frantic and jittering, and gash my lower abdomen on this inch-long turned-up aluminum corner. I register the pain but don't feel I have time to look at the wound. I return to the Denny's, where I wash up a bit and change into my suit. I'm bleeding from my side as I've never bled before. The wound looks fucked. It's at least a half-inch deep, I'd guess. I dab it with toilet paper, but it just keeps gushing. I fashion a bandage out of my filthy sweat-soaked t-shirt. It's 8:20. I grit my teeth and drop twenty bucks on a cab.

The ceremony's nice, I think. It's hard to pay attention, as the pain's intensity has grown. I'm also lightheaded from who-knows-what-at-this-point—blood loss, exhaustion, fear. Without looking, I touch the wounded area and wince, sucking air through my teeth. It's soaked. My fingers are red. As the ceremony closes, a small fleet of cop cars appears at the cemetery's entrance gate. I head in the opposite direction, where there's some woods. I look behind. One of the police cruisers has stopped and the officer in the driver seat's speaking with Aunt B. She looks around, sees me, turns to the officer, and shrugs. I turn back around and limp to tree cover.

I'm getting dizzy, but can't go to a hospital. It's not due to fear of being caught or that I can't afford it. It's because...you know.

I find a county road and follow it to a general store, sweating and bleeding. The right side of my body is numb and tingling. The store's well stocked. I pick up towels, gauze, bandages, medical tape, a sewing kit, a bottle of hydrogen peroxide. The cashier stares.

I return to the woods, crouch by a tree's base, thread a needle. I down the rum and begin stitching. The pain is tremendous; there's a wailing in my ears that can't be my own; a bright light that can't be the sun. I remember the color red. I remember feeling distinctly separate from my own body. There was a dimming. I can't feel or imagine having felt anything other than what I am feeling right now.

They've cuffed me to the hospital bed. My body feels incapable of movement. Everything hurts. The room spins. I close my eyes and try to remember, picking pieces of memory from the head fog like flotsam washed ashore. Then out of the gray it comes to me, the memory of standing at his funeral. This feeling of relief and victory comes over me like rain on a hot day. Maybe I didn't stay for the whole thing, but the important thing was I made it. I think I'd have made him proud. No—I'm certain of it. Some chapter has closed. It all seems significant.

Looking down at my cuffed wrist, I accept that, while I won't exactly be in a position to *do* much of anything for some time, I can still do it myself.

The plans start rolling around in my head. The things I'll do, the things I'll build, the people I'll help by DIY.

There's a poster on the wall featuring a sad-looking child hugging a stuffed ostrich. The poster's copy reads *Save a Life: Become an Organ Donor Today*. I look down my gowned front, lifting the fabric to examine my wound. I run my hands over myself, wincing when I touch where it's tender.

A doctor speaks to the patient in the room's other bed. The privacy curtain's pulled, but I can hear everything they're saying. The news isn't good.

The doctor says, "I'm very sorry, Mr. Willis. We'll put you on the transplant waitlist, but it's not unheard of for patients to die waiting."

The nurse comes in to check on me, I ask her about organ donation.

"Why you want to know?"

"I'm interested in donating organs."

"You mean when you die?"

"No, now."

"Like a kidney?"

"My heart."

Again, that look. This is not how they look at heroes in films. Why do they look at me this way? She was horrified because she didn't *know*. She didn't understand, like so few of us do, that most people tend to wait around for someone to do something. I told her I used to be like that, waiting, but I wasn't that way anymore. She seemed confused. She adjusted a knob on one of the monitors I was plugged in to and left the room. I felt the grin like it was on someone else's face.

MISPLACED BOYS

I was this miserable, hyper-bullied milksop of a student in Ms. Essenbruder's second-grade class when Mom yanked my younger brothers and me out of the public schools for good. *She'd be our teacher now*, she let us know the first morning under the new system. Though she cited curricular concerns, her real reason for reclaiming us from what she began calling "the system" was that the bullying had gotten so bad, at least for me. She never told us this directly, but I inferred it from preceding circumstances—the day before, there'd been an incident.

Just before lunchtime, in what had become a famously unmonitored length of hall just outside the cafeteria, I'd been sipping from the fountain when these fourth-grade fuckwits accosted me. Not that they didn't have good reason. Mom'd dressed me up in these bright red-yellow-blue-striped shorts that fell just above my knees—they were inlaid with these little sunglasses piranhas. A tucked-in neon LA Gear T it hadn't occurred to me to untuck. Worst: the socks—knee-high, also neon, of the tube variety. I was a marked man, more or less, pounded down before I even set foot out our house's door. Let's just say that in retrospect I partially understand where the boys who regularly kicked my ass were coming from. No idea what that woman had been thinking when she'd picked them out. Anyway, that doesn't matter when larger boys' knees are squeezing your stomach into your throat like a tube of toothpaste, a hyperventilative episode's got your little bronchioles knotted up, and Antoine Whatever's tenderizing the entire right side of your head with his pudgy brute mitts. And then they lock you in an unused and virtually forgotten-about utility chest about a third the size of your typical mid-sized American sedan's trunk. The administrator that answered the phone thought the person on

the other line was having a stroke, but it was actually Mom wondering where I was if not on the bus home.

The two hours it took to find me. How to describe this sensation? You've heard about the distinction between five minutes with your hand on a stove and five minutes talking to a pretty girl—who knew two hours could last so long? I was sure I was going to die in there. No light. No sound but those I made or imagined. I became intimately familiar with the rhythms of my own breathing in a way I've tried to forget. It's not until they're revoked that you understand the value of light, spatial freedom, the certainty of your continued respiration. As scared as I was, though, I think Mom must've been scared worse, or she wouldn't have reacted so drastically. But she did, and that's when our learning came home.

Actually, that's when *everything* came home. The same way my storage-locker internment had brought into relief the value of light and air, the boys—Gabe, Max, and Rassic—and I came to understand the importance of peer social contact and *getting out* soon after Mom moved every single one of our humdrum child operations in-house and clamped down—hard—on the liberties she griped the school had bungled protecting. We quickly learned there'd be no more piano lessons, soccer practices, sleepovers, birthday parties, skating rinks, movie theaters, Dairy Queen visits—at least not like we were used to. Anything we wanted to learn, she'd have to be able to teach.

All arenas of life had been imported home except, of course, Dad, whose increasing number of business-related hours away we always felt but never acknowledged. Even at that age, I was aware of some relationship between Mom's behavior, Dad's absence, and the monthly checks he sent, whose envelopes—the distinctive airmail kind, with the red and blue

parallelograms along the borders—Mom tended to grouse at as she opened but which she always slipped into her handbag. Well, she'd say, at least I can spend all my time home with you boys.

Mom had her own, privately developed way of tracking our progress. We didn't operate on a conventional yearly schedule, due to what she called the phallic linearity of time. No summer breaks or holidays, seeing as she viewed them, at least in their American manifestations, as imbued with the capitalist tradition. The boys and I learned the figurative meaning of the word "opiate" in a conversation about gratitude this one Thanksgiving. Whether she'd always espoused such extreme views we didn't know. It hadn't ever mattered. Though the distinction is clear now, I couldn't be sure whether she was overeducated or out of her mind. She *sounded* smart and had a knack for articulating her point, though I can't imagine it's difficult to make a strong argument when your audience has no other frame of reference with which to compare it, maybe especially when the audience is your kids.

In no time at all, she'd power-washed the system right out of us. Memories of our school-structured lives faded like a dream we secretly ached to return to. With all the calendars removed from the walls, the boys and I never knew what month it was. We fantasized about the fun we'd had at our friends' homes. We were some kind of pathetic diaspora, citizens of the wrong country. She said, this house is its own sovereign nation, and my word is its constitution. She pushed us to limits we didn't know we had.

That was before. If only we'd known things could get worse, we might not have complained when they were *just* bad. The boys and I were doing a C-SPAN-viewing activity, where we watched a congressional hearing and listed everything wrong about what we were seeing. From the couch, I saw Mom come back in from picking up the mail. She checked the

mail every day, so I didn't think anything of it. But she didn't return to us immediately. She stood in the foyer, her back turned to us, head hunched, reading. She walked to the room where we sat and hovered about, off to the side, staring blankly at the TV. Her breathing sounded like a warning. She stood, tapping against her palm what I recognized as one of Dad's envelopes. She tossed it in the paper shredder at the room's corner. She lowered herself slowly to the couch and hummed *Que Sera Sera*—something she did when she was either relaxed or upset; something I'd miss, later on. We were all looking at her, unaware of the grief and horror she carried and had begun to crack beneath.

A congressman on the TV hurled a chair off a balcony. Mom looked to us and said, It's just more of the same. They don't know how to live because they don't know what the world they're fighting for would actually look like.

And then: Did Dad say whether he'd be here for dinner? I'm making his favorite.

Which was when we first noticed things were off. She withdrew, haunted our halls. She sauntered and floated about, absent. She just couldn't be reached. It sucked. Stuck inside that house all day. We did what we could to reach out to her but she was lost to the world, so what could we do? As the oldest, everything fell to me, and for the first time, I had no luxury to complain about my circumstances before engaging them. Some part of me missed her. I hated her more—hated her for trying to control us, for revoking everything good and fun. And no sin on her part compounded my hatred more than the plain and inevitable: I was her son, and parts of whatever had destroyed her must have been alive inside me. The only way I knew, I had learned from her, and it led to a slow, degenerative death way beyond anything physical.

She was in bed all day now, functional but generally unresponsive. I did what I could to keep the house intact so that things didn't disintegrate completely. Dad's checks continued to

arrive unabated, and I quickly figured out how to deposit them and withdraw cash using mom's ATM card. I learned to write checks and pay utility bills through the mail. Our house sat close enough to a grocery store to walk there, which we did, though only on weekends when it was least suspicious for school-aged kids to do so.

Things were stable enough. As long as no one came knocking wondering about us boys, I figured we were doing all right. No one did come knocking, but it was clear my brothers and I had become lost boys. There were times our imaginations were what held it all together, making those moments of nearly every kind of poverty...spectacular. Mostly, though, I remember struggling.

We had no idea how to handle all that freedom. On productive days, which were few and far between, the boys may have gotten in two solid hours of work. For the most part, it was a shit-show. I would have worried—panicked—about their futures, but I was too frenzied holding together the inestimable loose ends of now. Let's just say that future college admittance didn't press me the way stocking the fridge did. I could have re-enrolled them at school, but I knew this would raise questions and that once authorities were involved it'd be impossible to keep my brothers together. I wanted to protect them from the world. I was just like her.

I managed to convince myself we were OK, but the house never looked the same once we were responsible for it. The particulars of housekeeping went out the window. A nasty mildew formed in the kitchen and bathrooms. We seemed to amnesic in terms of where things belonged and never put them away. Nearly all the contents of the shelves, cupboards, cabinets, and drawers were, over time, removed from their proper places, used, and then left on the floor.

Everything just kind of decayed, no matter how hard we worked against it. We tried sneaking into her room a couple times, crawling on the floor to her bed's edge and jumping out, screaming. She didn't budge.

I started making her sandwiches, one each for lunch and dinner. First time I did this, I actually thought I'd brought her back to life. Earlier that day, I'd purchased deli roast beef, Dijon mustard, mayo, Roma tomatoes, romaine lettuce, and a very expensive loaf of bread. I was thinking these were magic ingredients of some kind, and I continued to think this as I put the sandwich together and set it on a plate. I poured her a glass of milk and took it and the sandwich to her room. I cracked the door quietly so as not to frighten her—strange how these kinds of tendencies persisted—and crept to her nightstand, where I set her lunch down. I squeezed her hand, leaned over to kiss her on her forehead still warm, salty enough to burn my lips. I remember repressing some remote hope that this act would bring her back as I moved away, switching on her table lamp and saying, Please come back, I don't think I can do this. I closed the door behind me on my way out and rounded the boys up for an attempted study session. Some minutes later, from across the house, I heard her room's toilet flush. The boys and I looked at each other. As we ran to her room, I felt a surge of relief and joy, ecstatic that either my sandwich or forehead-kiss had saved her...but there she was, still in bed. The sandwich had been eaten, the milk drunk. I walked to her bedside again with no tenderness left in me, this time shaking her until one of the boys said, Stop that.

Things more or less went this way until I turned eighteen. I was a man, and now this fact was acknowledged by the law. Dad's checks kept on. We never actually heard from him, though. I suppose he noted the withdrawals on his bank statements and took this as ample proof that we

were OK—he was probably glad for his years-long not-talking-to-Mom streak, and didn't want to ruin a good thing.

Other matters changed, though. They boys began hitting puberty, to the dismay of our toilet paper budget, bathroom-sharing politics (suddenly the main-hall bathroom was the only viable option, as nobody wanted to jerk off in my mom's bathroom, her lying right outside the door), socks, and linens. We'd worked out most of the original kinks in our system, but we changed as we got older, and so did our routines. I used Mom's old van to drive the boys to whatever extra-curricular thing I could manage to support their participation in. My own education had taken a distant back seat to everything else, but I enrolled in a community college and was excited to attend, if surprised I'd made it so far.

A bigger surprise was Mom, who'd been kind of flickering. The boys and I were asleep when a loud clanging, a pot-and-pan kind of racket, woke me up. My alarm clock's quivering diodes read 4:40. I clicked on the little Maglite I always kept on me and did a quick head count—all here. More clanging. I tip-toed to the kitchen with the machete one of the boys'd found in a quarry and that I'd confiscated, then the stove's igniter began clicking, and I heard a familiar humming.

I almost emptied my bowels on the spot. There she was, clothed for the day, pouring pancake batter into a hissing skillet, a puff of vapor rising to the ceiling as she turned to face me, smiling, as if the last eight years hadn't happened.

That week—seven full days on the Gregorian calendar she'd so vocally resented—was a vacation. It was like the inverse of being locked in that box. If, before that week, you'd asked me or the boys how we were doing, we'd have said, Just fine. With Mom back, though, things felt

fuller now, somehow retroactively hollower before. She had no memory of the last eight years, so I outlined them, created a micro-history for her. I guess if she'd stayed around longer I'd have had time to get angry about all those years, to get indignant and righteous and to scream about how unfair it was that I'd lost my childhood scrambling to protect her sons, doing a job she had no good reason not to have done herself.

On the morning of our fifth day together, she began complaining about headaches. That night, she served us Oreos for dinner, which, despite how resistant we were to the thought of another regression, did alarm us. But the next day she started asking about whether Dad had called to say if he'd be late for dinner, which was about the time we realized we'd have to start telling her bye all over again.

If her unexpected return reminded us of how sad we'd actually been, her looming re-departure promised us something far worse. On the seventh day, I called a meeting.

We sat at the dining table, each of us at one of its four sides. I said, Listen, boys, I know we enjoyed the time we could get in with Mom these last few days. I know I've enjoyed it. It's been nice being not-in-charge. But the record's starting to skip, as you all can see. It's time. I need you all to be men, right now. I need you to be tough, or act tough, and hang in here with me, and tell me we're all on board again.

Their heads looked heavy on their necks.

I said, Look, it's OK. We're going to be OK. We've made it this far. We can keep making it.

They did not weep, but they shielded their faces from me. Gabe said, But how long do we have to keep making it?

I thought this over, unable to look any of them in the eye. I said, Remember when it all started? We could barely grocery shop without almost dying. Do you remember how scary things were? How much better are things now? You'll all be able to drive soon enough, have cars of your own. You'll go to college—I'll find a way, I swear to each of you—and you'll find something you really like to do. You'll have families of your own. One day you'll find that you're not thinking about making it, anymore, and...

Rassie said, This is the last family I ever want to have.

I leaned in and said, I know it seems a certain way now, but trust me, when you're older...

Max said, Trust you? When we're older? How much older? How do you know? Because of your *expert* experience and numerous years of life you know? Huh? You've been *lying* to us all this time. Nothing gets better. Mom won't get better, and we're going to end up just like her. Don't lie to us about college and families. You couldn't even get us out of this.

I wasn't angry. If anything, he was giving voice to a fear I hadn't brought myself to acknowledge.

I said, Boys, I'm afraid, too. Terrified. You're right, I *don't* know anything. It just so happens I'm older than you, which is why I tried to take care. But you're right. I haven't seen the world. I can't just carry us.

I looked at each of them, one at a time. I wanted to comfort them. I wanted to say the right things, but it seemed those things had gotten lost in some helium-filled balloon floating high above our heads further out of reach. I didn't want to end so somberly, but I froze. I'd always been able to fake it, to reach inside myself and find the vitality to muster one more

deceptively reassuring phrase, but now I was hollow. I kept reaching but always came back empty-handed.

We saw that last day coming from miles off and wanted to milk it. She seemed to, also—got up earlier that day than usual, woke us up before dawn. She said, Anywhere you wanna go, boys! We rode tandem bikes on the boardwalk, kicked a soccer ball around on the beach where we camped that night, chasing the waves as they ebbed and fleeing as they chased us back. We used found branches to cook hotdogs over a fire. The boys fell asleep, their heads in her lap, and she and I sat there quietly for minutes, hours, and with the setting sun's luster on our faces, she looked at me like it was dark, like she could not see, like she acknowledged all this but could not understand it.

She looked at me as if reminded of someone she missed and said, I'm so sorry.

Like it might have been for everything.