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American Gas

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AMERICAN GAS
VINCENT PRECHT

It's a sunny day in March, and I'm driving behind a bus, ten blocks away from American Gas. Michael, a teenager on my caseload, is riding the bus to work. He's a nice kid, but low, low, low. Big old thing with terrible balance. I pull alongside of the bus, and he smiles at me, gives me the thumbs up, and I give it back. "You think you'll ever amount to squat?" I sometimes ask him. I say it like a joke and he laughs: "Har har har, Mr. B. Very funny."

I ease up on the accelerator and let the bus slide away. I've been training him for six weeks. I wrote in his transition plan: *Michael will ride the city bus to work.* Until today I've ridden the bus with him, supervised on the job site, held his hand. Now, I'll still shadow him, but from the comfort of my '71 Nova. When he gets to work, I'll watch from across the street.

I bullshit. You have to if you want to find work for these kids. Got Michael a job at a discount station in the foothills: American Gas. It was a cold, drizzly day, the torn-up clouds brushing the frosted peaks. I was chasing Mr. Andonian around—the guy who owns the place—filling him up with facts and figures.

"My job," I said, "is to find ways to increase productivity."

Andonian was dropping hoods, snatching up pieces of trash.

"For example," I said. "Why should you be picking up trash? You're the owner. You should be inside." I started to laugh. "It's cold out here."

Andonian looked at me for a second. Tall and trim, he wore a blue warm-up

suit, high-top Jordans. Handsome guy with a neat goatee. I didn't like him. He was trying to put me in my place, never saying yes or no, making me slop through the rain. I barreled ahead anyway, making expansive gestures, explaining how Michael could pick up trash, clean windshields. I told him Michael was also a great gardener, showed him where a flowerbed could go.

"This place really has a lot of possibilities," I said, looking around.

It was a dump: two unsheltered service islands and a convenience store with peeling red, white and blue paint. Andonian had just bought the place, and the location wasn't bad (behind us, above the Arroyo, modern mansions sailed through the mist). But the place was so crapped out, all the traffic would pass it by.

I started rambling about beautification, image, corporate ID. Near the door stood Andonian's cronies, four old men in various stages of baldness, their eyes set deep in their heads. Andonian turned around and gave them a look. He thought I didn't catch it, but I've seen the gesture before: pointing from the hip, mugging "Who is this guy?" for his pals.

He stared at his Nikes for a second, then looked up at me. "I have no money for this," he said.

I just smiled at him. "Money? Who said anything about money? For you it's free."

I've worked at Occupational Center for fifteen years. I've placed hundreds of teenagers in fast food joints, hospitals, corporate offices. One client has been shredding sensitive documents, non-stop, since 1999. Right now, besides Michael, I handle sixteen other kids, all with different disabilities. I'm good at what I do, but I've been known to lose my temper. My clients are bereft, beaten down. I don't need to pretend that everything is rosy. Everything is not rosy.

When I told Michael's mom about American Gas, she was all smiles, fluttering her eyelashes, asking a lot of questions. Where was the place? Could Michael get there by bus?

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

"Oh, no, Miss Dunbar. You've done so much already."

She looked like she had knocked off a cosmetics counter, her wide mouth glossed with shiny purple lipstick, her eyelids streaked with blue shadow and sprinkled with glitter. Three years ago, when I first met her, she was a mover and a shaker. "I represent musicians," she had told me. "Major recording artists," she said. Recording artists my ass. She was out of work, on welfare, moving with Michael from one relative to the next. Now, she had her own place in Altadena, but her ambitions were just as delusional. Something about becoming a lawyer, something about going to school.

"This is a great opportunity," I said. I told her that American Gas would mean a new start for Michael. He had had several "new starts," but I didn't get into that. I told her not to worry about the Social Security, that he would still get his benefits. I found myself staring at her fingernails. About an inch long, they had butterflies painted on them.

"How long did those take?" I asked.

She scowled at them as if they'd been naughty. "Hours," she said.

The next day we went to work in the All Purpose Room at the Center. The first "bus" Michael rode was made of folding chairs. A big Baby Huey type, he crashed around a bit, dragging the chairs out of position, knocking them over. He wore baggy pants, a baggy Lakers jersey. His lips were huge—"fishy," the kids at the Center called them—his eyes round and bulging under half-mast lids.

I was the bus driver. "That'll be three bucks, bub," I said.

"Bub," he said. "That's what I gave you."

"You gave me \$2.85," I said. I watched him fumble with his change purse, making a mental note to enlarge the grip on the zipper. I got a whiff of his B.O., and later we talked about it. Michael is very touchy, a real momma's boy.

"Don't yell at me," he said.

"I wasn't yelling, Michael. I was trying to tell you something."

He started crying.

"Use deodorant," I said.

That night, I sat in my kitchen, writing in one of my notebooks: *Michael will*

locate deodorant at the store. Michael will pay for deodorant. Michael will use deodorant every day.

“Task analysis”: breaking a skill into steps. After awhile I found myself nodding off so I put the notebook away.

I live alone. Three years ago my wife Linda left me for another man. Sometimes if I can't get to sleep, I start thinking about it, like a bird of prey, circling but never landing. I live an orderly life in a one room Hollywood apartment, exercise regularly, read articles on learning disabilities when I have the time. I haven't dated in four or five months; I find dating too discouraging.

The first time we got on a real bus, it was almost empty, just a little old lady sitting in the back. We started toward her as the bus began to move.

“Well, where are you going to sit, Michael?” I asked, following behind him.

“Not next to her,” he said, pointing at the lady.

“Don't point Michael.”

He looked back at me.

I said, “Why aren't you going to sit next to her?”

“She needs her own personal space?”

“That's my boy.”

Michael's huge dopey grin can really throw you.

“Why are you staring at me?” he said, after we'd taken a seat.

“I'm not staring at you. I'm just looking.”

“Mr. B, you worry me.”

When we got to the station, Andonian was busy, so I got things rolling myself.

Michael will clean car windows.

“Hello, Miss,” he said. “And welcome to American Gas.”

“Miss” was about a million years old and drove a Cadillac Seville. She looked terrified. She had a green tube coming out of her nose, an oxygen tank riding shotgun. Michael asked her if he could wash her windows, and she nodded meekly.

He went to work with his squeegee as I cradled my clipboard, nodding to ol' Blue Hair with my Friend-of-the-Handicapped smile. Michael was having trouble

with a couple of hardened bird droppings. He was scraping so hard I thought the windshield would cave in.

“Sorry for taking so long, ma’am,” he said. “You got a lot of shit on your window.”

I winced, shooting a glance behind me to see if Andonian was around.

“You shouldn’t curse,” she said to Michael, wagging a crooked finger.

I ducked down to the window. “I’m sorry, ma’am. First day on the job. I think he’s a little excited.”

I was relieved when she gave me a wink. “Oh, that’s all right,” she said, her eyes turning to Michael. “You keep up the good work.”

And that’s how the day went. Every so often a Cherokee or Land Rover would pull in, affluent types who seemed to enjoy the fact that Michael was a little off. I pulled Andonian out of the store, pointed to a business man chatting with Michael from his Hummer H3. “You see. They like coming here. They think they’re doing something good.”

He didn’t say a thing, just rubbed his beard.

That Andonian. What a barrel of laughs. His black shirt had a flaring collar and was open at the chest. His cronies were standing nearby, smoking cigarettes, flicking ashes, stiff and unsmiling in that Old Country way.

I walked over to Michael as the Hummer drove off.

“What’s next?” he said.

I took him to a little island of dirt near the intersection on the corner.

“Get a rake and clean this trash up,” I said.

Michael started raking away, stuffing a garbage bag with cups and candy wrappers. I got the feeling that someone was watching us, but Andonian was with his buddies, under the hood of a 320i. I scratched my head like an idiot until I figured it out: Michael’s mom was parked across the street in her beat-up Toyota.

I crossed over. “Look,” I said, “You’ve got to stop doing this.”

“What am I doing?”

“Spying.”

“I’m just watching.”

My chest constricted as I raised my voice. "Ma'am, if you don't trust Michael, how's he ever going to trust himself?"

I had my arm on the car roof. I took it away and my shirtsleeve was smudged with dirt. I squatted down to the level of the window. She looked straight ahead, her fingers drumming the steering wheel, then tightening. Unicorns. There were unicorns on her nails.

I lowered my voice. "I really want this to work. I really need you. *Michael* needs you. He needs your support."

Her red eyes turned to look at me and she wiped her nose with a quick angry swipe. She twisted the key. The engine coughed and rattled. The tires yelped as the car lurched away.

Sometimes after days like that, you feel okay at first, but then you get swamped. You're high and dry on this island and suddenly the island is gone. You begin to question yourself, like you're the one messing things up, like whatever you're doing to fix things is only tearing them apart.

I lay on my futon, staring through the window at the salmon-colored clouds. The phone rang. It was my ex-wife Linda. She liked to call, once a month, just to torture me. She had a cool place in Silver Lake, a great design job, a soulful boyfriend.

"I'm moving to Paris," she said.

I grimaced behind my cordless as she filled me in on the details. Work was sending her; she'd be living there for a year. I tried to be enthusiastic, some part of me wishing her well, but I couldn't pull it off.

"Are you okay?" she asked me.

"Me? I'm fine, I'm fine." She started down-playing the move, and that made me feel even worse. "You're crazy," I said. "I would kill to live in Paris."

She didn't call to torture me. It was worse than that: she felt guilty. As I hung up the phone, a stupid movie started playing in my head. Scenes from our blissful marriage. Three years ago they would've made me blubber, but now the images seemed gratuitous. Journals lay splayed around my futon. I started to read one and fell asleep.

Michael will remember to wear his cap.

“Where’s your cap, Michael?” We were riding the bus. It seemed like a reasonable question. Occupational Center wouldn’t shell out for the uniform, so I had paid for it myself.

Michael felt his head, gave me a wide-eyed, bewildered look. “Shit,” he said, after I had told him a million times not to curse.

Michael will clean the restroom.

“I can’t,” Michael said.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“My mother says I can’t.”

I came out of the restroom. Andonian with his cronies. Smiles exchanged. Was something funny? Was I the butt of some joke?

On my cell phone with Miss Dunbar, keeping it cool, everything hunky-dory: “Ma’am, how *are* you?” I explained my situation. That’s how I couched it: “I’ve got this little situation.” Funny thing really. Michael seemed to think that she didn’t want him to perform certain duties, normal functions of his job.

“My son isn’t cleaning any toilets.”

“Well, actually, ma’am, that’s just a small part of the—”

“Is he there? Put him on the phone.”

Andonian was nearby, so I turned around, lowered my head. “Miss Dunbar, Michael is working.”

“Where is my son? I want to talk to him.”

Michael will clean car windows. He was great at that. That’s all he knew how to do. I ended up cleaning the toilets. While he was outside chatting it up with the gentry, I was in the bathroom on my hands and knees. One of Andonian’s cronies came in and started pissing. I looked up and there he was, shaking his fat shriveled dick.

I backed out of the restroom with the mop and bucket, the gray, dirty water slopping over my shoes.

“What the fuck is happening here?” It was Andonian.

I mumbled something about a misunderstanding. “Michael is more of a people person,” I said.

“Well, where the hell is he?” He turned to throw an angry finger at the service island.

No one was there.

When I got to Michael’s house the Toyota was behind the driveway fence, beyond it a couple of defunct Mercedes diesels, covered with blue tarps, cramped fender to fender against a detached garage. Everything was sagging with water, soaked by the recent rains. As I climbed out of the Nova, a rottweiler jumped at the driveway gate, jingling the hell out of it, snarling and barking. Poor people, with their attack dogs, their second-hand cars. Crap all over the muddy front yard: dumbbells, car parts, twisted-up towels. “Filth,” I mumbled as I knocked on the steel security door.

I stepped back as it opened. Miss Dunbar glared at me, her left penciled brow raised imperiously above the right. Behind her, stood the boyfriend, Anthony, short and stocky, his folded arms bulging with prison yard peccs. Miss Dunbar led me into the kitchen, and Anthony followed. We didn’t speak. I took a seat at the kitchen table, Miss Dunbar sat opposite, and Anthony faded into the background, leaning against the stove.

Miss Dunbar. Eyes narrowed, hands folded on the tabletop, a fake Prada handbag pushed to the side. I tried to match her unblinking stare, she in her knock-off sweat suit, her plastic hoop earrings. Bitch. Who was paying for all this junk? Where was Michael?

“Miss Dunbar,” I said. “Whatever it is, whatever’s bothering you, we can work it out. But I just want you to know, at this point we are *running out of options*.” I could actually see my words, the italics. A pulse pinged at my temple. I blew out a puff of air. “You can’t just pick Michael up like that. Michael is an employee. *He was working*”

There was a metallic creak as Anthony shifted his weight against the stove. All this talk of employment was probably giving him the willies. I should know; I had tried to place Anthony back in 1996.

I looked back at Miss Dunbar. Her eyes could have driven nails. Fuck if I cared. So could mine.

“I was taking my son out for lunch,” she said.

“Ma’am, Michael has a lunch hour. You know that.”

Her lips went pouty, quivering, puffing up. Her eyes began to glisten, and I thought, “No, please. Not again.”

I tried to maintain my pissed-off demeanor, reminding her about the pizza parlor, the nursing home. The times she sent Michael to work unwashed or unshaven. Late. Not at all.

But then she started crying, her eyes turning into fountains, her bubbling lips making a *brr brr* sound. I looked away, searching the grimy cream-colored cabinets for strength. I hated being put in this situation. I’d been teaching Michael for three years. I had taught her boyfriend, for Christ’s sake. We’d been through a lot. We were friends.

I stared into her eyes and covered her hand on the table. It felt tiny under mine.

She snatched it away. “Michael is a very sensitive person,” she said. “I will not have him cleaning toilets.”

“Michael has a wonderful sense of humor,” I said. I don’t know where it came from, but it seemed like the thing to say.

Miss Dunbar pulled a tissue from a cardboard box, started wiping roughly at her eyes. “He has *feelings*.”

“Michael really cheers us up in class.” I was on one of my complimenting jags. I couldn’t help it.

She sniffled, wiped her nose. “Michael is multi-talented,” she said, “multi-emotional...”

I found myself nodding like an idiot.

“Caring,” she said, “kind.”

“And capable,” I piped in. “Very capable.”

Anthony said, “He’s a good eater. He puts it away. I’ll tell you what.”

We both stared at him.

Miss Dunbar blew hard into the tissue, producing a honking sound. She started shaking her head.

“I just don’t think this job is right for him.”

That perked me up. “Oh, no, it’s right,” I said, staring hard into her eyes. “It’s definitely right.”

Anthony walked with me to my car. Frowning at a mud-covered rag, he snatched it up and threw it in the trash. We stood in the front yard for awhile, staring down the street. Thick pine branches reached out over it, meeting in the middle, shaking out rainwater when the wind picked up. Anthony had recently done time, and we talked about that. He seemed okay about it, no regrets.

“I wouldn’t worry about her,” he said, turning the conversation back to Michael. “She’ll come around.” I didn’t say anything, so he slapped me on the shoulder. “You gotta lighten up, Mr. B,” he said, massaging the back of my neck. “You’re all tense.”

The next morning the birds were chattering at my window, and after three cups of coffee, I started feeling hopeful, renewed. At American Gas, business was hopping, Porsches cueing up behind Jaguars at the pumps.

In the afternoon I taught Michael how to use the air hose, filling bicycle tires for the neighborhood kids, showing him how the brass gauge rises to indicate the pressure. After giving a demonstration, I asked the kids if Michael could have a try, and they smiled and nodded, watching like clinicians while he inflated their tires.

Andonian ignored us, so I knew things were back to normal. I told him Michael would never leave work again, and he grunted and walked away. I didn’t want to get into the issue of money. Things were still a little too dicey; I didn’t want to push my luck.

Days passed. Michael gained more confidence, probably because his mother stayed away. I started noticing more cars. Or maybe it was the same cars coming more often. One or two in particular: an investment banker in a Lexus, a college student in a Mini. Michael knew them by name, and sometimes they would get out of their cars and talk to him. The old lady in the Seville, I’d always see her. I’d look over, and there she’d be, all hunched over and decrepit, her oxygen tank at her side.

She'd try to straighten Michael's cap, which was way beyond her reach. She'd end up going after his shirt, slapping at the wrinkles.

Sometimes, after work, I would take him to Denny's for a milkshake. He would clench the straw in his fist, pound it on the table, peel down the wrapper when the tip had driven through. Then, lifting the straw to his lips, he'd blow, shooting the wrapper across the table. I'd only let him get away with it if I was totally exhausted, or after a good day, when he had done something independently, something that made me proud.

"I was very happy with you," I told him one day. "The way you checked those paper towels."

An accordion of white paper hit me in the forehead and Michael started to laugh.

"That's brilliant, Michael. Very funny."

But I wasn't angry, and he knew it. He laughed even harder when I balled up my napkin and threw it at his nose.

"So," I said, staring at him for a moment after the waitress had dropped off the check. "What do you want?" I had to clarify. God, did I have to clarify. No, I didn't mean now; I meant in the future. (I knew it was an abstract question, but Michael wasn't a moron. I thought he could handle it, and I was curious. I wanted to know.)

"You mean, when I grow up?" he asked.

"You're grown up now. I mean when you're independent."

He rolled the straw wrapper between his fingers. "I want money, an apartment..."

I nodded.

"A car," he continued. "A sports car."

"A wife? Do you want a family?"

"Yes. I want a beautiful wife."

"Like your mother?"

"Mr. B, please," he said in a scolding tone. "Somebody *my* age."

I apologized as he turned to look out the window. The glare from passing cars

threw shards of light on his face.

“What else?” he asked, dreamily. “What else do I want?”

“You want your rights, Michael. You want what everybody wants.” I took out my wallet, split it open, lifted out some bills to pay the check. “You want independence, you don’t want anybody fucking with your head.”

“Mr. B, you shouldn’t curse.”

“I’m trying to make a point,” I said.

“I know but you shouldn’t curse.”

A few days later, I decided to approach Andonian on the subject of pay. I needed to tie things up. I had other kids on my caseload; Michael was taking too much of my time. Andonian had started painting the convenience store, and I suggested that Michael do it instead. I fixed Michael up with a roller, showed him how to apply the paint. He had a tendency to repaint the same area, so we had to work on that. But when given a chance, Michael can do just about anything, within reason.

I dragged Andonian out of the store to watch him. “He’s a good little painter,” I said.

Gazing at Michael, Andonian took a deep drag from his cigarette. He opened his mouth and let the smoke drift away. He gave me a sidelong glance and raised his eyebrows. He nodded his head.

“You don’t find an employee like that everyday,” I said.

“He’s not an employee.”

“I know,” I replied, walking away. “That’s the point.”

Later, standing by the dirt-filled planter at the corner, I called out to him: “What kind of flowers do want?”

Andonian looked at me like he didn’t understand.

“Flowers.” I shouted, but he didn’t hear me. I waved him off. “Never mind.” I knew what to get.

Marigolds. I thought I remembered giving them to Linda and that they were hearty, difficult to kill. I thought I remembered transplanting them in our backyard, or that you *could* transplant them. Anyway, I remembered that they were cheap. I

bought a half dozen plants at the supermarket, a gardening spade, took them back to American Gas. Michael was painting with Andonian, so I took the flowers over to the planter, knelt down and started turning the soil.

The dirt was cool in my hands as I piled it to the side. I looked up, and Andonian was showing Michael how to grip the paint roller.

“Bingo,” I said.

Michael will ride the city bus to work. Alone.

I prepped him the day before. He was watering the marigolds.

“I can’t be with you all the time,” I said.

“I know, Mr. B.”

“Eventually, I won’t be with you at all. You realize that?”

“Yes, Mr. B. Yes.” He seemed distracted, so I shut my mouth. But I was nervous. I didn’t want there to be any confusion.

On Miss Dunbar’s answering machine I left a long, detailed message: Congratulations! Had she heard? From now on Michael would be making a salary. I explained about the bus, that he would be riding it alone. That he needed to be at the bus stop at exactly 6:45.

I felt like calling somebody, but no one was home. My two sisters, my brother. I even considered calling Linda. I was hyped-up, exhilarated. I wanted to tell her *bon voyage*.

The next morning I parked behind the bus stop, sat in the Nova and waited. The sky was sodden and gray like a piece of wet cardboard. I was wearing a lightweight jean jacket because the weather report had called for sun. The damn car guzzled so much gas you couldn’t let it idle for too long, so I shut it down. Freezing without the heat, I huddled around the coffee cup, holding it with both hands.

I thought about Miss Dunbar. I had told her that when Michael started making a salary he would still get his benefits. I had stressed it on several occasions, and each time she had nodded like she understood.

Tiny raindrops started to prick the windshield.

Had she really understood? Maybe she thought if Michael got paid, the check from Social Security would no longer come. I thought about her clothes, her cars. They might've been cheap and fake, but she hadn't gotten them for free.

I looked at my watch. I looked out the windshield. The bus shelter pulsed as the raindrops hit the glass.

I thought about the pizza place, the nursing home—the same scenario. There was a pattern. Whenever Michael was on the verge of making a salary, whenever it became more than just me holding his hand.

The raindrops drummed loudly on the Nova's metal roof. The 6:45 swept into the bus stop and idled. I looked across the street—would Michael pull his big self out of a late-arriving car, wave for the bus to wait as he lumbered for its still open door? I threw my arm over the seat to take in the rear—would he stumble up the block hatless in the downpour, fishy lips cupped between his hands, bellowing, “Excuse me,” or “I’m here?” I’d have been happy with any scenario, any excuse, no matter how lame. But don’t give me this, I thought, tossing the empty coffee cup aside as the bus door pulled shut. Don’t give me this vacant street, these unoccupied cars. Don’t give me this bus pulling away filled with somber passengers, work-bound and competent, gainfully employed.

Don’t give me this, *please*. I’ve seen it too many times before.

A pattern.

I leaned back in my seat. I slammed the steering wheel with my fist.

“He’s sick,” Miss Dunbar said from behind the security door.

The air was frigid, and rainwater was dripping down the back of my jean jacket collar.

“Well, can I see him?” I asked.

“See him? I said he was sick.”

Was someone pouring buckets on me from the roof? Had anyone ever bothered to clean out the goddamn gutter? Anthony was standing beside and slightly behind her, both dimly visible behind the steel mesh door. Wasn’t anyone going to let me in? I tried to remember my “teamwork” training. *Use “I” messages. Do not become defensive.*

“Ma’am, I think it’s important that we let Michael make his own decisions.”

“Don’t you patronize me.”

“I am not patronizing you.”

“What’re you saying? That I don’t know my son?” She was silent for a second.

“You don’t think I know my own child?”

“Miss Dunbar, I didn’t say that.”

“Do you have a son?”

I started to respond but stopped myself. The bitch was goading me. I couldn’t believe it.

“I’m asking you a question,” she said.

I stared at her through the mesh door. We had had this discussion on a previous occasion, a happier, dryer time. “You know I don’t have children.”

“Well, then how you gonna know what my child needs?”

“I’ve been working with Michael a long time,” I started to say.

“How you gonna know?”

My voice began to quake. “By asking. . . discussing it with him.”

She clicked her tongue, chuckled and whispered something to Anthony.

He rubbed his chin. “That’s a little vague, Mr. B.”

I turned on him: “She’s asking me how I would know!”

Just then, a frigid waterfall cascaded down the back of my neck. I jumped back.

“That’s it!” I shouted. “If you want my help, call me. I will not be treated this way!”

The rain was coming down in pearl-sized drops. I slipped on the way to the car, my heel going out from under me, gouging a slick trough in the oozing mud. I drove off. I didn’t know where I was headed. At an intersection I thought the light had changed and almost smacked into a car.

I was going to American Gas. I was going to apologize, tell Andonian I was sorry that it didn’t work out. I was going to pick up the gardening tools. Act professional. Move on. But something about my footing made me dizzy. Like I had forgotten which pedal was the gas and which the brake.

When I arrived the rain had stopped. Andonian was cleaning up, sweeping out puddles of water with a push broom. I said what I wanted to say, but after I had thrown my things into the car, I started to say more. Much more.

I followed him into the convenience store. "I do everything for these people," I said, "these people" meaning poor people, these people meaning blacks. I followed him outside, babbling about "learned helplessness," other crap I had studied in school.

Finally, he turned on me. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

Rainwater dripped like diamonds from the convenience store awning. The clouds opened to the bright white sun, which streaked the foothills before reaching down to where we stood, lighting the steam that rose around our legs. For a second, squinting, I didn't know where the hell I was.

"What do I want?" I asked. "Nothing. I don't want anything."

Andonian shook his head, rubbed his mouth. "Look," he said, but then he stopped himself. I waited for him to say something profound. Spent and exhausted, I wanted him to reassure me. "Look," he said. "Go home."

That night, after a hot shower, I dropped off into a free-fall of sleep. In a dream Linda informed me that she was having a baby by showing me her pregnancy certificate. In the dream, I wasn't surprised. It all seemed perfectly normal. When I woke up, it took me a second to realize that pregnancy certificates don't exist.

I got to the Center early and started going through folders containing student reports. I put Michael's to the side and stacked the others in front of me. I went through each one, reading the reports inside them. Fastened to the tops of the folders, they were like layers of earth, the most recent on top, progressively older ones beneath. I kept seeing Michael's folder out of the corner of my eye. After a while I pulled it in front of me.

Michael qualifies as learning disabled because of a significant discrepancy between ability and achievement, his initial report said. I had to hold up a thick sheaf of newer ones to read it. As the pages dropped, Michael moved through time, from pre-school to the present. So many hands had been in the mix, so many signatures, mine

on the most recent ones, the names of past teachers on the rest. And not only teachers. Scrawled in spaces were other signatures, spaces marked Psychologist, Speech Therapist, Administrator and Other. The only name on all of the reports was the most legible one. I stared at it now: in a dark, heavy hand, on the line next to Parent... Valerie Dunbar.

As I waited for someone to come to the door, the plan was to change what I could and leave the rest alone. I glanced at the yard. It looked neater, like someone had straightened it up. I turned around, and inside the security door, holding it open, a strange woman was staring at me. I took a step backward. Miss Dunbar? Something about her made her look completely different. Smaller? Older? I couldn't tell which.

"Michael isn't here," she told me, the anger gone from her voice, her eyes flat and stark. Holding her robe, she opened the security door wider and stepped back for me to pass. For a moment I just stood there. I couldn't move.

In the kitchen, cardboard boxes filled with bread and canned goods were pushed against the wall. I stood gawking at them, wondering if they were donations. She caught me staring, and I hurried to take a seat across from her at the kitchen table.

It was the makeup. She wasn't wearing any. The lipstick was missing, the shadow, the glitter. The penciled brows that once soared above her hazel eyes had vanished, as if they had flown away.

I apologized for my behavior the day before. I told her I had been wrong to cut her out of the process. "Why shouldn't you be able to visit Michael at work? What's the harm in that?"

She stared at her hands.

I forced a smile. "How is Michael?"

"He misses his job," she said, after a silence.

"Well, we miss him, too. Really Miss Dunbar, I'm sorry how this went... If there's anything I can do..."

Then, without looking up, she said, "He's here."

I followed her down the narrow hallway to his bedroom. The room was spotless—books stacked flush on a dusted shelf, a bedside table neatly arrayed with bottles of medicine—but when I tried to compliment Miss Dunbar, she didn't respond, taking a seat in the corner and sitting in silence. Michael, propped up against some pillows, greeted me enthusiastically, sliding over so I could sit on the edge of the bed. I asked him how he was feeling, and he said that he was doing better. I told him he was lucky to have such a caring mother, and he said, "Oh, I know, Mr. B. You don't have to tell me that."

We both stared at her. At the end of the armrests her hands dangled limply, her fingernails unadorned. Suddenly, she grasped the armrests, lifted herself, and walked out. I stared at Michael. His eyes dropped to his big folded hands on the crisp white sheet.

After an attempt at small talk—news from the Center, greetings from kids—I said, "We've missed you, Michael. Mr. Andonian wants to know when you'll be back."

He stared at his fingers. He didn't speak.

"Michael, you're not sick, are you?" The room was silent. I leaned over to check down the hall. Empty. I leaned back. "Michael?"

Then, after staring at his hands a long time, he said, "I'm a little scared, Mr. B."

"Of what? Of the job?"

Still looking down, he shook his head.

"Of Mr. Andonian?"

He shook his head again.

"Of what then? Of me?" His eyes looked up at me, and I started to feel dizzy. "Michael," I said, "I'm your friend. I want you to succeed."

"I don't want to disappoint you, Mr. B."

"You don't. . . You won't," I said, correcting myself. I put my palms flat on the blanket. I could feel them sweating. I didn't know what to say. I started making circles with my hands, the blanket dragging between my fingers. Wanting to escape, I lifted myself from the bed, but something jerked me around before I could leave.

“Michael, how could you think that?”

It seemed like ten years before he looked up at me. “You missed me?” he asked.

The way Linda put it, the marriage was a mistake. That is, we were never meant for one another. It wasn't the truth. It was what she wanted me to believe. And it showed what lies we could convince ourselves to accept. I had made Michael sick? Only if I let myself believe it. If I let myself believe it, then, of course, it would be true. But now, now all that mattered were the facts. My Nova needed an air conditioner, for example. I was burning up.

Backing out of my parking spot at the Center, I swore that I'd get one installed. It was only nine in the morning, and already I was drenched with sweat.

“Yo, Mr. B...” Someone pounded on the roof of the car. I hit the brake as he flashed in the rear view and came around to my side.

“Anthony?” I said. It was Miss Dunbar's boyfriend. He squatted down at the window to talk to me.

“Didn't you hear me?” he asked. “I was calling after you.”

“No. You were? What are you doing here?”

Something about my response made him laugh. “Shit, Mr. B. Nice ride.” He ran his hand along the bottom of the open window. He checked out the dashboard, the rear seat. “AC not working?”

“It doesn't have one.”

“I'd correct that. It's almost summer.” He moved as I opened the door and climbed out. “Big news,” he said. “The kid's back... Michael,” he clarified when I failed to respond. “I just dropped him off.”

“That's great.”

Actually, it was a moot point; I had just taken Michael off my caseload, traded him to a colleague for a kid with Tourettes.

“That's good, right?” asked Anthony, puzzled.

“Yeah, yeah...” I said, forcing a smile, looking up into the hazy sky.

“It sure took some convincing,” Anthony went on. “His mother was no problem.

She wanted him out of the house. But Michael, that boy is stubborn. It's okay though. I just told him he'd have to work hard if he wanted to grow up like me." Anthony made sure I was looking before he gave me a wink and exploded with laughter. "I'm just playing. I'm just playing. But really, you don't look too happy." And then, when I gazed up into the sky again, "What you looking at, Mr. B?"

A jet, glinting like a needle, traversed the sky.

"That's an F-16," said Anthony, shading his eyes. "You can tell by the wings." I looked at him, surprised. "You remember. Planes are my specialty. Got a bunch of models back home."

"You had them in the living room," I said, recalling the plastic models that hung in his mother's house.

Anthony nodded, smiling. "Still do."

The plane needled into a skin of high clouds. It glinted and disappeared.

I looked at Anthony, his forehead beaded with perspiration. "You're okay, right?" I asked.

He looked at me blankly.

"I mean your life," I said.

"Sure, Mr. B. Why?" But then he knew why and smiled. "Shit. That's ancient history. Oh, you know. I got my ups and downs. But it's okay now. I'm looking for a job." He studied me hard. "Look, Mr. B, you weren't the only one. You know how many people I had pulling for me? Teachers and social workers and aunts and uncles... I mean, sometimes I couldn't even squeeze into the house." I shrugged, and he said, a smile growing again, "I'm serious. What? You thought you were the lone warrior. I wish you were." Then, after a pause, he squinted at me, probing. "Mr. B, are you getting laid?" I stared back, deeply offended. "I'm just saying. It helps." He let it go, looking down the Nova's hood, asking about the engine. "What you got under there. A 350?" I nodded, still smarting. "That's a damn nice car."

We stared at it for a moment. He was right. I wouldn't have given it up for the world.

So. It's a sunny day in March, and I'm driving behind a bus, three blocks away

from American Gas. The bus comes to a stop, and Michael climbs off and walks the rest of the way on foot. While he walks he sways back and forth in a way that reminds me of kindergarten and the March of the Elephants. At one point he stops, lifts up his arm and smells his pits. He gets to the station, disappears into the convenience store and then comes out, staggering in the sun.

Parked across the street, I wait. Time for some coffee and the sports page. I lean my back against the door and settle in. Every once in awhile I check on Michael as he squeegees windows, waters the grass. One of Andonian's cronies has found a basketball and is dribbling it from hand to hand while one of his countrymen tries to snatch it away. Suddenly, in a burst of stiff-shouldered agility, he eludes the guy and pretends to shoot.

After awhile Miss Dunbar pulls up behind me, the snarling grill of her Toyota framed in my rearview. Anthony's with her, and I salute them with a little wave. In our separate cars we sit silently and watch. Michael has gone to the air pump with a little girl and is filling the tire of her bike. He's really getting into it—jabbering away, gesturing importantly, like a doctor explaining a complex procedure. The girl is about eight, fully outfitted in arm and kneepads, a mushroom helmet, which she nods up and down. I like a kid like that: polite, helpful, bracing the bike while Michael fills the tire.

From where I'm parked you can hear the groan of the air compressor. When Andonian steps out of the convenience store I pull myself up for a better view. But then there's an explosion, a loud bang, pieces of black rubber spinning through the air. The girl is still bracing the bike, and Michael is still kneeling. But now he holds the nozzle to a naked metal rim.

Everyone stares. Miss Dunbar, her hand to her mouth; Anthony climbing her arm. Andonian, knees bent, like he's ready to jump; the old men leaning in the same direction. *Me*. My heart is pounding. I have to laugh at myself. I've never been so scared in my life!

And what does it take to release us on this fine day at American Gas? What word? What sign? Only the sound of Michael crying, wailing. Red-faced and tearful, like a newborn babe.

