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The Perfect Age

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KEVIN MOFFETT

THE PERFECT AGE

From the shore the boy watched his father go down. His homemade catamaran started to break apart a hundred yards out, then his father disappeared between the hulls. The boy wasn't afraid until he saw the looks of fear on everyone's faces, and then he was. His mother yelled, did something with her arms, and a lifeguard swam out with a red flotation jug and bobbed among the wreckage. Pieces of the boat began returning to shore, scraps of wood, a dented construction sign. Fifteen minutes later, the boy's father was still underwater.

A second lifeguard came and asked if the boy wanted a ride in his jeep. It was a ridiculous question, but his mother released his hand. The lifeguard leaned in and whispered to her and she nodded. Her damp hair left epaulets of wetness on her shirt. "Don't be afraid," she said softly. "He'll come back."

The boy told her he didn't want a ride in a jeep. He wanted to stay with her. "He'll come back," she repeated.

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The lifeguard's jeep was red with vanity plates that said LIFSVR. He unlocked the boy's door, carefully placed newspaper over the seat. Through the windshield the boy saw fat clouds pinned over spinning black pools of shadow below.

"Check this out," the lifeguard said. He wore a plastic visor advertising a brand of throat spray, and every visible bit of him was tan. Shifting from first gear to second, then second to third, he popped the clutch pedal to make the front tires squeal. "Just learned that."

They continued south along Atlantic Avenue, motels to the left, shell shops to the right. Everyone on the sidewalks looked spooked, like animals just before a storm. The boy closed his eyes and made faces at them as they passed.

The lifeguard turned on the radio. "What's your favorite station?" he asked, flipping past songs and commercials. "Z104? Rock 100?"

"I don't really have one," the boy said. "I'm not supposed to listen to the radio or watch TV."

The lifeguard's mouth twitched as he turned off the radio. "Are you a Jehovah's Witness or something?"

“No.” It wasn’t the first time he’d been asked this. “It’s the commercials mostly, they’re harmful.” The boy stared down at his bare feet, powdered with sand. “My father says that the world’s just about used up. It’s gonna end soon.”

The lifeguard popped the clutch pedal again. “You sure you’re not a Jehovah’s Witness? Do you celebrate your birthday?”

“We don’t even believe in God,” the boy said. “We’re humanists.”

They passed a store partially hidden by a giant pyramid of conch shells. The boy’s father once told him that the ocean sound inside conchs was actually the sound of his own blood. The rush of it echoing within the shell’s chamber. It isn’t a toy, his father said. It’s a reminder of how we’re operational, alive. He was always saying things like that.

“What’s the longest someone’s been underwater?” the boy asked.

“Without oxygen?” The lifeguard squinted at a stoplight. “Don’t know. That’s a good question.”

14 A tiny blue dot in the corner of the jeep’s digital clock blinked off the seconds. The boy knew the lifeguard had taken him away so he wouldn’t see his father dragged from the water. It was probably the only thing the jeep was used for. Nevertheless, he was thankful for the delay. Thankful to talk about his father as if he were alive, still leveling the world with his scrutiny.

“That’s a really good question,” the lifeguard said, releasing his squint.

After pushing the boat into the water, his father had addressed the crowd. “This was made by my hands,” he said, “from your trash.” They laughed at his cut-off sweatpants, his boat of junk. The boy saw them. He saw how quickly they turned pity into amusement. “The many men so beautiful,” he called, too far out to be heard by anyone but the boy. “And all the dead did lie. A thousand thousand slimy things lived on and so did I.”

The boy locked the jeep door with his elbow. “My father’s always teaching people lessons,” he said to the lifeguard. Just to hear himself say it.

The lifeguard brought him to an apartment with surf magazine pages taped to the walls. He introduced a man on the couch in front of a TV. His half-brother, the lifeguard said. Two cans of spray paint and a pair of white canvas high-tops sat on a table in front of him. “Could you turn that off,” the lifeguard asked, pointing to the TV. “It’s against his...” He studied the boy and searched for the word. “Lifestyle.”

The half-brother leaned forward and turned it off. "I used to have a lifestyle," he said. Like the lifeguard, he was maximally tan. "What you all up to?" He looked at the boy and his face grew solemn with awareness. "Mibothiber?" he asked the lifeguard.

"Fibathiber," the lifeguard said.

"Shit." His expression went dim, then slowly reanimated once the lifeguard left. "Have a seat," he said. The boy crossed sun-warm terrazzo to a folding chair. "I need some advice from the youth of today." He lifted one can of spray paint. "Garnet Red." He lifted the other. "Premium Gold. Which should I use?"

"Why do you want to paint your shoes?" the boy asked.

"I don't want to paint my shoes," the man said. "I want to paint my car. But you can't paint your car till you paint your shoes." He sniffed the nozzle of the Premium Gold. "Huffers love this color. You ever see them on the beach with their gold goatees, begging for change? They look so happy and awful, like they been kissing stars."

"I'm not sure who you mean."

"Huffers? Guys who inhale gas and glue and spray paint to get high? The fumes. The gold must have the most effective effects."

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The boy sensed the half-brother was teasing him. His teeth, bleached-bone white, made everything he said seem incomplete, nibbled at. Cupping a hand over his nose and mouth, he sprayed the left shoe twice, and they watched the gold paint bloom. Outside, a dog was barking steadily, like a runner in rhythm. "I believe I just ruined my shoes," the man said.

The boy gazed at a photo sequence of a surfer launching out of a wave. "A Trestles local catches some air," said the caption. The boy read it again and again, memorizing it, trying to decipher it. *Catches some air*. He wondered if it had something to do with huffers. He wondered if his father had time to take a deep breath before going underwater.

"I've been in a slump since Portugal," the man said. "Everything's off. You know that feeling, going someplace new, and coming home's like hopping off a moving train?"

"I've never been anywhere new. I'm not even allowed to go to the store."

"You gotta time your jump just right. No sense trying—wait, nowhere?"

"I went on a canoe trip once, with my mom and dad." This sounded shabby, so the boy added, "We went pretty far."

“That’s somewhere.” The man picked up the Garnet Red, covered his mouth, and painted the other high-top the color of old blood. “I can tell what you’re thinking.”

The boy had been staring at sunlight trapezoids quivering on the terrazzo, hoping his father wasn’t somewhere in the lifeguard’s house, watching him. Not so much a thought as a feeling of fear that traveled through him and cleared room for a thought.

“You’re thinking I should wear them just like this,” the man said. “One red, one gold. You think a little thing like that might be all it takes.”

An outburst of talking in the kitchen, then, seconds later, the lifeguard walked in holding a phone to his ear. “We’re out the door,” he said, motioning to the boy. The lifeguard closed the phone, grabbed his visor from the hook. “We need to get you back.”

“What happened?” the boy asked.

“Your father, he’s alive.”

The half-brother leaned forward and shook the boy’s hand. “Pleasure to meet you.” He said it so slowly it sounded like a prediction.

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At the beach, the boy followed the lifeguard into a wooden first-aid hut, where his mother sat next to his father, still wearing his cut-off sweatpants and holding an ice pack to his shoulder. His hair was neatly furrowed with comb tracks. He smiled. “Look at you now,” he said. “Worried as a squirrel. Come here, give me a hug.”

The boy stayed where he was. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m—” He set the ice pack on his lap. “They don’t have a word for what I am. I’m fine. Little waterlogged, but fine. I’m also curious about where your mother let you run off to while I was down there finding my way.”

“He was with me,” the lifeguard answered. “He’s a good kid.”

“You think so?” the father said. “Is that an opinion, or are you just trying to change the subject to something we can all agree on?”

The boy looked at the lifeguard. The lifeguard looked at the mother. She looked at her lap. The boy felt sick. He started counting one, two, three, four....

“Because I agree with you—he is a good kid,” the father said. “And we’re trying to see that he stays one. You know, fostering mind and body, brushing his teeth, teaching him to name all the birds. Common tern, great blue heron, which as you know isn’t blue but gray. Teaching him the limits of

community, about hope and bravery and need. Shit like that.” He paused. “Are you aware that you have a hostile look on your face right now?”

The lifeguard frowned away whatever look was on his face. “Next time you go sailing,” he said on his way out, “try using a real boat. And a life jacket. You wasted a lot of people’s time today.”

“Take care,” he said to the boy.

“Thank you,” the boy’s mother said as the door was closing.

“Time time time,” the father said. The boy hadn’t seen him so gleeful in a while. “Pay attention to what people fill their time with. Noise, trinkets, junk, junk. Everyone talks, no one listens. Too busy living made-up versions of their own lives. Pretending. Expensive pretending. But hell, what do I know? I’m just a farmer.” This was one of his favorite expressions. “Come here,” he told the boy, his voice straining. “I’d like to hug you now.”

The boy hugged his father, smelled a ripe water smell.

“Nothing can happen to me,” he said.

A doctor came to examine him. The father had sand burn on his back and he was dehydrated, but that was all. The doctor gave him a tube of ointment, which the father tossed into a trash can on the way to their truck.

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“Where’d you go?” the boy asked as they drove home. They sat in a row, father, son, mother, in the front seat, the empty trailer rattling behind them.

“I was underwater,” the father said, “holding my breath, waiting for the next idea to come. And you know what? It came.”

Stopped at a red light, the boy watched a red convertible pull up next to them, its automatic top lifting and snapping unhinged like a snake’s jaw. The day was stockpiled with little dreads, animals that lay hidden at the edge of vision until he noticed, then they stepped forward, showed their teeth.

They drove past strip malls and cineplexes and sports bars and law offices and seafood restaurants with signs showing crabs wearing bibs. “We could’ve made anything, *anything*,” the father said, broadly gesturing. “And this is what we made.” The boy listened to his mother roll and unroll her window.

The father slept late the next day. The boy rose early, so he and his mother started work without him. Not the work of the father’s next idea—he kept these to himself until they were ready to execute—but the everyday work of the house.

"No lesson today," the mother said at breakfast. She watched him from the sink, sleepy-looking in a sleeveless sundress. "We'll double up tomorrow."

The boy ate his oatmeal quickly while the mother talked about the essay he was supposed to be reading. She twined her fingers to show the arguments coming together at the end. The boy finished the oatmeal and was still hungry, but he didn't ask for more.

"Was he nice, the lifeguard?" his mother asked. "Did he talk to you?"

"He was okay," the boy said.

"What's he most afraid of? If he were to use one word to describe you, what would it be?"

These weren't real questions. They were part of a game they sometimes played. Watching the men with metal detectors scouring the beach, she'd ask, "What if they started digging and found a trunk of gold? What would they do?"

The boy didn't feel like playing. He stared at his lap where two lumps of oatmeal had fallen, one big, one small, a planet and its moon. "Is it true that the world's gonna end? Is that why he built the boat?"

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"Your father and I don't agree on everything. You can't just give up because a thing doesn't work how you think it should. You fix it." She took his bowl and patted his back. "Remember when you decided to teach yourself to swim without telling us? Walked down to the dock, through the woods in bare feet. He found you on the dock with your toes in the water. He asked what you were doing and you said you were—"

"Talking myself into the lake."

"He loved that." She wet her hands at the sink and smoothed his hair. "He thought it was the greatest thing he ever heard."

"Is that what we're doing, talking ourselves into something?"

Her expression raised a little and fell. It reminded the boy of a kite with no wind. "I don't always know what we're doing," she said.

She handed him two empty milk bottles and kissed his forehead.

Their cabin was on sixteen acres of palmetto scrub and slash pines and fruit trees and a garden, which the boy passed as he walked the bottles to Arturo's. He stopped to feed and water the goats. He grabbed their horns and patted their rigid backs and talked to them in a crazy Hungarian voice: "You must haf to always realize your leemitations." His father didn't want him

to name them—*They're not pets*, he said—but the boy did anyway. He patted Blondie, Bib, Sandstorm.

The walk to Arturo's was terminally familiar, over a hill and around a bend. Atop the hill he looked over the carved-up plots of land. The ocean was twenty minutes away, but there was no sign of it here. No sign of anything but drab stability. He'd never been anywhere. Watching a pair of turkey vultures high overhead pulling invisible ribbons around an invisible maypole, he felt restless. Whatever his parents were protecting him from—by not letting him watch TV, or go to school, or play with other children, or do the countless other unknown things withheld from him—he knew he was ready for it. "You're not missing anything," his father always said. But the boy knew better. Nothing could be worse than this feeling of being held up and impounded; nothing.

He remembered having toys when he was younger: a wooden car, a slingshot, board games, a miniature kitchen with miniature food. He remembered laughing in his sleep, the open promise of morning. He remembered twin sisters sitting next to each other in his house, each with a package in her lap. The boy was allowed to choose one.

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"Never happened," his father assured him when he asked about it. "You must've dreamed it."

The sisters, in their sixties, wore frilled doll dresses, and the boy was afraid of them. Did the boy ever choose a package? He didn't think so. Probably this was why he remembered the sisters. The choice had hung around for years, unmade, embalmed.

"You must've seen some twins at the park or something," his father had said.

Arturo stood at his front door holding his dog by the collar, waiting for the boy. He wore a white T-shirt with the fold marks still visible and a cap with *Give Road Workers a Brake* on it. He waved the boy inside. "Tell me how it went. I want every last detail."

The boy liked Arturo. He lived alone and was big and unserious and at ease with the world. The boy followed him and the dog into the living room where a television played without sound. The boy, describing what happened at the beach, found himself telling the story as he knew Arturo would prefer it, making his father's test run with the boat sound as doomed and incompetent as he could.

"We thought he drowned but he came back," the boy said. "I don't know how. He was underwater for an hour at least."

When the boy finished, Arturo somberly shook his head. "Your father is a madman," he concluded. "One day a news crew will come to tell me about some crime he's committed, and they'll interview me, expecting to hear how normal he was. 'Nope,' I'll say. 'He always seemed exactly like a madman to me.'" He smiled at the boy. "I'm joking, of course. What's your mother think of all this?"

"We don't really talk about it. They've been fighting a lot more lately."

"Your mother's a lovely woman," Arturo said. "She just . . ." He hesitated long enough for the two words to disappear. "I'm glad you stopped by," he said. "You're about the only person I look forward to seeing nowadays. If I had the money I'd rent you from your parents a few hours a day." He paused again and shook his head. "I mean that in the least creepy sense."

On television, a man in a red tie pointed to a map of Florida edged with real-looking clouds that drifted over the state when he gestured east. He smiled and the clouds moved back to the edge and then repeated their slow advance over the state, and then he smiled again. The boy could see that he found pleasure in this.

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"So what's your father onto now?" Arturo said. "Building a space shuttle out of pinecones? A blimp out of dishrags?"

The boy said, "Maybe a machine that turns bad ideas into good ones."

Arturo laughed long and hard—his top teeth were purplish near the gums—and when he stopped it was like staring too long at a lightbulb before switching it off, laughter still glared around his face—and the boy felt a little sick.

Arturo took the empty bottles outside. The boy's father didn't keep cows, so they traded with Arturo. A very old woman on TV walked through a garden above the headline, "Deltona Woman, 102, Smokes Two Cigars a Week."

As the boy was loading the bottles into his backpack, Arturo handed him a plastic computer game called Twenty Questions. A gray screen lit up when Arturo turned it on. He showed the boy how the game worked. "Think of something. Don't say what it is."

The boy thought of milk. Questions appeared on the screen ("Is it shiny?" "Can you mail it?") to which the boy answered either *yes*, *no*, or *sometimes*. Between questions the game made challenging boasts: "Do you really think you can *beat* me? I am getting *closer*."

It guessed *milk* after twelve questions. The boy stared at the answer, amazed. "It is never wrong," Arturo said gravely. "I hate it."

When the boy tried to hand it back, Arturo said, "No, no, it's a gift."

The boy awkwardly thanked him and walked home gazing at the gray screen. He thought of a leopard, raisins, sand, a train, a gun, Abraham Lincoln, a ghost, mold, the alphabet, oatmeal, a broken arm, thirst, happiness, a pear, outer space. Around the bend and over the hill. The game guessed them all.

The father spent the week digging holes. The boy thought he was re-irrigating the garden or maybe laying traps, but he refilled the holes as quickly as he dug them. Was he burying something? Looking for something already buried? The boy stayed out of his way. When he asked his mother if she knew what his father was doing, she said, "What you see is what I see."

The boy saw a man perspiring and mumbling, who seemed to have forgotten all about the boat. No letdown, no I-should-haves. He saw, and heard, his parents arguing, mostly about two things: money and the boy going to school the following year. His father didn't want him to go. "School's only good at getting you used to the idea of school," he said, "and it's not even good at that. There's no point in it anyway."

"Quit it," the mother said. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about our son. Heir to my domain. I'm talking about the future."

"No, you're talking about nothing. It's the only thing you talk about anymore." She closed her eyes for so long the boy thought she'd fallen asleep. She looked pretty, iced over, depleted. "I want him to go to school," she said without opening her eyes.

He saw his father making and unmaking holes. He saw him mixing Quikrete in the work shed. He saw his mother talking to her sister on the phone: "No. Yes. I'm not surprised either. He doesn't. I know, I know. Of course I will."

One day, while the boy was pulling weeds from the garden, his father called him down to a clearing in the woods. His father wore a hat made out of braided palm fronds, and he was holding a shovel. "How you doing?"

"Just finishing up," the boy said. "Do you need some help?"

The father shook his head. "Not yet." He propped his foot on the shoulder of his shovel. "I have a question for you. I want you to be honest with me—can you do that?"

The boy told him yes, though he knew his father wasn't worried about being lied to. He wanted the boy to know it was an important question.

He tamped the blade of the shovel into the ground deep enough for it to stand without him holding it. "You probably heard your mother and me talking. She thinks we're warping you by not sending you to school. And I agree. I think we're warping you into something authentic, something good. But what do I know?"

"She visited a school, Tom Jones or Howard Johnson Elementary or some-such, told me all about it. There's an art room. There's a music room. The teacher's name's Jane and she lets kids call her Jane. Your mother, she sounds so—conventional." *Conventional* sounded like the final stage of a disease. "It's up to you. Say the word, my man. You want to go to that school?"

There was a right answer; the father never asked questions without expecting the boy to know it. "Yes," he said. This was not the right answer.

22 "Okay." The father quickly bent down to scratch his shin. It reminded the boy of how a cat licks itself after stumbling. "Hell, okay. It's settled then."

"I just want to see what it's like."

"Course you do. You're curious. It's human, a human attribute. You feel like you're on an island and planes are whizzing by but you got no arms to signal them, right? Just little dead stumps. Then you think about setting a fire but how are you gonna light a match with your stumps? So you try to yell but you got no voice. I know how it feels. I know exactly." He pulled the shovel from the ground. Well," he sadly concluded, "I guess we need to buy you some goddamn folders or something."

Before the boy returned to the garden, his father used the shovel to trace a careful circle in the sandy soil between them. "Know what that is?" he asked.

"A circle?"

"Nope. It's a button." The boy felt his father's eyes on him while he looked at the ground. "And if you push it, everyone in the world disappears except you and me. The people at the beach, the lifeguards, idiot Arturo, your mom, everyone disappears." He set the shovel aside. "Want to push it?"

"No," the boy said.

The father lifted his left boot, stepped in the center of the circle. "Boom," he said.

Late summer, before school started, the boy's father found the Twenty Questions game hidden beneath a pillowcase on a closet shelf. The boy had run out of words, and the game had mostly sat unused. Every so often, walking back from Arturo's or eating dinner with his parents, he thought of a word and tested the game after his parents had gone to bed, always unsuccessfully.

Topspin. Anxiety. Lightning. Crust.

Does it bring happiness to people? Was it invented?

The father worked all day on the southern edge of their property, which he told the boy was now off-limits. The boy helped his mother with her housework, the garden, and whatever chores she needed to do in town. She was quiet and content-seeming on these trips. She turned on the truck's radio and let the music play. The boy didn't like the songs but he listened carefully to the commercials: "I'm Art Grindel from Art Grindel's Tropic Traveler Motors. I need to sell you a van!" His mother stopped at the supermarket to buy flour and sugar. At the checkout line she grabbed a yellow bag of candy and, after the cashier scanned it, gave it to the boy. "Try one."

The boy opened the bag in front of the supermarket and bit into a red candy. Three textures, hard-soft-hard, and a gratifying sweet nutty tang. They sat on a bench and shared the bag. An elderly woman said, "That's the perfect age," as she approached. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

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The boy looked at his mother and said, "A farmer."

"A farmer. How sweet," the woman said. "I'd give you money if I had some."

"You can be whatever you want," his mother said after the old woman left. She dropped the last two candies into his hand. "Except a farmer."

Together they watched people walk into and out of the supermarket. The boy studied the children, watched how they clung to their parents and fussed and whined. This can't last, he said to himself. He didn't know what it meant exactly. It was something between a thought and the feeling left over after a thought. Steam of breath on glass. This can't last.

"You can be an ice skater," his mother was saying, "a teacher, an electrician, a pastry chef, a jockey, a mortician, a mortician's assistant."

His father was sitting on the front porch, rocking in his chair, when they got home. In his lap was the game. "Damnedest thing," he said. "I heard a beep-beeping from your room and I, well, my first thought was: it's a bomb."

Then I find this up in your closet, squirreled away like contraband. What am I supposed to think about that?"

"It's a game," the boy said.

"I know it's a game. You think I can't tell it's a game?"

"It can guess what you're thinking."

He laughed a slow wind-up laugh. "Is that right? Does it know I'm fixing to break it in half and throw it in the lake?"

"Maybe," the boy said.

"Son of a bitch, maybe! You got this from Arturo, right? Is that who gave it to you? That fat greasy skeptical do-nothing tornado of dog shit?"

"*Calm down,*" the mother shouted. "You said you wouldn't do this." She opened the screen door and went inside with the grocery bag.

"Okay, okay," his father said, then whispered to the boy, "Arturo, right?" His eyes were unfocused, fanatical. A few years ago, the boy might've felt guilty, or at least afraid, but not now. He didn't care. Whatever he said, true or not, would be an excuse. He was out of words, the game had won, the game was nothing. His father had found it and he'd use it to teach him a lesson, his main lesson, the one about how the world worked and how it should work and how these two things would never coincide.

"Going for a ride," the father called through the screen. He grabbed the boy's arm and marched him out to the truck.

"Stop it," the boy said. "That hurts."

His father squeezed harder. "Exactly."

In the truck, backing out of the driveway, the boy could see his mother's face behind the screen, visible, unavailable. Water reflecting sky.

They drove to Arturo's without talking, over the hill and around the bend. The game sat on the seat between them. Farm, the boy thought as he stared at the game. Road. Pointlessness.

At Arturo's his father knocked on the door, then took two steps back. The boy stood behind him, feeling his stomach tighten. Arturo answered the door with a smile, nodding to the father, then to the boy. He wore an apron, stained at the waist. The boy could hear music from the living room television.

"This yours?" the father said, holding up the game.

"Come in, neighbor," Arturo said. "I'm battering catfish. There's enough for us all."

"We'd rather stay out here, thanks. Is this thing yours?"

“No. I gave it to your son. It’s his.”

The boy’s father turned around and threw the game in the direction of Arturo’s barn, scaring a covey of meadowlarks into the air.

“What’s it like,” Arturo said, “to have no control over yourself? Is it fun?”

The father roughly folded his arms across his chest. “I’m so tired of people like you. The problem is, everyone’s like you.”

Arturo shook his head. “Everyone except you. A perfect man, living an ideal, right? No TV, no games, no school, no this, no that. Yet you have a telephone, air conditioning, a truck, a rototiller. No wonder he’s confused. He doesn’t know which century you’re pretending to be in.”

The boy focused on his father’s calf muscles, which tensed as his father stepped forward. It reminded him of a picture in his science book, the one he called Meatman: a body stripped of skin to reveal the red entwining belts of muscle.

“I’m not pretending,” his father said. He sounded breathless. “I have a family, a wife, a son. You have nothing.”

“Yes, you have a family.” Arturo met the boy’s eyes and smiled. “But look, he’s scared of you. Can’t you see? Your wife is, too.”

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The boy heard the bang of the front door before he realized what had happened. The father rushed up the stairs, grabbed Arturo by the waist, and pushed him into his foyer, through the screen. The boy moved closer. Arturo steadied himself and swung his arm and hit the father across the face, a firm slap. He planted his arm on the sofa and struggled to free himself from the father’s grip. Arturo kicked him in the shin, then hit him again and again in the face. It made an awful smacking sound. The boy backed away from the front step while his father retreated, hands over his face, back to the truck. “Silver,” he said through his hands. The boy saw blood around his father’s nose. “Sover,” he said.

“Madman,” Arturo said, wiping his hands on the apron. “This is my home. He comes and assaults me at my home over a game, a game!”

The truck’s engine turned over and the boy got in. “It’s over,” his father said. “All our work, everything.” Guiding the truck into their driveway, he began crying softly. “You’re not afraid of me, are you?” he asked. The boy, embarrassed, couldn’t look at him. He ran inside to his mother while his father stayed in the truck and stared at the cabin through the windshield.

“Don’t tell me what happened,” his mom said when she saw the expression on the boy’s face. So the boy told her.

Morning announcements came through a speaker mounted to the upper left corner of the chalkboard. "Today is Monday," the announcements began, if it was Monday. The boy's teacher, Jane, sometimes asked them to come up to the front of the room and give demonstrations. One girl demonstrated how to open a vacuum-sealed jar; another, how to make a marble disappear. When it was the boy's turn he asked Jane to think of something, an object, anything. She looked to the ceiling, said, "Hmm," tapped her fingers on her desk. "Okay. Got it."

"Can you eat it or drink it?" he asked.

"No."

"Is it alive?"

"No."

"Does it move?"

"Yes."

"Is it common?"

"Yes."

"Can you hold it?"

"No."

"Can you see it?"

"Yes."

"Does everyone have one?"

"Yes."

"Is it scary?"

"Sometimes."

"Is it black?"

"Yes."

"Is it a shadow," the boy said.

"Amazing," the teacher said. "A big hand for Terence, everyone!"

The boys and girls clapped for him, just as they had clapped when the jar opened and the marble disappeared. The boy was quiet and smart, and he wore the wrong clothes, had never heard of anything, and always seemed to be on the brink of some dull, sad confession. His classmates rarely talked to him. But he liked school. He liked the classroom and the teacher and the morning announcements and the easy assignments. This is comfort, he would think as he freed his school supplies from his desk; this is how it should have been all along.

He and his mother moved into a townhouse near the beach. It had wall-to-wall carpeting, a refrigerator with an icemaker, sliding glass doors, a back patio where he could watch people playing tennis. His mother worked selling cemetery plots over the phone, then as a customer service representative at an insurance office. She shopped at the supermarket, bought food the boy had never seen: Rice Krispies, orange cheese, peanut butter, lunchmeat, canned tuna, juice boxes, frozen pizzas, corn chips. She took the boy to see a movie about a robot who falls in love with another robot while cleaning up trash after the apocalypse. The boy walked out of the theater feeling giddy, veneered with sound and light.

He spent weekends with his father. The boy was careful around him, afraid to let on how happy he was, away. One morning his father burned himself while smoking mullet. He sat at the kitchen table with his hand in a bowl of ice watching the boy do his word problems.

"They teaching you anything useful?" he asked, clunking his hand in the ice.

His father seemed so listless and defeated. The boy lied to him constantly. He told him his teacher brought in a snake handler who told them old snakes were less dangerous than young snakes. It was something he read in a hiking magazine. "Young snakes don't know how much venom to use," the boy said.

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"Guess I'm still a young snake then." He lifted his hand out of the ice and looked at his palm, which was pink and swollen. Sinking his hand back into the ice, he looked at the boy for a long time, then said, "You better not grow up and start feeling sorry for me. That's a thing I'd never forgive you for."

"I won't," the boy said.

"Because I could've stayed underwater that day at the beach. I could've made myself very heavy and never come up, but I didn't. Remember that when you start feeling sorry for me."

Another weekend, one of his last with his father, he was walking aimlessly in the woods when he came upon a ridge beneath which was a cemented-over cavern. The boy walked to its edge and into the mouth of it. The inside was dark, but he could tell it was only about fifteen feet deep. He ducked his head and went inside. A kerosene lamp sat in the center of the floor, a pack of matches at its base. The boy lit the lamp, illuminating the inside of the cave, cemented top to bottom, with three chairs molded into the back wall. No other furniture was in the cave. The boy sat in one of the chairs, trying to imagine his father's plans for the cave. A fort? A permanent shelter? He

already felt sorry for his father. He couldn't help it. Feeling sorry for him was as natural as sneezing, as natural as trying to catch yourself when you fall.

Down at his feet, the boy saw something etched into the concrete. He dragged the lamp along the ground and read his father's neat handwriting: Here Is A Distraction. Whenever You Want A Distraction Just Read This.

A sudden downpour. Strings of water fell from the lip of the ridge along the front of the cave, but he was nicely sheltered. He recalled the lifeguard's half-brother and what he'd said about jumping from a moving train, timing it just right.

The boy stood and stared into the woods through the falling water. He pinched out the lamp, he counted to three, he stayed right where he was.