

Curtain Call

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Dr. Hofman's single, gold bullet earring glinted when the instructor stepped under the theatre lights. We all sat in the front rows and stared at the man. The bullet jangled about as he paced around the room. I watched it prance and dance around, independent of Hofman's will. Sometimes I worried the bullet would swing right into his eye, or hook onto his bushy eyebrows.

Suddenly, Hofman came to a stop. I watched him tug on his rainbow suspender with a big exaggerated motion and rub his hand on his clashing paisley shirt. I couldn't tell if the constant chest rubbing was some secret signal gesture, or a rash. I wondered the same thing with the way he would twist and turn his perfectly coiffed handlebar moustache. I realized I couldn't stop staring. Hofman mesmerized me, and that scared me a little. I shook my head and refocused. I looked down at my shabby t-shirt, cheap jeans and ratty sneakers. I was getting self-conscious, comparing myself to some guy who looked like a Keebler elf.

"Hey, James. That's your name right? It's what you said when we took attendance," said a voice to my side. I ignored it.

"I have a question," the voice added.

I turned to the direction of the pestering voice. It'd been awhile since a stranger referred to me by name. It made me uncomfortable. I stared at him blankly, and muttered, "What?"

"Do you think Dr. Hofman's killed someone before,"

asked the stranger.

I grimaced. "Why... why would you ask that?" I asked. "Why would you think this guy would ever kill someone?"

"The earring, it's gotta be a sign that he's been to prison. Like someone who has a tattoo of a spider or like, a guy who carries around one of those switchblade combs."

I eyed him over, and prayed the guy would stop talking to me.

"Also, the name's Clarkston, if you didn't remember."

"I don't think that's a thing we should talk about." I stumbled over my words. I hadn't practiced talking with a stranger in a while.

"Clarkston," he insisted.

"That's great, Clarkston, but wouldn't a normal switchblade be, uh, the real sign of danger?" I asked politely.

He furrowed his brow. "They're impossible to get a hold of, James. I've looked through five flea markets for one, and no luck. Can you believe it's easier to get a knockoff Andúril sword replica in this country than a switchblade?"

"GENTLEMAN," Hofman yelled. "You enrolled in this class; I'd expect you to pay attention to my syllabus. I didn't construct this in heroic couplets simply for you to ignore it."

I winced when I turned to Hofman. I was the center of the teacher's attention. Even worse, I was the center of the class's attention. Sweat dripped from my brow, and my hands felt clammy. I thought I was going to silently coast through the class and avoid all notice. I turned back to Clarkston. He had one hand raised, and he started to speak.

"PROF! The question must be asked," he said before adding a dramatic pause. "Have you ever been in prison?"

I froze in embarrassment. All these eyes focused on Clarkston and me, their vision drilling into my skin. I did the best I could to defend myself. I shrugged my shoulders. I assumed the most "I don't know either" face I could. I looked back at Clarkston, and scanned over his black t-shirt and red chinos. He had thin hair and a big frame and an erratic sense of movement. His hands moved all over the place, and he constantly shifted the position of his legs. I

hated this situation. I hated the glare Hofman stared us down with. The instructor's eyes were bulging out of his skull. I scratched my leg and clenched my butt on the theatre seat's fabric. Clarkston kept his same goofy demeanor.

Hofman started twisting his wispy moustache and broke the tension. "Yes. I had a stint in the hoosegow, the gladiator school. The court brought me in for 'tax evasion,' but they were attempting to silence me." He slammed his fists against his chest like an angry gorilla. "The pigs had to WRESTLE me into the car."

I couldn't bring my distended jaw back up to my skull. I stared at Hofman, who waggled his bushy eyebrows as an "au contraire," masculine gesture. I turned back to Clarkston and saw him tipping his head like he was Humphrey Bogart sporting a Fedora. Whatever secret language Hofman spoke, Clarkston was now fluent in it.

"Students, you should learn from this man here what it means to be an ACTOR. To analyze a face, to break down mannerisms, to get to the core of a person at a mere glance. This man gazed into my soul, like you all must GAZE into your character's soul. Applaud for him."

Dead silence hung in the air for a few seconds.

He coughed into his hand. "Applaud for him, I say," he commanded.

The students provided some half-hearted applause. Clarkston had a big smile on his face, soaking in the attention. I thanked God the ordeal was over. I wiped the sweat from my brow and squeezed my hands together. My fingers stopped shaking and my eyeballs felt like they were going to melt out of my skull. My heart wouldn't stop.

It took twenty minutes and a trip to the bathroom to calm down, but I had a tough time regaining my steely composure. I tried later in class to put up the tough, silent guy act. But Clarkston's constant talking didn't help me. He wouldn't shut up through the rest of class, whispering little jokes to me. Stuff like "Dialogue, more like, dookie log." Fourth graders couldn't survive this barrage of garbage jokes.

Just when the pressure was too much, Hofman started

wrapping up the lecture.

"You've been a lovely audience, and a lovelier group of students. My goal in this class is to teach you more than how to strut across the boards. No, my goal is to help you all change, to grow into new people. Through art and courage, you will become a better you," he soliloquized before turning his back on the class and standing still.

Everyone stood in awe of the genuineness and earnestness of the speech. Some people had a look of disbelief on their face, others looked wonderstruck. I held my poker face.

Hofman then swung around, juttled out his hip and winked. Most of the students' faces turned to a confused expression. I couldn't help but join them. Everyone in class left upset after Hofman swept everyone up with his grand statement and knocked them down with the wink. Not me though. I look upset most of the time. Clarkston stood out though, with his look of reverential glee.

"Acting lessons from an ex-con... look at where we've found ourselves," Clarkston said.

I didn't know who "we" were, but I knew I didn't like it. The stress of being around people usually made me shut up, but with Clarkston, I had to snap at him. "He was imprisoned for tax fraud. White-collar crime." I didn't spit acid at him, but I let him have my mind.

"James," he replied.

I winced again. I didn't like him saying my name, and I didn't want to hear what he said next.

"You underestimate white-collar criminals. Some nasty, nasty boys involved with white-collar crime. Al Capone was arrested for tax evasion. Also, uh.... Martha Stewart?" Clarkston asked himself.

"Yeah... yes?" I responded, shaking some from the disorientation. I hit my daily limit for conversation. I turned away from Clarkston, and started walking towards my car. I didn't say goodbye, or even motion that I was leaving. My head was in a fog and I needed to go home and sleep.

"We should talk again dude. You're a riot," Clarkston exclaimed. "I'm heading home. Safe travels, friend," he said.

“Safe travels yourself, young blood,” Hofman interjected from the opposite side of the parking lot. I jumped at the teacher’s voice, but went with the flow. With Clarkston looking away towards Hofman, I mumbled, “Uh, sure,” and stumbled away to my car.

Getting into my car, I felt the setting sun beat against my face. My 2003 Chevy Malibu’s paintjob was covered in dirt and grime. Garbage littered my ride. There was a Taco Bell wrapper riding shotgun for example. The carpet still smelt like that Buffalo Chicken Roller I dropped on it. The heat of the sun only intensified the smell. The world found a way to make my night just a little worse.

I drove home in silence. I usually play my own music, stuff like nineties R&B or eighties Punk. I don’t like quiet spaces. Quiet spaces remind me of the infinite vacuum of space. The infinite vacuum of space makes me think of the cold impassive nature of death. But tonight, the silence was refreshing. I preferred watching cars pass by and looking at billboards that catch my eye. Lots of weird cult stuff, with weird logos and questionable font choices. Ashebrook was the center of a big cult boom in the 90s. Only a few survived the fad, and they were all benign. Folks who worshipped snakes and barn owls. They display their sacred animals out in the mall I work at. Sometimes they’d even let you pet them if you wanted. I never did. I didn’t want to interact with the handlers. I don’t like interacting with people in general.

I yawned, pulled into my driveway, and entered my house. Dad was in the kitchen, cooking hard boiled eggs and watching Poirot on Netflix. Poirot’s moustache was perfectly styled, like Hofman’s. Dad took a seat and gulped down some beer. His gut protruded from his white shirt and rested over his khaki slacks. He wore long black socks instead of shoes. His hair was sweaty, but not greasy like my thick curls. It looked like work had been tough that day.

“Hey, son, I bought Rite-Aid sushi. The old, expired crunchy kind you like. It’s all yours if you’re hungry,” said Dad.

“That’s okay, Dad,” I replied.

He didn’t turn towards me, but he made his voice louder and more pronounced. “How was the acting class? Did you get the big part in the play?” he joked.

“One of the Goth kids I knew in high school was there,” I responded as flat as possible.

Dad ignored the response. “Make any friends?”

“No.”

“Did you even talk with another person?”

“I wish I didn’t.”

“Yes! Can’t spin that negatively towards me son,” he cried. “Talking to an actual other human on your first day? I’m proud of you, going to the acting thing and being pushed out of your comfort zone. You must have been chatting up a storm! My kid, an actor! This acting thing is better than all I had at your age.”

“Dad, you’re the guy who was living in rural South America at my age.”

“Central America, son.” He paused. “I knew plenty of Nicaraguans who’d push you off a bridge for calling them South American. They’re a proud people.”

“I hear you, Dad, I hear you.”

“Hear what? The acting class thing or the Nicaraguan thing?”

“Both.”

“Good. Dad’s watching out for you, and not crazy for referring to himself in the third person. As a dad, I’m allowed to do that.”

I shrug him off. “I’m going to bed.”

Dad smiled at me, and turned back at the screen. “Good job, pal.”

I marched upstairs, and sat in my room. I looked over the records and posters that hung on my wall. I looked at the sad, overexposed and oversaturated face of Bill Murray on the Scrooged poster. Dad got it for me when he couldn’t find a Rushmore poster. I laid down and rested my head on my pillow.

Summer vacation with Clarkston and Hofman was going to be a nightmare. Dr. Tremper, my psychiatrist, said the acting class would help out with the anxiety. I would

have preferred new medications, but Dad convinced me to try a different route. He said if I had mustered up the courage to get my own job to help save up for college, I had the courage to face this. Dad didn't understand there was a difference between selling pretzels and public performance. I yawned again. Sleep sounded good about now.



Two weeks later, and Hofman's class was fine, so far. I played it smart. What people don't tell you about acting class is its mostly adult day care. There was a lot of rest time, a lot of sitting around, and a lot of games. Word association games, games where you spin around, games where you'd pretend to be an animal. I liked the animal game, 'cause I knew how to work it. I played the solitary and quiet sea cucumber. I'd lie on the ground and filter feed away from the other students.

Clarkston enjoyed ruining these solitary moments for me. He'd lie beside me as a sleepy dog and bark in my ear during the lonely animal game. He also loved to ruin the "improv" games we played in class.

During the improv game, all the students stood in a circle on stage. Two kids would take center stage and play out a scene in the middle. One person would yell a line, the other would follow through. Without fail, Clarkston would always call me into the circle with him. He'd mug for a minute, and then slick his hair back. He'd then pull out his bad British accent, and start the scene. "Hello, constable, are you ready to die?" he'd asked while forming his hand into a finger gun.

I'm not an expert on these things. I've never seen an improv show. But I knew escalating to gun violence immediately was awful. I could tell Clarkston didn't understand the structure of storytelling. He failed to create any tension before introducing the main conflict. I had improved my ability to tell Clarkston off, but not when all eyes were on me like this. Moments like this made me remember why I hate being around all these people in class. I choked some. I couldn't say anything. All that came out of my lips was,

"Yes."

I sounded like an idiot.

"Yes!" Clarkston repeated, before dramatically posing himself like Sam Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*. A shadow of doubt suddenly clouded his face. "Yes?"

He paused again. "James, I don't know if your character is suicidal or you're just being lazy here." He dropped his stance. "In improv, it's called 'yes, and...' Not just 'yes.'"

Hofman put his hands in the timeout formation. He entered the center of the circle with Clarkston and I.

"Clarkston, I love and respect you as a master who loves and respects their apprentice. But you've given James nothing to work with here."

Clarkston bowed his head in shame. "I'm sorry, sensei."

Hofman placed his hand on his chin. "Call him constable," he paused, "and a werewolf. Constable Werewolf."

Clarkston's eyes lit up. "That's beautiful, sir."

Hofman closed his eyes, and tilted his head up towards the ceiling. He breathed out of his nose. "Is there no greater role than the tragic werewolf?"

"What about a Shakespearean role? Or Thornton Wilder?" a girl with frizzy hair asked.

A frown formed on Hofman's face. "Well yeah... but werewolves are good too."

The class stood around quietly. Hofman recomposed himself.

"And congratulations to James for keeping his cool. Everyone, applaud for him! Applaud!"

At this point, people were in tune with Hofman's applause fetish. The circle started applauding half-heartedly for me. I envied Clarkston's ability to soak up praise. Compliments make my knees buckle and my stomach feel sick. To me, this was worse than the time Clarkston fell on me in a group trust exercise. My skinny arms couldn't keep his entire weight up. Or the time he yelled at me mid-monologue to remember my "internal spiritual shark" that grants you the "strength of the sea." I had no clue I had a spiritual shark. Nor did I particularly care.

At least I had peace at my summer job. I worked days

and nights at Wetzels Pretzels. I hated my job, but preferred it to acting class. I still hated working there, though. I would have hated it even if I didn't have my condition. But I did have a coworker there I liked. She may have been one of the few people in general I liked. Her name was Kareena.

"An acting class, huh?" she said while planting her hands on the counter.

"Yes. Yeah," I replied.

"You didn't strike me as an acting type, but who's to say you can't be the next Christian Bale type. You've got a dark edge. How long have you been a part of this thing?"

"Thanks," I nervously responded. "Two weeks." I was just thankful she didn't say Philip Seymour Hoffman or Paul Giamatti.

Kareena had a bored expression on her face. She gazed out to the people walking in the mall. "Don't you hate the look in their eyes as they leer over this leathery salt bread? The look in their eyes when you're serving them corn syrup lemonade and cardboard pretzel poppers?"

I didn't tell Kareena, but I was right alongside those folks. My mutual hatred for the mall was one of the few ways I could connect with our customers. But I hushed up. Kareena was a poet in her spare time, and I was some lonely jerk. I politely nodded and added a "yes."

"But it's fun hanging with you, James. You're a good listener."

"That's great," I grumble.

"And the few times you do talk, it's delightfully acerbic," she added.

"Is acerbic a compliment?" I asked her.

"You can take it as a compliment, if you want," she said as she looked at her watch. "Shifts over, it looks like," she said. She started pulling the latex gloves off and taking off her Wetzels Pretzels visor.

I looked her over for a second. She said she had her dark black hair cut recently. It looked good. I looked at her almond colored eyes, and the shorts she had hidden behind her apron. I turned away. I felt like a leering creep. I felt disgusted. Like when I watched Clarkston flirt with girls in

acting class and drag me along as a wingman.

"Acting would be a cool job, more than just watching upset mall customers," Kareena said to me. "Well, like always, goodbye, James. We'll be seeing each other again... Tuesday?"

"Of course," I blurt.

"Perfect," she said as she walked out of the pretzel counter. I wanted to say goodbye, but I didn't. I felt equal when we wore the goofy uniform, but when she was another girl on the street, I could barely talk to her. I chewed on my lip, and stared up at the clock, trying to assess when my shift ended.

"How goes the pretzel work, old friend?" a familiar voice whispered to me.

I snapped back into reality, and focused on him. In the hard fluorescent light of the mall, it was the Clarkston. Same big head resting on the same pudgy neck. His face was clean shaven, except for the delicate moustache on his lip. What was most surprising was the little blue suit he was wearing. It had bright yellow stripes, accessorized with a pocket square and a piano key tie. Before this summer, I would have reeled in terror at the sight of this guy approaching me. But now, I could shut off whatever part of my brain freaked out at Clarkston's behavior.

"James, I didn't know you were a pretzel artisan! How's your twisting technique? Did you properly knead the dough? Did you apply an even pepperoni count to the pizza pretzels?" Clarkston quipped.

"Lovely seeing you here," I said, stony eyed.

"Lovely seeing YOU here," he said with affection.

I groaned, knowing I was going to ask the question he wanted to hear. "What's with the suit?"

"Oh, this old thing?" he said, before putting his hand in front of his face and assuming a ridiculous pose. "I'll tell you James, I work a temp job playing piano in a jewelry store. The owner's a former ventriloquist, so he lets me borrow some of his old stage suits."

"The dummy's suits or his?" was the first barb I threw at Clarkston. At some point in the summer, I had grown a

thick enough skin to finally throw a good insult at Clarkston. Of course, he took them on the nose. He almost enjoyed them, since he actually got a reaction out of me.

Like clockwork, Clarkston burst into laughter. “James, shots FIRED.” He chuckled for a second. “That’s why I like you! You got the wit! Shame you never share it with the class.”

I bristled at the comment.

Clarkston sensed my hostility, and lowered his voice. “Sorry, dude. I just think you’re funny.”

“Please leave,” I bluntly told him. “If my supervisor sees me chatting with you too long, I’ll get in trouble.”

He perked up a little, but still felt a little jilted. “Gotcha, gotcha. I see you need to sell more mustard cups, which is criminal if you ask me. The sauce should be for free! It’s practically fascist!”

Clarkston stretched my patience thin. “Please, dude, quit ragging on me. Just trying to make 8.15 an hour.”

“Don’t think of me as ragging on you; think of it as an attack on capitalism,” said Clarkston with bravado. “Marx practiced fisticuffs with any who disagreed with him, and he’s beloved and stuff.”

“Beloved?” I asked.

“He’s the Santa Claus of economics.”

The comment caught me off guard, especially in my sour mood. I chuckled for a half second, which delighted Clarkston. The worst part of Clarkston, besides all the other worst parts of Clarkston, is that he had some decent one-liners. He loved it the few moments he got me to drop my guard and laugh. His smile was brimming.

“Okay, James, I’ll let you get back to work. I have to go. Talk to you soon, I hope.”

“Goodbye.”

I watched him walk off.



Three hours later, I had made my way to Ashebrook’s Community Theatre. It was right past the Ashebrook Fictional Animal Fabricated Skull Museum. Before I start-

ed taking the class this semester, I’d never been inside the theatre. As an adult, at least. I had some memories of seeing Peter Pan there as a child. I also saw a children’s production of Glengarry Glen Ross there, I think. But as I got older, I developed a grudge against it. I knew kids in high school who performed here, and I hated them.

Granted, I hated everyone in high school, but theatre kids specifically. They didn’t shower, squabbled with each other, and took themselves too seriously. I mean, my hygiene wasn’t great either. And I took myself too seriously. But I kept quiet about it.

I decided to forget the far off past for a minute. It didn’t feel right in the calm atmosphere of the empty room. I had joined the acting class a month ago, expecting to just hide in the corner for six weeks. I didn’t imagine I’d enjoy it the small amount I had. Even after Clarkston embarrassed me. I mean, I stunk at acting. My dialogue didn’t come out right. I had no control over my body movements, and my voice would sink back into my throat when I forgot a line. But I enjoyed delivering some of the corny dialogue Hofman gave us to read. But only if I didn’t think too hard about my voice.

I also liked how people lowered their guard in class. It made me feel good when other people seemed genuine. I didn’t experience that feeling often. I used to think the theatre was like a prison. But I got used to the building’s dark brick complexion, its plush seating and big bright lights. The velvety curtain remained the most impressive part of the set. I looked around a little and there was no one around. I walked to the front of the room, and gripped the big velvety drape. Its material wasn’t as soft as I expected. I couldn’t tell if it was worn down or if it always felt this way.

“Ah, James, taking a feel for the stage?” said Hofman before he added, “Quite literally!” and laughed at his own joke.

“Yes, sir.” I attempted to chuckle. The chuckle sounded like a dying animal’s final gasp for breath. I made my way back to my regular seat.

When I sat down in my chair, I watched the other

students come in. There were the theatre kids, excited for a chance to show off their chops. There were the older kids who were roped into this class to get some easy credits. They looked unhappy to spend summer evenings in the theatre building. And then there were people you'd only see in Ashebrook. Folks who weren't like the others in class.

The strangest was the mysterious man with the greasy black hair, the dark leather jacket, and trademark aviator glasses. He'd show up once or twice a week, but would come and go from class at his leisure. He always seemed to be looking at me. Sometimes Clarkston would look off at him, with a confused look in his eyes. It's the only time I saw Clarkston look sullen. I'd asked him who the mysterious man was.

"Everybody called him Leather Jacket," is all he would say to me.

"Called him?" I asked.

"I mean, you're making me really intense about tenses here James. Now are you gonna help me come up with dialogue for my magic orangutan character or not?"

I took some acting exercises with the guy for detective work. He only wanted to talk about Kanye West and Rolex watches. I stood there, sweated profusely, and nodded. After that, I avoided talking to him. The only other time he interacted with me, he took me aside and asked me about Clarkston.

"Does he smell like a tire store?"

"I mean, if you're talking about his thick cologne, sure," I answered.

"Good," he said before leaving class again, leaving me scared and confused. I wasn't even sure if he was a student in the class.

Still, there were other strange folks in the class. There was the guy who carried the acoustic guitar around in the big case plastered with stickers. There was every single kind of sticker on the case. There were stickers of places, shoe brands, musicians, video game characters, and movie posters. It was a technicolor prism with a plastic-y sheen.

As I focused on his case, a girl walked up to the seat

next to me. I didn't turn my head. I didn't want my eyes to meet hers, and I did NOT want her to sit next to me. I sat in the furthest right seat of the least popular row, to make sure two students would never surround me. Clarkston was the only person who sat next to me. But he was a known evil, and she was an unknown element. My anxiety spiked up, and I gripped my fingers together. They only got tighter as she sat down next to me.

"Howdy, neighbor. Playing shy?" I turned toward her slowly. I recognized her voice from yelling out the Shakespeare suggestion that almost made Hofman cry. She had a pale face, and a curly tangle of orange hair. She wore librarian glasses, an old yellow sweater, a pair of jeans, and a pair of generic brand sneakers. I brought my eyes up to see her face. I also noticed the Led Zeppelin ZOSO symbols tattooed on her right hand. In my eyes, she was the theatre kid I spent all of high school avoiding. My eyes met hers, and I blinked in surprise. She looked back, confused but smiling.

"Is Clarkston sitting with you today?" she asked me.

I looked around. I realized Clarkston wasn't around. "I mean, he's not here now," I answered honestly.

She moaned for a second. "Where's your friend? I wanted to pick his brain. He's like a poet."

A lump formed in my throat. "He's not my friend," I said in a hushed tone.

"Oh, you two are friends," she replied before raising her hand up and giving me a thumbs-up. "I sense a connection between you two. You guys give off an aura. I don't do yoga, so I can't like, physically see auras, but I know auras, and you two got an aura."

"What kind of an aura?"

"Friendship aura. You're like Sonny and Cher. He's the Cher." She grinned at me. I think she thought that I thought the joke she thought up was good.

I didn't get the reference.

I stared at her with wide eyes.

She glanced around for a minute.

"We're all Cher in our own special way, if it makes you

feel better.”

“Yes.”

More silence.

“The name is Camilla, by the way. I like meeting interesting folks, like you and your friend.”

I clasped my nervous hands together. Before I could speak, I heard hair bristle between me and Camilla. “And I... am Hofman,” the professor whispered in my ear, his head jutting between me and Camilla’s faces. I had to yell “JESUS.”

“Yes, James, but which Jesus? The prophet? The revolutionary? The martyr? Or the prince... Tell me James, what is your Jesus?”

“The uh... the New Testament one.”

“James, that is an old testament. Your testament will be a new testament, a testament to your own vision.” Hofman panted after yelling that. The man thought he was dropping pure poetry on us.

“That was beautiful,” Camilla whispered to herself as Hofman walked back onto stage.

I usually kept to myself, but I had to know. “You can make out half of what this guy is saying?”

She put her hand to her forehead. “No wonder you keep Clarkston around. You need a genius like him to spell out the finer things these geniuses are putting on your plate. These two philosophers are putting out real stuff, intellectual vegetables. Kids like you gotta eat these vegetables.”

I didn’t know how to respond. It reminded me of how theater kids talked over me in high school. “I, uh, I don’t mean to insult, or hurt, or make fun of you but, I... I think some of his stuff... his lecture is a bit corny.”

“No, it’s not,” she said with authority. “Corn isn’t even a vegetable, James. It’s a fruit.”

Why do people think knowing random trivia makes them smarter than me?

“I’m going to be your temporary Clarkston. At least until he can come back here and get your head out of your ass.”

I wanted to slam my head against the wall. Do I only

attract wierdos in this class? At least she didn’t yell and attract everyone’s attention in class like Clarkston. But what was with her assumption that me and Clarkston were best pals. Did everyone else in class think he and I were best buds?

When class wrapped up that evening, Hofman raised his hands into the air. “Children!” Hofman yelled. “Tonight’s exercise: you will journey into the world of a fellow human being. That’s right, you will grasp onto the ties that bind us all as one, one life, one soul, a collective unconscious, Jungian in scope. Group together with some others, and go somewhere else. Write me a report on the proceedings. Or a poem. Sculpture works too.”

I hated the assignment already. I mean, the writing part didn’t bother me. Hofman was an easy grader. The last paper I turned in, he filled the margins with stars. He wrote on the back, “The sun we see in the sky is actually a projection of light the true sun released 8 minutes ago.” I assumed that was an A. No, I hated this assignment because I hated having to choose a group. Or worse, having a group choose me.

“You’re in my crew now, James. You want some Deny’s?” Camilla said to me.

Before I knew it, I was in the back of a Ford Torres. Camilla drove, and a hairy guy sat in the passenger seat. He had a big thick head of hair, bushy sideburns, hair cascading down his arms. I wondered if he had Hobbit feet. Just then, Captain Caveman rested his hand on Camilla’s thigh. I grimaced. I was trapped in a moving vehicle with a couple. Maybe this acting class was working. Before this summer, I’d be scratching my fingernails against the window trying to escape.

“Oh, I probably should have introduced this guy here. This is my boyfriend, Braydon. He’s a poet, a musician, and a soothsayer. You’d probably recognize his guitar case. The one with the stickers?” Camilla said.

He whipped his head back towards me. I flinched at the speed.

“Ya like dogs?” Braydon asked.

The question struck me dumb. “Uh, um... sure?”

“I, too,” he paused. “Like dogs.”

Camilla took her hands off the steering wheel and clapped her hands together. “I told you, the man I love is a poet. I’d kiss you right now if I wasn’t so near this round-about.”

We drove for a few minutes, and pulled into the Denny’s parking lot. We exited the vehicle, and entered into the Denny’s. It still smelt of desperation and maple syrup. The plastic chairs looked battered and beaten. The booths’ faux-leather had cracked and faded. A memory sparked in my head. This was the Denny’s where I had my seventh birthday party.

I’m still not sure why Dad thought Denny’s would be a great place to throw a seven year old’s birthday party. It didn’t matter in the long run, because the party ended horribly. My sort-of friend Mark got stuck in the toilet. Paramedics struggled to get him out, and everyone forgot my birthday. The toilet trapped him in there for two weeks and became a local sensation. Only in Ashebrook can a toilet boy become the talk of the town. He actually got some local pick-up, signed up with an agent, and starred in some ads. His career never blew up like his parents wanted, though.

“Flashing back to better days, James? A lot of good memories in this Denny’s?”

“I was thinking about how show business is hard.”

“James, we don’t have time to contemplate how modern capitalism devalues art and the humanities. We have something far more important to discuss, which is pancakes.”

The waitress walked over and tapped her pencil against her pad. “Can I take your guys order?”

“I want a lot of eggs” Braydon asked.

“How many eggs?” the waitress replied.

Braydon tapped his fingers on the table. “I want two fried eggs, two poached eggs, a hardboiled egg, cut in half, all on top of a bed of scrambled eggs.”

She scribbled the egg-filled order down. “Would you like toast with that?”

“Just eggs.”

I was dry heaving. What could be running through the waitresses mind right now? Did she think I was friends with the egg lover? I turned to Camilla, who started to run her order.

“Pancakes. I don’t care how they get in front of me, at what state. Bring a griddle and I’ll flip ‘em myself.”

“Ma’am, we offer and unlimited pancakes deal...”

Camilla furrowed her brow. “You offer unlimited pancakes, but do you deliver unlimited pancakes?” Her voice was condescending, like she was talking to a child. I asked myself, is this waitress going call the police on us? I shuffled around in my seat.

“Y-yes,” the waitress said, her hands trembling. The waitress kept one eye on Camilla as she scribbled down her order. She finally turned towards me. Her hands were shaking some, and she kept touching her face to make sure this was real. I must have been shaking with nervousness, thus making her nervous. This made me nervous, creating a nervous feedback loop.

“James, you gonna order something?” Camilla barked.

I ordered the first thing I saw on the menu. “Hashed browns.”

The woman looked at me for a minute. “Just hash browns?”

“Yes?” My throat was dry. This felt like a horrible set-up with a terrible punchline, and I was the butt of it all. I scratched my knee, rubbed my thigh, and pressed my feet together. I used to have my dad order food at restaurants for me. This was before I started working on my anxiety, before I could hold down a job. The nightmare I always feared was playing out before me. Who just orders hash browns? Who calls them hashed browns? I wanted to run to the bathroom and throw up. I couldn’t get out of my own head. I couldn’t breathe.

“Just hash browns are fine; it’s what he likes. Breakfast foods make him nervous,” said a familiar voice.

I turned to my right, and there was Clarkston. He had an arm on my shoulder. I used to bristle when people touched me, but Clarkston’s hand was weirdly reassuring.

He was a weirdo, but he was the weirdo I was familiar with.

“Uh, are you joining this table?” the waitress asked.

“Of course he’s joining the table,” Camilla said.

Clarkston pointed to the seat next to me. “I will join this table.”

The waitress gave up trying to sort us out. “I’ll be back with the rest of your food soon,” she said. “And I’ll take your order next,” she gestured to Clarkston.

She walked away. I felt relieved. I hadn’t felt relieved like this in a long time. Usually, Clarkston made me feel anxious, but now, I felt a weight off my shoulders.

“Clarkston, I presume. I’m Camilla, and I’m a huge fan of yours. Same with my boyfriend. Your pal James said you couldn’t make it today, but you made it here. Where were you?”

“Late. By the time I got to the class building, I got paired with Leather Jacket. He’s over there,” he said as he pointed over to the man in another booth. “I came to say ‘hi’ to my bud, James, and his new buds. But I saw him having a hard time and had to help out.”

I was kind of shocked, hearing someone was watching out for me. I didn’t want to say that to myself.

“You saw me confused here,” I asked.

“We’ve been friends for a while, dude. I can tell when you’re not feeling alright.”

I stopped rubbing my thigh for a second. The tight clench of my two hands loosened. I looked around at Camilla and Braydon. It weirded me out, seeing someone concerned about me from a distance. But that word lingered in my head. Distance. My fists started to clench up. Distance, it reverberated through my head. My anxiety started to flare. I stood up, and started walking out of the restaurant. I didn’t look at any of them as I left. I could tell their eyes were following me. I pulled my phone and called my dad. He picked up.

“Where are you, bud? Why’d you text me that class would be out late?”

“Pick me up.”

“I mean, I will. But where?”

“Denny’s.”

“The Trap-Toilet Denny’s, or the Denny’s by the highway?”

“Trap-Toilet.”

He whistled for a second, then paused. “A lot of nostalgia at that Denny’s, I loved that place—” I hung up on him.

Clarkston stepped out of the Denny’s. He had a worried look on his face, like a child who had done something wrong. He held his hands behind his back.

“I just wanna say, I apologize if the semi-stalking offended you. Or if it’s because I associated with Leather Jacket. He’s a sweet guy, and we were just reconnecting. But I still want to be friends with you...”

“And I don’t,” I yelled at him. My palms were sweaty. “You’re not my friend. I didn’t agree to that.”

“Agree to what? We have fun in class together. That’s fine right?”

“You have fun in class! I’m miserable! I feel like hot garbage every night. I’m in a constant state of misery!” I said while gripping my own arm tightly. “Why did you even attempt to hang out with me? To laugh at me? To make me a laughingstock in class?”

Clarkston paused for a minute. He looked contemplative, staring at his feet. “You didn’t look like you had a lot of friends.”

We stood there in silence. I didn’t want to look him in the eye.

He cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

I didn’t answer him.

“James...” he tried to get my attention, but I refused to look at him. “James, Leather Jacket invited us to a party Thursday. It’ll be the night before the presentation next Friday. You can come. It’ll be fun, the two of us.”

I didn’t answer him. We stood in that Denny’s parking lot for twenty minutes in silence. This was not the first time I felt lonely and alone in a Denny’s parking lot. When Dad finally arrived, I stepped in the car and rested my forehead against the dashboard.

“Hey, bud,” Dad said as he put the car in drive. “Who’s

the guy waving you off? That your buddy Clarkston you're always going on about?"

"He's not my friend and he's not going to be my friend."

"Buddy..." Dad sighed.

"I don't need an asshole like that for a friend."

I stared at my lap for the ride home. I didn't talk to my dad, and I didn't look at my phone. Dad yawned, and drew my attention towards him. He scratched his head and kept his eyes on the road. His mouth went agape, like he couldn't talk but he wanted to. He started to speak. I tried not to listen.

"Son, I try my best to understand what you're going through, 'cause I wanna support you. When you got the Wetzels Pretzels job, I was thrilled, 'cause it showed me you could handle the real world."

"And I can handle it without people," I paused. "Like him."

"Just don't push away the people who care about you pal," he said. "And I didn't mean to be insensitive. Just don't push people away."

I ignored him and stared into my lap again as we drove home.

I enjoyed that next week of Hofman's class. I enjoyed sitting by myself again. I enjoyed not having to talk with others. I had a blast driving home in my shitty car and getting shitty sleep alone. He kept his distance, and so did Camilla. He understood now that I didn't need him and he didn't need me. As a friend, or a punching bag for his jokes.

On my Thursday shift at the Wetzels Pretzels, Karena asked me again about the acting class, and I told her nothing.

"Why are you so cagey today, dude?"

I sighed passive aggressively.

"Really cute, dude," she quipped back.

I took it literally at first, and my smile perked up. Then the sarcasm dawned on me.

"I'm normal. I'm fine."

"You haven't been normal or fine in a while. You've just

been pissy."

"Thank you," I grunted.

"Well, now that you've gotten the baby bullshit over with, it looks like I'm heading out to a party," she said to herself.

I scratched the back of my neck, and coughed up a question. "Leather Jacket's?"

"You're psychic now too, dude?" she asked condescendingly. "Yeah, you going?"

"I don't do parties," I respond in a harsh tone. "It's all creeps and weirdos. There's like... no nice guys. Like me. And Clarkston will be there..."

"You didn't seem like the party type," she responded. "Leather Jacket might be a bit too strange for you, and I'm sure there'll be a lot nice guys like you at the party. Nice guys who creep on me and act cagey whenever anyone tries to approach them. Just me, nice guys, and your precious friend Clarkston."

"He's not my friend."

"Why would he be?" she said as she took her uniform off and left for the exit. I watched as she left, unable to say anything. She passed the cultists' booth and the store that only sold bird feeder equipment. Then she was gone. I couldn't tell what I felt right now. I was mad at her, and at myself.

I felt like it was Clarkston's fault.

I made it early to class again, mostly because I didn't want to stay at the mall. I couldn't believe I thought for a minute this place wasn't a prison. The brick was suffocating, and the carpet was a pain to walk on. I hated it here as much as that first day.

"James, how are you?" Hofman asked as I entered the building that evening.

"Good. Fine," I said, not putting much thought into the response.

"I was hoping you'd be here early again, my son," Hofman said before propping his leg up on the seat next to me. I took a step aside with all subtlety I could.

I tried to give him as flat as response as possible. "Is

this about the presentations tomorrow?”

“No... it’s about your acting in general. You seem out of it, and you haven’t been performing with Clarkston recently. It made me happy, seeing you two get closer. He needed you.”

Needed to torture me, I thought to myself.

“I, uh, shouldn’t say this, but Clarkston’s an import from Pembroke Private School. The school started by the famous glue salesman? The one whose ghost still haunts the halls to this day?”

I started to tune him out.

“I know this must be old history to you, but kids bullied him his last year in high school. Brutal stuff, honestly. You probably know about his breakdown. He closed up for a year after that. A teacher recommended my class to his mom, to get him out of the shell. I’ve emailed with her some about it. Told her about you. Before you, Clarkston shut off to other people. But it looked like he found a kindred spirit.”

I looked over at Hofman in shock. He arched his eyebrows and frowned.

“And now it looks like it’s over,” Hofman said. “It’s a shame, him locking out others again. But you tried your best. Maybe that’s why he liked you, I think.”

It didn’t feel right. Clarkston, the same guy who wanted to be buddy-buddy with me was haunted with emotional problems. The guy who always clung to me, the guy who was emotionally reliant on a stranger, had issues.

The realization struck me like whiplash.

“He joined the class to improve himself?” I asked.

“It’s what his teacher told me. I’m sorry if this is new to you, but I mean, he’s your friend right? You were the first person to respond to him in class after everyone pushed him off.”

“Oh,” was all I could mutter. It didn’t dawn on me, ‘cause I was in my own little world at the time. I didn’t realize there was another person like myself in the class. I didn’t realize that as he sat next to me each night. I didn’t know he came here to improve myself while I zoned out in

class and pitied myself.

“If you need help patching things up, just ask me for help,” he said to me as he turned away. He then gave me the wink, hip-turn combo. I squirmed for a second.

My mind was racing after the revelation, but I plodded over to my usual seat. I sat down and gripped my two hands together, and waited. I didn’t want to face Clarkston or apologize to him, but I wanted to see him come in again. I wanted to reevaluate the guy after learning about his past.

As my eyes stumbled around the room, Camilla sat down next to me.

“James, you looking for Clarkston?”

I didn’t answer. I just started twisting my head around looking for him.

“He’s at the party he was telling you about, at Leather Jacket’s. He’s skipping class today. He texted me that, and directions to the party if I wanted to come. I can forward them to you,” she muttered stoically.

I turned to her.

“In case you wanted to apologize with him, or for him to apologize to you. I’m not sure. Me and Braydon watched your guys argument from the Denny’s window. We couldn’t tell what it was about, but it shouldn’t break you two up.”

I looked her in the eyes for the first time. “I was being an idiot.”

“Well, being an idiot isn’t worth ending your guys’ friendship.”

“Why are you helping us?” I paused. “Clarkston out?”

“To be honest,” she sighed. “Me and Braydon broke up that same night. We ate all your hash browns, alongside my pancakes and his eggs. Don’t worry about the tab by the way,” she added.

“That’s not that important right now,” I said.

“Well, he got stuck in a Denny’s toilet. He screamed for me to help tear him out. I tugged and tugged, and I got sweaty, and emotions started to pour out. A lot of things came out, and now both of us are too scared to apologize to each other. Don’t be like us, James.”

Her conclusion seemed rushed and poorly structured, but it tugged at my heart some. She looked down at her lap, and scratched her thigh. I could see her eyes get a little glassy as a well of water formed in her eye.

“It’ll be alright, Camilla,” I comforted her. I rest my hand on her shoulder and gave her a delicate hug. It was the first hug I’d given to a person in, what, two years? It was with my dad, and it looked very sad at the time.

She started staring at me with her glassy eyes.

She kept staring.

I tilted my head.

“Go leave for the party now so you can help apologize.”

“But it’s still class, and there’s the presentation tomorrow.”

She stomped on my foot. I winced in pain, and a tear dribbled down my face. I raised my hand. Hofman, animated as ever, answered my raised hand with a boisterous “Yes, mein apprentice?”

My foot hurt like hell. “I need to check out for the night, actually. I have to, uh...”

“Find a friend?” Hofman said before nodding.

“Y-yes,” I timidly responded.

“Of course.”

I exited the building while running my hand against its brick wall. It was raining outside as I walked to my car. The rain turned my windshield into a dirty mess. I wiped it away with my hand while pressing the unlock button on my grimy key fob. I sat down in my seat. It smelled like rain in the car instead of Buffalo Chicken Roller for once. I took out my phone and looked at the address Camilla had forwarded me. I took my Taco Bell wrapper, and threw it out the window. I wasn’t sure what I was doing, but I was going to do it.

The party was located out in the hills, where few lived. For three-fourths of the year, the wind blasted everyone who lived there and few could stand it. Leather Jacket’s home felt alone in the hills. A few hundred people crowded around his old wood home. It looked like a mismatched, Midwestern Gatsby party on the West Egg.

There was a mix of normal people attracted by the scent of free booze, and then the stranger half of Ashebrook. A lot of cult folk, bridge-livers, and people who wore a lot of leather. The strange folks gathered around Leather Jacket. He sat on a tall, plastic-looking chair with two Tiki torches strapped to it. He was still wearing sunglasses even though it was night. He rested his chin on his fist like a bored conqueror. His greasy hair cascaded down his head. His shorts were too long to really be shorts, but they weren’t pants. He propped his head up when I entered his domain. As I got closer, I saw the black eye swollen beneath his shades.

“Hello, James,” he yelled.

“Yes, hello,” I said, stalling for time. I didn’t know if I was supposed to call him by his Christian name or Leather Jacket. His goons were staring daggers at me. But he waved his hand, telling them to step aside.

“You came looking for Clarkston?”

“I’m looking for him, yes,” I answered while fixated on his swollen, pulpy eye.

The lackeys started to lurch towards me, but Leather Jacket held them back. “He’s in trouble, off... somewhere or other.”

“Why’s that?” I asked. I started gripping my hands tightly together.

“He may or may not be confronting his high school bullies. Or stuck in a ditch somewhere. I’m hoping for the latter,” he answered. “You may not know this, James, but Clarkston and I, we go way back. He and I were friends in high school. Clarkston loved making trouble, and I tried my best to get him out of it.

He sighed. “That was until our senior year. Pembroke is a weird school, and I got sick of it, and my stepdad. I left to make my fortune selling these bad boys,” he said while toying with his leather jacket’s collars. “I thought Clarkston had toughened up when I left him, and he had. I didn’t learn until this year that the wolves set in on him when I left. He didn’t even send me a message about it. He didn’t want to bother me. The guy’s always been too brave. And a little stupid.”

I nodded my head, agreeing with the statement.

“Well, now some of those bullies from Pembroke,” he paused, “who I didn’t invite, by the way. They set in on a young couple hanging out here.”

“A lesbian couple,” a crony in a beanie yelled.

“Just a couple, dude. It’s the twenty-first century,” he sighed. “Anyway, me and the crew fought the meatheads off, but Clarkston wouldn’t have it. He was aggravated. He told me the people he cared about kept leaving him, no matter how hard he tried. He felt like he had to stop the bullies from taking it all away from him. I told him to stop, but he wouldn’t. He left in the direction opposite the hill you parked on.”

“I parked near the house.”

He gripped his temples in frustration. “There was signage that clearly explained the parking structure. I planned this out, dude. You don’t make a fortune on affordable leather goods without structure!” He spat out, with some of his saliva landing on one of his cronies. “I’m sorry about that, Greg. So, anyway, one of the girls who was being harassed left to go find him and help him out, but I don’t know if she can talk sense into him. But you can.”

I wasn’t prepared for that response.

“Why me?” I muttered. “You’re his oldest friend. I’m some creep he met in an acting class.”

“For one, he feels indebted to me in a strange way,” he said while pointing to his black eye. “Number two, we’re keeping around here in case those jerks come back. And third, I believe in you, James. When I came to this acting class those two or three times, I was checking in on Clarkston. You kept with him when no one else would. That’s what he told me at Denny’s that night before your little break-up. I want you to make up with and bring him back.”

I stared down at my own feet. “We’re not even really friends...”

“Well, at least act like he’s your friend. You’re the only person besides me who’s given him that before,” he said. He stepped down from his throne and rested his hand on my shoulder. “You’re a smart guy. Just get Clarkston back here

before he hurts himself. That’s all I ask, James.”

I coughed a little, and sighed. I gripped my hands together again. I squeezed as hard as I could. I looked back into Leather Jacket’s eyes. “Before I go, can I borrow a leather jacket? Just for the cold? Or to look intimidating if those assholes come around?”

Leather Jacket nodded. “Trevor, give the man your leather jacket for now.”

I put the smooth leather on. I felt cool for the first time in a long time. Like a badass Fonzie. I then felt bad that I called myself a badass Fonzie.

“Godspeed, James,” he said before collapsing. The fight must of been worse than he described it. I looked on his cronies, who looked similarly beat on. I guess it was up to me now.

“Hey uh, real quick,” Trevor said. “My lucky Alf pogs are in that jacket. Do you, uh, mind handing those back to me?”

“I mean... I’m looking for Clarkston. Do you mind if I keep the good luck charm?” I asked.

He looked a little beside himself, and looked around at all his friends. He saw the disappointed look on all their faces.

“Yeah... keep ‘em... but I’ll need them back.”

I left. I had lost a lot of weight due to the constant anxiety, but I wasn’t big on physical fitness either. I felt like my lungs were going to melt out of my chest running around in these hills. The partygoers faded away as I traveled further into the darkness. The moon was full, but there was too little light to make out what was before me.

I tripped face first into a quarry. I felt a sting in my leg, and gripped my hands around the pain. It stung like hell. It felt limp and lifeless. As the pain roared in my leg, I noticed a simple watch laying in the fissure. I picked it up and analyzed it. Even in the darkness, I could tell it was the watch Kareena wore to work every day. When I came to that realization, I heard a yelp erupt from a few yards away. I peeked out of the ditch and saw the fight in front of me.

Kareena was there on the ground, bleeding from the head. Next to her, three tall thug looking guys were kicking

Clarkston around like a soccer ball. I flinched at the sight of the goons beating on defenseless Clarkston. Seeing that blunted any pain I felt in my leg. Here they were, kicking the shit out of Clarkston, and I couldn't do a thing.

I squeezed the palms of my hands together. I would be no good in a fight, even without a lame leg. I had no combat skills, no weapon. I just had the two skills I regretfully learned this summer. This called for some acting and improvisation.

I pulled myself from my shallow grave, and started shuffling over. My eyes were gaunt. Here I am about to face a real physical threat. My legs trembled and my head felt foggy. This had to be all fight, no flight. I searched through all the cult knowledge in my head.

I took in a deep breath, and prepared the most authoritarian voice I muster. "Hello, young bloods. What brings you to the site of the sacred serpents?"

My authoritarian voice was a bad impression of Hofman?

The three angry young men paused for a few seconds. The first one with slick hair answered back first. "We meant you no trouble, sage of dark scales."

The second one punched the first in the arm. "Dude, he's just some nerd who owns a tank with a snake. Don't be such a pussy."

The third, most intimidating looking dude spoke last. "What do you want us to say? Like we're aggressively displaying our masculinity here by attacking our friend Clarkston here, a person we don't understand. Like, it makes us feel whole and complete in a world where our importance as white, heterosexual males is quickly becoming irrelevant."

The other two stood silent, before the third one piped up again. "Cause we aren't doing that. We're beating the crap out of this nerd."

I felt my tongue dry up after hearing the response. Even with the idiotic ending, that was a little too intelligent a response. But I had to follow my plan. I had them distracted at least. Clarkston had collapsed to his knees, but even in the darkness, I could tell he was still conscious.

"I'm a priest of the Superior Snake, the copperhead, and you are inciting violence on our land."

The two nervous goons started to shutter. "I don't like possessed or normal snakes, dude," one of the two said.

The most intimidating goon stood his ground. "So what? We're all six foot jerks with little to no regard for others' personal concern. Besides, my dad belonged to a cult, one of the weird sex and murder ones, and now he manages a Lady's Footlocker. My dad's not scary at all," he said before turning to me. "What can you do to stop us? Enchant us with a nerdy D 'n' D spell? Let's"

Now was the time to sell it. It. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, and went to Youtube. I plugged slithering snake into the search bar, and started a video. I prayed the goons couldn't see the screen's light. I rubbed my fingers around Trevors lucky Alf pogs in my right pocket. I could see the dark figures gesture towards me, coming closer. I heard noise playing from the phone, some distorted slithering playing from little speakers. But it was enough.

I cleared my throat again. They were coming closer and closer, but I had faith in the plan.

"You may not fear me, sniveling children. But, you must fear the deadly Copperhead."

I dropped the phone then. It was the gamble that'd determine if Clarkston, the girl, and I were making it home tonight. If they saw the light from my phone, or could tell it was just a sound, I was dead. All I could do was not break eye contact with their silhouettes. I needed absolute faith in my bluff.

I stared them down. One of them turned around. "Dude, I'm not going to get my ass bitten by a snake just to beat the crap out of a dweeb." Like that, he started running away.

Another goon spoke up. "I'm not gonna deal with some creepy guy like your dad."

The most intimidating guy spoke up. His voice sounded hollow, like his friend had betrayed him. "My dad's not creepy."

"He has the weird eye and a bullet earring. And snakes

are scary as hell. I'm getting the fuck out of here," was all he said before he started running.

As the two ran off, the intimidating bully with the cult dad fixated me. He started to walk towards me. My leg stiffened up on me in pain. It hurt so bad I couldn't run. He was getting closer and closer. I could start making out his face, and his mouth started moving.

"They're cowards, but I'm not. Well I mean, I am a coward for beating the pulp out of this defenseless guy here," he said as he calmly turned to a prone Clarkston and stomped on his hand. Clarkston wailed in pain. He turned back to me. "That's a joke by the way. I'm very secure about myself and who I am. Which is a nerd-puncher. Like you, nerd. You're no snake cultist; you're just a wimp for me to take my rage out on. My completely justified rage. So yes, you really think you can defend your fat friend and the dyke with your little bluff?" he said, coming closer and closer. He seemed to get taller and taller as he got closer. His frame was massive, like he towered over me.

"Do you have any last words, Mr. Snake Cultist?"

"Clarkston," I said. "I'm sorry."

"That's too cute, asshole." He wound his arm up for a punch. His fist looked massive. I empathized with Clarkston for a minute, having to deal with this throughout high school. Just then, a hurdling mass came from the back. Like a wrecking ball, Clarkston came in and bull rushed the guy.

"Get in on this tackle, James," Clarkston growled. I didn't think. I leapt out and joined Clarkston's coordinated strike. The bully's legs were like tree trunks, but we had the element of surprise. We used our leverage to our advantage, and had him tumbling down the hill. Just then, one of his rough palms collided with my head and dragged me down with him. In a split second, I saw Clarkston falling as well. The creep was dragging us downhill with him.

We all rolled down the hill together. The first time I bashed my knee against the ground, it stung like hell. The second time, the pain was twice as bad. I even heard a little crunch. After that, I heard Mr. Bully wail as his head bashed against something hard. Either a rock or my knee. I

wanted it to be my leg. I'd like to imagine that was my one good hit against the guy. But that wasn't what was important. I was conscious, and I needed to make sure Clarkston was okay.

I felt the rain start to pour down again.

"I think I sat on his head at some point during the fall," Clarkston said, between coughs. "You got here at the right time, James. You were the one watching out for me this time."

"Thanks."

"Sorry if I forced the friend-" he said before hacking up a little blood. "Let me start over. I'm sorry I forced the friend thing on you. I tend to get overzealous with people. I-" he wheezed now. "I have a tendency to drive people away. Because of that, I sometimes keep people at a distance. But when I saw you alone, well..."

I wanted to give him a meaningful resistance, but I felt my consciousness start to fade. All I could say was, "Jesus, my leg."

"What's that?" Clarkston asked.

"It's nothing, I'm sorry. My leg hurts like hell. I tend to get anxious. I think people have ulterior motives against me. I thought you had an ulterior motive. Sorry about that."

"Nope. Not a single one," Clarkston laughed.

"How'd this happen, by the way?" I asked, my grip on reality fading away.

"Your friend, Kareena, she was with her girlfriend."

I stopped him for a second. I couldn't tell if I heard wrong because of the pain. "Girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend."

I gritted my teeth. It was better to receive the news this way than learn about it under more unfortunate circumstances. "Let's skip to when you confronted them."

Clarkston gave a hoarse laugh. "Sorry, buddy."

Some blood trickled from my nose, but I wiped it away. "Please, skip."

"They caught me out here and put me in the headlock. They had perfected it on me in 12th grade and wanted to test it out again."

“Those were your old high school bullies?” I asked, before planting a foot in the unconscious man’s side. Clarkston and I sat at the bottom of the hill. A sharp pain started emitting from my leg once the adrenaline died down.

“They were, but I’m not really scared of them anymore. Not when you and Leather Jacket still have my back.” Clarkston said.

“You all right, Clarkston?” Kareena’s voice traveled down the hill. “Carrie called me and woke me up. She’s called the police already” she said while holding a hand to her forehead. I didn’t like the mention of this Carrie. “Also, I found some Alf pogs lying around, and I am feeling very dizzy. Did you beat them in a pog dual or something?”

“Clarkston and James here. All’s good.”

“We did it, Kareena. Somehow—” was all I could say before I started slipping out of consciousness. My body went limp. I regained consciousness for a little while later. I felt Clarkston’s hands under my armpits, dragging me. I wanted to tell him thank you, but I couldn’t form the words. Before I knew it, my eyes closed again.

That next Monday, I returned to acting class. Both Clarkston and I had missed our “mid-term” performance that Friday. But Hofman promised us time on Monday to present. “Heroes deserve their time and place to shine,” he said with the same upsetting wink as usual.

Dad drove me out to the theatre. My crutches laid in my lap as I stared out the window.

“My son, facing deadly combat with two former Pembroke creeps. I thought I saw some scary shit back in the forests of Central America.”

“I hear you, Dad.”

“A party and a fight, though. And three guys, right? That’s impressive. Dad’s gotta congratulate you there. Also, Dad apologizes for going into third person again.”

I looked out the window again. “Don’t, uh, apologize for anything, Dad,” is all I said as he parked in the Ashebrook Community theatre lot.

“Uh... thanks, son.” Dad started stretching an arm out.

I stretched my arm out as well. I crossed it against his side, and he crossed it against mine. We retained our awkward non-hug for a half a second, and unclasped.

Dad just smiled though. “Good luck in there, James.”

My arms rested on crutches as I made my way towards the building. When I pushed through the front doors I looked around the theater. It embarrassed me again. I hated having everyone’s eyes on me. I couldn’t help that I bruised the hell out of my leg and needed the things to get around. I joked that I was hoping after the soul-wrenching adventure Thursday night that I’d be cured of all the anxiety that clung to me. It didn’t happen, of course but I wish I did.

I looked at Camilla, who gave me a thumbs-up. Kareena sat next to him after Hofman allowed her to visit class. I looked out and saw Braydon, Trevor, and Leather Jacket playing pogs in the back of the theatre. Then I turned back and saw Clarkston. His face looked eager, even with the big bruise on the cheek and the cut up eye brows.

“James, you look like you’re in tiptop condition,” Hofman said while curling his moustache.

“I thought I’d, uh, need a crutch for the performance.” I smiled. It was a creaky smile, but it was the best I could do. I could have stuck the landing on that joke better. At least I attempted one.

“Are you ready to present your scene to us, James?”

“There might be a change of plans,” I said.

“You’re playing the randy fisherman right? Are you sure all your lines weren’t beaten out of your head?” Hofman joked, his bullet earring prancing and dancing again.

“No,” I looked him dead in the eye. “I’m ready for this. But I wanted to do the scene with a partner.”

Clarkston stood up and stood next to me. “As do I,” he added.

“This is highly erratic for both you, James, but I’ll allow it. Because I trust you guys. And also because this is a summer acting class. Who gives a shit?”

Everyone around started applauding Hofman’s comment. The first genuine applause he received that summer.

Probably the last genuine applause he'd hear in a while. And that's fine. Sometimes people need a little of something to change and grow a little bit. That's what happened when Clarkston showed me some friendship. Now here I was, standing in front of a class, and the velvety curtain of the stage.

"Are you ready?" Clarkston asked.

"Probably," I responded. I shook my head for a second. "I mean, yes. I'm ready."