




2019

Useless

Seth Stone
Butler University

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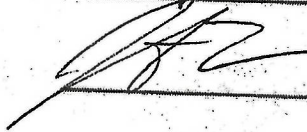
Seth Stone

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The Orange Crest Crusader

Burnt orange and white, the crowd was all burnt orange and white. At Orange Crest High School, on the storied turf of Wynn Field, illuminated by the newly-constructed Blair T. Holcomb Jumbotron, the 78th season of Crusader football entered its final stretch. With a record of 8 wins and no losses, they were on their way to another playoff berth and, with any luck, their fourth HSAA championship in ten years.

Mason Shaw was next in the lineage of Orange Crest running backs. He was a junior with scraggly brown hair that fell around his eyes in strange twisted ribbons. He'd been sitting behind Denzel Porter for two long years, each practice a little more upsetting, but now Denzel had tweaked something in his knee while running a route. Coach grabbed the air looking for Mason's shoulder pads.

"Get on in there!" He said in his trademark southern grumble.

Mason did as he was told. He bounced with each step out to the huddle. Big Stevie Coates, the quarterback, relayed the instructions. In his helmet was a little earpiece that allowed him to hear what the coach yelled from anywhere. If Coach was in the bathroom, Stevie Coates could hear him piss. At least in theory. The crowd was known to reach one hundred decibels or more, making even inner-ear communication difficult.

"Tiger right forty on one, tiger right forty on one. Break!"

Tiger was the formation, with two wide receivers out to the sides, two tight ends on either side of the offensive line and Mason alone in the backfield. Right was the side of the line he would be running to. Forty was the call for a draw play. Misdirection. Make the defense think there's a pass coming, and then hand it off when the congestion in the middle of the field disperses. Mason lined up behind the quarterback, about five steps back. One was the snap count.

"Hut!" Stevie said, and the ball came to him.

There was a moment's hesitation, hopefully enough to throw off the defense, and Stevie shoved the ball into Mason's breadbasket. He took the hole that the line had made for him, darting

through untouched. He was in the open field now, the field a treasure map with seven points at the X. His eyes grew large, because there was nothing to stop him from taking it all the way.

Except for an approaching linebacker, whose job it was to stop him. While Mason was looking at the end zone in the distance, the defensive player delivered a bone-crunching hit. Mason's throat gurgled a noise, and the crowd gasped as he fell to the dirt in a mess of limbs. The referee blew the whistle, stopping the play dead.

Mason woke up in a place he'd never been, a bed at the Orange Crest Regional Hospital. His mother, in her Crusaders sweatshirt and jeans, had dark lines of mascara running down her cheeks. He looked around for his father and found him staring out of the one window in the room, staring at the other hospital buildings illuminated in the night sky.

"Did we win?" He asked his mother, who dismissed his question and cradled his head in her arms.

The Orange Crest Crusaders were demolished that Friday night. Thirty-four to nothing. With no one to establish a running attack, the offense crumbled. The defense, left to pick up the slack, collapsed under the pressure. Eight wins, one loss. His father pointed this out with shocking bluntness.

He leaned forward to meet his mother in an embrace. His left hand laid against his mother's back, caressing her familiar warmth, but his right hand was not where he expected. He detached himself from the hug and looked down at his right arm and found nothing. At the elbow, his arm had been severed. The next few minutes no one in that hall of the hospital could hear anything but his screams. At first the screams were of shock, the arm isn't where it is supposed to be, but each new scream was one of realization. The recognition that nothing would ever be the same again drove him to keep screaming.

His father didn't move from his spot at the windowsill, while his mother tried to smother the screams by shoving Mason's face in her chest. The doctor came in holding a series of transparent slides, showing the extent of the damage to Mason's arm.

"Everything transpired rather quickly. Your elbow was completely shattered by the trauma you suffered, it was like looking at an archaeological dig with all the bone fragments."

Mason was too busy staring at the spot where his arm was to pay attention to the explanation by the doctor. The doctor continued nonetheless.

“The nerves were severed as well, so we had to attempt nerve reattachment surgery. The surgery failed, and the limb began to atrophy. We felt it was the best course of action to remove the arm, lest it become infected and threaten your life, and your parents agreed.”

Mason never thought of himself as brittle. He’d never broken a bone in his life, or even sustained a sizable cut. But now, after the hit that sent him flying and left him without a limb, he could only come to that conclusion. He was not the sort to be playing football and he should have known this. He should have drunk more milk, that was supposed to be good for bones. The doctor left the charts with his parents along with a prescription for some pain pills. He was discharged from the hospital and left to his own devices.

Not too long after leaving the hospital, he began to feel something in the missing arm. The football that he held on that fateful run was still there somehow. He could feel the leather dots on the joints in his fingers, but no matter the brainpower he put to it, he couldn’t drop it. He practiced picking up a ball with his other hand and dropping it, just in case he had forgotten the motion, but this did not help.

He knew that the real football had made its way back to the equipment room that night, and his arm was probably in a bag of medical waste somewhere, on a conveyor belt leading to the mouth of a roaring fire. Maybe it would find someone else’s amputated hand to hold as it was incinerated. There was no way the two were together, but he felt his fingers on the seams, his forearm on the laces.

Writing was a challenge now that his dominant hand was separated from his body. He thought about the word “dominant” in math class after losing track of his teacher’s explanation of balancing equations. He tried to jot it down, but his left hand wrapped around the pencil with all five fingers like a caveman. His shoulders burned with shame as he tried to curve the lowercase N’s. He was gripping the pencil so hard it might snap. Dominant meant power, it meant control over things that could be controlled. Mason was the opposite of dominant, he was cleat scrapings, boot scum. He swore that he understood the mechanics of writing, but the damn left hand wouldn’t follow. It’s like a master and a pupil were stuck in the same body. He practiced by writing his name

jaggedly along the edges of his notebook. His reign of dominance over basic human function was over.

The football was still in his right arm. He got the twinge and suddenly felt the ball's weight against him. It reminded him of a moment a couple days before the incident. He was relaxing in Coach's office, a small room that no more than four people could fit in at a time. The room was lined with metal filing cabinets, and those cabinets were filled with scouting reports, old playbooks and game tapes Coach sat in a swivel chair with his white hair swept back with pomade. Mason sat in the chair across from him as they both watched a small TV on top of one of the filing cabinets. It played clips of one of Orange Crest's most celebrated alumni, Jack Randall. He looked like a monster behind a tiny offensive line. He didn't need their blocking because he could just brutalize any soul that dared face him. Coach took a ball from the mesh bag that laid behind the swivel chair and thrust it into the pocket of Mason's arm.

"You could be that someday."

Nothing else was said. Nothing else needed to be said. Mason thought he had an honest connection with Coach, a man with a reputation for sticking with his players and believing that hard work beats talent any day. He'd seen neither hide nor hair of Coach since the injury and that made him a type of bitter unique to super-villain origin stories. He didn't have any powers though. Just a football-shaped ball and chain.

When he walked down the hallways, Mason got two different reactions. He felt either not seen at all, or stared at intensely. He didn't mind the avoidance, he thought that was what he would do if he was in their shoes. Catherine was one of the people who stared. Every day, on the path from English to geometry, he passed by Catherine's laser-focused eyes, aimed directly at his missing limb. When he got close, she would try to conceal by twisting her head back in the direction of the lockers, but by this point the damage had been done. After a while, Mason started taking another path to geometry, even though it took him three extra minutes. Catherine figured this out quick and adjusted so that she could meet him on this new path.

When Mason saw her in his new path, he saw red. He just wanted to be left alone to grieve. He just wanted to reside in his personal bubble or turn invisible for just a little while. To Mason, this girl's sharp eyes were like knives in his side. She *noticed* him, and that made him queasy.

“Stop.” He said to her, stopping them both in their tracks. “I know you think I’m a freakshow, so just stop.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re following me. You’re staring at me. Stop.” Mason wanted to make himself crystal clear. He got close and towered over her, cranking his neck down so that eye contact was not broken.

“I’m not!” Catherine insisted, lying through her teeth.

Mason disengaged and walked off, plunging the finger into the air on the way out. When he was a good distance away, he heard her smack the locker with an open palm.

Coach called Mason a workhorse, and that made him proud. He could shoulder any load, take it all on himself, and keep moving forward. Coach was not quick with compliments, he only let you know you did a good job by nodding slightly after a perfectly run play or pumping his fist after the team broke through the goal line. Where was Coach now? Mason asked himself this question. Mason guessed that he had outlived his usefulness.

His mother and father were wrecks after the incident. Mom didn’t want him to ever think about touching a football again, which was difficult for him considering the ball resting in the pocket of his arm. Dad went hot and cold, trying to breach the subject of Mason’s mental wellbeing timidly. No amount of “how ya doin’, champ” was ever going to break his titanium shell. They knew how he was doing, he knew how he was doing. Mason retreated into his room most days. He didn’t eat at the dinner table, he rarely ate. He tore books from the shelves in his room and threw them against the floor. Sometimes he would leak tears, but most times he was silent. Nothing was getting any better.

Mason’s room was covered in movie posters. They depicted action heroes doing what they did best, kicking ass and taking names. Schwarzenegger, Stallone, the guy who played Robocop. They all had two working arms. He used to see these posters as inspiration, something to live up to, but now it was all a cruel joke. He couldn’t be like them anymore, but what posters had a guy with one arm? What could he replace the posters with? It wasn’t supposed to be like this, he had a shot to realize his potential. He was going to be a great running back, one that people remembered,

talked about, placed in the annals of the greats. It's like the posters were laughing at him. He stood in front of the Terminator and plunged his left fist through the protective glass. Blood from the cuts he sustained dripped down the front of the poster as he left his hand inside the frame to suffer.

His father, too, stopped eating at the dinner table, choosing instead to scream at the television in the bedroom. The center of the house had been vacated. Mason walked downstairs expecting to see his father seated in the middle of the table, hunched over a Salisbury steak, ranting with his mouth full. Instead he heard his father screaming at the television in his bedroom. His father was in pain, like he was. Mason pinched his shoulders back at the onset of a chill and began to scavenge the drawers for bandages.

Walking past Catherine each period was like a walk of shame. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. The more he saw her, the more layers of disgust he felt towards her. He couldn't tell what she thought of him, whether she thought he was cute and now that he was damaged, he could be picked up like an item on the clearance rack, or she despised him and wanted to torment him by reminding him of his missing limb.

An article about his freak injury showed up in the Orange Crest Post-Gazette. The article described him as "former Orange Crest running back Mason Shaw".

The school sent Coach to the Shaw house, though he was reluctant to go. He had nothing to say, because there was very little to say. Mason stood five inches taller than him, towering over the man he once deified. He offered Mason a handshake, but the missing arm made that difficult. Immediately, he apologized, clapping the arm swiftly against his side. Mason shook his head at Coach, who bumbled and swayed from left to right as a sign of discomfort. He didn't want to be here, and Mason, though a month ago he would have welcomed him, didn't want him here either.

As soon as Coach was in his white Hyundai and on the road, Mason retreated to the shower to sulk. Only after the season was over did Coach have time to worry about him, the person who needed him most. Football was his life, and without that, he drifted. He'd never been a social butterfly, but he'd expected a message or two. Not a single teammate reached out, and Mason had wondered whether that was coach's doing. Coach might have wanted them to "focus on what's ahead, not what's behind". They'd only collapsed down the stretch, losing their last four, finishing the season un-ranked. Coach wanted them to forget about the waste of a season and forget about Mason Shaw, they didn't need Mason Shaw. Who cares about Mason Shaw?

Slowly, Mason fell off the path. His eyes glazed over at new concepts and taking notes was a humiliating chore. He stopped showing up to class. The teachers wouldn't miss him anyway. It felt to him like the world was moving on without him, so it was best to tear that Band-Aid off now. The world didn't need him, so he didn't need the world. His missing arm started to hurt as it gripped the football tighter and tighter. His senses were lying to him again. His left arm was covered in cuts from his last outburst.

Weeks passed, and the amount of concern showed for him dipped to an all-time low. The guidance counselor made a call to the Shaw household once and tried to speak with Mason's father. He picked up the phone and listened but didn't respond with anything more than grunts until the counselor gave in and hung up. There's only so many times you can try to wring information out of "mhmm" before you lose hope.

Mr. Shaw had researched the kind of phantom pain that his son was experiencing and called for him from downstairs. He had a small surprise for him.

"Son?" He asked to no response. "If you could come down, I've got something for you."

Minutes passed, and Mason stumbled shirtless down the stairs. He was already starting to lose some of the muscle mass he'd acquired after long days of practice and weight training. He was gaunt and pale, and his oiled hair fell to his shoulders.

"Are you still having that pain we talked about?"

He thought about his arm still holding the football, how sometimes in his sleep he would roll over and feel it contort in various direction, shooting pain up his arm. He'd only mentioned it to his dad in passing, to say that they talked about it would be misconstruing the truth. He nodded.

"Well, I was talking to a guy and I think this box might help. He said it's supposed to help with 'phantom limbs' like that."

He took something rectangular wrapped in a bath towel from underneath the dinner table and began to unfurl it. What was revealed was a handmade contraption, a shoebox cut in half with something separating the two sections. The lid of the shoebox had been cut in half, with the left half of the lid removed. There were two holes in the box large enough for arms to fit through.

“Stick your hand through the left hole.”

Mason obliged. As he plunged it in, his father took Mason’s right arm in his hand and pointed it towards the hole. His father was shaking, and his grip was tight, but Mason didn’t flinch.

“Now look at the mirror.”

A mirror had bifurcated the box, so when Mason investigated the box from the left side, he saw his right hand, or at least something close. He twisted his hand around watching the tendons shift through his skin. His breathing relaxed. Ten minutes passed with his hand in the box, just observing his missing hand. He started to weep. His father did not say anything and placed his hand around Mason’s shoulders, sharing a good cry.

But everything regresses. The football never left his arm, and no matter the amount of time he spent with his hand in the mirror box, he still had the pains when he slept and rolled over on top of it. The box could trick his eyes, but his brain knew better. He had to hold that football.

Mason wore a black hoodie and blue jeans to school on Monday. The loose sleeve fell at his side and flopped around when he moved too quickly. Mason was all too aware of every tiny motion of his body. Holding four textbooks in his left, Mason power-walked past group after group of orange lockers. On the final right turn before reaching his Social Studies class, he smacked into another student, and sent them both tumbling to the floor. He collected his books and reached for the hand of the person he knocked over with his phantom limb. He quickly pulled back, instead placing the books back on the floor and offering his left. But when he checked her face, his mouth turned to a grimace. It was Catherine. She was lying on the ground with a hand on her forehead and a look in her eyes that indicated she didn’t quite know where she was. She let out a moan when Mason tried to pull her up to her feet.

“You good?” Mason asked, fighting the urge to bolt. He was counting the seconds down until he was late to class and couldn’t help but tap his foot impatiently.

“You good?” Mason asked again, less polite this time.

“I think so. How are you doing?” Her voice gained an airy quality, like someone trying to feign sick.

“Fine. I need to get to class.” Mason didn’t want to mince words.

“Well, it’s good to see yo-oh!” Catherine lost her balance and toppled to the floor once again. Her face smacked against the top of the science textbook she was holding and bounced back. Mason’s body recoiled at the sight.

“Alright. Let’s get you to the nurse.”

Walking her gingerly back the way he came, he reached the nurse’s office, a white walled room with gentle jazz playing on a speaker in the back corner. The two of them took a seat in blue plastic chairs by the entrance. Mason assumed the nurse must have been on a break, and so he was stuck providing lukewarm bedside manner to a person who engaged in light stalking. He asked her if she needed some water or something to eat. Though she shook her head, he grabbed her a small plastic cup and fished a package of crackers out of his backpack.

“Drink and eat, you’ll be okay. You took a fall.”

“Are you okay?” Catherine asked, cutting through the politeness.

“I’m alright, don’t worry.”

“Even with your arm?”

Mason rolled his eyes. He didn’t want to talk to her about this at all. That’s what he got for trying to do the right thing. Everyone else got the hint that he didn’t want to talk about it. Why didn’t she?

“That’s none of your business.” He responded.

“Why do you hold it like that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your arm, it’s always held behind you. It’s like you’re carrying something.”

His face went flush. He didn’t even realize he was doing it and yet she could see it so clearly. She was perceptive, he gave her that. Explaining the situation to her wasn’t easy but he tried his

hardest to make it as clear as possible. He talked about how much football meant to him and how having the football attached to him now seemed like the cruelest joke. He talked about the way that Coach and the team left him out to dry and how much he struggled to get back on his feet.

“Woah, that’s a whole lot.”

Mason nodded and turned away.

“You got a piece of paper?”

He tore her a chunk from a notebook he had in his backpack and she started to scribble out something. She handed back the chunk with her phone number on it.

“If you need to talk more.”

The nurse came in with an iced coffee and with cream cheese on her cheek. She was shocked to find two children waiting for her. She apologized profusely to the both of them. Mason nodded, stuffed the paper in his pocket and headed back to English class.

In the silent days after, he would fish the number out from wherever he stashed it and think about texting her. Each night he would get closer and closer until a week had passed and he finally decided to reach out. He just sent his name. It was difficult to text, but still easier than writing. He just had to lay the phone down and peck with his pointer finger.

“Catherine.” She responded, adding a smiley face at the end. “Glad you reached out.”

“Me too.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about your problem and I think I have an idea for how we can fix it.”

Mason scoffed. “What are you thinking?”

“Meet me at the locker room in two hours. We’re going to go back.”

Mason did as he was told, but he had no idea what Catherine meant. If there was some way to get rid of this phantom football, he’d love to hear it.

He arrived in the empty school parking lot and just sat in the front seat of his car watching the school grounds for a few minutes. Without all the students, the atmosphere was graveyard-like. The silence that fell over the place was strangely peaceful. He'd taken a liking to silence in the time he'd lost his arm. It was like the only time he could think was in moments where there was nothing else to perceive. His mind had been so cluttered for so long, but in the light rustling of the oak trees he found something like solace. He had a bit of a walk ahead of him, which suited him fine.

Mason reached the center of the school grounds and saw Catherine loitering. It was funny, the way things changed so quickly. It hadn't been long since the sight of Catherine in her pigtails and glasses made Mason shudder in disgust. He wanted more than anything to push everyone away, isolate, because of the way he felt about himself. But even, as he's learned this, there was still the matter of the ball in his arm. It was gripping tighter and tighter as he approached Catherine at the door, so tight that no linebacker could jar it loose, so tight that his arm ached, and his muscles strained. The ball might pop at this rate.

"Alright! You showed!" Catherine exclaimed. "Let's get in there."

"Wait, so what are we doing exactly?"

"Okay, so, I know this sounds a little rash, but maybe if we recreate the moment when you lost the arm, it might activate some switch in your brain."

It had never occurred to Mason to recreate the event, because being around football reminded him of everything he had lost up to this point. His whole life consisted of thoughts of plays and formations and points, and without an arm none of it meant much of anything.

Mason nodded as Catherine pushed the locker room door open. Mason expected it to be locked, but perhaps someone had forgotten at the end of the season. No one used it for months at a time.

Burnt orange and white, the whole room was burnt orange and white. The first thing that the two of them saw was the towering mural painted on the back wall of the locker room. The Orange Crest Crusader in full regalia led a battalion of other crusaders into battle. With a sword pointed forward, and a football tucked in his other hand, he was going to get in that end zone or die trying. Catherine was amazed by the artistry of the mural, as well as its scale. Mason was getting a

tight feeling in his chest. He kept his head down, gazing into the gray vinyl flooring. He felt like a sinner walking into a church, he was not worthy. All the memories he had in these hallowed grounds came back to him. The breathless silence at halftime, the labored breathing of post-practice, Coach's lectures before a game, it was like he'd never been gone. He took off the hoodie, revealing a white undershirt. Metal rattling came from the equipment locker and a few minutes later, Catherine came back with a complete set of pads. She laid them out one by one: the classic Orange Crest helmet, large shoulder pads, a white practice jersey, striped uniform pants, a cloth belt and a fresh pair of cleats. She placed her fists against her waist and nodded triumphantly.

"Suit up, kid. There's a big game out there." She said putting all the bass and grit in her voice that she could muster, her version of a coachlike affectation. Catherine headed out on the dirt path that led to the field and he began to disrobe. He fastened the straps to his pads and pulled the pants up to his gut. He couldn't get the jersey over the pads with only one hand, so he draped it around his neck like an oversized lei. He was all decked out and he needed to see it in a mirror. The only mirror he remembered in the locker room was in Coach's office.

He shouldered his way past the door and found the desk mirror right where he remembered. Coach always was a creature of habit. Most coaches were, from what he'd heard. His hair was messy and long and he hadn't shaved in a while, but here he was, decked out in pads. He took in every inch of himself, angling the mirror to get the perfect view of himself. Everything he ever needed was here.

Mason Shaw sucked in his breath, wrapped his fingers around the facemask of the helmet and broke into a sprint along the dirt path, kicking up clouds behind him. Wynn Field was at the end of the path and Catherine was waiting.

The lights were still on, like they had never turned off from the moment he'd left. The Blair Holcomb Jumbotron cycled sponsored ads on its enormous LED screen. He imagined the crowds cheering his name as he crossed over the sideline onto the artificial turf. The bleachers were empty, but he could hear the cheers. His arm was missing, but he still had the ball. He slowed as he reached the fifty-yard line, where Catherine waited for him.

"So how did the play go?" Catherine asked.

"Tiger right forty on one."

Catherine looked at him like he had a second face on his forehead.

“Hike the ball, scan the field for open receivers, and then hand off.”

“Do we need a ball?”

Mason waved his right at her. “Already got one.”

She nodded at him and turned towards the end zone. Mason caught a sight of something strange in her face in the split second she turned around. A certain hardness about her features that caught in the light. She acted just like Stevie Coates under the lights, the way she took charge. It was not a comparison he expected to make, but the aura was the exact same. She lined up under the imaginary center, her hands quivering in anticipation.

“Hike!”

Catherine scanned the field, took her steps back and watched Mason Shaw bolt through the holes in the line.

The fifty, the forty. Mason was pumping his legs hard, expending every drop of energy he had. He blasted down the center of the field unburdened. The thirty, the twenty, the ten. He was free, and he could see the end zone and that big yellow pole behind it. He dove, arms spread wide into the end zone, and the ball rolled on the turf, free from his phantom limb. Catherine rushed to the end zone to lift him up and to celebrate. His heart was pumping fresh blood, his shoulders were hot and shaking. Mason Shaw shoved his missing right arm into the sky and demanded the world to look.

Billions and the Rat

When he was born, his parents called him William Lang with the express intention of calling him Willy for the rest of his life. When he turned ten, Willy figured out what his name was slang for, thanks to some schoolyard bullies, and promptly demanded everyone call him Will instead. He just couldn't find a name that suited him. Whenever someone called him anything but the name he preferred, he'd stomp his feet and yell "No!" at the sound of his given name until everyone complied.

When Will turned fifteen, he decided Will sounded too much like a kid's name, something that a parent would call their child when doting on them to another parent. "My angel child Will" was the phrase his mother used. Another switch was necessary, and so he chose the nickname Bill. Bill was a name that gave him power and stature. Bill was a name that made him sound mature, well, as mature as a seventeen-year-old with a sprouting mustache and a bad case of acne could sound.

Sometime during this Bill period, a couple high school friends turned him onto rap music. Bill had never paid the genre any mind because of the way his parents and most of his classmates showed a lack of interest or almost-derision to it. He watched the way the ends of their mouths curled subconsciously when they finished saying hip hop, the final syllable turning their face for a second into a consuming grimace. The kids at Bill's high school were predominantly white Southerners with a taste for cloyingly sweet tea and the sounds of softly strummed guitars. The ones who weren't that way tended to adopt that way of life after four long years of struggling, if for no other reason than to avoid being the black sheep. The friends who introduced him were two stick-thin kids who walked to their own beat and were constantly practicing raps outside the school before first period. Derrick and Jerry were their names. Derrick and Jerry told Bill that if he wanted something, he should go for it one hundred and ten percent. If that meant being a rapper and getting on the radio, then he better start practicing his craft. Derrick laughed when he said this and held his hand out for Jerry to high-five.

Bill wanted something bigger, angrier, and most importantly louder. It spoke to an urge inside him that he hadn't satisfied before. Soon, Bill had become obsessed with rap music, doodling images of rappers on stage in front of a huge crowd and scrawling lyrics in the margins of homework assignments. The sensation of listening led him into the urge to perform. He imagined

the adrenaline rush of being on stage and rapping his heart out. Bill wanted to express himself in front of millions.

So, Bill Lang became Billions Lang, local rapper. He set up a small microphone that attached to his computer to record his songs. After the labor of beat-making, writing, and recording, he released his first mixtape. It was his baby, his proudest achievement. Every few weeks, he would pop his head in the door at the local venues, where the big fish of this pond performed, just to get a sense of what he was up against.

All those trips to the other side of town were expensive, and his parents were threatening to charge rent, so he needed to find his way into employment. His father suggested a job at the mall where an old friend of his ran a Chinese food place. Immediately after he'd suggested the job, he decided to give his friend Lou a call. They talked for what seemed like hours. They must have been reliving a lot of good times.

Billions Lang got the job sight unseen. After a short phone call where Billions put on his best interview voice, adding a little bass to his voice and trying to enunciate more than usual, Lou Chang offered him an apron and a place at China Palace. The golden doors were swinging open for him. When he asked his father what to expect, his father only chuckled. His parents still called him Will, sometimes William when he was upset.

"Now, Will," his father said before dropping him off at work on the first day, "Don't let Lou down. He's a good friend of mine."

"I'll try not to."

The first day on the job, Billions took in a huge sniff of the mall's stale air and exhaled with a grin. The green square tile stretched as far as his eye could see, from the department store on the eastern end to the movie theater on the other. The food court entrance was plumb in the middle of the mall, a nice entryway for those looking to get their grub on. The last time he had been in this mall had to have been more than a year ago, when he needed tennis shoes to go to the gym.

The food court resembled the lobby of an airport, with tables and chairs aligned in rows outside each eatery. Repeated tile as far as the eye could see. It had a little bit of everything for everyone, it had a sub place, a pizza place, a Mexican restaurant, a jerk chicken place, a sushi stand,

an ice cream shop, and even a place that sold kebabs. In the exact middle of the row of restaurants lining the outer wall was China Palace and, next to it, its eternal rival Taste of Asia. China Palace's name was illuminated in red neon so bright that it drew the eye and then stabbed a hot poker in it. On the inside wall of the serving area was a mural of the mall food court painted like the art of ancient China. It made him chuckle to see an ancient depiction of a fat man in a Hollister t-shirt. The man's face bore an expression of pain, as if he were to burst if he were to eat another bite out of the Styrofoam tray in front of him. The mural had been painted several years ago and so featured many stores that no longer existed at this mall. Billions was shocked at the sight of a Blockbuster on the mural.

Billions was early, by about an hour, and so he decided that he would watch China Palace to get a grip on what to expect. At the front of China Palace, an employee in a black apron held a red tray of sample cups with chicken, while in front of Taste of Asia was a man in a red apron holding a black tray. They both had the same look, a scrunched face, as if their brows contained weights too heavy to bear. They were diametric opposites, alternate universe versions of one another. The man in the Taste of Asia apron would turn to the side and sneer at the man from China Palace, and when the Taste of Asia employee would turn his head back to the crowds, the man from China Palace would stick his tongue out and grimace. Billions could sense the disdain that each of the stores held for the other, it was ingrained in their corporate culture. Eliminate the opposition. Billions felt like there might be a fistfight, and since he didn't have to go to work for another hour, he might as well enjoy the upcoming show.

He reached into his back pocket and found nothing. Shit, he thought, where did I put my lyric book? There was something about the way they sneered at each other that reminded him of a rap battle. He'd never seen one in person, but he'd seen several on VideoShare, and he swore up and down that it was the exact same energy. He wanted to write a rap battle between them, what they would say about one another to really get under the others' skin. He tried starting with a line about the colors of the aprons. *Black and red/red and black/Eat at China Palace/you'll never go back*. Too much like a jingle, he thought, shaking the ideas out of his head as if he were an Etch-a-Sketch

The sub Billions was eating, a ham and swiss on wheat, tasted like nothing, like he was biting in to a remarkably thick fog. It was a miracle of science, being able to create something that tasted like nothing. Billions frowned at it and set it down. It was approaching noon and there was

not much activity at the food court. Perhaps lunch rush would happen a bit later. After depositing the sub into the trash where it belonged, he approached the ordering counter of China Palace.

“Can I speak to Lou?” he asked, raising the pitch of his voice as to seem non-threatening.

The woman who he’d asked had a ponytail so tight that it tore at her scalp and a face sour enough that she probably felt it. She paused for a moment, rattled some loose change in her pockets, and then understood what Billions was asking for. She walked away from the counter and into the kitchen. When she returned, she brought with her a short man with salt-and-pepper hair and a deep leathery tan. This was Lou Chang, proprietor of China Palace and his new boss. He grabbed Billions’ hand from his side and began to shake it vigorously. Billions’ hand ached, but he thought it might be poor form to complain, so he smiled through the pain. He noticed Lou was holding a black apron in his hand.

“We need all the help we can get,” he said in a voice that was surprisingly deep for such a small man. “I saw you watching Darrell doing his job. Well, consider that on the job training. That’s the job we’re having you do. Your father said you have very little in terms of practical skills, and that’s the easiest job we’ve got.”

Billions was hurt by his father’s statement, but not surprised. He didn’t know about his lyrical dexterity *or* his flow. He had a decent work ethic, he thought. He was always working on something in his head. Although, the more that he thought about it, he had never mentioned or demonstrated any skills he’d thought he possessed. The idea of mentioning rap as a potential career to his father, just seemed like opening himself up to a barrage of humiliating comments. He would never approve. Billions felt his body fall into a natural hunch.

“But, what about Darrell?”

“Oh, don’t worry, he can do counter or work as a cook. He has skills. Flexibility.”

That gave him a strange relief. At least he wasn’t costing someone a job. Billions took the apron when he was offered it and quickly tied it around his waist. That was a skill he had, tying aprons. He made a mental checklist of these skills. Lou yelled for Darrell, telling him to get behind the counter.

“So, uh, how much will I be making?”

“Minimum wage!” He clapped his hands together to punctuate.

Billions shrugged and picked the tray up from where Darrell had left it. It wasn't a difficult job, offering food to people. When would people turn away free food?

As it turned out, many people turn down free food.

“Free sample?” he said, extending his arm into the personal space of another customer. The customer shook his head and pushed his hand away before making a sharp right turn towards the exit of the food court. Billions was puzzled. The guy was clearly walking in the “sample zone” of the restaurant. If he didn't want to be offered free samples, he shouldn't have been walking in the sample zone. If you don't want to be offered free food, don't go walking in the areas where people are going to try to offer you free food.

There was an art to it, and he was a novice. Every time he would jut out his tray people would turn their noses up. A woman in an orange blouse sauntered up to China Palace; her side was turned to him. He tried to get her attention, and offered her the orange chicken, with the suggestion that it would match her blouse, only for her to turn away, revealing the phone pressed against her ear and stroll back away unaware. Billions felt his insides shrivel up. Even worse, she changed directions to grab a piece of orange chicken from Taste of Asia's tray.

“You'll get 'em next time,” he mumbled under his breath and applied another smile, wider than before. Two men approached in soccer jerseys, clearly fresh off a scrimmage judging by the way they were sweating and covered in grass stains. They swiped two orange chickens each off his tray. Billions didn't mind, instead smiling and telling them to have a nice day. It felt good to provide someone with a service. Lou hollered at Billions from the kitchen.

“One per customer!” he yelled, his voice straining.

That's when Billions spotted him. Yung Perks, the hottest local producer, from the south side of town. He made energetic banger beats in his garage, known locally as The Spot, and was making tracks for all the biggest stars. Big names were knocking down his door to get their hands on a new Yung Perks beat. If you worked with him, you were big time. It was hard to miss Yung Perks, with his numerous face tattoos and bright orange dreads tied into a messy bun. Billions tried to follow him with his eyes, but when Perks turned to approach China Palace, he nearly stumbled

and flung orange chicken all over the floor. He didn't have a copy of his EP on hand, he should have known that something like this was going to happen. He cursed himself. He was never prepared when he needed to be. He was a choker. The loose strands of Perks' hair bounced up and down as strolled up to Billions. Billions tried to appear dangerous by squinting and peering off into the distance, like someone with a mysterious secret, but when he locked eyes with Perks, every iota of danger left him. He was just the guy who held the chicken.

"Hey man, how's it going," Perks grumbled, his head cocked to the left. "Can I get my chicken? Love this shit." Billions nodded and moved the tray closer to him. He tried to open his mouth, to implant the idea of his next album into the star producer's head but words wouldn't come out. Yung Perks left after depositing his empty sample cup into the trash can.

Billions was devastated and fell into a quiet despair. He could have said something, anything, but he didn't. Chance encounters don't happen like that every day. When he turned around, he found Lou standing right next to him, causing him to start choking on his own spit.

"You know him?"

Billions nodded, but didn't feel like going any deeper into explaining, because that required the explanations of ancillary concepts. Lou grunted, and picked at a spot on his nose.

"Well, lucky you, he's always here. Regular customer."

Billions felt his body relax. There could be other chances. He had some CDs left in the basement, he could slip one in his pocket before a shift and let the rest happen as it may. It was unlikely that a man could affect change in his life through the exchange of Chinese food or CDs, but he was willing to try. The rest of the shift proceeded in a way that resembled the typical. Some people ordered, some took samples, and some avoided eye contact as if Billions were Medusa's long-lost son.

Billions wanted to say something to his father, about the whole "no practical skills" comment he had made to Lou Chang and how that hurt, but instead of doing that, he held his tongue and turned to his computer, jotting down phrases filled with the anger he felt. It benefitted those in this performative sphere to have some sort of emotional malady from which to draw energy, a

figurative anger spring, bursting with words and spit. His father would do well to keep angering him.

Billions had to drive thirty minutes before the crack of dawn and then find the back entrance to the food court where the employees entered. He thought he could just tail another employee and find the door that way but locating this special door was harder than he thought. There were five receiving ports for trucks into the mall, and only one of them lead to the store. It took Billions a whole agonizing hour driving around the mall looking for the receiving port that listed China Palace in its list of stores. When he pushed his way through the steel double doors, he was presented with a concrete labyrinth that led in so many different directions that exploring all of them might take an entire work day. Thankfully for him, he guessed the correct direction to reach China Palace and at the end of this tunnel was the stainless steel kitchen he needed.

Lou Chang was so angry that he started to vibrate. Billions, both exhausted and jittery, noticed the anger in his eyes and began to profusely apologize. He'd already violated his father's advice, he'd let Lou down and that made him feel like the dirty underside of a boot. He promised that he would never be late again, now that he knew which direction to go to get into the mall, and how he would be the best sample holder that he had ever seen but Lou would not hear it. He grabbed the tray and began to load it with samples. He'd missed out on so many potential customers already. Without a sample boy out there, Taste of Asia could snatch valuable sales. He jabbed it in to the boy's chest and barked at him to get out there.

And that's how his shifts went for the next two months. He wasn't late once, even if the shift began at eight in the morning and he had to get up at five to be there. As he spent some time at China Palace, he realized the financial situation of the store was quite dire. The people who liked mall-grade Chinese food had two relatively equal options, while all the other restaurants had their own niche. As soon as Billions became privy to that fact, Lou Chang came to him with a proposition. Billions had never seen him like this, his lips pursed. His eyes darted from one side of the kitchen to the other. He hunched over and muttered something to himself. The whole grill was covered from end to end with chicken. Chef Darrell hummed along to a pop song on the radio, splashing the chicken with sauce all the while. Lou shot him a look and the humming stopped. He leaned in so far that Billions could see the wrinkles inside his wrinkles.

“Alright, William,” Lou said to Billions, “you’ve been here long enough to where I trust you to do this right.”

Billions took a deep breath. Was he finally obtaining the trust necessary to take out the trash? The pure unshakeable belief needed to count the till? Lou Chang didn’t look like he was joking, but then again, in Billions’ eyes, he took everything too seriously.

“I am tired of Taste of Asia and that conniving suit who runs it. I was here first, and I have tried to play clean, but I am tired and old. Before you leave tonight, I will give you something to place in their kitchen. The health inspector comes soon, so we have to act fast.”

Billions’ eyes opened wide. There were three hours left in his shift, so it wasn’t like he was being thrust into this situation immediately, he’d be thinking about it. He was being asked to do some serious espionage spy stuff. He didn’t own a balaclava, but he was sure he could find one on his fifteen-minute break.

“But what if I get caught?” he responded, scratching at a bug bite on his forearm. He knew what reply was coming.

“Don’t get caught.” Lou Chang walked away, making it clear that they would not speak of this further. Holding the tray full of chicken was only a prelude to his real job: food court saboteur. The military arm of the Chinese food-industrial complex. He would take everyone to the cleaners one by one until only China Palace stood, amidst a mall of salted fields.

He grabbed the tray and went back to work. As he held the tray, he gazed at each chicken morsel’s bizarre shiny coating. He stifled the urge to dump them all in his mouth. The sauces draped over the chicken’s breading shone under the mall’s fluorescent lighting. They were mouth-watering, scrumptious, addictive to a fault. Over the short period he worked here, he’d seen people become slaves to the stuff, handing over ten bucks to Lou every day like a tax. Each morsel was like a perfectly formed piece of amber, round and smooth and with the possibility of containing a remnant of a long dead bird. Chinese food, at least of the Americanized mall variety, has thrived in malls for so long because of its portability. It’s incredibly easy to attract new customers with a taste, and the chicken chunks are just the right size. He was important, perhaps the most important function of the restaurant. Billions tightened his grip on the tray and called out to a couple strolling

together along the tile. Sabotage and propaganda? He was becoming more than skilled, he was becoming a jack of all trades.

His shift ended as the day ended. Taste of Asia was empty. The workers all left as soon as they were allowed and that would become their downfall, Billions thought. He rubbed his hands together and picked up the package that Lou had left for him. It was a black plastic baggie too large to conceal in a fist but probably just big enough to fit in the pocket of some loose jeans. Billions was about to make his mark on this town. The baggie had some heft to it, and whatever lied inside must be nasty, so Billions held it at arms' length in front of him and started his trek to the Taste of Asia kitchen.

Getting in was surprisingly easy. Unlike the door to China Palace, which had a lock, the door that led into Taste of Asia swung wide open with a push. Something in him, some malfunctioning neuron, wanted him to smell whatever Taste of Asia was about to receive. Perhaps looking would satisfy that craving instead. He pulled the bag open to find a single black rat, cut in half with its insides sloshing around at the bottom. He didn't make a sound, but he screamed internally. Its eyes were cold black orbs and its fur was matted and dry to the touch.

He recoiled away from the bag, groaning loudly before stifling the sound with his free hand. This would be the worst place to get caught, in the middle of the act. He didn't see any cameras, so he didn't have to hide himself, but the idea of alerting some guard made him fearful. Being dragged out of the mall in shame, just the thought made him go pale.

The next job was to find the perfect place for the rat to be hidden. It had to be a place that the employees didn't already check, but that a health inspector would have no problem locating on his check-up. The kitchen was narrow, with all kinds of equipment that Billions didn't quite understand the purpose of. Despite being in and around the Taste of Asia kitchen, he hadn't quite picked up all the different cooking terminology that Lou and the cooks used. There was the grill, Billions knew that one, but it was covered in black gunk. He reached out and dragged a finger through the stuff, finding that it had a sludge-like thickness that lingered on his hands even as he flicked it off. There were cobwebs on the corners of the ingredient shelves and the sink was filled with grimy dishes. He took a good whiff of the air and if it didn't smell like sulfur, it smelled like a strong sulfur substitute. The thought hit him, this place was already disgusting. Would any health inspector pass this place? Did he even have to do this job at all? Did this rat die for nothing, he asked

himself as he peeked into the plastic bag. The rat's black eyes reflected what little light remained, and its mouth hung open revealing chipped front teeth. The wound was crusted in brown and his pale gray intestines spun like ramen noodles around one another. Billions took the rat by the tail and chucked him behind the grill. He overshot his goal and ended up splattering the rat against the wall with a gross squirting noise. The rat then fell behind the grill and the deed was done.

Billions, hyperventilating, sprinted to his car in the mall parking lot and drove off. As soon as he returned home, he went into his lyric book and began to write down lyrics about the event. It was so dangerous, so unlike anything he'd experienced before, that he'd had trouble reckoning with the fact that he'd done it.

The next workday was usual, to a point. Darrell didn't show up to work but the lady whose hair looked like it was sucking on her brain took his place behind the grill. The man in the red apron wore his hair military short, like if you tried to grab his scalp it would have a grip like a football. Billions kept an eye on him like a bird of prey, and whenever he located a customer, Billions swooped in and hand them a sample first. China Palace had the better product for sure, so it didn't take long to win them over to his side. With each morsel delivered, Billions would look back at Lou and wonder how he was evaluating his performance.

The health inspector didn't show up that day, a fact that troubled both Lou and Billions. Billions took a deep breath and scanned the last few groups of people for what Lou said the health inspector would look like. Badge, black polo, clipboard. Nothing matching that description had been anywhere near China Palace. What if Taste of Asia found the rat? Would he have to continue his career of sabotage? All these questions swam around in his mind, but he wouldn't receive any answers. Lou Chang looked at Billions and shared a concerned glance as they closed the store that night.

At home, it was back to the notebooks. No matter what he wrote, he found that it didn't capture the spirit of what he was doing like he had hoped. He wanted to put out an edge, but when putting his actions to verse, it sounded fake and overplayed to him. He was doing nothing, and he had done nothing. His own experiences sounded manufactured on the page and he didn't know why. Maybe it was because the whole plan hadn't yet come to fruition. He was writing like he'd already put them out of business. Billions stomped his foot on the plush carpet. He just wanted the health inspector to show up and throw that damn Taste of Asia owner out on his ass for daring to

challenge China Palace. He could say he'd accomplished something, he could walk around with what little chest hair he had puffed out against the breeze.

Tomorrow came and went, seemingly with no health inspector in sight. Billions became despondent, surely, they would have cleaned the kitchen by now. The rat corpse must have stunk something fierce, it had when Billions had placed it. The rat's clumped fur and despairing face and exposed insides were all well-prepared for the next day health inspection. Maybe, Billions thought, foul play was afoot. An exchange of large quantities of money. However, he'd seen how many customers that Taste of Asia had daily, and they were certainly not swimming in cash. He needed to go back, to check on the rat, make sure the plan was still going off without a hitch.

That night after the sun had set and everyone had left, Billions again found himself in the mall's back corridors, a concrete labyrinth designed seemingly to contain him. But he knew these pathways well, memorized the twists and turns and found the steel door to Taste of Asia's dark secrets. He pulled on the door, expecting it all to be unveiled, out in the open, but instead feeling the door give no longer, clanking against the doorframe. The door was locked. They knew. He again had to flee, for his own safety. This lock meant that they were aware of his presence. He had to tell Lou.

He called Lou on his cell phone from his car in the middle of the empty mall parking lot.

"Lou, I've got some news."

"We are closed, William. Do not bother me past closing."

"No, it's about the thing you had me do."

"We can't talk about this here."

"Then, where can we?"

Lou told him he would talk with him the next day at work, in the safety of their own kitchen. Wiretaps were too prevalent these days to risk blabbering, he said.

He blinked and the next day arrived. The sun was riding its way up the blue sky, and shards of sunlight pierced his bedroom. He fumbled for his phone in the early morning stupor, and found his history loaded with calls from Lou, so he threw on his uniform and raced out the door. When he

finally arrived at his workplace, Lou's leather face had accumulated new wrinkles, deep ones around his lips and nose. He'd been scowling all night. As soon as Lou located Billions, he took him by the shoulders and shook him.

"What were you going to tell me?" He demanded to know. Back and forth, Billions rocked. In his half-asleep state, he found this pleasant, resulting in a large grin creeping its way across his face.

"Well," Billions hurried to spit the words out, "I was freaking out, because maybe the reason that the health inspector didn't come in, and I was thinking about this a lot last night."

"Yeah?" Lou leaned in closer.

"Well, maybe he's dead, maybe they killed him and stuffed his body in their kitchen. I tried sneaking back into their kitchen and there was a lock on the door."

Lou narrowed his eyes at him. He spent all his night worrying about this? He turned away from Billions' peach fuzz covered face.

"Are you sleep deprived, boy? Or are you on drugs?"

Billions swallowed a thick lump of saliva. "Couldn't sleep last night, sir."

"Drink a coffee, for God's sake, there's no dead health inspector in any kitchen here. Not even at the pizza place."

Lou had his back to the patrons, or else he would have noticed the man in the black polo holding a clipboard right behind him. Billions' eyes rolled back in his head, aghast at the specter he was surely seeing.

"Come again, sir?" The health inspector said in a quiet, strained voice. Lou turned to see him, and turning red, offered him an open palm. They shook hands before the man asked his next question. "Is this Taste of Asia?"

"No sir," Billions responded in a prepared customer service voice, "this is China Palace, you'll find Taste of Asia the next section over."

The man tapped at the clipboard in a steady rhythm with a pen made of clear plastic.

“Ah, well, wish me luck. Hopefully I don’t find a corpse there.” He chuckled but when both Lou and Billions stared, he collected himself and turned away.

The two of them were frozen in place by the health inspector’s surprise arrival. They dropped their conversation and went back to their stations. Lou chopped the chicken thighs into uniform cubes and got the oil going on the wok and Billions stared at the door that led to the rat kitchen while he waited for his tray of chicken to be prepared.

The next hour was agonizingly slow. What if the kitchen had been cleaned in the time between their planted rat and today? What would become of his job if he’d failed? Was Lou Chang the kind of person to cycle out employees after they’ve outlived their usefulness? Money was already tight, being without a job would make every day a little more stressful. How was he supposed to produce a new album if he had no money? How would he purchase a new car? How would he explain the loss of his job to his father, who’d picked this place out for him and arranged the interview? He was on the verge of being a jobless failure with a half-baked dream of a music career, like the buskers he saw on the fringes of baseball stadiums. All these loose worries jangled around his skull, like he was half-rattle.

The Taste of Asia kitchen door swung open and smacked against the pillar supporting it. The sound of metal smacking on plaster awoke the senses of the kitchen staff as well as the food court attendees. The health inspector burst out of the door furiously jotting, with the man Lou Chang so despised following close behind with his hands locked together, praying for his kitchen to be spared. The health inspector kept shaking his head from side to side and it seemed like he was quite a bit paler than when the two of them had seen him. Lou was tossing chicken in the wok, but his eyes were focused on the scene. Billions felt his heart soar, he had surely succeeded. That, or they found the other health inspector.

“You’re sick!” the health inspector yelled. “Get away from me.”

The man in the suit fell to his knees grabbing at the hem of the health inspector’s jeans and holding on for all he had. His hair was shorn short and his tie was tastefully simple, though it was now dragging along the mall floor. Billions put himself into the man’s shoes. He would burn that tie as soon as he could to forget the disgrace of the moment. The man’s life was being thrown into disarray by Billions’ doing, and it was clear from the way the health inspector grimaced that there was no *un*-doing.

When the health inspector freed the hem of his jeans from the suited man's grasp, he lay crumpled on the mall floor for minutes. The patrons of the mall made beelines around him. From the way the man's suit rumbled, it appeared now to be two sizes too big for his body, smothering him in a blanket of fabric. After his display, he stood up, brushed himself off and sulked back into the Taste of Asia kitchen, covering his face with the palm of his hand.

Billions felt a chill from the crown of his head down through his ribs one by one before resting in the balls of his feet. He turned back to Lou, who responded with a scowl and a twisting gesture with his pointer finger. Deep down, he was glad the job got done, but it was nothing to celebrate. He put his head down and continued laboring.

Within two weeks the Taste of Asia space was boarded up. The big metal screen was pulled down over the counter and the health inspector's report was taped on the middle. Some folks would stop by and read the list of infractions against the restaurant, which took multiple pages to list out. The list was in order of severity, and so the first item listed was the rat.

**High Priority* Dead dis-emboweled rat found behind grill. Not recently dead. Corrected on site.*

**High Priority* Thick sludge substance coating wok.*

**High Priority* Employees without training certifications.*

The list was too long for Billions to read all in one sitting, so he skipped to the very bottom, where the verdict would be found. He found the word result and looked down from there. Facility permanently closed. A killing blow. He couldn't believe anyone had been eating there with so many problems. A few he could understand, but this list had dozens of infractions. Maybe he had accomplished nothing, and after all those days of worrying, he would have been better off giving the rat a proper funeral and avoid all the drama altogether.

Billions never said much to anyone at the food court, other than to offer them samples, but today he was especially quiet. He spent more time in his own head, planning out rhyming patterns to mess around with, mouthing out words to see how they felt on his lips and tongue. The days were slow, but with the closure of Taste of Asia, the Palace saw a financial windfall come their way. Everything was snapping into place. China Palace was becoming the number one spot in the food court. Being the only Chinese food place in a mall food court is like being the main attraction at a circus, people come for miles to see you. Pretty soon there would be a line a mile long just waiting for the famous Palace Orange Chicken, or perhaps the slightly less famous Palace Mushu Pork.

Yung Perks popped in one day in all his dreadlocked glory, drooping his shoulders and swaying from side to side as he walked. His bony chest was covered by a tank top three sizes too large, and on his legs were a pair of ripped jeans so extreme that with a couple precise scissor snips, he would be wearing jorts. Billions hadn't seen him in a while, but Perks' afterimage never left his brain. So when Yung Perks appeared and asked to speak directly to him, Billions' mind emptied completely.

"I listened to your record," he said, letting a whiff of that trademark FireTracks rapper smell waft through Billions' nostrils. Pot, sweat, and expensive cologne comingled in a noxious mixture. Billions would get an earful from Lou if he stepped even one inch away from his spot, so he had no choice but to take in the scent.

"You what?" Billions held the freshly cooked honey chicken in sample cups on the plastic tray. The honey chicken was his second favorite dish on the menu, and he thought about offering Perks some, but Perks was already helping himself, snaring four white cups in one hand with a claw-like grip. He popped a piece in his cheek before continuing.

"I heard from a friend you were a local rapper, so I gave your tracks a sample and man, I think you could really shine with a little help from moi." His laughter rumbled deep in his throat. Billions was paralyzed in fear. He tried to speak but all his body did was blink. "Anyway, yeah, is Friday good for you?"

Friday, in general was a good day for Billions. Typically, he had that day off, in exchange for long shifts on Saturday and Sunday.

Billions nodded like his head was only loosely connected to his spinal column, to which Perks responded with a cheek-to-cheek grin.

"Alright, alright, alright." With each alright, Perks bobbed up and down. "That's what I'm talking about, my man. Six on Friday. The Spot, down on Franklin St."

"S-sure! See you then!"

And with that Perks slunk away into the crowd of people. For someone with such a look, he managed to evade sight rather easily. Things were happening so fast, he thought as he steadied

himself with one hand against the closest table. The meeting was only three days away, and he'd barely written in his lyric book for the last week. He felt naked, unprepared, stupid.

That night, Billions began to assemble a patchwork rap to perform for Perks, but found himself unable to continue when he couldn't choose what he wanted the rap to be. Did he want to brag about his accomplishments? He'd had none of note. Did he want to wax poetic about some girl he'd seen walking by? He'd had tons of detailed lyrics about various girls that ran around his mind, but he shook his head. He'd feel so self-conscious using his one chance to work with *the* Yung Perks to talk about a girl he remembered only as words in a book. It seemed like a waste of Perks' time. Did he want to talk about world issues in a constructive and well-thought out manner? Hell no, that would require a smarter, more well-read man than him, and besides, he had no interest writing essays at this point. He wanted to bring energy into the booth, not bore people to death and beat them over the head with a message. He scoured his lyric book for anything that held weight.

The kind of raps he liked to listen to the most were vitriolic, full of anger. The kind of violent energy they brought into the music made him stir deeply. It made him want to take on the world. He could never be that kind of rapper, he sighed, he didn't have the kind of fire that other more forceful rappers did. He wrote lyrics about things in his life, and for the most part his life was lacking things to be that angry about.

He found the full address for Perks' recording studio online, because Perks had only mentioned the street name. Perks was going to make him work for it. It wasn't too hard to find, because Perks was not the kind of guy to keep a low profile. The building looked like it hadn't seen a pressure washer in decades, what was probably beige plaster had become at once both faded from the sun and darker from layers of unwashed grime. Explicit graffiti covered the right side of the building, the side that faced the road. Perks had done some of this himself, Billions could tell by his signature, a Y and a P arranged in a circle at the bottom of his creation. It was a large pair of bare legs, spread as wide as the Atlantic Ocean, wearing red stiletto heels, but where the legs met was a human face with a disgustingly detailed mouth, long strands of viscous spit hanging like violin strings from the roof to the palate. The teeth inside of the mouth were yellowed to various degrees and one was black from rotting. Billions stared at this image as he parked and nearly struck the concrete divider at the head of the parking space.

Billions entered the double doors with trepidation, the further he trekked the less sure that he would end up in a recording studio. There were cobwebs in the corners of the rooms, everything was coated in a fine layer of grime. Yung Perks was a big name; he wouldn't be recording in a place like this. He worried that on the other side of every door he opened, he would find a coffin waiting in an empty room, standing open. There would be a moment's pause before the door closed behind him, and he would be stuck, alone with the coffin, with the expectation being to climb in. Billions shivered, he didn't want to die. He still hadn't achieved anything of meaning. He tried to shake these thoughts away, but they clung to him tighter the more he dismissed them. Luckily for Billions, Perks insisted on punctuality. Billions entered a dark room that seemed to him to be some sort of lobby, with a stiff maroon carpet and black metal chairs interspersed with fake ferns creating a perimeter around the room. He fumbled along the walls for a light switch until light leaked in from an adjacent room. Perks appeared in the light, a funky, twisted silhouette.

"Typically, people stand in the doorway and wait for me, but if I'm being real, I like your approach better. What's up Billy?"

He'd never been called Billy before, and the sound of it coming from Perks' lips left him uneasy. Was he a Billy? Perks came around to his side of the door and placed a heavy arm around his shoulder. It felt like a python that at any moment could decide to contract and start the long slow process of his death. He looked to Perks, to examine the glint in his eyes, to determine his intention.

Perks dragged him with the crook of his arm down a long, wallpapered hallway into a segmented room. The room was octagonal and split by a large metal wall. The first segment of the room, the one that the pair entered, was dark, save for flashing LED lights coming from a dashboard with levers and knobs all over. On top of the dashboard were three decently sized monitors, currently off. Billions had only seen this kind of setups in documentaries about the industry, and normally they were simply used as a backdrop. Perks walked up to his setup and pulled a rolling chair from the side of the room and began fiddling with settings.

"Alright dude, let's get down to business. You ever done this before?"

Billions had recorded his EP in his basement over the course of three months, because he could only record when his family wasn't in the house. If he was lucky, he would be able to pound out a song in the time it took his parents to go out for one of their "date nights". It had been a while

since he had checked on the listens for that album, but last he checked it was somewhere in the hundreds. He technically had done this before, but only technically. He responded with a cracking of his knuckles and a nod.

He opened the door in the dividing wall and stepped into the place where the magic happened. The walls were covered in black foam and the microphone hung from the ceiling by a thick wire, along with a pair of oversized headphones, which he knew to put on. It felt strangely private, like a home shower in the middle of the night. Quiet, dark, alone. The perfect place to think. Then the noise came flooding in. Perks started talking through the speaker system, but it was like he was right there next to him.

“Alright, Billy-boy, I’m going to start playing the beat, you should listen to it the first time through, and then when you’ve got something, tell me. I’ll restart the track and we’ll go from there. How does that sound?”

Billions looked for Perks through the wall and found that he was obscured. He could see Billions, but Billions couldn’t see him.

“That’s fine,” he said into the microphone. He prodded the microphone with his finger and watched as it swung like a pendulum. “Let’s do this thing.”

The beat started simply, with a minimalist drum loop and a backing synth, until an old vocal sample began to come in. Billions closed his eyes and listened to what the man was saying. It sounded like it was coming from an old-timey radio, judging by the warm crackle of the voice. The man speaking just kept repeating “I’m a bad man, I’m a bad, bad man,” for about eight measures until there is a moment of silence and even the drums disappear. The sample is reintegrated. In the silence, the man chuckled.

“But to be honest, I’d do it all again.”

The synths exploded into a cacophony of hot sound, the bass rattled Perks’ car keys, now lying on the workstation. This was his best work yet, Billions thought, and I was getting to rap over it? He felt honored. A great pressure hung over his shoulders like a winter coat. This beat was fantastic, it was a flammable sound, something that could catch fire and send him to superstardom.

When the song looped around again, Billions thought he had a grasp on what he wanted to do. He circled several passages in his little notebook and flipped to a new page to assemble them into a coherent rap. Like fitting puzzle pieces together, the ends had to match. *Split* is a half-rhyme with *lip*, but it's a full rhyme with *pit* or *lit*. Billions' eyes began to blur from just how many different directions he could go. At some point, the availability of so many different options can feel like a prison. After about three cycles of the song, Billions had something to work with. The lyrics he chose didn't really have a cohesive theme, but they matched somewhat. That would have to be good enough. He held up a thumb, way up high so his guardian angel Perks could see it. He stopped the track and restarted it, so that he could start from the top.

Billions entered a zone of pure rhyming energy, and his tongue was piloting him, flicking against the roof and sides of his mouth. It was a muscle with a mind of its own. He focused his eyes on the color of the microphone that hung from the ceiling. It was a steely gray with silver accents that shimmered in the warm light of the studio.

He felt the adrenaline of the rap carry him forward. His tongue still rattled around in his mouth, as if the beat was still going. Perks came down from his dark throne and eyed him up and down, took in his anxious energy. He took off the headphones and stared at Perks. The moment lingered, and Billions begged for him to say that it was passable, something in it was worthy of holding on to.

"So how was that?" Billions asked.

"Let me see your book." Perks answered, jabbing an open palm at his stomach.

"What?"

"Let me see your book. I'm sure you have better stuff in here than that."

His face fell. He'd fucked it up, he knew that much now, but for Perks to just ask for his book was just such a violation. Stuff like that was personal. It had all the lyrics he'd ever written, it was like a time capsule of his mental state, a diary meant to be put to song. Billions wanted to believe that Perks had his best intentions at heart. He gazed at Perks, with his hair the color and texture of hot Cheetos, and thought he saw something pure in him, so he handed him his notebook.

Perks pulled a red pen from somewhere in his snack food hair and began marking up some of the lines, changing what seemed to Billions like insignificant things like prepositions and crossing through entire lines and rearranging things. One punchline about algebra he just wrote NO in deranged scratchy lettering. Over the next hour, he went through every line in the book, scratching out every bit of his hard work. It was like watching someone light your childhood home on fire. Over quickly, but the sting would last forever. Towards the very end of Billions' evisceration as a lyricist, Perks reached into his hair, and pulled out a green pen.

"Do you just keep those in there?"

"Gotta stay prepared."

He only used the green pen a handful of times, but when he did, Billions took notice. After being torn down so severely, any modicum of positive reinforcement felt like manna from heaven. Finally, when Perks had shoved both his pens back into his hair, he handed back the notebook.

"Use some of the stuff towards the back. There's some good stuff here, but it is certainly buried."

The back, Billions nodded. Then he opened to the page covered in green ink and his ribcage suddenly felt like it was covered in fire ants.

It was all the lyrics he had written about working at China Palace. Perks had loved it. He was overjoyed and dismayed. He couldn't use this. It was secret information that only he should know, a diary of his crimes. Perks saw what page he was looking at and started pointing out why he liked them.

"I love how creative you are with the whole 'working at a Chinese food place' aspect of your work. You've got such a great imagination. Sabotaging other Chinese places, incredible."

Imagination, Billions thought, and then started nodding in agreement. This could totally work. They couldn't connect me to Taste of Asia's closing at all. It was just my overactive imagination. You gotta think about things like that when you work in a place monopolized by two Asian culinary behemoths. So what if my mind wanders, it's art for a reason. He was grinning ear to ear now. Perks was the light he needed in his life.

Perks went back up to the booth and started the beat again once more, ready to construct his next big hit. Billions took two huge breaths and pulled his hair back to release all the pressure on his scalp. He slipped the headphones back over his ears and let it all spill out.

[...]

Whether it's the boss or the feds, I'mma get that bread

And if you speak out, I put a hole in your head

I shut down businesses, with a drop of a hat

Your whole livelihood's dead with a planted rat

The chorus came in, and Billions was feeling it. This was the feeling he had been searching for his whole rap career, someone was actually listening to what he had to say. His whole body was rocking to the sway of the music, but as soon as the chorus ended the song cut out. Billions tapped the side of the headphones hoping to get the music back, but to no avail. Perks came down again from his cave. His energy flew him down the steps and down to Billy, who he wrapped up in his arms.

"Good shit, Billy!" He yelled in his ear.

"It's Billions," he sputtered, before regaining composure. "I thought I was gonna do another verse?"

Perks cackled, his pearly whites threatening to break free from his face.

"Nah, man. Listen, I was so impressed by your skills that I'm gonna find you a feature rapper to take the second verse. You nailed it man." Perks was bouncing on the balls of his feet while he spoke.

Billions was happy that Perks enjoyed his second rap, but he was also disappointed that he wasn't going to go a second time. Normally, that's how songs like this were structured even with a guest.

Perks gave Billions a playful shove, to which Billions returned the favor. But when Perks was pushed, his face changed to a disturbed grimace.

“Don’t push me.” He ordered, before backing away and resuming a bout of giggling. Billions decided now would be a good time to clear out.

“I’ll call you when it’s done!” Perks shouted at him as he walked away.

Billions went from work to shower to bed every night just waiting for the call from Perks. This was his big break. He was over the moon. He wondered who he was going to meet on his way to superstardom, who he would make alliances with, and which alliances he would have to betray to slingshot his way to the tippy-top.

He ignored all else, and stared at the phone app, waiting for the status bar to turn green and start vibrating. His father thought that he had found a girl, and permitted him to stare, because he knew what that kind of love felt like.

But he wasn’t staring at any picture, just blankly staring, no expression, no thought at all. He was waiting for a call that never came. Each day that passed filled him with a tiny bit of dread, until three weeks had passed, and he became worried that Perks had scrapped the whole project, declared him a loser, and went along with his day. This dread filled him and overflowed until the phone rang. He’d been spending each cascading hour huddled in a corner of his bedroom studying the pattern of his wallpaper and bemoaning his lack of a future.

The ringing jolted him from his depression. Everything had finally worked out. Everything was coming up Billions. All the waiting that he had endured was worth it for this exact moment. He picked it up, expecting to hear the familiar rasp of Perks, but instead was met with Lou Chang’s shrill barking.

“You idiot boy! Idiot! Boy!” He was ranting and raving and sounded like he was out of breath.

Billions chuckled nervously, not expecting to hear his boss. He hadn’t been called idiot boy since the first few days he’d worked there. It was one of his favorite phrases to berate newbies with, but if he used it on someone who was not new, he’d heard this from Darrell, that meant you had screwed up massively.

“Did I screw up cleaning the grill again, sir?”

“Way worse than that! Check the news!” His voice had turned from a bark to a yap. He was scared.

Billions grabbed the remote and did what he was told, still holding the phone to his ear.

The two news anchors in their suits stacked their papers together with their hands and began to read from the teleprompter about the latest story.

“A local restaurateur framed?” the newsman read, “That’s what John Ma, former owner of Taste of Asia is suggesting after a local celebrity came to him with a surprising bit of evidence.” The camera switched to a woman in a blue pantsuit standing outside of the mall. “We now go to Mary Franklin, live at the scene.”

“Thanks, Todd. I’m here with John Ma, in front of where he used to own a restaurant.” The camera panned to reveal Mr. Taste of Asia standing just outside of frame, wearing a white button-down shirt and black pants. His eyes looked bloodshot and his hair was combed, though not very thoroughly. A sprig of black hair shot up from the crown of his skull.

“Now, Mr. Ma, your Chinese eatery was quite popular until the health inspector showed up and permanently closed it down.”

“That’s right, Mary.” He folded his hands at his belt-line. “The main problem was that a large, disemboweled rat had been found behind the grill, among other more forgivable infractions. The thing is, I checked every day for rats, and magically the day before a health inspector arrives, bam, rat. I believe I have been set up.” Billions grunted in discomfort and started to look for something to scream into.

“Wow, that is bold!” Mary said in her trademark faux-surprise, typically reserved for small animals doing parlor tricks on slow news days. “I’m told you now have evidence of this.”

“Yes, Mary. I have been given a CD that contains a confession to the crime, in the form of a ‘rap’.”

“And who gave you the CD?”

“The rap producer, I think his name is Perkins.”

“You don’t mean locally famous rap producer Yung Perks, do you?” Mary was very good at pretending to be surprised. Billions thought that must have been a skill that one would develop as a newscaster.

“The very same!” John Ma tried to feign surprise, but he could not conceal his resentment.

“We actually have an audio clip from the CD loaded up for you all at home. Please, take a listen.”

The section of lyrics was very familiar to Billions. It was surreal to hear his music being played on the television. He vacillated between elation and despair. People were listening to his raps, but he might not be able to make any more raps, because he would be in jail.

“Fascinating!” Mary exclaimed, before turning to the camera. Even through the thick television screen, Billions could feel the intensity of Mary’s stare. “Well, I guess we’ll find out the truth soon enough. Exciting, isn’t it, Todd?”

“Exciting indeed, Mary.” Todd said, as the camera cut back to him. The next story was about a cat working at a local library, and it segued perfectly.

“I knew nothing could come from you talking with that Perks boy. I told you not to tell anyone, and I thought I was understood, but apparently not because you went and made a whole song about it” Billions opened his mouth to speak, but found that he had no rebuttal to give nor any assurances to offer.

The next morning, he was supposed to come in to work, but he didn’t. He couldn’t. Even if he were to stand up in front of China Palace with a huge grin, enthusiastically serving samples, he couldn’t stand the feeling that Lou was looking on him with disdain, that he had torpedoed every bit of goodwill he’d accumulated. When he didn’t receive a call from Lou about where the hell he was, he knew that he had spoken to Lou for the last time.

Billions turned inward and bargained with himself. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. It’s only circumstantial evidence. It was just imagination, remember? I just had a suspiciously similar

thought that just so happened to align with what happened in the kitchen of the place adjacent to where I worked, that was all. He told himself these things, but they did nothing to assuage him.

Then there were the days of silence. Billions stewed in the anger he felt towards Perks, betraying him like that. How could he? What was Taste of Asia paying him? Their food tasted like feet. Not even a lifetime supply of that garbage could have been enough. Perks had lied to his face and told him it was great. He was out of a job, because he was dumb enough to trust someone he didn't know. The most anger he ever felt, and it was all because he thought he could trust Perks, but what reasons had he ever given to trust him? Now that he thought on it, there was never a solid reason to believe Perks had his best intentions at heart. He believed that Perks was an agent acting for good. He had no skills, and nothing would ever change that. Lou Chang bet his money on the wrong horse.

But then, something changed in his mind. The electric surge of synapses within his brain switched his point of view. He didn't have to sleep in the same clothes for days on end waiting for the rain to stop crashing on his roof. He didn't have to wait for cops to drag him out, to wait for a judge to call him guilty and sentence him to death by shame. He could still fix this, it could all be fixed.

If he was going to make this right, there was only one person he could talk to, and that was the man who'd betrayed him. Yung Perks would be the only one to put this whole "Billions in jail for free Chinese food" plot to rest.

The phone calls began.

Yung Perks' studio, the one with the explicit mural that violated all definitions of good taste, had a sign hung on the door that read "go away or else", but Billions had a hunch that he was still in there somewhere. He pulled into the parking lot, ignored the sign and started slamming the side of his hand against the door.

"Man, I just want to talk!" He said, alternating his knocking pattern. He took in as much of the building as he could. It was a fortress, designed to keep people like Billions out. He'd seen the inside, where the magic happened, and he wanted to be a part of that again. The paint on the door had chipped away in several spots, and the bannisters were fragile, like the rust would eat through at any moment.

Billions spent thirty minutes knocking at his door, and when there was no answer, he began to look for other ways inside. He was nothing, if not resourceful. Circling around the building, he tried every window, every crack he could slip through, but nothing provided him an opening. It wasn't until he tried the doorknob that the door opened. He thought for a second about how dumb he felt that he could have just walked in at any time, but he forced himself away from that line of questioning. If he'd thought about it too long, he'd have to confront the idea that he was committing more crime to cover up a previous crime, and that wouldn't work with his current conception of the situation.

When he entered, the smell was both recognizable and overwhelming. The noxious marijuana smell wafted throughout the dark corridors of the studio. In a quick scan of the dark lobby, he noticed a cluster of empty pill bottles assembled in a pyramid on the curtained windowsill. Their reflections were the only source of light. He shivered, when he remembered the feeling he'd had the first time he entered. His chest once had that fluttery feeling most people get when chatting with a crush, but the situation had changed. Now, his chest felt swollen and tight, like all the organs inside him were expanding and fighting one another for space.

Something told him that if he was here, he'd be in his studio at the other end of the wallpapered hallway, trapped in the allure of a new melody or cutting a sample for the next big hit. Billions took one step and listened to the ghostly creak that ensued. With each step, he tried to apply a smaller amount of pressure, only for the creak to sound out each time. He calculated the number of steps and, deciding that there was no reason to continue sneaking, walked casually to the end. He pushed open the door and found that the studio was pitch black. In his mind, he could see the outlines and borders of the octagonal room, and the way it was violently segmented by the metal wall.

The darkness was impenetrable. He reached through the door and could not see his hand. Limb by limb, he prodded his way into the studio. His eyes became useless. The darkness was so thick. After a few seconds, his other senses went crazy. He could hear every noise in the building, the scurrying of little feet coming from above and the creaks and moans of an old foundation. His other senses, having gone unused for so long, overloaded. He plugged his fingers into his ears, making him deaf and blind, and that fanned the flames a bit. The sounds of his own breathing startled him. His body went stiff at the knees as he became disoriented. The complete lack of sensation caused him to pull his fingers out of his ears and reach for a wall, to center himself. Christ, he thought to

himself, this place gets eerie with no one in it. He just wanted to negotiate, nothing more, just a quick conversation to see if this fate could be avoided. The sounds were rampant, a rolling boulder of noise that collected and swelled until it swallowed everything. Somewhere in that mess, Billions heard shaky breathing. He wasn't alone.

The next thing Billions felt was a hand grab his shoulder and spin him around. He screamed, but a fist clocked him square in the jaw and the scream stopped. His body collapsed on itself in an uncomfortable-looking mess of limbs. Yung Perks dragged him down the stairs, through the metal wall and down into the recording booth, laying him against the black noise-reducing foam.

When he came to, he had a sore jaw. Panic set in. His hands started to shake and his eyes darted from side to side. He clambered up to his feet and immediately bolted for the exit. The metal door was locked, of course. He was trapped in this octagonal prison, and there was only one person who held the key. He could keep him here forever, Billions thought. He could barely see, the only light coming from the now active workstation. Perks' voice echoed through the room.

"So, this is how it's gonna be, Billy, right? Did that old man at China Palace put you up to that as well? Or are you a lone wolf now?"

Billions could barely understand what he was saying. He pressed his palm against his forehead, Perks was misinterpreting everything. He meant nobody any harm, he just wanted everything to work out for everyone. It wasn't his fault, he was just trying to make the boss proud.

"Perks, please. I came here to make a deal, not to kill you. I don't want to hurt you."

"You came to me at a wrong time, Billy. I'm not feeling so good right now. I'm so on edge right now!" Perks was sweating like a madman, and his eyes were open so wide that it hurt Billions' eyes to look at. He was clearly on something.

"I feel like I could split a mountain in half, and you aren't a mountain. Are you a mountain, Billy? Are you? Huh? Why do you think I put the sign on the door?"

The heat smothered Billions in this space; it hadn't been the last time he was here. It was like Perks was breathing on him, though he was far away. Billions just wanted to say his piece.

“I just wanted to offer you a deal. China Palace has the best bourbon chicken in town, and you’d be able to take home whole trays of it, if you wanted. And you wouldn’t have to worry about Ma’s dirty kitchen, either. We keep ours completely rat-free. I could work something out with Lou and we could get you Chinese for life.” Billions chuckled as he was pleading his case, but even without a response, he could tell he wasn’t being very convincing.

The room was dank, dark and silent. This was communication with God, or at least as close to it as Billions had experienced in his short life. The man who held him by the nuts sat on a wheeled stool raving on pills about how he tried to kill him. There were no good signs here. All he could do was plead to the Lord for mercy.

“What are you gonna do to me, Perks?” Billions asked, looking towards the green lights. “Call the cops, report a break in, have me arrested?”

“The cops don’t come around here, and even if they did, I wouldn’t call them anyway. That’s more your side of town.” Perks pointedly said. “I don’t even really want to hurt you.”

“You don’t? I thought that was kind of your M.O. at this point?” Billions rebuffed.

“Of course you would think that. You don’t get me.”

All Billions heard was the sound of footsteps and the ka-chunk of the door to the studio closing. He was alone again, stuck in a foam prison. There was a microphone dangling from the ceiling, but when he spoke the words reached no one. He had changed who he was so many times, maybe there was time to change back. Maybe he could be William Lang again and convince Perks that he meant him no harm.

He had no sense of time passing, with there being no visible clock in the studio. He could stand up near the metal door and bang his fist all he wanted, but the noise would be cancelled by the damned foam. He slammed his head against the foam when no other options presented itself. He was wrong, he thought, to do all the things that made everyone so upset. He barely understood what was being asked of him anymore. He just wanted what everyone else wanted, to be talented and appreciated. To show others that he had purpose and now in pursuit of that goal, he’d gone from locking himself in his basement, to being locked in a recording studio. It turned him red with anger. His sweat sizzled as it left the pores.

He could see the segments where his clawing had ripped pieces of foam from the wall. His head felt heavy. Two people entered, he could tell from the way their footsteps sounded like the clops of horse hooves. They came down the stairs and unlocked the door. Billions could have stood up and made a break for the door, but he chose not to.

Perks and a man he hadn't seen before stood in front of him. The man who he had never seen was large round and dark, a man built like a bowling ball. His face was fat, and the way his forehead wrinkles bunched up made him resemble a pug in a certain way. He wore a tank top and looked like he could squish Billions' head like a grape.

"Alright, Billy." Perks began, circling around him as he spoke. "I brought a little friend with me to prove a point. His name is Bill, too. Say hello, Bill."

Bill nodded his head at Billions, to which Billions responded with a hello underneath his breath.

"Now that you two have been acquainted, I want to make a couple things clear." Perks stopped circling right in Billions' face and pushed his pointer finger sharply into Billions' chest. "Look at me."

The smell of his breath plunged its way into Billions' nostrils. The warmth of his body heat radiated on him. He looked up but found the sight hard to maintain.

"Don't come in here like you have a right to be here. I helped Ma, because I wanted to. I do everything because I want to. And you aren't going to bribe me with food like I'm a goddamn dog!" Perks let go of the tension he felt in his chest with an exhale and stomped his foot on the carpet. He shoved the finger back into his chest, a rapier primed to pierce the skin.

"I'm going to show your mercy once, and that is a mistake." Spit landed between his eyebrows, which Billions was too scared to wipe away. The ferocity in Perks' eyes, a fire that swallowed all the oxygen in the room, made it hard to breathe.

Perks continued. "If I ever see you on this side of town again, Bill is going to break every bone in your body, and then you'll have to slither home like the worm you are." Bill walked to the door and held it open, a hint that Billions understood. He made his way out of the studio, down the hallway, into his car and back onto the road. Tears flowed from his eyes, though he tried to wipe

them away. His vision was blocked, so he pulled over at a gas station to weep. The tears flowed from the end of his nostrils onto his lap. All he wanted to do was to make people proud and do a good job and he ended up letting everyone down. He snuck back to his house and crawled under the covers, a safe place in an awful world.

Over the next few weeks, things moved fast. Several people went to interview John Ma, Lou Chang and Yung Perks. When Billions watched Lou talk about him, his face hardened. Lou spoke with no empathy, and wholly denounced Billions' actions, saying that he was no longer employed. Even when the reporter pressed on the reasoning, Lou coughed into his hand and said that he never wanted "that kind of help". Billions saw that and wanted to scream at the television, but he settled for a scowl.

The matter was settled with a mediator out of court. Mr. Ma talked to the health inspector, who was reluctant but eventually allowed Taste of Asia to reopen, though they would later close for a similar situation. Billions Lang was formally banned from the mall for a period of life, though he would receive no more punishment. There was a news article on the local paper's website, but nobody saw it, or had even remembered the incident in the first place. The ban suited him fine, it made him slightly sick to see the mall anyway. Soon after the verdict, he moved out of his parents' place to an apartment in the local college town.

At college, people would ask him if he was Billions Lang, the guy who did that one rap with Yung Perks. He would answer in the affirmative, nod at them and attempt a smile, but say nothing more. His school ID, a white laminated card with an awkward shape, read William Lang. William took walks on campus and always drew a handful of eyes, but he answered to whatever people called him.

He took the lyric book, filled with lyrics that didn't seem to suit him anymore and marked up with Yung Perks' ink, and threw it into a bonfire at a party, watching the words he'd spent so long writing turn into smoke in the middle of the night.

He wanted to abandon Billions like he'd abandoned Willy and Billy and Bill, but he realized that a name was just a thing people called you, and the things you did stuck to you like spiderwebs.

Lauren

Lauren had a dead car in her driveway and she needed to get to work. If she was late to another shift, the manager, a bleached blonde in her fifties named Janet, would tear her to shreds and then fire her. Two days ago, she attempted to run errands for her parents and ended up with a busted engine in a Wal-Mart parking lot. Driving used to help her clear her mind, but the black plumes of smoke clouded her thoughts. She wasn't the most financially stable, and she had bad tendencies with money, spending in intervals of tens and twenties. Car troubles only put her deeper in the hole.

She watched her body in the mirror, above herself, like an entomologist observing a bug through a magnifying glass. Long twiggy torso, gangly arms, a smile that ruffled the edges of her face. The medium black and purple polo hung off her shoulders like a tent. This was quite a specimen to behold. Look at the chompers on that one, she thought as she grimaced in the mirror.

Making it to work would require the actions of a merciful god. She had no money for an Uber, her parents were away and wouldn't be home for another day. Begging for a ride for stranger was the nuclear option, but it was one she'd have to resort to taking. She posted on Facebook and watched the minutes go by without a response. An hour passed and still no one volunteered to help.

Lauren was just about to give up on the whole endeavor and call Janet, to tell her that she was unable to continue in her duties as cashier at the Taco Bell, when she heard the familiar Facebook notification noise.

Molly. A name she hadn't heard in years crossed her lips. They'd been thick as thieves in middle and high school, friends 'til the end. She'd admired Molly's outgoing personality, the way she was able to draw anyone into her warm glow. Molly had taken her in because they were opposites. Apparently, she enjoyed the way Lauren talked to people, an explanation that Lauren never questioned, though she wanted to. It was like a joke, if you dissected it, it would surely lose its charm.

Molly posted that she was "in the neighborhood" and was willing to take her, so Lauren sent her a message thanking her, along with the typical how-have-you-been's that come with reaching out to someone that has long since lost contact. Molly said she was fine and that it had been a long time since they had talked to one another, stating the obvious. She didn't ask why it had been so

long, they both knew why they drifted apart. The well of their friendship had gone dry the day Molly left for college. Lauren resented the new people in Molly's life, seen only through snapshots of jubilant moments. Even though the messages on the screen were only text, Lauren could hear them in Molly's confident voice.

A few hours later, Molly arrived in her beat-up black sedan. You could hear it from miles away. The car screeched as it rounded the corner into the neighborhood, shaking the elderly out of their midday naps. Lauren took one last look in the mirror to make sure everything was still alright, before grabbing her keys and dashing out the door.

"I can take you, but I can't take you back," Molly said to her as she stepped in the ride, absorbing the minutia of her car, the cracks in the plastic dashboard, the distractingly faulty HUD, "I'm sorry, but something came up."

This was a problem. Taco Bell was fifteen minutes away by car. It was on the opposite side of town. The trek back home would start around nine, and this time of year it got dark around six. She knew her way through the town well enough, but it would take hours. She grunted under her breath, alerting Molly, though Lauren didn't intend for her to hear.

"Listen, I said I was sorry," Molly said, "I really, honestly, can't."

"Don't worry, I'm just frustrated." A nervous atmosphere filled the car like smoke. She tried her best to change the conversation. "So, it's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Sure has. About six years." Molly suddenly got terse. Lauren remembered how she used to do that when she was upset. No one could force more than three-word sentences out of her when she got in those moods. Lauren turned inward. Why wasn't she interested in catching up? Why did Molly seem so closed off? Lauren tugged at the hem of the polo shirt as they sped out of the neighborhood and onto the main road.

The air conditioning in Molly's car worked well, much to Lauren's surprise. In fact, it worked too well, because Lauren was shivering, and goosebumps were starting to form up her arms. She stared at Molly and tried to pinpoint changes in her face from high school. Her hair wasn't as dark, and her eyeliner wasn't as thick, but that was about it. The last six years couldn't have just

not touched her, could they? She was still as radiant as ever and being in her presence sucked her in to her world.

“You wanna ask me something or are you just going to stare at me the whole ride?”

“Sorry, it’s just, well, I’m really happy to see you.” She tried her best to make this excuse sound legitimate.

Molly had a look on her face between bewilderment and bemusement.

“Me too, Lauren.” Molly said, before clamping her jaw shut.

There was another uneasy silence. This wasn’t going how Lauren had wanted. She wanted something mystical to happen. A switch in their brains could flip and then, bam, they’d be back to being best friends. She knew so much about her and they’d spent so much time together that to squander this opportunity would be an affront. Every time she opened her mouth to speak her tongue felt paralyzed, unwilling to make the motions necessary for speech. Molly turned on pop radio and drove the rest of the way there humming along half-heartedly.

The Taco Bell rose into sight from behind a small hill. The kitchen was a nightmare, the dining area was littered with trash and mystery stains, and the bathrooms, well, the less Lauren thought about those bathrooms, the better. Lauren felt awkward and gross.

She told Molly not to worry too much about not being able to pick her up, and that it was very nice to see her again, before Molly sped off.

Working shifts at Taco Bell had been a way for Lauren to pay for her car insurance and school supplies, but now that the semester was over, the job grew more and more dreadful. In addition, the car she had to pay for was now reduced to nothing more than a big red space filler. She could quit, she thought, but there would be no guarantee that she would get a job that she was any more suited for. Before pushing through the glass doors, she scrolled through Facebook and her text messages one last time.

She stood over the counter in her polo and work visor, stiff and uncomfortable. People came in, stared at the menu or through her, when they ordered. The guys in the back would plop together the same six ingredients in different combinations and then Lauren would call out their names, like

they were less names and more random syllables strung together. Her eyes glazed over at these types of work shifts.

People talk to cashiers like they are planks of wood with faces drawn on. They bark orders, make demands, and have no problem with treating you poorly. Being a cashier was a lot like being a menu item, she thought to herself. She was an object to be consumed by others.

Lauren looked down at her sauce trays at around four o'clock, to see if she was running low on mild, and when she returned her sight to the lobby, there was an old man in teal flannel staring at her from one of the booths. His skin looked like it was barely solid, like if the temperature were two degrees warmer he would become part puddle and part skeleton. Lauren wanted to look away, but Janet was very strict about presentation. Janet's eyes locked her down. She was trapped by the intersections of their visions. Lauren shivered and tried to look away from the man, whose furrowed brow she imagined only grew more and more furrowed, contorting and twisting in on itself.

She could tell from his dead stare that he didn't like her. What had she done? She wanted to snap her fingers or click her heels and disappear. Out of this existence and into a world where she didn't have to serve slop to people like him. A world where Taco Bell didn't even exist, because people had better taste than that, a world where she had a better job and people willing to take her to and from that job and not only half way. A job where she didn't have to be seen. If only, she blinked.

He stayed in the same place, hunched at one of the booths, for about two hours. His shirt was wrinkled and faded flannel in an ugly teal and red. Not once did he move or shift his gaze or come up to the counter to order. He sat, stared and waited for two whole hours. His gaze lingered on her even after he left, like the flu or a nightmare. Lauren looked to Janet, as if to ask what they should do about the loitering old man, but Janet acted as if there was no one in the store at all.

On her lunch break, a fifteen- minute escapade often too short to procure food, she went into the bathroom to splash some water on her face and shake the thought of him from her mind. But with every splash of water, she saw him more clearly, his twisted white eyebrows that dwarfed his beady dark eyes. Splash! She saw his craggy nose, sniffing occasionally. Splash! His thin, chapped lips came into view. She knew that she was being paranoid, but she couldn't help it. Her brain turned to fight-or-flight in that moment, her heartbeat quickened. She resorted to repeating a

mantra of “he’s not here anymore” to herself in the mirror as she waited out the rest of her lunch break. She couldn’t eat at a time like this anyway.

When she popped back out of the bathroom, she scanned the restaurant, hoping not to meet the old man’s eyes. With a sigh of relief, she returned to her post.

The hours passed like seasons. She bit her tongue whenever she wanted to swear, either at the employees or the customers. She watched the clock like a hawk, but as the time crept forward, the dread of the long dark walk overcame the dread of standing at the counter and smelling like ground beef.

Eventually, when the shift was up, and the sun was down, Lauren gripped her visor in her right hand, crushing it against itself, and walked out of the establishment. It always felt good to walk out of those double doors and see the sky in pinks and oranges, it meant that there was just enough daylight to do something with the day. Unfortunately for Lauren, she wasn’t sure how she was going to get home to spend the rest of the day.

Lauren stood in the Taco Bell parking lot, underneath the light post and thought about what to do. Her parents were not home, they were coming back tomorrow. Her last Facebook post received only one comment and that took an hour, an amount of time she didn’t feel comfortable waiting. Her phone was on two percent and would soon die. What if the man appeared again? What if she was in danger? The only choice was to stroll towards the sunset and make the walk under the cover of night. Maybe she would make it home by eleven. She hoped so.

The breeze was cold, and it struck her consistently on the nape of her neck. She shivered and pumped her arms up and down while she walked to warm her body up. Gazing ahead at the streetlight, she caught a glimpse of something, a figure too far away to take any shape. Her heart gave her one big thump.

The thoughts in her head ran wild. She wished that she had just called in sick and got fired, all to avoid this moment. The figure was slowly coming into shape. A human shape. Probably just a loiterer, she told herself, or someone waiting for the bus. She wanted it to die. Something deep in her chest, beside or inside her heart, wanted whatever it was in front of her dead. As she continued to walk forward, it did not gain any clarity, escaping her sight no matter how much she focused.

When she had finally reached the spot where the figure had stood, nothing remained. The harsh white light flooded the cone around her, but there was no human here.

When she passed the streetlight, she felt something lock its eyes on her. But there was no one there, she thought, she had checked. She turned her head to the shopping center on her right, scanning its empty frame. All the lights were out in the buildings. No one had shopped there in quite a while and it wouldn't be long before the whole building was vacated and left to rot. She tried to remember something that she had done there, some memory to leave on it like a sticky note, but all her brain wanted to think about was this inexplicable watched feeling. Did anyone else feel this way? Did Molly feel like this when she went grocery shopping, or when she was in class, or at the gym? Why did she always feel this way? Was anyone ever watching her or was her mind filled with falsities?

She thought of Molly. How much of their relationship was filled with falsehoods? Were they ever truly friends? She was standing in darkness, in the absolute void, with only an inkling of which way to go. Navigating these dark roads left her with little visual stimuli. Lauren filled the darkness with her memories of Molly.

She was lonely, she knew that much about herself, and she wanted desperately for a friend who would stick by her. Molly could have been that. She could have made her not feel so alone in this world. She had been that way once. At her job she felt like an art piece, something to be gawked at and explained. At home, she felt like an insect, pitiable and hideous. In the arms of a friend, maybe she wouldn't feel like such a waste of oxygen. She was being chased by something, the blur, and yet, the more it encroached on her, the more she wanted it to take her. It almost felt nice, being wanted.

Molly used to be her rock. She used to write little notes of encouragement on neon colored index cards, fold them into fourths and shove them into the slats in her locker. Little 'I believe in you' notes or tiny 'you can do it' scraps. They inspired Lauren. Lauren hung on every word Molly said because Molly was an amazing person, someone who managed the rigors of high school with grace and ease. Someone like that finding potential in someone like her made her feel like a million dollars.

But when Molly left, the world became unfriendly. She wanted to follow her to wherever, a servant to her whims, but it couldn't be. Lauren's grades weren't good enough to admit her into the

school that Molly attended, and even so there was no way she could pay for it. There was no one to hold her up and tell her that the world was alright. Plunging into adulthood meant being comfortable with loneliness.

As night fell, she walked in darkness. She was lonely. Desperately, she wanted to see something familiar. She thought that she recognized a twisted tree while walking and decided that she was somewhere about halfway. She made demarcations in her mind without any knowledge of the actual distance to her house. They made her feel safer.

She did this at work too, at every thirty- minute interval she would examine her position relative to the end of her shift. Once I reach 3:30, which is in twenty-six minutes, I will be a third of the way done, she would say. It made the time go quicker in her mind. Breaking everything down into small parts was the only way Lauren could tolerate her current existence.

Lauren had been walking for an hour and a half, her legs quaked from the constant impact of her heel against the sidewalk. Looking behind her at the streetlight closest to the turn, she saw the same figure and her nervous system went haywire. She swore she saw those eyes again. Those same furrowed, frayed brows she had been witness to not more than three hours ago. She shivered again, she watched cars rocket across the six-lane road, but she could not afford to wait.

Running was the only option. She broke into a sprint.

Twisting back, the figure was there, blurry, but most assuredly there. She made another burst through traffic and collapsed onto the She was surrounded by giant pine trees. They stretched up to the sky so far that she couldn't see their tops when she arched her neck. The path she was on now was made of loose dirt and every frantic stomp of her foot kicked dust clouds out. She saw eyes between each of the trees, little blurry figures all with the same eyebrows and nose, an army encroaching on her from all sides. Her hair whipped in the night wind, in all directions. She held the visor like the least effective set of brass knuckles as the gaps between the trees grew blurry. She plunged her body through the opening of two trees.

The forest path ended and, not expecting the drop, Lauren took a step out onto thin air and tumbled end over end down the hill at the opening of the path. Crashing down into wet dirt, she laid for a second to breathe, her face coated in a fine black layer of the stuff. Something in her brain told her to stay face first in the dirt, that this muck was comforting in some way, perhaps if she couldn't

see the man, he couldn't see her. Her anxiety got the best of her, she'd never make it home if she were

The football fields were not far, she thought, and depending on the time, people might still be there. She was being haunted by something, but surely there was strength in numbers? She just wished that she could go back in time half a day and sit with Molly again. She would take a million awkward half-conversations over this, and maybe she could make something of those million conversations, convert them into something with meaning. If she talked to Molly a million times, she might be able to see how she really felt. Lauren's running slowed as she approached the stands. Looking around, she saw a few parents who looked like they were cheering on their kids. She couldn't hear anything except dull ringing in her ears. Everyone looked so happy to be here. She scanned every face as she jogged to the other side of the field. A few fathers with their hands cupped around their mouths, grandfathers holding hands over their eyes like the brim of a ballcap to see their kid on the field, and mothers with fashionable hats in their team color. Her eyes scanned down the bleachers, and once she saw what waited for her at the end, she broke out into a sprint.

The old man stared at her with his eyebrows twisting and branching into forever. They crawled up the edges of his brow like angry gray caterpillars. His wrinkled mouth shifted into a smirk. His black marble eyes bored holes in her skin. She was in the middle of the field without noticing, and a play had erupted around her. The tykes were in formation, and the sound of referee whistles rang out. The quarterback hiked the ball, and the little wide receivers ran at her. She kept running, to escape the sight of the man on the end of the bleachers. She wanted to die; being underneath the spotlight made her boil. She was the object of all the crowd's ire, and as boos rained down, there was no hope of explaining what was really going on. She continued to run.

The lights faded from view and once again she was stuck in darkness. She looked up to the sky and saw that it was filling with what looked like grey smoke or clouds. It was coming from behind her, but it soon coated the sky.

There was a sound that rang out, between crackling of a firework and the sizzling of a steak on a grill. Lauren swallowed hard, staring up into the newly forming weather phenomenon. It swirled around in the sky, twisting, chasing itself in circles. Lauren gazed into it with fear. It made several shapes as it swirled, until it formed a familiar face.

This was a nightmare, she was convinced. None of this was happening. What kind of demon had she brought upon herself? It taunted her at every corner and threatened to squish her like the bug she was. She was insignificant and miserable, lonely and fearful. Running was pointless, but her body was so full of fear and adrenaline that it would let her do nothing else.

She turned into her neighborhood, arms flailing from side to side and face coated in tears. Turning a corner, she bolted for her door. When she reached it, she twisted the knob and crashed face first onto the living room tile. Pushing herself up, she shut the front door and she crashed from wall to wall, struggling to reach her room in the back of the house. She needed her bed, she would wake up in the real world and she would work at the Taco Bell and she would talk to Molly and she wouldn't have to see that monster's twisting eyebrows and his beady little eyes. She dove into her bed and closed her eyes, hoping to reawaken in the real world. Her body collapsed in exhaustion.

After a small respite, she woke in the same world she was in before. It was the middle of the night, sometime around 3 am. Lauren could see through her bedroom window that the smoke in the sky, and the old man's face, had dissipated. The night was littered with shimmering stars,

She grabbed her computer and logged onto Facebook. She needed to talk to Molly. She typed out a whole message about how she felt, how nothing had been the same when Molly left, how lonely she felt, and talked about the events of the night before, the old man and his constant appearances. There was no way Molly would believe her if she told her this, she thought, but she had to try. Lauren was genuine with her feelings, and if she spoke the truth about that, maybe she could make Molly believe the rest of it too. The message was several paragraphs long, and contained so much of her, that for a second, she thought about deleting it, keeping this whole dilemma locked in her mind. She hit the send key, and waited for the response, which might never come.

The Virtues of Wock

Papa Ya

Did you mean [Papaya \(fruit\)](#)?

Yardley James Peterson (born July 4th, 2018) also known as **Papa Ya**, is an American professional [Wock](#) player, widely thought to be number one in the world by both [ELO](#) and the [Wock Rankings Project](#). He is a two-time champion of the [Weaponmaster's Cup](#), considered the most prestigious trophy in the game, and currently holds the crown. He is known for his hyper-aggressive style and unconventional approaches. His [pixl](#) stream has the most viewers of any professional [Wock](#) streamer, amassing over one billion total views lifetime.

When they call me Papa Ya, it's like they're lifting me up on their shoulders. When they call me Papa Ya, it's like I can see the entire sky stretched out in front of me. The whole world is my oyster. I am the pinnacle of Wock, the Ur-player, the undisputed champion. Hell, I am the game. I am Wock.

And yet. All I can feel is this terror inside me, like I am nothing without Wock, even though I know that's not true. Even if the scene is dying and people stop playing Wock, the audience will stick around because they think I'm great, right? I don't know. The fourth annual Weaponmaster's Cup (the Fawc, in Wock slang) is in two weeks and I have been practicing eight hours every day. It doesn't hurt that people watch me when I practice. That puts money in my pocket and helps me pay for my house. This is all precarious, you see. It's like a house on the edge of a cliff, sure the view is phenomenal, but every day you wonder if this is the day it all comes crumbling down. In that scenario, it's you versus nature, while in my scenario, four guys with large-scale digging equipment are coming over to try to cut my house from the cliff so their houses can get that sweet view.

Frames is on his way, he tells me by text. I hate that the contract I signed says that I can't stream without him in attendance. I tried, trust me, I really tried to get Mr. Torero, of Torero Beef Jerky fame (Can't beat their meat™), to budge on that point specifically in negotiation, but the man was stern and would not alter the terms.

My stream set up is some state-of-the-art shit. There are six screens at the desk that wrap around like I'm at my own personal sports bar. On one monitor is the stream and on another

monitor is the layout I can adjust, like where I put the number of donators or the big gold star that is reserved for only the guy with the deepest pockets. Sometimes, they compete with one another to see who can give me the most money. I don't even do anything, it just happens. The computer that runs all this is underneath the desk I sit at, and it is a thing of beauty in and of itself. Top of the line processor, graphics card, hard drive, you name it. Also, Papa Ya is illuminated in LED lights on the side of it. A little personal touch. Three of the remaining screens show video footage of my opponent's matches from the last tournament on pixl, though most of the time it's just filled with online videos I have been meaning to watch. The final screen always has Wock loaded and ready to go.

The Wock title screen is beautifully simple. It's just the word Wock in polygonal letters floating on a background of space. It tells the players absolutely nothing about what they're about to bear witness to and I think that's partially why I like it. There's a mystery to everything about Wock.

When the start button is pressed the sound of a single drop of water plopping into an ocean plays, then the sound of a great wind, and then finally, the raucous sound of power chords. It's both jarring and peaceful.

The contract, part of my sponsorship deal with Torero Beef Jerky, doesn't stop me from playing games without streaming. Can't beat their meat™. I'm legally required to say that every time I mention Torero or its affiliates. Hopefully this qualifies. Loopholes are a real bitch, aren't they? I start playing. You select a weapon; your opponent selects a weapon and then you fight. Simple enough. The first person to get three hits wins.

Of course, as soon as I start getting into a rhythm, Frames is behind me. I didn't hear the door, maybe I'm too absorbed in my own things. Either way, I freak out.

"You know you're not supposed to be practicing without me here, right, Ya?" Frames says, leaning into me, whispering.

"Streaming without you, Frames. And I'm not."

I want to throw my head back and crack him with it, see what color he bleeds, but I don't because the contract is the contract for a reason.

“Don’t want you picking up any bad habits on the way to the Weaponmaster’s Cup, do we?” I swivel around in my seat to get a good look at him. He always looks like he got dressed in a comedian’s prop closet. Today, he’s wearing a Hawaiian shirt half-unbuttoned with comically long cargo pants. Resting on his bare chest is a little star on the end of a gold chain. I think he fancies himself a “cool, fun guy” but honestly, everything he does screams trying too hard. After not getting an answer from me on his question, Frames continues.

“Well, anyway,” he says, “now that I’ve arrived, we can get started. Who’s on the docket today?”

I check my second phone. I give this number out to other top players, so they can schedule me for practice sessions. That’s the benefit of being on top. Your time starts to become much more valuable to other people. I’ve got people on the come up trying to buy me dinner just to get an hour of Wock in, people pleading with me like I was the damn Make-A-Wish Foundation. They say things like “Oh, it would mean so much for our scene if you’d come out to our local.”

Intense regional pride is pretty much a staple of Wock. Scrubs feel like they’re involved personally if they know the guy they see on the stream. I’ve had people after matches curse at me and spit at me for beating the hometown hero, and that’s just the worst feeling because on the one hand there’s a pit in my stomach about crushing so many peoples’ dreams, but on the other hand, somebody else’s performance is a stupid thing to get so attached to. Anyway, today’s lucky winner is Umbrella. I think I met Umbrella at this tournament in New York. The dude would stand around the back of me everywhere, pleading that I would turn around and talk to him. And damn it, it worked. Papa Ya is not a statue or an art piece. Papa Ya is a human being. Talk to me.

All the other top players are going to disagree with me, but there’s no bigger racket than local tournaments. They’re just farming grounds for top players. I wish I could say it was a principled decision that I don’t go to locals anymore but honestly, I just couldn’t be bothered, even for what is essentially free money.

I text Umbrella that he’s the lucky one today, winner of an all-expenses-paid trip to Asskickinburg. He’s always wanted to visit Asskickinburg so of course he responds instantly. Be on in a second.

Without another word from me or Frames, I turn on the stream. Instantly my face is visible on monitors worlds away.

“What’s up Ya Squad? How’s everyone doing today? I’m doing fantastically. Today’s going to be a practice stream, so I hope that you are ready to bear witness. We’re going to get that Fawc, let’s get those ChampChamps going.” ChampChamp is an emoticon of my face that the fans made from a screencap at the last Weaponmaster’s Cup. It’s like a shorthand for “dude, that was some sick Wock action right there, I would follow you to the ends of the earth.” Champion of champions, baby. I hate the picture because it looks like I’m screaming and constipated but once force gets behind a movement the only thing you can do is roll along with it and see where it takes you. To make it as an internet personality, you must take your lumps.

I switch the stream from my face to Wock, where we are already picking our weapons. I choose the long sword because every hero wields the long sword and Umbrella selected the shield and spear because he fears me.

Every match is like a conversation. We are standing on a platform in the middle of nothing. It’s like Shakespeare said, all the world’s a stage. As the match begins, I walk forward, unguarded, saying that I am not afraid of his attacks and he raises his shield and crouches, making himself small against me. He wants safety more than anything. As I walk forward, he walks back. He is conceding this space to me, and so I must take it. There is only so much space, he will walk himself back into the corner eventually. He does not let me get too close, he jabs at me with the spear. I make a game out of my positioning. In and out of the range of his spear. I am toying with him and I will continue to toy with him. He leaps forward with a huge lunge. He misses but instead of hacking his throat with the edge of my blade like he deserves for thinking he could touch me, I slap it against his shield and hop away from him.

The chat loves it, and I know that they do because I hear someone donating. A little switch flips in my head and I go into thank you mode. Thank you so much for the donation, I say, this is going to my rainy-day fund.

This house is special to me. I bought it, straight cash and shoved my entire life into it. The hallways are lined with framed posters and memorabilia from when I was a kid, all my old collectibles and action figures are stacked up on shelves. The streaming room is covered wall-to-wall in my vast collection of games. All these things I own become the summation of my life. All of it

was paid for by donations like this. Sometimes, I go out on my front porch and just stare at the angles on the roof, the facades of the windows, and smile.

Umbrella doesn't know how close I am to him. He's bad at gauging how far from him I actually am. He is in danger. He wants me gone. He wants my head on a mantle. I inch forward, sword drawn. He jumps back and forth, he isn't prepared for this sort of mental stress. There's so much tension in his fingers that he flubs his controls and ends up swinging the spear at my ankles. I knock him down with a slash at his legs. He hits the ground hard and I strike him two times in rapid succession. He is defeated. And the crowd cheers.

Frames taps me on the shoulder and shoves his notepad into my chest. It's filled with little notes. You were toying with him. No mercy. Do you want to win or not? Stop showboating. Work on your footwork. He doesn't get that all of this is part of the experience. If I can't have fun with the game, then why am I playing? If I can't take my frustrations out on this virtual sucker, then what is he good for? What purpose does he serve me? I am as much a symbol as I am a competitor. I am a wild stallion, free to roam the countryside.

Frames is clearly disappointed in me. From the way he tsk-tsks and shakes his head, glares and grunts. I could not care less what that bald third wheel thinks. It's me and the game. Torero thinks that he's necessary. Pah. I find it funny how he postures, he wants to be fun, but when it comes to me and my gameplay, he wants to shut it all down.

"This guy is not helping you. He's a pushover," Frames says, about Umbrella, and in earshot of the microphone. I was picking my weapon, but of course, because of his stupid comment, I had to swing back around and tell him to shut it. Instead of canning it, he just keeps talking.

"I mean it, Ya. You are learning nothing from him. He's too panicky and exploitable." I resist the urge to shove the palm of my hand over his mouth. You just can't teach some people how to act. He's clearly going to watch the stream footage over and over again, and he's going to hear Frames and he's going to be mad. And then that's a whole thing I have to deal with.

Sidebar. Let's be real here. If you're bad, you're bad. You can get better but there's a ceiling. After a point, none of the practice in the world can make you better. Some people are destined to be scrubs.

“He’s on the list, his number was first. It’s only fair. And he’s not that bad.” I say this, giving Umbrella the benefit of the doubt. He’s not great, but we all have off days, but maybe I’m saying that to save face. We start up the next match and without a moment’s hesitation I can push him onto his back foot and strike him another three times. Victory. So quick that Frames does not have notes for me. He slaps a hand on my shoulder and nods. We go again. Victory. Again. Victory. The picture is not becoming any clearer for him, but I can read his actions and movements like a book. Frames is growing increasingly agitated, I feel it behind me in the way he paces back and forth on my hardwood floors, with each step there’s a slight peeling.

“You’ve got something on your shoe, what did I tell you about coming into my house?” He raises his hand and waves me down as he starts to take off his shoes. “Also, stop pacing around everywhere, you’re making me nervous.”

“I’m making you nervous? Ya, let me tell you something. This whole situation is making me nervous. It’s like you’re playing against an oh-fer, someone whose never touched a controller before and –damnit! It’s making me tense. It is my job to make sure you are ready to three-peat but—”

“ChampChamp in the chat, everybody.” I turn around to say into the microphone.

“Ya, pay attention! We agreed that you can have a little bit of autonomy with your training and that’s fine, but this. This is a mockery.” He was off the rails at this point, making vigorous hand gestures, but I was distracted by the way that his gold star bounced and jingled on the end of the chain. “Look at me Yardley!”

I hate the sound of my own name, it sounds like a disease.

“Alright, Paul. I see how it is. Why don’t you take five and get some air?”

He grabs a chair from the guest bedroom and drags it over to the side of my setup. I am too focused on the game so when the monitor goes black, my mind freaks out for a bit. Sensory deprivation.

“Tell Umbrella that you’re sorry, but coaches’ orders.”

The little bastard unplugged the game. I tell him to plug it back in and he obliges.

“Fine.” As I grab my phone, he plugs in his own controller and selects his weapon. I feel awful sending these messages to Umbrella. I tell him that we will play more soon. I don’t want my disappointment to show on my face. The stream needs a strong Ya. Without a strong Ya, the stream dies. Nobody wants to watch some washed-up so-and-so with a wet noodle smacking cannon fodder. They want to see top-level stuff. Would you rather watch Wilt Chamberlain or some kids shooting hoops down at the local rec center?

I am always worried about Wock biting the dust. If Wock 2 is trash-garbage, then that’s a whole revenue stream out the window. If a game is on its death knell, you must jump ship. You can’t go down with the ship, you have to choose which new game you are going to make your primary focus. It’s like a game of musical chairs except there’s financial consequences. I’ve never done it myself, Wock will always be my first love, but I’ve heard real horror stories about those who couldn’t adapt.

Frames is not exactly gifted when it comes to the execution of Wock. He knows everything about the game. It is not from lack of practice. He is well versed in the data of the game, hell, it’s how he got his nickname, but when it comes to playing, it’s like his hands turn into slugs. We play a few matches and as expected I run him through. But each match, I find it a little bit more difficult to open him up. My body tenses up before last hit. I haven’t felt nerves like this since last year. The hours pass like seconds, the game feels like it’s unfolding in front of me. We reach about nine o’clock at night. Last match.

He selects a scythe. Low tier city.

“I thought you were trying to train me here. When am I ever going to see someone pick scythe?”

“I’m going to give this one my all. I want to see if you’re ready for the Cup.”

I feel a chill down my spine. I’m not sure why. I’m like seventy-five percent sure he was going full blast the whole time. I look to the chat, people are rooting for Frames. I’ve lost the audience. I’m like Samson with a buzzcut.

The match starts with the familiar bell. He steps forward, dragging the blade of his scythe on the ground as if to say, “look at me, I am now the center of attention, with my big farming tool” and I

step forward as well. We are locked on to one another. This isn't a trampling, this is a battle. He is saying he is better competition than Umbrella will ever be.

He isn't scared of Papa Ya, he says, he's seen me for what I really am. A hot air balloon waiting to be popped, a curtain waiting to be pulled away, a latex mask waiting to be removed. He slashes at me and misses. He comes back around from another direction and I am just deft enough to dodge it. Where did this ferocity come from? Which sleeve did Frames pull this out of?

He is slashing for his life. The only sound in my entire house is the hard clack of plastic joysticks, bouncing along the hallways and corridors.

Being outside of the game is scary. I only operate in spaces where I am loved and adored, and I know that's not healthy, but there's this kind of coldness to the world outside of Wock that pierces me.

The scythe is slow, and so I have plenty of time to get out of the way and make a counter attack, but Frames is doing a good job of keeping distance. But that's only until I put my foot down. I dash in to say that there is nothing he can do. He wants to control this, and he wants to put this in a cage. I will not let him. He wants to take Wock and distill it to its finest form, the cleanest inputs, scrub it all away. What he doesn't realize is that you can't put this monster in a cage, you can't dumb this down, because it's like a tree that's been growing since the dawn of time, there are too many different branches to trim. When I am in this moment I see everything that there is in Wock, I see all the dirty permutations and to wipe that away seems like the greatest form of sacrilege. I say this to him in the form of a dash through his defenses. I have the next nanosecond to choose where I am going to strike, but I've already chosen because I know what he is going to protect. He assumes that I will go for the face, because it is always most humiliating to go for the face. I finish by slashing his heels. Point.

He is attempting to fend me off, but it will not succeed. He swings the stick around and around like a rotor blade. I sneak in again, ready to strike, but when I swing at him, he is not there. He isn't anywhere I can see. Then he hits me from behind and I can feel the blade go through my chest. Frames is giggling in his chair, bouncing up and down even. His enjoyment makes me want to hurl. I lean back in my chair to give my eyes some time to rest before the mercy period wears off and we are back to the slaughter. I catch a glimpse of Frames' face out of the periphery of my vision. He is sweating. What does this mean to him? What is Papa Ya to him?

“I’m no slouch, Ya. I’ve been getting a little better day-by-day, just like you should be doing. You’re not practicing. You’re not putting your all into the game. This is supposed to be your life, and you are content to drink on your golden throne.”

“What are you saying, Frames?”

“The king has grown fat.” Everyone is watching.

So that’s the angle he’s selling. There’s nobody storming the castles in his name now, nor will there ever be. Ya is the one and true king. It is not by divine right that kings are made, but by blood. The enemy’s blood, specifically.

I run into the fray again. I want to prove to him that I can best any challenger, but why am I trying to prove myself to him? He doesn’t deserve an explanation. He is a hanger-on, an addendum to my legacy. The only explanation on offer is the one my fans deserve, for being there and supporting me. But maybe not then either, maybe it’s all futile and maybe as I lose and lose and spiral into myself they will dwindle away. It would be a drip at first, when I fail to win the Fawc, and it would grow to a trickle when I start falling behind the pack of contenders, and it would be a full-blown flood when I start losing to Umbrella. There’s nothing I can do but win, because otherwise all of it vanishes into a puff of smoke. The Kingdom of Ya would be no more.

He is slashing at the wind. He is no longer trying to hit me but keep me away by filling the space with hitboxes. I am not so foolish as to run into an oncoming blade, so I begin to circle around him. I don’t know what kind of sucker he takes me for. This whole thing is a test, but it’s a joke to think that he could test me.

I don’t know how to read him, and I really never have. And when I say read, I don’t mean read as in Wock, his intentions there are rather clear, I mean as a person. I make a lot of wild guesses at his intentions, what with the way he dresses and the slow, methodical way that he speaks, but I can’t ever place a finger on what he wants. Does he want me to succeed? Does he want me to fail so I can be replaced with another client? Does he like working with me or is this just a job for him? None of these questions mean much of anything in the long run, but they strike me as I measure the distance between us. If I were to drop off the face of the Earth, would his demeanor change? Besides the financial burden that my disappearance would put on him obviously. He would

be out of a job until Torero hired a new Wock player. No one has absolutely zero impact, zero footprint on the world. Disappearing isn't that easy.

The problem with the scythe is that, unlike the spear, its blade is on the side. It's used for harvesting wheat, not killing. The reason death comes for people with a scythe isn't because it's the most efficient way to kill or some other edgy reason, it's because he was from the middle ages and everyone in the Middle Ages was a farmer. He's coming to reap you like the farmers reap wheat. If you want to stab someone with a scythe, you either have a dumb pointy axe or a spear you must swing around, and neither is optimal. The attacks must come from one of two directions, straight down or from the sides.

If the image of Death were reinvented, we would give him a gun. Maybe a briefcase, too.

Frames is sensing that I am not going to approach and so he must make the first move. He steps in and raises the scythe over his head, ready to make a shish kebab out of me. This is the wrong move as I quickly step in and slash him before he can bring the heavy weapon down. Two to one.

The sound of close thunder rips my attention away from the game. It was clear outside when we started, I think. I turn to look at Frames, but he has taken this opportunity to charge. Quickly readjusting, I try to move out of the way of his strikes, but I get nicked by the final slash of his barrage. Two to two. In the middle of the chaos, I check the chat and they are rabid. They are declaring me washed up already.

The thunder storm is growing fiercer by the minute, the sound of the rain pounding against the roof is getting louder and louder and I feel truly powerless in this moment. When I was a kid, we used to do that thing where we would count one one thousand, two one thousand, to see how far away the storm really was. This storm was right on top of us, another one of our viewers. Flash, bang.

This wasn't supposed to be this way. Maybe Frames is right about everything he's said, maybe I have been slacking on my practice. Maybe all this time I've been spending has been a waste. That thought hurts more than losing. I am moving in and out of his range, but my heart is no longer in it. As he is about to strike me down, another strike occurs and knocks out our power.

We are out of Wock, and all I can do is stare at my hands. I'm exhausted and broken but I feel a slight twinge of relief. The audience didn't have to witness my loss, the ultimate cliffhanger keeps me from suffering the worst loss of my career. I can only thank a higher power than Ya.

"Hmph. Quite a show." Frames says to me, but I don't respond with more than a grunt. "I hope you learned your lesson. Stop messing around. You are wasting my time."

"You think this is funny, Paul?" I asked. "You think I don't take this seriously? You don't understand what it's like! This is all I have, and you come in like a bull in a china shop ruining everything. You keep shitting on everything I try to build! Why are you even here?" My whole body knows that I lost, even if I technically didn't. It stings.

"Because I must be, Ya. Contracts, remember? I have no time for someone who doesn't want to learn and adapt, even if that someone is the so-called best in the world."

That solves that then. I want the ground to swallow me up. I can barely mutter "please leave" to Frames, who responds with a shrug and a turn. A minute later, he is gone, and I am alone.

This house is far too big for someone like me to mope in. This house becomes a cave where the voice echoes unto itself; which is a fancy way of saying that if I scream the noise will rattle back threefold. The money I get from donations and sponsors goes a long way to build an empire, but when it is all hollow, you feel it in your heart. I want to destroy something. My anger tends to flare like this in times of great stress and I know it's not healthy, but I justify it by telling myself that I can destroy what is mine. I go to town. I grab a poster off the wall, frame and all, and I start swinging. I'm going to town like I'm a baseball star! Crash! The sound of the glass shattering doesn't impede me as there are five more posters. I'm drunk on anger and full of momentum! It's as simple as picking up another one and repeating the process, following down the line. This poster is from a midnight release I had attended with some friends back home. I remember we were all so happy just to have something new to play. The satisfaction of a good swing does nothing to quench the fire. I need more.

Pieces of glass cover the hardwood floor. I am stomping down on the ground; my whole body is a whirlwind of destruction. My mind is in such a frenzy that I can't even hear shattered glass, all I hear is the whooshing sound of the wind as my arm swings through it. Five posters now ruined. I yank the last one off its nail and smash it over my knee like I'm a heel snapping the back of

the crowd favorite. I am out of control. I am throwing punches, putting holes in walls and at the same time I feel like I am above myself, watching my body take control of itself.

And then I look down and I see what the final poster was.

It's the first Wock poster I ever bought. It depicts a grand battle between two swordsmen and how small they looked when put up against the vastness of the forest that surrounded them. At the top was the lettering of the Wock logo. I'd bought tons of merch for the game, sure, but this one was special, because I had gotten it signed by Mr. Hotaru himself.

I'd met Mr. Hotaru at the very first Weaponmaster's Cup, before I was the man on top of the world, when I was just Yardley. He was a smaller man than I had expected, though, thinking back on it now, I'm not sure why I expected him to be that way. He had this bright smile on his face that folded his face up into so many creases, a smile that said nothing could bring him down. He was watching people earnestly enjoy something he put his heart and soul into, so I understood why he was feeling that way. When I handed him the poster, which I had bought from an art vendor at a convention, he gasped.

"Oh, wow," he said, though he did not speak much English, I could tell that he was admiring the art. He talked to me in Japanese, which I couldn't understand, but then a man behind him in a well-maintained navy suit began to translate.

"It is a beautiful thing," the translator said, "he says, this is exactly what he was going for with regards to tone. Did you draw this?"

I shook my head and pointed to the artist's information on the corner of the poster. He took the poster and held it up against the light and kept nodding. Then, he laid it down and scribbled his name onto the poster with a little doodle of a man with a sword.

"Thank you for playing. It is very appreciated." His translator said. When I got home, I was so energized by this reaction that I played Wock non-stop for the next two days. Mr. Hotaru didn't show up at the next two Cups, and that puzzled me.

I wish I could take it all back. The poster itself is ripped in half, right through the signature.

The thunderstorm rages on. Frames is gone. I am here alone. That is for the best. It is for the best that people leave me alone so that they don't have to witness such a pathetic display. My anger is only good for so long until it turns into regret. I feel myself getting dizzy and my vision going dark. Overexertion. I've had fainting problems since I was a child. I need to remember to drink lots of water when I do strenuous activities, like destroying everything I've ever built.

The new day shines in through the window in the front door. I wake up, my back now punctured with glass shards. The popcorn ceiling looks like the surface of some far away planet, somewhere I'd rather be right now. My back feels like a pincushion. I'm pretty sure that if I were to get up, I would start bleeding.

I have to get up eventually. I pull my chest forward and scan my back with my fingers for any cuts or splinters of glass lodged back there. I manage to find some and pluck them out but when I stand up the pain tells me that I must have missed some.

Is this the result I feared so much? I ask this question as I stand up, gingerly to avoid getting glass in my feet (a futile endeavor) and go to grab the broom to sweep up this whole mess.

The shards are hard to sweep up and they are everywhere. I spend most of my sweeping time drifting through my own mind. Every snap of a neuron brings on a new wave of bad feelings. Whether it be about the poster or losing to Frames or how I acted, every new thought drags me slower down into a morass of my own making. I hear a buzzing come from my stream room. My other phone.

Every step is painful at this point. There are slivers in my feet.

It's Umbrella. He's in town and wants to talk. I'm not in the mood for conversation and I turn to walk away, but then I felt a twinge of regret for the way he got treated by the stream yesterday. If I'm going to make amends, now would be the best time.

I suggest we meet at this little pho place downtown, Twenty Pho Seven. I ask him if he's heard of it and he says no. I tell him it's a real trip. If I hadn't passed out like I did, I might have ended up there yesterday.

I change shirts, briefly examining the damage and briefly disassociating at the sight of myself in the bedside mirror. I throw a sweatshirt on over that, just in case I start bleeding through the shirt. Some sweatpants and a ballcap later and I'm out the door.

The midday sun feels targeted on me, though I try to ignore how hot it is by reading Wock forum comments. You might think it's too open a wound to dive back into, but I've got salt-shakers for hands and I'm a bit of a masochist. The top post is about last night. Frames and Papa Ya fight ends on massive cliffhanger. People in there are taking sides on what happened, whether I could get out of the way of Frames' attack or not. They analyze each pixel of data like it would solve a murder case. Most of my side's argument is predicated on the fact that I'm Papa Ya and there's no way I would lose to Frames. I must have dodged it. They don't know anything, and I sure as hell won't enlighten them. If I had to guess, they're probably talking about how scythe is the next weapon to break out, and how it has hidden potential, but honestly, no, I was greedy and wanted to show up Frames for trying to teach me something. Frames played me, not the matchup. Even though the match was inconclusive, or so everyone says.

Twenty Pho Seven has been here for two months and nobody's ever here, but the pho is good so who cares? The whole restaurant floor is covered in white tile and the walls are decorated with geometric art pieces in silver. It's an unintentional museum, two parts sterile, one part silent. If it weren't for the pho, I don't think I'd be in here either. I spot a booth in the corner and make it my own, waiting for Umbrella to join me.

There's a kid, no older than 14, sitting with his parents at the only other occupied table in the place. His parents are leaving him be, choosing to make conversation with each other. I understand kid, nothing to do but twiddle your thumbs and dart your eyes around this room filled with nothing. Our eyes meet for a moment and he reacts, his body twitches with recognition. I pull the brim of my cap down and turn away, but I fear already it is too late for me to stop what is put in motion. All I'm thinking is, "kid, you don't want to talk to me, I'm stupid and a terrible influence, talk to a doctor or something." But of course, he comes over to me, around the whole restaurant to ask me if I'm Papa Ya.

"Are you Papa Ya?" He asks, standing with his hands folded in front of him.

"Not right now, but yes."

He's downright giddy. He starts hopping up and down on the balls of his feet like he physically can't keep the energy in. I push my hand down against the air. "Quiet down," I tell him. I'm looking desperately for a waitress so that I can convince him that I am going to order food, even though there are no menus in front of me. When the waitress doesn't appear, I know I am stuck.

"I watch your stream all the time and I'm just really excited to meet you, I had no idea that people like you came to places like this and I don't know, it's just really cool." This kid goes at a mile a minute. I guess all kids do, I'm just slowing down. I ask him about his favorite part of the stream, hoping to maybe get some insight into why I have 14-year-old viewers at all. "I don't know, I guess it's because you're the best Wock player ever, you know? It's just like, if you were just some dude then why would I watch? Why would anyone watch? ChampChamp in the chat, remember?" Demoralization complete.

The kid's gotta a good point.

"You play?"

"I'm bad, but yeah." I honestly will never understand why people need to preface their enjoyment of Wock with their skill level. Like, no, dude, if I don't recognize you, I assume you're not a pro, but we're connected because we both enjoy the same beautiful game. Being bad at something isn't a reason to be ashamed. Unless it's your job to not be bad. Like me.

"What do you play?"

"Spear and shield."

"Oh, really? Just like Umbrella?" He looked almost embarrassed when I said this.

"Yeah, like Umbrella. I'm a huge fan of his, but, like, I'm thinking about switching. Even Frames was shi--crapping on him."

I looked around the restaurant to make sure he hadn't already arrived. When I was sure he wasn't nearby, I put a hand on the kid's shoulder. "Listen, kid, that's the wonder of Wock. Everyone has their weapon, their style. Don't let someone tell you you're playing the game wrong. Umbrella will figure it out and so will you."

He looks down for a moment, examining the texture of his shoelaces, and then he looks back to me and nods. The waitress appears behind him, holding a menu and budes her way into the conversation. She seems blank-faced, going through the motions of being a waitress without consciously performing.

“Would you like something to drink, sir?”

“Water, thanks.” The kid, sensing that he is being pushed out of the conversation, gives me a half-wave and retreats to the other side of the room. He continues to stare.

The water comes in an already sweating clear plastic glass that the waitress lays in front of me. I hear the door swing open, because you can hear every blink of an eye in this place, and I look to see Umbrella walking in. I don’t stand up or go to meet him, but I do make consistent eye contact with him.

Umbrella’s got the body of a marathon runner, gauntly skinny but with thigh muscles that bulge and pulse, and he loves to show it off. He’s wearing a neon green tank with the shortest pair of men’s khaki shorts that I’ve seen in a very long time. His dark face shows no expression as he approaches and pulls out a chair. The screech of the chair pulling out throws the calm of the restaurant out of whack.

“Hey, man. What’s going on?”

Umbrella doesn’t respond, he just stares at me. Normally, this would be my signal to leave the conversation, but unfortunately, due to societal convention, I am stuck. When I start to speak again, he decides to enter the conversation.

“What the hell?” He interjects. “All people are talking about is how washed up I am now. It’s sponsor season and I don’t want to have to see that video in every sponsor meeting, justifying why a team should sign ‘an oh-fer, someone who’s never touched a controller before’.”

I’ve made him feel the pressure. I hate that I must speak on behalf of Frames, apologize for his big mouth. When did I become his PR guy?

“I’m sorry, truly sorry, dude. I—”

“You don’t know how hard I’ve worked to get to this point, Ya. You don’t know how many raw hours I’ve spent glued to the screen working my fingers to the damn bone for your stupid coach to say one thing on a stream and ruin it all.”

Well, maybe if you’re going to play such a boring style, you should try winning occasionally. That’s what I wanted to say, but I realized that starting a fight with someone who’s on my side is the least productive thing I can do. These are our livelihoods on the line after all.

“Listen, Umbrella.”

“My name’s Bernard.”

“Bernard. I’m frustrated with Frames too. More than I can say. He’s not normally like this, but if you just give me a chance to explain the situation to him, I’m sure he’ll wisen up and apologize.” Speaking on behalf of Frames really gives me that skin-crawling feeling. I don’t want to be his spokesman. I do want to see Bernard kick his ass, which is what would happen if he were here right now.

“It’s too late, Ya. I’m a laughingstock. Public perception has shifted. Now the only thing that’s going to get me a sponsor and keep me afloat is placing well at the Cup.”

He’s right to be honest, and I have no words of sympathy to calm him. So, it’s best not to think about it, zone out and push the feelings away. Play neutral with your emotions. I pretend to follow what Umbrella is saying by nodding along. The waitress comes once again and asks what we would like to order, but neither of us have even glanced at the menu. She slinks away once again.

We sit in silence. I’ve said my piece and I don’t think that there’s any need to interact further. But still, there’s this nagging sense of responsibility that I can’t quite shake.

“I’ll pay,” I say to Umbrella who doesn’t acknowledge me because he is too involved in his texting. I assume he heard me. “You know, I just had a kid come over and say he was a fan of yours before he got here.”

“Really? When?” He perked up, broadened his shoulders.

“Just before you got here. He’s still here if your ego still needs a jolt.” This elicits an eye roll, which means it got the right reaction. “The only other table in this whole place. What are the odds?”

I still feel the glass slivers pushing in my back and the bruise forming on my knee after I snapped the frame over it. It’s going to be a struggle to walk for a while. My shoulders are hunched. Bernard is over at the table schmoozing with the kid and his parents and they invite him to sit down. No skin off my back.

I am having a revelation as I stare at the geometry on the walls and thinking about the situation I’ve pushed Umbrella in. It’s like someone’s taking a taser to my brain, a closed stunning loop of energy that shocks my brain into convulsions. I can’t stop thinking about it, trying all I can to yank the thoughts out of my head. I chug my glass of water and look desperately for something new to replace these thoughts, but the blankness of the room provides no solace.

Umbrella comes back, his face now more relaxed and his shoulders drooping, and asks me what’s up. I must look concerned.

“I’ve just been thinking about some things man. You mind if I throw some ideas at you for a little bit.”

“Be my guest. What’s going on?”

I’m one of those guys who needs an outlet. Something happens, and I need a discussion. I’m a public personality, so I feel at home in front of people. Umbrella is the only audience I got right now. So, I relay to him the events of the past night, the loss to Frames, that whole situation, and the rampage that followed his departure from my house, and how I can’t stop thinking about how I lost control and how much that scares me.

When you talk to someone about your feelings, you must fight the need to sanitize those feelings. The more I told Bernard about the night, the less I felt I could hide to maintain the truth of the situation, as embarrassing as the outburst was. It felt strange to pour these feelings out, but in a positive way, like being able to breathe out of your nose again after a long cold.

I guess some part of me wants to escape Wock and see what my life can be without having to be Papa Ya in everyday life. The split between me and him has grown too great. I am not Papa Ya, Papa Ya could sprout legs and walk away at any moment. I keep talking and talking, but Bernard

isn't doing much but nodding and gripping his chin with his forefingers. His eyes are closed, but I want him to make eye contact with me, so I say his name.

"Bernard, what should I do?"

He opens his eyes, but he's staring past me, into the great white expanse of the wall. He begins to lecture.

"Well, none of that sounds healthy. Maybe you do need to take a break from Wock and from playing this persona. Be you for a little while. You've neglected that part of yourself, let it wither."

I wait to respond because I am too busy examining his face for any hint of glee. Papa Ya quitting must be like the heavens opening and dropping a pyramid made of gold right on top of him. I am the biggest roadblock to anyone's success and I cannot imagine the weight off his shoulders right now. Though with what Frames said last night, I can imagine Bernard is not thinking of getting up on the table and tap dancing. Bernard is composed. There is no grin, not even a flicker of one. He is as good at hiding his emotions as he is hiding behind his shield.

"You're probably right, but how do I just drop a bomb like that without letting everyone down?"

Up until now, Bernard has had an answer for everything.

"I don't know, man. If you think you can't carry on, even for one last tournament, then it's best to break their hearts now. Just know that you'll never be fully free from it."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm saying fans are rabid, especially with audiences like yours. If you leave now, the specter of Ya will haunt Wock streams for the rest of the game's life."

Bernard's eyebrows furrow. I try to interrupt him, but he just keeps on going.

"Every tournament, people in chat will ask where Ya is. People will make jokes out of it to mask their feelings. People will put ChampChamp in the chat whenever the commentators mention your name. You'll be the absent king of Wock."

The waitress arrives, this time visibly annoyed with us, I can tell by the way her whole face scrunches up after she asks if we're ready. We decide to order the pho, a safe bet considering the name of the restaurant. She jots down notes and vanishes again. It's like we look away and she's gone. The longer I stay in here, the less relaxed I feel.

"I'm sorry Bernard, I know what you're saying, and I get it. I've been thinking a lot about the fans and how much I mean to them, but what does it all matter if I'm so miserable and angry that I'm breaking shit in my own house?"

"I'm not telling you don't do it. I'm just saying you should know the consequences."

The food comes out in a huge ceramic bowl the size of our heads put together and it is pumping steam. Immediately the whole place is filled with the fragrance of the beef broth, spiced with onions and ginger. Without hesitation, I dive in, and Bernard does the same. Eating this soup is like a religious experience, after a certain point I swear you'll start seeing visions in the broth. Gulp after gulp, a new wave of flavor crashes in. The strips of beef dissolve in my mouth. My tongue craves more. We are enraptured in the eating experience. When the bowl is empty, there is a stunned silence.

After the waitress leaves the check, I look again at Bernard and try to read his face, while also not getting caught staring. He is calm, at peace even. The man's face does not change. After he came stomping in, I was worried he'd kill the whole vibe of the place, but nope, a good bowl of pho and a conversation with a fan will always send the bad mood packing. Plus, now, I have some much-needed answers.

"Hey, Bernard. Check the stream tonight, okay?"

He nods at me, lips still sealed. I offer to walk him out, but he insists on staying. As I leave, I see him approach the waitress with cash in hand.

That night at home, I clean my streaming room vigorously. I move all the nonsense out of the way, so that when the stream comes on, there'll be nothing on their screens but me. All five of my monitors will have the stream going. I need to make sure goes right. The very last thing I do is text Frames. He says he'll be there in fifteen. I'll start in five.

“What’s up, Ya Squad?” I rehearse in my head. Dropping the bomb on them like this is going to be hard, but it’s necessary. I can’t be Papa Ya when the camera’s on and Yardley when it’s off. There’s not enough room in my body for the two of them. The clock is at 6:10, and when it hits 6:15, I will begin.

I watch the clock and I count the seconds until I’m free from this. It’s going to be good for me. I go through cycles of emotion, I question my ability, I shiver in fear, I coax myself out of fear, I think about the fans, I think about myself and I decide again that I need this. I realize I must think of me and Ya as separate things.

The audience trickles in. It takes a while to get everyone’s attention. When I go live, people who have marked me get a little notification on the bottom of their screen. It scrolls past and then it’s gone. Papa Ya is live! Not everyone is going to come in at the same pace, some people show up in the beginning for the chance to get my attention, some people show up slightly after because they gotta grab snacks, and some people hop from stream to stream, to catch only the hottest action. I should wait for the right moment to make my announcement.

When the minutes passed, I click the start streaming button on my software and begin.

“Hello, everyone. It’s your boy, Papa Ya. Tonight is going to be a different kind of stream, a different kind of vibe, so if y’all are ready, I’ve got some announcements to make.” The people watching flood the chat with question marks. Some people think I’m doing a Torero merch giveaway. Not a bad guess all things considered, I’ve done things like that in the past.

“Firstly, I’m going to be taking a bit of a hiatus from the stream. I’ve been stressed like no other, what with the buildup to the Cup and all that. It’s not something I can just ignore any longer. I am taking a break to work on myself.”

I hear the lock on the front door jingle and that means it is time to swing into the big announcement.

“And as you all know; the Cup is coming up—and I don’t make this decision lightly—but I believe I’m going to drop out of the Weaponmaster’s Cup. I’d like to take this time to formally apologize to all those who wanted to see my take the three-peat, but I personally am in no place to compete.”

I don't want to cry in front of my fans, that's the last thing I want to do, but you must sell the apology. And when I say that you are most certainly going to think that I am faking these feelings, but I'm not. The thing no one tells you about being a figure in the public eye is that histrionics are demanded of you. You must make an emotional show of it. This decision is tearing me apart. I have to make the audience believe that. With that in mind, the tears fall.

Frames is navigating through the hallway and I think he hears me, because I no longer hear his footsteps approaching. Maybe Torero is already on his ass. If that's the case, I should apologize to him, but I won't.

"I'd like to say sorry to those who wanted to come see me at the Cup, and to my sponsor Torero Beef Jerky. You really can't beat their meat."

The door swings open and he is in the frame. I watch him come in on the stream. He's still got that star chain. His bald skull shines under the lighting.

"Oh, Frames, nice of you to join me for this. I was just breaking the news to everyone."

Frames is mad. He's gritting his teeth so hard that I swear the microphone is picking it up.

"What are you doing? We didn't discuss this."

"It's my stream, Frames, and I'm tired. I want to own myself again."

"Is this about what happened last night?" I'm listening to him, but I'll be damned if I turn and face him. Instead I spend my time reading the chat as they fly by. Everyone is confused and disappointed about the news, but people are still with me. So, it's all okay.

"No, Frames, this is about everything but last night. This is about Yardley, not Ya."

"Well, do what you want to do, but you're making a mistake."

"We'll see."

"Yeah, we will." He slams the door and I'm alone again. I spin back around towards the camera.

“Sorry about that everyone. As you can see, things are becoming strained and I am in no place to deal with it. I’ll be fine, but I need a break. From Wock, from tournaments, from everyone. I don’t know how long it will be until I feel right enough to push myself back into the spotlight, could be weeks, could be years. Good night, Ya Squad.” And with that the stream ends. I click the button and put away all the equipment. I package it up in cardboard boxes and mark them with Ya in big black marker. I stack them in the corners of the room, by the figurines. When I finally leave the room, Frames is standing outside, looking somber as hell.

“You took down all the Wock posters?” He asked.

“I smashed the frames into pieces. Ripped them all up.”

“Even the signed one?” He speaks like a beaten dog. His head drooped on the end of his spinal column.

“Yeah.”

“End of an era, then.”

“Something like that.” I have a minor vision. It’s of the first time I was up on the final stage for the Weaponmaster’s Cup. The lights are shimmering around me and people are applauding my entrance. People are chanting my name. The swinging lights illuminate the top sections of the stadium, and even the highest nosebleed seats are filled with people. The bright, young up-and-comer with a million paths to greatness. The world is wide open to him and he can choose to do everything or nothing. He is the hope of the people, from his craggy teeth to his messy black hair, he represents something beautiful to them. The idea that anyone could be him, down there on the stage, having the time of his life, free from the weight of the world.

A Salad for Dinner

“Do you think I’m a sociopath?” I asked her as she cut into her steak, medium-well, like she’d asked. I had switched out the light fixtures; the room was cast in a sultry red. I had changed other things about the dining room, but that was the clearest change. I got a bit of a rush changing all the décor in such a short time. It made the house feel new again.

“I think that if you’re worried about that sort of thing, you’re safe,” she said to me, placing the tines of her fork against the plate. Her blue dress shimmered in the lights and the shape accentuated her long, well-toned legs. I was plating the dessert course, dribbling caramel around the lip of the plate. It looked a little shoddy, I hoped she wouldn’t mind. I barely had time to take a bite of my own steak, which had surely long gone cold. I liked my steak a bit *rarer* than hers. Tis a pity, but I am nothing if not a good host.

We’d been dating for a couple years now, and so we’d had enough familiarity with one another to eschew all the dress up and other fanfare, but we liked to indulge. We could pretend like it was one of our first dates all over again, here in this brand-new place.

“But what if my mind is just playing tricks on me, making me think that I care about other people? What if I’m not truly sensing other people’s emotions and I’m just guessing at what to do to seem personable?” As I was saying these things, I realized how convoluted my thought process had become and the more that I struggled to explain it, the more stuck I became. My mind had become a Chinese finger trap.

I turned back to examine the shapes that the caramel had solidified into. Globes of caramel left trails around the edges of the bowl like slugs. Where were they going? She tried to regain my attention by tapping the plate with her fork. It worked, somewhat.

“Wouldn’t you know if that’s what you were doing? I think you worry too much.”

“I just gotta know what he meant by ‘you pretend to care’. He said that about me. He said, ‘you pretend to care’, and sometimes, yeah, he’s right. I pretend to care. But, I’m doing it for him, I’m trying to be a good friend and every time I do something friendly, my motives are questioned? What possible nefarious plot could I have? What evil scheme am I pulling? I don’t understand why he chooses to hurt me in these ways.”

“Ask. That simple.” She had an answer for everything, and her answers were always simple. I felt like when I explained a situation and she responded in this manner, that I hadn’t adequately explained the complexity of the situation, but no matter what I said, her answers remained shockingly simple.

To explain what the issue at the time was, I would need to talk about the context. He and I had been friends for such a long time, and let’s just say that if you are my friend, you are always my friend. I’ve been known at times to follow up with people I hadn’t spoken to in many years, with a text or a call, just to catch up. In a way, I’m addicted to people. I love them, and I can’t get enough of them. So, when a close friend, someone who I’d grown with and watched grow, says that I pretend to care, well, I turn into a bit of a wreck.

He was in a constant state of longing; there was always something he wanted, whether that be a woman or a possession, and when he could not have it, he would come to me to complain. The incident in question occurred on a day not more than two weeks ago where I was more concerned about a fight that was brewing between my girlfriend and I via text message than his rants about how he’d never find love and how he should just give up and live as a hermit for the rest of his life. I tried my best to manage both conversations, but she’s incredible at delivering words that hurt. I was managing both sides, listening to his complaints and trying to handle her issues with our relationship, but neither was satisfied. As I was typing out a reply to her, he stood up from his seat and left muttering about how I pretended to care.

“God,” I exclaimed as I clasped my hands to my head, “you would think people would be appreciative.”

She lost focus and drifted in her own mind. When I got on those sorts of tangents, she would go dead behind the eyes for the explicit purpose of shutting me up about it. She had already provided her solution, and given the necessary effort to solve the problem, so anything more would be a waste of her time.

I shake my head and “whatever” the problem away, going back to my desserts. After thirty more seconds of fiddling with caramel drip, I turn with the finished product in my hands, only to find her with her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk thanks to an uncomfortably large bite of steak. I clicked my tongue and placed the desserts back on the counter, so that we could both finish our

steaks. Date night was going well, but I couldn't help but fall back into the conversation. It was bothering me, a splinter in my soul.

"I can't just ask him why. He has his reasons for saying what he says. Trying to get a reason out of him would require a wrench or pliers."

"Explain the situation, he'll understand. What you said was hurtful, and I'd like an explanation. He's a stand-up guy and he's your best friend." She was right, but at the same time, he was the only friend I kept from my college years and I hadn't bothered to go to the friend store and pick up any more. I was a busy man.

"It doesn't work like that. Men don't talk to one another like that."

"You can if you just ignore that little voice in your head that you can't."

My steak was a little overcooked. It was still rare, but not blue rare. The absolute worst. If something's undercooked, it's fixable with the press of a few buttons and a minute on the pan, but if it's overcooked, there's not much you can do other than chew on your sub-optimal hunk of meat. The vegetables were great, but that was no culinary feat, I sautéed them in enough butter to drown a rat. Hopefully dessert brings the whole meal together.

"Now please, just ask him. I'd hate to see a friendship crumble like this because you were too scared to talk." Her voice was polite, but firm. She wanted this sentence to be the coup de grace of the argument, and I was ruining the date night with it, so I relented.

I grunted as I put a piece in my mouth and chewed and chewed and chewed. This steak was the disappointment du jour. I wanted it to melt in my mouth without trying. But I had to keep trying, every rotation of my jaw, in circles the way cows chew cud. So much effort, just to suffer through subpar food. I was so demoralized that I nearly chose to bail on the date and knock out for the night, but I couldn't do that to her. I'd be disappointing both of us.

What did it mean to pretend to care? In bed later that night, I was kicking at the thoughts that manifested as ghosts in my dreams, knocking pillows, blankets and finally my girlfriend from the bed. I must have appeared silly, in nothing but plaid boxers, swinging my legs every which direction, fearful of something that didn't have physical form but gripped my heart in terror with tangible fingers. She scolded me from the floor, but I was existing in a state between awake and

asleep and could not respond in any meaningful way. I was mumbling incoherently, so she climbed back in to bed and stole the blanket for herself as payback.

The next afternoon, after a shift at the paint store, I called him. He was cordial, and that cordiality made me a little sick, how unrepentant he was about the incident. I wanted something more from him. His voice is deep, but in a way that sounds like a child doing an impression of a deep voice. When he laughed, it always came out as a guffaw, a burbling, gasping fit. I asked him out to dinner and drinks, and though he seemed hesitant, he eventually agreed saying that he wouldn't miss it for the world.

I knew this man well. It may not seem, from the way that I have described him, but we were friends. He was often in these depressive moods, where you had to scrape him out of his own house by offering to pay for his meal. His thrifty side couldn't resist, and I don't blame him for that. I'd do the same thing. But anyway, this was the simplest way, wallet be damned. I needed to know why he said what he said, and he needed to know that he'd hurt me.

We agreed on a place, Into the Night, this fancy rooftop bar with a small food menu. I'd been there a couple times before, a long time ago, and I remembered enjoying the place's lively atmosphere. The kind of place the two of us would have crashed in college to feel fancy. The temperature was finally livable, even this far south, so we decided we might as well get out and feel it.

I pulled the car into the parking lot and waited for him to arrive. The building Into the Night is on top of was a stodgy, brick office building, but the only floors you could access from the foyer elevator were the top and the floor directly below the top. There must have been some secret other entrance that lets you into the other floors of the building. I spent a solid while scanning the building's face for a hint on where this other entrance would be, but no dice. I sent him a text to let him know I'm here. He didn't respond.

I wasn't here for the food, I was here for closure, but my mind couldn't help but wander. At a swanky place like this, I imagined what kinds of hors d'oeuvres might be served. The thought of bacon wrapped scallops that melted in your mouth, accentuated by the sweet kiss of brown sugar riled me up. Dreams of rich deviled eggs with scallions danced on the ridges of my brain. Thirty minutes passed before I grew hungry and tired of waiting. I had salivated enough. All this time and still no text. He was supposed to be here by now, I'd been waiting long enough. Had it gotten so bad

that he couldn't even be coaxed with a free plate of delicious finger foods? Would he require larger sacrifices from now on? When would he ask for blood?

I decided quickly that it wasn't worth waiting for him, especially if that meant sitting in my car for extended periods of time. The car gets hot, even though the sun isn't out to warm it. It's like it's alive and generating its own heat. If I sat here any longer, my back would pool up with sweat and soak through the nice lavender button-down I put on. It was a plain, inoffensive shirt, not gaudy or showy like several other pieces in my wardrobe, and so it became a cornerstone in my going-out rotation.

I walked in to the lobby. It was indulgently posh for a place that held offices from its second to fourteenth floors. The tile floors were so clean that I could check my teeth in them. The ferns that spotted the vast room were all springing with life. Standing in a room like this for too long could make someone feel very small. I sighed and headed into the elevator, where a doorman, dressed in a stylish uniform with tassels pressed the only button on the panel. The doors closed, smooth jazz hummed from the speakers and I waited. For the second that I didn't have to concern myself with the whereabouts of my friend and the veracity of my own feelings and emotions, things were good.

The automatic steel door slid open and the night breeze rolled in. It licked me with its nimble tongue and I shiver in delight. The night sky was in full view and from the sounds of the conversations going on, the energy is positive. We were in full swing. The floor of this place was blocked off with several half-walls to give the illusion of private corners, where one could discuss anything. At the center of the whole package was a large pagoda with long thin legs, draped in ivy and surrounded by people ordering drinks. I ambled on in, sweeping my vision across the place. There were men and women here, drinking and cavorting with their buttons undone. In one corner was a group of large men in tight sports outfits, perhaps celebrating a hard-fought victory.

I spotted my friend sitting in a corner, hunched over a beer at a small side table. I'd worked myself up into a tizzy just thinking about the meeting, so I needed alcohol in my hands.

The bartender was strawberry blonde, and very sweet to me. I think she found me attractive, because she winked when she offered me a shot on the house. I took the shot, clenched my face and shook my head. I ordered a beer afterwards. I regretted the interaction in the back of my mind. I paid for the shot in her tip. With a beer in my hand and some liquor in me, I felt more at home in this place than most other places. I guess you could say this was my element.

This was decidedly no longer my friend's element. He looked sad, well, he always looked sad, but now he looked sad and lost. When I sat down next to him, gingerly placing my beer down on the tiny table in front of us, he didn't look particularly happy to see me. Part of me expected him to be a bit happier, because of the way he sounded on the phone, but the rest of me was not surprised to see him fall back into his emotional swamp.

"What's up buddy? It's so good to see you! Whatcha drinkin' there?"

He looked up at me and nodded. I didn't know what the nod signified. I didn't think he heard me, so I asked him what he was drinking again. He grunted.

"I told the bartender to surprise me and she gave me this shit." He slammed it down on the table and some of it sloshed over the side and onto the back of his hand. He didn't move a muscle, choosing to let the probably cold beer drip off his hand and on to the table.

"What's up, buddy?" I said again, sounding like a scratched record, "What's got you so down?"

"I don't feel like talking about it."

"In that case, let's get to eating and drinking. Maybe after a few beers and a full belly, you'll feel a little more personable." I got up, patted him on the shoulder and left him alone again.

The menus were back by the bartender. She noticed me again and saw who I was sitting with. She asked why I was with that guy, and I gave the necessary explanation. We had known each other since college, and he's always been a depressed little stick in the mud, whining about this or that. He's helped me out of a bind or two, so I promised to her that he wasn't all bad, but she wasn't sure. She told me that he had sat at the bar and leered at her, refusing to order anything for a solid fifteen minutes. When she finally confronted him, he asked her to surprise him, after which he moved over to the table. I apologized for him, insisted he was mostly harmless. The only two people he'd ever hurt were here at this bar.

I get back to him with the menus in hand, and he hasn't moved an inch. I set the menu in front of him like I'm decorating a full-sized dollhouse, everything must be exactly in the right position. He turns his head from the beer to the menu. I try to start conversation to lead into what I want to talk about, asking him about his day and whatnot, but every path feels like a dead end. I try

to ask him about the waitress and that line of questioning gets his head to move, but not towards me. His line of sight aims above me, at something else. I turn to see what he's looking at. A movie's being projected on the back wall of the building. I didn't recognize it, but it must have been enrapturing.

"I don't know man, it all feels so hopeless." He said, while we both watched the movie. The woman on screen danced on a stage in a flowing blue dress made of silk. It shimmered under the light of the stage. She was smiling as she danced but without context the smile appeared forced, like someone backstage was going to shoot her dead if she didn't smile. "How am I supposed to feel truly happy, like that woman? How am I going to put on the face she makes? I can't talk to anyone without making them uncomfortable."

I guess he didn't see the same things that I did in that woman's face. He didn't see the way the sides of her mouth stretched uncomfortably, the manic glint in her gaze, her taped-open eyes, her quivering legs as they followed the beat. There was no sound to accompany this movie, so I couldn't tell if she was even doing a good job. Maybe she was a half-step behind the whole time. We turned from the screen to each other. For the first time, I noticed his eyes. They were hazel, a burst of gold surrounded by an olive rim.

"As crazy as it sounds, I think that you have to pretend to be happy to be happy." I felt like I had the perfect opening line into what I wanted to talk about here. Being happy is a mindset that he would have to adopt if he wanted to be happy. It sounds like recursive logic, but it makes sense.

"That doesn't make any sense," he said, rebuking my point and twisting around in his seat.

"Oh, I know, trust me, but it's just like so many other things in life. Fake it 'til you make it."

He broke eye contact and went back to examining his beer. The size of the table made it so that I had to hunch, so I took the beer onto my lap and leaned to look at the stars. Everything was so clear outside.

"That's lying. I can't just lie to everyone. If someone comes up to me on the street and asks me how I'm doing, I'm going to tell them I'm fucking miserable, because otherwise I feel even worse." To me, there's never been a person more pitiable than my friend at that moment, hunched

and slumped in his chair, loitering over the rim of a beer, moaning about how he will never be happy because he is unwilling to tell himself to be happy.

“Okay, so let me get this straight, you’re going to make yourself miserable and others uncomfortable for the sake of your own moral code? You’re above even lying to yourself? You’re never going to be happy that way!”

Those were the wrong words to say. I’d driven the knife too far in with the ‘making others uncomfortable’ comment. I knew it was a sore spot for him. He stood up and threw his now lukewarm beer all over me. My lavender shirt was now soaked through with alcohol and the scent of it was immediately apparent.

“This is what I meant when I said you pretend to care! Jackass!” He screamed, drawing the attention of everyone in the bar. Storming off, he spiked the glass, sending shards of glass all across the floor of the bar, drawing a gasp from some of the people watching. I cupped my head in my hands and pulled down the skin on my face until I resembled the Scream. He was gone, and this beautiful night sky had been wasted.

I always come prepared for a wardrobe emergency. There was an extra shirt in the car. I wasn’t going to chase him, he had already disappointed me once, and now he’d attempted to humiliate me in front of a bunch of strangers. I was done pretending to care.

After I had finished changing, into a slightly less fashionable powder blue shirt, I took a seat at the far end of the bar, where I could see both the bartender and the projected movie if I peeked my head at the right angle. It was a distraction from thinking about my friend and his emotions. The bartender chuckled when she saw me and offered me another shot on the house, which I gladly accepted. The goal of tonight had shifted dramatically. It used to be “find answers”, but now the goal was “get absolutely plastered”.

The woman in the movie had changed out of her blue dress and was doing a lot of crying, about what I couldn’t understand. It was something to do with her dancing, but what it was exactly, I was too drunk to understand. The bartender was doing a good job of keeping me liquored up, but even drunk me knew that I was in for a hell of a bar tab. I was going to have to pay for the shattered glass, his drinks, and now my drinks. My girlfriend would be furious. And because of that, I would have to be furious.

I Ubered home and fell asleep immediately after. The person who drove me home seemed very upset that I was not responding to the things he was asking, but it was too difficult for me to speak coherently, so I chose just not to speak at all. I gave the man five stars and a tip for his troubles.

As soon as I woke up, she was standing over me with a look on her face that could make milk go bad. A look of such intense focus and disdain, a look that I could never match if you gave me a million years. I had a headache that felt like someone was trying to shove a large metal pole into my brain and it wasn't going to fit. My whole head was bursting at the seams, but I had to act like I didn't know what was wrong.

"Hey, dear." I said with a smile, suddenly realizing that I wasn't on the bed, but resting on the living room couch.

"Did you get everything solved? You make up with him? Find out what was the issue?"

"Nope. Everything is so much worse now."

She threw her head back and gave an exasperated sigh.

"He threw beer all over my purple shirt and stormed off."

She went to get some ibuprofen. Her footsteps clacked loudly on the tile floor, activating new waves of my headache.

"You gotta control yourself. Just because something doesn't go your way doesn't mean get drunk and act a fool." I felt her cool, slender hands on my burning cheeks.

"I promise, I didn't." I sat up from the couch and braced for the pain. "You'll never believe what he said to me as he threw the beer at me."

"Something about pretending to care."

"Exactly, he knew exactly what he was doing when he said that to me."

"What an ass," she said, already bored.

The matter seemed closed, to be honest. I don't think it's possible to come back from throwing a beer on someone. Regardless, he sent me a text me the week after, all chipper, acting like nothing had happened. Not even an apology. Just having the notification on my screen made me see red. Who has the gall to throw beer on someone and then demand to hang out again next week?

I was watching the steam puff and rise over my boiling fettucine. The plumes of steam warmed my face, like a hot towel at a salon. The text would receive no response, but it would make for a hilarious over dinner conversation. Can you believe this guy, I'd ask her in a nasal voice, and she would laugh and laugh.

I arranged the fettucine in a swirling tower with the help of a fork. Twisting each creamy noodle around and around until the dish looked like something Gordon Ramsay would call "adequate". I seasoned with fresh parsley, salt and pepper. Assembling the ingredients and using specialized equipment to create something one of a kind. It's a personal sort of creation, something you can choose to share or keep all to yourself. I used to only cook when it was asked of me, like a date or a holiday, but now the kitchen feels like an extension of myself. The first time I brought something I had cooked to a party, I experienced great joy watching people from afar pluck each individual cocktail sausage from their toothpick and swallow them whole. Something I had done had brought them great joy.

When she came in, she took a whiff of the air, smiled, and started to undo her hair. The plates were close to done, and she'd arrived at the perfect moment. I heard the shutting of the door and called for her, but she was already behind me, desperate to get another smell and maybe to see me too. Her kisses on my cheek slowed me for a bit.

"How was work?" I asked pleasantly, and she responded by grunting and dropping something on the floor. I turned around to see what it was and exhaled when I saw it was just her black leather purse. It sounded violent, like a gunshot had gone off. My first thought was of the possibility of cracked tile. But when she picked up the purse, the tile was fine.

"Work was alright, not too much to complain about."

"You sure? You seem exhausted."

"Oh, I'm positive. How was the store?"

“I was off today, so I’ve been laboring here.” I motioned to the dinner table. “Sit, sit, sit. Food is ready.”

“Getting comfy, be right back.” She called from the bedroom. I grit my teeth, she was going to be forever in there. If the fettucine was cold when she ate it, she wouldn’t taste all the effort I put into it, and then my whole dinner plan would be ruined. I examined the specks of different color in the countertop as a calming measure. Pasta is easy to assemble, I admitted to myself. I kept telling myself that it was okay, and nothing had gone wrong yet.

When she came back out, she had changed into a pair of navy pajama pants with white lines down the leg and a gray athletic shirt that was two sizes too big. Her bare collarbone poked its way out of the collar of the shirt. The pasta was in a tower on the plates, fully garnished, ready to be devoured. In my jeans now, I felt overdressed.

“You will not believe who texted me today.” I began the rehearsed portion of the dinner.

“Mr. Pretending to Care, the Ur-Pretender, Beer-flinger Extraordinaire?” She responded, putting sharp emphasis on her consonants and letting the vowels drone on.

“Damn it, you guessed it. I wanted to do the big reveal.” I took the plates of pasta in each hand and carried them to the table.

“Dear, you hang out with very few people. It was pretty obvious from the get-go.”

I sighed and sat down. This dark wood table was not very comfortable to sit in, because it came with backless benches, and I can never get used to sitting without having a backrest. I could never find chairs that matched the table exactly, but I liked the color of the table so much that it became difficult to discard it. I had to tolerate the lack of comfortable seating. The table was already set, and the plates were ready. It was time to eat.

“Well, what did he say?”

“He wants to meet up again. What a bastard.” I looked at her, trying to read her face for a reaction. When none came, I delivered my line. “Can you believe this guy?”

“Aw, maybe he wants to apologize, maybe he’s seen the error of his ways.”

“He throws a beer on me, yells at me in public, calls me a fake, spits on my hospitality and you want me to give him another chance?”

The pasta was warm, but that was about the only positive. The noodles tasted like snakes in my mouth and the alfredo was all wrong. It needed more salt and it wasn't thick enough for my liking.

We were silent for some time. She didn't confirm my thoughts about the alfredo, but she didn't deny it either, which for me might as well have been a confirmation. No amount of fancy garnish or plating can save a bad sauce and bad pasta. My comments hadn't helped things. Normally the good conversation would be enough to patch up an unsatisfactory meal, but now that I've made the atmosphere more hostile, we sat in silence and slurped. After a moment of thought, she looked up.

“All I'm saying is give it some thought. I don't like the guy, but hey, you've already decided before that you didn't want to give up on him, so why turn back now?”

“Because he threw a beer all over my nice shirt and made me pay for broken glass.”

“You're about to let a shirt get between you and a friend?”

“Is he really a friend or is he just a charity case?”

“That's something for you to decide. You know where I stand.”

The day dragged on like this, our back-and-forth about the state of my friendship grew tiring even to me, but she was so adamant about my reconnecting with him that I couldn't help but agree to give it one more shot. The man was depressed and dealing with so many different emotions that I couldn't or wouldn't understand, and I was being a bit pushy at the time. Besides, if I abandoned him now, that would only prove to him that I never cared about his problems, which I did. I hated making these kinds of decisions, because they had consequences. I could decide on the shade of blue for a house or which wine went better with a meal, but as soon as I decide on something that mattered, my brain turned to mush, and my mouth would babble and drool.

The both of us decided that it would be for the best to invite him to our house the next time he wished to hang out, maybe there was some power in outnumbering him, to negate his depressive outbursts.

I spent the week friend-proofing the house in case of absolute disaster. If he were to get angry and start smashing things again, I would need to decorate the house with shatter-proof vases and picture frames with photos that meant less than the ones we usually displayed. I took the candles out of their glass casings and placed them in metal ones instead.

That night, she wore her blue dress, and she appeared even more stunning than the last time. She wore eyeshadow to match the dress, which really made her eyes pop. I wore a black button-up decorated with stars. He came in the door in a funnel-neck hoodie with a large stain on the back of his left shoulder. The stain was yellow and recent. He came in with a slight frown but greeted us each with a tight embrace. I pulled him in and took in a whiff of desperation.

“Thank you for having me.” He repeated this to each of us multiple times, and each time we would respond with the standard rebuttal. It’s no big problem. Please, we insist, sit down, enjoy yourself. The three of us each knew that these formalities wouldn’t last very long, but we insisted on clinging to them for as long as we could.

I got to the kitchen, my place of business. My significant other can take the reins when it comes to conversation. I know she was relishing the opportunity to finally get some face-to-face time with this guy, especially after all the stories I had told of our debauchery back in the day. I was the wilder one back then, but he was right there behind me. We both seemed so free drifting from one fling to another and while I managed to attach myself to someone special, he continued to float in the void. I think being left out for so long made him spoil, so to speak.

I watched him through a rectangle cut from the dividing wall between the dining room and kitchen. He was tall, lanky, with a face that said shoot me now. His face featured droopy eyes, a bulbous nose and lips puffed as if by bee stings. He seemed a bit livelier than the last time I’d seen him, I suppose that was a positive development. The way he talked, his voice sounded a little stronger, and he moved his hands a little more wildly. He leaned into conversation with her, instead of shying away, like he had with me. I brought the knife down on a head of lettuce and it made a satisfying crunch. Wedge salads for everyone, I said to myself. I had to check that I had all the ingredients. I’d done this several times before he’d arrived, so one more check was nothing. Imagine

my surprise when all my ingredients for the blue cheese dressing were gone. I scoured the shelves of the fridge, tearing apart the orderly lines of foodstuffs. There was no sour cream, no blue cheese, no mayo, nothing. I swore these were all in the fridge yesterday when I made the preparations for this dinner. When it was clear that I had made a huge mistake, my insides shriveled. The grocery store would be my next stop. I called out to the two of them, still engrossed in jovial conversation, and when I received no response, I shut the door and climbed into my car.

I noticed that as I got into the car, I still had the knife in my hand, and I didn't feel like placing it back in the kitchen so when I hopped in the driver's seat, I placed the knife in the passenger's side. It's like he was my little companion.

The grocery store was always flooded with pale yellow light that made even fresh produce appear sickly. That combined with the insistence on dark green as a brand color, and you get yourself a horribly off-putting color scheme. It reminded me in a way of being in an old folks' home.

Everything under the light still looked stale and gross, but I had to tell myself that was just a trick of the eye. Vegetables and fruit as far as the eye could see, and in varieties too numerous to count. I identified some delicate heirloom tomatoes, tiny things that I could crush in the palm of my hand and decided they would make a perfect addition to the salad. I wondered what they were discussing with me not in the room. It never occurred to me until this moment that they could be saying horrible things about me or sharing embarrassing secrets pertaining to me. I had the sudden need to be home, to assuage my tired mind of these anxious thoughts. I collected my ingredients, mayo, sour cream, blue cheese, Worcestershire sauce.

Back in the car, the knife was waiting for me. I told it we would return it to its rightful place soon enough. Every note of music that came from the radio scratched at my eardrums. I drove in thoughtful silence.

Back at the house, I took up my supplies and got to the kitchen. That's when I noticed that no one was in the dining room. I peeked through one of the windows to get a look at the backyard, maybe they were out back enjoying a cigarette in the night breeze. They were not. I called out to her but received no response. The house was deathly quiet. Maybe they went for a nice drive, I convinced myself, but their cars were still there.

I tried to make myself comfortable by removing my dress shoes, but without my shoes I felt strangely naked. My feet slapped lightly against the tile floor with every step. I listened closely for any sort of sign of human life. I laid my ingredients across the countertop and grabbed a mixing bowl. That's when I heard the giggling, the sound that makes me shudder to this day, and I was forced by my own curiosity to investigate. It was not a large house, and so it didn't take me long to find that the source of the noise was the bedroom.

I swung open the door and the trail of their clothes led to the bed, where I bore witness to their tangle of limbs. The light exposed them, and they covered their nakedness. I had a sick thought the moment I saw them, observing their skin in contact, his hands pressed firmly into the plush of her thighs. I had a sick thought that I could use the knife on the both, end them for the pain they have caused me, but I did not. My mind went completely blank and I turned back towards the kitchen.

I dumped the sour cream, the mayo, the Worcestershire sauce, some lemon juice, salt and pepper all into the mixing bowl and whisked it together, not too quickly, not too slowly. I wanted the dressing to have a nice consistency.

They watched me in silence, peeking from the bedroom wrapped in blankets, as I mixed in the blue cheese. The house had a specter over it now that could not be exorcised. The dressing was finished. I took my wedge of lettuce and ladled the dressing over it just so, adding a few more crumbles of the cheese to give it a more decadent appearance. I did the same for two more plates.

I set the plates down at the dinner table and stared at the bedroom door on the far end of the room, waiting for them to come out. They wouldn't, of course they wouldn't, they were cowards. I imagined their quandary as they fumbled with their clothes, wondering whether it was safe to come out. I wanted this day to be a coming together of sorts, and that has happened. They've come together. I figured that since I had gone through the trouble of making the salad, they might as well share in my creation. I wanted to look at them.

Five minutes passed, with not a sound heard from the bedroom. Were they hoping to outlast me? I could have sat there until the dressing had spoiled and the lettuce had wilted. I did not wish for my salad to suffer such a fate, but sacrifices must be made. There were no windows in the bedroom large enough for them to crawl out of, so they had to face me.

I walked over to the cabinet where we kept our dishes and took one from the top shelf. The plate had a faintly visible seashell printed on it. I threw it against the tile floor and watched it shatter into twenty pieces.

“Dinner’s ready!” I shouted. My face was stuck in a twisting snarl.

Not more than a minute later, they appeared and took their seats. She chose to put the blue dress back on, but it no longer had the same rapturous effect on me. She looked like a sack of potatoes sauntered into my dining room and slouched into a chair. He was trying to stifle a smile, I could tell from the energy radiating off him. He’d gotten what he’d always wanted.

“Bon appétit,” I announced. We ate under warm lighting, taking the forks from plate to mouth. The sound of chomping and swallowing was the only sound. Disgusted was the only word I could use.

When we finished our salads, they left without a goodbye, walking stiffly next to each other, making sure not to brush up against each other’s arms, lest they break out into another round of fornicating on my carpet.

I listened for the sound of the engine and when it roared to life, I retreated to the closet to grab a broom.

An Important Sword Fight! Battle at the School Festival!

The bell rang shrill like the call of an ancient bird. The end of the school day commenced, and everyone could breathe again. The students dispersed to their club rooms, for after-school activities. Rich, bulging out of a suit jacket and button down, straddled uncomfortably down the hallway. Rich was the vice president of the only anime club on campus, the Club for Animation from Japan, a name devised so that it could fit its informal nickname, the Cage. It made him feel important, overseeing selecting the shows that the club watched and leading discussion about the major themes of the work. Though their discussions were never as in depth as he wanted, he was getting them to think deeply about a subject he loved.

Loved was not a strong enough word for how he felt about anime. Ever since he was six years old, when he stumbled upon a VHS tape with three episodes of Dragon Ball his cousin had given to his father, he'd been hooked. Hours were spent at the family computer watching bootleg episodes uploaded in three parts on video sharing websites. Thousands of dollars were spent on wall scrolls and body pillows and figurines and official releases and signed posters. All of it was littered across the walls and floor of his bedroom, the spoils of his conquest of Japanese culture. If anime were the Catholic Church, he'd wear an ornate pointy hat.

He loved the best anime, those that made his heart soar and his mind race, and he loved the worst, for how cliché and comically overwritten they were. The sharp animation stylings caught his eye, he'd never seen anything like it from an American animation studio. Any attempt Americans made at matching the artistic sensibilities of anime came off like a cheap joke, like they didn't understand the art form they were working with.

It was a Tuesday, which meant it was the day of their weekly meeting. Rich tugged at the collar of his white button-up. The top button pressed against his Adam's apple. He wanted to unbutton it so badly, but it would look ridiculous to wear a tie without the top button buttoned. Dressing his best for these meetings was important; it showed that he took the meetings seriously. Nobody in the club would ever question Rich's commitment to the Club. Victoria came into the club room and noticed Rich fiddling with his tie.

"Still struggling with that thing? Here, let me help." She reached for his neck, to free him from the light choking. He pulled away.

“No, no.”

“You’re turning a bit purple.”

“Wait ‘til the episode starts. Then I’ll unbutton it.”

“Fine, Rich. Your call,” she said, flaring her hands outward in a relinquishing gesture. Victoria turned towards the desktop computer at the teacher’s desk. It was best to let Rich deal with his own idiosyncrasies. Dealing with people often meant letting them solve things on their own, she found. She had her own ways of dealing with things and he had his and that was part of what made humanity so beautiful.

Rich looked at Victoria and flashed a toothy smile.

“This is going to be a real solid semester, I can feel it,” he said, smoothing out his shirt wrinkles with the backs of his hands.

“Is the light-headedness making you sentimental?”

Rich shook his head, still grinning widely. For an extended period, Rich felt as if he had no home. There was no group of people willing to take an oddball like Rich in. He didn’t have much of a circle of friends. That is, until Victoria approached him about joining the anime club. Rich never paid much attention to the school bulletin board, so he had no idea that such a club even existed. Victoria needed members to save the club, and she struck gold with Rich. It was a solution that fit them both perfectly. Rich found a home, and Victoria found a vice president.

The bell rang, signaling the end of the school day. The trickle of club members began. First entered Erica, one of Victoria’s childhood friends, known mostly for carrying a gas station soft drink with her. Then came Jarrett and Blaine, an odd sort to be seen at an anime club, total jocks, but loved shonen more than anything. They were exhilarated by the stylistic hyperviolence. Jarrett was lanky and muscular like a swimmer, while Blaine was built like a brick wall with a fire hydrant for a head. Midori, queen translator, and a couple of her pals flitted in behind them. Lastly, someone new stepped in the door. He had black hair that fell over both of his eyes like curtains and a thin pair of lips that looked painfully dry.

Once everyone was packed into the room and sitting down, Victoria welcomed them all to another semester at the Club for Japanese Animation.

“Also known as the Cage, because once you come in, you won’t leave,” Rich said, trying to chuckle at his own little joke, but he was stifled by the tie. He watched each member’s face, making sure they were attentive and ready to have their minds expanded. He looked for the glimmer in each of their eyes, but the kid in the back of the room, with his hair like curtains, pressed his chin against the desk and slumped. Rich tried not to frown at the sight of him, but there was negative energy radiating from him and it became hard to not notice. He could hardly breathe, though that was more from the tie than the new kid’s visage. From the desktop computer, Victoria pressed a few keys and the first episode of the club meeting began.

Rich walked over to the light switch, flipped the lights off and ripped the top button off his shirt while trying to unbutton it. He undid his tie and began to suck in air. Rich didn’t need to see the episode, he’d already watched it several times and taken detailed notes in a pocket-sized notebook he carried with him most places. He stepped outside, taking in the muffled melody of the opening theme song from behind the door.

When he reentered, he was just in time for the introduction of the main character, Hiroki, a teen who loved to eat and wanted nothing more than to prove himself in the heat of battle. In this basic description, Rich found a lot of himself. But any further description of the character would reveal the chasm that separated them. Hiroki had great natural talent, and he worked hard to push himself to even higher limits. He was attractive and had people hanging off his every word. He had purpose and a goal. He wanted to punch bigger and bigger things.

Hiroki took off into town to find someone with a problem he could solve with his fists. Luckily enough, every corner seemed to be filled with scoundrels and knaves, morally damaged villains with no qualms about hurting the innocent. This episode, a woman with dark hair and a ridiculously low neckline, offered a reward to Hiroki if he was able to retrieve the amulet that brigands had stolen from her in the night. Hiroki, being too young to understand the woman’s offer, asks her if she meant a nice homecooked meal.

Hiroki went to retrieve the amulet in hopes of finding hints about his missing father. Every episode, something about the request that people made of him reminded him of his father and that spark was what drove him to fulfill the request. He came across the brigands in a cave where water

dripped menacingly around every corner. The brigands, with scars across their noses like it was a kind of initiation to have one, were surprised to see a boy his age coming in and demanding things. They threatened to break his arms off and feed them to him.

“Sounds like a nice meal,” He replies with a practiced calm. He’d never tasted human flesh before but after he’d slain the brigands, their entire clan, he cut off a man’s arm and stuffed it into the pack he wore on his back. Later, in the nighttime, when he had a fire roaring and an empty stomach, he held the arm over the fire and when it felt cooked, he sunk his teeth in. The ending credits rolled with a victorious song in the background. The students in the club all clapped, except for the one with hair curtains, who slouched over the desk, possibly sleeping.

Rich, now sans necktie, flipped the switch back on and opened the floor for any comments about the episode they just watched. Midori pointed out that when Hiroki’s name appeared on screen, it was written in katakana, used exclusively for English loanwords, making the “hero” in Hiroki’s name possibly intentional. Everyone nodded their head, they understood. Rich smiled from the podium. He was happy when others brought up things that they noticed about the episodes they brought in, but he couldn’t shake a general uneasiness emanating from the room. And that was when the kid with the hair curtains spoke, standing up from his desk.

“Anyone else think this was bullshit?” He said, approaching the front of the classroom. There was a collective head tilt and a general confusion about his statement. When he stood at the front of the classroom, in front of Rich’s podium, he spread his arms out to the side to emphasize his statement. Rich, wanting to foster discussion, pushed him to finetune his point.

“What’s bullshit?” He was a little hurt by the insinuation that he had brought in less than stellar discussion material, but it was his responsibility to talk these things out. It might make a nice learning moment. Rich leaned back against the whiteboard and smiled after posing the question.

“Everything. It was all so cookie cutter, so blah. Hero goes on a quest, finds a magic item, yadda yadda. It follows such a formula and it makes me sick!” He punctuated his thought by slapping the side of the podium Rich stood at.

Rich was worried that he might have a point. Rich looked at the other members in their seats, Jarrett with his Nikes kicked up and crossed on the desk, Midori with her lips pursed and eyes darting from side to side, and Victoria staring directly at him, awaiting his next response. He felt like

he was choking again, but there was no button to undo. His pride was wounded, and he wasn't sure how to proceed.

"Victoria? Was the quality of today's programming sufficient?"

Victoria shook her head slightly to unsettle the cobwebs in her head.

"I enjoyed it, for the most part." Her voice was unsettled.

"Would you call it 'formulaic'?"

Victoria thought for a while, pressing a pointer finger against her cheek tightly.

"I guess I see where he's coming from. The whole hero's journey plot is kind of overplayed and if the series is episodic I'm assuming many episodes would follow this same format." Victoria put on a huge smile. "But I had fun and that's what counts!"

Her beaming grin, normally infectious, bounced off Rich's blank face. He tilted his head down at her as if to tell her that her answer was not what he was interested in. His criticisms may have been valid, but that was not the way that the Cage was run. There was civility, damn it, there was order here. Rich turned to the podium slapper and could see from the lower half of his face that he was as offended by Victoria's answer as he was.

"Don't you want to push your boundaries? Don't you want your entertainment to aspire to be more than just fun?" He tore into every hard consonant in his sentences, spitting with each new sound. He was practically frothing at the mouth. Victoria shrugged to his response.

"Not particularly. I don't have the excess brain power at the end of the day to dissect art. I want popcorn, not a steak."

His lips were twisting into a grimace. A long sigh pushed through the gaps in his teeth.

"Then this whole club is a farce! Have fun drinking out of your sippy cups with your basic shonen anime, when people who actually care about art are enjoying quality entertainment."

This conversation was frustrating the vibe of the whole club. Rich was particularly sensitive to vibe disruption, gritting his teeth together waiting for just the time to tell him off. But before he could speak, Midori stood up.

“If you hate it here so much, why don’t you just get out of here?” She took the words right out of Rich’s mouth and he was eternally grateful. He didn’t have to take executive action.

Mr. Hair Curtains swept the hair out of his eyes, revealing two dark lidded eyes with discolored bags underneath. Now that his full face was in view, Rich remembered seeing him one time before the meeting. He had gotten into a similar fight with one of the freshman English teachers over the definition of “romantic” when it came to poetry, and when he’d come into the lunch hall after said fight, he walked towards the food line utterly broken. His name was Freddy.

“You don’t understand. You won’t ever understand.” Freddy said as he stared down Midori. After their shared gaze was broken, he stomped his way to the door and left, but not before slamming the door so hard that it rattled a picture frame on the closest wall.

“Well, now that that diversion is over, does anyone have any comments about the episode today?” Rich gazed over his flock and found their eyes cast downward and away. The arguments had drained their willingness to discuss, and though this angered Rich, he decided to call the meeting to an early close. “But before you all go, remember, we have to come up with a presentation for the club festival at the end of the semester. Got it?”

When Rich stepped out from the school’s main building, the sun was at eye level and the lights from the football stadium in the distance were switched on. The skies were blue, but yellows and oranges crept in from the sides of Rich’s vision. Having changed out of his suit, he felt much more like himself. But he still couldn’t forget that kid and what he said. That kid had called into question his appreciation of the medium he’d loved most of all and called his selection garbage. It was a disruption, and it deprived him of a nice time enjoying a simple conversation with his club members. How dare someone question his devotion to anime, his sacred art? It was the altar at which he prayed. He spent his early mornings attached to his laptop, catching up with new series with a bowl of Fruity Pebbles on his lap. “How dare him” were the three words crawling around his mind as he entered his dad’s pickup truck.

“How was your club meeting?” his father asked, flipping between radio stations as the truck bolted down the town thoroughfare. “You have a good time?”

“Yeah, Dad. It was alright.”

He didn’t bother sharing any details, because they would only corrupt the narrative that the meeting went alright. Rich sat crisscross in his father’s back seat. The trees on the road home formed a canopy that hung over the road and blocked out any sunlight. He was in darkness. He wouldn’t speak unless he thought his father would care. And considering anime made his father sick to the point of not entering his own son’s room, he never would care. The ride was finished in silence.

Victoria sent him a text message just before he hopped out of the truck. It said that they needed to meet before the next meeting. She called it a sub-meeting, to determine their plan in the event of another disruption. People didn’t often text Rich, except for his mother, who had become a bit of a phone zombie in the past few years, so he was pleasantly surprised to see another name atop the message notifications.

“The Cage is supposed to be a friendly club where anime fans and non-fans alike can come in and have a discussion and sometimes some snacks.” Rich explained his vision of the club to Victoria, who rested her chin on her palm. “But when people like that come in and undermine the structure of the club and the authority of the vice-president, it destroys the club and the morale of its members.” The more he talked, the more he was filled with righteous fire. It made his bulging stomach tremble. Victoria’s smile vanished, and her eyes opened wide.

“So, what are you saying, Rich? You want him banned from the club meetings? We’ve never done something like that before.”

“But we have the power, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“Do you want to diffuse another situation like this next week?”

“I feel you’re being rash.”

“I feel I’m being proactive. The kid’s a troublemaker and he won’t stop.”

Victoria managed six other clubs at the school and wasn’t too interested in fighting Rich on the day-to-day goings-on of the club, so she let him ban Freddy for a period of one month from all Cage activities. Victoria sighed and went to the school office, talked to a few ladies at the front desk and brought back a handful of sheets of paper. There was a form to be filled out in duplicate and signed by both Rich and Victoria. It surprised Rich, how formal the processes behind these actions were. It was what had to be done, Rich thought.

When Rich came to the lunchroom that day, it was impossible not to look for Freddy in the throngs of people. He was the one person he wished not to see, and so that meant he had to feverishly search for him. It made more sense in Rich’s head. Eventually he spotted him along the left wall of the building, soaking up heat in a sweatshirt next to one of the room’s large windows. Rich took his plastic lunch tray and stomped to the opposite corner away from Freddy.

He was probably miserable, Rich thought. How could someone with such terrible taste and lack of social skills be happy? Not to mention how awful he looked, the sweatshirt had holes in the elbows and the pocket’s stitching was nearly unraveled. It didn’t make sense. Someone like that should fall in line, to ingratiate themselves to some cooler force and propel themselves into an “in” group.

“Hey fat boy, you’re in our spot,” Frank, with bad acne and a leather jacket, grabbed Rich by the collar of his shirt and pulled him to his feet. Rich could tell from the snickers that Frank was not alone this time. “Get up before I knock that tray on the floor and then make you eat it.”

Most people who rest on the lower rungs of the high school social ladder develop some sort of talent to retain friends and develop a barrier between themselves and the absolute bottom. This manifests itself often as a sense of humor, or the ability to tell stories. It’s a little something to keep people interested. Rich had none of those things, but he had diligence and an unwavering ability to ignore things that he learned from many years of living with his father. If he played a sport they would say he kept his nose to the grindstone.

“Fine,” Rich obliged and carried his food two tables closer to the middle of the room, choosing to remain closer to the bully than Freddy. The food wasn’t that good anyway. He didn’t know how the lunch ladies made pepperoni pizza unappetizing, but they managed.

Days were long, and their momentum built up to nothing. Life to Rich seemed at times like a perpetual anti-climax and it wasn't hard to see why. Rich felt alone and saw no reason why he should feel this way. Surely, he was charismatic enough to collect a few companions along the way.

Rich sat in the bathtub, surrounded by blue and green tiles, with the sound of an argument brewing in the distance. He wasn't sure whether it was coming from the television in the main room or from his parents until he heard the distinct sound of glass shattering. He didn't care. He was going to soak. After these types of things, either mother or father would flee the house for their own sanity and finally he could get some peace and quiet. This was his thinking place, and none of his thoughts were positive.

The club meeting was tomorrow, he thought as he submerged his head below the bubbling waterline. His parents always fought, a fact that soured his idea of what love could be. He wanted to give love to people, he had so much of it to give, and if he kept it in it would atrophy into crystals of something else entirely. Jealousy, hate, greed. The club meetings were his only way to talk to people and have them listen. Their eyes glazed over when he started talking about the finer points of the craft, but generally they were engaged and that was really all he wanted. His eyes were starting to hurt from all the water getting in and so he rose from the water, pruned like he'd aged seventy years, and staggered out of the bathroom looking for a towel.

When the club meeting commenced, the regulars piled in as Victoria and Rich kept their eyes peeled. Rich nodded to Victoria as she swung the door closed, with the banning form taped to the outside. Halfway through the meeting there was a knocking at the door and a familiar haircut in the entrance window. There was a slight panic in the room. Victoria sent Rich out there, much to his chagrin.

He pulled the door open and slunk out to meet Freddy and discuss their actions.

"What's this?" Freddy said, pushing the paper into his chest.

"It is what it says it is. You are banned for a period of one month. You are not to enter the club area during club hours until the ban has eclipsed."

Freddy stood up straight, swiped down the face of his shirt, and gazed down his nose at Rich. He must have stood a whole foot taller than Rich, though Rich outweighed him significantly.

“No, you just don’t like me because I undermine your so-called authority. That’s what this ban is.”

Rich had rehearsed this conversation in his head before. He’d already foisted the blame for the ban off to Victoria, to calm his heart down.

“This was not my decision. Our president decided that this would be in the best interest of our club and we would hope that you would accept that without resorting to violence or petty insults.”

“Well, too bad. You’re a loser who runs a terrible club.”

Rich nodded his head and smiled to agree sarcastically.

“You watch bottom of the barrel garbage and have no taste.”

“Mhm.”

“Your club members are only in this club because they can’t find anything better.”

“Sure.”

Freddy concluded while in the middle of his venomous ranting and he let Rich know.

“Aha!” he said, pivoted on the balls of his feet, and power walked towards the far exit of the building.

There was the definite sense that Freddy had left their conversation unfinished with whatever idea he’d had, which suited Rich fine. Though he was a pincushion, he didn’t like being stuck with barbs repeatedly, especially about something he put so much effort into.

Stepping back into the room, the projector was going, and the next episode of Hiroki’s adventure was already unfurling. Another woman offering herself to Hiroki in exchange for some meaningless task, which he refuses, doing the task instead for information about his missing father. Rich let his shoulders droop down and his jaw unclench as he became absorbed again. Being in the darkness of the classroom with only the projector light going made Rich feel incredibly safe. Cozy,

even. With each breath he took in, his eyelids became weightier until they fell shut. Rich was conked out.

The world was fuzzy in those moments when Rich opened his eyes and saw Victoria standing at the podium, pointing at every direction but his. She had a permanent smile, but her eyes could shoot holes in a person. The sounds around Rich were muted and faraway, sometimes becoming clearer and sometimes less. He craned his head up to the ceiling and watched the light travel from the projector to the screen, with all the dust particles floating between, drifting in and out of the light.

When he finally came to, Victoria had just finished the closing statement of the meeting and the rustling of backpacks and chairs pushed out brought him back to complete consciousness. Victoria hovered over him, hands behind her back, leaning over and observing him.

“Sleepy?”

“A little,” Rich said, face pressed against the desk’s cold wood.

“You left me up there on my own, but I managed after I swiped your notes,” she said flatly, “you sure do write a lot about these episodes. I think I could have left to go get food and still led the class. I’m super impressed.”

Rich thanked the club president for taking the reins and left without any mention of Freddy’s confrontation. Back into the pickup truck he went, down the winding tree canopy road to his house, ignoring his father’s radio programs and blind jabs at conversation topics.

Everything felt exhausting to Rich lately. He stared at the laptop screen in the wee hours of the night, jotting down notes, but his arms were heavy, and his eyes were weak. His face hurt, his hands hurt, his heart hurt. He didn’t know why he felt this way. Sleeping seemed like a great idea, but because of the nap he’d taken, he found himself unable to even close his eyes. He was tired and couldn’t do anything about it but stare at screens. He went down to the kitchen cabinet and found some nighttime sleep aid, and a giant glass of water.

At the cabinets, close to his parents’ room, he could hear them talking, but not what was being said. It sounded angry. Every conversation they had possessed a hint of hostility, but this was on the verge of becoming an argument, judging by the bluster building in his father’s voice. He had

the special ability to get louder and louder. Even when Rich thought he was at maximum volume, there was always one last push that shattered eardrums and windows alike. His mother did not have this skill, but she had a similar one. She was the shrillest person he knew, and she wasn't afraid to exploit that. They both needed to be heard. He was a mallet and she was an icepick.

The couch felt cool to Rich as he placed himself against its leather and promptly passed out on the pile of unfolded laundry next to him.

Rich checked his school email a couple of days after the meeting only to find something strange. A message addressed to him and Victoria from an OCHS email address, entitled Looking Out. The message read:

Hello there. Just so you know, someone else has filed an application to start their own anime club here at Orange Crest, maybe you should talk to him about your club, so you don't have a competition on your hands. The student's name is Freddy Christensen. Would you like me to give you his email address?

It was signed Jackie. Rich didn't know a Jackie but could figure that she was someone who oversaw club applications. He had a lot of explaining to do. He wanted to contract a bit of bronchitis, so he could avoid his responsibilities for just a tiny bit longer, but something in him couldn't fake sick. He wasn't that good an actor. It was sad, he thought, how quickly he was ready to abandon the club when problems arose. He'd spent so much time building it up, only for him to leave when people try to drag it down. No, he told himself, he couldn't be so weak. Another thing to talk with Victoria about, he supposed.

The official committee of club affairs at Orange Crest High School had issued a rule that said that if a club fails to maintain a minimum of five regular members over a two-meeting span, that club would be immediately disbanded. This never bothered Rich or Victoria before, because they were the only anime club and there were a lot of people who were just getting into anime at the school. It seemed natural that they would be able to maintain those kinds of numbers.

The sun peeked through the trees and speared through Rich's window, striking his eyes. He groaned and fumbled his way out of bed and towards the cupboard, where his favorite cereals were kept locked away. Once he had a bowl, he could watch a few episodes in preparation for the

meeting, as well as prepare himself for the upcoming talk with Victoria. Bowl, cereal, milk, spoon. He assembled the bowl hastily, swishing milk around the edge as he dashed back into the bedroom.

The next episode of *Hiroki no Densetsu* was available on his streaming site. He had become attached to the show over time, since so many good conversations were had about the story's framing and animation. It was a solid show that many people enjoyed. The only person he'd ever met who didn't like it was Freddy. After loading a large scoop of cereal into his mouth, he pressed the play button and sat back.

Hiroki found a lead about his father! A hunched man drinking at a local tavern said that he knew his father, as he chuckled and placed his forehead on the bar. Hiroki demanded he tell him, in his own way, by grabbing the tail of his coat and yanking him off the bar stool, drawing the attention of every drinker in there. When the man swiped the dust from his chest, he straightened out and stepped under the bar's light. The man was eight feet tall, at least, and had burn marks all over his face. Even still, Hiroki was not afraid, he stood his ground with his face reaching roughly the man's belt buckle.

"If you can best me in a sword fight at dusk, I will let you know where your father is now."

And with that, a montage commences of Hiroki struggling to wield a sword with any sort of proficiency.

Rich scribbled note after note about all the interesting places the fight could lead and where the story would go from here, when that was interrupted by his father calling from across the house.

"Get dressed! I gotta take you early!"

Rich checked the clock. It was almost six in the morning. School didn't start for another two hours, and Rich was unsure if there would even be any teachers there if he were to get there that early.

"It's too early," he hollered back.

"Don't talk back to me! We're leaving now."

Rich stuffed himself into a t-shirt and jeans in a rush, and slouched out the door, backpack in tow. His father didn't take the normal route to school. He took another, longer route that wined around the outskirts of the city until he came to a stop at Omelet World, a small brick building with a giant egg-shaped golem towering over. He watched the denizens of the Omelet World, making sure that none escaped. His father turned off the radio and yanked the key out of the ignition.

"Get out," his father commanded.

"Why are we at Omelet World?"

"Get out."

They went into Omelet World and sat at a red booth where the leather was coming off the seats. An old lady with a yellow smile brought them both coffee, even though nobody had asked for coffee. Music from the 50s played from a jukebox in the corner. When the waitress shuffled away, her shoes peeled off the wooden floor with every step.

"I needed to get out of the house, taking you to school was a way out. Have some breakfast with me."

"Not like I can go anywhere, Dad."

"Fair enough. How is everything at school? How's running the club going?"

"Fine. I was trying to get some club stuff done before I got rushed out the door."

His father pressed his lips together. After a second, he turned to grab the plastic creamer holder.

"Sorry, champ. Drink your coffee."

The waitress came back and asked for the order, even though there were no menus. His father ordered three omelets and when Rich asked if someone was joining them, his father shook his head and admitted that he was angry and when he was angry, he ate to stuff that feeling away. Rich didn't know how to deal with his father's emotional dump, so he tore off a piece of napkin from the dispenser and balled it up in his hands. He could tell that his father wanted to talk more, reveal

some more details about the fights they were having, but Rich's reaction caused him to cut that conversation short.

The omelets were okay. A bit overcooked, a bit rubbery, but seasoned well. Rich ate his in record time and continued balling pieces of napkins until he had almost torn apart a whole napkin. If he was back in elementary school, these paper balls would have been missiles, flicked at his friends or girls he fancied. Now they were just signifiers of what was wrong with him. All his nerves piling up on one another, leaping from one awkward situation to another.

He climbed out of the pickup truck and walked to the bench where kids who arrived early camped out before the hallways opened. It was dark red and looked to have no structural integrity, like someone could fall through it and be ensnared in rusty wiring. Instead of becoming that child, Rich placed his backpack down on the bench and slumped against the tree that stood next to it. He didn't have enough time to settle himself and get into the anime watching mood again, he could do nothing but sit and wait for the omnipresent intercom noise, followed by the morning announcements.

A figure shrouded by the morning sunrise approached him. Rich only noticed by the thin shadow that kept the sun off his face, but when he turned his head, he was surprised to see Freddy holding a stack of papers. His mouth was curled into a smirk and he walked with a bit of a swagger in his step.

"Are you ready, Rich?"

"Ready for what?" he asked, the line of questioning already exhausting him.

"Ready to be made completely superfluous."

Rich rolled to the other side of the tree, not having the mental wherewithal to deal with all of Freddy's pestering.

"Giving up so easily?" Freddy said, shrugging and cocking his head to the side. "Typical. You anime nerds are all the same, put up a front and then crumple like paper."

“You’re acting like you aren’t trying to start an anime club. We’re *both* nerds!” Rich tried to reason with Freddy, but his words failed to breach him. Freddy walked past the bench giggling and tossing a crumpled-up paper ball towards the slumping Rich.

Rich picked the ball up from the leaning position he was in and un-balled it, revealing a poster for Freddy’s prospective club, entitled “The Cooler Anime Club”. They were to meet at the same time in the same building as the Cage. It was direct competition and the lady at the office was right to warn him. Rich didn’t make a motion besides stare at the details of the poster, already approved by the Club Board at Orange Crest. The font was fun and vibrant, the location and time were clearly displayed. Freddy clearly had a talent for graphic design and that concerned him. This whole thing might work. The intercom sparked to life with several sharp metallic screeches.

“Good morning Crusaders, today’s announcements are as follows...”

Like they were summoned, hundreds of children appeared, pouring from cars in a stampede. Quick to collect his things before the stomping of thousands of feet upon him commenced, Rich dashed into the hallway in search of his locker.

Locker #437 was Rich’s, on the far end of the sophomore classrooms. He put in the combination. Right thirty-two, back around to 6 and then finish at 14. The lock opened. Rich placed the wadded-up poster and his backpack into the locker before grabbing his necessary books for the day. When he shut the locker door, Victoria was standing there with crossed arms and a stare like an angry parent.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it handled,” Rich said to Victoria, who was holding her own crumpled up poster tucked in her elbow.

“Oh? Do you now?” Victoria asked.

“Listen, there’s no way he gets enough members to even keep the club going. We’ve got prestige.”

This was not the answer Victoria was looking for, Rich figured, by the way she reacted. She got up close to Rich’s face and started whispering.

“Listen here, Rich. I’ve got to get into Orange State, I need every edge I can get. If one of my clubs disbands, that’s going to look really bad on my part.” The whole time that Victoria talked, she clutched her temples between her thumb and forefinger and shook her head slightly. After she had finished, she walked away muttering about how early it was. Once she was a distance away and Rich thought it was safe enough for him to breathe again, Victoria swung around and pointed at him.

“Take care of it!”

Rich knew that the problem had already grown past the point of being something he could take care of. He could barely take care of his own damn self. He’d forgotten to put on deodorant today, the thought had just entered his mind. He couldn’t take care of himself. Victoria was right in one respect, this was his doing. How would he have known that banning him would cause Freddy to go on a warpath and try to sabotage the whole club? Most people just stop showing up and don’t come back. Maybe they talk shit about the club underneath their breath to their friends, but that would be the extent of it. Rich had made a powerful enemy, another thought that had just entered his mind. But, instead of frowning, he smiled.

The hallways got loud at the beginning of the school day. Everyone was in a mad rush to either get to class or catch up with a special friend, and so the halls were littered with the sounds of squeaking tennis shoes and laughter, both of which annoyed Rich, who had an aversion to high-pitched noises and also recently an aversion to joy.

He slunk into the first period classroom with his math textbook in tow, hoping to avoid the noise for just two minutes longer. The teacher, Ms. Richards, was swiveling around in her rolling chair, fiddling with the levers on the side of the chair that adjusted the height and pitch of the chair. Rich once heard another teacher complain about how fancy the chair was, but the teacher she was complaining to explained that she had negotiated for the right to bring her own chair to the classroom.

“Hello, Rich, you’re early.”

Rich only mustered the energy to nod. Ms. Richards stood up from the chair and attempted to stretch her back before taking a marker to the large whiteboard at the center of class.

“You know Rich, you should drink some coffee before coming into class. It really makes the body move.” She said, pointing towards a mug on her desk.

Caffeine did nothing for Rich but make his heart hurt, and coffee tasted like the ashes of dead relatives mixed with hot water every time he’d had it served to him. He’d drank a cup at Omelet World, and it didn’t make him any more awake, but it did make him more aware that he was awake, and so he should act like it. Ms. Richards scrawled geometry concepts on the board, hopping on one foot to reach the top of the board with her marker to write the word hypotenuse. Rich tucked his head into the pit of his elbow and, finding it quite soft, decided to miss math class.

The week dragged Rich, kicking and screaming, to the day of the club meeting. Dressed to the best of his ability, in his suit jacket and khakis, with a clip-on tie and a notebook tucked under his arm, Rich turned into the hallway where both anime clubs would meet. His club was watching *Hiroki no Densetsu*, the episode that Rich had seen a week ago, entitled “The Sword of the Dusk” and since it was the conclusion of the arc, it would be the last time they would watch that show. Rich wanted desperately to peek his head into the other classroom to see what kind of high art Freddy’s so-called Cooler Anime Club was observing.

In Rich’s mind, Freddy was just doing this all for some sort of hipster weeaboo credit. Look at how obscure the titles I watch are, the Freddy inside Rich’s head would probably say, give me credit for watching things first. The Freddy problem had grown on his mind like mold on uncovered bread. It was beyond unfixable, something he would just have to live with. He clipped the tie on and decided to check anyway, just so that he could know what he was up against.

Damn it, he thought as he scanned the classroom. There were ten members seated in the desks, watching a movie intently. He tried to look at their faces, to see if any of them were former Cage members. He had worried that there would be defectors, but in the darkness, he recognized no one.

The Cage meeting featured all the usual faces. Everyone showed up to watch the conclusion of Hiroki’s arc, but as the episode’s pacing slowed to a crawl, he noticed a few people growing jittery in their seats. Their legs bounced, and their eyes scanned the classroom for something more interesting than another training montage. Some of them pointed their eyes to the door.

The final scene would bring them all back, Rich thought, the climactic sword duel with the man who had what Hiroki wanted. The animation studio clearly blew all their money on this last scene, as they dashed in and struck each other with all their might, sparks flying in every direction, every collision a cavalcade of light and sound. Neither of them had the upper hand. Hiroki slashed high, but the man parried and swung low, which Hiroki jumped over.

Finally, after a smooth bit of swordsmanship, Hiroki remembered something his father said and slashed at the man's hand, severing his thumb. He fell to the ground clutching the hand, looking for the thumb but unable to find it. The episode ended.

When the lights in the classroom came back on, Rich was dismayed to see that nobody seemed riveted like he was when he watched the episode. Was he wrong to believe that this was the most exciting fight scene he'd ever seen? Blaine and Jarrett rested their chins on their hands and Erica slurped loudly from the bottom of a Big Gulp cup. Midori had two pieces of paper in front of her littered with doodles.

The discussion was short, not much was said, and the meeting was mercifully culled.

At the moment of the meeting's close, in between the last breath of the club president and the eventual squealing of chairs scooted against the floor, the movie that the Cooler Anime Club was watching came to a rousing close. The crowd of people that had gathered in the room opposite them exploded in applause. Rich started to sweat looking into the eyes of each of his compatriots. He was up against a wave, or a movement, something cataclysmic for the state of the Club for Animation from Japan.

Rich was again thrust into a moment where he had to say something, to have his moment under the heat of the spotlight. But his tongue had turned to marbles in his mouth. He opened his mouth, uttered a syllable, stopped to swallow spit, choked on the spit, started to cough, spit a wad of phlegm involuntarily onto the carpet in front of him, continued to cough, regained his ability to breathe, noticed the moment was lost, and closed his mouth.

Weeks trudged on like this, with the Cage barely maintaining the number of participants necessary to be called a club. Meanwhile, the Cooler Anime Club, or just the Cooler, was flourishing, sometimes pulling in thirty to forty students a session. Victoria was calm, if the other club did not cannibalize their members, she was perfectly fine with running a club that barely fit the bill. Rich,

however, grew despondent. Nothing made sense. He put his all into running the club, facilitating discussion, building camaraderie, because he loved anime so much.

He put his head deep into his favorite pillow, made of memory foam and wrapped in an old t-shirt, and pulled the sides of the pillow around his face. Next, he screamed so hard that his face turned a shade close to purple and a large vein bulged from his forehead to his temple. He vacillated from numbness to rage like it was controlled by a poorly installed light switch. The semester was on its way to a disgraceful close.

He received several texts from Victoria over the span of two weeks about the Club Festival at the end of the semester. Each club was expected to put on a performance of some sort, a showcase of the club's various talents. Since Victoria was the head of so many other clubs that she couldn't devote a lot of time to making sure the anime nerds had their shit together. Every time Rich would feel a buzzing on his hip, he'd sneak a quick peek and then jam it back in his pocket. Each proceeding text message became more and more urgent until they were being delivered entirely in capital letters with multiple exclamation points at the end. If humans had invented more ways to express anger through text, Victoria would have used them.

Finally, at the end of Ms. Richards' first period class, sixteen days after the first mention of the festival, Victoria cornered him at his locker.

"Rich, if you've given up on this club, then we should just abandon the whole thing. I didn't think you were going to give up so easily, but watching the club dwindle away has made me question your leadership ability." She stomped her shoe on the tile and twisted it like she was putting out a cigarette.

"You're supposed to be the president. I'm going through a crisis, Victoria, and I don't have any way to put something together on such a short notice."

Victoria opened her mouth to speak but hesitated.

"What?" Rich asked, twisting to look behind him.

"Nothing, I wa-I was just going to suggest that there's someone else you could go to."

"No. I'd rather the club be disbanded."

“So, you’d let him win for good? Claim complete dominance? Just because your pride is hurt.”

“It’s not pride,” Rich said, slumped against the orange metal lockers, crumpling in on himself like a beach chair, “I have no pride left.”

People had long since stopped showing up to the meetings. Only the core five remained. Rich, Victoria, Blaine, Jarrett, and Midori. Erica took her big gulp and her allegiance to the Cooler Anime Club, and tried to pull Midori in with her, but Midori was too disenchanted with the way Freddy had acted in that meeting long ago to ever join a club he was involved in.

“If they disband the club, they disband the club, Victoria. I’m sorry.” Rich walked away towards second period, and Victoria did not give chase.

Every classroom in Orange Crest looked the same, with the same whiteboard, the same chair formation, the same inspirational posters on the wall. Even the teachers had a similar look to them, all women in their thirties or forties with spirits crushed by wave after wave of unruly students. Ms. Edwards taught Geology, and she made rock puns, but she was no more distinguishable from the rest of the teachers in the school for it. As Ms. Edwards talked about the intricacies of tectonic plates, Rich’s phone buzzed.

A phone buzzing in a classroom immediately draws all attention. It’s a scientific fact. Rich grew hot with shame, feeling everyone’s eyes search for the source of the buzzing, only to settle on him. Rich thought this was Victoria’s passive aggressive manner of revenge for his devil-may-care attitude. He looked at the clock on the back wall of the classroom. Time moved slow in class rooms. Another scientific fact. His phone buzzed again, causing another round of distraction, annoying Ms. Edwards who demanded that the students all turn off their phones “pronto”.

Rich took out his phone and set it on the desk, as visual proof that he was turning it off, but when he saw who the text was from, his face contorted into a sneer.

“Heard your little argument,” the text message read, “if you need help, you know where to find me.”

“Freddy.” He said aloud, and then wanted to spit. He could see the smirk on his dumb face now. He had all the power, he had most of the students, and now he knew about Rich’s club problems. He wanted to turn into an ant and scurry away.

The offering of a hand can be a dangerous thing. No strings attached, they say, as they hide all the strings. Freddy presented this offer knowing full well that there were strings and that the strings were completely visible. Rich could do nothing but accept.

“So, you finally decided to show your face.” Freddy said to Rich as Rich entered the Cooler classroom thirty minutes before the scheduled meeting. The classroom was shrouded in darkness, the only light coming from the projector’s off button. Freddy’s voice was a drifting specter, moving from one ear to another. “I have a proposition, and I would really appreciate it if you would give it your full attention. Please, sit down.”

Rich obliged, taking the closest seat to the door in case an early exit was necessary. Freddy appeared from the darkness, wearing a corduroy suit jacket and a pair of nice pants. He swept the hair off his forehead and the hardness of his gaze became apparent. He had the eyes of a hardened military general, constantly squinting and analyzing. He walked over to the door and slammed it shut.

“The club festival is rapidly approaching, and you find yourself with naught a plan, and the monkey on your back has grown significantly. At the beginning it was only a chimp, and when it hung on the hood of your sweatshirt, you thought it a nuisance. But now, oh now, it has grown exponentially. And yet you still crawl with this five hundred pound, black-as-night gorilla on your back. I adm--”

“Monkeys, chimps and gorillas are all different animals.” Rich pointed out. Freddy stopped his train of thought, rolled his eyes and sauntered over to a podium to lean on.

“See that’s the problem with you, Rich, you’ve continued to miss the bigger picture. The grand plan, if you will. You have become irrelevant; your club is on its last legs. I am here to offer you a deal that will save the club, and yet you still fight me at every opportunity.”

Rich turned his head to the side. “Doesn’t mean I have to listen to your monologuing.”

“Fine. Let me cut to the chase then. You and I are going to go onstage at the club festival, and we are going to have a sword fight. The swords will be real.”

“There’s no way the school will allow it.”

“They have already,” Freddy said, coming closer to place the approval form on Rich’s desk, “I told them it was a recreation of the fight from *Hiroki no Densetsu*.”

“Isn’t that show garbage, bottom of the barrel, in your words?”

“It has its merits, plus, that’s how I got it approved as a joint festival performance.”

“Alright then. What’s in it for me if I go through with this?”

“That’s simple. I’ll disband the Cooler, and you’ll go back to being King Weeb on campus.”

Rich felt jittery. Of course, he would jump at the opportunity to get his status back as the anime club vice-president, but at the same time, he might get stabbed. He’d never been stabbed before, except for that time with a pencil in the fourth grade. He wanted desperately to say no but the rewards were too great.

“Deal. Now, if you excuse me, I have a meeting to run.” Rich dashed towards the door, but Freddy called for him.

“Rich.”

“Yes?”

“Bring your own sword. The ones they will provide will be practice swords. Wooden. I trust you own a few katanas?”

Rich nodded and snuck across the hall before any of the remaining Cage members saw him fraternizing with the enemy. Little would they know that he just secured their safety for a long while. Victoria, always the earliest member to arrive, was waiting for Rich as he entered the Cage homeroom. She said nothing to him but expected him to speak.

“You took my advice?”

“Did you know what he was offering?”

“I did. He came to me first.”

“And?” Rich was biting the inside of his cheek and drew blood.

“I figured you would jump at the chance to restore the Cage’s ‘former glory’ or something like that. I let you make the call.”

“Well, I’m doing it. Thanks for the lack of a warning. He’s going to skewer me.”

Victoria, perturbed by the notion that she’d somehow abandoned Rich, tapped her foot and grimaced.

“You didn’t have to agree to it, Rich. You did it because you wanted the Cage more than you cared about your safety.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Rich said and left the club room to get a sip of water from the noisy water fountain on the far end of the building. That’s the one that had the freshest tasting water. Only that would get the taste of iron out of his mouth.

Rich drank from the fountain and while he was dribbling the water down his chin, he decided not to attend the club meeting this week. He needed practice with the blade if he was going to best Freddy and claim his throne again. If he showed up next week the club wouldn’t be disbanded. He sent a text to Victoria and bolted from the building to catch a bus home. She was furious, but Rich knew she’d understand.

His father had a small collection of weapons in his study in the event a SWAT team raided his house looking for his killer dip recipes, or something. Rich didn’t get it. Various handguns, hunting rifles, and other weapons were displayed in a humongous glass case that stretched from one end of the easternmost wall to the other. The contents of this glass case were his father’s prized possessions, including the katana he placed at the top of the case, suspended by two large black pegs.

Rich loved the katana; it was his favorite type of sword. It was the result of masterful Japanese handiwork, folded over a thousand times so that it could even slice through body armor. It

was a refined weapon, the absolute peak of swordsmanship. Samurai and ninjas both carried katanas, as did many protagonists of the shows he watched. The sword in his father's case was the ultimate sword, its hilt was jeweled and had all sorts of tassels on it. Rich wondered if it contained the soul of a powerful swordsman and prayed for the swordsman to grant him inexplicable skill with the blade.

He took the katana down from the pegs carefully, trying not to nick himself with the blade and end up bleeding out on the floor of his dad's study. He grasped the hilt with both hands and began to focus his energy into the blade. This was something he had witnessed before in several anime, where the swordsman would create a bond with the blade and become more attuned to the blade's whims. Rich began to vibrate, placing all his energy into his temples and shaking vigorously. He let out his version of a primal screech, a shrill nightmarish sound that would have caused any animals in the vicinity to flee.

"Nice," he said, as he finished his ritual and took the blade outside.

A shipment of water was delivered to Rich's house every two weeks in the form of a twenty-four pack of water bottles. Standing in the backyard and gazing at his surroundings, Rich found the bottles would serve as the perfect training.

He took a plastic trash bin used for collecting leaves and other yard trash and flipped it on its head. On top of the trashcan, he set a water bottle. He waited for the wind to die down before lining up the tip of the sword to the wrapper of the bottle. He imagined that the water bottle was that jerk Frank who always mocked his weight at lunchtime, and that the Great Value label on the bottle was his stupid leather jacket. He aimed the sword, holding it with two tightly gripped hands, and slashed at the bottle. He blinked at the moment of impact, but when he opened his eyes he saw that he'd sliced the cap off the bottle at a slanted angle.

He pumped his fist. He could do this, he told himself again and again as he set up another water bottle. The wind began to whip again, as if some deity was compelling the leaves to applaud. He felt a kind of power he had never felt before; he felt dangerous with the sword in his hand. Hiroki was a master of the blade without trying, he simply picked up a sword and knew how to kill with it. He did not have the luxury of supreme natural acumen, he was bad at most everything he tried and so he learned not to try much. With that in mind, holding a sword seemed to be something he was pretty good at. He had to become better. Freddy would be waiting.

Rich began to head right home after school, going through case after case of water bottles, practicing different ways to swing the katana. He sliced through enemy after liquid enemy, letting out a scream with every strike. It was more powerful that way. Freddy would rue the day that he decided to give Rich a way back to the top. The sunbeams of the afternoon dimmed and transitioned into moonlight in the evening hours, punctuated by the sounds of Rich's training.

Rich made an appearance at the next week's club meeting only so that the club would not be disbanded while he was training. Midori tried to stop and question him, wondering why he'd suddenly become so aloof with the club's status at stake. He didn't reply to her or Victoria, who'd had no plan for the club meeting and expected Rich to pick up the slack.

The club festival approached in the blink of an eye. From three weeks to two weeks to one week, the days dwindled down to nothing. The corpses of bottles stacked up in the recycling bin in front of Rich's garage, proof of his diligent work.

On nights when it was too cold to stand outside and swing a sword, Rich would watch the scene from *Hiroki no Densetsu* again. He'd memorized every line, every swing of the blade. He could recreate it blindfolded. A stab high and to the right, a slash to the left, dodge to the left, jump over a swing to the ankles. Rich sucked in a breath and turned to peek at the moon lingering in the night sky. It occurred to him that he would soon live it. He would be Hiroki, like he'd always wanted deep down. He would be a young boy with a sword, searching desperately for answers. He'd be a hero, savior of his club.

The club festival had become something of an event in the surrounding area, with people choosing to spend their day at the school grounds watching the various performances on the haphazardly assembled main stage, a large piece of wood stacked on top of pallet board and covered with a large red cloth. Speakers in the school's pavilion pumped in obnoxiously loud music, the kind designed to drown out ancillary conversation.

Rich was in his father's pickup truck. The sword was in the back seat. His father was surprisingly okay with the idea of him taking the sword to school, but he supposed it was because he said it was part of a presentation, and his father trusted the judgment of those sorts of institutions. Rich asked his father if he was going to stay and watch the performance, but he just muttered something about having somewhere to be. Rich could tell that he was upset that he had to miss it, which was something at least. He looked at his father, trying to draw a mental picture of

him, in the event he had his life flash in front of his eyes. His blue baseball cap that he wore almost every day was frayed on the top button and on the brim, and his jawline was swallowed in a scarf of neck fat, even though he was not a fat man. His shoulders were broad underneath his jean jacket, and he had an aura of rage that apparently only Rich could see.

He stuffed the sword, already in an ornate protective case, into his backpack for safe keeping, but it was so long that one side of the sword poked out of the backpack no matter how he adjusted it. Rich was nervous, but he had to conceal that fact, lest he give the hint that this event was something out of the ordinary.

He imagined his enemy, onstage, in front of the crowd. His eyes stared daggers, and his hands twisted in the grip of the blade. His shoulders were tense and hunched, legs apart in a ready stance, and then he charges. That's when the vision stopped. Rich shivered. Doubt poisoned his mind. He thought of the tower of defenseless water bottles, all the training he'd done in his backyard. What was it all for if he failed?

The pavilion was absolutely packed with people of all ages and sizes, all sitting in chairs brought from home. Rich watched a couple, a blonde woman and a red-headed man in their early forties, dash with chairs in hand to the front of the audience, push away two already placed chairs and set their own. The man nodded to his wife and smirked. Rich admired their boldness.

The event was much larger than it had been even in recent years. There were food trucks lined up in the school parking lot, attracting ludicrously long lines, and some booths where people could play carnival games to win prizes, run by actual carnies. Rich scanned the stage for people who looked like they were in charge. He looked for a clipboard or a name tag, anything that would denote that they were the person to talk to. He needed to know when the sword fight was scheduled to happen, so he knew how much longer he had to be alive. Finally, after a ten-minute period of searching, Rich located a woman with dark brown hair in a red suit who was giving a lecture and gesticulating to some of Rich's classmates. If this lady was not in charge, she certainly acted like it. Rich approached her as she finished the tail end of her spiel. She turned to him in surprise.

"Oh Rich, it's good to see you're here. I'm so glad you and Freddy were able to work out your differences to perform together."

Rich looked down at the floor and scratched at his scalp.

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea who you are."

"We exchanged emails. Jackie, remember? I'm also in charge of event coordination here at the Club Festival, so let me know if you have any questions."

"When do we go on?"

"You guys are the last group to perform. I was enraptured by the clip Freddy sent me. I've never seen any of this 'anime' before but if you can recreate what he sent me, I'll be super impressed!" Jackie clapped her hands rapidly as she spoke.

As far as first impressions go, Rich was impressed by Jackie. Nobody over high school age had ever expressed any interest in anime to him before, and this lady looked to be in her late thirties. He felt safe when talking to her, unlike a lot of adults in his life.

"Well, we'll try."

"I'll signal you when we're nearing the end of the event so that you guys can get ready backstage."

"There's a backstage?"

"Not really, it's just the Spanish classroom in the building behind the stage."

"Oh."

Rich's stomach rumbled, either out of hunger or nerves, he wasn't sure which.

"Well, anyway, have a great time out there!"

Rich nodded and walked off towards the food trucks. There were Cajun food trucks, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Chinese, mac and cheese, seafood, barbecue, any sort of food that Rich thought of was to be found in this parking lot. Except sushi, Rich noted. He sighed. Why couldn't this be here for our lunch period, Rich thought as he looked for the truck with the shortest line.

“You showed up!” someone shouted at Rich, who was unfazed and headed towards the navy-blue seafood truck. A fish sandwich was what he really wanted, not confrontation of any kind. He didn’t need to get his heart rate up, now on today of all days.

The man continued to shout at him and approach him. Rich turned and saw who it was. Blaine was wearing his orange varsity jacket with a black anime club t-shirt underneath. Just seeing the shirt, he was wearing sent him back to a simpler time, when the only issues the club had were about ordering everyone the right t-shirt size.

“Rich!” Blaine exclaimed and took Rich in his arms. He lifted him into the air in a ferocious bear hug. “Everyone at The Cage was so worried that you’d abandoned us. We didn’t know you were working on a festival performance the whole time!”

Rich chuckled nervously and stammered out a response.

“A sword fight too! Dude! I wish I would have thought of that! I bet it’s going to be great.” He placed Rich down on the ground and patted his shoulders. Rich felt his insides swirl around inside him like he’d become a human toilet bowl.

“Yeah.”

“Nervous?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if you need a pep talk, I’m going to be at the very front! Me and Jarrett set up some chairs there earlier and I’m so ready to see the action close up.” Blaine, with his freshly cut flat top, smiled so wide that it looked like his cheeks were straining. After one last pat on the back, Blaine walked back towards the stage, his broad shoulders swaying left and right with every step.

The weather was mild, overcast; a nice breeze rollicked through the throngs of people. In some spots in the parking lot, the sun poked through a covering cloud and a sunbeam struck the earth. Rich felt his skin leak sweat and his eyes dilate. In the fish sandwich line, Rich was becoming a nervous wreck. He always was one, sure, but present circumstances had only exacerbated that part of him. The people in front of him in line were loudly discussing which items to order, and Rich didn’t wish to eavesdrop, so he turned towards the stage and watched as the Orange Crest dance

team performed a routine. He couldn't see the finer details of their movements but by the way the crowd screeched and hollered, they must have been particularly impressive.

Sometimes, people get away with things simply because they act like they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. The sword was still tucked in his backpack, but since no one had even looked at it with a quizzical glance, he assumed everyone thought it was an umbrella. Its weight in his bag, along with the outfit he'd prepared for the performance, made his back ache. Twenty minutes passed by in a slog. Person after person received their food, as Rich's stomach threw fits. Finally, he was to the front of the line and he ordered a grouper sandwich. He received his long-awaited food in a reflective wrapper and took it to some benches to enjoy.

The fish sandwich was crisp and golden brown, and when Rich unwrapped it, the steam from the sandwich wafted through the air, tickling noses all around. The bun was soft and warm, and Rich pressed his fingers down into its plushness and took a large bite. The fish was flaky and hot, a supremely satisfying munch. When he looked down into the white meat of the grouper, an examination of the bite mark he'd left, he was shocked for the slightest moment, for he swore he saw Freddy's face, glaring menacingly from the sandwich. This caused Rich to lose grip of the sandwich, bobble it between his hands, and despair as it smacked against the asphalt.

Rich looked around, trying to locate anyone who might judge him for indulging in an asphalt fish sandwich, but as he spun around he was struck with agoraphobia. The whole sky seemed foreboding and the shape of the clouds resembled a monster, the people in their lines appeared to him hostile, and the sounds and music in the distance that once was pleasant grated on his inner ear. He felt his body spasm as he bolted away from his fish sandwich and towards the classrooms, an enclosed space where everything was perfectly fine.

Almost at a full sprint, Rich pushed his way through the double doors into the hallway where the two anime clubs met. The noise of the festival permeated the whole building. The sounds of applause and music made the hallway seem more alive than it ever was during school hours. Rich tried to open the Cage's room, but to no avail.

"Locked." Rich said, shaking as he cradled the doorknob in his hands. He fell to the ground against the door and kept muttering the word.

Victoria came around the corner and saw Rich in a pile by the door. Unfazed, she approached the door with the key, unlocked it, and nudged Rich into the room.

“What are you doing in here?” Victoria whispered to him.

“Hiding. What does it look like?”

“Hiding from what?”

“The outside world? I don’t know Victoria, everything’s awful and I am freaking out.”

Victoria went over to the teacher’s desk and started rummaging through papers.

“What are you here for?”

“I left some club paperwork in here last meeting and I can’t find it. I asked one of the teachers for their keys.” She turned from the desk and examined Rich, still laying on the cold tile, before going back to her original work. “You ought to get out of here and get ready for the performance, Rich.”

“I’m going to die, Victoria.”

“You’re going to be fine. You’ve been practicing right?”

“He’s going to gut me like a fish.”

“What are you talking about? They’re giving you wooden sticks to fight with. I saw them.”

“Freddy told me to bring this.” While face down on the tile, he arched his arm to point to the black case poking out of his pack. “My dad’s sword.”

Victoria was incredulous. She stopped what she was doing and stomped over to Rich, pulled the case out of his backpack and unsheathed the katana. Holding the sword limply in her offhand, she stared at the reflections of the minimal light in the room against the metal, and then back at Rich. Completely speechless, she dropped the sword on the ground and threw her hands in the air. She walked around in circles around the desks before coming back to the spot she was standing in prior and yelling.

“What?!”

“He said that if I sword fight him on stage, he’d disband the Cooler and we’d be the only anime club again.”

“You are a moron! This was all a ploy to get you kicked out for bringing a sword to school! Think! Think for once in your life, Rich!”

Rich blinked once, and then twice. He took a deep breath in and realized that what Victoria was saying made perfect sense. That would be the perfect maneuver. He played the scenario out in his head. He took to the stage with the carrying case in hand and watched as Freddy did the same from the opposite side of the stage, smirking the whole while. As soon as the cue for them to begin was given, the swords were drawn. One was real and the other was a wooden stick. Any administrator near the stage, which would be all of them, would have alerted a policeman, who would have tazed and arrested Rich, for possessing such a weapon on school property.

“Ooooooh,” Rich realized.

“Yeah. Now, get rid of that thing before you get in real trouble and I’m minus a vice-president.”

“What do I do with it?”

“I have no clue, Rich. You should have talked to me in the first place.”

“That’s not what I’m asking, Victoria.”

“Just trash it. Throw it away. I don’t know.”

Rich was appalled by the insinuation that he would part with the sword that he had bonded with over the last two weeks. Once, he would have thrown the sword aside and been done with it, but after so many water bottles vanquished, so many screams shared together, Rich found himself unable to think of such a thing.

“Victoria, this is a katana, made from Japanese steel and folded a thousand times, so that it is the lightest and most deadly sword known to man. If you think for a second that I would just leave something that powerful on the side of the road, I think you’ve got another thing coming.”

“Rich...” Victoria began.

“What if a homeless man picked up the sword and started ravaging the town, bodies start turning up with limbs hacked off, or bellies slit open? That would be on my hands.”

Victoria pulled a wad of papers from the desk and tucked it into her own backpack, her blonde hair bouncing around her face with every motion. Rich looked at her face, and in the dim lighting, noticed how concerned she was by the way her face contorted in on itself.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to you, Rich. This has been a terrible semester, and I don’t want it to end with you in jail and the club disbanded. Give me the sword, I’ll take care of it.”

The applause from the festival roared up again and loud bass music sent a tremor through the classroom. Rich nodded and picked the sword’s case off the ground, pushed the sword back into place and handed it to Victoria with open hands and a respectful bow.

“I think you’re next. You better go to the Spanish classroom to get ready.”

Rich checked the clock and was amazed that the time had passed so quickly. He smiled and thought about making a joke of the whole thing, like saying he should have horrible anxiety attacks more often, but by the time he’d thought of the joke, Victoria had left the room with the sword and left him alone.

There was pep in Rich’s step again. He bounced on the balls of his feet, nearly skipping to the Spanish classroom. He had a new outlook. It was like the specter of Freddy had been exorcised from him, the stain of his existence had been cleaned with bleach. The classroom was right around the corner, and Rich sauntered in with a grin.

The room was an utter disaster. It looked as if ten gorillas had started a brutal battle in the center of the room and brought everything into their tornado of destruction. Chairs were flipped onto their sides, posters had been knocked off the walls, and costume pieces were littered along the floor. Jackie, in her unmistakable red suit, looked frazzled as Rich entered the room.

“Oh, thank goodness, you’re here. Did you bring your costume?”

Rich tugged on his backpack strap.

“Alright, Freddy isn’t here yet, but I’m sure he will be soon. Just go get changed. You know where the bathrooms are, right?”

Rich nodded and left the room. He didn’t like the feeling of being in such a cluttered space so seeing the open hallways eased his heart. It struck him how difficult managing all these different high school students’ performances must be, and then on top of that having to deal with Freddy and his garbage. Rich thought about saying a prayer for Jackie, but instead said a prayer for himself. In the boys’ bathroom stall, Rich disrobed. He put on the bright red samurai pants Hiroki was known to wear.

Samurai didn’t really wear pants, their version was more like a long flowing skirt, but Rich wasn’t going to brave that hurdle. What if he fell over and exposed himself to a whole crowd? Rich was amazed at how free-flowing they were, it made him feel like he was wearing pajamas. The pants might as well have been a skirt. He could do all the sick samurai moves he wanted to now. On top, Hiroki wore a fur vest, like a cartoon barbarian would wear, blood-soaked while he ransacked a village.

Seeing himself in the garb made him feel like he had inherited a modicum of Hiroki’s power. He was strong as an ox, and ready to take on anything. The more he looked, however, the more he realized he was still nothing like Hiroki. Rich’s hair was the color of a paper bag, while Hiroki’s was dark as the night. Plus, Hiroki made the fur vest look ferocious and wild, while Rich in the vest made him slightly resemble Fred Flintstone.

Leisurely walking back to the Spanish classroom, Jackie hurried him along, saying that he needed to get out there on the stage. She handed him a wooden practice sword and practically shoved him out the door. He could hear her exhale in relief as the master of ceremonies, the school principal, took to the stage to describe the next and final act.

“And last but not least, we have a joint performance from the Club for Japanese Animation, and the Cooler Anime Club, recreating a scene from,” the principal squinted to check spelling and pronunciation, “Harokono Densetsu, give it up for Rich and Freddy!”

Rich stormed onto the stage, weapon in hand. It was a whirlwind of change for him, the adrenaline of being on stage in front of so many people made his thighs twitch and bounce. Crossing the barrier to the stage was like becoming a different person, or maybe less than a person. Rich thought of himself as a big cosmic joke, especially now, as he jumped onto an empty stage trying to clash swords with someone who wasn't present. He practiced a few slashes at the air to keep his muscles moving and to relieve nervousness, but even after that, Freddy had still not arrived.

The crowd's cheering had dulled into a murmur, some clapping from politeness and some turning to others in the crowd asking the obvious question. Where was the other swordsman? Rich was equally confused, though he did wonder why the only time he'd seen Freddy today was on the inside of a fish sandwich. Wouldn't it have made sense to taunt me the whole day and pester me to death, Rich thought. But as soon as he had completed the thought, there was a loud door slam and Freddy appeared on stage.

They were both dressed as Hiroki, rocking the red pants and fur vest combo. As they looked down at one another, they realized the error. Neither of them had called dibs.

"I see you've finally arrived," Rich announced and pointed the tip of the wooden sword to Freddy.

"Yes. Yes, I have," Freddy smiled and pointed a real blade in Freddy's face. The crowd gasped, but no one intervened. Rich felt his heart bounce around in his ribcage. Who allowed this? Without a moment's hesitation, Freddy started to swing wildly, aiming for the body.

"You didn't bring your true blade, young Rich," Freddy announced after two strikes collided with one another. "you attempt to disgrace me. Very well. I am like the wind and you are but a flower, waiting to be uprooted."

Rich didn't know what Freddy was going on about, and he was too busy avoiding death to inquire. He kept his mouth shut as the barrage continued. The force of the swings sent Rich to his back foot, retreating to the far end of the stage. The speed of his attacks was intense, but Rich was able to parry them away. The crowd roared as Rich took to the offensive. He envisioned Freddy as a water bottle and stepped in with a swing. Thwack, the shot connected with his ribs. Freddy staggered.

Rich was amazed at how easy it was to strike Freddy, who seemed to have trouble seeing where he was attacking from. The curtains had blinded him, Rich chuckled to himself. Rich was striking at Freddy's sides with the middle of the blade, delivering cracking blows. The wooden sword would deal damage, but the real sword could kill. Nobody was alerting any policemen, nobody was demanding that the festival stop. Everyone trusted that this was what was supposed to be happening.

As the fight lingered on, Rich continued to wail on him. Every hit he delivered to Freddy elicited a wince from the audience, but Freddy did not howl in pain, he kept coming forward. He wanted blood and he had just the instrument to extract it. Rich could see the hurt in his eyes, in the way he hunched when he swung the sword around his body like a baseball bat.

"I will never let you win!" Freddy shouted at the top of his lungs.

"I've already won!" Rich responded, taunting him and then feeling a bit bad that he'd done it. Though it was true, he'd hit him many times and in any sort of regulated sword fight, Rich would have been declared the winner.

The crowd was bored. The novelty of two kids hitting one another with swords quickly faded when one was clearly the superior. It became less a competition and more an act of savagery. People in the crowd, including front row sitters Blaine and Jarrett were starting to have second thoughts about their moral standing after witnessing such an event.

Freddy screamed at the top of his lungs, shocking everyone in attendance, and ran towards him in one last foolish assault. Rich saw the desperation in his stance and quickly circled around him, but Freddy was prepared for such a maneuver. He swung high, about throat level, a shot aimed to kill, but Rich had seen these moves before. He ducked and swung low to debilitate him. To his surprise, Freddy leapt over the attack.

"This is for banning me from your club!" Freddy screamed as he delivered a downward slice, severing Rich's right thumb from his hand. The crowd gasped, broken from the spell of the performance by the sight of a thumb hitting the stage. Rich was now the one screaming. Teachers stormed the stage, escorting Freddy away and collecting the now separate thumb. Someone yelled to someone about getting ice, but Rich was too in shock to see who.

The blood was leaking from Rich's hand at such a rate that it scared him. He didn't know what to do. He held the part of his hand where the thumb had been severed from, but nearly vomited from the feeling of blood gushing against his opposite hand. Blaine and Jarrett were on the stage asking if Rich would be alright, but the teachers ignored their questions, in predicaments of their own. Jackie started to weep openly and babble. Not long after that, Rich fainted.

The first sight he had after waking up was the tear-stained eyes of his father. Seeing that Rich was awake, his father took him in his arms gently and placed his head on Rich's shoulders.

"I'm so glad you're okay. I'm so glad you're okay," his father repeated.

The stark white of the hospital room stung Rich's eyes. He'd almost preferred being passed out. There was a large blue curtain to his left and some sinks to his right. A television was hung on the wall directly across from his bed.

"What happened?"

"The doctors were able to reattach the thumb, thank the Lord, but you may have some lost range of motion. I heard you were impressive with the sword. It's a shame I missed it."

"I'm done with the blade, Dad. No need for such things."

"I sure hope so," his father said gruffly, "don't need you losing any fingers."

"How long am I going to be in here?" Rich asked, not expecting a concrete answer.

"Not too long hopefully, but just in case." His father pulled a large shopping bag full of DVDs onto Rich's hospital bed. Rich leaned forward and inspected the cases. They were all anime, nothing he hadn't seen before, but nothing he owned. At the bottom of the bag was a long receipt. His father went in for another, tighter hug and offered to put one of the DVDs in.

"I'd like that a whole lot," Rich said, his eyes brimming with tears. He looked at his father and saw that a great fog had dissipated, like he was seeing his father for the first time. When he blinked, the tears came rushing down.