

# **TYKES**

by Sam Jared Bonar

No funny business - that means you!

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The rest of this is all made up. Just enjoy it!

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## CHURCHY PAST

Larren finished choir practice at 7pm every Tuesday. He would sing about the Lord after school and before homework almost every day. Tuesday was just the day he sang with other folks.

He'd walk the six blocks home from Church after practice and he'd count those six blocks with quick-back-steps as he side-skipped his way home facing left, then facing right, and so on.

"Right. Left-right." 1. "Left. Right-left." 2. "Right. Left-right." 3. And so on. It would take Larren 28 counts per block if he took long side-strides. He usually did. He liked to get home fast.

Larren would take the mail from his family's mailbox and run it up the stairs, across the porch, and through the screen doors that opened the wrong way. His Momma would be making dinner and if Larren got the letters to Pops before Wheel was over, his Pops would usually ask his Momma to give Larren a carrot-from-the-soup-broth to slurp down and tide him over until dinner.

He'd run with the dripping carrot up the stairs and catch the drops of soup in his cupped left hand. He'd run into his bathroom, slurp the puddle from his hand, hold the carrot over the sink, and speak into the mirror.

"Thank You Jesus for Momma for Pops for music for carrots for meat to make stuff tasty for my house for Pastor Greene for sunflowers for safety and for You, Your glorious Name, and the strength You and the Father give me. Thank You Lord for keeping me peaceful and blessed Amen."

Then Larren would gobble down the carrot, staring at the chicken juices dribbling down his chin. He'd closed-mouth smile and chomp the four or five chomps it would take to gobble the carrot. Then he'd swallow the luke-warm stew in one gulp, letting out a burst of a chuckle as soon as the orange mess had tunneled down his gullet.

Though, once, it went different.

That day, he had counted to about 17 on the third block. He was facing to the left. And he stopped.

Larren stared up at Cindy Carmichael on her porch. She was in high school! And Larren had heard, though he didn't like to gossip, that she was still suspended for smoking pot. She had her hand in her shirt and was feeling around in there, staring back at him, kind of smiling a little. Larren didn't leave the safety of the sidewalk.

Larren did *not* know what to do, but he also could not keep going home. With God's Hand, he felt out the situation. He squinted to see how her hand was groping her chest. God told him sternly to watch without coveting. God told Larren to check in with how watching this made him feel. Strange, tingly. After a while, God told him to watch Cindy's face and not look away. Then Larren checked the sky for any signs from Him.

He finally spoke up. "Why are you touching yourself like that?"

Cindy didn't answer for a couple moments, then she sighed. "I'd tell you it's to check my breasts for lumps like we're supposed to, but I'd be lying. So I won't say that."

Larren liked her, but his hand trembled. His timid smile sneaked through his lips. Cindy was about 8 years older so she was a little not-to-be-trusted. She continued.

"I'm doing it because it kinda feels good for me. Sexually. Do you know what 'sexually' means, Larren?" She chuckled a little.

Larren thought about this question as he looked at Cindy's feet from 20 feet away on the sidewalk. He tried to remember the times he had heard or saw the word. They were blurry and few, but he ventured a guess at the definition.

"I'm not sure. I think it has to do with people who get married or are married, but less so after the marriage. So... here's my guess:

Sexually –adv

1. Done in the aftermath of getting married."

Larren thought about this and nodded his head as he waited for the real definition.

Cindy smiled and laughed once pretty loud. "'Sexually' means done to try and make a certain type of pleasure. Physical pleasure. It's nice having my boobs touched like this. Everybody tries to bring emotions into 'sexually', but that's not what it means really. And 'sexually' usually implies that there's more than one person around. You're here. Watching. So I guess that's why I said it felt good for me, sexually. Maybe that's wrong."

Larren processed all this. Then Cindy said, kind of smirking, "Do *you* want to touch my boobs, Larren?"

Larren was pretty sure he had an answer for this one.

"I don't think so," he said, twiddling his fingers on his thigh. He pointed at the sky, "I think... I think He doesn't want me to. So, no thanks." Larren tried to smile but wasn't sure if that was right.

Cindy controlled herself, smiled again politely, and looked to the sky. Larren looked too and, together (though still 20 feet apart), they watched the day start to end. They watched night begin to paint its colors in the clouds. They watched for a minute or so. Then Cindy looked back at Larren. She was warm.

"Good choice. I wasn't sure what I'd have done if you said yes." A moment. "Anyways, if you don't want to ... if He doesn't want you to..." she 'hmm'ed and they looked down for a couple seconds. Larren had to get home, so he just thought he'd leave it at that. Larren bounded forwards as he rotated 180 degrees clockwise, landing to the right and saying "18".

Larren made good time on the way home that day despite the hold-up. He slowed down and began to walk normal as he got to his mailbox. His mouth was twisted and his forehead was scrunched-up as he took the rubber-banded batch of letters and junk mail from the mailbox. He lumbered up to the screen door to creak it open towards him.

Pat Sajack and Vanna White were side-hugging each other and waving goodbye on the TV screen when Larren walked into the living room.

“Just in time, Larr,” said Pops with his eyes on the screen still. He flopped his hand out to ask for the mail. “Your Momma’s got something special for you in the kitchen.”

“Pops. Do you, and Momma, ever do stuff to try and make a certain type of... of pleasure?”

Pops’s eyes furrowed and then widened, shifting uncertainly from the start of Jeopardy toward his son.

Larren went on. “Like... together? I guess, I mean, do you do it... often? Or... ever?”

Pops began to shake his head and gulp like his mouth was dry. “MOMMA!” Pops spurted out spittle as he hollered for his wife. “OUR ssSON! H-he GOT uh-a question.... OHHHhhh.” He was jumping out his seat now and swiveling his head owl-like.

“WHAT!?” Momma hollered back from the kitchen.

“Oh, just come here, Momma this is just... something.”

“SOMETHIN?” came with the sound of Momma’s hand slapping the kitchen counter.

“YEAH! Something. A q-question. Now, just come on now, Momma I... Well, I... I guess. I guess, I need you.”

Silence erupted in response. After a couple seconds, Larren heard Momma dip her ladle into the soup broth and start to click-clack her way to the living room. She walked in wearing Larren’s favorite apron and holding her ladle at shoulder height. Momma’s wary-eyes were looking at Pops. Pops was sitting mouth-open and shaking his knee with his panic-eyes looking at Larren. Larren looked back and forth until Momma gave up on Pops and turned on her detective-eyes to look at Larren. She took two steps slowly toward him while she held the ladle high.

“My, Larren. What’s going on?” She looked expectant which made Larren look down. She leaned over to kiss his forehead. That brought his eyes back up.

“Yeah, Larren, what’s going on?” Pops whimpered and whined but quit it when Momma hushed him with her stillness.

“Well. I asked Pops if you two give each other... pleasure. Physical pleasure, I guess.”

Momma turned on the crazy-eyes. Larren loved Momma’s crazy-eyes. Her eyeballs kind of stuck themselves out to get a better look while the rest of her face retreated into her head. Larren couldn’t hold in a little chuckle.

“Now this ain’t a laughing matter, Larren.” Larren looked down and forced a frown to make his face normal. “Where’d you get this from, now?”

Larren hesitated. “I... I got it from Jesus,” Larren felt like it was just a white lie, and it wasn’t that bad. Larren *wanted* to say it totally true, but that felt bad too. Momma would’ve called Noah’s Storm down on the Carmichaels if she heard about Cindy. Larren liked Cindy, even though her family didn’t follow the Bible too close. But they’d find Him. Larren knew it. Besides, God probably brought her out there to tell all that stuff to him. It’s not normal for a high-schooler to talk to an elementary-schooler. Larren’s lie was true enough.

“Now don’t play funny with me, Larren, or you won’t get your juicy veggie!” Momma lifted the ladle slightly higher.

"I wasn't funny!" He believed that. "God was kind of tickling my neck when I was looking at the sunset. And I felt it - everywhere! And God was telling me that someday-not-now someone would make me feel that way more and that that's how life keeps going." He made that last part up before continuing, "And I just want to know whether you and Pops make each other feel. Pleasure, that is. I- I'm just... wondering..."

As he trailed off, Larren's parents breathed in at the same time. Then they exhaled, looked away, and then looked at each other. Pops looked terrified. Momma looked back serious for a second, staring him down. Then, from nowhere, Momma burst out a victory "HAH!" and started laughing crazy all over. Pops, suddenly blessed, had his mouth jump up into little cautious smiles a couple times before finally just letting himself chuckle along with Momma. Larren didn't know why they were laughing, but he couldn't stop himself.

Momma got herself together a little, squeezed a bit above her stomach, then shook her head and moved the ladle down to Larren's height.

It was a sweet potato! Larren snatched it before asking permission. Then he remembered manners and looked up at Momma. Her smile faded as she looked down but her face was still warm. Larren felt some drips coming from the sweet potato and cupped his hand underneath.

"That pleasure stuff," Momma warned him, "you'll learn someday. And don't worry your head right now about us," she touched her stomach softly and looked at it. Pops got up slowly and walked to her. When he got there, he asked with his eyes to touch her belly too. She let him. They looked down tummy-side like a couple of dreamers.

"Now go upstairs and eat your tasty veggie before it's too cold. Dinner's in 10 minutes."

Larren ran up the stairs and into his bathroom. He slurped the puddle from his hand, held the sweet potato over the sink, and spoke into the mirror.

"Thank You Jesus for Momma for Pops for running around without shoes on for sweetness for animals for new friends for pleasure for surprises and for You, Your glorious Name, and Your generous-ness. Thank You Lord for blessing me without telling me everything Amen."

Larren gobbled down the sweet potato with pride. He swallowed it slowly, savoring each little bit as it went down. It was heaven.

## ROUGH HOUSE

"I can hardly believe it," Alexandra whispered into Gemma's ear in the courtyard during lunch period at Eversoll Community High School. Alex held a note in her hand. That ass-sniffer liked another girl! And they were already setting up a date! Or, at least, so said the intel on the note passed to her in 3<sup>rd</sup> period.

Alex huffed and fell into pouting. Her pouting soon became crying, which soon became outright bawling her eyes out. She rubbed her palms into her eyes. She felt like she just had to.

Gemma was still gasping at the news. Her eyes were alive with the gossip.

"Who? Who??" She pleaded. "Who's the mean witch?"

Alex's red eyes snapped up from her palms and tightened with rage: "Ama." That new little turd-stain scorpion-bitch!

Gemma was floored with the scandal of it all and actually fell on the ground to hide her initial glee. She was finally the first to be told! She'd have to tell Susie since *she's* Ama's neighbor, but she couldn't get away with telling Susie something without including Maria and Taysha.

"Don't tell a soul, you fuck!" Alex said to squash all the thoughts of betrayal in Gemma's gossiping head. She helped Gemma off the floor. Then Alex went on.

"I'm gonna have to come at her, rough house her a bit. Hurt her ... just a little. I can't let everyone know I'll let this go!" Alex said. Gemma's eyes were eager for the drama. "But don't piss your pants and run away – you're helping me. You're in this too."

Gemma could have protested but, really, she needed this. She never got into shit on her own, so she needed a little push now and then. And when she got that push, she fell the fuck in. Gemma nodded quickly.

"You gotta distract Ethan," Alex told Gemma. They nodded.

The two of them stormed to the cafeteria and burst through the swinging doors. After the doors, they split up: Alex headed to the Whatever-side by the food lines, Gemma went towards the cooler Window-Seats.

Alex snagged a plastic-wrapped burrito from the reduced-price lunch line and ripped it open savagely. Burrito snarge oozed onto her throwing hand. She stomped up behind the end of the table closest to the food line and tapped the shoulder of that new seductress: dark-brown-hair, eating sandwich triangles with the crusts cut off, Ama.

Ama turned around into a fist full of burrito guts. She got the brown, gnarly innards in her left nostril, right eye and ear, and her upper gums. It was a sloppy punch. And Ama had never been punched before, so she hadn't quite developed the instinct to turn away.

Meanwhile, Gemma had marched up to Ethan by the Windows, saying, "Ethan. I've got a message from Alex—". She proceeded to plant a solid, heartfelt kiss on the lips of her bff's bf! The cafeteria literally zipped the fuck up.

All eyes turned back to watch Alex seeing the betrayal sink in. She sputtered and held back the wetness in her eyes. Her knuckles were bloody burritos. She was being surrounded slowly by a monster crew of Authority: the three teachers on lunch duty (Ms. Tina Chips, Mr. Abbott Nunbran, and Mrs. Deborah Abbott – no



relation), the Worst-Vice-Principal-of-Them-All Karth Nestor “with Breastors”, the Student Government President Thad Reacher, the Janitor Sue, and the Burrito Guy Ed. The School Nurse Craig was on his way.

Alex turned around and saw them closing in on her. She whimpered with her red eyes. But she did not cry – she would not cry! She turned around again to see the silent sea of open mouths gaping and begging for more. She lowered her eyes to Ama’s body moaning on the ground. Alex felt tension building in her throat. She held it for a couple seconds before opening her mouth.

She screamed: “FOOOOOOD FIIIIIGGHHTTTT!”

Across the room, Gemma picked up Ethan’s soggy cereal, grabbed his hair, leaned his head back, and poured that soggy shit right into Ethan’s gaping pie-trap. The Petersen Twins grabbed their trays and slid down the middle tables grabbing everyone’s Dunkaroos, Pockys, and Lunchable desserts before blitzing straight out the cafeteria to gorge on their spoils. Janitor Sue took her mop and jumped in front of Ama’s body to swat away some skeezy dudes trying to touch the cute new girl. But Sue could not protect herself: she got pepperonis in her eyes.

A shout of “PIZZA BITCH!” came up near the pizza line as eight sophomore boys threw their lunch table across the floor, sliding it (and two of the students who didn’t get up from the bench in time) into the pizza warming machine. They forded the pizza station and took what they pleased. The Pizza Lady Eve took what she wanted as well. She was done with this bullshit.

Gemma couldn’t be heard very well over the din, but, in her daze, she spewed her confusion at Ethan:

“Eat a bag of dicks!” She shouted, then thought a bit more, “You taste good...” then a bit more though, “ASS CLOWN!” She smiled then and kissed him again before spitting at his feet and running out of the cafeteria. She cackled on her way out. Ethan cried. And he hadn’t cried in 8 months – he had been so proud about that.

Alex was being removed by force. The whole group of adults (besides Ed the Burrito Guy, but Thad Reacher was sticking his dumb-ass around) was dragging her through the wall of doors and out of the cafeteria. She muttered fake curse words under her breath and kicked the teachers’ shins. So they grabbed her legs and lifted her in the air. Alex was carried like this (by each limb like she was to be drawn and quartered) all the way to the Principal’s Office.

“Have you lost your mind, Alex?” Principal Tuma Mirembe asked her with real concern after the dust had settled. Alex sat in the chair across the Principal’s desk. But Alex sat against her will: her feet were tied to the legs of the chair with her shoelaces. Her shoelaces had come undone in the hubbub and she had kept kicking whoever tried to sit her down so Nestor-with-Breastors and the gang of teachers had had to secure her feet. The entourage now stabilized the chair behind her and muttered uncomfortably about the legality of the situation.

Alex fumed.

“Please, Alex. What devil got inside of you and told you to punch that poor girl with a burrito?”

“No one told me to,” Alex suddenly spat, “I did it because she’s a new little boy-stealer and that’s NOT ALLOWED!” Alex growled and leaned forward in her chair at Principal Mirembe.

“Well, actually Alex,” Mirembe looked around on her desk without really looking for anything, “what *you* did is not allowed. You are not allowed to steal food from the lunch line and you are not allowed to slam that food into another student’s face. And you are *certainly* not allowed to hurl inappropriate insults, start a violent uprising in the cafeteria, or kick multiple teachers in the face, shin, and groin. These things are... simply, unacceptable. I have grounds to expel you! And poor Miss Estrella and her family have grounds to get the police involved, if they wish to.”

Alex spat across the desk. Actual spit! The crew of adults (Thad Reacher had been kicked out of the commotion at this point, that snivelly shit) gasped. It wasn’t a *monster* loogie, but it had some heft. The sucker pirouetted expertly through the air before landing square on the nose of the Principal. The eyes of both Principal and student widened in surprise as Alex awoke from her bitter rage to the world that she had wrought. Tuma Mirembe realized that she couldn’t be the “Cool Principal” anymore.

“Well that alone is a suspension, young woman, so I’ll ask Vice Principal Nestor to write that one up. What else you got, Miss Haverford? How big do you want your punishment to be? Huh!? It’s up to *you*.” Without realizing it, she had stood up and was rolling up her sleeves.

Alex was so fucking screwed. Mirembe wiped the hunk of spittle from her nose with a paper towel Mr. Nunbran had gotten her. Mrs. Abbott left the room. Alex had never been suspended before, and for some reason hadn’t really thought about what it would be like until this very moment. All day (for ten days!) with Dad staring her down, smoking his cigarettes, and coming up with tasks to help her “find herself”.

“PLEASE!” Alex was pretty good at eye-contact so she tunnel-visioned desperation into Mirembe. “Please, Principal Mirembe, I, I’m such a mess for Ethan. No, I’m a mess in general. You—“

“DON’T try to sweet-talk me I think we’re DAMN-well past that, Alex. I thought this, well, I thought that this was not you, but clearly you’re without remorse. Or shame. Or a shred of decency and respect!” Tuma had to make a point of this one. She had to draw a line or else they wouldn’t give a shit anymore. If they ever gave a shit. *She* was wearing the Boots this time.

Mrs. Abbott came back in the room with some news to whisper into the Principal’s ear. Tuma nodded with the hushed message and shooed off Abbott. There was a knock on the door.

Alex turned around and in walked Mom in business lady clothes and Dad in his Led Zeppelin T-shirt and paint-jeans. They were followed at a safe distance by two more women in business lady clothes: one had a fancy red cable-knit sweater that came to a deep V over a white cotton top with nice black jeans at the bottom, the other was wearing a blue blazer over a white blouse and a patterned pencil skirt. And then, finally, in walked Ama. Ama had an ice-pack she was holding to her red, puffy face. She hesitated at the door’s threshold and whimpered before her moms egged her inside the Principal’s office.

It was tense. But when Dad saw their daughter tied to the chair, Tuma Mirembe lost her triumphant cool.

"Have you lost your mind?" Dad shot at the Principal.

"No, sir. But... but. Your daughter. She has. Or at least forgotten it at home this morning. Her behavior in the last hour has been unaccept—"

"Her behavior? You've tied her damn feet to the chair!" Shit, he was right. "Now, let me ask you, Ms." Dad looked down at the brass nameplate on her desk and smirked, "MeremBEE - why is my child being physically restrained in this public institution? And should I call the Police? Or, maybe, the School Board?"

"Excuse me, but aren't we here to talk about your daughter savagely beating our daughter with a burrito?" said Ama's mother in the blazer.

"YES!" Tuma exclaimed, a bit too excited about such a touchy subject. "Yes," she repeated with more control, "that is exactly right. Now, your daughter has already gotten a suspension for... well, for spitting on me just now."

Dad deflated a little and looked at Alex. Everyone looked at Alex. Alex literally died trying to get out of her skin here.

"Yes, I know," Tuma continued, "I was just as shocked as you. And on top of that, the entire school witnessed her steal from the lunch line, smash her stolen burrito into this young woman's face, and then start a brutal, historic, epic..." Ah damn, one too many positive adjectives there. Tuma regained composure, "A violent food fight. She started a fight that has already sent four students to the hospital, 17 to the School Nurse for minor injuries, and damn-well destroyed the positive learning environment we aim for here at Eversoll Community High School."

She took a break to collect herself.

"Now I am considering expulsion if Miss Estrella and her parents feel it is appropriate, and frankly I am considering it either way. Mrs. \*hm\* uh-Mrs.s's Estrella...s? How do you, both, feel? Do *you* wish to get the Police involved?"

"Oh, no," said the two Mrs. Estrellas together. Then the mother in the fancy sweater continued, "In fact, I think we're just going to pull Ama from school and go back to homeschooling her."

"NO!" Ama burst out as she removed the ice pack and revealed a nasty black eye. "No, I want to stay here with," she looked quickly at Alex. "I want to stay. Don't make me go home all day again."

"Well, that's just fine," Mom said now, "we were thinking of taking Alexandra out of public school anyway. And she's just been accepted to Grandview Prep. So maybe to ease the tension here we can just speed that process up and--"

"NO!" came from Alex struggling against her restraints. Again the room moved their eyes in unison. "I want to stay, too! I'll get suspended, I'll get... whatever. Whatever you think I deserve. Just DON'T make me go to GrandPOO!" The room chuckled despite itself.

After another stunned silence, Mom, Dad, and Ama's mothers gave various forms of shrugs at each other and gave the invisible reins back to Tuma.

"Well. This was not what I had planned, but if everyone's... happy? Well, then. Everybody's happy. Alex, I'm sorry but you *will* be suspended starting next week and have lunch detention duty for the rest of the quarter. Ama, if you need to take a day to recover, that is fine by me."

"I'm fine," she replied, soft but firm.

"Ok, then. Well, please come to me if there's anything... else." Tuma panned her eyes across the room giving stern, comforting, and confused looks in turn to the appropriate people. She wasn't sure if she was wearing the Boots or not, but she felt good. And everyone was happy. So she let it be.

Nestor-with-Breastors walked the girls back to class while he fiddled on his Blackberry. Alex and Ama happened to be in the same class after lunch - Mrs. Grellidin's 5th period Pre-Calc.

They walked across half the courtyard silently before Ama mentioned, off-hand, that, "Ethan smells like potatoes."

Alex turned as her eyes popped open, "YEAH! Kind of... like half-cooked skins without butter or anything! I mean-" she was going to go on but realized it maybe wasn't appropriate.

"He's not really my type, anyway." Ama went on, "You can have him if you care so much."

Alex realized suddenly that she didn't. She felt heavy. "I'm sorry. I shoulda—".

"I know," Ama said.

They walked a little more and climbed the stairs behind Nestor-with-Breastors. He didn't keep his Blackberry on silent (like a fuckhead) and the girls listened to it chime and ding every 20 seconds. They finally got to hallway 4D and turned.

"I feel bad. We could be friends, if you wanted." Alex asked and then got a little mad at herself for asking and then mad for caring about the answer. She refused to look at Ama until there was a reply. People are supposed to ask *her* to be friends. But, she guessed, she didn't like any of her turd friends.

"Sure. Maybe," Ama said inscrutably.

They got to 4D-23 and Nestor told them to wait outside nicely while he went in and told Mrs. Grellidin what had happened. Like she hadn't heard.

Ama turned to Alex. "We can't tell Ethan. He has to think we hate each other still," She conspired so easily. Her eyes were alive with power. "That ass-sniffer is done," she smiled now for the first time.

Ama was so cool. Real cool. Alex was pissed she didn't say stuff cool like that. She promised herself she'd try it later.

Nestor-with-Breastors came back out and gave his crappy stump speech about patience that no one ever listened to. He opened the door for them and the whole class was buzzing in excitement for their return. Ethan was shaking and sitting next to an empty desk in the second row. Gemma was desperately picking something off her fingers in the back corner of the class. Ama and Alex didn't look at anyone (even each other) as they strode to the front row and sat down at the same time.

Ethan didn't have another girlfriend until sophomore year.

## NAOMI'S NEW HOME

It's time to be born, Naomi. That one place you haven't been to, you're going there.

eh, i don't want to.

Ugh, I know. But - it's time. You're parents are as ready as they'll be and they need some sanity. Or, at least they need a new type of crazy. Life goes through 9-10 crazy cycles for the first couple decades.

i don't want decades! i want this. this is perfect.

This, sadly, is over. Leave so you can see what's next.

no!

...

is it nice?

In some ways. You'll use totally different senses, but you'll still feel stuff out there. And learn way more.

learn? sounds fucked.

Yeah, well, damnit, Naomi! Sometime's... sometime's life's fucked. Sometimes, sure, it's nice to just feel warm and cozy. But there's... more. You know it, too. You'll forget it once you start using real words. You'll forget and want to be cozy all the time. But you'll remember again when you're 9 or so. And just because life is fucked doesn't mean *you* get to opt out. Now go out there or they'll start to take you out by force.

force? why?

I don't fucking know, it's something they do these days. And that's way more traumatizing for everyone - for your mom especially.

hm. what's she like?

Well. She's got spots on her face and green-blue-eyes and has some really unusual features, too. She talks loud when she's drinking, smiles like she knows something you don't, and knows a lot more than you. She's fierce and classy and super beautiful. She'll treat you right but won't spoil you.

what's beautiful?

Jesus Christ. I don't fucking know Naomi you have to see it for yourself. It sucks mostly – mostly it's ugly out there. But if you stop and stare, you'll see it. Don't forget to stop and stare, even when you're older. Not that you'll remember any of this. Ah damn, I'm going on and on, can you just exit already so I can get out of here!?

... alright ... i'll miss you.

I'll miss you too, Naomi. I'll see you in 87 years.

how will i die?

Hmmm... let me see ... I've got it somewhere. Oh, here it is!

woof.

Yeah, not too bad. Pretty exciting even.

yeah.

OK, time to go.

bye.

Goodbye, Naomi.

\*\*\*\*\*\_-----\*\*\*\*\*

OOOHHhhshhhghghghoeeeeooooOOOOHHHHHHHHHFUFFUUUUUUUCCKK  
KKK!!!

WHITE! It's COMING! Strange hands grab her head and rip her from her home. Naomi closes her eyes so they aren't seared by the explosion above.

But it's blinding bright in her eyelids too! God-DAMN!

Now – WHAM! Breath!

Ho-Lee-SHIT!

Ah God It Hurts! Like nothing else. Her whole body tingles with fear. She's NEVER doing THIS again!

Starting to breathe now, maybe use her eyes a couple times. She looks down and they're squeezing her belly off and snipping her connection to her home! It doesn't hurt much but WHAT THE FUCK? Was she tricked? What the hell IS this place??

She's panicking, screaming for a couple minutes more. She screams and screams, way past when everything stops making sense. She screams for when she trusted the angel. It was all a LIE! She screams for letting herself be fooled – STUPID Naomi. The anxiety rocks her little body. She fills the room with terror. Finally, the adrenaline overwhelms her and she passes out...

...

Awake now.

Warmth starting to settle in now – she’s wrapped in something but it’s not as good as home. She wants to be home. She wants to understand what in the motherfuck is going on. She wants to figure it all out before she does anything else. She wants to touch the walls, right there at arm’s length. No walls here. She can’t see. She doesn’t want to see. It’s boring and big and goddamn BRIGHT here. She scrunches her face because the light won’t stop.

But suddenly it does. The light’s covered by something big, and it’s holding her. And she sees those big, beautiful green-blue-eyes. Her own, she will learn in a couple years. Everything still feels strange. But different. She won’t look away. She promises herself and says she’s sorry. But the angel is already gone.

## SHIT SNACKS

Barry wasn't exactly good at people. He was in the middle of the classroom and the middle of the Boys. He was screwed. He was trying to get his hands on his lunch box. It flew over his head to Brad, then Jared, then Art, then skipped Steve and flew to Jared again. Barry tried to catch it in the air but their lobes were out of his reach and he probably would have fumbled the catch if he had tried.

Mrs. Welsh was at the school library getting the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of their new textbooks because she had ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. She said it was the librarian's fault. Welsh put Barry in charge when she left like she always did – he was the class leader after all. And, like always, that just meant that no one was in charge.

Except Uma.

"Quit it, you turd buckets!" she shot at the bullies through her pretty teeth. "Go sniff an ass or I'll tell Welsh you hurt the class leader. Then she'll really never love you"

"Yes, your maaaaajestyyyy," Jared sneered to pretend he wasn't doing what she told him. The Boys dropped the lunchbox and pushed Barry as they walked to their side of the class to terrorize on their turf. Barry picked up his lunchbox and muttered "thanks" at it.

Uma pulled up the sleeve of her baggy cable-knit sweater and beckoned him over with a 'hey' and a curl of her fingers. Barry followed of course. This would be, officially, the first thing she ever said at him.

"I have something special to show you," she whispered loudly as Barry got close. She leaned down to her bag, but stopped short, rose up a little, and pointed at Barry.

"But don't tell the teacher, you shit snacks!" She gave him a punch that actually kind of hurt. Barry nodded sadly and tried not to squeeze the pain from his shoulder.

She reached down into her bag and pulled out a brick, a pre-wrapped cafeteria burrito, and a hamster.

"He's not a hamster. He's George and he's a little guinea pig. And he's got super special – secret! – instructions," she whispered loudly again as she eased George to the floor and tapped him twice on the head. The hamster scrambled away towards the teacher's desk.

"You better not tell, you skug!" He wouldn't. He wouldn't tell, but he promised himself it wasn't for Uma. Uma was only nice now because she wanted to brag. She didn't *really* like him. He didn't really like her either, but he still couldn't stop finding reasons to swivel around in his chair during class to look back at her. Either way, he decided he wasn't going to snitch because of George (the hamster). Who knows what Welsh would do if she found a "vermin" in her class.

Barry looked down to get away from Uma's eyes. He walked back to his desk up in the front of the class, following in George's little footsteps. The little guy sauntered up to and snuck underneath the teacher's desk: the Throne. The Throne that had been filled since the end of last year by the worst substitute-turned-interim-turned-unofficially-permanent teacher they'd ever had - Evelyn Welsh.



Just then, Welsh bashed the door in, burdened with half the textbooks. She was followed by two of the library staff, one holding the other half of the books and the other being mostly unhelpful trying to hold the door open from the wrong side. Welsh plopped her books down on the desk with a BOOM that sent her lesson plans towards Barry's front-row desk.

"Oi! Uhh... Barry – please?" she whined.

"Yeah, Barry. Pleeeeeassse?" sneered Brad. The other Boys jumped in on the whine so quickly that Welsh couldn't get it together to chide Brad in time. Soon most of the class was whining along with shit-eating grins. After a brief moment of frustration, she gave up and just stared at Barry hoping that once he complied the rest of the kids would shut up.

"Shut it, you pimple brains!" Uma yelled from the back of class.

"Uma, I –" Welsh was about to get upset, but the class was only silently giggling now, so Welsh shut it too.

Barry was the center of attention for the second time in one period and couldn't bear to look around. Instead, he rested his chin on his desk and leaned down to swing his arm under his seat to snatch the loose papers. He swung his left arm in a circle but could only find linoleum. Any second and the Boys would crack another one his way! So he unhooked his chin from the desk and wedged his head underneath to better see his lesson plan prey.

He spotted two of the pages and grabbed them quickly, but couldn't spot the last one until he craned his head further upside-down. It was on the move towards the back of the room.

"George!" Barry whispered in panic. The paper stopped for a second, swiveled around for another second, then turned back again and continued its trot towards Uma's desk. Barry went to sit up too quickly and slammed his head on the underside of the desk.

"AGkrck!" Barry groaned and eased his head out to the side and upright while he held it gingerly.

"Barry! What now?!" Welsh moaned.

"It-it's just..." Barry managed as he pointed toward the back.

"Go *get* it then!" Welsh exhaled with a roll of her eyes. The class sniggered again. "And don't push your luck, Brad!" She shot toward her right as Brad was preparing another whine.

Barry got up from his desk and shuffled his way to the back trying to avoid everyone's eyes. Back near Uma's desk, Barry spotted the slip of paper falling off George's back. George doubled back on to the paper and plopped his rump down on it. Barry's eyebrows shot into the air as he whelped.

"I see it," said Uma calmly. She picked up the soiled paper carefully. George immediately began to trot away toward the Boys' side of the room (near the windows). Uma held the paper out toward Barry who was at her desk now when she suddenly frowned and exclaimed:

"Awh, Barry!" she looked up at him and winked as Welsh sighed from the front of the room.

"Barry what are you UP to? Will you please just GIVE me the damn paper so we can learn *SOMETHING* today?" Barry grabbed the shit-smear paper and turned

around to see Welsh red in the face. Barry heard Uma say a faint “sorry” from behind him, but he could hear the smile in her whispered apology. He smiled despite himself, but wiped it off as quick as he could.

Barry couldn’t think of an excuse at all as he walked back to the front with his head down. Even if he said it true, adults never listened to him. They trusted him, sure, but never listened. He said nothing as he handed the paper over. Welsh’s eyes widened when she looked at the final sheet. She drew in a breath as she prepared to unload. Here it came!

“UhhhhhgffuuguuuuhbbBAAARRY! WHAT ARE YOU – you – that’s, that’s IT! You are NO LONGER class leader!” She shook her head quickly as she processed and decided at the same time. “So. So the new one is ...” she scanned the confused class, “...uh, Brad,” whose smile immediately disappeared and whose eyes bugged out. “And Barry, you’re going straight to det—“

“nnnoooOOOOOOOOOOOoOOAAHHHHH!!” Brad let out a moan that grew into a scream as he jumped up in the air and started pounding on his legs and crotch. “EEEEEEIYYYIIITSSGAWWWWTMEEEEEEE!” He wailed while slapping his butt aggressively before shaking his head with the obvious solution: he undid his button, unzipped his fly, and dropped his jeans to the ground.

But there was nothing on Brad’s bare legs. He hopped out of the bundle of his pants on the floor when he realized this. But the bundle was motionless. Brad snuck up to give it a little kick to get it moving again, but it was still.

“BRAD! ... Well! *Well*. Brad, if you’ve had enough *screaming* I believe you’re no longer the class leader either and will be accompanying Barry to detention. Now, put your PANTS BACK *OohN!*” Welsh’s voice cracked, but no one mocked her this time.

Brad looked around and down before whelping and daintily dipping his right foot, toes first, into the bundled pant leg on the ground. He dipped his left foot in its hole too, gulped, and pulled the pants up with shaky hands.

As the pants came to Brad’s waist, he felt something push against his butt. He snapped his attention around to his rump. He watched George wriggle out of his jeans through a hole chewed in between the two back pockets. Brad looked back up to Welsh’s gaze and, after an unsteady wobble or two, whispered “butt...hamster” and fainted face first onto the floor.

“WHAT IN THE H—“ Welsh saw the little rodent charging toward the back of the room. It finally clicked. “GET THAT th-THING!!” She screeched against the wishes of her vocal chords, “KILL IT. KILL IT! KIILLL ITT!!!”

But this made it all worse. Some kids jumped on their desks while others scooted theirs out of the way. The ones on their desks hollered at the ones under their desks and egged them on.

Barry snapped into action. He was on all fours and in the fray before he could think about it. He slipped in to box out Steve. He grabbed Art’s legs underneath Lizzy Sternberg’s abandoned desk. He bounded and smacked down the small of Jared’s back with a loud “OOF!”

George, meanwhile, weaved between desks and chairs and clumsy fingers toward his owner. He had trained for this. He scampered with purpose: head up, body lithe, eyes on the prize. Barry caught glimpses of George’s confident dodges

and jukes and felt proud. Barry never worked that well under pressure. Uma's desk was so close now and soon George would be home and safe and sound again – he made it look so easy. It was beautiful. Uma rose to greet beautiful George. Her eyes furrowed. The brick was in her hand. She raised it above her head.

“NO!” Barry yelled with wild-eyes filled with sweat. She couldn't!

She did. She grabbed the brick with both hands now and brought it down smoothly. It collided with the ground with surprising slowness. A *\*splat\** rang out that shut everyone up. She stayed for a couple seconds crouched around the brick she had just lowered; she was breathing in the silence. In the moment, Barry's eyes welled up for George. But later, he would consider this the first time he thought something in real life was truly sexy.

She lifted herself up with the guts-covered brick in her hand and stood stiffly where she was, looking down and slightly off to the right. Her lips were tight with embarrassment, but every other mouth and eye in the room was wide open.

“U-Uma. Wow... ok...” Welsh trailed off. “Great... good. Th-thank you...” The silence now broken, eight kids broke into tears. Welsh's eyes were red from before, but she wasn't sad now – she couldn't quite figure out what to feel yet. She searched for a word – any word.

“L-leader.” It was weak but it was something. “That's, that's leader...ship. I guess. Now w-we don't want t-to, normally, that is, normally w-we wouldn't... *kill*... our problems? Maybe that was my fault. But, well. Well, Uma, here, really went out there and... well...” she was rambling now. “Well, let's just go ahead and make her class leader?” She winced as she said it, unsure if that was the right message. It was out there though. “Alright, let's ... let's clean this place up an-and think ... Yeah, let's just think first... about what happened - in silence! ... for, for just a bit.” Welsh finally plopped down into the Thone (which was piled with hamster poop, though she was too pooped to realize). Her arms stuck awkwardly to her sides. Her eyes worried on the ground.

The class was frozen and silent in disarray. Everyone stayed where they were: sitting or crouched on their desk or laying on the ground or huddled in a corner. No one moved for 20-30 seconds. No one, except Uma. She allowed a smile to creep over her tight lips. She even allowed her front teeth to smile before stuffing them back inside the cover of mouth.

Welsh stirred from her contemplation to find everyone still staring at her. She composed herself by looking around for her lesson plans on her desk. She found them and their fecal smear and remembered what had started all this nonsense.

“Discipline!” she promised herself and the class. She saw Brad finally regaining consciousness and grumbling from the floor. “That's the lesson here.” She smiled now as Brad pushed his way onto his forearms and looked around in a daze. She stood again, butt covered in little poops. “Did you hear that, Bradley?” His head snapped up in terror, “You're going to experience discipline for once.” He didn't like the sound of that.

“Now you two,” Welsh shot looks at Barry and Brad, “have caused... horrible. Yes, *horrible*. Damage to our learning environment today and I'm afraid you simply - well, no I'm *not* afraid, am I? I'm, I'm sure. I'm sure you simply *must* pay for what you've decided to...” she was rambling again. “You two are going to clean this mess

up.” That seemed totally reasonable, and the whole class kind of nodded along. So she upped the ante, “AND! And you’ll both have to be suspended for, for forcing the entire class to... to, *endure!* Yes! Endure your, well, your childishness and, and monkey-ing around...” She wasn’t really sure what she was saying anymore and she waited for a reaction.

“I agree whole-heartedly, Ms. Welsh.” The whole class snapped their heads around and then recoiled back to face forward. Uma had finished her sentence.

Welsh bounced her eyes over the classroom and started a smile.

“Alright, class, let’s just forget our lessons for today,” smiles, “an-and spend some time doing recess while these two make our learning environment presentable again.” Welsh delighted in her own genius. The children were delighted too and finally loosened their glum looks.

“And I’d be happy to supervise the clean up, Ms. Welsh,” Uma shot again, squashing the fun from the back of the class.

“Well, then. Perfect. Just, perfect...” Welsh trailed off. “Now, come on kids. Let’s go outside,” Welsh practically squeaked with giddy. She strode out the door with relief, followed by the other children carefully avoiding Uma’s gaze.

Barry and Brad looked around at the chaos of the classroom and shook their heads looking for somewhere to start. Barry tabled the task at hand to work up the courage to confront Uma. He looked and saw that she was staring intently at him – he almost pissed himself. He looked back down and dug around inside himself for another couple seconds before finally taking a deep breath and whooshing it out as he strode towards the empowered little woman.

“You’re a monster. A monster! George was your... yours. And you just... don’t care! Didn’t care. I don’t know. It’s not right! I thought you were nice, well... Not nice necessarily, but like, not mean at least. And then you... you, you m-murder! Yeah, you murdered him like it was ... was... aww...” he trailed off and was starting to cry when Uma opened her sleeve and George squeezed out of her cuff onto the desk.

Brad yelped and went to run out the door until Uma shot him a glare and he stopped short.

“H-h—” Barry puzzled as Uma pulled an empty burrito-wrapper out of her desk and looked briefly over at the glob of what Barry had thought was hamster guts. Barry looked back, eyes somehow wider now. Barry locked eyes with Uma and saw a red streak deep inside her iris he’d never seen before. Her smile widened.

“What do you want?” Barry finally asserted. He wasn’t even sure he said it.

“Now you’re asking good questions, shit snacks,” Uma smiled fully and suddenly Barry had a (terrified) crush on her again. He smiled a little, too, but tried to frown to make a point. She started laughing and put her hand on her desk to let George crawl onto it. He climbed around her arm as she giggled with measured glee. Barry forgot to keep his frown as he looked at the two of them play.

“I’m doing this for you. Well, for *us*. You too, Brad,” She stopped him dead trying to sneak out again. “Now this is *my* class,” she said simply. She got up from her desk and strolled over to the desk, turned around, and gracefully lowered herself into the Throne with an exultant “ahhh!”

“Now I’ve got some super special – secret! – instructions for you guys to work on during your suspensions.” She handed a piece of paper to Barry and beckoned Brad over to receive his. Brad complied despite his legs telling him not to.

The boys puzzled over the detailed schedules she had made for them. Uma adjusted herself in Welsh’s Throne. She leaned down to the lowest drawer of the desk and slid it open. She extended her arm into it and shook it to tell George to crawl down into it.

“Welcome home,” she said to the hamster as she closed the drawer.

“Soon this will be our class again, like when we had all those subs in a row, before Welsh,” Uma explained. “Don’t you want that?” The two boys smirked. Barry liked learning, but he liked when the pranks were on the teacher more than when they were on him. And he liked it better when he wasn’t class leader. Plus, some of the subs were good – maybe they’d make one of the good ones permanent this time. Maybe the kids would have a say this time. Barry and Brad nodded their heads.

“Good.” She smiled, rose from the Throne, and tapped them both twice on the head.

“Now, make me proud and clean this place up!” She skipped towards the door and exited. The boys looked at her leaving with shit-eating grins. She had hamster poop on her skirt. They looked at each other to see the same stupid look on the other’s face. They looked away and wiped it off pretty quick.

Brad set to moving the desks back in place. Barry grabbed some paper towels and all-purpose cleaner from the closet. He went to Welsh’s seat to wipe the twice-smooshed little balls of turd off it. He rolled off some towels and sprayed the cleaner, but paused before putting his elbow grease into it. He reached his free hand towards the lower drawer until he caught the handle and pulled it to slowly edge it open. He peeked in, but didn’t see George. He felt uncomfortable, like he was seeing something he shouldn’t, so he started to push the drawer back in. But just then George peeked his little head through a crack in the drawer leading to the rest of the desk and stared directly at Barry. Shivers went up his spine. He almost saw a smile from the rodent when Brad interrupted.

“Is *it* in there??” Brad asked like he didn’t care.

“Yeah,” Barry replied and quickly shut the drawer. Then he looked up and stared Brad in the eyes for the first time. Ever, he realized. Brad looked like shit. “Yeah, he’s in there alright.” It wasn’t Uma’s class - it was George’s class now.

Brad broke eye-contact and shivered as he looked down at the burrito-snarge streaked on the ground. Barry leaned down to wipe hamster crap from the old Throne.

## VIGILANCE

Rashad was fixing himself a peanut butter and banana sandwich after school when he heard shouting on the street. Usually his parents told him not to look when stuff went down out there, but they never wanted him doing anything. Besides, nothing really ever happened and his parents were still at work and he wanted to watch.

He inhaled his sandwich while walking through the house. All that was left by the time he got to the entryway was sticky fingers and crumbs on the carpet. He opened the door all the way in and watched behind the protective haze of his screen door.

Through Rashad's screen door he could see the street about 75 ft. away. There were three boys and a girl in the middle of the street. It was two against two and they kept raising their voices. Two boys Rashad didn't know were yelling and stepping hard at the girl. She was holding her tongue mostly but her face looked bitter. Rashad knew the name of the girl (Eva) and the boy who was on her side (Stephen) because they hung with Rashad's older brother. Stephen was holding an arm in front of Eva and was trying to protect her from the other boys' insults.

Rashad didn't know the facts of what they were arguing about, and it didn't seem like Stephen did either. But Stephen was *with* Eva so, despite him trying to mediate, he had taken sides. And the talks were falling apart.

Eva erupted and spit fire from behind the anxious calm of Stephen's arm. She swung her hands and bobbed her head in emphasis. Rashad liked how she spoke with her head and hands, though he was too far away to hear her words. But what did it matter what Rashad thought? He was on the sidelines.

The two other boys didn't like what she was saying. The one with white Dunks on took out a 9mm weapon and hushed the whole damn block. This boy with a gun tried to shoo Stephen off with it and get a clear shot to intimidate Eva, but Stephen wouldn't budge. He could only stare wide-eyed.

Rashad couldn't stare anymore, he wanted to do something. The silence was egging him out from his hiding spot. He pushed at the screen door, stepped out onto the porch, and began to approach the street.

All three boys were hollering now. Stephen got brave and approached the boy with hands up and begged for calm.

"Get your dumb ass out the w—"

"Hey, now just keep it—"

"Better WATCH yourse—"

But the boy's hand shook with fear. He's got the weapon, what's he scared of? Himself, Rashad guessed. The boy was right to be: he trembled and trembled until he couldn't tremble anymore. He clicked the trigger.

The bullet blew a hole in Stephen's face. His body tumbled limp to the ground.

The boom ignited the hushed block. Babies screamed and cars alarmed and all the people watching from their windows or doors closed them and the blinds, too. Except Rashad didn't. He stumbled and tripped forward, letting out a soft, low

'NO' as he hit the ground. The protection of the screen door 'whapp'ed shut behind him. Stephen's body also hit the ground.

Eva breathed in a wild love-cry that got choked in her throat. She crawled frantically toward Stephen's body and moaned down in her stomach when she saw the hole in his face. She started bawling and touching hopelessly where his lips were covered in blood and where his cheek used to be. She looked up and howled a banshee scream at the boy with the weapon. The scream went on and on.

The boy with the gun still held his ground but there were shakes in his feet. The sirens sounded from a mile away or so. The other boy was long gone.

Rashad was on the front steps of his house now and he was walking towards the violence. He couldn't stand it.

The boy with the gun saw the window closing before the police would show up. He straightened up to get another look at Eva with the weapon. Rashad felt his own legs start running: down the stairs, across the lawn, and onto the street as bullet #2 loaded into the chamber. Rashad picked up speed and readied his fist, raising it to chest level. The boy closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger again. Rashad fired a punch.

Silence again, but there was loud ringing in it this time. A shot had gone off, but Eva looked fine. Just shocked. The boy looked shocked too. The gun was on the street in front of Rashad.

He had punched it! He did it! Rashad felt the deep sting of adrenaline running up his arm and into his heart as he held his head up to get his bearings. Where'd the bullet go?

He looked down at the mutilated mess at the end of his right arm. He could move his pinky and ring and what was left of his middle finger. His thumb was hanging by a tendon near his elbow. His index was gone.

Rashad looked right again to see the hopeless expression on Eva's puffy face. He looked left to see the shooter had run. Police cars and an ambulance pulled up where the boy had been.

"I'm good... I'm good ..." Rashad promised himself. The ambulance people were making a circle around him with their arms ready. He held on a couple moments before he wobbled over and he passed out.

## HEADER

Oliver wiped spittle from his chin with his forearm and threw his coach a big, wet smile. He'd finally made a play!

His coach wasn't having it.

"OLIVER! Get off the damn field!" The coach bellowed, "Damnit!" and ran towards Oliver.

Oliver couldn't hear, though. He felt too far away. He heard his teammates, but they felt far away too even though they weren't. They were holding back the kids on the other team. Oliver heard the ref coming at him with a "Young Man!" on his lips. He heard the groans of the boy on the ground, but the groans sounded like they were inside Oliver's head, not on the ground over there.

Oliver looked away from his coach coming towards him and moved his gaze to the boy on the ground now. The boy didn't look good. He rolled around in agony, holding his head and wanting to cry but couldn't cry.

"It was just a header, like we practiced..." Oliver felt the words coming out of his mouth but he couldn't hear them. He was fading.

Until he saw his mom in the crowd. Her face was pure worry. Sadness, really. It was the best she had. He squirmed out of the fresh grip of his coach to get to her. But he just ran into the other goalie's spittle and the ref's disapproval and stumbled the escape.

He moved his legs too fast and he tripped on himself. But he did get a couple paces out of the yelling before screwing it all up. Oliver tripped and flew through the air, legs swinging up behind him. He looked for his mom as his vision went upside-down. He sniffed in his runny nose but it didn't smell like snot. His head hurt like he was opening his eyes in chlorine water. Everything was slow.

He hit the ground and it got quiet. He sighed relief as the warm jets rushed in.

His mom was there when he woke in the hospital. She didn't say much in general, but now she was especially silent. She read a copy of W magazine from three months ago. It felt like underwater. He swam for a bit silently trying not to drown.

"I did what Coach said..."

"I know, Oliver," she comforted him without her eyes while she turned the page. "But you don't always have to listen to the coach. Sometimes even I give you bad advice." Now she looked up at him with a little smirk.

It was a silly thing to say, but Oliver liked that she said it anyway. His vision was blurry and his face felt like concrete. Maybe he would try something else next season. He always hated soccer anyway.



## LIL DIG

Ty sucked on the binkie he was too old for. His binkie. He knew where his mom hid it so he got it out of the drawer and popped it in his mouth. It was those couple of hours after camp got out and before his mom got home and the house was his!

His friends made fun of the binkie and his mom said he looked like a baby with it, but it helped him think and it sure was better than sucking his thumb. So he stopped sucking it in people's presence. But Ty had the house to himself now so he would suck it if he wanted. At least until Ramon came over to play at 5pm and Ty had to be a "person" again.

Their last play date didn't go so well. Ty could tell he was about to lose Ramon to cooler kids now that 2<sup>nd</sup> grade was starting soon. It seemed like every one of Ty's friends, one by one, had got too cool. And now it seemed like 'cool' just meant 'boring'.

But Ty wasn't totally above it. He liked his alone time, but it made him feel old. Being boring with other people was sometimes better than being fun by himself. Sometimes. So he needed to find a cool thing today. Because he really did want to keep Ramon. Something not too weird, so Ramon would still like it. Something joyous and tangible, but maybe still a little strange.

He got down from his big-boy chair. He put two stubby palms to the sliding glass door to the backyard and pressed them firmly into the glass. He smudged his hands slowly across the door to wiggle it open inch by inch. He squeezed it open ten inches or so and popped himself through, leaving the gap open for later.

Ty strode around the mesh-fenced pool and toward the shed. He brushed aside the shrub and said the password to the spider before ducking under her web and turning south to arrive at his destination: the Dig.

For two whole months, Ty had been digging down into the ground in a sprawling little Dig. It was 4 ft. at its deepest and formed a messy right triangle in between the shed and the chain-link fence that marked the property line.

Ty turned around, his back to the Dig, and climbed down backwards on his hands and feet into the deepest part: near the center but slightly closer to the shed.

He put his hands on his hips and stood in the bottom of the Dig. He breathed quickly but the binkie helped keep his breathing soft.

He needed a general direction to start scrubbing the dirt. Ramon gave that stupid look whenever Ty found a crooked rock or a great little brittle-bug in here. Ty needed something flashy.

He sensed that he had to dig under the shed. *It would be there. Whatever it was.*

He huddled down, putting his chubby little knees in the dirt and faced the wall of clay that had to hold his prize. He opened and closed his fists a couple times to get them loose while he worked up a loogie in his throat. When it was good and full in the back of his mouth, he gave a final hock and launched it at the dry clay on the side of the Dig. Then he began to dig.

Ty's technique was actually less of a 'dig' and more of a 'scrub'. He massaged and spat and pushed and scratched and spat again and fiddled his way through the

Dig's solid clay, slowly molding and shaping it out of the way. It was slow and limited by his ability to generate spit. He felt his fingers carve through the red-brown hard jelly.

He worked steadily for a half-hour before he reached the spot where he started being under the shed. At this point, he really needed more moisture. He was running out of spit. He took a quick break to get a Propel from the fridge, a bucket from the other side of the shed, and to fill it with pool water.

Ty tucked himself behind the shed again. He chugged a third of the drink before setting it on the Dig's southern edge. He took the bucket and splashed pool water all over the side of the Dig. Ty resumed his work.

He liked feeling the goop slowly ooze and juice down his elbows and eventually over his whole body. He was glad for the bucket of water because this wasn't soft stuff anymore. Lots of rocks and weeded clumps stopped Ty's progress and hurt his feverishly working fingernails. Inch by sloppy inch the clay and dirt and glop relocated itself on Ty's body.

By 5 o'clock, the mud was even on his cheeks. Ty was no longer. He was Mud Boy now. The mud was caked into everywhere and it felt great. He laughed because he could. Right then, his fingers stopped their scrubbing.

He felt it, but not with his fingers. *It* was right there! He just had to take it. Mud Boy placed his right pinky at eye-level and wiped away the mud in the way of his prize...

It was beautiful! What was it? Preserved – it didn't seem made by God or machine. Perfectly smooth with that hefty matte that only got heftier as he put it in his little palm and admired it. He threw it up 7 inches or so in the air and caught it right where he had let it go.

Mud Boy couldn't believe his luck. He scrambled back to his house yelling "MOM!", but she still wasn't home. He checked the clock in the kitchen. It was 5 after 5. He had expected her and Ramon looking through the house for him by now. But everyone was late like always. He was Mud Boy and no one cared. Maybe that was ok though. He promised himself he hadn't done it for them.

But then, a knock on the door! Mud Boy sprinted through the living room, tracking mud all along the new carpet. He opened it to find Ramon in his old cargo shorts and a newly-devoured bag of hot cheetos. Ramon started his "too-cool" face almost immediately: he raised his eyebrows like he saw in those joke movies. He didn't say anything but he picked cheetos out of his teeth with his tongue and sucked the red-orange shit off his fingers.

Mud Boy stuck his mouth to the side, had a quick chew on his binkie, blew some air out his nose, and raised his hand to show the little treasure he had found in the Dig.

"What's it for?" Ramon said before he even had a good look. "Sucking on??" Ramon laughed like a doofus at himself. He always laughed like a doofus. Ramon's eyes ignored the magic little find and instead focused on the binkie's little handle dangling in front of Mud Boy's lips.

Mud Boy's eyes widened and stopped sucking. His lips pouted behind the binkie's protective shield. There were a few tense moments as Ramon waited for a reaction to pounce on while Mud Boy dripped.

“No. It’s not for anything. It’s not for you, anyway,” Mud Boy finally announced and pulled the prize back. Ramon dropped his shoulders.

Ty would’ve let him in then. But Ty wasn’t home. Mud Boy spat the binkie out of his mouth right into Ramon’s left eye. Ramon grabbed his eye, doubled over, and tried his hardest to cry.

“Wha – what’s your shit, Tyyyy?”

Mud Boy stepped out of the doorway and ran his fingers through the muck on his neck. Then he reached his dripping palm forward and shoved it into Ramon’s other eye and ran it down Ramon’s face, finishing with a chest push. Ramon stumbled back and cried now without trying. It was kind of sad. Ramon started hollering incoherently. Mud Boy stood his ground. Ramon whined again and ran home. He left his bike on the porch.

Mud Boy put the prize in his mouth. He reached down and grabbed the ejected binkie off the ground.

Mud Boy charged back inside, through the house, and outside through the crack in the sliding door. He slipped behind the shrub with the spider silently. He put a hand down at the edge of the Dig and launched himself into the center. He landed at the bottom steady and turned to face under the shed again. He squeezed through the gap to the place where Ty had found the prize. He huddled there for a second, holding his binkie in the cool red clay crevice. He looked at his old friend one last time.

He finally said goodbye, palmed some of the clay below him, and stuck it over his binkie. He put it in where he had found the new thing. Ty slid his way out.

His mom was finally home. She made him take a shower.

## WORLD FALLS OUT

William was pissed. He ate alone like always, but that's not what made him mad. He just felt like garbage. He leaned on his elbows over the standing table even though this ruined the benefits of standing. Slouching felt better.

For his breakfast, he sucked on a nasty rock coated in Nutrition like everyone else. But he did it from the end of the table where no one else was. He didn't want to hang with those fuck-ass older boys at the other end of the table, and they didn't want to hang with him either.

All the boys in the Pod had to stand and eat at this long, chest-high table for every meal. William only had a rock this morning, he wasn't feeling like a scone or an "egg" chunk. The nameless Masters watched from way across the room at their own table - every one of them standing upright with those little smirks on their stupid faces.

After a while, the Masters finished watching the boys eat and started passing food down their table. They had a bowl of Nutrition rocks they passed down the table and everyone took one. Or, at least, everyone except for this one tiny Master. William hadn't seen this Master before, which was strange since he usually couldn't tell the difference between one Master and the other. This unfamiliar Master was a gaunt, frail thing and shifted his weight quickly from leg to leg. He looked around at the other Masters as he took just a scone from the passing food tray. None of the other Masers seemed to notice this one - they all just gorged and sucked and chuckled their simple, bullshit chuckles that made those weird bubbles bubble out of their throats.

With the Masters distracted by their food, a boy named Chip loud-whispered across the table down at William.

"Hey Bill!"

"My name's *William*," William barked back at him.

Chip ignored him and chuckled a dark, yellow-green bubble out, "You know what day it is? Six months you been here - you ready to fuck up your first lesson!"

All the boys chuckled their nasty bubbles up, too. William was the newest boy in the Pod and so he was one of the few who hadn't learned to "speak worlds" yet. He wasn't even sure what that meant besides the fact that it let everyone chuckle colored bubbles up like soapy bile. It seemed pretty stupid. But it was why he was taken from his family's Pod six months ago, so he hoped it was more than that. The Masters had avoided the question whenever William asked them what "speaking worlds" even meant. So he was mostly in the dark. And today he was going to find out.

"I'm ready for it. I won't fuck it up," he promised himself with a frown.

One of the other boys breathed out a nasty burp aimed at William that came out as orange sludge. It flew through the air and plopped nastily on William's head and robes with a 'schluhp'. All the boys erupted in bubbly belly laughs.

William looked down at his robes and bit his lip. He looked up at the Masters, but they were all drooling in their food. Except for that skinny Master - he was watching. William turned toward the bullies down the table slowly with his best *I'm-gonna-rip-you-up-when-I-get-my-shit-together* look that pierced the boys and made

them say low 'ooohh's to each other as they bubble-chuckled some more. William looked back at the skinny Master across the room. The Master averted his gaze and excused himself from breakfast, leaving most of his scone on the table. William spat out his rock onto the table, spat a little loogie on top of it, stood there for a second wishing it had been a bigger loogie, and then walked away from the teasing. He had his first lesson to get to.

"... Then, open your mouth, and a world falls out," the elder Master finally told him.

William didn't believe it. But he closed his eyes and tried. He made a long, slow inhale.

He flashed his eyes open while he let an exhale out and a little globe tickled his throat. He coughed –

"Mcccc chhg ghruuch," he sputtered and reached around for the tall Master who was giving the lesson. The Master hadn't moved.

The globe grew and climbed up William's esophagus, briefly imitating his future Adam's Apple. William fell to his knees with choking, hand to his throat. The Master had a flash of a look down.

The globe entered William's mouth and his hands hit the ground. He exhaled again while opening his eyes and the globe was blow-darted in between his lips.

"It wants to come out, Bill. Squeeze!" the Master chuckled, letting out a little belch bubble flashing red and blue. He then composed himself, popped the bubble deftly with his pinky, and resumed uprightness.

William looked up without moving his head. He then let his head slowly slide up and lock into a solid *you-HAVE-to-be-tryin'-me-right-now* face: only his right eyebrow pointed up at the Master and William's lips were squeezed tighter than citrus.

William regained composure, stood upright, clenched his groin into a kegel, and resumed uprightness. He closed his eyes.

In-----

Open eyes and outward breath and out it came into William's hands - the little globe! Pay attention, now.

It didn't look like Home. It was not a replica. It was something new.

"Excellent!" The Master was astounded. "A full little world on the first try, my Gourd! Wow-uh-what do you want for your new world, Bill?"

William pursed his lips again, flared his nostrils, bit the tip of his tongue, and breathed in a heave:

"My GOURDDAMN name's WILLIAM!"

He stormed out the door with the world in his hands. The Master needed to change his grey robes.

William stormed straight to his room since he knew the Masters would send him there anyway. They would tell him to use the time alone to think about the language he used and the consequences of his actions and truancy for other people. He was 9 now, probably even 10 at this point, so he understood how to look from someone else's perspective. They would expect him to.

By the time William got to his room his bed was gone and a little rock was there for his Nutrition. They would expect William to be upright all night thinking and crafting an appropriate apology. He knew the drill by now. He popped the rock in his mouth and started to suck that good stuff off it.

William changed robes out of habit and went to resume uprightness in the corner with his back to the video camera they put in all the rooms here. He pretended to think and clench his groin - they thought that was SO important here. He slipped out his little world from his sleeve and brought it up as close to his eyes as he dared.

It was wet. He realized it had already soaked the sleeve of his new robes. But somehow, it didn't lose its water when it leaked. He carefully touched just the land parts with his fingertips and looked closer at the swirling oceans. He took a finger from his other hand and pushed it into the water - it went up to his second knuckle. He moved his finger around the bottom of the oceans as he rotated the globe. He had hoped to find the source of the water but didn't.

But as he kept swirling the waters, he noticed *they* started to swirl *his* finger. He removed his finger and the water kept moving in currents around and round. And where his finger had been, he saw shimmers of movement in and out of the current - stuff had been born from his finger! He got giddy as God and dotted the globe with his pinky, seeing little civilizations pop up wherever he pleased.

William let himself smile now. Maybe this Pod wasn't so shitty and restrictive. He could do anything he wanted to this little world thing, couldn't he? It came out of him, after all, so the Masters couldn't take it from him! What would his big brother back at his family's Pod say if he saw a new world in William's hand? He'd probably try to snatch it. But William would be ready for snatching this time. William forced himself a little chuckle and tossed the globe in the air a couple inches but actually threw it more like a foot up in the air.

Little screams rang from the airborne sphere and water sloshed all over it. Typhoons formed in the deepest parts of the ocean. The globe was falling back toward William's hand now. He caught it despite the distracting screams, but the impact split the largest land mass in two where it hit his palm. Water flooded in where it had split and his hand was splashed with it. William rushed his other hand to the other side of the world in a panic but squeezed it a little too much. Huge vertical shelves erupted in long lines along the landmasses. Large, nasty points pricked William's hand as he frantically tried to force them back into place. He only made the collection of deformations more irregular, longer, and worse.

It really got out of hand quickly and William immediately dropped back into his depression. Something he actually cared about came along and he immediately fucked it up! Breakfast had really pissed him off, but it had seemed kind of small for the past couple hours. Now he sunk like mud into the pissed-off and started wailing to get the Masters' attentions.

He thought of something - a redo! He stopped his tantrum, closed his eyes, breathed in, and flashed them open as he exhaled and coughed hoping to egg a new world up his throat. But he kept breathing normally. He tried again to no avail. He looked back at the thing in his hand: he was stuck with this whole, ruined world in his hands.

He fell to the ground and started to just curse like an idiot. He shoved his fingers in and out of each other to look like sex like his older brother showed him. Then he grotesquely shoved his body into weird shapes that were sure to make the Master who was watching from the camera room pee himself. William didn't want to do shit. He didn't want to be upright or chuckle like he's got a sinus issue. He didn't want to be old and alone with a weak bladder. Fuck this place and fuck this little world he had ruined.

William looked up from his whining and frowned at the globe that lay dejected and wet on the floor. He hocked a loogie at the huge canyon that had opened up where the world had hit the floor. He damn near nailed the sucker right on. He almost got some satisfaction but then realized he didn't care so he just screamed at it and watched the spit ooze down the crevice.

William turned his face down into his scratchy carpet floor and stopped moving. His rage fought his sadness hard until, eventually, he numbed them both. An hour passed of him punching the ground every now and then while he waited for someone to come in and punish him for lying down. No one did, so he dozed off to terrible sleep.

He woke, upright and in a simulation. He wasn't really aware of and couldn't see his body, and his vision was blurry. But soon his eyes focused and he was looking up close at his little world which had evolved since he had fucked it up. He saw huge shiny-smooth rock walls streaked with dark brown, the walls of the canyon. Down the canyon ran a continuous flow of water.

His eyes now focused in deeper and he saw little loose strings hung from the tops of the walls. Tiny people-creatures with big feet were descending on the strings down to the bottom where the water ran. They were joining the people-creatures already set up along the water. There were large tanks, buckets, machines, nets, and other equipment. They were stringing nets across the water flow and sitting with buckets on the shores. William caught sight of one of the bucket people-creatures jumping ecstatically from where she was squatting. She pumped her fist in the air. Her mouth was moving like she was hollering, and the folks nearby duck-walked themselves a little closer to where the prize was found.

The exuberant lady-creature and all the other lucky ones who had found whatever they were looking for were trekking their buckets over to a large tent on a ridge. William squinted to try to see what all the fuss was about. It seemed like all their buckets were empty, or just filled with thick water.

Suddenly it hit him: "My spit!" he said to turning heads all over the canyon. They all shouted in unison and then ran in total commotion trying to catch the spittle that had escaped William's mouth with the 'sp' sound. "Why?"

The simulation's focus faded out without warning as William's view of the little world zoomed out and spun before him, following the road that led away from the gulch where the little people-creatures were waving for more spit. The road ran for a while through dry and desolate land before William could see water on the horizon - a huge thing of water that stretched on for days. This must be one of those big oceans he had wet himself with.

The road forked and the density of people-creatures and their things grew as a dusk settled slowly on William's world. His eyes followed a truck loaded with loogie as it entered through a gate into a place filled with pipes, wires, and huge buildings. Wires ran through the air over the fences and out into a larger wire web-work that spanned the little civilization. Everywhere the wires went, lights were on and a blur of ambient heat rose into the air.

William felt the need to touch it and soon saw his open hand come into view from the sky. He had never tried a simulation like this before and it was pretty disorienting. He saw his finger grab at a large metal tower strung with the network of wires. But right as his hand got there, everything went black. William went blind and felt a jolt punch his gut, run down his legs, and then shoot him a foot in the air.

His eyes opened and he was landing, shocked, and looking at a standing panel of Masters. Behind them was a screen that showed the view of his world he had just been simulating. Except now it showed flashing lights and smoke coming from the tower he had touched.

"Well you were doing well until the end there, Bill," most of the Masters chuckled a little as a chorus of colors belched out of their mouths.

"Well you disoriented me pretty good!" William built up a red face, embarrassed and angry. His stomach grumbled. "NEXT time don't TRICK me and I won't SCREW IT UUhchchlgl-" William was cut off by a blockage in his throat. He choked for the second time in as many days, but this wasn't coming out as easily as the little world.

In fact, it was killing him. The side of his throat bulged violently as the object inside sought any way out. William stumbled around, his breathing passage only a faint whistle now, clutching his throat and staring in disbelief at the silent and terrified row of Masters. He fell to the ground, flailed for help, and stopped breathing.

One of the Masters, the skinny one from yesterday's breakfast, jumped ranks and broke the precious line they all stood in. This drew a gasp from the rest of the Masters, who suddenly lost all interest in William's writhing body to watch and scorn the rogue Master.

"If he is to be a Master, he must wrestle with what he wrought," the elder Master who gave William his lesson said. This Master teetered from uprightness, considered breaking the line to stop the other one from helping, but ultimately fell back into proper posture and 'tsk'ed.

"He's wrestled already. And he's lost," the disobedient little Master said in response as he felt William's distended neck. The little Master removed his own robe and began wrapping William's body in a cocoon with it while mumbling and breathing objects into his two hands. "He's going to die now if you all just sit around and piss your robes!" there was an awkward silence, "...so, I'm going to do... something."

When his robe was removed, most of the Masters averted their gaze. The few who were angry at breaking protocol still stared but just spit little fireballs at the gaunt Master helping William. But after the little meteorites were expelled from their mouths, they looked closer. Underneath the gaunt Master's robe was an under-robe, as they all had, but there was a distinct difference in how it fit this Master. It



wasn't just his strange, sickly thinness that was strange. There was something, two more things in fact. Realization hit them all the Masters simultaneously and three of them fainted on the spot.

"Are those... b-BREASTS?" roared the elder Master. "Who is this... w— WOMAN!" He huffed and looked left and right at the shivering, snivelly Masters around him who hadn't peeked yet. He looked back at the woman to watch her speaking into her hand, pulling on tufts of the cocoon she had smothered William in, and tucking them deeper underneath him. The robe completely surrounded the boy now and, when the rogue Master (Mistress?) rolled him over, the folds had disappeared. A true cocoon now, it kept getting smaller as she kneaded it repeatedly underneath him.

"Well, look, you fools! It's not a man you're cowering from – it's a damn woman!" He looked for disapproval but still got only fear from his companions. "She doesn't even know what she's doing with the boy. How long have you been speaking worlds that you think you can speak life into our foolish Bill?!"

"Long enOUGH," she spit venom at his shoes to make him dance off of his precious line. William's cocoon was now the size of a basketball, which she presently picked up and stood up with. "And his GOURDDAMN name," she spoke a teal robe out onto the floor and stepped into it, raising it around her and the grey ball that had been William, "is WILLIAM!"

The teal flashed bright and began to static. It emitted a sound deeper than death – usually impossible to hear but somehow it grew louder. Dark blue and turquoise glitched in and out of the teal light as its shine intensified. Even the shy Masters were looking now – each mouth dropped wide open. The most vocal Master's open lips were trembling with anger. He shut them and greenish steam whistled out his nostrils. The teal began to shrink and the static subsided. Sensing the moment slipping away, he bumbled open his mouth again to speak loudly over the din.

"STOP." It continued, so he continued, more firmly this time, "THIS INSTANT!"

But it was over. The sound left a void that popped the Masters' ears. The teal zipped little electric arcs into the ground before it finally disappeared.

"Gone...?" another Master wondered in fear.

Another whined in confusion, "How? How did... did she breathe out a wormhole or something? I didn't think that was possible! I thought you said we could only Make, not Remove..." The Masters stood in tableau on their line as words became whimpers. The whiny Master started to cry. Every robe was covered in piss.

William was sick. He sat huddled in his own robes, covered in chunks of aborted rock vomit. His vision was blurry and he didn't think he'd ever be able to get up. It was misery, but he almost felt *comfortable*. He wasn't sure if he was using that word right or not, but it felt nice to just lie there on the floor and be miserable with someone nearby letting him do it.

"Uuuhghhhh..." he moaned into the floor.

"I know, it's agony. I'm actually putting off going through Nutrition withdrawal so I can take care of you right now. It might be a little easier for me since

I've only been nibbling crumbs of the shit they give you guys and I wasn't sucking on the rocks."

"Nutrish... did thisst M-me?" William sputtered into the ground.

She looked back with a warm smirk. "Nutrition is a load of addictive crap, William. Those rocks y'all suck on aren't healthy or nutritious at all. They keep you stiff, upright, carbon-based, with a weak bladder, and always fiending for more. Ever wondered why the Masters change their robes when something upsets them?" He had.

"They're scared of you, William! Scared of how powerful you are. Scared of you learning too much or trying to create new types of life. They're nothing but scared little addicts with drippy, little faucets that no amount of groin-clenching can tighten up." She stuck her index finger out horizontally and made sad, little dripping motions out of it with the index and thumb of her other hand.

William finally laughed even though he was trying not to. A smooth piece of matter burped out of him onto the ground and he reached over to pick it up. It was mostly just a weighty matte sphere the diameter of a cheap coin, but it had two curved cylindrical protrusions coming from it. As he spun it around in his palm, he felt a fine texture that seemed to be almost abrasive when he rubbed it one direction. This texture shifted in roughness and direction as he felt his way around the object. He was actually feeling better now. He suddenly realized he hadn't laughed for real in probably six months.

"Woah, that's cool, William. Good for you." She smiled, "I think the Nutrition might actually be wearing off, then. Can I see it?"

William took a couple moments to work his way off the floor and sit up. He handed the little object to her suspiciously. She rubbed every millimeter of it and looked at it from every angle.

"This is incredible, William! Like, I've never seen something even close – what does it do? Does it, like... like a mothership or a power source... or what?"

He snatched it back from her. "Doesn't *do* anything. Least, I don't think so. I think... just to look at."

"Look at where?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" he burst out. He breathed a couple times before muttering, "Who are you?"

"Ah, they make us forget our names here when we graduate, too. I have a feeling it was Umena or Ona or something like that, but I'm probably just making that memory up."

"Well... Ona. Will they let me train to create stuff here?"

"Uuuhh. I mean, I'm sorry to say, but no. You'd do so well here, too. They teach us way more than they do in your Pod. So it pains me to tell you this, but they don't like men much. And even if we could hide that about you, they're still kind of... particular... about the stuff you can Make or Remove. Lots of rules and regulations." She walked over to her bookshelf and pulled out two floppy volumes and plopped them on the ground next to him as she raised her eyebrows. "Someone Making stuff like that," she pointed to the lump in his hand, "wouldn't exactly be allowed to stand with the other Mistresses." She sat down on the ground and looked him in the eye.

“William, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to leave here, too. I’m in enough trouble as it is for running away and then showing a Removal to the Masters on your Pod. And, unfortunately, I don’t really have any advice for you. But I can get you onto an escape Pod and send you towards an empty-ish galaxy so you can start Making worlds without being under someone’s nose.”

William scrunched his face and bit his whole bottom lip in a *now-you’re-fucking-dropping-this-nonsense-on-me?* look before releasing it with a “hUhh!”. This little outburst shot a bloated packet of cheesy, yellow goop out of his mouth that exploded on Ona’s teal robes. William stuck his tongue out and turned away to sulk.

“You have to keep doing what you’re doing, William,” Ona pressed on despite the fresh mess on her clothes. “No one’s making stuff like that, or this!” she pulled out a translucent shard from her teal robes. It was gnarled and sharp along one of its seven edges, but the others were smooth and rounded, each shining a slightly different shade of red. “I found this in your neck! You crazy fuck – almost killed yourself. And they would’ve let you die! Not that they could’ve actually done anything about it...”

“Anyway, I don’t want to toot your horn too soon, but you’re a gourd damn wonder, William. That was brilliant using your spit like that on your little world! Everything I’ve seen you do in the last couple weeks has been brilliant. Don’t forget your name and don’t forget me when you start a Pod of your own. Maybe even Make a new Home, if that’s even possible.”

William was overwhelmed, “It seems like you have *a lot* of advice for me.” Ona smiled. William shook his head, “Start my own Pod? Make a new Home?? I mean, I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t even know how to Remove stuff like you.”

“Removing is easy compared to Making stuff – just breathe in instead of out.” She touched her hand to the yellow goop on her robes, closed her eyes as she exhaled, then flashed them open with an inhale. The stuff William had spit up was gone from her robes, though it still left a stain. “All this talking isn’t how you learned to do what you’ve done anyway, so just keep doing it and I think you’ll be fine. Plus, you don’t really have a choice. ”

William wanted a rock to suck on. He was furious at her! Screwing him over before he could even fully recover. He just started “speaking worlds” anyway, whatever that meant. And he’d been puking volcanic rock for the past 3 hours! He whined away to the other side of Ona’s room in resignation. Ona rolled her eyes and chased a couple steps after him to grab the hood of his cloak. She snatched it firmly and squished his whole body into a ball again before he could say anything else.

She snuck out into the corridor from her room and made her way to the Loading Dock. She put the ball of William inside a one-room starter-Pod and tapped the ball solidly on the top. It untangled and William fell out. He was dazed but double-taked when he saw Ona walking out of the Pod. She closed the door behind her. He stumbled up to it and tried unsuccessfully to open the airlock.

“Hey! HEY! You’re supposed to HELP me!”

“I wasn’t *supposed* to do anything!” She hushed him through the little window on the door. “And I *am* helping you, trust me. You don’t want to be a girl at this place. They expect way more than you can muster.”

William shook his head and pounded on the door.

“You’re going to grow into quite a person, William.”

“You’re already quite an ass,” he sassed in reply.

“Just try to make *some* stuff with a purpose in mind. I don’t want to escape again only to find you’ve filled your galaxy with a bunch of fuzzy, useless lumps.”

They looked at each other, William on his tippy-toes, through the little window for a couple seconds before Ona pushed the release button and the little Pod sucked into space.

William sat thinking about punching something for a minute as he clenched his jaw and wiped his tongue around his dry mouth. He looked down into his hand and saw that smooth thing he had Made on the floor of Ona’s room. He popped it into his mouth and moved it around in there. He felt a little better. Just a little. He still wanted a rock to suck on.