

# DEVIL IS FINE

*John Vercher*



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# ONE



**The morning we buried you, a road flagger danced in the street.**

The route from the church to the cemetery took our procession down that two-lane stretch of County Line Road, the one we'd both often complained seemed perpetually under one form of construction or another. The project that day required a bucket truck, crane extended to the top of a leaning transformer, the result of soft ground and high winds from the storm the night before. The truck, long and wide, made travel in the opposite lane impossible and it was our turn to wait.

My car was two behind your hearse, your mother in the car ahead of me, my mother and father in the vehicle behind. I found it odd the road crew had chosen to stop a hearse from making its way through. Maybe they didn't want to interrupt our caravan when they'd seen just how long it was, knowing they couldn't keep the other line of traffic waiting much longer without the inevitable horn honking. Or maybe they didn't care about funeral protocol. When I was a kid, my father had knocked my baseball cap off with a slap to the back of my head when I'd failed to remove my hat as a motorcade passed, its orange flags whipping. I didn't

know how I was supposed to have known any better, but my stinging scalp told me I wouldn't forget any time soon.

I didn't see at first that the stop sign at the end of the flagger's pole was moving, but when I did, I couldn't look away. Leaning to the side, I could see around Vanessa's car—is it strange for me to call your mother Vanessa?—I saw the artist in his glory. His one-size-fits-all reflective orange vest draped over an oversized white T-shirt and dark baggy jeans, cuffs spilling over a pair of stained tan Timbs. Thin braids snaked from beneath his construction hat, playing curtain to the wireless earbuds pumping whatever song moved him to moving. He two-stepped back and forth, side to side, pivoting around the pole, lifting and dropping it to the asphalt, a cane in his one-man step show. I envied his obliviousness to the row of hazard lights blinking in front of him, finding fun in what I always thought had to be the most mundane of tasks. But there he was, enjoying himself, not giving a damn how boring I thought his job must have been.

I eyed the empty passenger seat. Your seat. You would have loved him, this dancing man, you would have said, "Homie is getting it *in*, huh?" Hearing your voice in my head, I stopped obsessing over your seat and stared ahead. Vanessa's—it is weird, isn't it?—*your mom's* compact car did little to shield the hearse from my view, but though I'd looked away from where you'd once sat, I couldn't take my eyes off where you now lay.

What if you awakened? What if all the prayers I'd thrown up asking for the miracle of your return were answered right then? You'd rouse to a satin-lined darkness. The vision was so vivid, eyes open or closed, I couldn't rid myself of it. I imagined your straining to find a swallow of air in that coffin. I hyperventilated. Pressure built in my chest. I whispered between gasps.

"Not now."

The first panic attack came after the accident. The first, at least, in several years. But now, what should have been a five-minute drive to the grocery store became an evening spent at urgent care. The first time, the nurse practitioner explained to me how a panic attack could feel just like a heart attack, like an elephant sitting on my chest. Was that a baby elephant or

a full-grown one, I'd asked. What if it feels like, say, a pygmy hippopotamus? Is that just indigestion? She wasn't amused. To be honest, neither was I. But why be austere about your mental health and the ramifications of not taking it seriously when you can dismiss it with a joke?

Cars in front of me, cars behind me, cars crawling by in the opposite lane, a steep drop-off where drainage ditches had been dug to channel runoff from heavy rains. I had nowhere to go when an attack came. And one *was* coming. Maybe it would be quick. Maybe the other line of cars was long, long enough to let the panic pass before it was our turn to go.

The dancer stopped. He pulled a walkie from his belt and spoke into it. Red became orange. "Stop" became "Slow." The hearse's brake lights extinguished, followed by your mother's. And I couldn't move. Arms straight, elbows locked, skin taut around my knuckles gripping the steering wheel, I braced for a phantom impact, my back pinned to the seat. The patch of skin on the back of my thigh, just below the crease in my right buttock from where they'd taken the graft, itched. So did the pale scar tissue on my cheek. But I couldn't scratch either place. I couldn't sit up. I couldn't breathe. I was going to make everyone late.

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't sit up.*

*We're going to be late.*

Please don't. I know what you're doing, but it's not helping.

Then a tap on the windshield. The dancer. He made a rolling motion with his gloved hand. Afraid to let go of the steering wheel lest I fall down this hole and never recover, I pressed my lips together and shook my head. I waited for the annoyance, the muffled shout through the glass to get the hell on. Yet the exasperation I expected at my lack of cooperation never came. Instead, he spoke, loud enough I heard him through the window, but with an unanticipated calm, stretching and contracting his lips around each syllable.

"It's okay."

I slipped my hand off the steering wheel and accidentally locked the door, unused to the layout of the new car, before I pressed the window

button long enough for a sliver of air, wet with a new mist forming, to pass through a small opening, then resumed my grip on the wheel. Ahead, the hearse along with your mother's car had pulled into the driveway of a real estate office located in a stone façade building. Your mom stood at the driver's side of the hearse, leaned over at the open window. My eyes darted to the side, catching the movement of the road worker stepping closer to my barely opened window.

"My guy. You good?"

I shook my head again.

"You need an ambulance?"

Another stiff shake.

"Panic attack, huh?" A curt nod. "Yeah. My sister gets them. She says it feels like she going to die when they hit her." He unclipped his walkie from his belt again. "Let your side through, Joe. We going to be a minute." Joe's voice squawked something in protest through the microphone, but the dancer wasn't having it. "Just let them through, man. Nobody on your side's going to complain." He lifted his chin at me. "Right? They the ones getting to move."

He turned his pole so the "Slow" side faced the other lane and cars crept along again. Though my head stayed facing the road in front of me, my eyes traveled from your mother at the side of the hearse to the passing drivers watching me, probably in wonder, though I convinced myself it was out of pity. Behind, my parents sat, seemingly unbothered, my mother's face a Parkinsonian mask, my father's equally expressionless, though not manifest of any malady save a surplus of staidness. None of these things I saw unlocked my hands or arms. Nor did my phone buzzing in the cradle clipped to the air vent. Your mother calling.

"Put your window all the way down, man," the dancer called out to me. "Get some air." I shook my head again. "Okay, it's cool. You tell me when you ready to move. I got you."

His kindness was a hand on my shoulder, squeezing, not urgent, but comforting. I released the wheel with my left hand, shook it out, let the window all the way down. He was right. The fresh air helped.

“Family?” he said over the passing cars. I cocked my head, and he tilted his toward the hearse. A looser nod this time.

“Son,” I said.

He blew air out through puffed cheeks. “That’s the wrong order, ain’t it?” He squinted at the light gray sky, the sun working its way through the cloud cover. “Don’t know why He does that.”

My grip loosened and blood filled my fingers. Slack returned to my elbows. “Me, either. Can I . . . I just need another minute.”

He waved me off. “Take your time, man. I don’t hear any horns.”

Though I’d sworn I’d heard impatient honks a moment before, he was right. Nothing but the sound of tires hissing on the wet asphalt. My phone buzzed again. I sat forward, freeing my back from the seat, and took the phone from its cradle.

“I’m coming.” A deep breath. Hers and mine. “I’m sorry.”

“Okay. It’s okay.”

I disconnected and replaced the phone, then released the hand brake. Before I took my foot off the brake, I dipped my head in thanks to the dancer. He returned the nod and spoke into his walkie. Before he spun his pole and signaled for us to move on, he took off his construction hat and held it at his side. We exchanged another nod and I drove to catch up to you.

A field of black flowers bloomed, umbrellas unfolding against the mist turned light rain pelting their petals. The absence of the church’s walls and roof had done nothing to diminish the overwhelming gathering of classmates, family, and friends who’d come to see you one last time, huddled together, seated in plastic folding chairs sinking further into the wet ground a centimeter at a time.

I’ll be frank, Mal, I was shocked. A kid who hadn’t been an athlete, wasn’t prom king, no chorus, no Key Club, who didn’t belong to any specific clique, instead seemed to belong to them all. The jocks, the nerds, the academics, the artists, the geeks, the goths—they’d streamed in through the doors of the church until some had no choice but to stand behind the final row of pews. I’d seen less attendance at Christmas mass and wondered

if they'd ever stop coming. I'd thought such throngs only feasible in films. Never had I suspected you'd known—touched—so many. There'd been so much about you I hadn't realized.

The ground squelched and gripped at my shoes, threatened to pull them off my feet as I walked to the front row of seats and took the empty one next to your mother. The rain, though light, came at an angle, driven by occasional gusts, remnants of an earlier squall. Beads of precipitation clung to her lace veil. She remained focused on your remains, her eyes flitting to me a single time in acknowledgment of my presence. I adjusted my umbrella to sit atop hers, a phalanx protecting us both. Her free hand rested on her knee. I slid mine underneath, palm up, and squeezed. She did not return the gesture. I watched our hands not hold each other for a moment, then watched her, hoping she was watching me, too. She wasn't. She minded your casket, rain rivulets cascading off the gunmetal-gray lid as tears down unfeeling cheeks.

Tears I'd yet to shed.

I wanted to cry for you. I knew I should. I thought certain those tears would come as the priest read the eulogy. He was as warm as he could be, but because he'd not known you—no matter how hard I'd tried to remedy that, and I know this isn't the time or place—there was no heart hoisting his words. No familiarity. Regret for a life lost, of course, but the loss was not personal. He knew me. He knew your mother, to some extent. He'd not known you other than to know you were our son. If no tears came then, they would come when you were lowered into the ground. Then, certainly, my body would find the faculties to mourn you.

You don't believe it, either?

The machine's mechanisms, once activated, caused the coffin a small but sharp lurch upward. Your mother let out a hushed gasp and pulled her hand away from mine, brought it to her chest, her fingers fluttering. Her tears flowed unfettered in that moment as the glistening curve of the casket disappeared below our line of sight. I kneaded her shoulder, but the act seemed to induce tension, not make it recede. There was no comfort to be found in my touch, so I took it away. How familiar that sensation.



Your burial site sat on the cemetery's hilltop, the incline too steep, the ground too wet for my mother's wheelchair to make the climb. Despite my entreaties to help them sit by our sides, my father refused. He stood next to my mother at the hill bottom, a large umbrella shielding them from the increasing rain. He returned my solitary wave with a near-imperceptible nod.

I never told you about the one and only time I'd seen my father cry, and how it scared me more than anything I can remember, then and since. He was as old as I am now, and I still have no idea why he was crying. But everything I'd known—everything I'd believed—about him, about his stoicism and strength, crumbled as easily as he did in my mother's arms as she lowered him to the floor. His body shook with big gulping sobs, childlike in their drama, but if their design was manipulative, I couldn't see it. My mother soothed him as she would have me in such a crisis, stroking the back of his head, whispering everything would be okay. I wanted to ask what was wrong, what could bring him to such a state, but fear choked the words in my throat and fixed my feet to the foyer floor. My mother opened her eyes and when she saw me, gestured for me to go to my room, freeing me from my paralysis. I was grateful. I fast-walked down the hallway, shut my door behind me, and sat on my bed, bewildered. His sobs carried down the hallway and my eyes stung. I wanted to join him in his misery, despite my ignorance of its origin. But seeing what crying did to him kept my tears at bay—that day, and the many days that followed.

The wheels of the casket hoist clicked their teeth together a final time and you were laid to rest. Returned to the dust from whence you came. Lowered so you could ascend.

Your mother wept. We stood.

I glanced over my shoulder, waiting for one hand to be placed on it while another was thrust forward in offering sincere and heartfelt condolences. But neither happened. All rose from their chairs and, hunched against a summer wind growing ever stronger, left us to our mourning, filing down the hill to where they'd parked. Some paused and offered condolences to your grandparents, then waited in their cars until we led them

in ours to the repast at the apartment your mom and I had once shared. No longer a home since I'd left. Since she'd asked me to leave. No longer a home with you gone.

We stood short of the edge of the grave, not close enough to see down into it, as if not seeing made it not so. Her quiet tears fell in tandem with the rain.

"This was good," I said. "He would have been happy."

She scoffed and shook her head. "What kind of thing is that to say? Happy?"

"To see how many people he'd touched. I had no idea how many he knew."

She fixed her regard on the horizon. "You think he didn't know that when he was alive?"

"That's not what I meant."

"What *do* you mean? Do you even know?"

"I don't want to fight, Van."

"Then don't say such stupid things. Don't pretend anything you say like that matters to anyone but you."

"I only mean that if he could see—"

Now she turned to face me. "But he can't, can he? He's not sitting on some cloud, listening to all the nice things people have to say about him. I know that's what you think. What you believe."

"You used to, too."

She rolled her eyes, though her face didn't betray exasperation. She was exhausted. I was exhausting her.

"Yeah, well, not anymore." She cleared tears from her lids with her thumb. "He wouldn't have wanted any of this. But you insisted."

"Now, Van? We're going to do this now?"

"There's never a good time for you, is there?"

"Don't you think if I could take this back, I would? When are you going to stop acting like I did this on purpose? Why do I have to be the bad guy?"

"Because you are!"

No melodramatic hand to her mouth. No checking over her shoulders to see if anyone had heard her shout. She faced me, eyes electric with rage, forcing me to feel all her fury. You know the face. I'd seen her give it to you one time you'd mouthed off and wondered how you'd ever let yourself do so again. I was frightened for you then, just as I was afraid for myself now. Under her glare, I was a sculpture of ash. Insubstantial. Her next breath would send me scattering. Still, she stared. Her eyelids twitched, unblinking. Fearing I might collapse to dust, I glanced down. At this, she seemed satisfied and turned back to the rows of tombstones across the field. Her breath came in short bursts until she calmed herself with a long, deep one.

"All that time," she said, "you kept insisting he see God as his father. When the only father he wanted was you."

Is that what you wanted, Mal?

I opened my mouth but had nothing to say. "People are waiting," she said. "We should go." She walked past me and down the hill.

Stunned, I hadn't noticed I'd lowered my umbrella. Raindrops tapped me from my daze. I watched your mother walk away. Despite all she carried, despite all I'd given her to bear, she held her head high. Shoulders pulled back. At the bottom, she was met by aunties, uncles, and cousins, her parents long since passed. As she embraced them one by one, I saw them see past her to me, and though their faces maintained a loyal sternness I'd come to know all too well, I witnessed there a softness, too, one that would offer hugs if I came to collect them. I nodded my thanks. To a one, they nodded back.

I turned back to where you rested, took another step closer to your grave, and stared down.

*I can't breathe.*

*I can't sit up.*

*We're going to be late.*

Chest tightened. Fingers tingled. I retreated from the brink.

Not again, not so soon.

The scar on my cheek pulsed. Focusing on the sensation was a distraction that kept the attack at bay. One foot slowly in front of the other, the

tension in my lungs receding, I followed your mother's path to our cars. My father waited for me, the umbrella only just shielding him and Mom, rivers of rain running down the sides, spattering her wheelchair armrests. When I reached them, he squeezed my arm, gave it a pat, then handed me his umbrella. I covered him and Mom as he wheeled her back to their car. We parted without a word. I returned to my car, drove to meet your mother, and followed her out of the cemetery, watching the long line of mourners fall in line behind us.

Back on the main road, I saw another hearse approaching, doubtless on its way to where we'd just left with our procession, presidential in its enormity. Behind him, hazards flashing, flags flailing, trailed two cars. Only two. I could not help but notice the negative space behind them.

As we drove past them, I thought of my father, fetal on the floor, cradled in my mother's arms.

And I cried harder than he had.

## TWO



**Days later, the letter arrived.**

I'd almost missed it, sandwiched between circulars and catalogs, the envelope unremarkable in every way, almost tossed with the rest of the junk if I'd not seen the esquire designation before snapping my wrist toward the recycling bin. At my desk, I tore through the top of the envelope and read. The contents brought only confusion, no matter how many times I read it.

The matter of an inheritance from my mother's father, your great-grandfather, and could I call the office as soon as possible, make an appointment, as there were matters to discuss as your named next of kin.

The language was clear, the facts within succinctly stated. And yet it made no sense. I couldn't get your great-grandfather to give me the time of day, much less an inheritance. Was this his idea of a joke? Had he played the long game, planned a pernicious prank from the great beyond? Were it so, much as I loathed the man, the thought fostered a modicum of respect for the commitment. That notwithstanding, how many times I read the letter I'd lost track, scanning for some proof of error, an overlooked "no"

or “not,” anything to invalidate the information contained within. But my search provided no such negatives. Having determined it was too late in the day to act on the attorney’s polite requests, I slid the letter into the outside pocket of my messenger bag and packed for my return to classes the next morning. I had decided I’d end my bereavement leave from the university two days early and phoned David, my department head, telling him I’d be coming back tomorrow.

I know that seems soon. You might feel you deserved more grieving than I’d given myself time for, and you’d be right. But as frequently as I’d cast myself the artist unburdened by the need for social interaction, your absence proved my fancies fraudulent. My apartment was empty. No clichés of loud or oppressive silence. The quiet was vacuous, a singularity, each room a compartment of sensory deprivation. The want of your voice—with or without the venom that had laced it as of late—created a void into which I was being pulled, stretched like so much taffy.

That lack is how I came to talk to you in this way. Yes, of course, I am in essence talking to myself. Perhaps that you can’t answer me—or that your imagined answers are mine—is the only reason I’m comfortable admitting something so strange in the first place. There is odd comfort in this confessional. An unburdening. If you were here, I’m certain you’d tell me talking to myself was no different from talking to God. There was a time I’d have been sure of my response to that rebuke. I’ve now no certainty as to how I’d react.

Sleep never came easy for me, but even less so that night. I fidgeted in bed, anticipating my colleagues’ crinkled chins and dour downturned mouths, their funeral faces offering sympathies, their Anything I Can Dos, as if there were anything they could do, their outstretched hands and arms, their teary eyes and I Can’t Imagines. Feet slid back and forth until friction flamed the skin of my heels. Arms and legs made snow angels on the less-than-fitted sheet, searching for regions of cool. Pillow an omelet folded on itself, either not thick enough or too much so, comfort ever elusive. With each change of position, each turn of my head, I caught a flash of white in my periphery, the envelope holding the letter peeking from my

bag's pocket, antagonizing me with its enigma, the One Ring calling to Frodo, and with that thought I remembered your Golem imitations, shirt off, shorts hiked up, an impossible curve in your spine as you leapt about the living room on all fours, gasping for your Precious. The recollection of your uncanny impression, the sound you made like a bubble was stuck in your throat, now placed one in mine. I threw back the covers, crossed the room, and pushed the envelope further into the bag until it was hidden from view, half expecting to see a flash of feline pupil, fire wreathed, or worse, to be stuck with that vision of you.

Only when the letter was out of view did I sleep.

I didn't call the attorney the next morning. *Too much to do, so much to prepare*, the mantra of my justification. Make sure the contents of my shoulder bag were just so. Tighten up the beard, iron the shirt, sharpen the crease in the slacks. Subtract all signs of sadness.

Then there was rehearsal, practice my Thank You, I'm Goods, As Well as Can Be Expecteds, I Will, Yes, I *Will* Be Sure to Call If I Need Anything.

You see, Mal, there was simply no time to call the attorney.

Obviously.

Rationalization the mother of procrastination.

After class ended, I sat in my office, hypnotized by my monitor's screen saver, footsteps in the hallway breaking my trance, making me a prairie dog peering over the top of my ergonomically elevated laptop at the heel click of company coming, sinking into my chair as to whomever the shoes belonged breezed by my doorway. Conversations trailed off into echoes, then silence, students and staff lamenting or celebrating the minutiae of their lives, blissful in their unawareness or willful ignorance of the notion that those complaints were trifles. Those trivialities times to be treasured. I envied them. I hated them. I wanted them to sit with me. I wanted them to go away.

Office hours dragged on, due in no small part to the dearth of visitors, student or otherwise. It seemed no one on the faculty had put in the same

rehearsal time I had for how they should approach me upon my return. Throughout the day, they trafficked in polite avoidances. Eye contact, sure, but brief, mouths tight lest something untoward and unintentionally thoughtless slip out, for who really knows what to say in these instances. I know I never did. Maybe ending my leave early hadn't given them enough time for proper preparation, but really, that was no excuse. Just lazy.

While I waited out the last fifteen minutes of my office obligations, I spun my chair toward the window behind me with a view onto the freshly mowed quad. I never told you that the years I'd put in at the college had earned you a tuition remission. If you'd wanted it. I hadn't told you because I'd convinced myself you would have taken the foot off the accelerator with your studies and coasted. Or would you have, I wondered. Would you ever have accepted something like that from me. Would you have sat with me on the manicured lawn below, shared lunch, talked to me about your classes, your day, your current crush. Would you have taken my class.

Would I have wanted you to.

Red flickered across the quad, the inconsistent illumination of the neon sign above the door to the Teachers' Lounge, the faculty-frequented watering hole situated aside the university employees' parking lot. For years, the *O* and *E* in "Lounge" had been burned out, apropos this loss of letters, as the owners had defied the smoking bans for as long as they'd been able, thus the ceilings, the walls, even the barstools held on to the smoke smell like living tissue. And in our infinite cleverness, the Teachers' *Lung* was born. How many nights we'd spent there, celebrating, or commiserating. Seems a lifetime ago. In some sense, it was.

Just shy of eighteen years.

Your mother promised me she'd let me tell you this story when I felt the time was right, as if there were ever a right time to admit to . . . well, to the thing I would admit to. She said it wasn't her tale to tell, but that if I didn't, she would, and I couldn't have that. I'm thinking now might be that time, when telling you is tantamount to saying the thing out loud. So—here goes.



“Knock, knock.”

How about that? Another time then.

“Got a minute?” David leaned on the doorjamb. Arms crossed, his face held a restrained expression of sympathy, lips tucked, eyebrows raised, the nonverbal equivalent of I Don’t Know What to Say mixed with I’m Here for You. I was impressed. At least *he’d* been practicing. “How was the first class back?”

“Incredible. Gave them an exercise to push their creative boundaries and experiment with form and function. Stunning work by all involved.”

“You gave them a generic prompt and scrolled social media the entire hour while they wrote?”

“Give the man a prize.” I closed my laptop and waved him in. He pulled at the waistline of his sagging slacks, all his pants’ bands stretched beyond the limits of elasticity by a gut growing at a rate alarming to everyone but David. I gestured to the chair in front of my desk, and he lowered himself into it, hands on thighs, griping as he did.

“They say the first sign you’re getting old is you make noises when you sit,” he said.

“And how long have you been making those noises?”

“Too long. But my aunt Chrysanthemum used to say—”

“Chrysanthemum?”

“What?”

“You people say we have strange names.”

“You people?” I smirked at David’s faux horror. “It is strange, but we called her Gigi for short.”

“So why didn’t you just say that?”

He cocked his head. “I don’t actually know. Anyway, she said growing old ain’t for sissies. But then she also said it’s better than the alterna—”

Finding opportunities to increase David’s discomfort was an activity in which I’d always taken great pleasure, though those moments most often manifested when he’d said the word “Black” that while in a manner devoid of malice, I’d tell him he was guilty of yet another racist screed. While he knew these jabs to be jovial in nature, he squirmed

nonetheless, checked the room, ensuring no one actually thought *that* of him. Though his tired and poorly planned aphorism about aging was a different type of gaffe, I couldn't, in good conscience, let a chance pass to avoid revealing anything about my true emotional state. I narrowed my eyelids, sending how-dare-you daggers across the space between us. In turn, his eyes went wide, smile disappeared, hands up in defense, ready to rationalize and retract, flop sweat forming at the fringes of his retreating hairline. Unable to contain the quiver in my chin, I broke and grinned.

"Gotcha."

His breath left him in a whoosh as he put his head between his knees, a passenger prepared for an emergency landing. I reached across the desk and patted his back. He flinched and shirked my reassurance with a playful pout. "Too mean."

"Maybe."

"I take it you've had enough time off, then?"

"Enough time . . ." I sat back. "I've been thinking—who measures grief?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I read somewhere that grief experts recommend at least twenty days of leave after the loss of a close family member. How do they figure that out?"

"*You* decided to come back early. I had your classes covered."

"I'm serious, though. Who decides the appropriate amount of time you need to cope? This person or persons have to exist, right? Do they have an actuarial table calibrated for sorrow? Do they factor in standard deviations from the mean? What's the *n* value? Do they use regression analysis? How do they know that in three or five or ten or twenty days your bereavement should end? That your emotions will stabilize, thus rendered able to return to the full duties of your job? What if that person never experienced their own grief? Do they speak the language of loss? How long is too long to mourn? How short is too short?"

David stared, unblinking, though past me, not at me. I snapped my fingers in his face. He shook his head as if I'd splashed him with water. "I'm sorry, were you saying something?" Mouth open, it was my turn for mock shock. He returned the smirk I'd given him moments ago.

"Good one."

"The language of loss.' You should write that down."

"Noted. So . . . what is it?"

"What is what?"

"Why are you here, David?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've never known a conversation beginning with 'got a minute' to lead anywhere good. Or take anywhere close to a minute."

He sat forward, leaning his forearms on his legs, a posture affirming my assertion.

"Jokes aside, how are you doing? Good? You seem good. Are you good? I'm saying good too much."

"You are. But I'm all right. All 'good.'"

"Very funny." He eyed the area rug under his feet, finger-combed his thinning grays, then looked back to me. "You don't have to be. All good, I mean. You don't have to be here right now, either. I meant it—you can still take more days, despite your wholly unsubtle knock on our bereavement allotment." He winked, but made a smooth slide into sincerity. "I know you know that, but I just want to say it again."

"Your minute's almost up."

He chuckled. "Yeah, you're all good. *Anywho* . . ." He slapped a beat on his knees and glanced around the room, anywhere but at me. "Any bites on the manuscript?"

"There's the rub."

"What rub? No rub. Just a question."

"A loaded one. If you hadn't led with 'got a minute,' I maybe would have believed you. Maybe."

"Come on, it's not like that."

“No? What’s it like then? You know you’d have been the first person I told if there was news.”

“You’re right. I know, you’re right. It’s just . . .”

“See? There is a rub.”

He ran his palm back and forth across his forehead. “So, here’s the deal—and this is not coming from me—but if you don’t have something soon, a contract, an excerpt somewhere big . . . the committee meeting is going to be here before you know it. You know it’s publish or perish here. You knew that coming in.”

“Uh-huh. ‘Publish or perish.’” I stood and tripped on my messenger bag as I retrieved the paperback of my first novel from my bookshelf and tossed it in his lap. He stuck out his jaw and averted his eyes. “You see that silver foil stamp, Dave? Same award nomination as Richardson’s book. How many books did he publish before he got tenure?”

“You don’t want to go there, man.”

“Anyone show up at his door and give him this talk? Of course I mean *before* he got the tenure you’re telling me I’m in danger of losing.”

“You know his book was a monster.”

“And mine wasn’t?”

“A monster? No. In a perfect world, critics’ love equals sales, but let’s be honest—did that happen?”

I tapped the silver foil badge on the cover. “Nominated for the same national award, David.”

“He was also a part-timer for years, several more than you.”

“That’s crap, Dave. I did my time, too. How long did I adjunct here? How many times did I apply for full-time and get rejected? And I kept coming back like a kicked puppy.”

“I know that. You know I know that, but Richardson was also well known by the committee.”

I scoffed. “‘Well known.’ It’s funny, man, I hear you giving all the reasons my tenure is in danger but the real one.”

“Don’t do that.”

“I’m just saying, man, all things being equal, all things don’t seem too equal.” He shifted in his seat. I tried a different tack. “Dave. Come on. This is you and me. What’s really going on?”

He pulled free a bit of cuticle he’d been picking at and winced, stuck his thumb in his mouth and sucked the blood bubble that bloomed there. “Look, if no one is biting on this one, maybe you should think about spreading your wings a bit. Maybe stay away from the . . . you know, more incendiary fare.”

“‘Incendiary’? Is that a code word? What are you talking about? You just said the first book did great, and it did.”

Thumb injury managed, he took an interest in the shine of his shoes. “Right, sure, but I mean . . . time was on your side. So to speak. You know what I mean, right?” I crossed my arms over my stomach. “Come on, man. Don’t make me say it.” I raised my eyebrows. “It’s just . . . people have moved on from the racial narratives. And not just with fiction. You know I loved your first one. The mixed-race protagonist struggling with his identity. It was all so topical yet timeless. But . . . well, it’s not 2020 out there anymore, you know?”

“I’m sorry, did you say ‘moved on’? I mean, did you actually just use those words?”

“Hey, I didn’t say *I* moved on. *They* have. You know.” He waved his hands in the air at some unseen entities. “*They*. They’re kind of . . . over it.”

I blinked rapid-fire and shook off the shock of still-worse words falling unfettered from my friend—check that—colleague’s mouth. “They’re . . . over it.”

“What, this is breaking news to you? Do you read the paper these days?”

“No one reads the papers these days, David.”

He reached across the desk and slapped my arm. “I know, I was being ironic.” He grinned. I didn’t. He stopped grinning. “Hey, you *know* me. I’m not saying it’s right. It’s not. It’s fucked. You know I know that. But it’s the reality, man. I mean, Christ, they’re banning books from schools now.”

“Which is exactly why I need to keep writing my story, David. Our stories. You want me to whitewash my work, not talk about the issues in my community because Black folks are no longer the movement du jour? Because some narrow-minded fools want to keep us off the shelves? No, sir. I’m not the one. *You* know *me*. At least I thought you knew that, because I can’t believe what I’m hearing. From you of all people.”

“Hang on, don’t do that. Don’t paint me out to the bad guy, all right? I’m here as a favor.”

“This doesn’t feel like a favor, David.”

“Believe me, it is. Look, real talk?”

And now it’s time for another spin of Dave’s favorite album, Time-Life Records’ *Hey Cringe*, Volume One. Whenever Dave wanted connection with me on a more serious level, he dialed up his discography of what he perceived as Black culture’s greatest hits.

Swoon to the sultry sounds of track one, “Real Talk.”

Slow-jam with the downbeat number “You Feel Me.”

Close out your evening with a soaring rendition of “My Man.”

“Agree with me, disagree with me, these are the facts. At least as far as the tenure committee is concerned. And that’s what matters right now. You feel me?”

Track two.

“Do I feel you? Let’s see. If I’m picking up what you’re putting down—and please, correct me if I’m wrong here—you’re saying that despite the university posting my face all over the website as their latest and greatest diversity faculty hire, if I continue to write about Black issues—sorry, you said mixed-race, right?—that are apparently no longer in vogue, then I’ll be shown the door like every other director of diversity, equity, and inclusion as of late. Is that it? Am I feeling you, Dave?”

For a second there, Malcolm, I swore I heard your voice instead of mine.

David gave a sharp exhale, stood, and tossed the book back on my desk. “This would normally be where I’d say you’re out of line, that you

know I'm as aware of this place's shitty politics as you are, and how I'd fight like a dog to keep you from losing tenure. How I maybe already did but that it didn't matter and that I still had to come down here to have this incredibly uncomfortable conversation with my friend. Normally, that's what I'd do. But these aren't normal times, so I'm not going to say that to you. I know that despite the jokes earlier, you're having a rough go of things and that those jokes are how you deal with things, along with getting just the slightest bit vicious, so I'm going to pretend you didn't imply that I align with those closed-minded idiots, and I'm going to go home before this situation becomes even less normal. Okay?"

He approached the office door. As angry as I was, I sensed no false sincerity in what he'd just said, and I'd not realized how much I'd needed some of that genuine-article compassion until just then.

"Not okay." He stopped and faced me, eyebrows raised. "That explanation was exceedingly expositional. I expect better from tenured faculty such as yourself."

The tension around his eyes relaxed. "Maybe I should sign up for your class then."

"Too popular. Wait-listed. You should maybe remind the committee of *that* fact."

"Who says I haven't?" He resumed his route to the door. "Go home. Get out of the apartment this weekend. Take the rest of your leave. If you need more time, talk to me. We'll work it out. Go find some inspiration."

"Yeah. Maybe I can borrow your jacket with the elbow patches. That's sure to make me feel like writing."

"Jealousy is ugly. Don't be ugly." He sighed. "Tell me you'll at least think about this."

"You'll at least think about this." He frowned. "I'll think about thinking about it."

"All I can ask." He walked back to my desk, arm extended, his pudgy porcelain paw dangling for dap. I gave his fist the once-over. "Come on. Give me some."

*No, my brother. You got to get your own.*

I obliged with a smirk. And with a finger gun and a wink, he glided out of the room to the dulcet tones of track three, “My man.”

Time was, a conversation like that would have sent me spiraling down an anxiety abyss, but with my antidepressant prescription pumped up post-funeral to proportions fit for a pachyderm, I was quicker to another emotion. I flipped open my laptop, opened a blank document, and switched the font.

publish or perish

publish or perish

publics or paris

pubis or pear shaped

plkuxiubtkonzfjnsrogjnldskgm;sLDmfgsPKRGMFUCKYOUHAVE

My hand hovered over the print icon. Send the job to the community printer. See who picks it up. He'd know it was me but could never confirm. But that back-and-forth between us pushed the limits of my tolerance for conflict. I closed the document and slapped the laptop shut. He was right about one thing—I knew the deal when I took the job, but as far as I was concerned, tenure track meant tenured. I'd fought the battle, won the war. Just had to bide my time. And when it happened, I knew, just knew, the wall damming my creativity after publishing the first book would crack then break, releasing the torrent of words sloshing and frothing against the barrier, just high enough to keep them from spilling onto the page. No more writing in the margins of the copywriting gigs and other adjunct positions I'd cobbled together, or in between my weekly visitations with you, Malcolm. Writing would become the day job. Teaching writing would only make my writing stronger. Tenure would remove the pressure of making rent and buying groceries, until I would become so unfettered as to become prolific. But the dam was made of committee work and four-four loads, a foundation I found impossible to break. So, I went back to what got me here in the first place—another novel interrogating a mixed-race



man's Black identity, albeit in a different way. And despite my initial resistance to revisiting that well, the creative waters surged, breached the wall, and I swam with the current. Yet those familiar waters had now put me in danger of drowning.

Despite my anger with him, saying he was wrong about all he'd said would have been lying to both of us. I'd seen the slow closing of the door to Black creatives. The corporate backslides on promises for more inclusion. And still somehow—and yes, I'm sure you know how, Malcolm, but I'm making a point—I thought that this reality wouldn't come for me. That I was safe. Immune. I was award-nominated after all. And yes, you're right, I shouldn't have let him off so easy. Yes, I'd gotten angrier with you for less. But was it fair to hold him accountable for the truth I'd asked him for? Besides, I knew (believed) (hoped) David likely *had* tried to help me with the committee, though doubts lingered as to whether his effort matched his narrative. He was younger than the senior faculty, relatively, and far more progressive, though that's far from the compliment he might have perceived it to be. Still, he was a sight better than that proverbial network of truly old boys that ran the roost. At the first university holiday party, your mother and I, tipsy, had joked—a little too loudly as I'd learned in a text from David the next day—that one of their past committees had to be the one where the one-drop rule had been created. Because my hair was—say it with me, brothers and sisters,

CALL: Closer to straight than curly, but

RESPONSE: Curly enough

CALL: My nose not that wide, but

RESPONSE: wide enough

CALL: My skin light, but

RESPONSE: not light enough.

These self-evident truths meant I had no room for error, that they had no time for a diversity hire professor who didn't publish, especially after that diversity hire was hired due to the acclaim of his diversity book, but

then couldn't publish because he wrote another diversity book that the zeitgeist had now determined was too diverse. By my count, that's two strikes. And shame on me. Had I no idea how that might reflect upon them? I mean, my God, man, think of the optics. They couldn't be out of step with the times. There was enrollment to consider.

Office hours over, I picked up my bag from where I'd kicked it, and the envelope fluttered to the floor. I'd tucked it so far down into the pocket. How had it worked its way out? Had I kicked it that hard? Or had it made its way out through other means?

Or was it you?

I laughed, perhaps a bit too loudly. That's just crazy talk.

I sat back down, collected the letter from the floor, and scanned it again, still in disbelief at its contents. Then I picked up the phone.

After I made the appointment with the attorney, I sat for a moment with the letter in my hand. A connection to you. Your name on a piece of paper. A keepsake for a shoebox tucked away on a closet shelf full of things meant to tell the story of you, something to retrieve in low moments to remember you fondly, as if fond memories were all there were. These keepsakes for the dead never made sense to me. I don't want a placeholder for your absence. I don't want to remember the happy times because they make me sad. I don't want to remember the sad times because they were my fault. I want my memories of you to decompose and fall away.

I tore the letter to pieces and threw those pieces in the trash. And then I went home.