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Far Away from Sactick Street

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The long, even rows of desks are empty. Late afternoon sunlight slants through the battered Venetian blinds in narrow rectangular strips, catching swimming particles of dust.

Mr. Lewis is hunched over his desk in the right corner of the room; there is a knock at the door, Lewis looks up.

The door swings open and Tom enters. "I hope I'm not bothering you or anything."

Lewis looks back down at his desk. "Sit." And he motions toward a desk in the first row.

Tom moves across the room and slides into the seat, silently laying his notebook down. He watches as Lewis scribbles a final sentence, then sets his pen down, looking up. The face—the entire head—is white. The mouth, the skin, the hair, everything but the eyes have an aged, bleached quality; the eyes are light green.

Lewis leans back in his chair. "So what can I do for you?"

"I'm quitting the program."

Lewis says nothing at first. His expression is unchanged. Then: "I see."

Tom picks up the notebook and throws it on the desk. "There's my journal," he says and folds his hands in front of him.

Lewis leans forward a little, his back still flat against the chair. He leafs through the book quickly and stops on the last written page. "It's not complete," he says.

"Does it matter?"

"It does to me." And the green eyes on him, awaiting an answer.

Tom shrugs; he is suddenly uncomfortable sitting in the hot bands of sunlight. He shifts in his seat, looks at his fingernails then the writing on top of the desk then the scuff on his loafer that hadn't been there an hour ago—

"No reason?" Lewis says.

"Something happened." The last is said quietly, in a voice that is not quite a whisper.

"I see." Lewis begins to rock softly in his chair, his fingers interlaced behind his head. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No." Tom presses the palm of his hand on the desk, spreading his fingers and rubbing them across the almost-smooth surface. "But I will anyway. . . ." And as he tells, he remembers.

He had never felt guilty about being rich till he'd visited Sactick Street. He'd never even thought about it, never considered himself privileged or especially secure till he pulled up in front of the crumbling old house.

It was white where there was still paint, and squeezed between two other houses just like it. Looking up and down the block he wondered whether each house just served to hold the other up and what might happen if one suddenly collapsed. Tom shut the car door behind him, careful to lock it. He read the number again on the house in front of him then walked up the stoop and knocked.

It was dusk and still early in the fall. A warm breeze blew against his cheek and he turned his head slightly, watching
a group of boys playing mumblety peg; two girls playing hopscotch on the cracked sidewalk; and across the street some older kids standing around a car.

From further down the street he heard the sound of a baby crying, a car horn blaring over and over, shouts and laughter and screaming. And he remembered his own neighborhood only a few miles away... the wide, clean avenues, the big houses tucked safely behind thick lawns, and the only sounds being those of a lawnmower or car sliding easily and quietly down the street.

The door opened and a small boy stood there, clutching the knob.

"Hi," Tom said smiling. "Are you Randy?"
The kid nodded.

"I'm Tom Farrell, your tutor. From the high school," Randy took his hand off the knob and pushed the door all the way open for him. Tom stepped in, looking at the kid, noticing how small and frail he looked for a fifth grader. Especially a fifth grader living on Sactick Street.

"Where's your mom?" Tom asked.
"Work."
"Will she be back pretty soon?"
"No."
Tom nodded. Randy walked into the tiny, box-shaped living room and seated himself on the couch. Tom set his books down on the coffee table and sat. "You wanna study right in here?"
Randy looked at the books then at Tom. "I don't care," he said.

"Did you ever meet the mother?" Lewis says.
"Yeah. Once."
"Like her?"
"Okay, I guess. Y'know."

Randy's mother had no front teeth. Tom tried not to stare when she suddenly burst through the door one night, but he'd never seen a grown woman with no front teeth before.

"You the tutor from the school?" she said walking past him into the kitchen.
"Yes ma'am."
"I just come back for my purse," --he could hear her looking all over the place in the kitchen--"and what'djew say your name was?"
"Tom."
"Tom." She came back into the living room. She was a big woman, dressed in some kind of white uniform and apron. Tom guessed she was a waitress. "Well, Tom, you and Randy study hard."
She leaned over and kissed the kid on the cheek. "I'll be back around nine, you be good."
Randy nodded.
"Bye now." The door opened, closed, and she was gone.

"He was a quiet kid," Tom says. "Didn't say anything unless I asked him. I mean, even after--y'know, after I thought I knew him pretty well, he---"
"You don't feel you had his complete trust."
"Yeah."
"Okay," Tom said, "so verb is action. What's a noun?"
"Person, place or thing."
"Gimme some examples."
"The lamp, the book, the table, the couch. . . ."
"Good, good." Tom glanced at his watch, saw that it was after 7:00. He started putting his books and notes together. "Listen, uh, my parents aren't home tonight, I was gonna go to McDonald's and maybe get something to eat. You wanna come with?"
"I don't think so."
Tom stood up, slipping the books into his knapsack. "You sure?"
Randy remained seated. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"But things went okay," Tom says, "for four or five weeks."
"And then?"
"Then Randy's old man came back. I dunno, I guess he and his mother had been separated or something because I hadn't seen him or even heard of him till he came back."

They were in the living room, on the couch, the books spread out in front of them on the coffee table. Just like always.
Tom said, "Now, is it 'I was' or 'I were'?"
"I was."
"Good, very good." He turned the page. "Okay, when we're--" a loud crashing noise. Tom jumped, startled, his eyes snapping up. He saw the knob being turned and all he could think was, I should have locked the door, you don't leave the goddam door unlocked in a neighborhood like this . . .
It swung open and smashed against the wall and Tom was on his feet. He wasn't really planning to do anything, it was just an instant reaction, an alternative to facing certain death in a sitting position.
The man who lurched through the frame wasn't very big. In fact, he was smaller than Tom, even after he straightened himself and was looking through squinted eyes right at him.
The first thing he said was, "Whothedhellareyou?"
It was slurred and said so quickly that at first Tom had no idea what to answer. Then suddenly it came to him and he said, "I'm Randy's tutor."
"Hiswhut?"
"T--tutor. . . I help him with his homework and---" Tom stopped, wondering why he was telling this to some guy who just stumbled in the door. Tom glanced at Randy. Randy was looking at the man as if he knew him and yet--
"I'm Randy's father," he said a little slower.
"Oh," Tom smelled the whiskey.
The little man bent down picking all the books on the coffee table up. "Randy don' need no more tutorin'. . . I'm home now. . . ."
Tom nodded, looked at the kid again; his eyes were darting from one side of the room to the other, as if he might be looking for a way out. The little man handed Tom the books and Tom walked reluctantly out the door to his car.
From inside the house, he heard: "C'mere Randy, daddy's home. . . C'mere, gimme a big hug. . . ."
"No daddy, I--"
"Come on, it's--" There was a loud thump then the sound of splintering wood. The coffee table, Tom thought.
"No, daddy, no, don't!"
"I said get over here. . .! Come here!" Footsteps, loud and soft - both fast.
"Don't chew gimmenomouth!"
The footsteps stopped and the next thing Tom heard was a loud slap. Then another. And another. And another. Above it all he heard the kid screaming and Tom started toward the house, started to go up the stairs and in the door so he could---
So he could what?
There was nothing he could do, it was the kid's father fer christsakes, not a mugger, not a bully, Tom stopped and closed his eyes and if only he could have closed his ears but it didn't matter; because even after he was in his car and far away from Sactick Street and safe in his own neighborhood he could still hear Randy screaming. . .

After a while, Lewis says, "I see."
"I don't think I ever felt so helpless in my whole life."
Lewis nods.
"I wanted to, God I wanted to go in there so damn bad and break that son-of-a-bitch in half. . ."
"Have you seen Randy since it happened?"
Tom shakes his head.
"Do you want to?"
"I. . ." He shrugs.
"I think," Lewis says slowly, "if you're ever going to be able to live with yourself, you'll have to."
"Yeah, well I go back and what happens then? He'll just come back and I won't be able to do anything then, either."
"Maybe." Lewis tosses the journal onto his desk. "Maybe not."

The sun is almost gone as the car pulls up to the house on Sactick Street. Tom climbs out, pauses, then walks to the front door. He turns the knob and gives a push. The door opens, he sees Randy on the floor in front of the television. The coffee table is gone.

Tom steps all the way into the room, unnoticed. "Hiya, kid."
Randy looks up, at first startled then suddenly, at ease. "Hi," he says.
Tom sees half his lip is swollen; there is a cut under his eye. "Look, I didn't bring the books this time, guess I'm gettin' pretty forgetful in my old age, but if you'd like to go out and get an ice cream cone or something. . ."
He nods and stands. And for the first time, Tom sees him smile and maybe it isn't the greatest smile in the whole world. . .
And maybe again it is.
Progress Report

Forty . . . forty-one . . . forty two. Forty-two people with 42 heads and 84 useless hands to feed 42 mouths. Forty-two; too much. Annihilate.

See janie play. See janie play jump rope. janie has two brothers, michael and paul. Error . . . Error . . . Public Law 2046 directly states that only 4 units are permitted per family. janie + michael + paul + 2 parental units = 5 units. Annihilate . . . Error . . . Annihilate . . .

paul swung gently from the tree limb - the jump rope cutting ugly welts into his broken neck, eyes bugged, face deeply purpled, lips grossly swollen. Error corrected . . . janie unstrung the laces from his dangling tennis shoes and began a game of cat's cradle with michael.

The computers whirred through the problems methodically. Lights blinked reds and yellows, beepers beeped, buzzers buzzed, tapes turned. A parasite with thoughts, it spit out the answers, methods . . . This was progress. This was perfection. This was Society.

Populations must remain constant. Computer brains whizz out exact figures. "Each family is allowed one adult male unit, one adult female unit and 2.3 child units. If total child units exceed this number, last born will be annihilated, or may be substituted by child of parent's choice . . ." "... there was an old woman who lived in a shoe . . ." "aunt sara always lied about her age - but she couldn't fool Them . . . .

. . . there's no such things as grandparents anymore. These kinks in the system had been smoothed out long ago . . . . . . i heard that she went out to the mailbox one day and never returned."

Sweaty hands squeeze each other reassuringly. But there's no need to worry. This is right. This is the Law.

A fly vibrated up and down the window pane - searching for the escape that wasn't there. It's sixteen subdivided eyes ogled as 16 chubby fingers descended upon its small hairy body and gently pressed it against the glass.

. . . cold metal gleams in the dewey sunlight, as it programs a new day's work . . .

Small cupped hands delicately capture and cage it. A wide blue eye peeps through thumbs into the zumming darkness.

The fly skittered - throwing itself against the walls of its skin prison - blindly making no progress. Squeezing it would be fun, pull the wings off, make it squirm - make it scream, make it sorry for getting caught.

. . . but deliver us from evil. Amen.

The chubby hands began to close tightly - closing off air and life- skin sensing the quickened thrum of wings. Then - impulsively the fingers uncurled . . .

"... who had so many children, she knew not what to do . . ." Annihilate.