

Cordelia  
Strube



Mitosz

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*for Carson*



Milo hears more noise than usual coming through the wall. A thumping sound: Robertson's head? Didn't Tanis say he had outgrown head banging?

'I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!' Strapped into his protective helmet, Robertson can go on like this for hours, spacing his words at regular intervals, using the same inflections. Tanis's response is inaudible through the wall but is probably, 'You don't hate me, possum. You've just had a bad day.' She will sit with her son for however long it takes, steadily offering soothing words. If she's lucky, he'll allow her to put her hand on his shoulder. When he lets her touch him, she says, it all feels manageable again. For five minutes. Her love for him can be painful to watch. Milo has walked them to school and seen the open wound of her need to protect her child. Half a block from the schoolyard Robertson insists she let him walk alone. Tanis obeys, smiling brightly and calling out, 'Have a good day, possum!' Stooped, without looking back, Robertson shuffles into the mob, a lone target. Turning from the yard, Tanis's face ages, the forced cheer fading into haggard determination.

'Don't start that or I'll eat you for fucking breakfast!' Robertson shouts. He frequently says he'll eat people for fucking breakfast. What's different about tonight is that his father shouts back. 'Can you for one second think about anyone but yourself? Look what you're doing to your mother. You're destroying your mother!'

Robertson's father doesn't normally shout. He cuts his grass and edges his flower beds. He wants to resurrect the fence dividing his lawn from Milo's weed patch but Tanis insists it would make her feel cramped. 'I don't want to look out my window and stare at a fence.' She has confided to Milo that the real reason she opposes Christopher on the fence is that she wants Robertson to feel free to 'hang' with Milo. She is the only person in living memory who considers him a good influence.

'I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!'

'Look at her,' Christopher screams. 'You're killing her, you're killing your mother!'

'I'll eat you for fucking breakfast!'

Milo can't listen anymore. He hurries downstairs, away from their torment.

'One of these days somebody's going to get hurt,' Wallace says, practising his golf swing in the living room.

'Don't say that.' Milo waters the spider plants.

'Might be better for all parties. Two's company, three's a crowd.'

'He needs both his parents.'

'Do they need him?'

Wallace shakes the crumbs from a chip package into his mouth, crumples the bag and pitches it into the wastebasket. Nothing bothers Wallace. Nuclear war could be declared and Wallace would say, 'More junk removal.' His business is junk removal, is, in fact, called Friendly Junk Removal. There's no end of work, no end of junk, particularly with recession house foreclosures. Wallace tosses the remnants of the evictees' personal belongings, photo albums and birthday cards into the truck without a hint of a wistful sigh. Milo, chronically short of cash, assists Wallace when Pablo isn't available. As Wallace forces his way into what they hope will be unoccupied houses – some evictees resist evacuation despite repeated notices – Milo is frequently stalled in the kitchen, staring at a fridge festooned with lists and recipes, children's drawings, graduation and baby photos, vet bills. 'Get a move on,' Wallace will command, 'we got two hours to clear this fucking shithole.'

Wallace takes another swing. 'That kid's fucked up. I mean, seriously.'

'Who isn't?'

'You want to work tomorrow?'

Milo hasn't worked as an actor for over a year if you disregard his silent appearances in commercials – he's currently moderately popular as set dressing for fast food and big box chain campaigns. Last month he screwed in a light bulb in a Canadian Tire ad. His agent says Milo is experiencing a renaissance as *Everyman*. 'Spreading gut, losing hair, it's all working for you,' his agent says. But Milo knows the reason he hasn't gotten a decent part for over a year is that he no longer knows how to act.

'Isn't Pablo available?' he asks.

'He's getting a tooth pulled.'

‘Why?’

‘Fuck if I know.’

‘Nobody gets their teeth pulled anymore.’

‘He’s fucking Mexican. You want the gig or not?’

In Milo’s last stage role, as Konstantin in *The Seagull*, he began to think too much and was conscious of every movement he made onstage. It was an Equity Showcase production for which he wasn’t paid but given the opportunity to showcase his magic. Milo would arrive at the theatre three hours before curtain in an effort to inhabit Konstantin, to work up a desire for Nina and the compulsion to blow his brains out. He’d skip rope for an hour to induce Konstantin’s weariness, drink black coffee to attain his edginess, dredge personal experience to suffer his despair. As the curtain rose and his cue came closer, he waited to exit Milo’s world and enter Konstantin’s. This had always happened in the past: he would forget who he was and become who he was supposed to be. But that was before his father deserted him, leaving Milo steeped in shame although clueless as to what he had done to make his father bail on him. He preferred his father’s wrath to the resounding rejection of abandonment. What little self-worth he had managed to nurture in adulthood left him, because a father only abandons a worthless son. And so the futility that began onstage became pervasive. Now Milo acts badly 24/7.

‘Whose house is it?’

‘What do you mean “whose house”? Some fucking loser.’

‘Is it a family house, a single occupant, a childless couple?’

‘What’s the fucking difference?’

Milo can’t think of the difference. It’s all lives lost to landfill.

‘Fine,’ Wallace says. ‘I’ll ask Jorge.’

‘No, I’ll do it.’

‘Suit yourself,’ Wallace says, ‘just don’t spend six hours staring at the fridge for fuck’s sake.’

The banging stops at two a.m. Milo lifts the pillow off his head but still can’t sleep and considers going next door to ensure that no one has been hurt. They can seem so comfortable, the three of them, in the backyard flipping burgers,

tossing the ball for the dog. Sometimes Milo sits in darkness, undetected, on his side of the yard, and looks in their windows. Tanis and Christopher often share a bottle of wine at the kitchen table, conversing easily. Milo envies their intimacy, their shared troubles, their abnormal son. When he moved back in after his father disappeared, he could hear them making love. It sounded as though they were trying to save each other from drowning. Not anymore. Now the only noise coming through the wall is the TV. Or screams.

He climbs their deck and peers through the sliding glass doors. An old lady hoarder occupied this house while Milo was growing up. Her porch was stacked with newspapers, broken toys, bikes, pots, lawn mowers, chairs. Milo's father referred to her as 'the fire hazard.' The old woman never made a sound on her side of the wall. When she died, Christopher and Tanis bought and gutted the place, filling it with colour and their angel-faced son, who seemed normal, although Milo's father declared him 'backward.' Milo didn't argue because no matter what his rebuttal, his father would argue it. Gustaw had argued himself out of a business and out of a wife. He argued with Christopher about the fence, and with Tanis about her 'shit machine of a mutt.' Towards the end, none of the neighbours would venture into a conversation with Gustaw for fear of becoming embroiled. Milo was able to endure his father only for short visits. The long-suffering, despised adult son caring for his elderly father was a role he could play. With the rebelliousness of youth gone, Milo took pride in his ability to withstand the blows, to resist being drawn into battles he could not win. 'I don't know how you put up with your father,' neighbours confided, and Milo smiled benignly, so secure was he in his role as the misunderstood, underappreciated son.

Of course he still yearned for the old man's approval. On the opening night of *The Seagull*, Milo peered through the slit in the curtains, scanning the audience for Gustaw. His father would see, finally, the scope of Milo's talent. He imagined him jolting at the sound of the gunshot, and possibly a tear rolling down his cheek. After the final curtain Milo waited for the tentative knock on the dressing room door, the awkward embrace, the bewilderment, 'Son, I didn't know you had it in you. You have a gift.' But Gustaw never made the performance or, if he did, never admitted it, and decamped soon after, leaving Milo without the force of his father's loathing to resist. Thrown off balance, he has been stumbling ever since.



Only the light above the Wedderspoons' kitchen sink is on. The table has not been cleared; spaghetti hardens on the plates. This is highly unusual. Tanis always clears the table and does the dishes. Formerly a director of human resources, she became a full-time homemaker to look after Robertson and drive him to appointments with doctors, psychologists and behavioural therapists.

It's not surprising that the sliding doors are unlocked. Tanis and Christopher are Block Parents and rarely lock their doors. Milo finds her in the living room on the rocking chair, watching a muted samurai movie.

'Are you all right?' he asks.

'You heard?'

'Maybe I should've come over sooner.'

'He's asleep on the floor. Can you help me lift him?'

'Of course.' He follows her up the stairs, wondering why she hasn't asked Christopher to lift their son.

Robertson lies prone, his head inches from the wall. Tanis carefully removes the helmet. Freed of consciousness, Robertson could be any pink-cheeked boy on the threshold of life. Tanis steps back, allowing Milo room to manoeuvre. He slides his arms under Robertson's knees and back. Tanis cradles the boy's head as Milo transfers him to the bed. They lay him down gently, pulling the comforter around him. Tanis kisses his forehead, holding her lips against his skin. She has told Milo that the only time she can be sure Robertson won't recoil from her is when he is unconscious.

Back downstairs she resumes rocking and staring at the muted samurai movie. Voiceless warriors swing blades at intruding ninjas. Milo tries to think of encouraging words but knows they have tried everything: drugs, psychotherapy, dietary changes, chelation therapy, supplements, herbs, homeopathics. They have spent their life savings on their son.

'Christopher thinks he's turning into a juvenile delinquent.'

'He's only eleven,' Milo says.

'Next year he'll have a different teacher for every subject. I won't be able to kiss all their asses.'

Tanis has devoted countless hours to the chores Robertson's teachers prefer to avoid: arts and crafts prep and clean-up, flash-card duty, one-on-one reading, vomit mop-up.

A samurai thrusts his sword into a ninja's neck, causing blood to spurt from the ninja's mouth. Tanis's relentlessly curly hair, usually restrained with clips, tumbles over her face, hiding her expression.

'Christopher's leaving,' she says.

'Where's he going?'

'Away.'

'For how long?'

'Forever.'

This information catapults Milo. This couple that he has admired, that talk to each other, that work things out and love their son, cannot separate.

'Does Robertson know?' he asks.

'Not yet.'

'Maybe you should talk about it in the morning.'

'He hit Robertson.'

'When?'

'Tonight.'

'Hard?'

'What do you mean "hard"? He hit him.'

'But people do that,' Milo says.

'What people?'

'My father.'

'Oh, well, that's different. Your father was ... your father wasn't normal.'

'What's normal?'

'A father who doesn't hit his child.' She begins to twirl some of her hair so hard it looks as though it hurts.

'Why don't you see how you feel in the morning?' Milo suggests, standing as though trapped in netting, understanding he has no place here.

'A ten-year-old boy was abducted and sexually assaulted for six hours,' she says. 'What could be worse than that? Death, I suppose. I worry about Robertson. He'll talk to anybody.'

Milo has witnessed Robertson speaking with total strangers. He'll ask them abruptly about things most people would only ponder. Deformity fascinates him and he won't hesitate to ask the disabled what it's like to have flaps for arms or a misshapen head. He reprimands anyone who litters, regardless of

their size. And, of course, if he overhears a conversation in which he feels he should take part, he will, in that too-loud voice of his.

‘They were bouncing a basketball off his head,’ Tanis says. ‘Usually he manages to avoid them, pretends to be tying a shoelace or something. When a group of kids starts to pass he jumps up and tries to blend in. It didn’t work today.’

‘Was he hurt?’

‘Not physically.’

‘Is he going to school tomorrow?’

‘I don’t know.’ She twirls her hair. ‘They win if he doesn’t go.’

Milo would like to ask, ‘Don’t they win anyway? Has Robertson *ever* won?’ But Tanis seems scarily fragile, and her husband is leaving her. A samurai warrior, dishonoured in defeat, kneels and commits hara-kiri.

‘Sorry if we kept you awake,’ she says.

‘Don’t worry about it.’

‘You should get some sleep.’

‘Ditto,’ he says.

She nods as the warrior falls forward over his dagger and blood pools around him.

‘Till tomorrow then,’ Milo says.

Closing the sliding doors, he can still hear her rocking.

‘Hope there aren’t any fucking Rottweilers,’ Wallace says. ‘Last house I did there were *two* fucking Rottweilers. Black.’

‘All Rottweilers are black,’ Milo says.

‘These were, like, *totally* fucking black.’ Wallace slides a flathead screwdriver between the door and frame, and then leverages the cylinder out of the lock as he twists the doorknob with a clamp wrench. ‘We’re in,’ he says. ‘Get a fucking move on. And no way do you read their fucking mail.’

The rancid stench of abandonment greets them. Wallace immediately starts taking photos of the contents and condition of the house while Milo shakes out a garbage bag and begins to toss in the mail. It’s mostly bills, easy to ignore. It’s the personal letters that stop him, carefully penned and sent. When his father disappeared, Milo felt obliged to respond to Gustaw’s personal mail. It was Christmas, which meant greeting cards from relatives his father couldn’t stand. Gustaw wanted to forget Poland, the Nazi invasion, the raping and pillaging, the betrayal of Jews and the theft of their property, the mass graves, the Russian invasion, the raping and pillaging, the slaughter of priests. Gustaw remade himself in Canada, became Gus and atheist, learned English and, with much practice, removed all traces of Polish from his accent, even mastering the ‘th’ sound. Reborn as a Canadian, he married a bubbly Canadian girl and then argued her to death. Milo remembers the soft hairs on her forearms, the smell of Bailey’s Irish Cream on her breath and the ragged sound of her sobs, but little else, except the arguing.

Pablo stumbles through the front door.

‘I thought you had to go to the dentist,’ Milo says.

‘I been already,’ Pablo mumbles through gauze.

‘Did he say it was okay for you to work?’

‘He don’t know shit.’ He pulls a piece of gauze out of his mouth, sees blood on it and shoves it back in. ‘That *hijo de puta* charge me two hundred bucks, can you believe that?’

‘What the fuck are *you* doing here?’ Wallace demands, clutching his sledgehammer. Any furniture too big for the truck gets demolished in seconds.

‘I need cash,’ Pablo says.

‘No fucking slacking, asswipe, you read me?’

‘*Sí, sí.*’

Pablo, although short, can lift entire couches. He spends hours bodybuilding and comes to cause destruction wearing a bodybuilding belt. For this reason, Milo leaves the heavy lifting to the boys. Upstairs he empties a closet of a mildewed fake fur coat and a wedding dress covered in plastic, several pairs of high-heeled shoes moulded to the shape of a small foot, boxes of obsolete PC technology, exercise equipment and numerous garbage bags filled and labelled. Presumably the evictees had intended to take the bags of *summer clothes* and *winter hats/gloves* but had, at the last moment, realized they had nowhere to store them.

‘Milo,’ Pablo calls. ‘Check this out.’ He beckons Milo to a pink and blue room undisturbed by the evacuation. ‘This is a baby’s room, man.’

‘So?’

‘Nothing’s been used, man. Everything’s, like, still wrapped up. There’s never been no baby here.’

Milo looks at basket of baby toys wrapped in cellophane. ‘What’s your point?’

‘They couldn’t have no *bambinos*. They got the house and the nursery but no babies. That’s sad, man. They just left everything.’

‘What else are they supposed to do with it?’

The upstairs back room of Milo’s house was intended for a baby. His parents referred to it as *the baby’s room*. But after repeated miscarriages the baby’s room became the back room again, and Milo’s parents stopped exchanging the smallest of tender gestures. From the age of four, Milo never saw them sit in the same room at the same time, although they continued to share a bed, and argue. He’d block his ears with his teddy bears until Mrs. Cauldershot, with hands like sandpaper, yanked them away from him. ‘Best to keep busy,’ she told him. ‘Sitting around never helped anybody.’ Which is probably true. Milo has done more sitting around than keeping busy and look where it’s got him, en route to becoming a fire hazard. But then wasn’t Gustaw mercilessly busy? Isn’t it possible he walked into the storm to *stop* being busy, to inhale the brisk air, to die?

The bubbly Canadian girl died of a heart attack at forty-two.

'Wakey, wakey,' Pablo says, 'you don't want the boss man on your back. We got fleas. He wants us to pull up the hall carpet.' Pablo tucks his track pants into his socks and starts ripping up broadloom with an X-acto knife. Just the mention of fleas starts Milo scratching. He too tucks his pants into his socks.

'We got to get poison to spray on these suckers,' Pablo says. 'If I bring bugs to my girlfriend's, she'll kill me.'

Pablo's girlfriend is always about to kill him. Milo has difficulty understanding what Pablo gets out of the relationship, but then who is Milo to judge, having blown each and every one of his relationships? 'I don't think she'll kill you, Pablo.'

'Are you fucking slackers getting a move on?' bellows Wallace. 'No fucking group therapy, you read me?'

Wallace doesn't like it when Pablo and Milo commune.

'She told me,' Pablo says, 'I'm not committed. She says I'm always doing stuff without her. What's she talking about, I gave her a ring.' He rips up more carpet. 'What's she want from me? I gave her a *ring*.'

Milo rolls up pieces of carpet and binds them with twine. 'Maybe she wants affection rather than material things. I mean, rings are just rings.' Although maybe if he'd given Zosia a ring, she wouldn't have dumped him. 'Where did you buy it?' he asks.

'Walmart. They got nice jewellery there.'

'Oh, so it wasn't like an engagement ring?'

'Shit, no. It was a honey-I-love-you ring. That's what guys do, they buy girls rings. You never done that?'

'No.' Zosia left a silk scarf behind. In moments of howling woefulness Milo lies with it draped over his face. What if he'd bought her a honey-I-love-you ring? 'How much did it cost?'

'What?'

'The ring.'

'Fifty bucks.'

'Maybe it was too cheap. Maybe she wanted an expensive ring.'

'Not Maria. She don't like extravagances.'

'How do you know? I mean, maybe she just says that.'

'*Qué?*'

‘Maybe she just says she doesn’t like extravagances. Maybe she’s secretly hoping you’ll splurge.’

‘What do you know? You never bought a girl a ring.’

The sound of splintering wood interrupts them. ‘I told you deadbeats to shut the fuck up.’

‘*Come mierda*,’ Pablo mutters, which Milo knows from previous translations means ‘eat shit.’

At McDonald’s, Pablo continues to work out the girlfriend thing. ‘Sometimes, when she’s shouting at me, I’m thinking she’s trying to reach out. I saw that on *Oprah*. When people shout, they’re just trying to reach out.’

Is that what Milo’s parents were doing? Is that what Christopher and Robertson were doing?

‘She’s shouting because you’re not fucking getting it, asshole,’ Wallace says.

‘You are a very negative person, Wallace. Always. You are just trying to protect yourself from being hurt.’

‘By who, dickwad?’

‘You never loved a girl, Wallace.’

‘What the fuck do you know about it?’

‘I know you never loved nobody. Not even your mother.’

‘Fuck you, asshole, you fucking Mexican.’

‘He’s Cuban,’ Milo says.

The afternoon shift involves spraying bug killer throughout the house. Pablo takes charge, even spraying himself.

‘That’s toxic,’ Milo warns.

‘If I bring fleas to Maria’s she’ll kill me.’

‘It’s getting hard to breathe, Pablo.’ They remove more labelled garbage bags and broken exercise equipment. On good days Milo discovers books in the deserted homes but the only books here are *How to Eat What You Want and Stay Skinny* and *How to Get the Love You Want*, both of which Pablo intends to give Maria.

‘You have to forgive people,’ he says. ‘That’s what it’s all about.’

‘Forgive them for what?’ Milo asks.

‘What they did to you, forgive them. I saw this movie about this family who were all mad at each other. At the end they forgave each other, were all, like, hugging and kissing. It made me cry.’

‘It’s a fucking movie, butthead,’ Wallace says, emptying a chest of drawers at their feet.

‘Wallace, people do forgive each other. If you love somebody, you forgive them.’

Milo tries to forgive his father. Everyone has to move beyond blaming their parents, don’t they? Particularly if their parents are dead, or presumed dead. Increasingly Milo feels a seeping regret for opportunities lost, distances maintained, intentions misunderstood. After all, as his father was so fond of telling him, he’s had it easy. Milo was not a child in war-ravaged Poland, did not cower under a table while five drunken Russians raped his beloved sister. According to Gus, Poles were spineless, letting the Nazis, then the Russians, walk all over them. According to Gus, Poles turned on Poles so they could steal their pigs. Poles betrayed the Jewish boy who’d been buried under corpses and had run naked to Gus’s father’s barn. When the Nazis came for Jakob, he was in the woods searching for his cousin, even though it was assumed that the cousin was in a mass grave along with Jakob’s parents and uncle. The Nazis lured the Jews to town squares by telling them they were taking them to Palestine. Then they’d march them to the graves, force them to strip and trample the recently murdered to make room for their own soon-to-be-dead bodies.

When Jakob returned from searching for his cousin, Gustaw’s father told him he had to leave immediately or they would all be shot. Jakob had become like a brother to Gus; they’d shared a bed and talked about outer space and how one day Jakob would fly a rocket to the moon. Gustaw never forgave his father for ordering Jakob to leave. He watched his friend creep into the woods like an animal. Within days he was back, shivering and begging for food. Gus’s mother packed him some bread and cheese. Gus’s father told Jakob that if he returned again, he would shoot him.

Such grim reminiscences cause Milo tremors of compassion for his father, until he remembers Gustaw swatting his head after parent-teacher interviews. ‘How can my son be such an *idiot*?’ Milo knew that Gus was longing for his other sons who weren’t idiots, the ones who died before they were born.

...



Robertson tosses the ball for the dog. Fortunately for Sal, Robertson, unlike normal children, is never bored by this activity. He can play fetch for hours.

‘How goes it?’ Milo asks, approaching slowly because sudden movements startle the boy. ‘Any snails about?’

‘Didn’t look.’

‘Did you go to school today?’

‘Nope.’ Robertson has difficulty interacting with people but not with animals. Dogs strain against their leashes to lick his palms. ‘My dad left.’

‘Did he say anything to you?’

‘About what?’

‘Why he was leaving?’

Robertson begins speaking in the rushed manner he adopts when he doesn’t understand but wants to appear as though he does. ‘He’s tired. I don’t know, maybe he’s just tired of me, he works too hard, maybe he just needs a rest. Mummy says it’s all right. It’s just for now. I’m not easy to be around. I get mad and I don’t know why. I’m going to finish the patio.’ Since April Robertson has been laying patio stones on gravel in symmetrical patterns. Tanis said she knew he was different when he was three and lining up his toys. He would become extremely distressed if she tried to tidy up, thereby disturbing his order.

‘It’s looking good,’ Milo says, offering Robertson some cashews. The boy takes a handful and scatters them around the garden for the squirrels. Sal, ball in mouth, pants at his feet. Robertson takes the ball and tosses it. Milo lies back in the grass, not wanting to crowd Robertson with conversation. It’s hard to imagine the house without Christopher. Tanis will drink alone. Robertson will seek refuge in World of Warcraft without Christopher to stop him.

Scratching at flea bites, Milo sees Tanis preparing dinner. How strange to set places for only two. What can Christopher be doing? Watching TV in a Days Inn? Does he despise himself for hitting his son? It’s not the first time he has had to be rough with him. When Robertson has episodes in stores, and onlookers stare disapprovingly – believing him to be a spoiled child in need of discipline – Christopher throws him over his shoulder and carries him out. He has no choice but to force him into the car and wait for the tantrum to pass. The car functions as a therapeutic quiet room, a term they learned after sending Robertson to the Child and Parent Resource Centre. Overall, it

seems to Milo, Christopher has shown tremendous restraint. As much as he loves Robertson, there are times when Milo feels an urge to slap some sense into him.

Sal lies on her back with her paws in the air, waiting for Robertson to rub her belly.

‘Robertson,’ Milo says. ‘Sal wants tummy rubbing.’

Robertson rubs her tummy but doesn’t talk to her as he usually does.

‘Have you ever tried pretending you’re an alien?’ Milo asks.

Robertson doesn’t respond. Unlike normal people, he doesn’t feel compelled to reply to mindless chatter.

‘Because,’ Milo continues, ‘I’ve found that pretending to be an alien with the capacity to vaporize at any second helps me through difficult situations.’

‘You mean like being beamed up on a transporter?’ Robertson is a Trekkie, his favourite characters being the androids who, though emotionless, have great curiosity – and wistfulness – about being human.

‘I prefer having the capacity to vaporize at any second,’ Milo says. ‘Who wants to wait around for a transporter?’

‘So where do you vaporize to?’

‘My planet, where everybody thinks like I do. We get along great, no wars. So I don’t mind visiting Earth occasionally. I find it quite fascinating, actually. Studying humans.’

‘As long as you can vaporize at any second.’

‘That’s right.’

Robertson faces Milo, which is a bit disconcerting. Generally he avoids eye contact and glances at people sideways. Under such scrutiny, Milo realizes the absurdity of his alien ploy. It works for him because he has never experienced the kind of suffering and isolation Robertson endures daily.

‘Are you saying I should pretend I’m an alien at school?’ Robertson asks.

‘Anytime you feel like it. Generally I become an alien when people act like assholes. I also picture them naked and make mental notes for my report.’

‘Who do you report to?’

‘Other aliens. My comrades back home.’

Robertson considers this, blinking repeatedly as he does when he’s working things out. ‘You can do that because you’re an actor,’ he says. ‘I can’t do that.’

Tanis has told Milo that children with Autism Spectrum Disorders are very literal. They miss nuances, which is why socializing proves challenging for them. Social conventions and codes are beyond the comprehension of the autistic – they don't understand that people rarely say what they mean.

'I don't see why you can't vaporize,' Milo says. 'It's all in your head. How you look at things. If you can vaporize at any second, there's no point sweating over anything, just vanish.'

'You *can't* vaporize at any second. That's stupid.' He leaves abruptly, as he often does without so much as a 'see you later.' Social niceties never seemed important to Milo until he met Robertson. Sal glances briefly at Milo, who offers to toss the ball for her. She too turns away, trailing Robertson. Once in the kitchen, Robertson shuts the blinds.

Standing or sitting naked in front of strangers in cold rooms pays thirty bucks an hour. Despite the space heater, Milo feels a chill, which adds to the thrill of being nude in front of strangers. They *must* look at him, have paid to look at him, he exists – even with the spreading gut and thinning hair – and can't be ignored. There is power in this, and in his ability to hold a pose for twenty minutes. A concentration is required that he is unable to muster outside the studio. Outside, his thoughts run on, split up, turn back, scrambling over one another. In the studio they sit quietly with their hands folded in their laps.

It is while he's standing with one arm overhead and the other resting on his uplifted forehead that his mission becomes clear. He must find Christopher. Without Christopher, Tanis and Robertson cannot mend. Tanis doesn't realize this; she will soldier on, clipping back her hair. Robertson will absorb the blame for the loss of his father just as Milo internalized the blame for the loss of Gus, despite searching for him long after the police called off the sniffer dogs. Clambering in the ravines, acting a grief he could not feel, he spoke to the homeless about the old man in the beige windbreaker, following their leads, imagining his father a King Lear under exploding skies. During his quest, Milo lost twenty-four pounds and developed a swarthy complexion. Wallace called him the Marlboro Man. Women looked at him differently but Milo did not return their glances, so intent was he on his task. When asked about Gus, he simulated anguish, hoping that by acting it he would feel it. As the weeks passed and he could no longer ignore the fact that money was not being withdrawn from Gus's account, and no credit card transactions were being reported, Milo continued to walk the city. If he stopped searching, it meant Gustaw Krupanski of Krupi and Son Ltd. was dead. The only interruptions Milo allowed were auditions during which he tried not to think; but thinking about not thinking destroyed his spontaneity, and he stood empty, unable to give or take. His agent told him the same thing happened to Olivier. 'Sir Larry couldn't look anybody in the eye,' Stu said, 'asked the other actors

not to look at him because it would throw him. For a while he couldn't even be alone onstage. Seriously, chief, everybody goes through rough patches. Your dad died, give yourself time to grieve.' Milo waited to be struck and pitched into the throes of grief he'd acted when he still knew how to act. As though preparing for a part, he read about the stages of grief, assuming some common behaviours, all the while appalled at how badly he was acting.

'Did you tell Robertson to pretend to be an alien?' Tanis has been pounding on Milo's back door for several minutes.

'Yes.'

'What were you thinking? He feels like an alien *all the time*. Not a second goes by when he doesn't feel like a total freak.'

'Being an alien is quite different from being a total freak,' Milo says.

'Oh, really? How so?'

'Aliens belong on other planets. They aren't total freaks on their own planets.'

'He tried to strangle a boy today. He said he was pretending to be an alien when a human threatened him. He had no choice but to respond with his superior alien strength.'

The image of Robertson, nurturer of snails and small creatures, grabbing the throat of another human being, forces Milo to seek support from the fridge. He leans against it, sobered by its rumble. 'I'm sorry,' he says. 'It was supposed to stay inside his head.'

'What?'

'A different perspective.'

'What perspective?'

'Of being special. He is special, just not everybody can see it. I was trying to help him feel special regardless of what people say.'

'Well, it didn't work, Milo. The school's hysterical. They don't want him back.'

'They can't stop him.'

'Would you want to go where you're not wanted? Where you're *despised*?'

'What if I go with him?'

'What do you mean?'

‘I could go with him and hang out in the yard, shoot some hoops.’

‘They’re not going to let some strange man into the schoolyard.’

‘You could tell them I’m not strange.’

‘Oh, okay, so I say, “This is my neighbour, an unemployed actor who’s got nothing better to do than hang around my son”. That would make him real popular.’

Robertson scrambles towards them holding two snails. ‘These were under the steps. Don’t know what they’re doing there. I’m going to put them on the hostas.’

Tanis rubs her face. Milo knows she despairs over her son’s concerns for pests that destroy her foliage. Robertson charges to the hosta bed and sets the snails carefully onto the leaves.

‘Has he forgotten he tried to strangle somebody?’ Milo whispers.

‘Who knows. Who knows what’s going on in his head.’ She starts down the steps.

‘Where is Christopher working these days?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘I was just curious,’ Milo says. ‘He was downsized, wasn’t he? Didn’t he get some other job?’

‘At Empire Financial, why?’

‘Oh, well, someone I know is looking for work in the financial industry. I thought I’d mention that Christopher just got hired.’

‘He was hired months ago. Get with the program, Milo, and please don’t mess with my son’s head. He’s got enough problems.’

Robertson begins lining up patio stones. Afraid to mess with his head, Milo lies down on the grass on his side of the yard. Sal sniffs him briefly before wandering off. ‘The patio’s coming along great,’ he offers. Robertson keeps working. If only life could be as simple as creating some small order amidst the chaos.

‘He took the ball from *me*,’ Robertson says after several minutes. ‘I was playing by myself and he took the ball.’

‘Whose ball was it?’

‘The school’s.’

‘I guess you’re probably supposed to share it then.’

‘They don’t share it. They *never* share it. I had it first. He wasn’t even playing.’

‘Who?’

‘Billy.’

‘Were there other kids around?’

‘Just Billy. He wasn’t even playing. He said I couldn’t play but he wasn’t even playing.’

‘Billy the Bully,’ Milo says. ‘What an asshole.’ Tanis would want him to remain objective. She invariably tries to view the altercation from the other kid’s perspective to help explain the situation to Robertson. Her experience in human resources has led her to believe that problems can be solved. In Milo’s experience, problems cling like barnacles. ‘I would’ve kicked his ass,’ he says.

‘Strangling’s probably not the best choice,’ Robertson admits.

‘Going for the throat usually scares people.’

‘He was scared all right.’

‘The hitch is you could kill a person by mistake, going for the throat.’ Milo doesn’t look at Robertson for fear of making him retreat. Instead he listens to the soft tapping of the bricks.

‘He was scared all right,’ Robertson repeats. Is this how delinquency begins? Will he crave the adrenalin buzz he felt with Billy the Bully’s neck in his grip? Did he throttle the boy because his father hit him? Milo certainly did. Nothing relieved the sense of injustice like kicking around another, preferably smaller, boy. Little provocation was required. Although Milo had the sense to only beat up strangers who couldn’t trace him. In the schoolyard he was just Milo the nose-picker.

‘The principal says I can’t go back unless I apologize.’

‘That’s rough.’

‘Would you apologize?’

Milo has never been good at apologies. Generally he avoids confrontation, despite inner rumblings of rebellion. With his father he would feign obedience, until Gus, fed up with his diversion tactics, would fling whatever was on his plate – potatoes, beets, Brussels sprouts – at him. *How can my son be such an idiot?*

‘Would you apologize?’ Robertson repeats.

‘Probably. To avoid further trouble.’

‘Then they’ll just hit me again and I won’t be able to hit back.’

Tanis summons Robertson for dinner. 'Right now, please,' she adds. Before the vaporizing alien incident, she would allow him to dawdle. Does she no longer consider Milo a good influence?

He lies with Zosia's scarf over his face, picturing her smoky, weary eyes. She expects the worst, and when it happens only shrugs, trudging onward. She views Canadians as overindulged children to be tolerated but not taken seriously. She called Milo a *coaster*. 'You coast,' she said in her Latvian accent, heavy on the c's and slow on the s's. 'One morning you'll wake up and you'll be old and you'll have nothing.' Zosia studied electrical engineering in Russia, worked hard among misogynists to earn her degrees. In Canada the only work available to her, despite retraining, was waitressing, which is how she met Milo. Zosia was attracted to him because he wasn't an alcoholic. She said all Russian men are alcoholics. With such low expectations, Milo could not disappoint, or anyway that's what he thought, until she dumped him. He wishes he'd bought her a honey-I-love-you ring.

Wallace told Milo that Zosia was after Canadian citizenship. 'She wants your fucking wedding vows, butthead.'

This, of course, had not occurred to Milo. He'd thought she was after his body and his mind, not necessarily in that order. She certainly wasn't after his income. Should he have it out with her? Gus was a big believer in 'having it out' with people. Maybe Milo should show up at the Copper Pipe where Zosia slings designer pizzas and simply ask, 'What did I do?' He could even take a honey-I-love-you ring along as backup.

He lifts her scarf a few inches off his face then lets it drift back down as he hears Wallace returning from the airport. Milo agreed to board Wallace's mother for a sizeable cash sum. Normally Wallace's baritone carries upstairs easily but Milo hears only a chirpy British voice. He has never met Wallace's mother, even though they lived blocks away growing up, because she was always working two jobs. Someone knocks on his door.

'Who is it?'

'Can I talk to you for a sec?'

Behind the door stands a tremulous Wallace. 'What's the problem?'

'I fucking forgot to make up her bed. Do you have any, like, nice sheets and towels?'



'Whatever's in the closet.'

'They're fucking sad, man, they're, like, *totally* used.'

Milo hears clomping on the stairs. 'Did I hear you use that word again, Wally?'

'Sorry, Mum, I was just ...'

She appears, tiny, sparkly, with electric currents for eyes. 'Are you Milo?'

'Yes. You must be Mrs. ...?'

'Call me Vera. What's all this fuss about then, Wally?'

'It's just,' Wallace murmurs, 'we don't have nice towels and stuff.'

'What's that got to do with the price of cheese?'

Wallace stares at his feet. 'It's just, I wanted you to have something pretty.'

'What codswallop. Let's have a cuppa.' She turns and climbs down the stairs with surprising speed. 'Will you join us, Milo?'

Wallace looks imploringly at Milo and mouths, 'Please!'

'Not tonight, thank you, Vera,' Milo says. 'There are some digestives in a tin beside the tea things.'

'Oh, how lovely,' Vera exudes. 'Just what the doctor ordered.'

Wallace pushes Milo into the bedroom. 'I'm not going to make it through this.'

'Sure you will.'

Wallace hasn't seen his mother since she returned to her native English burb years ago. He comes up with annual excuses not to visit her. She lives with her sisters who, according to Wallace, are all a hundred and never shut up.

'She wants to meet my girlfriend,' Wallace moans.

'You don't have one.'

'Like I don't know that.'

'Just be honest with her.'

'Are you fucking *nuts*? Can you set me up with somebody?'

'What?'

'You know people, like, actresses and stuff. I'll pay her. She just has to act nice and be polite.'

'Oh, come on, Wallace.'

'Waal-lee ...? Your tea's getting cold. Shall I make us a sanny?'

Wallace presses his hands together in a pleading gesture. 'I'll pay you a bonus.'

‘Waal-lee ...?’

The bullish Wallace morphs into a small boy with downcast eyes and a timorous gait. ‘Coming, Ma,’ he calls back in a singsong voice Milo has never heard before.

In the morning, Milo, ducking behind parked cars, follows Tanis and Robertson to school. A year ago Robertson allowed Tanis to put two fingers on his shoulder as they crossed the street. Now, almost her height, he maintains a distance between them. He says he doesn’t need her to walk him to school, but she insists because it is his last year at the neighbourhood school. Next year he will have to take a bus. She has admitted to Milo that she can’t imagine putting Robertson on a bus, watching the doors close behind him, trying to see through the windows as he searches for a seat. ‘It’ll be rush hour,’ she said. ‘He’s bound to freak.’ They have even considered buying a used car, having sold the Subaru last year to pay off debts.

Mother and son part half a block from the school so the kids in the yard won’t see her. Tanis keeps waving but Robertson doesn’t look back. Milo hides behind some recycling bins as Tanis retraces her steps. She stares hard at the pavement as she walks. Once she has turned the corner, Milo ambles towards the school, pulling his baseball cap low over his forehead. Poses of children part as Robertson makes his way through the yard. Once his back is turned they make faces or pinch their noses. Robertson stops beside the basketball net. Boys ignore him, jumping up and around him. Robertson says something Milo can’t hear above the racket in the yard. A boy in a hoodie shoves him and flips him the finger before resuming dribbling the ball. A stout man with wiry hair, presumably a teacher, approaches Robertson and leads him into the school. The bell rings and the kids begin to line up outside the doors. The boy in the hoodie continues to shoot hoops until the stout man returns. ‘Billy,’ he says sharply, ‘now.’ Billy misses one more shot before slouching towards the entrance. The man pulls off the boy’s hood, revealing a shock of red hair.

Now Milo knows who Billy is.

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