

It is late afternoon on Wednesday, and the house is quiet aside from the gunfire and explosions. They are playing a level set in Paris in 1943, which is thankfully devoid of civilians. Jeremy has the rifle and Fred is using the shotgun. Jeremy is trying to figure out how to move over a low wall in the corner of the map, but he accidentally drops a grenade and frags himself. Fred is in constant motion, seems to have memorized the system of alleyways, and is racking up kills like the other players online are clay pigeons.

“How do you jump?” Jeremy says.

“You can’t jump,” Fred says.

“What?”

“You can’t jump.”

Despite Jeremy’s occasional friendly-fire mishaps and frequent suicides, the resistance delivers a crushing defeat to the occupiers, thanks in large part to Fred’s violent finesse. Jeremy stands and stretches.

“You want anything from the fridge?” he asks.

“Get me a beer.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Get me a Coke.”

In the kitchen Jeremy opens a beer for himself and stands at the window, looking out on the flowers and hedges in the backyard. He is twenty-seven years old and his own apartment is the size of the living room here. His cousin, Fred’s mother, did well for herself with Todd. He likes Todd, but Jeremy would never marry someone

with a ten-year-old kid. He takes another beer from the refrigerator and returns to the couch where Fred, who is thirteen now, has resumed slaughtering Germans.

“Seriously?” he says, when Jeremy passes him the bottle.

“One won’t kill you.”

He has to help him open it, but Fred’s face shows pure glee when he sips, then a brave attempt at non-revulsion as he sets the bottle down. Fred is short for his age, with dark curly hair and serious features that make him look like he’s doing math all the time.

“It’s good,” he says.

Jeremy laughs. “I doubt it.”

“Jump is triangle,” Fred says.

“You little shit.”

This time they fight on Guadalcanal. Again, Fred weaves through the terrain as naturally as if on his way to the bathroom. At one point he gets a kill with one hand while taking a determined sip with the other. Jeremy makes use of his new jumping ability to get killed in a variety of new ways. After a few games in silence, Fred speaks, without taking his eyes from the screen.

“Did you ever fight in trenches like these?” he says. “In real life?”

“Not really. The geography there isn’t like this.”

“Right. But you like, had to shoot from cover and stuff?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you ever, you know, get a guy who was behind cover?”

“Yeah.” Jeremy also does not take his eyes from the screen. It seems like he is being killed repeatedly by one player in particular, someone named nail3ater. When he respawns, he can hardly get his bearings before fire comes out of nowhere and his screen turns red again. He is sick of reading, *Wasted by nail3ater!*

“Cool,” Fred says. “Have you ever thrown a grenade?”

“Not in combat,” Jeremy says. “Why do I keep getting killed by this guy?”

“Who?”

“Nail ater.”

“Oh, Nail Eater. That’s Dakota. He’s in my clan but I hate him.”

“You know him?”

“No, he’s just in my clan. It’s a bunch of people from D.C. and NoVa that play together. I found them online.”

“He lives here?”

“I guess. None of us have ever met.”

“Well he’s an asshole.”

“Yeah, he’s real good. Hang on.”

Fred retrieves a headset from the entertainment center and puts it on. He changes the settings in the game and after a few minutes, he frowns.

“He’s talking shit about you.”

“Watch your mouth,” Jeremy says.

“He says you play like . . . he says you suck.”

“Of course I suck, I’m an adult.”

The battle rages in the Pacific theatre. The light coming through the living room windows has turned from gold to tobacco. Jacqueline will be home soon. Fred presses a button on the headset. When he speaks, it’s not to Jeremy.

“Hey ass-eater, that’s my cousin you’re grieving.”

Jeremy sets his controller on the table and picks up his bottle.

“Shut up, Dakota. Yeah, it’s Fred. Yeah, I’m coming after you now.”

Jeremy watches the screen and nearly smiles at how angry he has become, playing this stupid game. All in all, this isn’t a bad way to spend an afternoon. Better than watching TV alone, doing pull-ups and heating cans of soup. He likes Fred, and being paid is nice. It’s not much, but he’s still only part-time at the bookstore and doesn’t have much else to do. Fred doesn’t really need a babysitter, of course. Jeremy has wondered whether Jacqueline asks him to do this because she thinks it’s good for the PTSD she made up for him. Let her think what she wants.

“Whatever,” Fred says into the mic. “You’re the bitch.”

“Language,” Jeremy says.

“My cousin could beat your ass.”

They hear a car pull into the garage. Fred takes off the headset and looks at the half-full beer bottle in front of him, then at Jeremy, as if his leg is paused over a bear trap and he needs instructions on what to do. Jeremy takes both bottles into the kitchen, drains them, and throws them out.

When he re-enters, Jacqueline is hanging her jacket on the hall tree. She has started wearing more makeup and heels since being promoted to office manager at the real estate firm where she started as a receptionist, where she met Todd.

“Hello, men,” she says. “How’s your day gone?”

“Good,” Fred says.

“Gone,” Jeremy says.

They agree that he will come back on Friday and Monday, when he does not have work. Then Jacqueline walks him out to his car.

“Things are going good at the store, then?” she says.

“Fine. Not much to it, you know?”

“And everything else is going okay?”

The way she says “else” is so neutral it stands out. Jeremy is irritated that she still does this, asks nebulous questions about his general well-being, as if he might be on the verge of some kind of freak-out.

“Affirmative,” he says.

The next day he is the only employee to show up on time at the bookstore, and has to wait ten minutes for the manager to arrive with the keys. The manager, Tom, is only a year older than Jeremy but he’s been at the store for six. He wears thick glasses and tight jeans, and does not acknowledge the time this morning. Jeremy puts on his lanyard and spends his shift solo in the music department, as usual.

It’s a slow day, so he dusts the shelves. As far as he knows, he is the only one who does this, although technically the task should rotate. It sometimes amazes him how little the other sellers do in a shift, though actually he’s thankful, because without the slack to pick up he would be even more bored. He doesn’t lounge and chat like everyone else does, and is certain they think he’s weird because of it. But he’s there to work, not make friends.

Around eleven, an elderly man wanders in and tries to listen to a DVD on the music sampler. He scans the barcode over and over, scowling, and finally leaves the department as if suddenly realizing that everything inside it is beneath him. Thirty seconds later, Tom appears at the counter.

“Everything going okay?” he asks.

“Going good.”

“Just want to make sure we’re being proactive with customer service. Don’t wait for them to come to you, am I right?”

“Yes sir.”

But the afternoon’s only other customer is a man who calls to ask about Mott the Hoople records, and screams at Jeremy for asking how to spell the name. At one o’clock he takes off the lanyard like it’s a bull’s eye. He checks the shift calendar on his way out, sees that he’ll still only get twenty hours a week for the rest of the month. They promised him when he was hired that full-time work was almost guaranteed if he stayed on for three months. It has been six.

At home he goes for a jog, then does some push-ups and pull-ups and crunches in his living room. After a shower he heats up a can of ravioli and puts on the Discovery Channel. It takes great mental effort to avoid brooding on how many days in a row he has gone through this routine, and how many more stretch in front of him.

In bed that night he finds himself thinking about a ridge north of Kajaki in Helmand Province, where he nearly became famous. This was eleven months ago and seven thousand miles away. He and his spotter had set up in the crook between two boulders overlooking the valley. The valley and the mountain and the boulders were all the same oatmeal color. The sky was as blue as an advertisement, and the weather was mild.

On the ridge opposite was a squat stone hut where three or four insurgents were holed up and firing down at a squad pinned in the valley. The squad radioed for artillery and fire support. Jeremy and Haywood were cleared to engage. Through the scope Jeremy could see flashes at the windows of the little stone cube—even at maximum magnification the men were tiny. After five shots at the ridge they had the target ranged. Haywood put the distance at eight thousand feet.

The record, neither one said out loud. The longest confirmed sniper kill in history. Jeremy’s first shot on target

was wide left. He corrected. Over the radio, coordinates were confirmed for an artillery strike. His second shot was closer and punched a crater in the building. An impossible distance. A shot like this would make him a legend. At the window a man stood with a rifle. Artillery inbound.

Jeremy fired and he is still sure, lying in his bed in Alexandria, that he scored a hit. The man blown backwards, gone from the window, gone from the earth. But only a half-second later the building itself became a cloud of powdered rock, stamped out by 105mm shells from seven miles away. Haywood was not sure about the shot. Jeremy thought he was jealous because he was not on the rifle that day. He did not get credit.

Thinking about it has gotten him worked up. His palms are sweating. He should have corrected more after the first shot, or taken fewer to range it. If only the Light Gun had been engaged somewhere else, and not demolished the whole building. Or if Haywood had done his job like he was supposed to. He must have seen it.

Anyway, it didn't matter. Two months later a Brit killed two Taliban machine gunners near Musa Qala. He got them from 8,120 feet, one after the other, then hit the gun they had been manning. Three in a row. Not even God can shoot that well. Jeremy's record would have been short lived.

This is the thought that gives him enough peace to sleep.

On Friday Jacqueline comes home for her lunch hour and makes chicken salad for the boys. She enlists Jeremy to chop celery, and lowers her voice while Fred plays in the living room.

"I just wonder," she says, "if he should be outside or something. Playing soccer with kids his age?"

"He seems all right to me."

"Sure. And you know how grateful I am that you can do this."

Her recipe, which Jeremy loves, includes red grapes, fresh dill, and cashews. However much is left over when she and Fred are done, he will finish it.

"But I think it would be good for him to get out of his box a little," she says. "You think you could suggest something? He won't listen to me, I'm not cool. But you could say something. Take him and some friends to a movie, I don't know."

After she leaves to go back to the office, they settle in on the couch. Nailzater plays with them the whole afternoon. Fred wears the headset but does not turn on his microphone. He seems to be actively gunning for Dakota, but does not admit so much to Jeremy, who has at least slowed down his rate of self-termination. They are taking part in the North African campaign, energetically though seventy years late.

"Did you ever shoot a big machine gun?" Fred asks.

"Once. A truck-mounted .50."

"Was it cool?"

"It wasn't bad."

Jeremy admits to himself that this is one of the best things about hanging out with Fred. His thirteen-year-old cousin is not interested in the politics of international conflict, in bumper-sticker morality, or in the cost to the economy or national psyche, things that have nothing to do with soldiering anyway. He's interested in the visceral experience. In many ways Jeremy gives more credit to Fred's opinions on the subject than to anyone else's. Conveniently, Fred reveres him.

In a later match, Jeremy finds nailzater facing the corner in an attic, and shoots him in the back of the head. Fred starts laughing, and explains.

“He said he was hiding there so he could take a bite of his sandwich. He’s pissed.”

Then something he hears turns his grin to a frown, and Fred switches on the microphone.

“Dakota. Fred. So what? You’d do it too. Yes you would, that’s exactly how you play all the time. That doesn’t even make sense.”

Sure enough, Jeremy is suddenly killed by a headshot from an unseen source, and a line of text credits their friend.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Fred says.

Jeremy spawns, runs for about thirty seconds, and is blasted into the air. He is gritting his teeth. He knows it should not matter, but he cannot shake the vision of an overweight teenager, sitting all day in a basement with a bag of chips for company, talking shit in a stupid game because it’s the one thing he’s good at and he’ll never have to answer for it.

“Let me talk to him,” Jeremy says.

Fred’s anger evaporates. “No, I like playing with him.”

“I’m not going to be mean, just let me hear what he’s saying.”

Fred passes the headset over. The number of voices coming through surprises Jeremy—distorted snippets from half a dozen people, exultations and boasts and frustrated grunts. Constant, fervent profanity. While he is listening, an Allied soldier zigzags up to him, and Jeremy shoots wildly before being stabbed point-blank. *Waxed by nail3ater!*

“Knife kill, bitch,” someone says.

“Is that Dakota?” Jeremy asks.

There is a moment of silence. Fred squirms on the couch. The same voice says, “Yeah.”

“What’s the problem, man?” Jeremy says. “I’m the only one in this game you shoot at?”

“Just paying you back.”

The kid’s voice has that fake-deep sound, like he’s trying to sound older and more masculine than he is. Hearing it makes Jeremy angrier.

“Paying me back for what?”

“For killing me.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?”

Fred says, “Give me the headset.”

A random voice says, “Shut up, faggots.”

“That’s how I play,” Dakota says. “Quit whining.”

“You wouldn’t last two seconds in actual combat.”

“Good thing we’re not in actual combat, then.”

Someone says, “My dick would last two seconds in actual combat,” and another says, “My dick would last two seconds in your mom’s vagina.”

“Give it to me,” Fred says.

“Don’t be a bitch,” Dakota says.

Jeremy takes off the headset and tosses it at Fred’s outstretched hand. He leaves his controller on the table and goes to the kitchen, where he drinks a juice box and looks out the window. Slows his breathing. The hedges are neatly trimmed. Jacqueline and Todd don’t pay a landscaper, as far as he knows, so one of them must get out there with clippers.

When the juice is gone he goes back to the living room, where Fred is laughing again. Dakota has backed off, to his credit, and at least seems to be giving equal opportunity to his targets. Jeremy’s teeth are clenched. He knows it shouldn’t matter. He tries to smile.

He waits twenty minutes or so, then says casually, “We should meet Dakota.”

“What, in real life?” Fred says.

“Yeah. Just get pizza or something.”

“Why?”

“You know, actually meet a human you’re supposedly friends with. Instead of sitting on this couch all day.”

“I don’t know.”

“Ask him.”

“Why would he want to meet us?”

“Guys like that are lonely. They want to make friends.”

Fred, eyes on screen, seems caught by the phrase: Guys like that. Jeremy is not sure what he meant by it. He doesn’t know the first thing about Dakota. But he has a clearer picture, suddenly, of why Jacqueline thinks these afternoons are worth ten dollars an hour. Why there has never been another kid from school hanging out on these weekday afternoons, and why she has an interest in getting him to interact with some new people.

“How do you know?” Fred asks.

“Just ask.”

“I don’t want to.”

“C’mon. I’ll ask him.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

They war on in silence for a few minutes. Once, Jeremy sees an enemy through his rail sights, but the shot is obstructed by one of his teammates. He mows them both down, which goes against training, but feels good.

“Hey, Dakota,” Fred says into the headset. “Yeah, Fred. Hey, do you want to get pizza or something? Yeah, in person. I don’t know. Like, meet up or whatever.”

The round ends, and player statistics appear on the screen. Jeremy’s are at the bottom of the list. *Kills: 3, Deaths: 11, Suicides: 3.*

“I guess,” Fred says. “Exactly. No, my cousin can drive me. Yeah, I’ve been there, it’s good. Okay, cool.”

From the half that Jeremy hears, the conversation seems to go well, animosity brushed off like sand from lips. These kids must be lonely. And there must not be a

stigma anymore, meeting people from the Internet. The plan is for lunch tomorrow, north in D.C., where Dakota apparently lives. Paradise Pizza in Dupont. Unclenching his jaw, Jeremy licks his canines.

That night a cashier at the bookstore calls in sick and the manager phones Jeremy. He works from six to eleven at register four, taking one break for coffee and otherwise grinding nonstop through a battalion of customers. Cashiering is not his strong point—their software is outdated and hard to manage, even at the slow pace of the music department.

Toward the end of the night, a sweating, red-faced man sets at least fifteen magazines on the counter. The one on top is GQ; every one below is an adult magazine—what the store calls “sophisticates.” The man never speaks, but stares defiantly at Jeremy throughout the checkout process. The line behind him has pushed past the ropes, and people are lining up directly at the registers, fanning themselves and shifting their feet. Jeremy is trying to scan, bag, and key in the purchase all at the same time, and when he swipes the man’s card he doesn’t pay attention to the message on the screen, just hands the card back, and the bags, and watches the man fairly bolt from the store.

The woman next in line just wants a newspaper, but now Jeremy sees the monitor. Card not accepted. The red-faced man is gone. How did that happen? Why didn’t he notice there was no receipt? When he excuses himself, the woman holding the newspaper sighs with grave disappointment.

Tom the manager is in the break room.

“And the guy’s gone?” he asks.

“Yes sir.”

“What was the amount?”

“Around a hundred and fifty.”

“Whoo boy.”

Tom takes off his glasses and pinches the bridge of his nose. Jeremy knows that Tom would never make this mistake. On the other hand, Jeremy doubts that he could field strip a Barrett M82, or relay coded ground coordinates to a multi-million dollar targeting system, or stare through a night vision optic for three hours at the edge of a rusting armored truck, waiting for someone who might not actually be there to peek his head around the corner.

“This isn’t good, Jeremy.”

“No sir.”

Chances are low that Tom has ever watched a lung deflate, a wet, pink little balloon shuddering in the open chest cavity of someone he has shared a tent with. It’s unlikely that Tom has ever really considered the phrase *nice shot*, the pleasing cruelty of that oxymoron, after using his right index finger to disembowel a man from two thousand feet away.

“How could you not have noticed?” Tom asks.

There are no official reprimands, no explicit warnings, but when Jeremy leaves the store at eleven-thirty he has the feeling that his job is on shaky ground. If they want to let him go—and they must, everyone hates him—this could be enough cause. In the car he starts laughing. He pounds the steering wheel, smashes his fist into the moon roof. He didn’t notice because he stinks at using the register. Just sucks at it, the same as that stupid game.

Twelve hours later, Fred is waiting on the front steps of his mother’s house. He’s wearing a collared shirt, which he never does, and it unsettles Jeremy. His cousin is not on the same page as he is, though he’s not sure what page

that would be. Fred is actually excited, like he’s meeting a real friend. Jeremy hasn’t thought about what he wants, exactly. He has some notion of proving that the game doesn’t matter. He has a picture of a skinny, scowling teen realizing how completely out of his depth he is.

They take Memorial Bridge across the Potomac and drive north on 14th, park at a meter, and walk through Dupont Circle. It’s sunny out but chilly, and the people thronging the sidewalk sport an array of scarves, mittens, and colorful knit caps with ear flaps. The restaurant, when they get inside, is crowded and trendy, with exposed brick and hardwood floors. They get one of the last tables and sit on the same side.

“I said I’d be wearing this shirt,” Fred says. “He said he’d be wearing a JMU sweater.”

“What, he’s in college?”

“I think it’s like his brother’s or something.”

Jeremy has a beer and Fred has a Coke, and they can’t keep from jerking up to look every time the door opens. An old couple comes in. Then three men. Fred is humming, nodding so that his ball of hair bounces with the tune, but Jeremy is starting to feel uncomfortable. Why did he propose this? Does he really want to intimidate a thirteen-year-old? Then he remembers. “Don’t be a bitch.” That voice, trying so hard to sound deep, as if he could fool anyone. “Quit whining.” While the dispassionate Dakota preys again and again on someone who can’t defend himself. No, this is a good idea. Jeremy rolls up his sleeves.

The door opens, but it’s a woman and her daughter. Their drinks are gone, so Jeremy points at Fred’s glass to ask if he wants another, but Fred is still staring at the door. The daughter is wearing a navy JMU sweatshirt. Coincidence. No—she sees Fred’s shirt and points him out to the mother, and they walk over.

“You must be Fred,” the woman says. She’s in her late forties, short and thin with homemade jewelry on her wrists, a puffy vest and yoga pants. “I’m Elaine, and this is Dakota.”

Dakota is a heavysset, fifteen-year-old girl with a pixie cut and Clark Kent glasses. Her mouth is slightly open, her eyes are glazed.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” Fred says.

Elaine turns to Jeremy and shows perfect teeth. “And you must be Fred’s . . .”

“Cousin. Jeremy.”

They all sit. Jeremy catches Fred’s eye, and Fred makes that foot-over-the-bear-trap look. Jeremy attempts a casual shrug, but he’s also thrown off. The voice makes sense now, of course. And why did he think a kid would come alone to meet strangers at a pizza place? When the server arrives, Elaine orders a medium veggie with white sauce to split with Dakota, and Jeremy orders a pepperoni for himself and Fred.

After the server leaves there is one beat of silence, and Elaine steps in like someone accustomed to moving conversations along. Dakota, staring at the table, doesn’t look up when her mother speaks.

“So, you guys like playing this game together, huh?”

Fred nods. Dakota is still.

“Have you seen it?” she asks Jeremy.

“Yeah, I’ve played with Fred a few times.”

“Pretty violent stuff if you ask me. But, you know, kids have been playing war since, what, sticks were invented. I say do your homework, then do whatever you want.”

“Sure,” Jeremy says. “Makes sense.”

“How about you, Fred?” Elaine says. “Do you like school?”

“It’s okay. I like social studies.”

“Well, you’re in the right city.” She laughs.

“Do you like social studies, Dakota?” Fred says.

The girl raises her head and tilts it. “It’s okay,” she says. Her mouth barely moves, and doesn’t close when she’s done speaking. Her posture is reminiscent of a plant dying in the heat.

“The political situation,” Elaine says, “It’s just so screwy right now, you know? Maybe Fred can get us out of it.” She smiles. “Dakota is more into the sciences. You should hear about this science fair project she’s doing. My kitchen is full of chicken bones in mason jars.”

“Actually,” Jeremy says, “I wanted to meet your daughter because she’s been saying some pretty disrespectful things to me.”

Elaine looks confused.

“In the game,” Jeremy says. “Over the Internet.”

“Is that true?” Elaine looks at Dakota. No response. He half-expects to see drool spill from the girl’s mouth.

“I mean,” Fred says, “everybody kind of trash-talks. It’s just a thing, it’s not a big deal.”

This defection is not so surprising. Jeremy still wants whatever it is he came for, but knows that for Fred the objective has changed. Dakota is a girl. This is potentially the best thing that has ever happened to him.

“I’m just saying,” Jeremy says, “I didn’t do two combat tours in Afghanistan to come back and get called a bitch by a fifteen-year-old girl.”

Elaine’s eyes narrow for a split second. Jeremy would have missed it, but he’s seen that reaction before, from people who think watching CNN equips them to form strong opinions about the military. “Did you say that?” she asks Dakota, in a stern mothering tone.

“I’m sorry,” the girl says.

“That is not okay, Dakota.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“Are you really?” Jeremy asks, leaning forward. The weight of his elbows on the table causes it to tilt slightly.

Their pizzas arrive. While the server clears a space on the table, Jeremy keeps Dakota fixed in his stare. He can’t help it. She’s not smug, exactly, just blank, like she has turned off the aggressive part of herself, the part she lets out when she doesn’t have to see who she’s talking to. It’s infuriating. Fred passes out the smaller plates.

“Thank you, Fred,” Elaine says.

“Really,” Jeremy says. “Is she actually sorry? Because she was saying some pretty raw shit when it was all anonymous.”

“Language,” Fred says. The pissant.

Elaine swallows and considers. “I do think kids get carried away, what with the Internet and all. But I’m sure she really is sorry.”

Dakota is looking around the restaurant, as if this conversation isn’t as interesting as the ceiling material. She could be on Mars. Fred is chewing with his head down, watching out of the corners of his eyes. Elaine has, almost imperceptibly, squared her shoulders.

“And that’s great,” Jeremy says. “I’m just saying, maybe she should worry more about who she’s talking to.”

“Are you someone a fifteen-year-old girl should worry about talking to?”

“If she’s going to talk shit without backing it up, sure.”

Fred winces. Elaine crosses her arms and frowns.

“I don’t know what you mean, ‘backing it up.’ I agree she shouldn’t be saying things like that. But it’s a game, right?”

“You’re goddamn right it’s a game. It has nothing to do with reality.”

His heart is pumping fast. There’s a fork in his right hand and his grip on it almost hurts. Fred is staring at him with pleading eyes. The girl—finally—looks at him,

though her expression doesn’t indicate whether she realizes he is different from empty space.

“Okay,” Elaine says. She unfolds her arms and holds her hands just above the tabletop, palms facing him. “Let’s take a step back. I understand you’re upset. But they’re kids, okay? I think you can tone it down.”

“Of course,” he says. “That’s my problem. I need to tone it down.” Jeremy pushes back his chair and stands. He knows that he has to move, that he needs to leave this company behind and breathe different air. “I think I’ll tone it down somewhere else. Come on, Fred.”

Fred glances at Dakota, who is still staring blankly, then back to Jeremy. “But, the pizza,” he says, pointing at it. Jeremy feels a rush of sadness and disgust for his cousin, who doesn’t know anything about anything.

“Fred,” he says. “She’s a dyke anyway. Let’s go.”

“But . . .” Fred says, not moving.

“Are you kidding me?” Elaine says.

Dakota, staring right at him, breathing through her mouth, still doesn’t react. So Jeremy places his palms on the table, leans in, and almost yells.

“She’s. A. Dyke.”

A few people turn from their tables. It seems quiet all of the sudden—he can hear the whir of the fans overhead. Fred’s lower lip is trembling. The girl is a stone. Elaine leans back in her chair. Her mouth is pursed and her eyes are wide. She watches Jeremy and waits, and he can see that, in her mind, she knows everything there is to know about him. She has him all figured out, knows just what’s happening here, knows who is right and who is wrong. Her mind will never be changed, and she will sit like that for all eternity, until he apologizes or a glacier runs them over.

He turns and walks straight out of the restaurant, into a wind that chaps his lips instantly, and heads south. He walks straight down 19th until he gets to the Mall, near

the memorials, and he walks the path through the trees until he finds a bench next to the pond, where he sits and watches the water, listening to his pulse die down.

After a few minutes his pocket vibrates. It's a text from Fred. *U okay? Dakota's mom can take me home.* Now that must have been an awkward exchange. Though he figures the woman can handle it.

He doesn't feel good, exactly, but he's not sorry either. He may not be famous, or important, but he deserves a certain amount of respect. People who don't know that can learn. Another text comes through: *Wasn't that kind of mean?*

The question mark is amusing and sad. Jeremy realizes he may lose Fred, if he hasn't already. So be it. Let him play with his little buddy. See if she ever turns into a human being. See where their little game gets them.

Three white ducks are floating at the other end of the pond. Two are facing away, but he considers the other one, the one facing him. Distance is two hundred yards. Jeremy tears some blades of grass from the ground and tosses them up—wind is coming from the northwest. Twelve or twelve-and-a-half miles an hour, judging by the tree branches. Temperature not a factor. 