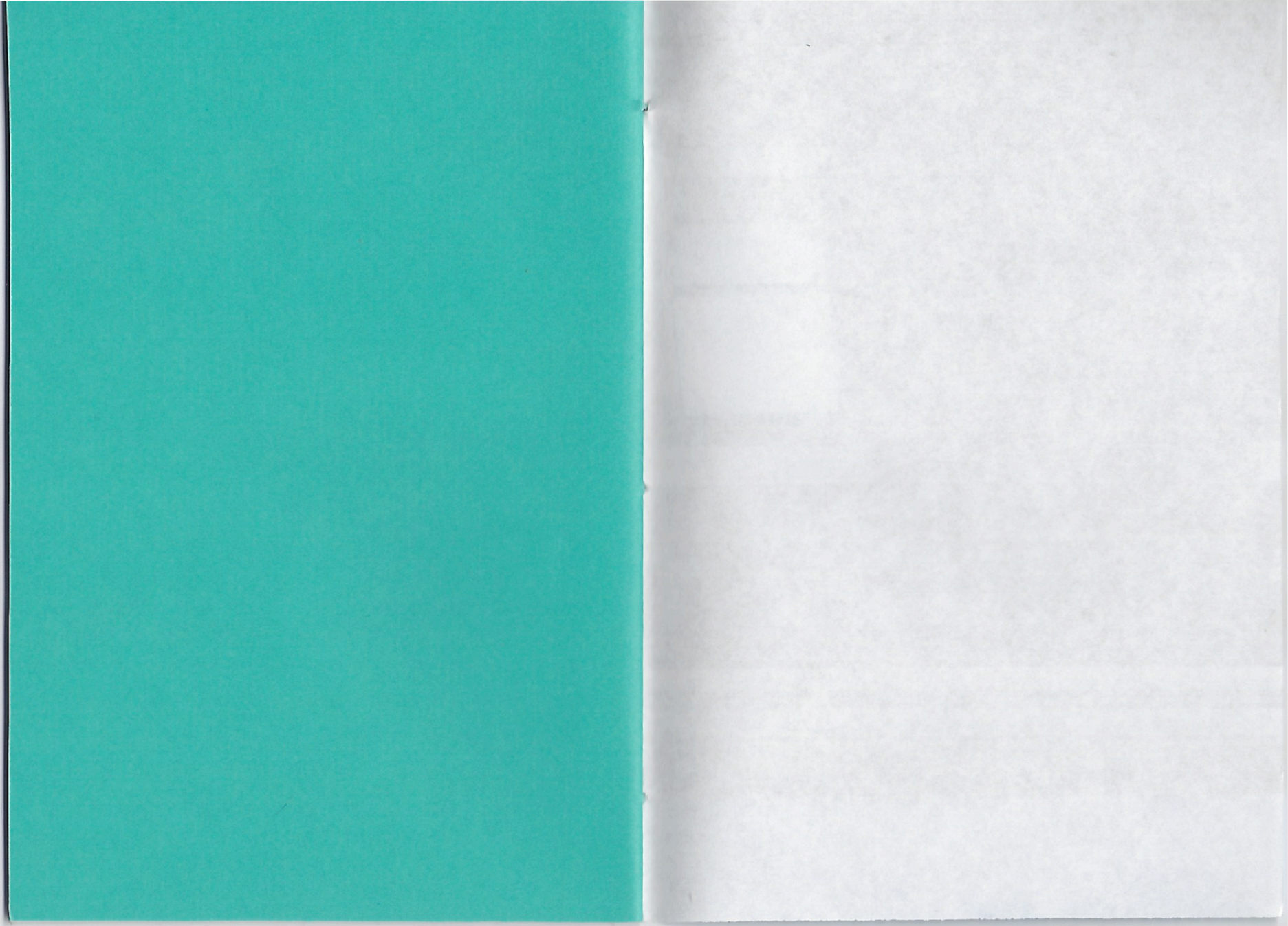




WASH DC





An excerpt from
KANADA
in which I is Silent.

Jonathan Ball

2008

No

Before we begin, there are things about I you should know. The first strange thing I noticed was the television screen in his driveway. Until this point, I had lived an average, uneventful life. Of course, there *had* been events in his life, events that would seem spectacular to other people. He had used a telephone, something the ancient Greeks would have questioned, though they possessed a casual belief in a great many fantastic and impossible things. He had slept warm and well on a winter's night, something a poorer person might never have known. He had seen the towers fall. But he remained unmoved by these things, all these things and more, though he might pretend otherwise. Something all too easy to believe.

I thought his life uneventful. Many would agree. Though not a virgin, he had never been in love. Though not rich, he lived a comfortable life in the middle of the middle-class. Though Canadian, he had never voted. He believed in universal health care. He believed aliens were out there, somewhere, but had never visited Earth. He believed that a good life and hard work would be rewarded, if not by God, then Economics. That the capital of Canada might as well be Toronto. That you could cure yourself of hiccups, if you could just hold your breath long enough. That the ocean must be beautiful. That in the north, where the day lasts for days, it was difficult to sleep, tourists went mad. That the Americans were crazy. They would attack someday, and then it would be over. No one would fight. The

country would fall. Peace was impossible. There were no bad guys in black hats, good guys in white hats. There were women, and the hats changed heads; things were more complicated. Things were too complicated. Music was not as good as it used to be. The movies were all boring. All the great books were written, the *great* books. This year, he was going to spend more time at the gym. He would lose some weight. He would learn guitar. He would stick to his writing schedule, and finish his novel.

But *uneventful*, perhaps, is the wrong word. It is better to say that his was a life *without great events*. Like so many people, I had lived a life of small events, with small triumphs and small disappointments, a life of smallness, which was perhaps not small at all, only it *felt* small to him, it *felt so small* compared to the lives of his heroes, who were countless, whose books made his growing book seem *so small* by comparison.

Like so many lives, his was a life lived in the shadow of other lives, of Father's, of the people he learned about in school, of his heroes, who had written such great books, made such great films, played such great music, done *so much*.

And to this great mass, to this *great* mass, he hoped to add his small book. Only the more he thought about it, the more he wanted it to be a *great* book. And he thought, in the back of his mind, of the world, of its history, as *a challenge*.

And he feared he was not up to this challenge.

But he had taken his first small steps. He had begun his novel. And he had received his degree.

He noticed the television screen in the driveway on the way home after the graduation ceremony. The ceremony was nice, but not what he expected. That morning he spent a long time in the bathroom, getting ready. He had gotten a haircut the previous week, so that his hair would have enough time to begin growing back, so that it didn't look like he had just gotten his hair cut. But it did not grow back as fast as he expected, his timing was off, he should have gone earlier. Looking in the mirror, at hair shorter than he ever remembered it being, he saw that he was beginning to go gray. Rather, white. Was it normal to go white? Just a few strands around the temple. He thought about covering it up. Maybe the mortarboard would cover it up. Maybe he should pull the hair out. There were only a few. It was not a big deal. Father was gray. He used a special shampoo designed not to hide the gray but bring it out. He was proud of his gray. I wondered if there was a special shampoo for white hair. Maybe the hairs just looked white individually, but collectively would look gray. There were so few, it still looked shiny brown unless you moved in close. It didn't matter. There was a knock on the door. He opened it and there was his mother, smiling her broad smile.

"Breakfast is ready. Don't take too long. We have to go soon."

I nodded and she went away, whistling. He decided the hair was fine. But what about his shirt? It was tucked into his dress pants, which were held up by a thin black belt, but it seemed too formal, he looked too much like a child playing dress-up. He wanted to look natural, as natural as one could look in dress pants and a buttoned shirt. Lots of people at the university looked so natural in these clothes. He decided to pull the shirt out a little bit, so that it hung looser on him. He tugged at it around the waist, but then it just started to look puffy. Maybe he could just let the shirt hang out, rather than tuck it in. But then Father would insist. I had fought a long, quiet fight over the tie — rather, his lack of a tie. And won. He did not own a tie, and did not want Father to buy or lend him one. He had tried to tell Father this without offending him, because it wasn't a way in which he was trying to rebel, he just wanted to buy his own tie after getting his own job. He would browse the ties and try a few on, and after trying on a number of ties would settle on the first one, the one that first drew his eye, that best suited him.

He would wear it to *work*.

He decided that the shirt could stay a little puffy. It would be hidden beneath a graduation gown anyway. He could fuss with it in the car. Breakfast was ready.

At the table, he ate eggs while his mother watched. She beamed and took a sip of tea from time to time, polishing off an English muffin between sips, smiling at the eggs as they slid into

his mouth. Father collected the newspaper from the front porch and brought it to the table, but didn't read it. Instead, he asked if I wanted it, which he didn't. Father put the paper on the extra fourth chair.

"Then I'll just save this paper *for later*."

I wondered when *for later* would come.

Father was dressed in his best suit. He had outdressed I, but I didn't mind. Father was so proud and happy it was embarrassing. He ate and watched Father eat and watched his mother watch him eat and was warm at being the centre of such pleasant attention.

"We got you a card." His mother reached into her purse and produced a small envelope.

"He's still eating."

"When you're done." She slid the card across the table. I began to eat a little faster. Even though he didn't care about the card, he wanted to show that he appreciated the gesture.

"Almost time to get a move on." Father finished his plate and started gulping his orange juice. I followed suit and took the card in hand. "You can open it in the car."

They bundled themselves out the door and into the car. His mother insisted that I sit in front with Father. They lived in St. James, the northwest part of the city, but the University of Manitoba was in the south and further east. Winnipeg was small, as cities went, and the trip only took about half an hour,

twenty minutes on a good day. It was a good day. I opened the card under his mother's watchful eye. It had an embossed mortarboard on the cover with a yarn tassel hanging off. Underneath the picture, *Con-GRAD-ulations!* was scrawled in cobalt blue. He read the card through twice, to make a big show of it for his mother.

"I hope you like it. There weren't very many good ones at the store."

"Feeling nervous?" Father said. It was not really a question.

"It's a big day!" mother answered for him.

He smiled and read the card through again before putting it on the dashboard. On the inside of the card was printed a short poem:

*Graduate, the time has come,
To cast your cap into the fray;
Be proud of all the things you've done
Preparing for this special day.
Don't forget to stand up tall
As you make your way in the world;
Always be proud of who you are,
And savor the beauty of the world.*

I thought the poem was atrocious. He took particular offense to rhyming "world" with "world." He did not mention this to his parents. It was the thought that counted, after all, or

so he had often heard. And they meant well. He wondered why no one ever hired *real* poets to write greeting cards. He supposed too many cards would look like this:

*time into this proud cast your day
come cap forget make has the tall
way the the of beauty of world you
fray the things you've your you in
Be of all the world done
To be stand proud to
As special are
Preparing up*

*Always who
And savor the*

*Graduate, ,
;
for.*

*Don't
;
.*

Less cards would be sold, I admitted to himself. Render unto Caesar.

After they arrived on campus, there was the matter of the signs to deal with. One sign pointed to the left and had a large arrow printed on it. Beneath the arrow the word *PARKING* was written in large bold letters. Father drove past this sign.

"You missed a sign back there," said mother.

"Back where?"

"Just now."

"There wasn't any sign."

"It said *PARKING*."

"There's a parking lot up here, I'm sure of it."

"Well, but the sign said *PARKING* back there."

"Just never mind." I sighed and watched the trees pass by the window. They drove on.

"Where's that goddamn parking lot?"

Nobody said anything. They drove around in circles for a while. I made a game out of predicting which way Father would turn. He gave himself an extra point when Father switched lanes away from where I thought he would go, and then switched back again. Eventually they came to the sign again.

"Finally, a sign!"

Mother moved her lips soundlessly and looked out the window. They followed a series of signs to park a few minutes away from the gymnasium where the ceremony would take place. His

parents fussed over him for a few moments, then left him to get ready while they searched for good seats.

He was relieved to see his parents go. On a regular day he would have said something in the car and said something when they fussed. But he had decided not to be a bother today. To be quiet. He wanted them to enjoy the graduation. And he was looking forward to it himself. He had worked long and hard for this day. The last few months had been particularly stressful. So many things to do at once. Every year he got the feeling that the professors converged in some secret committee, where they conspired to coordinate the due dates of essays and final exams so that everything for his five classes ended up being scheduled within a span of three frantic days, during which he was unable to sleep. Now, a few weeks after that ordeal, when all the grades were in and all the forms were filled out, he still felt tired, listless, strange. The last few weeks were like some sort of limbo, like being in a doctor's office. Waiting and able to think about nothing except waiting, or what might be wrong.

Even now, it was all about waiting. He waited in one line to get his graduation gown and in another line to get his cap. The gown turned out to be the wrong size and he had to go back to the end of that line and wait again to get another one. After getting dressed and ready, he had to stand in line to get his picture taken. His parents had ordered what seemed to him an unreasonably large number of pictures. When it was his turn to sit

down for the camera the photographer, who was an elderly man of at least sixty, pushed his legs and head around into a strange position, until he was facing right but looking left, so far his neck began to hurt.

The old man seemed satisfied. He made some adjustments to the settings on the camera. "I'm going to tell you a joke."

I waited for the joke.

"What's the difference between an orange?"

His eyes felt strained at their corners.

"Tough crowd." The flash took him by surprise, but he managed to keep from blinking.

After having his picture taken he browsed the degree frames. They were surprisingly expensive and he decided just to get one later on, from some bargain bin somewhere. A voice came on over the loudspeaker and commanded everyone to get in line alphabetically by last name. There were letters posted to the room's large pillars, and the graduating students began falling into rough lines. I took his position near the front of the B line. He recognized a few people, but none of his friends, who had already scattered across the country to begin their careers. The only people he recognized were the people he passed on campus who were recognizable because of their strange hairstyles, women he remembered seeing because of their beauty, and men he remembered seeing because they were handsome and memorable in way that he wanted to be. Some music

swelled up from the next room. The A line began to move and he made sure his mortarboard was on straight before following near the head of the B line.

He entered the auditorium to peals of applause, the floor shaking under the noise and the trampling of hundreds of graduating students. He looked around for his parents but couldn't pick them out from the endless crowd. The auditorium was tremendous, larger than he had expected it would be, its great space filled with the sharp thunder of clapping hands. This was what he had been waiting for, this recognition from his parents and countless strangers that he had been working, had accomplished something. He smiled and would have waved if he could find his parents. He decided to look for them during the ceremony so that he could wave to them on the way out.

On his seat was a small book that I realized was the program for the event. It was over a hundred pages long, filled with photos of faculty he didn't know, and a congratulatory letter from the president of the university alongside a photo where she sported the biggest smile he had ever seen. She had perfect teeth. There were also photographs and biographies of the people who would speak and present degrees at the ceremony, and advertisements for sponsoring businesses. A long list of graduating students, organized alphabetically by degree, took up the last half of the book.

There were a series of speeches to endure before the degrees were handed out, most of which repeated the sentiments of the previous speech. He noticed that a number of his classmates were absent, not just the ones who had already left town. He knew that a lot of people didn't bother to attend the ceremony, but he was happy to, he had worked hard for his degree and felt he deserved the pomp and ceremony. At first he planned to attend only to satisfy his parents, but had found himself looking forward to the event and the comfort he expected from its ritualistic predictability. But his spirits, buoyed by the thunderous applause and affirmed by the repetitive speeches, were dampened by the subsequent granting of an honorary doctorate.

Here he had worked for four long years to complete a Bachelor's degree, a Bachelor of Arts with Honours, and at what was ostensibly a celebration of this achievement, the university had elected to make the event's centerpiece the giving of a free doctorate to some guy I had never heard of. The man's biography claimed that he was a candy manufacturer, a former dropout of the university's business school. He had soared to candy manufacturing stardom on the strength of marshmallow fast food — tiny hamburgers, hot dogs, and chili fries no bigger than one's thumb. I remembered the candy from long-ago trips to the corner store. It tasted nothing like hamburgers, hot dogs, chili fries, or marshmallows.

“When I was a child,” said Dr. Marshmallow, “all I wanted to do was eat candy. My dad was a salesman, and I thought to myself, why not go into the candy business? Every Halloween I stocked up on treats, storing them away until February. February was a lean candy month. All of the children had depleted their Halloween hoards, and Christmas was fading from memory. Easter seemed so far away. I took my Halloween candy and sold it in the schoolyard every lunch hour. I saved up my money and bought a bicycle with one of those baskets in the front. Then I began door-to-door candy deliveries....”

Dr. Marshmallow droned on. I looked at his watch, but it was gone. He tried to think of where he had seen it last. On his wrist? On the dresser?

“In university, I'm not very proud to admit it now, but I used to sell chocolate sauce and whipped cream at all the sorority and fraternity parties. You could sell that stuff for *five times* the store price at the top of the stairwell in a frat house. Well, it was sleazy, I see that now, but it *did* put me through business school....”

Could he have left it in the car? Why would he take it off in the car? He remembered the sleeves of his dress shirt seeming unusually tight this morning, remembered thinking his wrists had gotten bigger or the shirt had shrunk. Did he take the watch off then, to accommodate his too-small sleeves? But if that was the case, why didn't he have a clear memory of taking off the

watch?

“Over the years, I’ve been embroiled in my fair share of controversy. But I’ve managed to always bounce back, to learn from my mistakes — and I made many, many mistakes! — but I learned from them instead of letting them destroy me. Now, it’s true, I *did* sell large quantities of peanut butter toffee to Osama bin Laden. I figured, what the hell, it might put him in a better mood! But of course, I didn’t know what he was going to use it for....”

The watch was a present from his last girlfriend, Sarah. They had dated for almost a year. It was an awkward courtship, she was shy, at least to begin with, and I was never sure how to approach women. Not even women in particular, but people in general. He was never quite sure what they expected of him. Sarah had given him the watch for his birthday about a month before they broke up. The breakup was a subdued affair, without drama. They remained friends, though “friendly” would be more accurate. He looked back at their relationship with a sort of sad weariness, not regret or longing so much as disappointment. The watch was a nice watch, his only watch. She would be upset if they ran into each other and he wasn’t wearing the watch. Of course, he didn’t really know that, he just assumed. She might not even notice, might not remember the watch at all. Even I had trouble picturing it, and he looked at the watch a few times every day.

“If I have a message for you, before you make your way in the world, it’s this: let passion guide you. These days, I’m far too busy to relax and enjoy some candy, but my passion for candy remains. If you aren’t passionate about something, you might as well hang up your hat now, go home, go to bed, and stay there. There will always be somebody with passion working toward the same goal as you, and without that kind of drive you are doomed to continuous, circuitous, unceasing failure.”

The watch preyed upon his thoughts, cutting the face of each one.

The crowd applauded Dr. Marshmallow. I found myself joining in, automatically, despite himself.

After a few more speeches, they began to award the degrees. At this point the ceremony became even more repetitive. I began to relax again, enjoying the comfortable sameness of the presentations. He waited for his turn, enjoying, in the meantime, the air of general cheer that exuded from the graduates. But he was beginning to get uncomfortable. His chair was made of hard plastic, and the room had become quite hot. The auditorium was filled beyond capacity, occupied by hundreds of graduates and what seemed like thousands of onlookers, each adding his or her own body heat and particular odor to the thick, soupy air. The room was large, but most of its size was directed upwards, where the ceiling vaulted high above him, higher than any ceiling had a need to be. Lights were suspended

from it on long metal rods, hanging quite low so that the ceiling itself was darkened and out of sight. Large ceiling fans also hung, but did not turn.

His gown was becoming itchy and he was starting to sweat. It had been a chilly morning, and he had not taken the heat into consideration when dressing, nor the fact of the heavy black graduation gown. He noticed some of the other graduates were fanning themselves, and he began to do the same.

As they were getting near the end of the As, I felt a drop of water fall onto his head.

He looked up. Another drop fell into his left eye with a mild sting.

I rubbed his eye and looked around. Everywhere in the auditorium a sparse, light rain drizzled down. The As hid their degrees in their gowns. The rain was light enough not to cause great concern, but heavy enough to be noticed. He decided that the heat in the auditorium must be causing water droplets to condense on the otherwise cool ceiling, high above. Maybe there was even a small cloud up there in the darkness. It seemed strange, but so did a man rising to power on the strength of hot dog marshmallows.

The ceremony continued, and so did the rain. Soon, the president called his name. There was a rush of applause, as there had been for every graduate. He leapt to his feet and moved toward the aisle, looking around for his parents. He still couldn't

see them. He slipped a little but managed to catch himself before falling down. The aisle was beginning to get slippery with droplets. The applause continued but began to fall away as he mounted the stage. Soon it had all but diminished. He was able to pick his parents out of the crowd now, for they were the only ones still clapping. Their exuberant applause and the clipping of his polished dress shoes echoed in the giant room, small sharp sounds that billowed out into the emptiness. The clapping of his parents bounded and rebounded off the great stone walls above the crowd, transforming into a dull, indistinct thundering. Or *was* that thunder? The rain seemed to pick up, but perhaps it was his imagination. He shook the president's hand, which was rougher than he had imagined. She had a soft face and hard hands. He collected his degree from another woman standing nearby. He smiled and waved at his parents, who increased the already frantic pace of their clapping. He was all smiles. He nodded his thanks to the president and her aide, then continued onward down the stairs at the other end of the stage.

Through a feat of intense concentration, he managed to spare the parchment from the rain until seated, when he slipped it beneath his gown. The ceremony continued, and so did the rain. A few people in the crowd tried to open up umbrellas, but they were hissed down by the people behind them. The graduates looked at one another uneasily. Somebody laid a spare gown over the parchments waiting to be distributed. His smile

faltered and left. He wondered why nobody turned on the fans.

There was nothing to do for the rest of the ceremony but read the program, even though it was mostly a list of names. He recognized so few of the names. Everyone seemed to lose their enthusiasm. The announcer stopped reading out middle names. The president took less time shaking hands, and stopped smiling between handshakes. The rain fell and mortarboards began to droop. Dr. Marshmallow took some exaggerated looks at his watch and snuck off the stage. Some of the Ys and Zs had to be woken up when their names were called.

The procession out of the auditorium was bleak. The audience had been clapping for hours at that point, had filled their quota. Not even his parents clapped. The music swelled but began to distort. The procession clomped its way outside, splashing.

Outside, the sun shone. Early morning chill had given way to late morning warmth. It was looking to be a beautiful day. He waited as the crowd exited, searching for his family. Clustered around him, other graduates did the same. As the audience began spilling out of the gymnasium doors, its mass splintered into smaller factions, each congregating around a black-gowned figure. I watched each reunion. They seemed easy. Hugs and cheek kisses were parceled out with practiced grace. A few mouths met, proud lovers offering their congratulations. He saw Sarah some distance away. She had changed her major, did not plan to

graduate for another two years, but her brother was the same age as I was. I covered his wrist but Sarah didn't notice him.

Father appeared and clasped him in a ferocious bear hug. When he pulled away I noticed that the front of Father's suit was dampened from contact with his own dripping gown.

"We're so proud of you, honey. Aren't we?"

"You just saw me hug him."

"I was just saying." She moved his tassel to the other side of the mortarboard. "Aren't you supposed to do that, dear?"

"Quit fussing over the boy." Father pulled out a cigar and offered one to I, which he declined. His mother eyed the cigar with disgust.

"I had to deal with that growing up." She spoke in a confessional tone. "Every night, after work, my Father would light up one of those things, almost stink us out of the house. A different brand than the ones *your* Father smokes, but still." She squinted in the morning sun. "Then it's poor mother who ends up dying of lung cancer. They say the secondhand smoke is worse."

"How could it be worse?"

"Well, it certainly doesn't help matters."

"You don't even inhale with cigars, and I hardly smoke them. Only on *special occasions*." He drawled those last words. "And this is certainly a *special occasion*."

"Do you have to return the gown?"

"We paid to keep the gown."

"That's right, I forgot. What about the hat?"

"It comes with the gown. We paid for all that stuff in January." Father tried to puff out a smoke ring, but it was more of a smoke log. "You should have bought a school ring then too."

"He didn't want the ring. When is he going to wear a school ring?"

"You can wear it anytime, all the time."

"Just something for somebody to steal."

"Nobody would steal a school ring. What's the point? You've got your name engraved on it. Are they going to sell it back to you?"

"People steal all sorts of things. Anything flashy like that."

"What people?"

"People."

"You're going to regret not getting that school ring. I guess you can get one later if you want."

"Look at Tommy Peterson. His ring got stolen."

"That wasn't a *school ring*. Just some cheap crap from somewhere."

"Well, if they'd steal some cheap crap, why not steal an expensive ring?"

"Tommy Peterson is an idiot. Anyone smart enough to get a *school ring* is smart enough not to get it stolen."

"Well, I didn't want one anyway."

"Who, you or the boy?"

"Either of us."

"You didn't even go to university."

"Sure I did, I just switched into a different program."

"No, you switched into a different *school*. That's a whole different thing."

"There's nothing wrong with the school I went to, just because it was a college instead of a university."

"Of course there's nothing *wrong* with it, but it's a *different thing*. You're actually better off going to college these days, for most things. More practical."

"His degree is fine. English and History are both very useful. You can teach and do all sorts of other things, I'm sure."

"Of course it's *fine*, I didn't say it wasn't *fine*, I'm just making a general observation."

"How is that novel coming along, by the way?"

"I've always regretted not getting my own school ring."

"Are you very close to being done?"

"I think about it sometimes, calling and putting in an order, but I just never get around to it."

"You know, I always wanted to be a writer myself."

"If you don't do something right away, you're liable not to do it at all."

"I'd love to read it when you're finished."

"As you get older, you think about doing things more and more, but then you do less and less."

"Even if I don't understand it."

"There are so many things you *think* about doing, but then when you look back, it just seems like you *thought* about them too much, when you should have just gone off and done them."

"It'd still be nice to read."

"If you never finish what you start, there's no value in having started."

"Of course I didn't write that much."

"Let that be a lesson to you."

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