

1.

THE VALEDICT



**JUST ONCE, I WANT TO
DO SOMETHING RIGHT.**

JIM STARK

DENIS COOVERMAN WAS SWEATING more than usual, and he usually sweat quite a bit.

For once, he was not the only one. The temperature in the gymnasium was 123 degrees; four people had been carried out and were presumed dead. They were not in fact dead, but it was preferable to think of them that way, slightly worse off, than contemplate the unbearable reality that Alicia Mitchell's ninety-two-year-old Nana, Steph Wu's overly kimonoed Aunt Kiko and Jacob Beber's roly-poly parents were currently enjoying cool drinks in the teacher's lounge with the air-conditioning set at 65 degrees.

Ed Munsch sat high in the bleachers, between his wife and a woman who smelled like boiled potatoes. Potatoes that had gone bad and then been boiled. Boiled green potatoes. Ed thought he might vomit, with any luck.

Anyone could see he was not a well man. His left hand trembled on his knee, his eyes slowly rolled, spiraling upward; he was about to let out the exact moan Mrs. Beber had just before she escaped when his wife told him to cut it out.

"You're not leaving," she said.

"I'm dying," Ed countered.

"Even dead," said his wife, at ease with the concept. "For chrissakes, your only son is graduating from high school. It's not like he's going to graduate from anything else."

*Tattoos of memories
and dead skin on trial*

the Sullen Girl sang, wringing fresh bitterness from the already alkaline lyrics, her wispy quaver approximating a consumptive canary with love trouble and money problems. She sang every song that way. At the senior variety show, she had performed "Happy Together" with such fragile melancholy during rehearsals

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that rumors began circulating that, on show night, she would whisper the final words,

I can't see me loving nobody but you

then produce an antique pistol from beneath her spidery shawl and shoot Jared Farrell in the nuts before blowing her brains out. Nobody wanted to follow that. Throughout the final performance, Mr. Bernard had stood in the wings clutching a fire extinguisher, with a vague plan. Although the Sullen Girl didn't execute anyone in the end, it was generally agreed that it was the best senior variety show ever.

BEHIND THE SULLEN GIRL sat Denis Cooverman, sweating: along the cap of his mortarboard, trickling behind his ears and rippling down his forehead; around his nostrils and in that groove below his nose (which Denis would be quick to identify as the *philtrum*, and, unfortunately, would go on to point out that the preferred medical term was *infranasal depression*); from his palms, behind his knees, inside his elbows, between his toes and from many locations not typically associated with perspiratory activity; squirting out his nipples, spewing from his navel, coursing between his buttocks and forming a tiny lake that gently lapped at his genitals; from under his arms, naturally, in two varieties—hot and sticky, and cold and terrified.

“He’s a sweaty kid,” the doctor had diagnosed when his mother had brought him in for his weekly checkup. “But if he’s sweating so much,” his mother had asked, him sitting right there, “why is his skin so bad?”

Denis worried too much, that’s why. Right now, for example, he was not just worried about the speech he was about to give, and for good reason; he was also worried that his sweat was rapidly evaporating, increasing atmospheric pressure, and that it might start to rain inside his graduation gown. This was fully theoretically

possible. He was also worried that the excessive perspiration indicated kidney stones, which was less likely.

I hope you had the time of your life

the Sullen Girl finished with a shy sneer, then returned to her seat.

Dr. Henneman, the principal, approached the lecturer.

“Thank you, Angelika—”

“Angel-LEEK-ah,” the Sullen Girl spat back.

“Angel-LEEK-ah,” Dr. Henneman corrected, “thank you for that . . . *emotive* rendition of”—she referred to her notes, frowned—“‘Good Riddance.’”

THE TEMPERATURE IN THE GYM reached 125 degrees, qualifying anyone there to be served rare.

“Could we,” Dr. Henneman said, wafting her hands about, “open those back doors, let a little air in? Please?”

Three thousand heads turned simultaneously, expecting the doors to fly open with minty gusts of chilled wind, maybe even light flurries. Miles Paterini and Pete Couvier, two juniors who had agreed to usher the event because they were insufferable suck-ups, pressed down on the metal bars. The doors didn’t open.

People actually gasped.

Denis began calculating the amount of oxygen left in the gymnasium.

Dr. Henneman’s doctorate in school administration had prepared her for this.

“Is Mr. Wrona here?”

Mr. Wrona, the school custodian, was not here. He was at home watching women’s volleyball with the sound turned off and imagining the moment everyone realized the back doors were locked. In his fantasy, Dr. Henneman was screaming his name and would presently burst into flames.

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“Let’s move on,” Dr. Henneman moved on, mentally compiling a list of janitorial degradations to occupy Mr. Wrona’s summer recess. “So. Next. Yes. I am pleased to introduce our valedictorian for—”

JAH-JUH JAH-JUH JAH-JUH JAH-JUH

Lily Masini’s meaty father slammed the backdoor bar violently up and down. He turned and saw everybody was staring at him, with a mixture of annoyance and hope.

JAH-JUH JAH . . . JUH!

Mr. Masini released the bar and slumped back to the bleachers.

“Denis Cooverman,” Dr. Henneman announced.

AS DENIS STOOD UP, his groin pool spilled down his legs into his shoes. He shuffled forward, careful not to step on his gown, which the rental place had insufficiently hemmed, subsequently claiming he had gotten shorter since his fitting. Denis had been offered the option of carrying a small riser with him, which he had declined, and so when he stood at the lectern barely his head was visible, floating above a seal of the Mighty Bison, the school’s mascot. The effect was that of one of those giant-head caricatures, of a boy who told the artist he wanted to wrangle buffaloes when he grew up.

Denis looked out at the audience. He tried to imagine them in their underwear, which was easy, since they were imagining the same thing. Denis sort of smiled. The audience did nothing. They were not excited by, or even mildly curious about, Denis’s speech, merely resigned it was going to happen. He met their expectations.

“Thank you, Dr. Henneman. Fellow Graduates. Parents and Caregivers. Other interested parties.”

Denis had left a pause for laughs. It became just a pause.

“Today we look forward,” he continued. “Look forward to getting out of here.”

That got a laugh, longer than Denis had rehearsed.

“Look forward to getting out of here,” Denis repeated, resetting his meter before proceeding in the stilted manner of adolescent public speakers throughout history.

“But today I also would like to look back, back on our four years at Buffalo Grove High School, looking back not with anger, but with no regrets. No regrets for what we wanted to do but did not, for what we wanted to say but could not. And so I say here today the one thing I wish I had said, the one thing I know I will regret if I never say.”

Denis paused for dramatic effect. Somebody coughed. Denis extended the pause to rebuild his dramatic effect.

He blinked the sweat off his eyelashes.

Then he said:

“I love you, Beth Cooper.”

DENIS COULD THINK of no logical reason why he should not attempt to mate with Beth Cooper.

There were no laws explicitly against it.

They were of the same species, and had complementary sex organs, most likely, based on extensive mental modeling Denis had done.

They had both grown up here in the Midwest, only 3.26 miles apart, and could therefore be assumed to share important cultural values. They both drank Snapple Diet Lime Green Tea, though Denis had begun doing so only recently.

And while Beth was popular and good-looking—Most Popular and Best Looking, according to a survey of 513 Buffalo Grove High School seniors—Denis did have the Biggest Brain and wasn’t repulsive, exactly. It was said that he had a giant head, but this was an optical

illusion. His head was only slightly larger than average; it was the smallness of his body that made it appear colossal. He had the right number of facial features, in roughly the right arrangement, and would eventually grow into his face, his mother predicted. She also said he had beautiful eyes, though in truth, one more than the other. His teeth fit in his mouth now, and he did not have backne.

Denis could imagine any number of scenarios under which his conquest of Beth Cooper would be successful:

if Beth went to an all-girls school in the Swiss Alps, surrounded by mountains, hundreds of miles from any other guys except Denis, son of the math teacher, and Beth was failing algebra, for example;

if Denis was a celebrity;

if Denis had a billion dollars;

if Denis was six inches taller, and had muscles.

Any one of those scenarios.

One also had to consider that there were 125 to 200 billion galaxies in the universe, each with 200 billion stars. Using the Drake equation, that meant there were approximately 2 trillion billion planets out there capable of sustaining life; the latest research suggested that one-third of them would develop life and one-ten-millionth would develop intelligent life. That left 1,333,333 intelligent civilizations created across the universe since the beginning of time, surely one of which was intelligent enough to recognize Denis and Beth were meant for one another.

Alternatively, if current string theory was correct, there were a google google google google google universes, all stacked up with this one but with different physical properties and, presumably, social customs. In one of these, odds were, Denis Cooverman not only bred with Beth Cooper but was worshipped by ravenous hordes of Beth Coopers. Unfortunately in that universe

Denis had crab hands and inadvertently snipped each Beth Cooper to bits as she came ravenously at him.

This was but a small sampling of the thinking that went on in Denis's Biggest Brain prior to Denis's sweaty lips declaring his love for Beth Cooper in front of 3,221 hot, testy people.

For all its obsessive analysis, Denis's Biggest Brain had neglected to consider two relevant facts. Big Brains often have this problem: Albert Einstein was said to be so absentminded that he once brushed his teeth with a power drill. But even Einstein (who, according to geek mythology, bagged Marilyn Monroe) would not have overlooked these facts; even Einstein's brain, pickling in a jar at Princeton, would be able to grasp the infinitudinous import of these two simple facts, which now hung over Denis's huge head like a sword of Damocles—or to the non-honors graduates, like a sick fart.

The two incontrovertible, insurmountable, damn sad facts were these:

Beth Cooper was the head cheerleader;

Denis Cooverman was captain of the debate team.

THERE WAS A MOMENTARY DELAY in the reaction to what Denis had just said, because nobody was listening. While the adults contemplated cold beer and college tuition, and the graduates contemplated cold beer and another cold beer, their brains continued routine processing of auditory input, so that when Denis's mother yelped *Oh no*, they were able to rewind their sensory memory and hear, again:

"I love you, Beth Cooper."

Mrs. Cooverman had been following right along, syllable by syllable, and she knew something was up at syllable ninety-four, when Denis went off the script they had worked so hard on. Her *Oh no* was the release of tension that had accumulated in the subsequent twenty-nine errant syllables, building suspense for her

alone. She did not know who Beth Cooper was, but she knew this was not appropriate for a graduation speech, and probably worse. Mr. Cooverman had been enjoying the speech until his wife yipped.

The bleachers echoed with confused murmurs, while down on the floor the graduating class retroactively grasped the tragic nature of what had transpired, and laughed. Dr. Henneman had been calculating how many dirty, dirty toilets required Mr. Wrona's lavish attention and had not noticed anything wrong until she heard the laughs; they seemed genuine, and that was not right.

Everyone who knew who Beth Cooper was—the entire class and several hundred adults—craned their necks to stare at her. She was near the end of the third row, next to an empty chair, the seat Denis himself was to return to once he was done humiliating her.

He wasn't done.

"I have loved you, Beth Cooper," Denis went on, his eyes clinging to his notes, "since I first sat behind you in Mrs. Rosa's math class in the seventh grade. I loved you when I sat behind you in Ms. Rosenbaum's Literature and Writing I. I loved you when I sat behind you in Mr. Dunker's algebra and Mr. Weidner's Spanish. I have loved you from behind—"

This got a huge laugh, one Denis should have expected, being a teenager. He also should have anticipated that Dr. Henneman would be looming up behind him, about to put her hand on his shoulder, but he did not and continued at the same measured pace.

". . . in biology, history, practical science and Literature of the Oppressed. I loved you but I never told you, because we hardly ever spoke. But now I say it, with no regrets."

DENIS MADE A NOISE, a dry click, as if resetting his throat.

“And so, let us all, too, say the things we have longed to say but our tongues would not.”

He had returned to the approved text. His mother exhaled for the first time in more than a hundred syllables. Dr. Henneman decided intervention was no longer worth the effort, and sat back down. Denis also felt better, having disgorged his annoying heart, and so proceeded more confidently, with the well-practiced cadence of a master debater.

“Let us be unafraid,” Denis preached, “to admit, *I have an eating disorder and I need help.*”

Fifty-seven female graduates, and six males, glanced around nervously.

“Let us,” Denis chanted, “be unafraid to confess, *I am so stuck-up because, deep down, I believe I am worthless.*”

There were at least seven people Denis could have been referring to, and another four so low on the social totem their conceit was meaningless, but the clear consensus was that Denis was talking about Valli Woolly. Valli Woolly acknowledged the stares by baring her teeth, her version of a smile.

“Let us”—cranking now—“be courageous, truly courageous rather than simply mindlessly violent—”

Greg Saloga. He was definitely talking about Greg Saloga. It was so obvious that even Greg Saloga suspected he was being talked about, and this, like most things, made him angry.

“Let us stand up and say, *I am sorry for all the poundings, the pink bellies, the purple nurples . . .*”

Denis had received seven, sixteen and dozens, respectively.

“*I’m sorry I hurt so many of you. I am cruel and violent because I was unloved as a baby, or I was sexually abused or something.*”

Greg Saloga’s big tomato face ripened as he erupted from his chair. He had not fully formed a plan beyond

smash and *head* when something tugged the sleeve of his gown. He wheeled around, fist in punch mode, and came very close to delivering some mindless violence into the paper-white face of the diversely disabled and tragically sweet Becky Reese.

“Not now,” Becky Reese said in a calming wheeze.

Greg Saloga felt stupid. She was right. He could kill the big-head boy *later*. He grinned at Becky Reese, much like Frankenstein’s Monster grinned at that flower girl before the misunderstanding.

“You should sit down,” Becky Reese said.

Greg Saloga sat down.

“In your seat,” Becky Reese clarified.

DENIS MISSED his own near-death experience. He was busy expressing the regrets of fellow classmates who started *malicious, hurtful and totally unfounded rumors* (e.g. Christy Zawicky and her scurrilous insinuation that semen had been found in someone’s fetal pig from AP biology) or who *chose indulgence over excellence* (e.g. most of the class but specifically Divya Gupta, Denis’s debate partner, who drank an entire bottle of *liebfraumilch* the night before the downstate debate finals and made out with both guys from the New Trier team, revealing the entire substance of their argument even if she did not recall doing so). And Denis was just getting started, or so he thought.

“And let us not regret,” he said, “that we never told even our best friend”—pause, then softer, slower—“*I’m gay, dude.*”

Denis looked right at Rich Munsch, his best friend. This was unnecessary; everyone knew.

Rich Munsch, however, was flabbergasted. He mouthed, somewhat theatrically: *I’m not gay!!!*

Denis was about to respond when he felt four bony fingers dig under his clavicle.

“Thank you, Denis,” Dr. Henneman said, leaning

across Denis into the microphone. "A lot to think about."

For a bright kid, Denis was not quick on conversational cues.

"I'm not done," he said.

"You're done." The principal moved decisively to secure the podium, driving Denis aside with her rapier hip.

She heard a *splish*.

She looked down and discovered she was standing in a puddle.

THE AUDIENCE SPATTERED ITS APPLAUSE as Denis shuffled off the stage.

"As I call your names," Dr. Henneman was saying, "I would appreciate it, and I think everyone would, if you came up and accepted your diploma quickly, with a minimum of drama."

The applause grew.

Denis felt good about the speech. He had let Beth Cooper know how he felt, after all these years, and had made some excellent points about other classmates besides. He wondered what Beth would say to him when he sat down beside her. He had prepared two responses:

"Then we agree"

or

"It's my medication."

Denis suddenly had a scary thought: *What if she tries to kiss me?* Would he politely demur, deferring such action to later, or would he accept the love offering, to the thunderous applause of his peers?

So Denis did not see the dress shoe that belonged to Dave Bastable's father that Dave Bastable had stuck in his path. Denis tripped, lurched forward, stomped his other foot onto the hem of his gown, dove across his own chair and sailed headlong into Beth Cooper's seat, where, fortunately or unfortunately, she no longer was.