

# Astronaut Food

B-sides: Stories,  
Fragments, &  
Remixes



# Preface

“**Semicircles**” is a fragment that started as part of one of the first stories I wrote. People seemed to like the first few pages, which I’ve included here, but had a hard time getting into the story as it went along. I’ve tried revising it different ways, but the story just doesn’t seem to want to come together. I never quite know what to do with it even though I’m still attached to the characters and like the world it builds.

The core of “**Procedures are in Place for a Reason**” started as a flashback scene in a longer story, but flashbacks are hard to write well. I ended up clipping that and turning it into its own piece. I wanted to pick something new to include in this issue, and this one seemed to fit the theme of a “B-side” because it entailed reworking the original flashback in a new way.

“**A Little Pedantic**” is a remixed version of “**Win for Life**,” which didn’t contain any genre fiction elements (it appeared in Issue Three of *Astronaut Food* as well as in the *Fiction Writer’s Den*). The idea of doing remixed versions of stories occurred to me after reading Samantha Hunt’s *The Dark Dark*, which does something a little like that in some parts. My original goal was to write a collection that would be 50% realist and 50% vernacular fiction reworkings of those realist stories.

Ultimately, however, the schtick wore thin, and I gave it up, though “A Little Pedantic” comes from that experiment. I always thought of “Win for Life” as a dark story exploring small forms of quiet cruelty, so it seemed amenable to a campy, 1980s-style slasher reimagining that literalizes the way subtle abuse can foster monstrous, obsessive behavior.

Finally, I included a short section from a novel I started awhile back, *Most Perfect Map*. The novel was modeled loosely on Kelly Reichardt’s film *Old Joy*, which I reimagined as taking place in a fictional Asian country. It explored themes of friendship, education, and colonialism. Occasionally, I scavenge those remains for usable material. In this case, I chose a few pages from when the protagonist Aaron, a teacher from Vermont, first gets to Asia.

# Semicircles

“The fields are dangerous” is what Jimbo thinks he hears his father say. It is one of the times he is left guessing as to whether the old man is trying to clue him in that he knows more about his son’s lifestyle than he lets on. Now and then clarity surfaces from behind the old man’s incoherence and belligerence.

“Sure,” Jimbo says. He puts the bag of nuts down between the legs of his yellowed lawn chair. During wetter times he has seen strays drink from the furrows dug by the chair’s slatted legs. Only a few flies are now at the bottom of the dried-out troughs.

“Not in the dirt.”

Jimbo raises the bag to his lap. He shoots forth a dribble of chalky, dense spit. It joins the similar mounds that make a wide half-moon around the front of the two chairs.

“Hey—” the old man starts before going silent as he takes a massive sip from his beer. It is unclear if he had interrupted himself with the sip or if the sip itself had been the point. He lets out a loud burp.

“Putting ‘em back, huh?”

“Look, Son, I’m not drunk. If I was *drunk*, I’d be going like *this*.” He holds up his hand to demonstrate severe tremors.

“Yeah, and if you was *really* drunk, you’d be going like *this*,” Jimbo says and shakes his whole body.

“You’re looking like you’re trying to kill me,” the old man crows. He retrieves the

coin and sends it back through the Coke machine. Another cold one comes out as the quarter reappears where it had been. His dad's rigged Coke machine is a great conversation piece with his friends, though none had seen it.

"Phone! Phone! *Jimbo*—phone!"

"I said I'm coming," he shouts even though he hadn't said anything. He jogs across the backyard and bounds up the cracked cement steps before throwing the screen door open hard enough to contribute to the dents that mark the house's faded facade.

"I told you *watch it* with that," his mother says in a harsh whisper, taking him by the shoulder with a finger in his face.

Jimbo grunts and takes the phone from where she had left it on the counter. The kitchen is humid. It smells like sweat and smoke.

"Hello," he says now in a voice deeper than the one he had used with his parents.

"Yo, coming around," the voice on the other end of the receiver says.

"You work, and these kids shit up everything," his mother grumbles, sagging as she walks to the sink.

"Now?" Jimbo says.

"Yeah. Coming around."

Jimbo hangs up the phone. His mom is saying something about his father to herself. He slows upon hearing this. Most times the old man was agreeable enough if you didn't get in the way of his drinking. Not always, though.

"Tommy's coming to get me. We're going out."

“*Out?*” she turns from the small window above the sink to face him.

“Yeah. Out. With Tommy,” he says, brushing past her as he heads for the front door.

She puts her hand to the same thin hair she shares with her son and sighs. As he grabs the door handle, he sighs as well, making them seem contagious like yawns.

He adds another dent to the house on his way out before pausing to look toward the Coke machine where the old man is still drinking. Sometimes his father will take unexpected offense to things like that. Sensing no movement from the Coke machine, he sprints up the dirt driveway.

Tommy never comes when he says he will. No one ever comes when they say they will. But you still have to be there. You always have to be somewhere.

# Procedures are in Place for a Reason

The crowd in front of the courthouse gave the judge the opportunity to make the perfect quip for the history books when one of the defendant's supporters called to him, "Do justice today, Judge."

"We don't do justice here. We do the law," the judge replied, trying to keep the pleasure out of his voice. The judge always took bullying satisfaction in reminding the naïve that the law was about precedent and procedure and not fuzzy ideas of what was "right." Procedures were in place for a reason.

Today, however, that pleasure was more delicious than he could remember it having ever been. One reason was that on that morning the judge indulged in a pleasure even richer than that of doling out the harsh truths of life: it seemed that the ruling he would make today would reflect a time when the two, justice and law, fit together perfectly. The fact that this was a case of world-historic importance (or at least national-historic importance) only further sweetened things. The judge felt a secret relief that he could earn a warm footnote in the nation's history without having to risk his legal integrity—to his lights, precedent was as much on the side of the defendant as public opinion.

Taking his place in the courtroom, the judge bellied up to the bench. He watched as the defendant was brought in. For someone who had spent the better part of a year in a penitentiary, the man looked remarkably good. The guards must have

been lenient with him, much as the nation in general had offered him special understanding. The defendant was a distinguished man from one of the nation's political dynasties, and the easy arrogance of elite schools and social engagements had been etched into his body. He moved with poise even as he entered the courtroom a murderer.

The judge felt a certain chummy familiarity with the defendant. While the two hadn't known each other personally, in the judge's estimation, they came from the same cultural milieu. Admittedly, the judge was a first-generation national elite hailing from the petite gentry stock of the provinces. Still, to the judge, they were both defenders of a cultural heritage typical of the nation's patrician class, which celebrated thrift, discipline, and scholarship. The two men shared an alma mater.

The defendant took his seat gentlemanly, and his attorney began his closing comment, as was procedure in the country. The closing comment was always something of a formality, but that was particularly true in this instance. You'd have been hard-pressed to find a single person in the country who didn't know each and every detail of the case. Nevertheless, the attorney started what would become a slightly protracted account, doubtless enjoying his time in the spotlight, which was unusually bright in this instance, even for a celebrity attorney of such a caliber.

The defendant's hope was to have his charge reduced to mere murder, or even better, dismissed as self-defense, which the law permitted though rarely granted. His current charge was much graver because his victim had, until the moment the

defendant stabbed him, been the country's president. Without exception, the nation punished treason with capital punishment. If found guilty, this morning would be the man's last.

The legal arguments were long and complicated, but the story was straightforward. The defendant had been a senator when he was called to the presidential palace. The senator had become a key target of the president, though the two came from rival parties and not much love had ever been lost between them. By that point, the president had extended his administration past the end of his term for the better part of a year by invoking emergency political powers on what even his strongest supporters had to admit were shaky grounds. At the same time, he'd become increasingly brazen in calling members of the opposition to his home who routinely disappeared as predictably as did the members of the dissent movement sent to the "weather report" camps the president had constructed as defense against the nation's previously unknown "atmospheric threats" (a key justification for his emergency powers).

As the defendant told it, during a moment when the president's staff had left the room, the president had advanced toward him and assumed a "menacing stance." The defendant, a younger and fitter man, had seized a steak knife from the palace's grand dining table and soon stopped the president from being able to ever take any stance again.

The facts of the case were hazy. The president's staff either didn't know or wouldn't say what they'd seen. It was unlikely the president himself would do the dirty work of disappearing an opponent, and it was a little unclear that the president's "menacing stance" had been tantamount to impending mortal threat as the defendant alleged.

Still, it was plausible enough that the president, a man widely known to be a petty and vindictive sadist, might have taken it upon himself to personally carry out an attack on a hated rival. Regardless, as the defense pointed out, there was ample evidence of irregularities in evidence collection, record keeping, and virtually every other procedural facet of the case. By the time of his murder, the president had so many lackeys and corrupt detectives on his payroll that it had been trivially easy for the defense to make a reasonably convincing argument about the unreliability of the case's evidence.

Of course, a host of subtle legal points remained, but that was the gist of it. The judge did his best to concentrate on the attorney's final comment, shifting his attention to the defendant only when the attorney gestured in the man's direction.

And that was when the judge noticed something strange. The formerly genteel, confident man now sat with the histrionically slouched posture of a child waiting to be disciplined. He looked like a sulking adolescent trying to appear contrite. What had happened to the graceful and handsome man who'd walked in a moment before?

A memory then came to the judge unbidden. In his school days, for weeks one fall, the judge, then of course a boy, and his friend had played a game during recess. The boy who would become the judge would run from the friend. When the friend would catch the boy, he would pinch him. Tug his hair. Touch his nose and then touch him.

One day, the boy who would become the judge closed his eyes during their game. When he opened them, he was surprised to see that the friend's puffy face was bleeding. The friend's face was bleeding, and the boy's hand hurt. In some distant way the boy couldn't quite work out, the two things seemed somehow connected.

The two boys had watched in companionable silence as a droplet of blood drifted out of the friend's nose. Another came. A third droplet soon fell. Finally, the friend rushed off as a fourth started.

The boy who would become the judge shouted in fear, following the friend before stopping at the edge of the playground, where he stood staring as he watched the friend say something to the two teachers on recess duty, Ms. Archer and Ms. Cummins. They were two of the softer, older teachers, and one had been there when his father had taken recess on that same playground. The teachers looked at the friend in mild alarm and then briefly at the boy. As Ms. Archer took the friend away, Ms. Cummins went to him.

"There, there," she said. "The nurse will patch him up and make him good as new. Now, I need you to be brave for me."

He nodded and looked down, choosing to be brave for Ms. Cummins. He slumped his shoulders and lowered his head. Somehow his friend, his best friend, had gotten sick while they played their funny game. He put his hand, that terrible autonomous thing, in his pocket to punish it for having done something so awful.

No trouble was visited upon him or his hand for its violence. The friend had come back to the classroom wearing a fresh shirt and acting as though nothing had happened. They never spoke of it. The teachers seemed to think it was the friend's nose's fault for having bled. Of course, the boy had done the wrong thing. There were procedures in place. He should have said something to someone. Had some part of him enjoyed hitting the friend? It was hard to sort out, but that morning he felt an awareness of unacknowledged feelings, dark potentials he hadn't known had been in him.

Back in the present, the judge was shaken from his reverie by the defense attorney finishing his account. It was the prosecutor's turn to offer his own final comment, reminding the court that the defendant's argument had gaps and leaps in logic. He conceded that while the former president had been a tyrant, the country had laws against murder for a reason. They were a civilized, elevated people.

Tilting his head back, the judge looked appraisingly at the defendant. Something in the man's beaten-dog posture mirrored how the judge imagined himself to have looked that day when whatever it was had come out of him had made him perform for Ms. Cummins. What was behind that sense of recognition: superstition?

Projection? Or was he picking up on something he knew in some deep way, an understanding refined from years of experience that had led the sharp principles of reason to thaw into a softer, intuitive form. This wasn't about justice, this was about the law—precedent and procedure—and procedures were in place for a reason.

The judge looked away, then at the defendant, then at the unadorned wood of his bench, and finally out at the courtroom. He began to deliver his ruling.

## A Little Pedantic (“Win for Life” Remix)

“What’s up, Hoffen-Crowley-reider?” Bill said, interrupting Hoffenreider. Absorbed in his textbook, *Communications: Making Connections*, Hoffenreider hadn’t noticed Bill come into the convenience store. The store never got customers, especially not at that time of night, so Hoffenreider was able to study. He was taking extra classes that summer so he could graduate a semester early from Middlesex State University.

“Whatcha you doing, man? Reading some books, making some power moves?” Bill said.

“Sure, big moves,” Hoffenreider said without looking up from his book.

Bill squinted like he was thinking. “So, what’s up with Citgo, man? It’s weird thinking of you working here. You don’t seem like a Citgo guy. Is that what they do to the guy who doesn’t get the top grade?”

“It’s just for the summer. It’s not like I’m a townie. I don’t even live here.” Middlesex State University was a forty-five-minute drive away in Muncie.

“You do right now. You did growing up,” Bill said.

Through the window, Hoffenreider could see the turquoise of Chicky’s soiled baseball hat turn this way and that as he exhaled impossibly huge plumes of smoke. What the hell was he smoking out there? He must have come with Bill. Hoffenreider wondered if whatever was making all that smoke was why Bill smelled so sickeningly

stale.

The station Hoffenreider normally played on the gas station's little boombox started "O Fortuna" of *Carmina Burana* before the radio abruptly screeched and went silent. Hoffenreider walked over and fooled around with the dials. Nothing. He tried unplugging and plugging it back in. Nothing again. Shrugging, he walked back to the counter.

Hoffenreider might not have seemed like a Citgo guy now, but he had been one. When he'd applied for the summer job, his supervisor, Naum, had made Hoffenreider come back twice to talk before hiring him, which felt weird, like having to introduce yourself to your best friend. Naum might not have known Hoffenreider, but Hoffenreider knew the Citgo.

A few years before, the guys at the Citgo had sold weed and coke from behind the counter. If you were in the know, you could say what you wanted, and they would slide a bag over to you when you checked out, hidden from the store's security camera by a strategically placed Certs display. It was popular with kids from the high school, who were connected to it by none other than a young Hoffenreider himself, who wasn't then working at the Citgo, but helped to hook some of the younger customers up with the operation. He also sold those same small bags out of his backpack at school.

"Hey, what happened to that kid who used to work here during the day? The kid who always wore sweatpants. He used to look at me real weird when I came in

here,” Bill said.

“Oh, Aaron? He got fired for stealing scratch-offs.”

“No, shit. People are always stealing scratch-offs, huh?”

“He had a good idea: he pulled out the roll when no one was here and took them from the middle before rolling it back up. We have to write down the number on the last card every time we leave, but because he took them from the middle, the numbers at the end of his shift were what they should have been. They only keep the video,” Hoffenreider nodded his head toward the security camera, “for three days.”

“So, how’d they get him?” Bill asked.

“Out of nowhere, the 1-1-1 Guy came in and bought like a million Win for Lifes,” Hoffenreider said, laughing.

“Does he buy Win for Lifes?” Bill asked.

The 1-1-1 Guy was super old and bought two things every day: a lotto ticket with all ones and eggs.

“He’d never done anything like that. He bought so many that they caught up to where Aaron had taken the tickets. No one could figure out what had happened, so Naum checked the video and saw Aaron taking them. It was gonna be erased the next day.” Hoffenreider shook his head.

“Aaron got fucked,” Bill said. “That’s crazy. He was so close to getting away with it.”

“He was pissed. Naum took it pretty hard. They’d been boys. I asked Naum

about it, and he said Aaron said something racist when Naum asked him why he did it.”

“What? Why?”

“Got me, man. I don’t know what race has to do with scratch-off tickets.”

“So, what was he getting, the Win for Lifes?” Bill said. “What do they run anyway?”

“Two each,” Hoffenreider answered.

“Oh, yeah?” Bill paused for a beat. “Let me get one.”

Hoffenreider tore off one of the cards. In the meantime, Chicky had appeared behind Bill. Hoffenreider hadn’t heard him come in.

“What up, Hoffenreider?” Chicky said, giving Hoffenreider daps.

“What’s up, Chicky?” Hoffenreider said, pounding Chicky’s fist with his own.

Hoffenreider rang up the card and Bill slid two singles over to him.

“For Aaron,” Bill said ceremoniously before scratching it off. He held the quarter tight in his fist, which made it look like he was scratching off the ticket with his flesh.

“How’d ya do?” Hoffenreider asked.

Bill held the card close to his face. “You need four to win, but I only got two.”

“Here, let me see that,” Hoffenreider said, taking the card. “You need four dollar signs to win the jackpot, but only three to win some money. You got two,” Hoffenreider said.

“You were pretty close,” Chicky said.

“Yeah, I think you can actually win a decent amount of money with three,” Hoffenreider said distractedly. He paused, looked at the card, looked at Bill, and then looked back at the card. He seemed to have had an idea. “Crazy, right? If you got three, you might have the money you’d earn for months of work just handed to you because you scratched off this card.”

“That much? Without even hitting the jackpot?” Bill said.

Hoffenreider leaned against the cash register. “Oh, yeah. I’ve seen guys come in here with just three and win all types of money. That’s why Aaron stole these: you can make a lot,” Hoffenreider said.

Bill looked at him. “You think so? Hey, give me another,” he said after a beat.

“*Win for life. Don’t give a fuck ‘cause you won for life,*” Chicky screamed, boosting the energy of the fun.

Hoffenreider tore off another and handed it to him. “Could be the one,” he said.

Bill set upon it, scratching it off intensely. “Nothing,” he said without looking up.

“Sucks,” Hoffenreider said and laughed shrilly. “If you won? I mean, really won? No more time in the warehouse. No more time at your workstation with the boss being a dick to you. Get up when you want, sleep when you want, do what you want. I see guys at college like that. The future’s bright, bro.”

*“The future,”* Chicky screamed. *“Gonna be dope.”*

“Yeah, Chicky. The future would be dope for Bill if he won. Man, if he won, he could buy this whole place, and then I’d work for him.”

“If I owned a store like this, I would scratch off all the cards. Then I would have all that money,” Chicky reasoned.

“Imagine how much money you would have if you had all those cards,” Hoffenreider said. “Would you sell those cards if you had them, Chicky?”

“No. No, definitely not,” Chicky said, shaking his head.

“Another,” Bill said, slapping a stack of bills down on the counter.

“Smart. That’s smart,” Chicky said, nodding.

Hoffenreider tore off two more. He handed one to Bill and kept the other on the counter. Bill took the first card, leaned in close, and started scratching it off.

“If you’re—” Hoffenreider began, but Bill grabbed the second from him before finishing the first, which he tossed aside after seeing the results.

Hoffenreider pulled off a few more and piled them on the counter. “Bill’s gonna win big, man. He’s gonna have some pull in this town. Bill’s gonna be the guy to go to when you want to make stuff happen—just like when we were kids,” Hoffenreider said. Chicky met Hoffenreider’s eyes and nodded his head in short, excited bursts.

Bill stopped scratching. He held his head too close to the card for them to see what it said.

“So?” Chicky said.

Bill didn’t answer. He kept his head down. He stood frozen, bent at the waist, his face still close to the card.

“You win for life, Bill? You win *at* life now?” Hoffenreider said.

That was when Hoffenreider noticed little droplets on the counter. He followed them to Bill’s card and stopped smirking. Bill’s hand was bleeding. Hoffenreider recoiled. “What the fuck, Bill?”

Saying nothing, Bill hungrily set upon the stack of cards Hoffenreider had put out.

“Put more down,” Bill said in a strange, guttural voice.

“Can’t win if you don’t play,” Chicky said.

Bill’s hand left thick swaths of red on the card.

“Dude, use a coin,” Hoffenreider said.

“*Put more down,*” Bill thundered, tossing aside the finished card.

“*Use a coin,*” Hoffenreider shouted as he reached into the case for more cards, which Bill savagely took without looking up.

“*More,*” Bill shouted as he scratched at the cards. His fingernails hung loose.

“*In chaos, there’s opportunity,*” Chicky shouted.

The boombox snapped back to life, its lights glowing a bright, angry red, as it blared a terrible, high-pitched wail. Hoffenreider put his hands to his ears, looking to the boombox and then to Bill, who groped at the scratch-off dispenser, seizing what

he could with his left hand while continuing to tear at the cards in front of him with the flesh of his right.

*“Gotta bleed if you wanna lead,”* Chicky screeched, his eyes wild, his pitch matching the radio’s wail.

Bill hunched over the mound of cards, making sucking noises and grunts. His right hand was mangled like he’d gotten it trapped in the moving parts of a stainless-steel machine; it was too mashed to remove the adhesive from the scratch-offs, but he rubbed it on the cards anyway, which by then were so slick with blood that the mashed pulp of his hand feebly slid off them.

Hoffenreider hurdled the counter, landing just beyond Bill’s lunatic grasp. He dashed toward the exit, stopping to look back only after the store’s automatic door had closed, sealing off behind him the smell of blood and the sounds of the radio’s crescendo, Chicky’s screeching, and Bill’s grunts. He saw his textbook, fat from having been soaked in what seemed like an impossibly large amount of blood, still on the counter.

Hoffenreider sprinted to his car, though Bill was too absorbed in the seemingly endless string of blood-splattered scratch-offs to pay attention to him.

Tearing out of the parking lot in his ancient Taurus, Hoffenreider asked himself whether it was more probable that Bill would drown in the pool of blood or drown in the pool of scratch-offs the Citgo was likely to become. Something about the question seemed off, though in his fractured mind he couldn’t tell what. Having thought about

it, he might have to concede that all that studying had made him a little pedantic.

# Most Perfect Map (fragment)

They trudged in weary silence until reaching what looked like an all-night diner. Kenny pointed, and Aaron nodded. They would go in. The wordless exchange reminded Aaron of high school football. Kenny and Aaron had both been on the school's team before Kenny's grades had gotten in the way. Once teammates, always teammates.

A waitress stopped Kenny when he tried going in with his cigarette. "All right, all right. You know no one cares, right?" he said in English, taking a final drag before tossing it. "Happy?" he spit at her.

"Can you speak the language?" Aaron asked.

"Not a fucking word, but I knew what she wanted." Kenny looked bitter but then smiled. "No one cares what you do here. If you speak English, they pay you like a doctor."

The diner was crowded and loud, which felt weird and sudden after coming in from the desolate street. Conversation in a foreign language buzzed around them. People toasted each other and laughed, ordering plate after plate of food by shouting at the waiter. The air was thick with cooking smells mingled with a whiff of bleachy, industrial cleaner.

They ordered by pointing at pictures on the laminated menu and had two beers sent over, something local with an elephant on the label. They toasted before shooting

them back. Kenny gulped down his in two sips. He held up the bottle to the waitress and motioned for another. Aaron took a long sip. His abdomen throbbed faintly; reflexively, he put his hand to it. The waitress came back with Kenny's beer and put down small plates in front of each of them and larger bowls of rice and puree on the table between them.

Kenny cut a bloated, Falstaffian figure in the diner's booth. Aaron remembered him as a thuggish '90s hardcore kid: cleanly shaven, baseball hat cocked to the side, Madball basketball jersey, Adidas sneakers. Now he looked like a Hells Angel. His beard bulged as much as did the red bandana that held down the dry nest of his hair. A faded Mayhem t-shirt stretched against his bulging stomach.

"Feels good to be drinking on a weeknight," Aaron said.

"Don't it always. Throw some cologne on, sweat it out at work," Kenny said. The waitress brought over a plate of something Aaron didn't recognize. Kenny took a massive bite and chomped loudly with an open mouth.

"Aren't you a teacher?" Aaron said.

"I teach shit. I jack off in the classroom and get paid for being dumb. I'm not a teacher-teacher." He made a motion like masturbating his beer bottle.

There'd always been a hint of competition between them. Kenny would push to the extreme when Aaron compromised. Aaron smoked weed, Kenny snorted crank. Aaron got C's, Kenny got F's in the teens and twenties. Aaron had graduated and started

at the community college before transferring to State. Kenny had dropped out after his third freshman year.

“Yeah, well, I’m taking home a teacher-teacher salary,” Aaron said.

“I’m doing just fine,” Aaron said, nodding his thick head.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Living large,” Kenny said, possibly being sarcastic. He lit another cigarette despite what the waitress had said when they’d come in. No one seemed to notice. “Had to fire a guy last week. You get a lot of fuck-ups in my industry. Don’t understand the customer comes first,” Kenny said.

“Fire him, huh? What are you, the principal?” Aaron said.

“Something like that. I’m the boss,” Kenny said.

Apparently, Kenny was a supervisor at a franchised ESL school. It sounded grueling, with long hours doing whatever it took to get as many students in the door as possible. “Inflow equals cashflow,” Kenny kept saying, sounding like he was repeating something he’d heard someone else, probably his boss, say.

Aaron thought of the messages he’d received from W over the last few days. *Just checking in. Making sure we’re on the same page. Going to miss you around here.* He made it sound like Aaron had already resigned. Even if Aaron held out for the rest of the year and finished the contract, W obviously wasn’t going to keep him on next year. He had nothing saved and was staring down the barrel of \$90k in student loans. His abdomen hurt.

Kenny motioned to the waitress for yet another beer to be brought over. He raised his eyebrows, gesturing to Aaron with the empty bottle. *Did he want another?* Aaron tried to calculate how much he'd already spent on the trip. It seemed then that "should he get another" had been the central question of his life. Some part of him was always rationing things out to himself. But Kenny wasn't doing that. Aaron nodded, and Kenny held up two fingers to the waitress.

"So, you had to get rid of that guy, huh?" Aaron said.

"Different expectations. Happens a lot out here," Kenny said, shrugging.

"You looking to hire another teacher? Maybe a guy who's been teaching for ten years back in the States?"

"Yeah, sure, we'll make you superintendent," Kenny said. He put his face into the bowl, using the chopsticks to shovel rice into his mouth. Aaron had noticed people at the other tables doing the same thing.

"I'm serious," Aaron said.

"You could be a real teacher back in the States."

"I'm looking to do something different. Do what you did—see a new place."

Kenny leaned back and looked at him. "Well, if you're serious, we could have a pow-wow about that. The big boss would be thrilled to have a guy like you. It's good marketing to have a real teacher around. The owner's a good dude, a lot of connections with local government, so we're all taken care of there. I'd ride you hard in the beginning, but we could hustle. Make some money."

All the talk of money and hustle sounded a little crass to Aaron, but it was also refreshing as a counterpoint to what he heard around school. They were workers to the administration when they needed something and volunteers when they wanted something extra. A lot of the teachers seemed to buy it—or least wanted to. Kenny's focus on power and profit cut to the chase. That was how everything really was when you scratched the surface.

Kenny held his bottle out to toast Aaron, who gave the same nod he used to give when they agreed on a play. Once teammates, always teammates.



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