

RULES

Hit the ground.

Curl up in a ball.

Cover your head.

Don't cry. Ever.

All this I know. All this is instinct, as automatic as any breath, any blink, any beat of the heart. Knowing this has always gotten me through. But even now, as I repeat these eighteen years worth of hard learned lessons over and over in my head, waiting for the hail of blows to stop, I worry it won't be enough. There's something different this time. Each kick is more savage, every stomp falls with the ferocity of the sky itself. I suck in more breath, knowing how important it is not to so much as whimper.

I don't remember learning to count to ten. I can't recall who taught me to sing my ABCs. I've tried but the memories are safely tucked away. None of those memories

matter now. All I need to remember are those four lessons. And I can picture, with a clarity that always seems married to terrible thoughts, how I learned each and every one of them.

Hit the ground. In second grade, Zach Meyers pushed me off the swing in the park and when I stood—not even to reclaim the swing, simply to walk away—Zach clocked me with a haymaker, sending me to the ground once more and splitting my lip. I stayed down and Zach took the swing. When they give my eulogy, they’ll say, “He was a fast learner.”

Over the laughs and war cries from above, I hear something: a grunt, a whimper, a moan—a sickening combination of all three. It’s Davis. He’s nearby and while I can’t see him—my arms cocoon my head—I know he’s curled in a ball, mirroring me. But he’s just made a mistake. The blows, doled out by the two or three guys still standing over me, ease up. I venture one impossibly short glance out between my elbows. I’m still, silent. I offer no sport. Davis’s utterance earns him the attention of all our tormentors. Throwing their legs back as far as they go, they launch forward in a vicious, steel-toed assault on my best friend.

Curl up in a ball. Sixth grade, Pete Isaacson announced to everyone at recess that he was taking karate. He asked me if I wanted a free lesson. Before I could respond—the prepared response was a quiet “no,” followed by walking away—he demonstrated a powerful kick to my stomach that sent me to the asphalt in a fetal lump. *Cover your head* was part of this lesson too; instinctual.

“You got something to say, faggot?”

That's Pete's voice, six years later and six feet away. They're ignoring me completely now and I dare a longer look. For the first time, I see there are six of them total. No surprises. The usual suspects. Pete's mob from the wrestling team. Pete lording over them all in those trademark, size-eleven bowling shoes, burnished emerald and ochre. Two glints of gun-metal silver, dogtags on a chain around his neck, shoot the sun's reflection like a laser. He's grinning. They're all relishing this blind attack more than they ever have. No doubt, with graduation tomorrow night, they see this as their last chance to get in one final beating. Sometimes, despite all the lessons I've learned, I forget. I should have known they'd pull this.

When Davis does not answer, Pete throws his leg up and brings it down in a forceful stomp on Davis's hip, eliciting a howl. I'm too sore to take in a breath, my right arm is weak again. I can't say anything. I can only send silent pleas to Davis: *shut up*. And although it is hard to tell—the savage blows pitching Davis's body this way and that—I know Davis is sobbing.

Don't cry. Ever. This lesson was more a culmination of all the others. I've never cried during a beating. It had never occurred to me. I used to think it was that I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing they'd gotten to me. The real reason? Crying solves nothing. I only do things that make a difference. Like now. When I summon the strength to cough.

The effect is instantaneous. Three of them break off and renew their assault on me. A couple of them fall to their knees, pummeling the side of my head and my arm with their fists. A year ago, Kenny Dugan broke my right arm by slamming me into a

locker. That might be him now, trying to recapture the glory. I have no choice. I do what I always do. I take a diversion.

LOCAL TEEN DEAD IN GAY BASHING INCIDENT

Madison, Wis—Authorities are questioning six local wrestlers in the beating death of Evan Weiss, a senior at Monona High School. Just one day before all seven were set to graduate, the wrestlers are facing charges of first degree murder in what authorities are describing as a clear case of gay bashing.

Weiss and his best friend, Davis Grayson, were walking home after the last day at school when the suspects allegedly jumped the pair and began beating them. Grayson remains hospitalized in critical care. Perhaps most tragic is the fact that this death occurred mere blocks from the state capitol where Governor Doyle Petersen is days away from signing major hate crime legislation into law.

When asked to comment on the incident, Governor Petersen said, “It’s difficult to comment without all the facts at hand. But once these boys are found guilty, I plan to lobby for the re-institution of the death penalty and see those little fuckers fry.”

My self-inflicted fantasy does the trick. It carries me away into unconsciousness. I don’t know how much later it is when I feel Davis gently prodding my chest. I move and my body explodes. A discharge of pain in my shoulder, rendering my right arm flaccid. I cry out and pull it to my chest. Sitting up isn’t going to happen so I continue to lie in the dry, scratchy grass. I look up at Davis. His left eye is swollen; it’ll be layers of yellow and green and completely shut by the morning. His sandy blonde hair juts out in every direction, decorated with grass clippings, cigarette butts, and pebbles. Dark streaks crisscross his face like war paint and, with the sun almost completely down now, shadow and blood fuse into one.

“A car drove by and they freaked.” His whisper is like ground glass. “You were out. I didn’t know what to do.”

He holds out his hand to help me up and I shrink away, keeping my right arm as close to me as possible. He sees this.

“Is it broken?”

It hurts to move and it will be useless for a few days. But I remember vividly what it felt like when it broke last year—pinching my eyes shut until the daylight turned red, a river of knives flowing up to my shoulder—and this does not feel like that. I shake my head and, using my good arm, lift myself up. We stand facing each other for a moment, each fading into a silhouette. We limp back to my house.

OCTAGON

My obsessions never seem to work for me. I'm obsessed with artists. How they work, how they manipulate color and light, how they frame the world and how the world frames them. Every year, I pick a new artist to study. I look at their work, I study their style. I mentally catalog brushstrokes and subject matter and tints and points of view and mediums and choices. All the choices. And once I've absorbed it all, I paint. I evoke their technique and I paint something as they would have done. No. I don't evoke. I perfect. I've been told I'm good at imitating others. I'm also told it's creepy.

Since January, I've been studying Keith Haring. Davis thinks Haring was a nut. That's because he doesn't get Haring. Davis's brain gets math and computer programs and other things that are either this or that. He's not into possibilities. He dismisses Haring's work, calling it "comic strip" art. I think Haring's brilliant. I'm amazed at what he can elicit with so little. Nothing like my last obsession—Seurat—who was all about intricacy and tiny details. When Mr. Masterson, my art teacher, saw me looking at Haring

paintings online, he offered to loan me some books for the summer. So Davis and I met with him after school. Jackpot. Masterson has some great stuff, huge coffee table books filled with photos of Haring's work. Books that've been out of print for years. I did my usual stupid job of lapsing into a conversation about art, leaving Davis stuck there, and before long we'd been at school an hour after it let out. I have no idea what the trogs were still doing at school that late. Whatever the reason, it led to the last beating of our academic lives. I hope.

The twenty blocks to my house are ten minutes on a good day, twenty miles on a bad. Davis winces when he puts weight on his right ankle. I continue to hold my arm to my chest and try not to trip on the uneven sidewalks. Day retreats, leaving a scarlet-toned dusk. I watch as colors ebb into the shadows of the hulking two story homes along East Johnson. Two blocks over, I can hear people at James Madison Park, starting their summer vacations on Lake Mendota. I want to enjoy all these, the best parts of my favorite season, but that's not possible now. Enjoying hurts.

Davis keeps playing with the tear in his shirt. Twilight robs it of its brilliant cyan tone. It's his favorite shirt: his mother bought it for his birthday a year ago. He's protective of things his mother buys for him. This is ruined now.

Davis smolders—corrugated brow, blue flame glare.

“So close, eh?” I ask, shaking my head. “Almost made it the whole school year. Timing couldn't be worse. I just finished making us signs to hang over our bedroom doors—‘372 days without a workplace beating.’”

It should get a laugh, a chuckle. It doesn't.

“I heard Pete’s going to Brigham Young. Can you imagine that? Asswipe supreme out in Mormon country. Hey, is he Mormon? I never thought about that. I thought Mormons were typically happy, peaceful people. Exception that proves the rule, huh?”

I should know better. What happened today wasn’t typical. I’m in more pain than I’ve been since Kenny broke my arm. I’ll be bruised for weeks. I can only imagine what shape Davis is in. I shouldn’t be making light of it. Why can’t I stop? Because I have to reach him. I have to reach Davis. It’s what I know.

Davis picks up his pace a little. I don’t know if he’s trying to pull away from me or just get home faster. He’s prone to anxiety attacks after an encounter with the trogs and he usually waits until we’re home to hurl. I match his stride.

“I think Kenny Dugan is staying here in Madison but I heard he couldn’t get into the UW. I wonder if the tech offers a major in ‘duh.’”

The corner of his mouth shoots up, just for a second. Almost there. Drive it home, drive it home.

I lower my voice and do my best Kenny. “Yeah, I’m here to major in ‘duh’ and minor in—“ I strum my lips up and down with my finger. “—bebedebedbebededebe.”

Davis stops and glowers at me. “Quit being such a tardmonkey. This isn’t funny.”

His voice shakes on ‘funny’ and his eyes, periwinkle in the encroaching darkness, moisten. Bad time for humor.

I glance down the road, past the oncoming traffic, and spot the maize-colored bricks of home.

“C’mon,” I toss my head onward, “let’s get you cleaned up.”

No one is home. We go straight to my room—right now, I'd give anything not to live upstairs. I keep a triage kit under my bed. Here, in full light, we look horrible. Like extras in a zombie movie. We don't say anything. We sit on the edge of my unmade bed. He treats my wounds; I return the favor as best I can, dabbing at his face with a dry sponge. The routine is sad but with a strange, familiar comfort.

I stare over Davis's left shoulder at the wall by the foot of my bed. It's littered with typing paper—some tall, some sideways—and each sheet is dotted with small flashes of color, like a mosaic someone forgot to finish. Watercolors, crayons, acrylics—these are the colors I've created and each one has a name. Most people I know measure their life on what grade they were in when something significant happened. A hierarchy of colors governs my personal timeline.

The watercolors started it all with the most elemental of offerings: ROY G BIV, the trick we learned in grade school to memorize the rainbow's colors. I rarely confined myself to those seven. I was always mixing and creating, dazzled at my own brilliance and stunned that no one else had thought to make new colors from old. This was followed by the Crayola 64s. Suddenly, there were shades of red and white and black. Nothing could prepare me for the Crayola 128s. Cornflower, orchid, burnt sienna, gold, silver.

ROY G BIV had clearly been holding out on me.

When I started painting, I discovered that Windsor Acrylics made two hundred fourteen different colors of paint. I still remember the first time I saw all those tiny ashen tubes laid out on the rack at Fitzhugh's Art Supplies. It may have been my first orgasm. The color names became more concrete and real. Smoke. Ice. Military. Crayola gave me a new world. Windsor Acrylics came along like the Death Star and blew it out of the sky.

I once started to chronicle every possible color combination you could make, starting with a base of two hundred fourteen colors. I had worked my way up to covering fifty-three pieces of paper with tiny “swatches” of four hundred unique color mixes before Davis, never a slouch when it came to math, showed me this:

$$2^{214} - 214 - 1 = 2.63 \times 10^{64} - 215.$$

I have no idea what it says. But it means that if I mix each individual color with every other color once and then combine some of those combinations with combinations until I’ve mixed every possible permutation, I would end up with more than four trillion different colors. And trillion isn’t even the right word. I don’t know if there’s a designation for what kind of number it would be. A ten with sixty-four zeroes after it.

I gave up at four hundred.

While Windsor Acrylics offers over two hundred fourteen different colors, I own only about two dozen at any given time (quality paint is pricey) and carry half as many in my modest painting kit when I’m out and about. But I like the idea that any time I want to march down to the Fitzhugh’s on Fordham Avenue, I can marshal over four trillion colors. It made me wonder if there’s an emotion to correspond with every color. The romantic in me bets there is. The cynic in me prays there’s not.

I affix a large gauze pad to the cut over Davis’s brow. Glare coated in Teflon, Davis focuses on the painting opposite my bed. This is his favorite of all my work.

I don’t paint on canvas. I go to auctions and pawn shops to buy old windows. Some still framed, others just sheets of glass. Oval, rectangle, I’ve even got one triangle. I built my own special easel years ago out of an old music stand and a series of rusty vice clamps that shoot out in a series of Shiva-like arms. Davis calls it THE CLAW. It’s

heavy and awkward but I can position the window in the stand, grip it with the clamps, and point it at whatever I want to capture. Then I paint over the image I see through the glass, stroke by stroke, until the world beyond the window is replaced with my acrylic reality. My sister, Shan, used to call it “poor man’s paint-by-numbers.” I miss my sister.

My favorite is an octagon-shaped window, just over a foot across, with an oak border and slats running through that divide it into a tic-tac-toe board. I found it at an estate sale at an old farm house about twenty miles north of Madison. I lugged it around with me this past year, painting different scenes into each of the little squares within.

This is what’s in each box:

The perfectly formed right pec of a UW volleyball player	Lights on the marquee of the Orpheum movie theater—two are burned out	A snake-like chain lock shackled to a bike in James Madison Park
Two chopsticks on a white plate next to a broken fortune cookie	A stack of lead bars, as seen on the Wisconsin state crest	The antique doorknob of the old Rainbow Youth Center on Washington Avenue
A streetmap of Madison with a large star labeled YOU ARE HERE	Three blue squiggles and two yellow circles on a white background	

Each box depicts a moment from my nine-year friendship with Davis. A moment that represents a changing point for us. A moment where everything that followed could no longer impersonate what had gone before. The last box is empty. My plan was to fill it in tonight—with what I still don’t know. Davis does not know but I plan to give this to him as a graduation gift.

I’m no longer sure that’s a good idea. The way he’s looking at it now, it’s like he hates it. I wish Davis had a diversion, like I do. I make it through the tough patches with my diversions—visions of my death and the repercussions on those who remain. It’s not,

as I've explained to Davis countless times, a wish for death but just childish joy and strange solace in imagined aftermath. But just as Davis can't see past Haring's complex simplicity, he has no use for imagination. Therefore, he has no such way of escaping. So everything rots inside him. Davis rarely chooses anger.

He chooses it now.

A wild man erupts, leaping from my bed. I fall back, favoring my left side. Davis slams the door. He kicks the wall. My paintings—most hung by thin wire—dance in place. His face, freshly cleaned, is marred with more tears. This is not my best friend. This is someone whose pallid, thin features have given way to something molten and dangerous. He falls to his knees on my lousy old carpeting and keens. I have seen Davis cry many times. High pitched and intermittent. Not this time. Now it is low and forceful, what I'm sure the end of the world will sound like.

“Why?”

This question, a cornerstone of our relationship, has yet to receive an answer. In its most pure form, the question has remained unspoken. It hides in shared glances, lurks in the duality of our limited social circle. It's a question I doubt even the trogs could answer. They don't know why they belittle us. It's race memory, encoded into who they are. It's instinct. I don't know if there's an answer for instinct.

“I hate this fucking city!” He pulses, beating tiny, useless fists into the floor. It's a sentiment we've both uttered at one time or another, neither completely believing it. The city always offered an easy focal point for anger. It's always been easier to assume life would be better elsewhere. We want to believe that. So we hate a city that harbors people

like the trops. But everyday, I'm reminded that the city is also home to good people. Teachers. Sisters. And nurses. I've stopped hating Madison. Davis can't.

I kneel next to him; his sobs flow uncontrolled. I lay my left arm across his shoulders, easing my right arm around the front, and I hold him. He breaks apart and I scramble to gather the pieces. These moments—where consolation seems impossible—are rare but I've always excelled at getting us through them. He continues to cry out but I can't make out what he's saying anymore. He shakes. I shake.

Davis sniffs and he looks me in the eye. "The bastard told me last night. Next Tuesday's it. I don't know what to do."

He doesn't need to explain. We've known this was a possibility for a year now. We graduate tomorrow. Davis turns 18 on Monday. It's never been a secret that Davis's dad wants him out of the house as soon as he's legal. At least Davis isn't getting thrown out for being gay. His folks don't even know. He's just getting thrown out because his dad is old-fashioned and thinks that being legal means you need to take care of yourself. Davis's dad can be really fucked in the head.

"Let's check out the Rainbow Youth Center," I tell him. "They've got some small rooms upstairs, for runaways and—" The rest of the sentence is—and kids like you who've been kicked out. I don't say that.

"Those are meant to be short term." Yeah, I figured he'd already asked.

I punt. "So it'll be short term until we figure something out. Until the fall." A thought occurs. "Are you...still planning on school?"

The University of Chicago has shined on the horizon of our senior year since last summer. No matter what happened, we told ourselves, "Next year, we'll be in Chicago."

Escape from trops, from parents, from everything that holds us down has never felt closer than when we discuss the Windy City. I ask about school because sometimes plans change. Sometimes, *things* change plans. Unexpected things that change the desirability of escape.

Davis nods. “Are you kidding? It’s all I’ve got.”

This is where, if we were boyfriends, I would kiss him. But we never went there, he and I. That’s not who we are, and that’s not who we can be. That was decided long ago. Maybe forever ago.

I fuss my way up onto my feet and take his hand. “C’mere.”

I ask him to take the octagon off the wall, which he does without question. We go downstairs into the empty garage and I tell him to take a seat on a stool while I attach the window to THE CLAW. He laughs nervously.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m finishing your graduation present.”

His mouth drops and forms a smile for just a moment. But smiling hurts so he lets his face harden again.

I turn THE CLAW so it’s directly in front of Davis and I push it toward him, zooming in until his ravaged, discolored eye envelopes the last empty box in the lower right corner. I squirt paint from my wrinkled tubes onto a palette and quickly begin to mix just the right colors. Davis senses immediately what I’m doing—focusing on his eye—and stiffens. Not because he is unhappy or uncomfortable, but because he wants to be perfectly still while I paint. He wants me to get it right. He knows that I paint honesty. I can do sunsets and perfect pecs when the moment merits. But I can also do rusty

doorknobs and broken fortune cookies because sometimes life just breaks and you can't ignore it. Davis respects that about me. "I'm calling this: 'Last Time.'"

"After you're done...." He hesitates. "After you're done, I have this other idea."

"What's that?" I look up. A single 60 watt light bulb casts meek light. I wonder if I want to grab another lamp from inside. No. It's a good contrast to the resolve on Davis's face.

"Pete Isaacson, Kenny Dugan.... They hate us because we're different."

I almost correct him: they hate us because we're gay. But maybe he's right.

He continues. "I say we show them what different really is."

I don't know what he has on his mind but I know that look: whatever it is, he's going through with it. Sometimes Davis is reckless and I go along to make sure he doesn't get hurt. That's what I decide. I'll go along with this. It can't be that bad.

"Hold still."

I paint hurt.