

Five Ages of a Man

by [Judd Baroff](#) (December 2021)



The Stages of Life, Caspar David Friedrich, 1835

The teacher calls on me and I move the placard so she can see. It's a new year and she's new too. Young and pretty, and all the boys behind me talk about her in whispers. I'm thinking what they're saying, but I'd never voice it. I'm no savage.

I've decorated my placard with negligent design. The drawings are thoughtless, almost random, but stuffed with more reality than the other kids even try at. She glances at the drawings,

at my name, and then pays attention to my face.

"So, your name is Edwin and you're interested in?"

"The hypocrisy of the world."

I say it confidently, wisely, not at all like I'd been introduced to the concept over the summer.

She smiles at me.

"What hypocrisy?"

When I'd arrived at school that morning, I looked upon the school as a new-crowned Sophomore, with a double vision. I saw both what my Freshmen self saw, a castle swarming with giants. And I saw what the school really was, a warren of adolescent competition. I walked the halls with the swagger of the initiated, laughing at the turned-about newbies. Mostly this was a cover for my own fear.

My friend was macking on the prettiest Junior, talking about his new watch, his vacation in Europe. I grabbed him, told him she was out of his league. He told me that as long as she didn't know that, it was fine. I was resentful, but I tried to hide it. I'm still shorter than she is. He called me a dwarf. I called him a lanky masturbator. He asked if I were doing art again. I am. Debate club? Nope. We laughed our way to history class.

Our teacher described the class. "We start with 'A Model of Christian Charity.' Then the class follows the white settlement of the 'New World.'"

She used her fingers for the scare-quotes.

She said, "Then we learn about the Revolution, about the Declaration of Independence, who was excluded from the original conception, and how that conception expanded. And we end on the lead-up to the Civil War, with special attention

to *Dred Scott*."

After class, I walked up to her and handed back the *Wobbly* magazines she'd lent me.

"Thanks," I said. "They were interesting." I hadn't finished a single article. "But can Communism work?"

She said, "It's always about getting greed under control. But what do you think? We study it in depth next year, but I teach honors."

I went to Geometry, then to Biology, then to Spanish, and I realized that choosing no honors classes was going to make the year more than a bit dull. I complained about it at lunch.

"Everyone's just stupid in the classes."

"Well," my friend said, "You're in the classes, so that must be true."

I punched him. He punched me. We went on with lunch, looking at girls, and I dropped my complaints.

After lunch, I went to English and that when I met the new teacher. Teachers don't really have ages but come in forms: young, middle aged, old. My Biology teacher is middle aged, my History teacher old. And this English teacher is young, very young. And very pretty.

She has a game, an "ice-breaker." It's the first time I hear the phrase. We each write our names on placards, decorating them however we wish, and then tell her one thing that "animates" us. She has to explain what "animate" means to the class. I roll my eyes. The whole class reacts to the idea with robust excitement. And if you believe that, I have a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you. I've already made up my mind about her. She's an idiot and going to be chased out of school by the end of the year.

She goes around the class. People say they're animated by "basketball" or "movies" or "Michael Jackson." They're stupid kids. So, when she gets to me, I've a knowing smirk waiting for her.

"So, your name is Edwin and you're interested in?"

"The hypocrisy of the world."

My voice is slick, conspiratorial. I'd perfected the knowing pose of the adolescent adult talking about the silliness in the world with someone who knows. It works with my family, and it works with the teachers. From the mouths of babes and all that other BS.

Instead of respectfully nodding, I see laughter hidden in her eyes, and when she speaks it's in a voice I recognize, the voice of humored toleration that I use with children. I wonder if she knows she's doing it. I wonder if she realizes I can tell. I don't for a moment wonder if the class can tell. I won't wonder that for another decade. After all, they're dumb.

She smiles and says, "What hypocrisy?"

The question devastates me, like a Mike Tyson punch to the stomach. I fall back onto instincts honed in a year of debate and stammer something out, about power and money and people who say one thing and do another.

She says, "Ah, I see."

I leave the class confused.

Art is a refuge. In the basement, stuffed into a side-room, smelling of acrylic and poor ventilation, warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and dark. The art teacher is a woman, middle aged, with crazy hair and the sort of frantic energy I associated then with small dogs. She disappears to the bathroom a lot, which is what women do. And she talks about Picasso.

"There's a joke about Shakespeare," she says, starting with the same story she used last year. "The crazy thing about Shakespeare is he's actually as good as people say he is. The same is true of Picasso. If you study him in sequence, you see him re-invent art from scratch, until he gets to masterpieces that no one before could have even imagined, let alone completed. He created the modern world."

Personally, I like the older Picassos better. She tells us she'll teach us the techniques of Native Americans the first marking period, mid-life Picasso during the second, Japanese line-drawing the third, and late-stage Picasso fourth quarter. I hear a Freshman girl whisper to her friend, "I don't know how to do any of those styles."

I lean over to dispense wisdom, "You won't have to. She's cool and'll let you do whatever you want."

The girl looks at me as if she'd caught me outside her window. I try to look unfazed, but my drawing that day is full of dark corners and long shadows. When we stand to leave, I realize she's taller than I am.

Months pass and my classes pall until I'm wearier than Sisyphus (not that I know who Sisyphus is then). I throw myself into art, throw myself into friends, do anything but pay any attention in class. My grades don't seem to change more than a half-step. My History teacher tells us about the former slaves who fought in the Revolution, how many of them were re-enslaved after the Treaty of Paris. Many of them fled to the North. The Constitution valued black men at three-fifths of the white man.

A girl raises her hand in the back, "Didn't they just value freemen one thing and slaves another?"

Our teacher says, "And who were the slaves?"

My teacher still gives me *Wobbly* magazines. I still skim them.

I wonder at the greed of people and see it everywhere. One day a football player from my English class cuts in line before me. He's almost twice my size. I tell him he can't cut. He laughs. I try to move his tray. He smacks my hand. I tell him, again, he can't cut, and I try to move his tray. He slaps me again and says "If you touch it one more time ..."

I do.

The next thing I see, his friends are pulling him away from me, my back's on top of the ice-cream freezer, and my head's against the wall. My head'll be sore for the rest of the day. But I now have a story and that's more than worth the price of admission. In art, we start learning about Cubism. I'm drawing old ruins, something out of *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *Star Wars*. Sometimes I can't tell the difference. The same girl who'd seemed to think I was a voyeur, leans over to talk to me now.

"Did you really punch him?"

"No," I say, giving her a lying smile even though I'm telling the truth. "I didn't do much more than tell him he couldn't cut in line. It's not fair. It's ... well ... it's greedy."

I get a real smile.

In English, I study my teacher. I talk more here than anywhere. Poor woman, she's trying nearly everything to get us to participate. Charts, diagrams, videos, blocks, presentations—nothing much works. She tries games, and sags visibly when we start a yelling match over *Fahrenheit 451*. But when the teacher next-door walks into the class to see if we are alright, my teacher is grinning like an idiot. The games work well the second time too, but less well the third, and by next week the magic wears off entirely. So, I take to answering questions when no one else will, which means I talk almost more than she does.

When the last bell rings before Winter Break, I stay behind.

"Happy Holidays," I say.

She looks up at me, confused.

"Thanks. You too."

I smile at her, as I've smiled at children.

"Harder than expected?"

I say it as a joke, half-mockingly, and any other teacher would skewer me where I stand for that tone. I don't know how I know it's the right thing to say, but it is. She laughs aloud. I realize it's been months since I've seen her laugh. She's very, very pretty when she laughs.

"I knew first year would be hard. Real life versus the theoretical, I guess."

I have nothing else to say. We stand there.

She says, "Well, Merry Christmas."

And I'm gone.

We return to school and it's like a roller-coaster. There was the slow build-up before Winter Break, an excited pause at the top that's the break itself, and now a fearful plunge which will take us deep into April without a single day off. In History we have an essay, to be handed in right before Spring Break. Asking what I should write about, my teacher suggests the economic origins of the Civil War.

"Wasn't it about slavery?"

"It concerned slavery, surely," she says, "But it was much more than that. The Union didn't exactly fall apart because whites cared about black suffrage."

English brings the biggest change. I notice it walking through the door. No longer does the room have the tension of a tinderbox, no longer does the teacher hunch and scowl. She pairs us off into reading comprehension groups, and, when class breaks down into social hour within the first ten minutes, she barely seems to notice. I stare at her the whole period.

Art never changes. Being in the basement is a real blessing this time of year. I ask the girl next to me what her break was like.

"It was fine," she says.

We talk about what we got for Christmas. I show off a new colored pencil set, and, as I'm showing off, I draw her.

She calls me "clever." Through our teacher's whole lecture on Picasso's turn to Classicism, we talk. I make her laugh, and she tells me I'm "a jerk" when her laughter interrupts the lecture. When we stand to leave, I realize I'm taller than she is.

Over the next several months I grow like I've seen other boys grow. I started the year at five-two. When I go to the doctor in March, I'm five-six. My mom has to buy me three pairs of new shoes, back-to-back-to-back. We start going to second-hand stores. I notice people talking to me more. Maybe it's just my imagination.

In English, the teacher starts getting funny. Biting jokes, insulting back the kids who insult her. She makes the class laugh and plays kids off each other. We listen to her a bit more. I have to speak up less. But still, no one studies, no one reads, and she starts reading to the class, turning each class into communal homework time. I draw, usually I draw her, often her in a scene from our books. I often draw her in a homely house.

The History essay proves difficult. I read the Confederate Constitution and it seems pretty clear to me that it was about slavery. I say this to my History teacher.

"Isn't that normally how economic anxiety manifests?"

She points out some modern scholars, but the books are hard to read. So, I read more people from that time. South Carolina seceded first and gave as its reason "the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery." Southern preachers talked about slavery's "positive good."

They said that as parents enlighten children so too must white men enlightened black men, though they didn't say "black men." The 'n' word is the least of the language I read. I read them in old newspapers, and I draw the gruesome photographs of lynching. If slave holders were willing to say that, to do that, then surely, they'd have been open about the economics of it.

My history teacher says, "You don't see what's underlying it, though. Owners always cloak their greed in the language of liberty."

I write it up anyway. It's the best thing I do all year. I get a B. I stop taking the *Wobbly* magazines.

After school, I go to my English teacher's office to complain about the grade. She listens patiently, nodding along. She asks me more about what I meant that first day, about the world of hypocrisy. I'm touched that she remembers, but I have nothing more impressive to say about it now than I did then. I revert to complaining of the grade, saying hypocrisy is telling the class they can write on anything they want and then grading them harshly when they don't write what you want.

She asks me what I like to read. I tell her *Harry Potter*. She nods, returning to the woman from the first day's class,

confidant, knowing, boundless. I ask her if she's read it, liked it.

"Her twists are easier to see when you know Latin."

I don't understand.

She says, "Lupin is Latin for wolf. Remus was a Roman mythic figure raised by a wolf. And Rowling's character disappeared during the full moon to be replaced by Snape who gave them werewolves as an essay. It's fairly obvious when you know the language behind it. I also knew who Nicolas Flamel was."

That would rather ruin the books, I guess.

She says, "I think you'd like *No Exit* by Sartre. He's right up your alley."

I don't read him for a decade. I'm over him by the time I read him, but I see what she meant.

The next week, the football player disrupts the class, asking her how old she is.

"Way too old for you," she says.

The class laughs, but not quite loud enough to drown out his, "I'll give her my six inches."

I see the color drain from her face, but she carries on as if he hadn't said anything. I catch up with him later, in the cafeteria. I tell him he's a douche, gross. He tells me to shove off. I suddenly notice we're the same height. I tell him if he were really six inches, he'd know it wasn't large enough to brag about. He punches me, and while I give back much more than last time, he's still a football player. His friends pull him off me again.

I put ice on my face in the nurse's office, refuse to tell her who hit me. In Art, everyone already knows what happened. The

girl next to me looks critically at my puffing face.

"You definitely punched him this time."

I agree.

"Why did you defend her?"

I honestly don't understand her at first. Perhaps it's the punches to the head.

"She's a flirt. All the girls talk about it."

I'm offended and I can't keep it from my voice. We don't talk for the rest of the class. At the end, though, she stops me.

"Sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to be a cow. You just got in a fight. I shouldn't have said anything." She pauses. "I think it was noble, even if she doesn't deserve it." She pauses again, laughs. "Though he is a varsity football player. It was kind of stupid."

I'm even more offended now. I don't do stupid things. I'm smart enough not to say that aloud.

"If you want, my brother's on the wrestling team and he'll let you work out with them."

I seem to remember that wrestling ends in early Spring.

"It does. But they train all year. If you want, he agreed."

This means she asked him before class. This too only occurs to me years later.

Blushing, she says, "Weight room, right after school."

I can't thank her before she runs off. I'm still not sure I would have.

But I do go to the weight room after school, and her brother folds me seamlessly into the workout everyone does. Everyone

agrees the football player is a fag. And even as I'm uncomfortable with the use of the slur, we laugh about him sucking dick. They show me how to use the equipment, tell me to drink milk, eat more meat, a lot of salads, pasta and stuff the night before a match. I have to use each machine on its lowest setting. Fifteen-pound weights are heavy.

I spend the night on my computer, searching my English teacher. I don't know what I'm looking for, but I find her birth certificate, or an announcement of it. She's twenty-three. It seems so old, but I realize she must have just graduated from college. Next day after school, my eye fully black and blue, I knock on her office door. I tell her that the football player is an ass. She smiles but doesn't say anything. I tell her I found her birth online.

She looks behind me to another teacher. They share one of those looks that only women share. I'm too young to realize it's about men, or, in this case, about one particular boy who's a bit too eager to play the man. I stand there so long she has to invite me in.

When we're sitting, I ask her how she can come in and teach every day. She says it's her job, and she's always wanted to teach. The other teacher is still there. We talk some more about books. She asks after my art. In sudden inspiration, I ruffle through my bag and almost lose my loose leafs on the floor. After I've caught them and organized them enough to stuff them back into the bag, I turn to a blank page of a sketch book and draw out a picture of her on the raft with Huckleberry and Jim. She laughs, but my heart is racing ten-million beats a minute. There are drawings in there that I wouldn't want her to see.

By May, I'm five-eight. Twenty-pound weights are no longer heavy, and I agree to join the wrestling team the next year. I flirt with the girl in art but can't bring myself ask her out. Part of me expects she'll refuse. Part of me knows her brother

will kill me, and I rely on him for almost everything. Most of me is just in love with my English teacher.

History used to be my favorite class but Art. Now I can barely sit through it. The teacher there keeps shooting me worried glances. I feel betrayed, but one afternoon I re-read my essay and wonder if it really was anything better than a B. I start reading history again after school. I draw men in chains, men in blue, a tall man in a top hat. I ask my teacher after school which of Abraham Lincoln's speeches I should read. She gives me three. I don't read any of them.

In English, I catch the football player cheating. I tell my teacher.

She says, "I know."

I ask her why she doesn't throw him out, or fail him, or whatever.

She says, "The administration won't let me."

I can tell she's sad. The other teacher isn't there, so I tell her I know she gave up after Christmas break. She seems surprised, and a wall falls between us. I tell her how angry I am all the time. She comforts me, and I'm on the cusp of telling her I love her.

She says, "We can't keep meeting. People are starting to talk."

I want to tell her I don't care. I stand and rant about that and I almost get down on my knees to complete the story-book romance. She stops me. She almost pats me on the shoulder, but pulls back even from that. Later I see them, even when she and I are in public, the hawkish eyes of the too knowing, modern day Mrs. Bennets. I don't know that reference yet, but I come to hate them all the same, hate them for years.

During that last meeting, she says, "I hope you can break down

before a woman in college, really get in touch with your soft side. A boyfriend of mine once did that and it really brought us together.”

I ask her if they’re still together, sick to my stomach.

“No, but for other reasons. Don’t keep yourself locked inside, and give yourself some slack.”

I leave.

In Art, I keep to myself, drawing in Picasso’s late style of broken forms. They mean nothing to anyone but me. The girl next to me moves across the room, whispering with her friend like a boiling kettle. Her brother takes me aside after one session at the gym.

“I hear you’ve been shunning my sister.”

I deny it.

“Listen, stop being a douche. She’s into you. Ask her out or don’t ask her out, but don’t lead her on.”

I’m confused. Wouldn’t he want to murder me if I dated his sister?

“Don’t be a jerk, don’t touch her ... you know ... *that* way, and we’re good. She could do worse. You’re a good kid.”

I never feel like I am.

In History, we study the underground railroad and Harriet Beecher Stowe. I actually read her book. It’s quite moving. During one class, our teacher shows us various pictures, the images of run-away slaves when they were brought back to their ‘masters’. They’re tore and mutilated. The class is deadly silent. At lunch, everyone talks in hushed voices about how they’d have helped Harriet Tubman and the others. I’m silent and wonder what I would have done.

In Art, I sit next to the girl. We talk about what we're drawing. I draw her. She calls it "clever" again. Even if she doesn't realize it, I do, and the realization hits me harder than the football player's punch to the face. After class I rifle through the cabinet, take out some of my older work. I was better at the beginning of the year.

The next day, she asks, "Who's your favorite artist?"

I no longer know, but I always used to say 'Monet'. I say so now.

She asks, "How well do you know the Dutch Masters?"

I ask her if she wants to go to the movies with me this Friday.

"Sure. How're we getting there?"

I hadn't actually thought that far ahead. In a fit of honesty, I tell her so. She laughs.

"My brother can drive us. He's always out with a girl."

In English, I wait until everyone else clears out. There's only three more days left of school. I heard a rumor she isn't coming back next year.

"It's true," she says.

I say, "Are you going to another school?"

"In a way. I don't think I'm cut out for High School. I got into a graduate program. After a PhD, I hope to teach college." A pause. "Thank you." Quickly, "What are you going to do next year?"

I tell her I'll join wrestling and keep up with my art.

"And after? College?"

In our family, only my mom had ever gone to college. All that got her was a secretary job she hates. When I was a kid, I thought basketball would make my life. My friends are thinking about rap careers. I always figured I'd be a plumber like my uncle. I tell my English teacher none of this. I tell her about the date last weekend, about the movie. I don't tell her about the kiss, but I can feel my cheeks brown.

"Good," she says.

I'm disappointed that she's so clearly happy. I wonder if she can see the blood drain out of my face.

She says, "Be kind to her. Be kind to yourself too. Please."

Will I see you again? I don't say that either.

"Bye," I say.

"Bye," says she.

I never see her again, but she never quite leaves me. And when I survive BUD/S, it's as much to do with her as it's to do with my friend the wrestler. Much more to do with either of them than with me.

We meet in purple sun outside a small cafe. I picked the place because it was beautiful; I picked her because she was beautiful and because she reminded me of nothing from my latest life. She did remind me of my English teacher. With a start, I realize I'm half-a-decade older now than she was then.

I'm jiggling my leg, keeping my hands away from the cigarettes in my pocket. I'm trying to quit, and I now regret bringing them. My date walks down the sidewalk, stops slowly like a cruise ship, and stares. I stand. She comes closer, tentatively, not to be rude. Her hair is up in a braid, and

she wears a thin red wrap, showing more leg than I'm altogether comfortable not staring at.

"Edwin?" she asks.

"Ed to my friends. Nice to meet you."

I pull out her seat and we share an uncomfortable silence. A waiter comes by, and we hurl our orders at him.

"Vodka sprite," she says.

"Rum and coke," I say.

He leaves.

"So ... " I start, "How are classes?"

In fits and starts we get the conversation going. She studies Politics and History, is part of a sorority, and plays tennis. We share a West Coast childhood and the sense of going far away after graduation. I went rather farther, but I don't say it.

"How do you like Jersey?" I ask.

"Princeton's still a bit cosseted. I often think I should have gone to Columbia instead, but I wanted to see what living outside a city was like."

The options some people have.

She says, "How did you end up here?"

"Transferred to Fort Dix for inter-service training. I'm training others, I mean."

She won't look me in the eye, but her long fingers play with her straw, moving a bobbing and mostly dissolved piece of ice in circles. I look for a long time at her nails and notice a chip in one of them. The polish is bright-red, and I hear a

voice in my head back from the platoon about women with black nickers and bright-red nail-polish. I try to banish the voice, but the gunner's ghost won't shut up. Her nails match her dress.

She says, "I haven't ever dated a soldier before." I don't correct her. "I'm actually a bit against it. My sorority recently staged a walkout against the war, so, like, Lysistrata, you know?"

"I didn't realize sex was already on the table."

I don't mean to say it, but the Navy will do that to you.

I say, "Do I have to stop all U.S. combat operations or only declared wars?"

It turns out, she blushes very prettily, like roses from loamy soil.

"I just meant," she says, "That this was a big gamble for me. And I don't mean to be disrespectful. I just thought you'd want to know. But your picture with the dog was just too much. You should have brought him. What's his name?"

"Dirck," I say. My hand jumps to the cigarettes in my pocket and I almost tell her that he exploded last year. "Tell me about your walkout. I don't think it's disrespectful." And that's true enough for a first date. "We fight over there so you can protest over here." Which is cliché enough for a first date.

Through the second drink we talk about the different causes she advocates. She makes it sound like she preaches peace and revolution more often than she studies. Her model is Denmark, she says. I've never been and neither has she, so we can't talk about it long.

"And they're fighting a healthcare system that Republicans made up in the first place. Governor Romney put it in place as

the sensible alternative, but now he's running against it, it's all talk of socialism and death panels." She pauses in what sounds to me like mid-stump speech. "Sorry. Are you ... a Republican?"

Civilians are much touchier about these things. Back at base, we have regular shouting matches over politics, but then we shrug it off and get back to work. Honest difference of opinion is encouraged, at every level. Some officers put that into practice better than others, but to speak in terms of apology, as if being asked if you're a Republican is like unto an interrogation over whether you have an STD, that I just don't get. We both order another drink and I compose my answer.

"I'm not really anything. I've been apolitical since I entered the service. I was a communist in High School."

"Why'd you lose the faith?"

"Maybe life? You look around when you're younger and only see the stuff you want but don't have and you rage about it. But you get older and you realize that there's a lot of stuff you do have which others want. In college I knew a man in a wheelchair and all he wanted to do was to run steps. Half the population goes out of its way to avoid steps. People won't look at walkups, they will take the elevator even if it's just a single floor. His family could pay me twice what I make now, and do it every year for the rest of my life without noticing the difference. But he will never be able to take the stairs. How's that fair?"

"It's not. One of the things I've been trying to get done in Princeton—I haven't mentioned this yet—is finalize the ADA requirements. Old school, you know? Lots of impossible buildings."

I don't tell her that this friend of mine hated most of those regs, felt like it was desecration to put ugly metal platforms

outside centuries old churches. Instead, we take our fourth drink in front of the darts board, and I'm starting to get impressed by her ability to take alcohol.

"Ivy League, baby!"

She says 'baby' in two syllables, pumping her arm up and down and laughing. Though we play three rounds, I crush her in each. I almost let her win the last round, but it feels dishonorable. That or I just like to win. She's a good sport through the whole thing.

"I guess you learned how to play in the Army?"

"Navy," I say. "I'm a Seal."

She makes the seal noise, which normally wouldn't be funny, yet I'm laughing like an idiot. She really is very pretty. I hold her shoulder and try to charm her with my smile. I tell her about how my dog died.

"Right," she says. "So you like ... know the people who got Bin Laden?"

My smile changes to a smirk. "I can neither confirm nor de-ow!"

She punches me and we get another drink. We stand at the back of the bar, her back to the wall and I almost repeat the *Romeo and Juliet* line but stop myself. Instead, I tell her about the week that the Navy played nothing but *Silence of the Lambs*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Alien*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. She tells me she needs to go home and study.

I say, "Do you want to come back to my place?"

It sounds dumb.

"I don't know ... "

"Come on. You wanted the inner life of a serviceman."

I stroke her arm some more.

She says, "Okay. But not for long."

The door to my apartment is solid and every time I open it, there's a sense that I'm unlocking a mystery. This is particularly true tonight, for her. I watch her face as she gets her first glance. The door opens into a wide but short living room, empty but for a workbench with mechanical bits scattered across the floor and walls festooned with drawings. Through the far door, one can see the kitchen which I right now wish were rather cleaner than it is.

I watch her eyes scan the sprawling mess that is my workroom, then take in the drawings.

"So you're a tinkerer," she says. "My dad was a tinkerer."

We talk of her parents. Divorced, with her spending the bulk of her time with her mom. She loved school. Perhaps you have to love school to get into Princeton. I tell her about falling out of love with History, of falling out of love with schoolwork in toto, and how I learnt to deal with machines. I almost tell her of an English teacher I had, but I pull back. I won't open that wound for years yet.

After another drink, she says, "Who drew these? They're striking."

At least one hundred pictures cover every part of the open space on my living room wall, pasted or framed or nailed up there like a crucified man, all pictures of life and war in Afghanistan. There are drawings of men hanging on cranes, of women pulling water from a well. Dogs, insects, burnt-out buildings—they're all there.

"I did."

She hums appreciatively.

"Secret beyond secret to you, aren't there?"

"I think I'm rather straightforward."

She gets up to look around the room. I grab her a vodka-sprite and bring it to her where she stands before one particular drawing. It's of a woman, arms bent behind a chair as if they're tied there, for they had been. It's a bust portrait cut off high at the shoulders, but it's clear she's naked.

"It's horrible," she says.

"It was."

"Did you see this?"

"Yeah. You asked me where my dog died. Rescuing her, and another dozen women like her."

I see her whole body shake as I hand her the drink. I rub her shoulders.

"Cheers," she says, and downs it. "I really should be going."

I say, "Why don't we go take a shower?"

"Together?" Yes. "You have this all worked out rather well, this whole system, don't you?"

"No system," I say. "I just want to take a shower, and since you're here ... "

She says, "Do you have a gun?"

"You mean besides the one I have in my pants?"

It's lame, yeah, and she doesn't smile. I wonder if she's going to want to use the gun in a strange roleplay. There's no way that's happening. Guns aren't toys. I almost tell her that but wait to see if she asks.

I say, "Yeah. It's in the lockbox over there."

The water is warm and she's as nice underneath the dress as I could have hoped. After we're warmed and well-kissed, I take her to my bedroom.

I ask her, "What do you like?"

She shrugs and goes with what I'm doing. She's the silent type, says nothing at all. I track our progress by her breath, and I can tell I'm getting us where I want us to go. In the morning, we go again before she asks to be driven home. I offer her breakfast, but she wants to go.

Almost a decade later, I see her on national news. She's a Civil Rights lawyer now. Her dress is blue and doesn't hug quite like the red one did, but she's still killer. And I wonder whatever happened to her. The interviewer is asking about her client's recent allegations. About what? Against whom? I don't know. I stopped because I glimpsed her face out of the corner of my eye.

"Well Brian," she says, "My client's allegations should not come as a surprise. Women's stories have been coming out for years. My client's is just the latest in a long list."

"And," says Brian, "We've heard the rumors about the mogul for years too. It seems everyone in the industry heard the rumors."

"I don't want to speculate on rumors," says my former date. "This isn't about rumors, but hard evidence and stories long suppressed coming to light, stories only now even able to come to light. Many women, as we're hearing, have these stories. I certainly do. I went on a date with a soldier once, won medals, was in operations you would have heard about. He's now the founder of a company, doing very well for himself. Well, he didn't take no for an answer, and I have to live with that trauma. There wasn't the culture of coming forward then."

My heart and head hurt, and I feel dizzy. There's the grief

that only comes with sudden separation, and I should be used to it. I grope blind to my desk and sit there wanting water.

"Ed," says my secretary.

I roll my wedding ring around my finger.

"Not now, please. Could you give me ten minutes?"

"Of course."

I hear my heartbeat like gunshots but barely hear the door close. For two or three minutes I breathe deeply, then pick up the phone, almost dial, and then dial a different number.

"Concord Psychiatry," a young voice answers.

"Hey. This is Edwin Montpelier. I'd like an appointment, earliest you've got."

We make an appointment for later that day, and then I call that first number.

"Hey Ed," she says.

"Hi El. I'm going up to the doc's before I come home."

"What happened? The kids next door still firing at the VW? The rockets are not real, remember. That's our mantra."

"The problem is, real or not—I still hear them. But it's not the kids. They've been good."

My wife says, "Don't let the trauma control you."

I say, "That's the idea. I'll see you at seven-thirty."

"Lily and I look forward to it."

We hang up. I stare out into the forest, and I wonder if there are any wolves out there and how many foxes have surprised how many mice, and I hear drums and I hear rockets which do not

exist.

The windows overlook The City at eighty stories, making me a King in a skyscraper throne. I see the power light my attorney's eyes, like a Seal noob the first time he'd paste insurgents behind an M240. The view is less an aphrodisiac to me. But, then again, I'm the one who has to sign the papers.

"Thanks for doing this," I say.

He turns, and the fire comes out of his eyes, replaced by soft pity. I look out the window again.

"Hey," he says, "What are friends for?"

To that I don't respond. I haven't seen him for a quarter-century. He still has a wrestler's body. We spend our small talk talking about jiu-jitsu.

He says, "Why didn't your old firm do this? They have a bankruptcy division."

"They said they didn't want to be on the opposite side of OFAC, so when I refused the request for information ... "

"O Fuck," we smile at the pun, "They dumped you."

"As soon as they could. The judge wouldn't let them abandon me while we fought the case, but as soon as I lost ..."

The door opens and in walk the creditors. We start the messy rigmarole at five past twelve, and my only satisfaction as the clock rolls near quarter-till five is my attorney saying that the action has reduced OFAC's take from \$10,000,000 to \$10,000. I sign on the dotted line and we're done.

"Not quite done," says the attorney. "The judge has to sign off on it first."

"But you think he'll accept it?"

"Probably."

"OFAC won't lean on him?"

The thought hadn't occurred to me until now.

"Federal Judges don't take kindly to being leaned on. They slap back at Presidents."

In the following lull, I take another look out the window. The sweep of the sunset across skyscraper trees paints with the brush of an impressionist. I take deliberate breaths, trying to feel my freedom. Maybe when the judge signs off on the bankruptcy agreement, Sisyphus' rock will fall from my back.

My attorney says, "You going home?"

"Yeah. El and Lily have been going at it every day this week. If I'm not there soon to intervene, the house'll be a crater."

"What's the problem?"

"Lily wants us to talk to her teacher and get her a new assignment. El wants Lily to do her assignment."

"And you?"

I sigh, and that clears my lungs a bit.

"I just want to be left alone."

The house is standing when I arrive but quiet reigns inside. From the TV room, I hear explosions and Hollywood-style machine gun fire. From the kitchen, I hear pots banging. From upstairs I hear nothing at all. That worries me the most.

"I hear you!"

It's El's voice from the kitchen, light and airy, stress-free.

"Just reconnoitering," I say.

"Have you discovered where the enemies lie?"

"First I've got to tell if my senses do."

El stands at the sink, scrubbing hard at a pot. Half her ponytail has come loose, and her cheeks are dark red smudges. She hasn't yet changed out of her work clothes, her briefcase rests cockeyed on the table, and besides her sits a half-empty bottle of red which I'm pretty sure wasn't opened this morning. I tense at the threshold, and El, apparently deciding the pot has been punished enough, turns to me.

"Clever play-on words there," she says.

Her voice is hard.

"I missed my calling as a poet, I know."

"How about as a leader of men?"

"Excuse me?"

"Or more specifically, leading one particular, impressionable teenager."

From the TV room I hear a reverberating explosion, to which I glance.

"Are we talking about Lily or Logan?"

"Lily, you self-righteous ass."

That escalated quickly.

She continues, "Do you know where I was this evening? While you were signing away our fortune in a fit of pique, I'd been called to the High School and to the principal because our Lily decided to call her teacher a monster, a tyrant, and un-American. Now where do you think she learned that from?"

While I had never called OFAC a monster, I'd certainly called it both a tyrant and un-American. In fairness, it is.

"So we're blaming me now?"

"Who else?"

"Maybe the girl insulting her teacher and making threats?"

El's finger shoots up, pointing directly at my heart, and that's when I know we shouldn't be talking right now. We should each turn right around and walk out of the room, coming back only after we're calm. Not that I make the suggestion. It's just a feeling I have, one I dwell on later.

"You," she says, "Are the person making the threats, or you were until you dissolved the company because Mr. Federal Government was mean."

"It more than being mean, but a complete usurpation of both privacy and—"

"And now Lily thinks she can do the same to her teacher!"

"Good!"

I'm shouting, El is shouting, the TV no longer booms, and the silence from upstairs has turned attentive.

"Let her take the fight to her teacher. She'll see how well that works. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Your daughter," El says, both slowly and at maximum volume, "Is trying to get into Barnard, if you remember. If she creates an enemy, if she keeps up with this nonsense, what do you think her grade will be then? How do you get into Barnard with a B, huh? An A- might kill her!"

"No one is dying because of a grade, El. Jesus. And there are worse things than not going to Barnard."

We're suddenly speaking very, very softly, and as I saw the thirst for potency in my attorney's eyes before, I see betrayal in my wife's now.

She says, "Seven generations of Wilfords have gone to Barnard, starting with Great-Grandma Maud the year it opened." I hadn't thought to shut my mouth before, but when I open it now I know I shouldn't.

And yet I say, "Lily is a Montpelier."

And El says, "Get out."

Outside sits my workshop, a climate-controlled palace to engineering, over one-thousand square feet with garage door to fit a semi and an air-filtration system that keeps one breathing easy when working on fiberglass. I sit at a desk, field stripping various guns. Then I put them back together. Then I strip them again. Then I put them back together again. As I'm inserting the slide on my father's 1911, Logan walks in.

"Lily and mom were at it again."

"Any decision?"

"Nope. If we run to twelve rounds, though, I think Lily will get the knockout."

"That's not exactly how boxing works," I say. He shrugs. "And you should have more faith in your mother."

"Normally. But normally she isn't fighting you too."

Fair enough. I stand, motioning to the guns, half of which are half deconstructed.

"Help me put these back together and get them in the locker, will you?"

We do, both of us counting to make sure we have them all away.

Logan is efficient and careful, counting three times before he closes and locks the locker door. I walk us over to where we're working to upgrade our golf-cart. Right now, we're replacing the default motor with one that can go sixty.

He says, "I still think you should have gone with the Navy flag."

"If we were going nautical, I would have done the Jolly Roger."

"That's burnt. Especially with the big-money. I went on Levi's dad's boat last weekend. His dad's the tax lawyer, the thing was thirty foot and hard wood." He pauses a breath. "Well, wood at least. But flapping up at the top was a Jolly Roger."

"In my day it was all the middle class, upper-middle class kids talking about being from 'the hood'. I was always like, 'Dude,' -I guess I didn't say 'dude,' but anyway-I'd say, 'you haven't been on the wrong-end of a gun your whole life. Stop fronting.' 'Fronting' was--"

"-I know, Dad. I'm a teenager, not stupid."

"Sorry."

In silence we finish the replacement. Logan hooks it up to the charger.

I say, "Tomorrow we can try it."

He says, "You were on the wrong-end of a gun, though, right? In the Navy?"

"Yeah."

"Was it cool?"

"Yeah." I draw the word out. "It was hard, horrible, and I was uncomfortable almost all the time, but it was pretty damn cool."

Going outside, we sit in lawn chairs and stare up at the dark kitchen. A light is on in the den and another in Lily's room, and I suspect that we're either getting take-out or we're eating from the freezer.

Logan says, "I don't think I want to be a Seal."

I hadn't realized he'd ever considered it.

"You have other options. Infinite options."

"But isn't that what people do when they're poor? It's what you did."

"But we're not poor."

I can see Logan is genuinely surprised.

He says, "You filed for bankruptcy."

"The firm filed for bankruptcy. Our family has plenty of money. Your mom and I made sure to put loads away. And she still works. I know we joked about how I made all the money, but being a psychiatrist isn't generally a job that leaves a family poor. And, anyway, I can work again, somewhere else."

While my Sisyphus stone still draws me down, I watch as Logan's dissolves.

I say, "You were really worried?"

"I spent half the day on my phone looking up jobs thirteen-year-olds can do. Turns out there are laws against that."

I laugh and I feel my stone shift.

"They're called 'Child Labor Laws' and, yeah, you're supposed to stick to school. Speaking of—half the day? That wouldn't be half of class, would it?"

When I walk into the house half-an-hour later, El sits at the

dining room table. I saw her come in, shortly after Logan left me to go do his homework. Go do his homework or look up something random on his phone, one or the other.

"Hi," I say.

"Sorry I kicked you out of the house."

"Sorry Lily's being an ass. I do understand why you want her to go to Barnard."

"Well," she sighs the word more than says it, "I don't understand why you don't want her to go."

Now we're getting into tongue twisters, for I say, "I don't not want her to go. I just don't care if she does go or not. I didn't like my college. I mean, it was fine, I have nothing against it. I just don't have the close attachment you do. Lily is her own person."

El says, "But we're still her parents, and whether or not she wants to go now, I think in ten or twenty years, when she's fixing to have a daughter, she'll look back at a long line of ancestors who've gone to Barnard and kick herself, curse herself for not going there too, not being able to pass that on to her girl."

The only thing I passed to my kids was liberty and big ears, and they came by those as honestly as I did. They didn't have to escape a plantation and fight in a war, nor did they have to run North and then fight in another war. As Logan had just recently reminded me, they didn't even need to join Uncle Sam to hope for a good life.

"Would it help if I talked to her?"

"Please."

It's not until the third knock on her door that Lily answers.

"What mom!"

I think that was supposed to be a question.

"Wrong parent."

There's a pause.

"Okay. Come in."

Her room is a disaster. Clothes litter the floor like bodies in a mass grave. I tip-toe my way among them, but box myself into a corner near a pile of books on what should be her desk.

"Should I go downstairs and have words with your mother?"

Lily starts to say, "Please do", but I interrupt her.

"Because I'm starting to think she cheated on me with a pig to get you.

"Eww—gross. Dad! Ick—why would you say that?"

I motion to the mess like a conductor his orchestra.

"I'm in the process of cleaning." Then, "This cannot be what you came to tell me."

"It isn't, but can I sit somewhere?"

"Just move those books to the floor."

I do. They fall over. I hear Lily grumble behind me.

"Oh yes," I say, "This is my fault." Finally situated. "So, what's the problem?"

"You know what the problem is."

She's being snooty, so I take the long way around. I explain, in as much detail as I can, with extended paraphrasis, with many digressions and diversions, and several jokes that have

as much to do with the topic as a dead chicken, with double-backs and even one well-executed triple-back, I explain that her teacher gave her an essay to defend or reject the hypothesis 'Congress should pass single-payer healthcare today,' but that, quite against the wishes of the teacher, Lily wants to argue for neither of those positions but in a third direction, and that when her teacher refused, making the point that the essay is not about arguing one's actual position but about being able to make good arguments for any position, Lily, quite contrary to her usually sweet-tempered disposition I am sure, threw a hissy-fit, a term she adores by the way, and, being thwarted, ran to her parents hoping for a defense, but instead she got her mother defending the teacher, and so she had to fall back onto Family Law, which states, 'I shall not lie,' and now she refuses to do anything but voice her actual opinion. And by the time I get to my second description of El's position, Lily screams at me to stop.

"I get it," she says. "Yes. That's it. You and mom tell us not to lie."

"And we've explained that an essay like this is advocacy and nothing at all like lying, right? We can explain it again."

She shakes her head firmly. "It's a lie. I don't believe either of those, and I'm not going to argue for either."

I shrug. "Okay."

"Okay!" She's on her feet, delight shining as if her true father were the sun. "You mean you'll tell my teacher that I'm allowed to write my own thing?"

"Oh no," I say. "I just meant 'okay, I guess you're going to fail.'"

"But I'm willing to write the essay! This essay is in place of our final. I can't fail it!"

I shrug, "Then you'll have to write it."

"But that's not fair!"

Her shout is more piercing for the hope I've stolen from her. But when she says the primal scream of every child everywhere, I laugh. She catches herself and picks another tactic.

"You fought. You refused to bow before the Feds. Why do I have to bow before a stupid High School teacher?"

So it is my fault. Well, maybe it can be my remedy too.

"First off, your teacher isn't stupid, and weren't you just puffed up about how you don't ever lie? Second off, I did fight back. And I lost. And I took the consequences of that loss. You're doing all of that, except the consequence part. The consequence of not writing the essay as your teacher wants is to fail. Or at least to get something less than an A. Are you willing to suffer those consequences?"

Though Lily would never hear it, at that moment there is a cacophonous rumbling as the boulder falls from my shoulders. That is the lesson, as much for me as for her. And now I need to apologize to El. Great.

When Lily finally speaks, her voice is small, "I do want to go Barnard."

"Getting an 'F' on this essay might not keep you from there, especially if you explain it in one of the essays you have to write to them. Say something like, 'My grade suffered because I refused to lie in an essay, blah blah—I took the consequences and was happy to, and if one of those consequences is not going to Barnard, I'll take that one too. But it wasn't an academic failure, and I wanted you to know that.' If you get this same teacher to write a recommendation letter, I really can't see it mattering. But she won't do that if you've been rude to her, and I hear you've been more than

rude. So, if I were you, the first thing I'd do in the morning would be to apologize to her before class even starts. And while you're preparing for that apology, maybe apologize to Mom too?"

She nods.

"You could even tell mom you want to go to Barnard. It'd do her some good."

The rain falls so softly it mists, and I stand under a tree peering at the scrum up by the church doors. My three-piece suit is the kind I'd wear for a board meeting, but I don't wear a hat. As the procession leaves the church, Margaret runs up to me with an umbrella.

"You keep it," I say. "I want little Marco to be comfortable."

I'm looking at her tummy.

"And what would I say to him if I let his grandfather die of cold?"

I smile. "I'm not old yet. I've survived worse than a little rain. Go be with your husband."

The procession passes me as she rejoins it, and I catch Logan's eyes, nod at him. His faint smile fades as he turns his head to keep his feet. The coffin is heavy, and he's a lead pallbearer. He's wearing a hat, as are all the young men. A story in my youth had it that President Kennedy set the new hatless fashion, and our current President seems to be setting it back. I can't get used to the things.

I walk at some distance from the procession. It's almost a mile to the gravesite and the dirt paths are potted and muddy. Through the sprinkling sound of mist and a low hubbub of voices, I hear the rat-a-tat-tat of drums and the woosh of

rockets which aren't there. PTSD's a bitch, but one I have a fairly firm collar on. I sing along with the drums to the rain.

The Rabbi speaks of David and Goliath, names I know more as ticks of English than as stories. He reads, first in Hebrew, then in English, and the story comes alive in my head. He talks about the dignity of courage, about self-control and honor.

"David was not honored of God because he lived, but because he was willing to stand there."

Then the Rabbi sings and it's magic, like a floating symphony. The audience sings back and there are claps of thunder in the singing which jerk Logan's head and rattle my chest from twenty yards off. There is earth in this language, and fire. After the song, Logan stands before the mourners, ready to declaim. His voice starts low and slowly rises, becoming whole and almost steady. He ends:

*"You are the queen for whom this noble knight
Has died. So take some pardonable pride,
And live life clear and bright, one clear of blight,
Keeping those virtues dear for which he died.*

You mustn't beat your breast or rend your clothes,
Thy lost hero rests now in God's repose"

The poem is one I taught him, one I learnt as a Seal. Two new warriors in dress blues stand forward, one with a bugle. Who found a bugler? He sounds "Taps" as the second soldier marches forward to present a folded flag to the boy's mother. Miss Goldberg takes it with eyes tightly closed. She has not yet cried. More the Rabbi speaks and I don't hear his words but think on funerals I attended in my youth, others with "Taps" and with the flag. When Logan went to college on our dime, not Uncle Sam's, I'd thought he'd be spared this.

Just before the funeral breaks up, though I don't yet know it will, Miss Goldberg sails forward to fix the flag atop the coffin. She nods to the men who lower the casket into the ground. Tears like rivers now run down her face in silent grief, she grasps the shovel and tips a hunk of dirt onto the casket. It makes a sound like an empty drum. She hands the shovel to a man who is dark in grief, and in a group they keep handing the shovel off, piling the dirt on and never letting the shovel rest on the ground. First to family, then to friends, then back to family. Purposeful becomes the crew, dedicated, and I hear someone say, "Are they going to bury him entirely?"

Some turn to walk back. Some stay. Logan stays, and Margaret by him. The servicemen walk forward and lend a hand. I stand there for the half-hour as they finish. Now just a small depression marks the spot. I have a thought I always have and always hate: it looks like gardening.

Logan introduces me to Miss Goldberg as she's still rubbing dirt from her hands. I tell her I don't mind and we shake.

I say, "I imagine this will make you as sad as it does proud, but Logan told me the story. He died a true Seal."

She says, "Logan tells me you were one?"

"Yes. But I fought in the Middle Eastern wars. It was easier then. We knew who our enemies were."

She smiles, almost. "My father fought in Vietnam, and I remember those Middle Eastern wars. We always say the same thing, don't you think?"

"Ma'am?"

"In each new war, we say, 'it was easier back then. We knew who our enemy was.'"

I wonder if that's true. It sounds true. I don't have time to

decide.

I say, "The more things change ... "

She looks at me, hard, and it feels sacrilegious to notice her beauty over her grief.

She says, "I can't believe I'm phrasing it this way." A breath. "Your son was a life-saver to mine, a true hero. Thank you for sharing him, and for raising such a wonderful boy."

"Thank you," I say, "Azi lightened Logan's life, lit it on fire. After knowing Azi, Logan was a changed man, a better man. Becoming a Big Brother was the best thing that ever happened to him."

She looks at Margaret's tummy. "Except becoming a father."

"Let's say 'along with'."

I wonder if it's true as I say it, but her smile is fit to clear the rain.

When I was a teenager, I tried to DM a D&D Modern-type game. This was shortly after the start of the Middle Eastern wars, and I imagined an Iraq healed from the trauma of invasion, occupation, and Civil War. This was all before the Surges, before the Turkish invasions, before ISIS even. Reading up on their history was what convinced me to join the military. In my imaginings, I 'invented' self-driving cars. They traveled on mag-lift tracks, and though they traveled quickly, they went only where those lifts were laid. When I shared this plan with friends, they told me that self-driving cars had already been invented and that they didn't need mag-lifts. That was when I became interested in engineering.

I tell Logan and a woman I recognize this story as we travel in a car without a driver. It pulls up to a Chick-fil-A.

"When did we get a self-driving car, Logan?"

"I'm Marco, granddad. And we've had one since I was born."

I blink. He looks like Logan, if darker. Marco was always darker than Logan. But Marco is two. Or is he three?

We walk up to the counter, and I remember the woman. I can't remember her name. She taught me English, and I thought I was in love with her. My English teacher orders us sandwiches. She orders my favorite, but I can't remember her name. It's on the tip of my tongue.

"Thank you, Miss," I say. "Your surname, what nationality is it?"

"Edwards?"

I hadn't thought she was Miss Edwards. I thought it was something Dutch.

She says, "English, I think. I don't know. We never talk about it."

I say, "What are we doing here?"

"We're just having lunch, Mr. Montpelier."

I try to remember when we met up again, and if I told her I loved her. So I turn to my friend. He's Logan, Logan with a wicked tan. I warn him about getting too much sun. He smiles and rolls his eyes, good humor colored by some exasperation. With me?

"I need to use the head," I say.

"Do you need help, granddad?"

I look at him. He looks like Logan, but he's darker. Like Marco, but Marco is young.

I say, "I'm a grown man, aren't I?"

The head looks like something out of *Star Trek*. Clean walls, clean floors, all in chrome and silver with pastel blues and a racing stripe. On the corner of the mirror is an American flag sticker. There're no urinals, so I step outside, worried I made a mistake. It says it's the men's bathroom. I walk back in and take a stall. Soft music plays as I go, then an automatic flush and a squirt of some foul-flower-smelling aerosol thing. There's an old man in the mirror and I jump, looking behind me. I'm the only one here.

When outside, I look around. It's a Chick-fil-A and I'm really quite hungry. I walk over to order something.

"Granddad!"

I hear it two, three times, until I look over and see Logan. Man, he's tan. He needs to be careful. Though I heard on the news the other day that there's a new treatment for skin cancer that uses basal cells.

To Logan, I say, "What are basal cells?"

He says, "I don't know. You should ask Dad."

To this, I don't say anything.

Miss Bakker says, "You should eat your sandwich."

I look down. "Right."

I bite into it. It's my favorite.

Logan and Miss Bakker talk about graduate school. He looks forward to graduation and having "freedom". She will start applying over the summer.

"Wait," I say. "Didn't you already get into graduate school? I thought you were planning to teach college?"

"No, Mr. Montpelier. I'm going to med school. I took your son Logan's class, remember? That's how Marco and I met."

Right. Logan had just started his third year of med school, a series of brutal rotations. It seems perverse to have him teach already. I don't say it. I don't want to be rude. Instead, I notice them holding hands.

"Is it allowed to date your student? I thought they'd made that illegal. It wasn't in my day."

I laugh, but they don't.

"Mr. Montpelier," says Miss Bakker, "You should eat your sandwich."

I take up my food and munch. It's my favorite. When did I order it? When I finish, I get up and walk towards the entrance.

"What're you doing?" Asks Logan.

"I'm getting the car," I say. "I'll pull it around."

"The car comes to us, Grandpa. Ast," he says to Miss Bakker, "Why don't you take him out? I'll grab a coffee and we can go."

In the car, we drive past a High School. It looks like one of those magnet schools. Retro futuristic architecture with lots of glass and sweeping concrete walls. There's no parking lot out front, just a lawn and meadow and a u-shaped sweeping driveway. But a football field sits to the side of it with professional looking stands. They seem to hover off the ground, and I wonder how the architects managed that effect.

In the field play a bunch of students, but not football. They run here and there with companions I first think are dogs. Now I see the wheels on some of them. They're robots, almost as many robots and kids. I see one lurching along at great speed

before it trips over itself. Two boys stop next to it and punch commands into a screen which looks like one of those old tablets. The robot stands up and starts running, now with a more even tread.

“I hate these places,” says my English teacher. What was her name again? “We talk about progress all the time and yet we give the working man’s kids schools from last century.”

I almost argue, but I don’t like fighting. Instead, I tell them a story from when I was a teenager, when I tried to DM a D&D Modern-type game. This was shortly after the start of the Middle Eastern wars, and I imagined an Iraq healed from the trauma of invasion, occupation, and Civil War. This was all before the Surges, before the Turkish invasions, before ISIS even. Reading up on their history was what convinced me to join the military. In my imaginings, I ‘invented’ self-driving cars. They traveled on mag-lift tracks, and though they traveled quickly, they went only where those lifts were laid. When I shared this plan with friends, they told me that self-driving cars had already been invented and that they didn’t need mag-lifts. That was when I became interested in engineering.

Logan smiles and rolls his eyes, good humored but also a bit exasperated. Was it something I said?