

DAMIAN GESSEL

Hallways

TYLER HENNING STANDS ACROSS FROM ME, his face a scowl, his hands balled into fists. He's short for a junior—five-foot-six or so—his blonde hair combed back, the right sleeve of his plain white T-shirt rolled up to expose his skinny bicep. Five seconds ago I'd made the mistake of telling him, for the third or fourth time, to get back to work. Two seconds ago he'd stood up and screamed at me to leave him the hell alone. And now everyone is watching.

"Why don't you step out into the hallway with me, Mr. Henning," I say, keeping my voice low and even.

"Nobody knows how to leave me the fuck alone in this place!" Tyler shouts. His eyes scan the classroom, search among his peers for anyone who might issue a challenge. The other students don't so much as make eye contact.

I walk into the doorway and beckon him.

"Come on, buddy. We'll work it out," I say.

Tyler slams his chair into his table and stomps past me into the hallway, his unlaced boots pounding against the tile floor.

It's the second week of school, a Tuesday, and Tyler's first day. He didn't bother showing up for the first six. It was a condition of his parole that he attend school, he'd repeatedly announced to his tablemates when he was supposed to be reading Shakespeare, but they'd all be damned if he did a fucking thing here.

The instant I leave the classroom my juniors explode into conversation, the closed door barely muffling their voices. Tyler stands in front of the fire extinguisher, pacing back and forth, his finger wagging in the air as he speaks as if it's his turn in a rap battle.

"I don't need none of this shit. Goddamn people always misunderstand me. I'm peaceful now, motherfucker. I'm trying to get right with my life. I

ain't trying to start nothing. Just let me go," Tyler says.

"Okay," I say.

Tyler stops pacing and looks at me, his eyes narrowing.

"You're trying to better yourself. I respect that. I was being too pushy in there. I apologize."

"I don't need none of this shit," he says, pointing toward my classroom. "I got a job. I can make my own money."

"I understand. From now on if you want to participate, you can. If you don't want to, you don't have to."

Tyler's brow unfurrows. He purses his lips and gives a single upturned nod.

"We good," he says. He extends his hand and we slap in an awkward misalignment of expectations.

"Do me a favor though?" I say.

"What's up?"

"Don't shout at me in my own class again."

AFTER 21 YEARS, this is what I believe about teaching: that all students can be saved. It's true that most won't be no matter what you do. But you never know when your words, your concern, your love will finally take root in the soil of a young person's mind. If I lived by any other motto in a place as empty as Mount Joy, where cornfields and crows outnumber people, where the disappearance of agricultural and manufacturing jobs has left the community barren, where opioid addiction reigns, I wouldn't have lasted two decades.

These are the things I tell Principal Dave Anderson on Friday at our department chair meeting when Tyler Henning's name comes up. Dave shuffles his shoulders and frowns when I'm done speaking. He looks across the table at Missy Yaridge, the chief complainer, who's taking notes on a legal pad. Tyler has been disrupting her class to the point of Missy's being unable to teach, according to her.

"I understand what you're saying, Stan," Dave says. "But if he keeps getting into trouble, my hands will be tied. He'll have to go to alt. ed. He doesn't seem to be successful in any room but yours."

Missy stops writing on her pad. She addresses only Dave.

"I'm sorry, but alternative education is the right placement for him. I don't mean to be so frank, but he's horribly miscast at this school. It's unfair to him and it's unfair to the other kids."

I look around the table. Except for me and Missy, every teacher but one, Annie Kirkstetter, is staring at a laptop. I catch Annie's eye and she shakes her head—whether in solidarity with me or as a warning, I can't tell.

"So keep him in my room, Dave. I can watch over him. It's not a problem, really," I say.

Missy sits back and crosses her arms over her chest.

"Is that really feasible? He would still need his work from the other teachers. And he would still be a disruptive force in the school," Missy says.

Dave shimmies his shoulders again. He pulls at his jaw and squirms in his seat.

ANNIE STOPS INTO MY CLASSROOM after the meeting and shuts the door.

"Were you serious in there?" she asks.

"Serious about what?"

"About Tyler Henning."

"Absolutely. There's a real kid in there, Annie. He's not just a thug like people think. Why the hell did they get into this profession in the first place? That's what I wonder sometimes."

Annie grimaces. "He's pretty bad, Stan."

"So? A lot of kids are pretty bad. You know why? Because nobody has ever given a shit about them."

"Oh God, you're so naive. It's kind of cute," Annie says, elbowing me.

"You know what's not cute? Missy Yaridge. What a flaming bitch."

"I never realized what a mouth you have on you, Mr. Cirillo. I never would've guessed."

"Yeah, well."

RIGHT AFTER SCHOOL that day Annie and I meet for "symposium," which is how we refer to our trips to the Tavern in emails and in front of students. Six or seven of us gather here every Friday for happy hour and gossip. In truth, I don't care much for the gossip or the company, Annie excepted. I can't remember now if she gave me the initial invite or if I asked to join, but at my first symposium last spring, my colleagues ogled me in mock disbelief when I sat at their table.

"Stan Cirillo at symposium? Are you the real Stan or is this one of those body snatcher deals?" somebody had remarked.

We have assigned seats now at a table tucked into a corner, and the waiter brings our drinks and appetizers without even taking our order. I

sit across from Annie. The other symposium regulars have begun to joke about us, but I don't think they know. Not yet, at least. By the time I arrive and sit next to her, Annie is already in her seat, her IPA half gone.

"You realize after the meeting today that everybody in that room hates you now, right?"

I laugh.

"Now?"

"Good point," Annie says, taking another sip of her beer.

IN THE MOTEL A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, our bodies are pressed together, Annie's head resting on my chest. The muted drone of cars racing past on Route 15 makes my eyes feel heavy, and I close them as I speak.

"Let's just run away together. Forget all this crap," I say.

"You'd never leave your daughter, Stan. Don't be an idiot."

"I wouldn't. You're right. We'd split time."

Annie puffs. "Right," she says.

"What if I'm not kidding?"

Annie props herself up on an elbow and looks at me.

"I don't know," she says. "Aren't you?"

I breathe in, my eyes drifting to the whiteness of the ceiling. "I don't know."

She studies my face for a beat, then lays her head once more against my chest, and we again exist in the warmth of silence. A thin bar of light shimmies in from beside the closed Venetian blinds, rising and falling against the blank television screen like a sleepy tide and reminding me that there's still daylight left, but not much. Erica will be calling soon. The now familiar churn of dread kneads at my stomach.

"I'm still thinking about you at that meeting today, you dope," Annie says, her voice airy, tinged with sleep. "You know you can't fix them all, right?"

"Yeah," I say. "But you can sure as hell try."

ERICA NEVER CALLS. I pull into the driveway at 6:45, almost an hour later than usual and without a rational excuse, but I know it won't matter now. I walk in through the kitchen door and find Ava, my eight-year-old, sitting at the table by herself, eating a microwave pizza bagel.

"Where's your mom?" I ask.

Ava shrugs.

“Her car is here. She go out for a jog?”

“I don’t think so.”

I reach down and swipe her bagel, stuffing a big bite into my mouth before she’s able to claw it back from me.

“You’re such a dork, dad!”

“You love me,” I say. “And anyway, how do you not know where your own mother is? You’re a kid.”

Ava rolls her eyes and turns up the volume on the video she’s watching on her tablet to let me know she’s done talking.

I get halfway up the stairs when my suspicion turns to certainty. The throaty sound of Erica’s snoring echoes from the master bedroom. I enter it and find her fully dressed and face-up atop the comforter, her mouth ajar. An empty pint of Bacardi sits on the nightstand next to her, beside a red Solo cup of what was probably orange juice. I feel a jolt of anger before I remember where I’ve come from, and a new guilt douses the anger, changes it to something closer to sadness.

“Erica?”

No response.

“Erica?” I say more loudly, shaking her calf. “Erica?”

She draws in a sharp, guttural breath and her eyes slit open. “What? Stanley?” she says, her words a slush of slurring.

“It’s me, yeah. Are you aware that our eight-year-old is downstairs eating a dinner she made all by herself?”

“What? What time is it?”

I check my watch. “A little after seven.”

“Shit!” she says. She draws herself up into a sitting position, placing a palm against her forehead. Her dark hair is matted in back and wild in front.

I sit on the bed next to her.

“She figured out how to make those pizza bagels.”

Erica starts to wretch. She clutches her stomach and doubles over.

I take her arm and guide her stumbling into the bathroom, where she kneels in front of the toilet just in time. I hold her hair back as she vomits two and then three times, her body convulsing with each spasm, the smell of rum and acid filling the room, and find myself irrationally thinking of our honeymoon in Jamaica all those years ago. How we both drank too much the first night and took turns in the open air bathroom beside the pool house, the whole world spinning, unable to eat or make love until the

third day. How that seems like another lifetime now.

"We have to talk to somebody, Erica," I say, rubbing her back in small circles. "We can't go on living like this. We just can't."

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too."

ON MONDAY IN CLASS Tyler is attentive. I'm teaching Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," doing my damndest to engage my juniors in a conversation about Brutus, the play's tragic hero. Although Tyler hasn't read a word, he seems to want to answer every question. He points his index finger up from his desk when he's ready to be called on.

"Question?"

"Yeah. You're saying Brutus is a dumbass, right?"

The class snickers.

"I wouldn't put it that way, exactly. More like naive. Actually, foolish might be the best word to describe him."

Tyler's finger points up again.

"What's the difference?"

"Foolish people can be smart. Brutus was a brilliant man on the battlefield and in his role as a senator, but he was no good at reading people. Everybody around him was greedy, and because Brutus was so honorable himself, he was blinded to their greed."

Tyler nods. The slightest curl of a smile lifts his lips, like I've just revealed something he'd already suspected.

After class, Tyler lingers. When every student has emptied into the hallway, heading to lunch, he approaches my desk.

"Yo, would it be possible if I could stay here during lunch? I have problems with some of those little kids downstairs."

"Of course," I say. "My door is always open."

"I got you," Tyler says, and he slides into a seat, stretching his legs out into the aisle. For the first time, I notice how frayed and dirty his sneakers are.

I lift my lunchbox from beneath my desk and extract a turkey sandwich.

"Don't you eat lunch?" I ask, speaking around a mouthful of food.

"Nah. Not hungry."

"If you're hard up for cash I could spot you a five."

"Thanks, Mr. C. I'm good, though."

"You sure?"

“Yeah.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes and I browse the day’s news on my computer.

“You wanna see something?” Tyler asks.

“Sure.”

He pulls a wallet from his pocket and walks over to me. He flips it open, slides out a corner-creased photo, and holds it up. It’s of a slightly younger version of him, shirtless, a wide smile on his face, a blanket-swaddled infant clutched in his arms.

“My daughter,” he says. “Tiana. Her mom named her after the Disney princess.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

We stare at the photo together for a beat until Tyler slips it back into his wallet.

“That’s my plan in life right there. That little girl,” he says. “I’m gonna be a good dad to her.”

“It’s a good plan.”

I TAKE ERICA AND AVA out to Sorrento’s for Italian ice after school. It will be our last chance until the spring. We’re in the final week or two of fall so we’re all dressed in sweatshirts, Ava’s teeth chattering in between red-dyed bites of her cherry ice. Erica sits across from me, next to Ava. She hasn’t ordered anything. When she notices me looking at her she flashes a tight-lipped smile, but she’s wearing the vacant look I’ve grown so accustomed to over the last three years, since what happened with Maggie, our oldest daughter. Even six months ago I would have taken her hand; I would’ve pressed a spoonful of gelato to her lips until she had no choice but to smile and swallow it. But such a simple gesture is impossible now.

“We seriously have to sit outside on this stupid bench, dad?” Ava complains. “It’s cold.”

“Oh come on—it’s a family tradition,” I say.

She rolls her eyes.

“It’s not a tradition anymore,” Ava says beneath her breath, just loud enough for her mother to hear.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Erica says, turning on her daughter. Her mouth is a straight line, her eyes wide with outrage. It’s the same outrage I saw on her face once, long ago in Central Park when a mugger

attacked us, the year before we uprooted and moved here to Iowa for a simpler life. Was it fear on the mugger's face or only surprise when Erica slapped him with her purse? No matter how many times we told the story over the years, we were never sure.

But now that ferocity is unbounded, tempestuous.

"Nothing, mom. I'm sorry. I didn't know you could hear me."

"Like hell you didn't!"

"Erica—" I try.

"What do you mean, huh?"

"Mom, I said I was sorry."

Erica grabs Ava's arm and squeezes. Ava's mouth falls open in a grimace of pain, her red-stained tongue juxtaposed against the whiteness of her molars.

"You have no right!" Erica yells.

And then I'm behind my wife, pulling her away from my daughter. An elderly couple waiting for their Italian ices turns to us, the woman's mouth open in a small "o" of concern. Erica slaps at my hands, frees herself, steps back from the bench. A choked sob bursts from her, her face twisting with its force. She turns and half-jogs to the car.

I wrap an arm around Ava and pull her tight to my chest, feeling her own sobs rise and fall beneath her skinny ribcage as we watch her mother pull out of the parking lot and roar up the highway.

"How will we get home?" Ava asks, wiping her eyes.

"Don't worry, baby," I say. "She'll be back."

I DRIVE TO SCHOOL TUESDAY with a box of Maggie's old clothes in the passenger seat beside me. I've been removing them slowly from the house, sometimes item by item. I'll sell an old baby bouncer on Facebook and meet the buyer clandestinely at the supermarket, or grab a pair of pants and a T-shirt and stuff them into a clothes-drive bin when Erica is away for a weekend visiting her mother in New York. The trick is not to take so much that she notices.

But today I don't care if she notices. It feels right, what I'm doing. I speak to Maggie in my mind, the way I still do every few days. *These will go to good use, baby girl. Let's hope this kid doesn't screw up his life any worse than it's already screwed up.*

The day Maggie died I was in Chicago with 17 students for debate nationals. Maggie was the starting point guard on the junior varsity bas-

ketball team, and they had practice in the middle school gymnasium that day. It was the middle school principal who called me, his voice thin and reedy as he formed the words that will never stray far from my thoughts so long as I'm living.

"She wasn't breathing, Stan. I'm so, so sorry."

She had an undiagnosed congenital heart defect, a hole in her heart no bigger than a dime. It can sometimes be hereditary, the doctor said, but when the three of us were tested, nobody shared Maggie's defect. No one could have anticipated what happened, the doctor assured us.

The first six months were the hardest. We went to family therapy every week, sometimes twice a week if we needed it, and we often did then. We fought against the isolation the counselor warned us about—the almost magnetic compulsion to retreat to our own spaces, to wallow in silence, cocooning ourselves in technology and television and alcohol. Then those six months passed, and Ava and I started trying to do certain things again: we went to the mall, or to a movie, or to the batting cages. But always without Erica. No amount of coaxing could ever make her come, until the guilt had shifted and I realized that Ava and I had pulled ourselves out of the worst of it without Ava's mother.

I told myself that she would eventually follow, that she would find her equilibrium in time. I told myself, too, that I could, with love and persistence, win her from her grief. But she hasn't found equilibrium, and nothing I've done has seemed to matter. I recognize now that Erica's resentment of herself has spread to Ava and me. It was subconscious at first, an ineffable hum of frustration, but over time it's blossomed to genuine anger. Doesn't she know that I also wanted to give up when Maggie died? That for weeks there was nothing I wanted more than my own death, nothing that would've made me happier than a sudden aneurysm or heart attack, a swift end to the torture of irrepressible pain? But I couldn't exist in that space of indefinite heartbreak, as easy as it would have been. I have another daughter. And goddamn Erica for not seeing what her emotional permafrost is doing to Ava.

TYLER IS WITHDRAWN IN CLASS TODAY. His finger doesn't lift for a single question. Halfway through the period he pulls his hood up and lies his head on the desk, not raising it even when I gently tap his arm to rouse him. When the bell rings, I ask him to stay.

"I gotta go, man," he tells me, standing and slinging his bookbag over

his shoulder.

“Just a minute. If you’re late I’ll write you a pass.”

He doesn’t make eye contact with me, but he doesn’t leave, either.

“You okay, bud?”

Tyler shrugs.

“I have something for you,” I say, and I lift the box of Maggie’s old clothes from behind my desk and carry it to Tyler’s table. “These were my daughter’s clothes. They’re still going to be a few sizes too big for Tiana, but she’ll grow into them.”

Tyler’s eyes move from the box to me. He doesn’t speak.

“Sometimes it helps to talk, to share your problem with somebody who cares,” I say.

Tyler shrugs. “It’s Tiana’s mother. She’s my problem, man.”

I nod.

“You want to sit?”

Tyler slides himself onto a chair and pulls down his hood.

“She’s a fucking bitch, man. I love her. I want to be a family. And she just wants to play around with this young boy. She’s probably with him right now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m gonna kill him. He don’t know it yet, but he’s gonna hear from me.”

Outside the classroom a gaggle of teens rushes by, laughing and talking loudly. I draw in a deep breath and slide my chair closer to Tyler’s.

“Believe it or not, you’re not the first kid I’ve taught in 21 years who was in a shitty situation. That’s not to diminish what you’re going through. I’m just saying. Some of the kids walking around these hallways sit down to dinner every night with their mommies and daddies, some of them lead happy, functional little lives, but more than you can imagine have it rough. I’m not kidding—if you could look past the fake smiles a lot of these kids wear to hide themselves, you’d see the pain so many of them feel. Twenty-one years. I know it.

What I’m saying is that you’re on a knife’s edge. You have the thinnest of pathways to make it right for yourself and your daughter. Listen, you have a chance to be the kind of father I’ll bet your dad wasn’t to you, the kind of father so many of these kids who walk around in pain are missing. Don’t fuck that up.”

Tyler stares blankly past me, the muscles in his jaw contracting and

releasing. I touch a hand to his shoulder. The wall clock marks each second in whisper ticks.

ANNIE AND I MEET in the park after school. We'd met here only once before—in the first few weeks when we were just beginning to test the limits of our flirtation. The park is all but empty now. Most of the leaves have already fallen from the trees and a steady wind whips from across the lake, forcing us to stow our hands in our pockets. We walk the paved pathway, past a childless jungle gym.

"I've been thinking about what you said," Annie says. "Kind of a lot, actually."

"Oh? What's that?"

"What you said at the motel."

I try to subtract the days and place myself there again, within that feeling of possibility. It's hard.

"Don't you remember?"

"Of course," I say.

"Good. I know you're older than me, Cirillo, but you have at least a few years left before senility hits."

"Gee, thanks. You know, you're great for my self-esteem."

"I do what I can," she says.

The wind picks up and blows Annie's hair across her face. She sweeps it away and looks up at me.

"I would do it," she says. "I mean, if you really wanted to. If you thought ... if you thought it would be okay for Ava."

I stop walking and turn to her. Above us, a leafless tree is swaying, its branches scraping as they knock together. I pull Annie's hands from her pockets and take them in mine, searching for the right words to say, hoping I'll find them.

TYLER COMES INTO MY CLASSROOM during last period. My freshmen are finishing a test, the squeak of erasers against paper the only noise cutting the silence. A girl at the front table sees him first and waves at me, her nose wrinkled in confusion.

"Who's that?" she whispers.

He stands at the back of the classroom, his fists clenched. His T-shirt hangs loosely from his neck as if it's been pulled, and it's this detail that calls to mind what has happened. I close the distance between us.

“Hallway,” I say to him.

In the hallway, I notice Tyler’s knuckles—the scraped skin, the bloodless fingers, the tendons running taut up his wrists.

“What happened?”

“I told you. I told you I would kill that motherfucker,” Tyler says, his voice low.

“What did you do, Tyler?”

“Go downstairs and check for yourself if you want. Now he knows what’s up.”

I envision a boy lying prone in the cafeteria, blood pouring from his nose, the assistant principal and nurse huddling around him.

“That little boy wouldn’t leave her alone,” Tyler says.

In this moment I know it’s over for him. He’ll be placed in alternative education. He’ll go back to juvenile detention. He’ll lose whatever rights he had to his daughter. I stare into the slant of his dark eyes and see he understands this, too, that in just a few minutes Principal Anderson will come to send him home and he’ll begin his cycle of destruction all over again. Maybe he’ll never escape it. Most certainly, he won’t.

“Aww, Tyler,” I say. “Damn it. Damn.”

Tyler’s nostrils flair. He shakes his head. He places a palm over his eyes and mouths a curse.

I embrace him, and together we listen as Principal Anderson’s dress shoes come clicking down the hallway toward us.

BY THE TIME I GET HOME Erica is already on her third or fourth drink, but she’s still cogent enough to talk. I have a drink in front of me, too—a vodka so strong my lips pucker with every sip. I shouldn’t be drinking in front of her, but I need one. I’m on the recliner and she’s on the sofa, her legs tucked underneath her. The television is on but muted.

On the drive home from school, I thought through every word of what I would say. I circled the highway, exited in the town adjacent ours and swung back again, unwilling to pull into the driveway before the words were all there. And now, as I stare into my wife’s glossy eyes, those words are gone.

“Stanley? Is something the matter?”

I feel myself starting to lose it and I don’t want to. I’m no damn good at that. I shut my eyes and will myself to pull in a series of long, slow breaths.

“Stanley?”

When I open them I see that Erica is now leaning forward, her eyes narrowed in concern or suspicion or both.

“Stanley? What the hell is going on?”

When we moved out here, to Iowa, the very first night we sat together in an undecorated apartment, a box of takeout pizza and a bottle of champagne between us, and we made a promise to each other. We were all we had. No matter what, it would be us. *Pinky promise*, Erica had said, intertwining our fingers, and we’d made love right there on the bare carpet.

How foolish I’ve been. How traitorous. This is the mother of my daughters. This is the woman who’s given us everything—who’s given *me* everything. This recognition flushes through me all at once with the coldness of saline, and despite the vodka I’m suddenly more sober than I’ve been in months. She’s owed what I’m about to say to her. She’s owed what I’ve prolonged for far, far too long.

I take her hand in mine. I open my mouth to speak.