



THE EVALUATION

by Chad Sansing



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Evaluation is a near-future, science-fiction meditation on the state of teaching in the United States. It is also—to a lesser and more personal extent—my mediation on the future of professional development, teacher leadership, and storytelling about public education. In experimenting with quasi-long-form fiction in *The Evaluation*, I hope to push myself into taking new kinds of stances and actions against the standardization of schools, the infantilization of teaching and learning, and the commodification and punishment of our young people's lives.

As science fiction, *The Evaluation* is not meant to represent any real people or events, so any similarity to specific persons or happenings is purely coincidental and unintended.

The cover features photographs I took of airbrushed scraps of paper left around my classroom.

I want to thank my wife, Bethany Nowviskie, for being an inspiration as a writer and public intellectual. I want to thank my kids for breaking through the mental firewall I sometimes put up while writing. I want to thank my friends at CoöpCatalyst and the National Writing Project for supporting my writing elsewhere. I want to thank all of my colleagues and students, past and present, for a career that has changed me as a person, and my parents and teachers for letting me write so much as a kid

and young adult. And I want to thank Jack King and Jose Vilson for being early readers.

To everyone stuck in our dysfunctional system of public education: keep hope; help one another; subvert everything you can. You deserve more.

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1.

He stayed behind in the classroom for a few minutes, straightening desks, pushing in chairs, securing the wall safe, and initialing the affidavits he had to sign in the presence of the school's compliance officer that morning promising not to share any information about what or whom he taught that day. Not a post, not a tweet, not an update—and not a word out loud.

He took those affidavits seriously. You never knew who was listening on the subway or looking over your shoulder at the noodle stand. No one would stop him—or herself—from reporting a teacher; plenty of people wanted a job; nancing out a noncompliant teacher was the easiest way to create an opening in line.

He was sorry he stayed, but only a little. By the time he got out into the hall, the line for daily wages stretched all the way from the office to the library, where they key the books. He would probably be here for a few hours, waiting for the others to collect their pay and contest the charges nicked and dimed out of it. Yesterday he had been dinged for the janitorial pay it took to straighten his

room. He guessed it was better to wait and get more pay than to rush out and be docked again on a “lack of organization” charge. Too many of those and he might as well not get in line at the beginning of the day any more.

Everyone in line kept quiet. There wasn't much to talk about apart from the day, and talking about the day wasn't allowed. Moreover, chatting up colleagues during contract time meant another charge, so no one wanted to risk being seen as a chatterbox after school—maybe there would be a charge for that; maybe the compliance officer was watching; maybe someone would say something in violation of their contract, lose his or her spot, and drag everyone around him or her into a compliance hearing costing each witness days of work.

He turned on his little cloud of privacy, catching up with friends, family, the news—and his teeter-totter finances—in his glasses, which he wore strictly for computing and the air of nerdery that they lent him in line and in the classroom. It was good to look a little covered. Compliance officers liked that, and school discipline asked fewer questions after they took a kid from your room if you looked wimpy. More people in line wore glasses than not, but everyone had a way out into their own lives at the end of the day—a true retinal display, a smart piece of jewelry, a haptic display projected from a little fluorosynthetic me card folded up in a purse or wallet, pixel noise encrypted to resolve in their sensory cortex or under a cop's broadbeam flashlight.

He caught up with his life, pushed some music into his brain, and then started spinning up prediction after prediction of how much he would make today and how far it would get him tonight. He'd have his dinner and his data paid for; he'd have subway fare back to his folks' house. Maybe he'd have enough for that cheap bubble motel down the street from the bar his friends liked. If he could keep up his habit of saving a few bucks a day, he'd be sure to have enough to re-up his license at the end of the year, and maybe he'd have enough to buy an upgrade that would let him add a grade level or a few more students to his permissions list.

Everything shuffled ahead.

As he and his turn at the teller approached one another, he got nervous. His stomach started turning. It felt like his insides wanted to fold themselves sideways. He hated this part of the day. He hated knowing what he did wrong more than he hated not knowing. He hated seeing his charges more than he hated bad pay. He hated having to argue in public, at the head of the line, more than he hated the charges against him.

He heard that at nicer schools in the suburbs, there was an electronic teller in every room—that every teacher got paid in private after taking all the time in the world to make their rooms just so. Brats, he thought. They don't know what teaching really is.

It was his turn at last. Only a few teachers were queued behind him; he was glad there was only a small audience left. He hoped he wouldn't say anything stupid.

In his whole career, he had only seen two teachers get too specific in line. They made the mistake of talking about what had happened in class those days; they broke their affidavits. They lost their wages and licenses and picked up heavy misdemeanors which kept them from voting until they completed prison-service hours staffing a feed line or something at a jail.

He wiped the data off the lenses of his glasses and turned off the music. He stepped up and slid his me card into the light on the counter outside the office door. The smart glass wall of the office had been dimmed so the teachers couldn't make eye contact with the teller or compliance officer, or argue with anyone in particular for that matter. Frosted letters on the door glowed with a soft light: "City Employees Only." It was another penalty for any teacher who went in there.

"David Cruz?"

"Yes."

"Do you swear that you complied and comported your teaching today—to the best of your ability—in accordance with the affidavits you filed this morning with the school compliance officer?"

"I do."

"Thank you, Mr. Cruz."

"Thank you."

"Fifty-dollar flat-rate for a teacher in good-standing, plus your two-dollar incentive under the 'Men in the Classroom' act, minus charges today."

"Thank you. May I hear the charges?"

“Certainly, Mr. Cruz. Mr. Cruz, in nontrivial, non-terminative violation of your affidavits today, you went off-script during instruction a total of seven times, which accounts for the first seven dollars of charges. Those departures from the script negatively impacted the National Academic Proficiency test-passage actuarial matrix predictions of one hundred thirty-three out of one hundred forty-seven students you taught today. Those impacts were calculated to be non-statistically significant, however, docking you only ten cents per student, or thirteen dollars thirty cents. Those departures are predicted to benefit ten of the remaining students, but not in a statistically significant way, which means you do not merit extra pay for them. You did not exceed your materials or discipline allotment. You left your room well organized. You will end the day at thirty-one dollars and seventy cents.”

“Could you tell me how I deviated from the script?”

“According to records, Mr. Cruz, you provided unproven and possibly confusing metaphors seven times, and in five of those instances you used flagged, though not prohibited, words. Would you like to purchase a review of the records?”

“No. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Will there be anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Would you like a receipt?”

“No.”

“Very well, Mr. Cruz. Your me card has been credited thirty-one dollars and seventy cents. You are over fifty-percent likely to be chosen as a teacher with us tomorrow. I am required to inform you that we are experiencing a shortage of male teachers in the City Middle, Low Woods, and Banner Square neighborhoods, and that you are over seventy-five percent likely to be chosen as a teacher tomorrow at any school in any of those districts.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Next.”

David Cruz bought some third rate Pad Thai and rode the subway to his parents' home thinking about his future. Today was okay; he came out a few dollars ahead after paying for dinner and his ride. Maybe he would be able to teach 200 students a day next year or add an art endorsement to his license—there were still a few schools that liked art and used it as a cover for school discipline. No scripts in those classes. Just quiet. Kids who knew that if they acted up in art, they would be out of school next on heavy misdemeanors. The kind of cushy job he imagined those suburban teachers had. Maybe he could get a few days of that a month, clear his head, practice his lines, pitch that perfect fifty-dollar game.

He fell asleep thinking about what he would do if more of the kids he taught this year managed to pass the NAP than fail it. What would he do with all those

fractional bonuses? Commute to the suburbs for a few weeks? See what that was like?

What would he do if they all failed? Where would he have to live so he could work? How could he afford rent? Who would hire him then?

How would he pay back all those wages?

No more metaphors, he thought. No more going off-script. He could push in those chairs; he could push out those lines.

David Cruz fell asleep. He felt good about tomorrow.

2.

“David. David, wake up.”

His mother.

“David, wake up or you'll miss work.”

He got up; she had already disappeared back into her life. He had no idea why he had overslept. The music was playing in his head; his glasses weren't broken. His me card was glowing on the nightstand, disrupting the bedroom gloom with blue light. He had just kept on sleeping. As he rushed through getting dressed and out the door, a loose worry began drawing itself around his mind.

He would have to wait a long time in line this morning. He decided to go to City Middle High School. He hoped the shortage of male teachers there would help him cut the line. He wanted to work a high school today anyway; fewer questions from the kids; less of a chance he would go off-script.

He was getting the hang of teaching; he wanted to stay on a roll.

He left the house and spun up his teacher traffic app. Most of the paths had already tuned red: too many teachers; not enough spots. There were a few green lines leading to the ghost schools hidden between the broke-down row-houses far away from any subway stops. Lots of homeless kids. Sad places. They had to open each year because of the projected number of kids in their neighborhoods, but by the time September enrollment came around, their funding got gutted. They only needed a few teachers to staff them then—to watch and feed the kids and keep the neighborhood recruiters out of the school. If he went to one of those schools, he might as well stay there forever—or at least until he lost his license. No one got out of those schools with more than a few bucks a day. He couldn't imagine surviving that.

City Middle, though, had a yellow line. If he hurried, he could make it. He would be fine if he could keep from committing unforced errors.

He took the subway and walked the last few blocks to the school, following the reddening path superimposed over the sidewalk by his glasses. He arrived. The

compliance officer was still out walking the line. It was close to contract time, and there were only a few men left in the queue. He stepped up to the end of the line; the compliance officer would reach him soon. So far, every man left had been sent inside; a few female teachers had made the cut, as well. Veterans, he thought with an angry envy, by the looks of them.

"Mr. Cruz," said the compliance officer, "Please come inside."

"Thank you," he replied.

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. How is your tenth grade math?"

"Fine, thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Room 110. Please prepare. The doors open to students in half an hour."

David Cruz hurried to room 110. Four classes. One hundred seventy students. Four examples. Ten questions. Seat work on the tabs—he would have to keep track of all fifty of them. Mostly fill-in-the-videos auto-checked by the assignment bank's bottled cloud. He used his me card to open the wall safe, counted the tabs, and ran through the rest of his checklist on his glasses, affirming his understanding and initialing his affidavits with a few swipes of his eye.

The soft bell rang. The kids came into the building.

Everything went well in the classroom, but during the third class something happened in the hall.

He hadn't heard whatever happened, but he could hear the compliance officers sharp shoes clacking down

the hallway. As her footfalls approached, the window in the door darkened in a wave, its lock slid shut, and the soft hum of the school's noise-cancellation system came on over the intercom. The compliance officer had activated her proximity lock down privileges. The lights in the room stayed on; he could keep teaching; the kids could keep working.

He and the students looked up and at one another, but they didn't speak. They got back to work.

After a few minutes, the noise went off; the window cleared; the lock slid open. He felt good; he could stop wondering.

But then there was running. Before he could help it, David Cruz looked out the window.

The kid must have gotten away. The compliance officer hadn't caught up to him, or maybe she hadn't been told. David Cruz could see the kid running down the hall—a big kid. Huffing. Cornering, tripping, and then stumbling down the hall like a fishtailing truck.

After him came three guards and the compliance officer. The kid ran past the window; then the guards; then the window, the lock, and the noise again. The clacking of heels.

He kept quiet. He turned back to the class and pantomimed working a tab. At the end of class, the window lost its opacity, the lock opened, and the intercom stopped its hum.

It felt difficult to concentrate. He felt himself reading flatly to the last class, resting his hand against the

board, slowly dragging it from point to point to advance the examples. When it was work time, he sat down on the desk and looked down past and through things. He kept his eyes from flicking on his glasses too early. He fought through his confusion of feelings until the end of the day, and then dismissed the kids.

He started some music and then opened his mail and messages. He stayed in the room a long time. Push in a chair. Put up a tab. Repeat. He sighed after every effort and tried to exhale the day.

When there was nothing left to do but collect his pay, he double-checked the wall safe, stepped out of the room, closed the door, and swept his me card near the handle. He turned toward the office, took a step, and then felt and heard a crunch underfoot. He looked down. Broken chalk. He hadn't seen any in years. There was nowhere to wipe it off his shoe. He lifted his foot, slammed his heel down on the chalk, and flicked the splinters and shards of it to the side of the hallway.

The line for the teller was short when he got near the office. He was last. Everything felt full and mute. It took him some time to get ready to speak again. He drew out his me card and let it fall under the light on the counter at the teller's darkened window.

"David Cruz?"

The voice sounded familiar.

"Yes."

"Do you swear that you complied and comported your teaching today—to the best of your ability—in

accordance with the affidavits you filed this morning with the school compliance officer?"

"I do."

"Thank you Mr. Cruz."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Fifty-dollar flat-rate for a teacher in good-standing, plus your two-dollar incentive under the 'Men in the Classroom' act today."

"Thank you. May I hear the charges?"

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. There are no charges today."

"No charges today."

"You are correct, Mr. Cruz. There are no charges."

He felt his face moving around as he tried to think.

"Mr. Cruz?"

"Thank you."

"You're welcome Mr. Cruz. Fifty-two dollars and zero cents have been credited to your me card. You are over ninety percent likely to be chosen as a teacher with us tomorrow. I am required to inform you that we are also experiencing a shortage of male teachers in the Low Woods, and Banner Square neighborhoods, and that you are over seventy-five percent likely to be chosen as a teacher tomorrow at any school in any of those districts."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz."

The lights in the hallway went dark. The office glass cleared; the lights within in the office and pay kiosk were off, too.

David Cruz could see the compliance officer seated across from him.

"Hello, David."

He had no idea what to do.

"It's okay, David," she said. "I just wanted to talk with you. Do you understand?"

He nodded without thinking.

"David, did you see anything today?"

A kid. Some chalk. No charges. How could he be sure?

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know that I saw anything."

"That's very good, Mr. Cruz. Because I neither did I."

He nodded.

"Because if you did—if you did see something—then so would I. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Will we see you again tomorrow, Mr. Cruz?"

"If you want to," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Cruz. I think we do."

"We do."

"That's right, Mr. Cruz." She leaned forward. "I would shake your hand on it," she said, gesturing at the glass and then rapping on it with her knuckle, "but you understand."

"I do."

The lights came on and the wall went dark.

David Cruz took up his me card and looked at his balance. He brought up his contacts and found his friends. He thought he might see them tonight and crash somewhere in the city—somewhere near the school in case he overslept.

He walked blindly to the bar, past the cops and their prisoners and APCs as they pulled away from the sidewalk that had been just been chalked, and as if every moment was another reminder from within the comfort of his absent mindedness, he kept on discovering the rain.

3.

He didn't drink much, which was unusual. He so seldom saw his friends, so seldom went out after work, and so seldom made so much in a day that he got drunk nearly every time he had the chance to reconnect with adults who were not his parents or compliance officers.

Tonight, though, he felt bad. Off somehow and in many ways. His body felt full even though he hadn't eaten. He could taste the alcohol through the flavors and sweeteners, thickly acerbic on the sides and back of his tongue, etching a line of constant discomfort down his throat.

His friends were of no help—all of them happy, all of them with stories to tell, all of them in retail. They crowded around their me cards showing one another in turn what they had bought, what they had sold, what they had done with one another—and with others in their circles. He kept to his barstool, dyspeptic, his chest and thoughts thickening with bile. He wanted to feel superior and aloof to cover how he felt inadequate and unnecessary to his friends. Knowing it without being able to stop denying it, he felt inadequate to the day.

If he could admit it. If he could make them understand. If he could make them complicit in his self-indulgence and self-sabotage.

"I saw this kid today," he said.

"You see kids every day," said one of the girls.

"He was running."

"Like between classes?"

"No—"

"Like to go home?"

"No—listen—"

It got quiet around them.

Another friend spoke up before he could, "Like to go between classes or to go home, David? Like that?"

He was caught of guard by how caring and stern these new strangers could be.

"Yeah," he retreated. "Like that."

They finished their drinks and invited him to the next bar, but he refused, which was also polite. Many of

them touched him on their way past him out of the bar. He didn't want to have any idea of what any of it meant.

He finished his drink, but held on to the glass for a long time before leaving. He bought a night in the bubble hotel. Insomniac, he followed his friends throughout the city wishing his shoddy adulthood could be like theirs.

The rain sounded like foot falls. The headlights swept across his window. He feel asleep replaying the pursuit in his mind, slicing it smaller and smaller until he could pause, repeat, and slow that last sliver of time and perception just before the door on the window went completely dark and the possibility of seeing something was gone.

When he woke up the rain was still falling.

It was early. He had set his alarm early so he could buy new clothes before going back to City Middle High School—an expense he hadn't thought of last night. He didn't have much left of his perfect day.

The path was still green when he made it back to the school, and the compliance officer sent him straight in to room 110.

He stepped up to the door and took out his me card. There was another piece of chalk on the floor. It wasn't broken or splintered or stepped on; it was new and frightful.

David Cruz didn't pick it up; he stepped inside the room and put everything he had to do between him and the chalk. The gentle bell rang, and to David Cruz it felt like time began again.

4.

“Good morning. My name is Mr. Cruz. If you need assistance during today's lesson, please remember to ASK. Attend to the entire lesson first. Seek clarification only after you know what it is you need to succeed. As I present the lesson and the included examples, please remember to SQUINT. Sit Quietly Until I Notify you it's Time to volunteer a response. If you do not SQUINT, I will warn you to SQUINT before summoning school discipline to remove you from the room. Remember to SQUINT before you ASK. Do you have any questions?”

“Please activate the tab on your desk. Do not do anything on the tab unless I tell you to do so. The tab will auto-play today's lesson. After each example you will be able to indicate the proper response by selecting it with your finger on the tab. Do you have any questions?”

“At the top of your tab, you will find several tools that you can use during today's lesson. Take a moment to try out the tools now. Do you have any questions?”

“If your tab does not function correctly during today's lesson, remember to SQUINT and ASK before raising your hand. You can follow the lesson on the board. Do you have any questions?”

“If you attempt to leave the lesson, your tab will lock and notify me. I will then summon school discipline to remove you from the classroom. Do you have any questions?”

“Now we will begin. Today you will continue with your learning about geometry. Today you will learn about the triangle. This is a triangle. A triangle has three sides. A triangle has three internal angles. The three internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees. If you know the measures of any two interior angles of a triangle you can find the measure of the third angle. Look at the example on the board and on your tab. Find the measure of the missing angle. Select your response using your finger on the tab. Tyler Cooper, I am summoning school discipline to remove you from the classroom.”

“Which answer did you choose? C is the correct answer. If you did not select C as your answer, do so now. Do you have any questions?”

“Look at the next example on the board and on your tab. This is a right triangle. A right triangle has one angle that measures 90 degrees. A 90 degree angle is called a right angle. If you know the measures of two sides of a right triangle you can find the measure of the length of the third side using the Pythagorean Theorem. The Pythagorean Theorem is $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$. C is always the side opposite the right angle. The side opposite the right angle is called the hypotenuse. Do you have any questions? Tyler Cooper, I am warning you

to SQUINT and ASK until school discipline arrives to remove you from the classroom.”

“Look at the example on the board and on your tab. Find the measure of the length of the hypotenuse. Select your response using your finger on the tab. Which answer did you choose? B is the correct answer. If you did not select B as your answer, do so now. Do you have any questions? Tyler Cooper I am summoning school discipline to remove you from the classroom again. Miranda Thomas, I am summoning school discipline to remove you from the classroom. Dalton Wicker, I am summon school discipline to remove you from the classroom.”

“Look at the next example on the board and on your tab. Jesus Lopez I am warning you to SQUINT and ASK. Mario Castro, I am warning you to SQUINT and ASK. Jennifer Pfeiffer, I am warning you to SQUINT and ASK. Look at the three triangles. The first triangle is a right triangle. The second triangle is an obtuse triangle. The third triangle is an acute triangle. An obtuse triangle has one interior angle that measures over 90 degrees. Jennifer Pfeiffer, I am summoning school discipline to remove you from the classroom. Mario Castro, I am summoning school discipline to remove you from the classroom. Jesus Lopez, I am summoning school discipline to remove you from the classroom.”

“Look at the example on the board and on your tab. Find the triangle with the obtuse angle. Select your response using your finger on the tab. Which answer did

you choose? B is the correct answer. If you did not select B as your answer, do so now. Do you have any questions?”

“Look at the last example on the board and on your tab. The triangle has been used in many pieces of art and architecture like these. Sometimes even your food looks like triangles. Many triangles can be combined to make other shapes like these. Think of a piece of art or a building in your city that uses triangles.”

“Look at the example on the board and on your tab. Find the building that uses triangles. Select your response using your finger on the tab. Which answer did you choose? A is the correct answer. If you did not select A as your answer, do so now. Do you have any questions?”

“Your tab will now auto-play the rest of today's lesson which includes your work. Items one through ten require you to fill-in-the videos. Items eleven through twenty require you to draw definitions with your fingers. Items twenty-one through thirty require you to calculate angles and sides using the tools on your tab. As you complete each item, remember to SQUINT and ASK. You can flag any question for review by clicking the review button at the bottom of the screen. Remember to SQUINT and ASK about any items flagged for review after you complete the lesson. If you need help during the lesson, use the help button at the top of the screen to review the definitions you have already learned. Do you have questions?”

"After you finish today's lesson, you are not to discuss it with anyone, including your parents and friends. Do you have any questions?"

"I am warning all of you to SQUINT and ASK. Terrence James, I am summoning school discipline to remove you from the room."

"You may begin working now."

It was his best class yet. He knew it. For the first time in weeks, he looked forward to the rest of the day.

At the end of the day he flew through his checklist, left without thinking about the chalk, and wound up fourth in line at the teller.

"David Cruz?"

The voice was different. Not the compliance officer.

"Yes."

"Do you swear that you complied and comported your teaching today—to the best of your ability—in accordance with the affidavits you filed this morning with the school compliance officer?"

"I do."

"Thank you Mr. Cruz."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Fifty-dollar flat-rate for a teacher in good-standing, plus your two-dollar incentive under the 'Men in the Classroom' act, minus charges today."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Would you like to hear the charges?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Okay then, Mr. Cruz. You exceeded your school discipline allotment by two students today and will therefore be charged for the negative impact on two students' National Academic Proficiency test-passage actuarial matrix predictions. Those impacts have been measured as significant, so you will be charged twenty-five cents per student for a total charge of fifty cents. You also went off-script once, potentially negatively impacting twenty-six students' National Academic Proficiency test-passage actuarial matrix predictions. However, those impacts were calculated to be non-statistically significant, docking you only ten cents per student, or two dollars and sixty cents."

"That's fine."

"Would you like to purchase a review, Mr. Cruz?"

"Yes. Thank you."

He would treasure it, he thought.

"Very well, Mr. Cruz. Your me card has been credited forty-three dollars and ninety cents. You are under fifty-percent likely to be chosen as a teacher with us tomorrow. I am required to inform you that we are experiencing a shortage of male teachers in the Belle Foundry, Low Woods, and Banner Square neighborhoods, and that you are over seventy-five percent likely to be chosen as a teacher tomorrow at any school in any of those districts."

"Under fifty-percent?"

"Yes, Mr. Cruz. That is correct."

"How do you know?"

"That's what my terminal tells me, Mr. Cruz. Will the be anything else?"

"No, thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Next."

He lost his enthusiasm for the review and nearly deleted on his way out the door before remembering its cost.

5.

He searched for the fastest way home and kept his head down, eyes glued to the path in his glasses.

Why didn't they want him?

"David Cruz?"

A strange voice with the kind of authority he wished he had. He stopped.

"Turn around, Mr. Cruz."

He did. Two cops were walking toward him, broadbeams drawn. The people on the sidewalk quickly separated out of the space surrounding him and the police.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Cruz."

"Good-afternoon."

"Your me card, please."

"Sure, officer."

The name tag. Office Pfeiffer.

Pfeiffer shone his broadbeam on the me card, launching a projection of David's ID and license.

"Are you in the country illegally, Mr. Cruz?"

"Illegally?"

"Yes, Mr. Cruz. Are you an illegal?"

"No, I'm not. You can see that. You can see my parents—"

"Lots of forgeries lately, Mr. Cruz. I'm sorry. Some of them use the last name Cruz."

"I bet."

"Excuse me, Mr. Cruz?"

"I said, 'I bet.'"

"Are you a teacher, Mr. Cruz?"

"You can see what I am."

"Do you have search and seizure insurance, Mr. Cruz?"

"No."

"Let me see your glasses, Mr. Cruz."

David Cruz froze.

"Your glasses, Mr. Cruz. I am going to remove them. Please don't move."

The other cop took the me card and kept it lit with his flashlight. Pfeiffer put the glasses in front of his broadbeam and projected David Cruz's map home on the wall of the building next to them.

"You came a long way to City Middle today, Mr. Cruz. You must have gone to a lot of trouble."

"No trouble. I just go where I work."

"I bet you do. I just work around here."

David Cruz flinched. Unexpected, but familiar noise started up in his head. Playback from the glasses. Class today. The review. From the way Pfeiffer titled his head, he must have been listening to it, too, from the me card in his partner's hand.

"That's enough," he said after a few minutes. "Everything seems in order, Mr. Cruz. Here are your glasses and card."

David Cruz put his glasses back on and nervously thumbed his me card.

"Have a good walk home."

Pfeiffer and his partner waited for David Cruz to turn and walk away. He could hear Pfeiffer say something and he turned in time to see the cop pocket his own me card.

David Cruz turned back toward home. His breath and pace hurried. He deleted the review from his me card before shoving it away.

The metro: almost home. He started down the stairs and then stopped. He saw them at the bottom; they saw him at the top. The girl, Pfeiffer's—the cop's daughter—from class. Three of the boys. All of them climbing the stairs toward him.

Rather than face them, David Cruz turned and ran.

He wasn't so far from his youth that he couldn't keep ahead of them for a while. He didn't know anywhere to go but the school so he followed the line back toward its gates. Maybe it would still be open; maybe there would

be other teachers still in line; maybe the compliance officer would be there to set things right and get these kids away from him. He couldn't call the cops on his me card. He understood that Pfeiffer had given him up to the girl.

And then he understood why. And he understood, perhaps, why he wasn't wanted. With just yards to go until he reached the sanctuary of the school, he slowed. He decided to take what was coming.

But as the kids came around one corner, the compliance office came around the other.

6.

He took off his glasses, folded them slowly, bent down, and rested them against the outer wall of the school.

He stood. City Middle's compliance officer approached from one side while his tormentors approached from the other.

"Mr. Cruz," said the compliance officer, "It's a surprise to see you here." Her eyes went to the four teenagers behind him. "Was there a problem with your pay?"

"No. There was no problem."

"Something else then?"

"No."

"And them?"

"I don't know them."

"I do." She slid past him. "Come here," she said to the kids.

Pfeiffer's daughter and the boys slouched closer. The compliance officer reached into her bag and pulled out a small broadbeam.

"I can turn this on," she said, "and put you all here right now if that is what you want."

He could hear the anger in their eyes. "I'm sorry," he said with a diffidence he hoped would excuse him from everything.

"I said, 'I can turn this on.' How many of you have heavies?"

Two of the boys lifted their chins to look down at her.

"If I put you here chasing after Mr. Cruz, you'll have walking felonies. No school. No job. No home but your parents'. No prison to go to. A lifetime of nothing but the street starting now. You can stare at it all day. And you—Pfeiffer, Castro—unless you're eager to collect your first heavy and have me snooping around your me cards until the cops get here, leave. You have no rights here once I say something is unsafe. And while Mr. Cruz is one thing, I am quite another. You want to be tough, you brush this off. Go home. Come back in the morning; I'll review the tape and your punishments then."

Castro spat on the wall and turned with the others. They dragged themselves off into the city.

"You have a broadbeam," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Cruz. A little one that works around the building. But you have a problem that is much bigger. I wouldn't come back here again. Won't you pick up your glasses? It's time for you, too, to go home."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Mr. Cruz. Can you make it? Do you live nearby?"

"No. With my parents. They found me at the metro."

"Your parents, Mr. Cruz?"

"No—I mean the kids were at the metro."

"Then let's hope they don't think of going back. I can certainly walk you there, Mr. Cruz."

"Can I buy you a drink? A thank you?"

"That would hardly be appropriate, Mr. Cruz, but I can walk you to the metro. It's on my way home, as well."

He put his glass back on and smoothed his sleeves and pants. "Well, again, thank you."

"Let's go, Mr. Cruz. Before it rains again."

They walked without speaking for a while. The city noise filled up the space between them. He felt safe. When he looked down he looked at her hand instead of at the path in his glasses.

"You didn't have to do that, you know."

"Yes, I did, Mr. Cruz."

"I mean, I could have taken the beating."

"But I couldn't have, Mr. Cruz. Not there outside the building."

"I'm glad I didn't have to—I didn't mean—"

"It's no problem, Mr. Cruz. I'd rather not have you beaten in front of me, if it's no difference to you."

"I don't really know what I'm trying to say."

"Then it's good we're at the metro, Mr. Cruz. Time for our good-bye for now."

"Good-bye,—"

"Don't worry, Mr. Cruz. I know you. You know me. You've seen me twice now with my make-up off, so to speak. And I've seen you without your glasses. We won't forget each other too soon."

"No—"

"But remember this, please. The next time you see a piece of chalk, pick it up."

The chalk.

"Why?"

She stepped close to him—into his space. She leaned in so far that her cheek brushed his, her lips touched his ear, and her throat rested against his collar bone. He didn't so much hear her as feel her speak again in almost subvocal tones.

"Think of me like gravity, Mr. Cruz. I am everywhere around you. And eventually I will pull you in."

He spent the time he watched her go wondering if he had ever been so close to anyone ever before. He backed on to the train and boxed himself as hard as he could into its sweep and clatter all the way home.

7.

While he couldn't quite forget the compliance officer, the rest of his life fell back into order. He spent most days teaching at Low Woods. He became something a fixture there. It was a more relaxed school with a chirpy compliance officer who liked to pick her favorites each morning.

David Cruz got in because of the shortage of male teachers, but he made every effort to stay there. He arrived early every day, chatted up the compliance officer about how well her school seemed to run, and followed the scripts she gave him.

He relaxed.

He stopped threatening students. He started to think of some of them as his own. He didn't worry so much about SQUINT and ASK. He even answered a few questions asked out of turn. From time to time, a few kids messed around with their materials and had to go, but that was that. He couldn't risk having to pay for a bricked tab.

The last few weeks of the year went well, he thought, and in the final days it was just as easy to give the tests as it had been to teach. He looked forward to the results.

The last day of school he got his bonus from the teller. Sixty-five percent of the kids he had interacted with

that year passed the NAP end-of-year content-area tests in the areas in which he had interacted with them. That entitled him to a fifteen percent bonus on his average daily wage multiplied by the number of days he had worked that year. He left for the summer with a bonus of a little over a grand credited to his me card.

He had saved another three hundred or so after all his commutes, meals, and infrequent recreational spending.

He did some quick calculations in his head to estimate how much money he would need to have on hand to make it through the summer. He planned to look for summer school work at Low Woods starting next week, so there went fifty dollars to renew his summer school endorsement. He also wanted to pay back some fraction of what his parents spent on him to thank them for keeping him at home and on their insurance for so long. He wanted to upgrade his license and make more next year.

He figured he could spend another five hundred on his license and still have enough not to go crazy that summer with worry or boredom, so long as a spot at summer school came through most days of the week.

Riding home, he played through different upgrade scenarios in his head. He brought up his license tree from his me card and spun it around to look at the different branches he could reach and the different endorsement badges he could unlock.

He one-tapped the summer-school badge and paid for its renewal. It was quick and easy to credential himself

when he had the money. The system figured that teachers could self-pace their professional development based on performance and pay. The system figured that lowering the bar to credentialing would remove the obstacles keeping the best and brightest out of the classroom. As a student, David had been successful and felt cared for in a bubble school, so he felt at home at school. At school he felt bright. At school he felt best. Also, he hated working retail. He had gone to work with his friends, all of them talking about maybe trying college one day after their parents' patience and insurance ran out, but none of them really saw the reason for more education and debt when their scores and schools put them in the upper range of what retail managers looked for in new employees. They were just right; able to make a sale without thinking too critically about their customers, products, or selves.

But David Cruz couldn't deal with all the adults. He couldn't handle the uncertainty of not knowing how to please his customers, which made it hell to deal with customers who couldn't be pleased. His temerity soured his bosses on him. Throughout that exaggerated and somewhat panicked time of his life spent working in stores, he just tried to emulate his friends and coworkers hard enough to avoid being fired.

As soon as he had made enough to take a test to break into teaching, he had never thought of doing anything else. Even the anxieties and pitfalls of his worst days felt natural and deserved to him. He had fewer adults

to worry about and could self-soothe discomfort in the classroom by sending out whoever caused it.

He brought around the student-load branch next. He could easily afford to increase the number of kids he was allowed to teach per day to one hundred fifty. It would be a stretch to pay for two hundred, but he could do it if he didn't purchase any extra endorsements.

It was all about the numbers.

Better schools had bigger class sizes, but they were typically further out from the city than he could afford to reach on a daily basis. Once you got into one of those schools, the kids' compliance and performance paid for the commute and then some. Maybe it would be better to buy a license for a hundred fifty and to go just a little further out this year—to the edges of the city—so he could build up his reputation at bubble schools before heading out to the suburbs for two hundred kids a day the year after that. If he could work a connection from Low Woods to one of those bubble schools, he would have it easy next year—easier than he had ever had it before.

If he bought the hundred fifty upgrade, he would have two hundred dollars or so left over to spend on the content area endorsement branch. He could unlock different levels of math. He could add a related content area like science, or another elective, like business. However, until he got out of the city, the electives would be a waste. No school in the city offered any of them any more apart from art, the catch-all, and he already had that. If he did add another area, he thought he might spring for

the assessment insurance, as well, in case some parents' group decided to sue him over their kids' failing performances on an end-of-course content test in an area in which David Cruz had little or no education of his own. It had become common practice for parents to sue teachers with sub 50% pass rates out of the classroom. A successful civil case also triggered a heavy misdemeanor that barred the defendant from teaching, as well as from voting, until he or she made restitution.

Maybe he should stick with math. His pass rates had been in the mid to high sixties for years.

If he wanted more money in the short term, he could add an after-school, extended-day endorsement and run bubble kids through their interventions, risk-free, for another two hours at the end of the day. If he did that, he could pocket another two dollars a day, no questions or actuarial tables asked, but he would have to commit. He would lose that license if he didn't stay after school four days a week, and he would have to find a school that had space for him in its extended-day program or he would never meet that requirement.

The holy grail endorsement, of course, was gifted-and-talented, but that was so far out of his reach he didn't even consider it. It cost over a grand by itself, and its prerequisites included endorsements in all core areas and a handful of costly and rare performance electives. Moreover, only suburban schools had positions for any of those electives and gifted and talented classes, and it took years to break into any of those places as a regular, let

alone as an elective or gifted and talented teacher. The city had eliminated its positions years ago. Gifted and talented teachers typically got monster bonuses in the summer time, so the city had made a practice of hiring them for a few days at a time and then blacklisting them from any position for a few weeks before letting them come back at certain schools to work certain classes so their pass rates never got any higher than any one else's. The gifted and talented teachers all left for the suburbs or became something else, and the city let the program die as an efficiency.

He didn't know what else he would buy after the hundred-fifty upgrade. Maybe he would just save all that money for next summer. Maybe he would buy some discounted monthly passes for the metro or modest firmware upgrades for his me card and glasses.

Or he could throw everything into a single branch and work toward mastering it quickly in pursuit of a new job at the department of education. He was just three upgrades away from mastering the student-load branch. If he completed it, he could apply to be an entry-level scheduler downtown. If he could make it to the top of the math branch, he could become an apprentice curriculum or test writer in math for the state-private partnership for curriculum and assessment. Of course, he would have to teach until there was an opening he won, but, ultimately, if he didn't start working his way up the ladder now he would never leave the classroom. It took action to do so, as much as patience and planning.

Whatever, he thought, which was a rare luxury for him—like a slow stretch and yawn before a long sleep. He'd make his choices tomorrow and take care of business before summer school began. Another tap or two of his me card and he would be ready to go for next year.

8.

He slept in the next day and woke up knowing exactly what we wanted to do. He would take the hundred-fifty upgrade and buy an extended-day endorsement. If he could count on another three hundred dollars next summer, he could make serious headway up the math content branch and maybe make it into a job downtown before too long without ever needing to go to the suburbs. It was one kind of victory to make it there and enjoy the luxuries of those schools; it was another to make it in the city without selling-out to the suburbs' soft-scores.

He didn't expect to be so happy with his decision; he didn't expect to find a purpose in his work besides survival.

He felt ambitious again. The same way he did when he was a student-when he knew his work would let him pass his test. That is the way school worked. It would work again like that for him. A hundred eighty days of doing

right by the script, by his compliance officers, by himself. He would go and make a mark and help run a school or write a test or set of lesson plans. He would have a whole new job tree. He could make schools better. He could make teachers better. Just a tiny bit at first, but then who knew? He could get deep into numbers in a way that teaching never allowed. He could discover patterns instead of pointing them out. Math and school; school and math; he could hold on to this quick, awake feeling between the two.

David Cruz sat up in bed and grabbed his me card from the night stand. He spun up his job tree and tapped the hundred-fifty badge on the student-load branch. It flashed, and then its colors deepened. It was active. He was upgraded and could—with luck—find himself a nice bubble school in need of male teachers in the fall.

The extended day badge—there it was. He would tap it, live frugally this summer, teach summer school, and pull in all sorts of extra money in the fall between his increased student-load and work after school. The active branches of his job tree, glowing with a soft amber light, braided and resolved themselves in his mind into a grand, unified path. He tapped the badge for his extended-day endorsement.

It recoiled softly from his touch and went dark. A black badge with red lettering superimposed itself over the extended-day badge. “User error,” it flashed and then, “Report to DOE.”

Fear. Fear and What have I done wrong?

He fumbled for his glasses and then shoved them on to this face, scraping the bridge of his nose. While he jabbed his thumb at the black badge again and again—hoping it would go away—he brought up a map to the department of education with a flick of his eye. The line to the building was green, but inside it was all red vectors. Once he went inside it would be hours before he came back out, and —because he didn't know what he had done or how he would be punished—his eyes welled and tears spilled as he got dressed.

Even though it was sunny and hot he grabbed a coat on his way out so he would have something to twist and hold.

On the way to the metro he nearly broke into a run.

A half hour later he stood outside the department of education, thumbing the dark badge one more time before he stepped inside.

He followed the line of his glasses up through the ceiling to the bottom of the twenty-third floor. He found the elevators and went up, sharing the car with a pair of better dressed staffers and two teachers who were headed to the licensure office, as well.

When they got there, the line was out the door, stretching back through the elevator bank into an unused reception area just beyond it. No one ever sat down here; everyone stayed in line. First to the door, first served. No numbered tickets or air conditioning or processing time wasted managing the herd even though the local network picked up every me card in order as people exited the

elevators. It was understood that there was simply no recourse for anyone out of line.

The twenty-third floor of the department of education was all neutral walls, imitation dark-wood accents, and yellow-gelled fluorescent light. The deep crimson carpet, softly rippling through it's noise reduction cycles, kind of squished beneath his feet without bouncing back at all. It felt, to a point, like sinking in shallow mud. He kept shifting his weight to shake off the mired feeling around his feet. Fluorosynthetic plants flanked the door to the licensure office. They gave off a smell like cut grass and lawnmower oil. His feet hurt. His head hurt. His breath and thoughts came like pangs.

After he had been waiting in line for half an hour, a staffer opened the office door and admitted the next group—his group—inside. Twenty-five teachers shuffled into the next line that what would take them to the narrow screening hallway where they would turn to their right and watch the office's liability indemnification video. Every teacher who came through the office door to meet with a real person had to watch. Remember, it said, your license is your responsibility, the information provided by any licensure cloak was not the same as legal advice, and your failures may be used against you in a court of law.

After the video—which he had only watched once before on his me card as part of his initial end-user-license-agreement checklist—his group exited the screening room and got back in line after the stragglers from the last group.

The licensure office took up half the twenty-third floor. The waiting area, screening room, and clerk's area took up the central part of the office like three rows. To its right and left, behind opaque glass walls, were cubicles for analysts and licensure officers who audited everything they could relating to teachers and their pass rates and to schools and the teachers they employed. It was common knowledge that in addition to its more nebulous duties, the licensure office curated data against teachers and schools to give plaintiffs in civil suits in order to coöperate with them and thereby exclude the school division from the suits.

The unused reception area was in the middle of the other side. It was flanked by large business suites for the assistant and deputy superintendents of licensure and their assistants and lawyers.

The last sweaty minutes went by, and it was suddenly his turn.

“David Cruz?”

He stepped up to the clerk at the far right end of the high counter.

“Yes.”

“Your me card, please.”

He handed it over.

“Thank you, Mr. Cruz. Do you know why you're here today?”

“No, I do not.”

“Mr. Cruz, were you aware that we are piloting a new paper-based affidavit system for licensing?”

"No, I was not."

"Well, Mr. Cruz, you have been selected to sign a paper affidavit affirming your intent to commit to four days of extended-day teaching per week. Are you willing to sign that affidavit, Mr. Cruz?"

Confusion, which felt close to relief.

"Of course."

"Thank you, Mr. Cruz. Would you like to purchase insurance in case of sickness or other absenteeism?"

"No, thank you."

"Of course, Mr. Cruz. Please sign."

He scanned and then signed the affidavit. The clerk took it back.

"Thank you, Mr. Cruz. I will now charge your account the cost of the extended-day endorsement, and it should show up on your job tree. Will there be anything else, Mr. Cruz?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Very well, Mr. Cruz. Here is your me card and receipt."

Who ever gave out paper receipts? Was it part of the pilot?

And then there was, at least, a superficial understanding. Wrapped inside the receipt was a cold white piece of chalk.

"Please, Mr. Cruz," said the teller, "If there will be nothing else, just keep moving along."

9.

Ever since the Pfeiffer girl and her friends had jumped him on the way home from school, David Cruz had turned on push notifications for his student proximity tracker. He knew about the app before that night, but had never believed he had reason to use it. He was a low key guy who hightailed it home from work every night to sleep in his room at his parents' house. When was he ever going to run into a student at home? On the metro going out of the city?

The tracker showed David Cruz a map of his surroundings out to a hundred yards. Within that range, the app tracked and displayed the movement of any nearby students. The app searched for students' me cards on the network and then anonymized their identities before showing him where they were. He only had permission to view anonymized students with whom he had interacted as a classroom teacher. He couldn't see other students or teachers, or parents, although students and parents could see all teachers in range, and compliance officers could see all students, parents, and teachers, if they so desired.

The pins representing students showed yellow until he came within five meters. Then the pins went red, and both his me card and any nearby students' me cards began

auto-logging their behavior. Students and parents' me cards sent an audio feed to the division's contracted security servers. Those audio logs were time, place, and person-stamped. His me card logged more information: it kept track of his vitals and also sent along information about any purchases or electronic communications made in close proximity to any student. He knew about the records kept from interactions with students he had seen in a classroom, but he had no idea how much of his behavior had been logged and kept from the times he passed by students he didn't know.

After the Pfeiffer incident, David Cruz felt paranoid about unwittingly running into students he had slighted in the classroom. So he turned on the notification that would alert him -through his glasses—whenever he came within five meters of a student he had taught.

Of course, he kept those alerts off at school.

Whenever he got an alert outside of school, though, he would pull himself out of the flow of his day, get out of the way, and spend a minute or two looking around for familiar faces. If he saw a student he remembered, he tried to remember how he had treated that student—he didn't want to be chased, chastised, or otherwise punished again. More often than not, he didn't recognize anyone; when he did, he usually didn't remember how he had treated that student.

As he went through his summer routines, he remained acutely aware of two things—his student

proximity tracker alerts and the piece of chalk he kept in the front left pocket of his pants.

It had been a few months since he had seen his friends and failed completely as a social animal at the bar, so the invite to their weekend bowling outing came as a surprise. He wanted to see them. He wanted to make up for his past behavior and to come across as slightly goofy again. He wanted to resume his role as the harmless teacher friend. He could tell them about his license upgrades and explain his goal to work his way back into a school that was a lot like the ones they went to as kids—maybe even into a better one, an even more suburban one. He could show them he was back on track.

He accepted the invite and imagined that the next few days of summer school would go by like a cool breeze, and they mostly did.

His friends had decided to go bowling on the Low Block boardwalk, which—in its supremely attractive ambiguity—oscillated wantonly between has-been, retro, trendy, ironic, and post-ironic. It was edgy not to care how sincere the place felt to each segment of its diverse clientele.

It took David a little while to make it to the boardwalk on a Saturday. He had to ride in from home, but he didn't mind spending the time or cash to see his friends again and to gird himself with their soft approval.

He came up from the underground a few blocks away from the boardwalk and walked the rest of the way.

The air didn't smell good, but it smelled wet, which felt different and bolstering.

David Cruz followed his glasses to the bowling alley. Even before he entered the alley, he could see his friends inside, but as he walked through the door and crossed to the shoe counter he could see student proximity alerts pile up in messaging margin of his glasses. He scanned the room for his friends. They were already playing between two groups of kids all wearing the same community organization tee-shirt. Both groups were apparently led by former students, none of whom David recognized. Regardless, he knew everything he did would be recorded—and everything his friends did or said could be captured in the background.

He didn't know how to be. He didn't know how his friends would be. He didn't know who would be listening at the end of the stream.

Maybe being quiet would be enough of an improvement over last time to earn him back some goodwill with his friends, Maybe talking enthusiastically about new possibilities at work would get him some points with the nosy staffers downtown who might already be listening in to his feed. Maybe going home would be best, but by now he was all over his friends' proximity feeds. It would look weird to walk out on them. He didn't want to be weird.

David Cruz rented some shoes and went to sit down by his friends. He made small talk. He made sure to smile. He cringed when his friends cursed and talked

about drinking. All the while, his me card streamed his discomfort downtown.

Another red dot appeared on his map. He looked up. It was her—the Pfeiffer girl—in a youth group tee shirt. She looked right at him. His eyes recoiled; the focused on Pfeiffer the red dot rather than on Pfeiffer the girl. He didn't want to look at her; he couldn't quite look away.

She walked past his friends to the group of kids on the other side and asked if anyone needed to use the bathroom.

He didn't notice it was his turn to bowl even though his friends called to him again and again. He got up, grabbed a ball, and stood at the line feeling the weight of the bowling ball in his hands, his heart a steady hammer in his chest, his attention flitting between a hundred pins and people all crashing together at once. He stepped back, swished up to the line again, and swung the ball, letting it go from his hands as a vehicle for his attention and intent. He took off his glasses and watched it punch a hole through the right side of the pins, everything else filtered out of his senses until he exhaled, turned, and said, "Six."

The youth groups were leaving, filing out with their counsellors at the front and rear of their lines. He stayed standing on the edge of the deck and watched the Pfeiffer girl lead her group out of the bowling alley. Then he sat down, put his glasses back on, and leaned back just far enough for it to catch his eye.

There, in the next lane, on the back of the chair pushed into the scoring table: a small white x drawn in chalk.

10.

On the last day of his otherwise uneventful summer school experience, David Cruz stopped short inside the classroom door and found himself face to face with the compliance officer who had saved him from the Pfeiffer girl's ambush and beat-down.

"Hello, Mr. Cruz," she said.

"Hello," he stammered, "again."

She invoked the end of summer ritual, "How was break, Mr. Cruz?"

"It was fine, thank you. I got to see my friends some."

"Did you teach the entire time?"

"Mostly."

"Do you ever leave school, Mr. Cruz? I mean, do you ever really leave it?"

"Are you asking me?"

"Yes, Mr. Cruz. Or maybe both of us. May I come in? Do you have to go? I can process your pay later."

"No—that's fine. Of course."

She walked into the room and sat on the corner of the desk. David Cruz walked back toward her, stopped a few feet away, and let his bag slip off his shoulder to the ground.

The door clicked shut, and its window darkened. The little lights on the cameras winked out and went dark.

"Mr. Cruz, what would you say if I could get you a sure thing?"

"A sure thing?"

"A guaranteed job. Every day. A ninety-nine percent chance of employment each morning due to a shortage. Steady pay at schools that would honor your after-school license obligations. A fast track to what passes for financial stability for someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Someone who still lives at home, Mr. Cruz, and spends his merit pay on additional licenses. Someone whose needs are modest, or at least routinely understated."

"What do I have to do?"

"You just have to teach, Mr. Cruz, at the schools that promise you the ninety-nine percent chance of employment."

"There's nothing illegal?"

"Is there anything illegal about your teaching, Mr. Cruz?"

"No—I mean—is there anything special about it?"

"No, Mr. Cruz. Nothing special, so to speak. In fact, I want you because of how unspecial you are."

"You do?"

She stood. "I do, Mr. Cruz. And now let's go process your pay. I have a feeling I know where you'll be needed next Monday."

She stepped closer. "Right there," she said, pushing a finger against his sternum, "in the deep, dark heart of the city."

11.

Monday.

"Good morning, Mr. Cruz. I trust you didn't have any trouble finding the place."

"Good morning. It was fine." He looked around the entrance way. "Aren't there any others?"

"Let me explain a few things, Mr. Cruz, before you step inside."

"Am I hired?"

"Yes, Mr. Cruz. But just listen. I will pay you. I will pay you if you step inside or not. I will pay you if you leave meaning to never come back. I will pay you if you stay forever. But there's no pay that will explain things to you, so for God's sake, just shut up. Your stumbling and your foolishness and your youth and immaturity have gotten you here, to what we'll call my school, Mr. Cruz, and either shut up or leave. If you plan to stay, for now

stand just here, please, outside the range of our students' me cards, and listen."

Hoping to catch her off guard, he pulled the chalk from his pocket.

"Why do I have this?"

"That's our calling card, Mr. Cruz—how we know one another, mark things, send warnings and invitations. You have been invited in, Mr. Cruz—just listen."

"I will."

"You will. You will, you will, you will. How simpering and naive and perfect of you. I told you I would bring you in, David. I told you. The vacuum of the empty parts of you; the mystery of why you were selected; the excitement of something that feels vaguely off; it all brought you here. It's all here for you. It will all keep you going if you play along, David—if you just keep being you, you will be of endless use to me. If you become someone else, we'll just wait and see."

"Wait and see for what? What is this place? Am I teaching here today?"

"It's a school, David. Griffin Hill High School. One of the city's first comprehensive high schools. Later a vocational school. Then an alternative school. Then a last-chance center. Then a school that other schools would go to and use up while those schools were getting repaired or moved and finally re-opened. And then things spread, and schools further out got used up and used as foster homes for schools on the rise even further out."

“Why isn't this something else? Are you even teaching kids here?”

“Because everything happened all at once, David. Mindlessly. Numberwise. School choice. The dissolution of your profession. The normal weird mix-up of money and compliance. The decision to preserve a number of token neighborhood schools to assuage whomever wanted them and to teach our hapless losers. The collapse of the education market. We've recruited many special losers here, David. There's something to be said—many things to be said—for rotating teachers and administrators like we do. It hurts organizing. It hurts cohesion. It negates the need for morale. It encourages standardization and bureaucracy and hierarchy. But we get to see a lot of things. We get to meet a lot of people. You know. Get to know them, their personalities and troubles. Save them from their students or their teachers or themselves.”

“You're here to save me?”

“We're here to use you, David, until you're ready to move on, at which point you'll know who you are and whether or not you belong to yourself or the system. We are the great disabusers of our age. There are some things you should wonder about yourself. Things you should wonder about us and the system. Today and every day you work with us you will be a teacher and you will be with students, and everything we ask you to do will be what you've already done, except for what we want of you today. Today, like I said, I want you to shut up. Today I want you to listen and nod or shake your head and just

make one decision, set one goal, or take one step back. This is a tiny day, David, but a different one. Maybe important, even, for you. What do you think of the chalk? What do you think it means today?”

“It's—”

“Come on, David. Listen. There's no need to answer. Just stop. We're about to walk in the school. Do you understand?”

He nodded.

“I'm sure you don't, but that nod was good, David. Very emphatic. Let's get inside.”

12.

The first thing he noticed was how empty the place felt. Griffin Hill was deserted. Classrooms were dark. Half the light bulbs in the hall had blown. The opacity of the office walls had worn down in some spots to translucence and transparency. Splotches of clarity. Old furniture; stacks of paper; stale smells. It was unlike any school he had ever walked in before.

“This place is gutted. We shouldn't be here.”

“Just a bit further, David. You've nearly seen it all.”

Down another hall, past rows of battered lockers, and through a set of double doors: they arrived at the cafeteria.

He was struck again by how he'd seen nothing like it. Kids scattered all around, some alone, some with others. Some at the tables or on them; some on the floor by the walls. All of them at work or talking. One or two adults dressed like the kids blending into the crowd.

Two students broke away from the group at a nearby table and approached David and the compliance officer.

One of the kids was Pfeiffer. The other was Castro. He realized he should have expected them. The compliance officer took note of his surprise and its resolution.

Pfeiffer had a small plastic bin in one hand and a hand-written note scrawled in tiny print on a piece of lined paper in the other.

Put your me card in the bin.

"My what?"

"Your me card," said the compliance officer, whispering. "You have to turn it over to go on."

He hissed back, "I'm not supposed to do that. Why does this—why does this—why does she need it?"

"It's all part of the deal, David. It's a tiny little price to be paid for everything we're about to show you. You'll definitely get it back"

Pfeiffer poked the note at the box.

"I'm not supposed to," he rasped as he handed it over. "What is this doing? What am I supposed to see?"

Pfeiffer and Castro fell back to the table. He saw her hand the bin over to another student who hopped the empty lunch counter and disappeared into the kitchen.

"All of this, David. What do you see?"

"Kids. Working. Talking. Doing stuff. I don't know."

"They're on alert out here, David. Enough kids and teachers to fill a few classrooms by the front office in case of emergency. We very seldom get visitors, but every so often the results of our work draw attention."

"What work are they doing?"

"Come and see."

She took him into the kitchen. It was filled with computers—big ones—set up inside cubicles scrapped together from milky, discarded smart glass. Maybe old ones. Lots of cables. External drives. And printers—3D printers. The kind he'd seen at the pharmacy and the optician's and at the hardware and department stores when he ran errands for his parents. He saw the kid who had taken his me card in its bin back to the kitchen. The kid was at a computer hooked up to an external drive, and there was a me card sticking out of it. His me card.

"Why is my card in that machine?"

"Is that really your first question?"

"I think I want to go now."

"I think you ought to stay."

"Why? What for? To go through the motions out front? I don't know any of this."

"To go through the motions, David, for sure, but just like you've always we done. Out there. From school to school. Class to class. Innocuous. Mostly harmless. An actuary's teacher."

"Then why did you bring me here."

"To make you understand."

"Understand what? You took my me card? Are you buying stuff with my money? Are you spying on me?"

"Such paranoia, David. I'm kind of sad you have it in you, but relax, or at least attend. We don't need your money, David. And I've known everything I've ever needed to know about you since you walked into that one school last year—the one with the kid running for his life in the hallway before we slapped a heavy misdemeanor on him and glitched his life. You remember that kid, David?"

"I do."

"He's right over there."

He was. Attending to one of the printers. And then David saw it. A pile of me cards, not just his own. Many more. The printer was printing me cards.

"What is this?"

"I'm glad you're ready to listen."

The compliance officer took an empty seat and motioned for David to do the same. After he sat, she bagman.

"We make me cards, David. Cards; scores; people. We print them out right here. Someone, sometime, before our time, figured them out. And that person sold the plans—and then disappeared. And then some kid found

those plans somewhere—someplace we proper adults don't look. Some place we don't acknowledge where things are actually much easier, but not really any more corrupt. And some kid brought those plans here and found another kid who knew something about computers and used the school shop to make fake IDs for their friends and customers."

"And then they were busted and sent elsewhere, and the change came. Teaching bottomed out, and Griffin Hill became a home for losers—kids guaranteed to never pass a test, all under one roof, justifying an endless stream of interventions and remediations and inspections and attention and turnover and funding. Pretty soon the school had a reputation. Despite all the intervention money, no one would come here and take responsibility for the place. Not any teacher. Not any compliance officer. No one but that principal who busted those kids. He saw what he had done wrong. He came back as the school's compliance officer."

"What did he do wrong?"

"He never should have busted them. He thought he could have used them to save the school—to produce a miracle. He suddenly saw that there was no reason they couldn't have helped him hack the system. So he found the kids on the street. He paid them to make themselves new me cards and to re-enroll in the school. He brought them back to make himself look like Griffin Hill's savior. But cheating was way too boring for those kids. When those kids left and went through the system, they got

religion. They saw what the street did to their friends. They stole the compliance officer's money and then stuffed his me card with so much questionable product that by day two of their reunion the compliance officer was frog-marched out of the school by central office and stripped of his licensure forever. Then the kids took control of the schedule; the student records. They flipped the school and took over from the shop without anyone ever noticing until they were brought into the fold."

"Is that what they're doing?" He gestured toward his card. "Setting me up?"

"It is, David. But don't be afraid. They've done my card, too. I can't imagine what I have on there. But they're very careful about controls and locks and triggers. Just keep listening, David, and keep in mind that when you leave you can work with us or not, but you just can't blabber all this to your mom or puke it all over your friends at the bar. You understand?"

"I understand that this is blackmail."

"This is blackmail, David, but it's also something amazingly more. You know that one of the reasons I want you is that you think this entire room is here to blackmail you, don't you?"

"I don't."

"Yes you do. You are afraid for yourself. I love your sorry little life, David, and everything we can do with it. All the good. It's just that we can't have you doing bad."

"This is bad."

"It's not, David. And if you talk to anyone about this outside the building—if you talk about this with anyone who isn't holding chalk—you are done. Finished. More profoundly ruined than you are now, stuck as you are in life. And we'll just scatter. We'll disappear into the system. We have thousands of identities here, David, for just a few people. You, my David, have one—one sad little identity all to yourself."

"You keep saying that."

"You keep going, David. You keep going in your predictable, fraught little ways. You wake up at home and put on your chalk face and go out to make a few bucks in this world so you can work harder to make a few more doing—fundamentally—the same thing. Don't you see the ceiling, David? Don't you feel it pushing down on your head? What do you ever expect to do other than what you have done?"

"I can make it to the suburbs. I can teach successful kids."

"You will never make it, David. Not doing what your doing. I've seen the tables on you, sweet friend. You are officially going nowhere. But whereas the division will never admit that, I do. And I can offer you something more."

"I just want to get out of here."

"Then here is the score: I came here after that first compliance officer left. Those kids thought I gave people a fair shake. They noticed when I overlooked things. They recruited me to do something much more significant than

cheating—they recruited me to go out and find kids like them and teachers like you—people to make what we make and people to deliver it to our customers out there in the schools. Obedient rank-and-file teachers. Content mules.”

“You deliver me cards to schools?”

“Essentially, yes. But we do more. We make those me cards, David, and we stuff them with demographics and scores and activities that guarantee free rides out of the city. At first, we just made them for the kids we recruited here—kids with trumped up heavy misdemeanors spawn-camping just outside the reach of their lives. Then we recruited some of our teachers, and after they recruited more kids, some of them moved up the chain and got their own schools—way stations, so to speak, between here and there, the world outside the system. We could only take so many “problems” and still hack scores that seemed reasonable given our ceaseless turnover and turnaround efforts. We needed more sites. We needed steady access to transfers of kids who have skills we need in our kitchen. Some of our kids leave after they graduate. Some of them make a new me card and re-up for another tour.”

“But you're lying. You're making up fake people. You're committing fraud.”

“Who are you parroting, David? The whole system is lying. It has no idea what learning is. It can only ever know and work to replicate itself. It incubates some kids; it dessicates others. It has tables of results to tell itself that

this is okay. We're not making fake people, David—we're saving real ones. Real people who can get real jobs after college. These are kids facing a lifetime of unemployment at age thirteen, David. We help them find education and work and keep them off the government books. Do you know how many kids your discipline requests have put on heavy misdemeanors? Do you, David? Because I do. Would you like to know the number?”

“No—”

“Eight. You've personally tossed eight lives into the gutter. I know plenty of teachers with more, but you're young yet, David. You want to keep going? Give yourself time. What to know your record? Three in a day.”

“I don't—”

“Don't what?”

“I don't want to be a criminal.”

“Then don't. Save lives instead of ruining them.”

“What do I even do? I can't do this.”

“You just go from school to school, David, and stop by here every few weeks for after-school or a day of teaching.”

“You want me to carry the cards—is that it?”

“No, David. I still go out and recruit. I wander around where compliance officers are needed. Our friends come back here and fill in for me. When they need specific cards for specific kids, they carry them out themselves. Otherwise, all they want from us is data. And that's where you me card comes in.”

“What do I do?”

“Nothing. All you do is wait in line at the end of the day and let your me card get swiped. It'll push out what it needs to push out into whatever school pays you.”

“How isn't this cheating? How can you have all these schools suddenly all be passing?”

“That's just not how we work, David. There's no point in making everyone pass. That just means the test would change next year, or just the way its scored. We operate on the margins, David. Sometimes a kid works hard and needs just a nudge to keep up with probation and avoid a heavy. Sometimes a school needs just a few scores to make accreditation or stay out of the turnover weeds. Sometimes a school is too successful for some kind of funding, so we tip the scores down. Everything is smart. People make the decisions.”

“Why don't they ask you for more?”

“We've blackmailed each other, David. And there's no money in this that doesn't belong to the system. There's nothing to be had, in any real way, apart from doing good. Or fighting bad. Take your pick.”

“You mean pick a side.”

“I mean join us, David. This isn't national security or finance. No one is really looking past the numbers floating on the surface. Nobody looks any deeper or questions any expert. It's just school. These kids can handle all the hackery and risk. The paper tigers downtown either have no idea what we're doing, or they don't care. We aren't flattening their precious curve, David. We're just helping a few kids get off of it. But now

you have to tell me, David. Are you in? Are you ready to be in?”

To David Cruz, the idea of belonging was irresistible.

13.

After David had said yes, the compliance officer retrieved his me card.

“Now, when you get paid, you'll be saving lives, David.”

In the next few weeks, he took to flipping his me card over and over again in his hand. He kept visualizing his connection to the others. Sometimes it was a ribboning blue tether drifting lazily around his room and out the classroom door or a rare window. Sometimes it sent out rippled, rainbow radio waves that crisscrossed rings of bright white light emanating through the city from Griffin Hill. As he got used to his new routes, he used his glasses less, and he imagined vibrant new lines in blindingly bright colors connecting him to the students he picked out of the hall and his classroom—the ones he imagined saving.

Suffused with purpose, he taught on-script and brushed aside the upsets disregulated students sent his way. His performance improved; the charges against him dropped. By doing right, he thought, he was doing okay for himself, as well.

Then it happened again, three weeks in to his new life and mission. He heard the footsteps—hammer-falls in the empty hallway outside his class. Before the glass of the window on the door darkened—and before the door locked—he stepped outside to see what was happening.

A kid ran towards him and then past him.

A sharp-dressed compliance officer strode after the student, and as David stepped toward the compliance officer, his classroom door clicked.

David reached out to the compliance officer.

“Hey,” he said, “It's going to be okay.”

The compliance officer looked at David, tilted his head, pursed his lips, and furrowed his brow. David knew the look. It was disappointment. He felt gut-punched.

“Mr. Cruz,” said the officer, “Can I let you back into your classroom?”

David taught the rest of the day with his heart battering his chest while all around him his imagined rainbow lights flared, faded, sparked, sputtered, and burned.

At the end of the day, he stood in line for his pay. When he got to the window and lifted his head. He saw what he knew he would see, the compliance officer from the hallway.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Cruz. Would you like to hear the charges against you?”

“No.”

“Very good, Mr. Cruz. During your time in the classroom, you deviated from the planned lesson once today, negatively impacting less than five percent of your students projected achievement scores as calculated with the division's actuarial testing tables. You left your class unattended for one minute twenty-three seconds, negatively impacting twenty-percent of your students projected achievement scores as calculated with the division's actuarial testing tables. Your actions also violated federal and state policies requiring a highly qualified teacher to be present during all seat time to verify course credit, creating a time deficit for those students and this school and creating a liability for the yourself under the Equal Access to Education Act, a liability for which you indemnified the school in contracting for your license and accepting work here today. You also interfered with a division compliance officer in the course of his duties, which, at the discretion of the compliance officer, can be referred to the city police department as a complaint that may result in heavy misdemeanor charges laid against you. At the discretion of the compliance officer, your pay may also be forfeited for the day and your license may be suspended pending an investigation.”

“I thought we were doing good. I thought it would be okay. You know—”

"Do you want to purchase a video record of the charges, Mr. Cruz."

"No. No I don't."

"Very well, Mr. Cruz."

"Can you tell me what I should do?"

"Give me your me card."

The compliance officer swiped it.

"Here's your pay for the day, Mr. Cruz, minus charges. Keep the five dollars. I am required by law to tell you that other schools probably have shortages and needs for teachers like you that we do not."

"I understand."

"While I do not plan to submit a complaint to the police or division, Mr. Cruz, I will be required to report on today's incident to account for the charges against you."

"I understand."

"Do you, Mr. Cruz?"

"I do. I think so."

"Then don't let it happen again. We all have rules. We have them for reasons, Mr. Cruz."

With that, the compliance officer slid back his me card along with a receipt and a piece of chalk snapped in two.

14.

He grew increasingly and frantically unsure of himself over his gaffe and the broken chalk. Wasn't he supposed to become a better person? Wasn't he supposed to stand up for kids, especially amongst the people with chalk? Or had he blown everything? Should he have been callous? Should he be more callous tomorrow? He had been sending out fewer kids; should he send out more? Was he really supposed to be the teacher he had been even though he knew about the fake students? The fake scores? How could he expect him to be who he was and to break the law every time he handed over his me card to get paid?

Despite his daily mania, he kept to his rounds and tried to commit himself to the custodianship of a crude inner abacus tallying his present against his past. I let that kid go; slide a bead back. I sent that kid out for laughing at something; slide a bead forward. I ignored the noises in the hall; I didn't smile or frown; leave the beads alone.

But it wasn't enough to think he was doing something good. He had to know. He had no idea how to know, for himself, if what he was doing was right or if he was doing it right. Everything he expected of himself, he expected on behalf of others—his betters, he thought—and

without contact with that compliance officer or even that girl, Pfeiffer, he had no idea whether or not he was making the grade as their mule.

So he started to leave the marks.

At first, he just drew a short line of white chalk somewhere in each of the classrooms he visited. After marking those classrooms for a few weeks without response, he started drawing question marks on the floor. At first he drew one at a time; later he grouped two or three per tile, but he never allowed himself more question marks than would fit within a single square.

So far as he could tell, nothing ever happened because of the marks. His routine did not change. He never found a secret message written in chalk on the floor of the classroom in which he taught the next day. There were no mysterious line items on his receipts. No broken pieces of chalk slipped into his hand. No familiar eyes winking at him from behind the misted office glass.

Was he still wanted? Was anyone watching him?

In his desperation for affirmation, he thought about addressing the cameras in his classrooms. He thought about writing his pleas across their walls. He thought about handing his chalk to someone else, just to see what they—the secret they—would do.

Ultimately, he decided on a simple test. He would go back to one of his older schools—one of those schools in constant, scientific need of male teachers—and see if anyone, in any way, invited him back to his routine.

And he did.

He spent the day in teaching through an adrenal haze of expectation and defense against disappointment. He cleaned up quickly at the end of the day and wound up near the front of the line for his pay. And then it was his turn at the window.

“David Cruz?”

“Yes.”

“Do you swear that you complied and comported your teaching today—to the best of your ability—in accordance with the affidavits you filed this morning with the school compliance officer?”

“I do.”

“Thank you Mr. Cruz.”

He said nothing, waiting.

“Today you’ll get our fifty-dollars for a teacher in good-standing, Mr. Cruz, plus your two-dollar bonus for ‘Men in the Classroom,’ minus charges. Do you understand, Mr. Cruz?”

“I do.”

“Very good, Mr. Cruz. Today, in nontrivial, non-terminative violation of your affidavits, you went off-script just once, negatively impacting the National Academic Proficiency test-passage actuarial matrix predictions of one forty-three out of one hundred eighty-two students you taught today. Those impacts were non-statistically significant, Mr. Cruz. At ten cents per student, you lose four dollars, thirty cents. Your room looks fine, and you did not take up extra resources today, Mr. Cruz. That was

well done. You'll get forty-five dollars and seventy cents on your me card. May I have it please?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. This will just be a moment, Mr. Cruz."

He didn't know what to do. Was there a message? No message? Had he missed it? Had he been supposed to notice that there was no message?

The office glass went completely opaque. Its quick flicker caught David Cruz's eye. He stepped back from the counter. Several teachers in line raised their eyes. The office door opened, and out walked the well-dressed man David and the others immediately recognized as the compliance officer for the school.

"Would you come with me, Mr. Cruz?"

It was something, he wanted to tell himself. It was something.

But he already knew it would be bad.

Even so, with something exactly like relief, he followed the compliance officer into the office.

The compliance officer walked him through the office floor to a small room walled by more opaque glass.

"Please sit here, Mr. Cruz."

"Am I just supposed to wait?"

"Wait for what, Mr. Cruz?"

"What am I doing here? Why am I not getting paid? What did you do with my me card? Why did you bring me back here? What am I doing here?"

The questions filled his chest like breath.

"I'm authorized to hold you, Mr. Cruz, as well as your me card, in case you try to falsify more data."

"But I only went off script once today—"

"Your performance today was fine, Mr. Cruz."

However, there are questions to be answered about your me card and the way in which it interacted with our licensed information systems. Our vendors seem to think you did something, Mr. Cruz. You're being held by me and the department of education on behalf of those interests until such time as we come up with the questions we'd like to ask you."

"I don't understand—you're not—you can't hold teachers here overnight."

"No, Mr. Cruz, we can't. But we can transfer you to central office, question you, and send you off with a heavy misdemeanor and no license for disrupting school operations if we find anything out of sorts on your me card. So sit here. Think about what you did. For your own sake, come clean or stay quiet. Someone will be along to collect you. I'm going back to my school."

"When will I get my card?"

"When everything is done."

After the compliance officer left, he flicked on his glasses and found himself shut out of most applications—the HUD stayed stuck on its load screen; everything was blocked.

Without his me card or glasses, he felt lousy at telling time.

He couldn't guess how much time had passed when someone from central office showed up with a cop, took his glasses, showed him to a department of education car, and took him to central office.

They took him to the twenty-fourth floor, which seemed to him half-full of cubicles and half-full of opaque glass cells like the one he occupied in the office at the school.

The central office staffer showed him to a cell.

"It will be just a moment."

When the door opened again, his compliance office came inside the cell. There was no sign of the other staffer or the cop.

"It's difficult to see you here, Mr. Cruz. According to our data, you seemed to be teaching well this year."

"Where were you? Why didn't anyone answer me? Why didn't anyone see the chalk?"

"What chalk, Mr. Cruz?"

"The chalk I wrote on the classrooms. On the desks. On the floors. The question marks. The lines. No one came to answer my questions."

"I have no idea what you're saying, Mr. Cruz. Before we go on, you should know that my me card is streaming our conversation to a licensed server open to both the department of education and the police."

"I don't understand—"

"Don't understand what, Mr. Cruz?"

"Why am I here? What do you want with me?"

"Can you tell me, Mr. Cruz, why your me card broadcast packets containing falsified student data to one of our licensed student information servers during your check out today?"

There was so little in her face. Her head cocked to one side, her right, as if it was an invitation. Or, maybe, he thought, a test.

"I didn't have any kind of data on my me card other than the data about me."

"I'm afraid that's untrue, Mr. Cruz. In analyzing your card, we found twelve falsified student records as well as a cache of protected data using encryption that people like us aren't allowed to have. It doesn't seem like we have access to that data yet. More falsified records, Mr. Cruz?"

"I didn't falsify any records."

"But it seems like you did. Did you give your card to anyone else recently, Mr. Cruz? Did you ask someone to buy something for you, or let someone buy something with your card?"

"No. I don't do that."

"Have you always had your card, Mr. Cruz?"

"Yes," he said. "I have always had my card."

"Then it would seem like there's no one here to blame but you, Mr. Cruz."

"There was nothing that I've done."

"Was it all magic then, Mr. Cruz?"

"Yes. It must have been magic, or something like it."

"That's unlikely, Mr. Cruz. Just because you say there's no story to unravel doesn't mean you can keep from being undone."

"I understand."

"We're going to refer this matter to the police to see if they can ascertain what happened here. If you can provide us with any reason for why you felt the need to cheat, things might go better for you later. As it stands, our license and all its endorsements are revoked without refund. I am also charging you with a heavy misdemeanor for falsifying student information on a licensed server. You will get your me card back, but we will make a copy of its contents before retiring it to you. Please return to your home and await a police summons if further prosecution is warranted. Do you understand, Mr. Cruz?"

"I understand, Miss—"

"Officer, Mr. Cruz. Officer will do."

She stood, dropped his card and glasses on the table, and then opened the door for him. He left the cell and walked back to the elevators, ready to go down, to ride home, and to wait for the police to tell him what to do next.

While he exited the building gathering himself, he fumbled his glasses and walked straight into the back of a cop. His glasses fell; the cop turned.

It was Pfeiffer's dad.

"What the hell, Mr. Cruz?"

"I'm—I'm sorry."

"No trouble, I hope?"

"Some," he said quietly. "Just some." And then, with realization, "You're part of it."

Pfeiffer gave a subtle nod. "When they got Jenny, they got me."

Pfeiffer stepped on his glasses, crushing them to bits.

"I'm sorry about your glasses, Mr. Cruz. May I please see your me card?"

Again and again, something inside David Cruz let go.

"Thank you," said Pfeiffer. He tossed the me card into the street, and it was run over by a passing cab. It splintered into dust, dark glints against the asphalt.

Using both hands, Pfeiffer grabbed David Cruz by the front of his jacket and pulled him close. Then Pfeiffer used one hand to reach into his own coat. He pulled out another me card and shoved it inside David Cruz's coat.

Pfeiffer whispered, "For your troubles. Your were a bad bet, David, but we wish you good luck." And then he yelled, "Police. Let go. Let go and step away, sir. Desist, or I will use force."

With that he shoved David Cruz into traffic, and when he was hit by the next car, although he didn't die, David Cruz decelerated through pain into a hurt sleep.

15.

"You're back, Mr. Alvarez."

David Cruz woke to incomprehension. He was shoved; he was hurt; he was lying down; a stranger was talking to him.

He croaked, "Where am I?"

"Back amongst the living, Mr. Alvarez. Someone must be watching over you. Do you remember what happened?"

"I was pushed."

"You fell into traffic, Mr. Alvarez. But you're alive. Your body is healing. You're going to be okay."

It hit him. Pfeiffer had tried, maybe, to kill him. He was in the hospital. The man talking to him was a doctor or a nurse. The walls made sense. The light. The trays. The window. The size and angles of his bed.

"What day is it? Why are you calling me Alvarez?"

"It's Sunday, Mr. Alvarez—are you feeling okay? Do you know where you are? Do you remember anything about what happened?"

Pfeiffer had destroyed his glasses. His me card.

He had shoved another one into his coat.

"May I have my me card?"

"Just a moment, Mr. Alvarez—can you tell me what you remember? How does your head feel?"

"I feel terrible. I was in the city. I fell into traffic. I woke up here. I have been hurt. You are putting me back together."

"That sounds about right, Mr. Alvarez. Here's your card."

The nurse was right. He was Alvarez. Tomás.

"Call me 'Tomás.'"

"We'll take good care of you, Mr. Alvarez, and get you home soon."

Home. He looked it up. A new address. In the suburbs apparently. A condo. Near this hospital.

"I'm sure your students will be happy to hear you're okay, Mr. Alvarez. I'm sure they'll be happy to see you soon. I remember how special my gifted teacher was to me."

"I would like to see them, too."

Searching again for sleep, he wondered if they really existed, or if they would all pretend together that he did, too.