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I am covered in sweat when I wake. It must be late. The sun is beaming directly into my eyes. I squint. I feel like I've just emerged from an operation. It certainly feels like my innards have been pulled and scraped. I wonder what time it is.

Last night comes to me in strange fragments and shards. It doesn't take long to sink in. One bilious moment, a weighted white dress. Then I remember it all.

And I sit up, startled. I expect police with whistles and urgent orders. Sirens. Bells. Spotter planes. Bloodhounds. Yellow tape and busy-looking people. I expect a red sky and ominous clouds. I look through the window. It is utterly serene in our backyard, save for a castanet chorus of cicadas. Even so, I suspect I'm being watched. I peer at length through the window, making sure I'm not being surveyed.

I get up and glance at my bed. There's a dark patch where I slept. I touch it. It's wet. Sweat. But around that is a thin layer of grime. It looks like the chalk outline of a murder. Like I died during the night. Or I shed my skin like a snake.

I need to piss. Urgently. But cruelly my dick is jutting at my underwear, trying to assert itself. It's rock hard and disobedient. I rearrange myself and grab a towel, then slip quickly across to the bathroom, hoping I don't encounter anyone on the way. Thankfully, the coast is clear. I slam the door and toss the towel. My aim is appalling, but the relief forces a thin smile.

I sit on the edge of our lime-coloured bath. Naked and solemn, I run water, flinching when the first spurts scald my fingers. It pools and burns my feet. I hold them aloft. Goddamn. Has

someone lit a fire underneath our water tank? I want to yell at my parents for this. Finally it eases to a lukewarm stream. It's the best I can hope for. I splash water on my face, rub my neck. I wash myself thoroughly with granite soap. It feels good to scratch and scrape at my skin. I don't mind that it hurts me a little.

And I sit. Head bowed and whirring. Dripping. Ashamed of the lack of meat on my body. I'm skin and bones all the way down. It's the gangly body of a kid. No bumps and curves or lines and scars. Nothing like Jasper Jones.

I linger. It's cooler in here. And to be honest, I'm nursing a distant urge to cry. I still feel tired. And angry and sad. Kind of the way I get when I'm on the cusp of a cold or something. Sad and weird. My belly is tender. It's like I've been shaken and pounded and stretched. I want to cradle my head in my hands, but I don't. I won't. I'll blub if I do.

My head whirrs.

What if it really *was* Jasper Jones? What if he did this? What if he killed Laura Wishart? What if he killed her and I said nothing? Could I go to jail? Could he really have hanged that girl in that quiet clearing? The notion seemed so implausible in his company, but how well do I know him, really? He could have been feeding me bullshit the whole time. It could have been him all along. I dig at my ear with a knuckle.

But then why on earth would he seek me out? It makes no sense. There's no chance anyone would enact a murder and then go find a witness. That's just stupid. So he can't have. Surely.

But aside from that, I trust him. I really do. And not because I have to. I think he's probably the most honest person in this town. He has no reason to lie. He has no reputation to protect. Last night I never suspected him of pulling the wool. Not once. The way he talks to you, it's like he's incapable of being deceitful. He says things with such conviction that you're sure he believes them to be true. It's just a feeling you get.

See, most people you meet, they'll talk to you through fifty layers of gauze and tinting. Sometimes you know they're lying even before they've started speaking. And it seems the older they get, the more brazen and desperate folks become, and they lie

about things that don't even matter. Like my dad with his comb-over, or my mum with her russet hair dye. Or when my dad insists he enjoys the challenge of teaching Corrigan kids to love literature, or when my mum assures her sisters in the city that she loves it down here, and, no, it's not too hot at all, it's just lovely, it's a wonderful community. I don't know. Maybe they just get so used to it they don't even notice. Maybe it's like a creeping curse, and the more you do it the easier it gets. What's amazing is that they think they're fooling anybody.

Yes. I think Jasper Jones speaks the whole truth in a town of liars. I can tell. See, it's these lies that precede him, these foggy community fibs that I've been led through; they're the source of these niggling doubts in my head. I mean, if it were Jeffrey Lu who'd woken me last night to lead me silently to that awful scene, I wouldn't doubt his story for a moment. I wouldn't even question him. So why should it be different for Jasper Jones?

I hoist myself out of the bath, restless and heavy. And I don't feel much cleaner than when I sat down.



When I tentatively enter the kitchen, both my parents pause and eye me suspiciously, brows raised. This is how they demand an explanation without asking for it. For a brief horrible moment I think they know something. Perhaps my mother has already inspected her trampled gerbera bed and noticed the fingerprints on the dusty glass louvres of my window, instantly surmising with her uncanny facility to accurately persecute without evidence that I must have been out all night with Jasper Jones, that I've seen and done something terrible, that I'm in all kinds of trouble.

But then my father smirks and reaches out to clap my back.

'Rip Van Winkle! The corpse has risen! So nice of you to join us.'

I sit and offer a weak smile.

My mother produces a hot cup of Pablo coffee with a fair dollop of sweetened condensed milk. She leans over, hands on her knees.

'I trust you're enjoying your stay at our hotel, Mr Bucktin, sir. Might I remind you that our turndown service ends at ten sharp. Will sir take eggs for his lunch?'

My dad snorts. My mother is the most sarcastic person in the universe. My father calls it Droll Wit, but I think it's more or less an opportunity to get up my arse without appearing unreasonable. She's most acerbic when she's faintly pissed off about something, which is every waking hour of the day.

'No thanks,' I say. 'What time is it?'

'Almost noon. So you've only wasted half the day. It's nice for some.'

Her back is to me. She's wearing a thin floral dress that clings to her in the heat. She looks good today, I have to admit. Usually she only looks like this if she's just come back from the city, where she's been going more often recently. I want to go hug her, to be held by her, but it would be too awkward and unusual. Still, her hair looks nice today.

'Your hair looks nice today,' I say.

This has her whirling around. She glares as though I'd just spat her coffee over the table and called her a courtesan.

'What did you say?'

'I said your hair looks nice today.'

'Oh,' she says, and frowns, searching for a deeper meaning. She cuts her eyes. 'What do you want?'

'What? Nothing. I just said your hair looks nice.'

'But why would you say that?'

'I don't know. Because your hair looks nice.'

Exasperated, I turn to my father. He is nodding and laughing quietly with his back to her.

After a brief pause, she says, 'Well, thank you,' in much the same way she might say, 'Well, *don't*.'

I shrug.

My dad smiles and folds his paper.

'So, my boy. Couldn't sleep, or couldn't get enough?'

I set my glasses and sniff. It's difficult to play this role. *Charlie Bucktin at breakfast: Scene One*. I don't feel the same. I'm uneasy in my own skin.

'Yeah, no sleep last night. It's too hot. I was just reading, I guess.'

'I see. So what's taken your fancy?

'*Pudd'nhead Wilson*. It's really good.'

'Ah,' and my father leans in. 'It's been years since I've read that. How are you liking it?'

'Yeah, well, like I say. It's really good.'

I crimp my lips and raise my brows. I don't want to play this scene out. This coffee is making me too hot. I'm sweating. I'm stuck to this vinyl seat.

Still, it can't mollify that uneasy feeling that I'm about to be caught. There are insects crawling on my shoulders. At any moment I expect blue-suited troops to burst and bundle into our house and cuff me from behind. Neighbours will line the street, spitting and hollering as I am led, roughly, to a flashing wagon.

I nod towards my father's newspaper.

'What's news? Anything good?'

'Same old, my boy.'

'Oh, okay,' I say, sipping my coffee and looking away.

'You alright, Charlie?' My dad shifts tone. He reaches across and feels my forehead, and runs his thumb over my cowlick. I want to tell him everything. I want him to wrap me in his arms and reassure me.

'Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired, I guess.'

'Well if you're not eating, young man,' my mother says. 'I suggest you go visit Jeffrey. He's been over five times already this morning with a bee in his bonnet. I told him to go in and wake you up, but he just trotted back home and said he'd try again later. He's too polite, that boy.'

Shit. The Test. I completely forgot. Little wonder he didn't want to come inside. He wasn't being polite, he just didn't want to miss a delivery. Right now, Jeffrey will be huddled beside the radio, intently poised as though it is spilling state secrets. I've never understood it. It's not like the same thing doesn't happen over and over. Cricket is the most repetitive enterprise in history. But Jeffrey will listen to the words: *Wide outside off stump, Lawry*

*shoulders arms*, with as much glee and intensity for the eightieth time as for the first.

I don't want the rest of this coffee, but it's not worth the wrath of my mother to waste it. I quaff it quickly, wincing at the bitter bits at the bottom. It burns my innards, but it's gone. I rinse its silt at the sink and exit stage left, offering a casual farewell.



Jeffrey lives across the road, four houses up. Any further away and I doubt I would make it. This has to be the hottest day in history. Either the earth is being devoured by the sun, or it is hurtling towards us like an enormous meteor. Our front lawn crunches beneath my feet. Down our street, I can see strange undulations of heat. I arrive at Jeffrey's door feeling like I've endured a marathon, and I knock quickly, surveying the veranda. I greet Jeffrey's grumpy tabby, Chairman Meow, who ignores me and crouches beneath the white cage of his affable budgie, Chairman Wow.

Mrs Lu answers.

'Hello, Chully!' she says, and then her broad smile disappears and she looks suddenly crestfallen. She shakes her head solemnly. 'It's no good. The test crickit is raining. Come in, come in.'

Jeffrey bursts out of the lounge. He is wearing all white.

'Where have you *been*? You're an *idiot*.'

'I don't know. Sleeping. Is it raining?'

Mrs Lu suddenly laughs again. 'No Chully, it's very *hot*!' She squeezes my arm, nods once, and walks away giggling.

'What does that even *mean*?' says Jeffrey, watching her walk away.

I follow Jeffrey into the lounge. He has the radio turned right up.

I take a seat on their couch, Jeffrey perches on a piano stool he has dragged over to the radio. It's much cooler in here. Jeffrey recounts the day's action with unnecessary attention to detail. He's clearly disappointed. Doug Walters is on debut, it's the first Ashes Test, and it seems it's going to be washed out for the rest of the afternoon. The notion of rain seems incredibly inviting to me right now. A huge cold shower, harsh and bracing.

Mrs Lu swathes in with a plate of sweets and fruit, and two tall glasses of icy lychee juice. I thank her, and Jeffrey dives at the tray. She turns and shrieks something stern at Jeffrey in Vietnamese.

Jeffrey, his mouth still full, says, 'It's *not* impolite! It's only Chuck! He doesn't care!'

But her fiery barrage continues as she walks away. Jeffrey grins. He takes up the tray and bows.

'Please, O Holy Omboooddsman, take first from our tray of fine delicacies, aye beseeeeech you.'

'That's better,' I say.

I take something round and bright orange. It is delicious.

'What is this? It's amazing.'

Jeffrey squints. 'That is Bang Chow Pow.'

'That's a lie.'

'Incorrect. That's a *fact*. Don't be ignorant.'

'You're an idiot.'

'You're a communist.'

Jeffrey spills his drink as he gestures. He mops it up with a cushion.

'Here's one: would you rather die of the heat or the cold?' he asks.

I lean back and put my feet up.

'Do you mean immediately burned or frozen, or steady exposure?'

He thumbs his jaw.

'Steady exposure.'

'Well, I don't know. Neither.'

'But you have to choose one.'

'Why?'

'Chuck! Are you retarded? It's hypothetical.'

'But when am I *ever* going to have to make that choice?'

'Well, let's just *say* you have to.'

'Why would I have to?'

'Because they've got a hypothetical gun to your head.'

'Who is they?'

Jeffrey is smiling. He's perched restlessly on the edge of the piano stool.

'I don't know. The Russians.'

'Why do the Russians want me dead?'

'Because they're evil and hypothetical! And you're a spy. You've been selling their secrets.'

'To who?'

'Ze Jarmans.'

'I see. Well, I'd choose to be hypothetically shot in the head then. I mean, if I'm going to die anyway, why hypothetically suffer?'

'Okay, one: you're an idiot. Two: you're making this too hard.' Jeffrey ponders for a bit. 'Okay. They've got your parents too.'

'Jeffrey, you're just sweetening the deal.'

We both laugh. I take another orange ball. Then Jeffrey clicks his fingers and looks at me slyly, still smiling.

'Okay, okay. What if they've got, say, Eliza Wishart too. Eh, Chuck? What do you do then? You can save her by choosing one or the other.'

The mention of her name rattles me. It makes me realise how much I'd pushed Laura aside since I got here. I set down the sweet. I feel like throwing up.

I tell Jeffrey to piss off. Of course, I let this slip just as Mrs Lu strides back in with more food. I freeze, eyes wide, expecting to be dressed down, but she appears not to hear. Jeffrey is quietly asphyxiating at my expense.

'Here, Chully,' she says cheerfully, and refills my drink. She exits as swiftly as she entered. I watch her go, wondering how I have skirted a certain death.

'It's okay, she doesn't know swear words,' Jeffrey says when he's recovered himself. 'You should have seen your face!'

'Really?'

'Yeah. Listen to this.' Jeffrey yells towards the kitchen: 'Ma! Chuck really fucking loves these orange balls! *He really fucking loves balls!*'

There is a loaded pause as we both wait for a response.

'Okay! That's good! Thank you, Chully!' she calls down the hall.

We have to bite our fists to stop from shrieking.

I lounge back. But then I suddenly remember again, and that fist of queasiness rocks me forward. It's a rollercoaster in my belly. I wish I could tell Jeffrey everything. I really do. I wonder what it is about holding in a secret that hurts so much. I mean, telling Jeffrey doesn't change anything, it doesn't take anything back. It's just information. It doesn't dredge that poor girl from the depths of the dam, doesn't breathe her back to life. So why do I feel like I need to blurt it all out? Is it just the fact of telling him? Loosening the screws, getting the horrible mess out of my body? Maybe if I spill it over, it's a little less of the burden that I have to carry. By that logic, if I told everyone in Corrigan, or Australia, or The World, if I gave everyone a share, it might become bearable.

But I can't anyway. It's locked in me tight. It's not that I don't trust Jeffrey, it's that Jasper Jones trusts me. It's an unusual contortion of my loyalties. I know I can't say a thing.

Jeffrey suddenly clicks his fingers and points at me.

'Okay. Got one.' He spreads his hands, showing me his palms like a mime, the same way he always does when he's telling a joke. 'Okay. Why are pirates called pirates?'

I look at him blankly.

'Because they yarrrr!'

He dies laughing. He almost chokes. He has to stop to cough.

'Jeffrey, that is the worst ever. And I mean that. The *worst*.'

Oh, come on! Chuck! You're being harrrrsh!'

I laugh. I can't help it.

'Really. Stop. It's bad.'

'No way! You can keep that. Tell it to Eliza Wisharrrr!'

'Jeffrey, I'm going to hold a non-hypothetical gun to your head. If I have to kill you, I will.'

'Pffft! You couldn't do it. Not to this handsome face.'

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We stay in Jeffrey's lounge until the broadcast ends. Despite the fact that there is no chance of play continuing for the day, Jeffrey doesn't want to run the risk of missing any developments.

Jeffrey soundly defeats me at Ludo, and then I destroy him at Scrabble. He shrugs and says: 'My ingrish. Is no goot.'

We get restless. Jeffrey suggests we head to the nets in town. I'd much prefer to stay inside and arse about in Jeffrey's lounge room, but I know there's no chance of that. Jeffrey is ushering me out the door like we're fleeing a fire. He yells behind him: 'Ma! We're going in to town to play some fucking cricket!'

We pause.

'Jeffrey! Wait! Okay? Wait!' his mother yells sternly. I detect a moment of panic on Jeffrey's face when Mrs Lu charges down the hall. But she holds out two cold flasks of water and smiles as she shuts the door.

'You should have seen your face!' I say.

He laughs as we run out onto the street.



Jeffrey tosses a polished red ball in his hands as we make our way into town, snapping it with his wrists and his fingers, fizzing it into the air. The seam is a whirring blur.

I don't especially dislike cricket, but it requires some special sort of pathology to give it the kind of devotion that Jeffrey shows. I don't know. Maybe it's because I'm rubbish at it. I am really bad. Of course, being born without courage has proved to be a significant hindrance, but mostly it's the fact that my limbs have never acted in accordance with what I intend for them. It's like they're being controlled by some vindictive puppetmaster.

But Jeffrey Lu is uncanny. His skills are so impressive I'm not even envious. The things he can do with that red rock in his hands are amazing. Really. And his batting is incredible, he's so compact and powerful. Despite being roughly the size of a garden gnome, Jeffrey can manage to be intimidating. He's not so affable with the pads on and the bat in hand. He's like an animal, aggressive and focussed. Or some kind of sword-wielding hero. You can't put the ball anywhere when his eye is in.

Granted, I'm not much competition for Jeffrey, but I think if he ever gets the chance to play a real game, he's going to be brilliant.