

Ryan Stark

Cable-Knit Kid

I last saw the kid when he was delivering his (shitty) valedictory speech. “There are many stripes here at Frederick Mason High,” he said, referring to a high school that was flanked on all sides by corn fields and was about as diverse as one would expect given that information. It wasn’t, for the record. “There are students who play sports and students who participate in the quiz bowl team”—no shit. Thanks for the revelation. “Our differences make us stronger. We are all, together as one, Frederick Mason. Go Masons!” Pity applause. Whooping from his family that were tucked away in the corner.

He delivered it stony-faced and stiff. His tassel did not sway; his gown did not ripple. He blinked at regularly scheduled intervals. Each time he turned a page in his notes, the motion was automatic and smooth. Speech-giving processes all in order. No deviation from programmed principles. Kid didn’t even smile at the end when he marched off the stage and lowered himself into his seat at the front. Gave perfunctory nods to the kids sitting next to him who were congratulating him, possibly out of obligation. The people around me were giggling uncontrollably. I watched him adjust his position when the principal walked back onto the stage and started giving basically the same platitudinous speech that was somehow less pathetic coming from a fully-grown man.

How odd it was to see him exist outside of the continuum of our high school. Kid wore a cable-knit sweater and slacks every fucking day throughout high school, and the gown complicated that mental image. He was like those goddamned cartoon characters that have closets full of one sort of thing to wear. He was years ahead of his time, too. Nice clothes start to

look nice on people about freshman year of college; doing it in high school made him look like a dweeb. He was off to college in, like, two months anyway, and he still managed to look like a small child.

“I am proud of every single one of you,” the principal said with a little too much conviction, “because each of you are incredibly smart and gifted students.” Patently fucking false. Our grade was famous for our number of arrests. The kid who was arrested in a Walmart bathroom for trying to flush brass knuckles down a toilet was sitting in the third row. “Special thanks to Aaron for that wonderful speech.” Gesture to the front row. More pity applause. More whooping from the corner. “I have never known a more able administrator than Aaron. Parents, if your child was ever involved in anything at our school, Aaron probably organized it.” Pity laughter. Whooping from the corner.

It was true. Kid was the physical manifestation of bureaucracy. He was a part of every conceivable administrative club—student government, class councils, planning committees—and he had the least flashy position in each. He was never president or vice president or anything like that—no, he was always fucking historian or secretary or treasurer, and yet he still took it upon himself to micromanage the hell out of absolutely everything.

I was dickin' around with my books before class one day when he first came up to me. I had the books for show, really—no one actually had time to read in school if you bothered to read anything at all—but keeping them around made for effective props in convincing teachers that I was their boy. Add in a few good grades and the occasional answer to an in-class question and that bought you tons of leeway to do just about anything. Extensions on extensions on extensions for papers I couldn't muster the will to do on time.

“Hey...” Kid’s hands were stuffed at max distance into his pockets. Any more pressure to them and he’d likely have produced enough force to just burst through the front. It looked supremely uncomfortable.

“Hey. Aaron, right?” He always ended up in my classes. He never much talked in them. I absorbed his name at that point via teachers taking roll.

“Yeah.” Hands were still pressing down as far as hands could press. “Hard test the other day, wasn’t it?”

“It was kinda tough, I guess, yeah.” It wasn’t. I got a ninety-six. I just needed an excuse to not press the topic I expected him to leave at that point, since we had never shared a word in the entirety of the time I had been aware of his existence and I tried my very best to make damn well sure that the conversation had run its course already, and yet he continued to hover over me. I had been bested. “What’s up, I guess?”

“I, uh...” He shifted his gaze to the side. I had never seen him so ineloquent. Conversational sub-programming must have been malfunctioning. “You... drink, right?” Oh no. I had been pegged.

Context: I drank for the first time several months before this conversation. I hadn’t yet at that point nursed a rebellious streak to round out my adolescence, and I figured junior year post-SATs was about the right time to develop it. My-friend-slash-supplier, Karl, was the class’s mid-level degenerate, accessible to all the middle-of-the-totem-pole people who lacked the access to the big parties. He gossiped relentlessly. I guess my night of, like, six shots of Morgan and falling asleep midway through *Fight Club* was enough to tease out a story advertising his particular set of skills.

“I mean... not often.”

“Oh.” It was painfully obvious that he wanted alcohol.

“You could, uh, ask my friend Karl if you wanted any, I guess? No promises whatsoever. Don’t know if he knows you too well.”

Karl could have eaten that kid alive. He was an awful influence—I escaped because I gave too much of a shit, but falling into his orbit was a sentencing to a life of nothingness and vacancy. He started holding these parties with his cohort near every weekend where everyone would black out and start making out on the floor of his disgusting basement. Half the people who attended these parties dropped their advanced classes and resigned themselves to failure; Karl recently dropped out of community college and began expanding his operation, adding coke to his inventory to fuel his continuing make-out parties. He also buses tables at the local pizza restaurant, so that’s something?

“Oh. Cool. Thanks.” Hands still pressing the shit out of his slacks, he walked back over to his seat and lowered himself down, as in accordance with his typical robotic self. Questioning operations completed.

I was quite comfortable in my bed later that night when Karl called. His drunk calls were regular and typical—he liked telling me that he loved me, which was almost admirable for his otherwise lacking character—and so I ignored it to save a painstakingly dumb conversation. A string of five calls compelled me to answer.

“The hell do you want. It is two in the goddamned morning.”

“Brooooo. This—kid that wanted to drunk. Is here. And like, dead.”

“What.”

“Yeah man. It’s awesome. Stumbled around, man. Puked.”

“Fuck.” I led the most uptight kid that could conceivably exist into the house of the easiest degenerate shithead to talk to and got him in deep shit. “Well, is he, like, super dead seeming? Or, like, just a little?”

“Who knows, man. Ha. He’s face down in it.”

“Fuck.” I managed to facilitate this kid possibly getting alcohol poisoning by telling him how to easily get drunk. It only felt fair that it was now my responsibility to take care of him to amend for that mistake of giving him what he wanted in that earlier conversation to get rid of him quicker.

I hopped in my car and drove the ten minutes to Karl’s to find Aaron sprawled on the floor, face down in a pool of bright red vomit, red liquid crawling up the previously snowy fibers of his sweater. Karl was slumped over in an armchair in the corner. *Superbad* was on the TV at a deafening volume. An empty bottle of Fireball was knocked over and made the basement smell like a rancid Christmas candle.

Faced with the option of calling an ambulance and being possibly complicit in an alcohol poisoning or handling this myself, I chose the less scary option and dragged him out to my car, dousing him in Febreeze before pushing him up into the backseat. I mimicked his voice well enough to have his phone direct us to his house, and I saw him shift a bit in the rearview mirror when I turned on the engine and started listening to his phone’s directions.

“Aaron?”

“Mmph.” A response! Not totally dead yet. That was a situation that I could deal with much better than a dead classmate.

“Why’d you do this to yourself?”

“I wanted—something, something more.” Whatever that meant. Fittingly dramatic for a drunk person, I guess.

“Right.” I didn’t push any more conversation lest it gave his body an opportunity to vomit in my car. He was quiet the rest of the way back to his house, and did not stir when I pulled up to his house. It was in the rich white people neighborhood, right next to the elementary school I went to. I gathered the courage to ring his doorbell; his mom answered the door in a robe, holding a sleeping mask, and looking bewildered and furious that someone would possibly ring a doorbell this late.

“Hi.”

“What are you doing here? Young man, I should be calling the cops if I knew any better. Do your parents—”

“I have Aaron passed out in my backseat. He went out to drink tonight. He’s not doing so hot right now.” I’ve never seen a face drop so quickly. Her furiousness stayed; her bewilderment turned to utter, unadulterated concern.

“DANIEL. GET DOWN HERE. NOW.” She slammed the door in my face and returned with a disheveled-looking man in boxer shorts and a white shirt. “Where is your car, young man?” I pointed at the curb, and the couple marched to the car, his mom hiking up her robe as if

it were a skirt. They worked together to drag him off the seat and carried him, one clutching his legs and the other clutching his arms, through the front door. They slammed it on me again. I left, and never heard from them again.

He was among the first to climb back onto the stage to receive his diploma. They called his name to cue his turn to climb—Aaron Enten, graduating with honors, heading off to so-and-so state university.

I tried to place him in a future. He'd go off to his dorm in a few months, his family having meticulously packed their minivan with linens and see-through crates of microwavable snacks and pencils and whatever, and shake hands with his roommate who gets a vibe that he won't be talking much to this new figure in his life much. He'd maybe keep a small framed picture of his family, smiling on some pier during a summer vacation at some tourist trap dressed in matching white polos or something, sitting on the corner of his desk. He'd try to continue his bureaucratic streak and major in public policy or perhaps business. He'd graduate on time with an average GPA and go on to get a typical nine-to-five in the suburbs, never getting whatever more he wanted and generally failing at the one thing he sought at the juncture in his life where his crossed mine.

But who knows. Maybe I was being a generalizing asshole, extrapolating him that far in the future.

He shook the principal's hand as he received his diploma, shaking each adult's hand on the stage in succession—the superintendent, the consensus-favorite teacher who always interrupted class to talk about some unrelated family drama in the middle of his lectures, the

assistant principals who no one wanted in their ceremony and were there seemingly out of obligation—and descended off the stage, pausing at the marked spot to get his picture taken. I last saw him drenched in a flash. Who knows if he ended up smiling.

Graduation accords completed. Switching processes now.