



# ***Guilt-Free Vanilla***

by Maxwell Klausner

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## **“Guilt-Free Vanilla”**

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It was during one of those long, soggy drawls of summer that Northern New Jersey so often absorbs like sink-water into a graying sponge that Eli found himself closing shop for the first time with Daniela and Lamar. Though Daniela claimed the air conditioning had been busted “literally since my first summer here,” the refrigerant fluid that enabled Cosmic Ice to scoop out tens of gallons of frozen dairy a day kept the little storefront more than cool enough to work in, even if the seating area became a sort of rainforest where patrons could withstand only a minute or two of socializing before they fled for the solace of the fresh outdoors. Lamar admitted that he preferred this type of evening, since it discouraged the typical lollygagging of children and their adults that would only make the small shop stuffier with body heat and chatter.

Summer hours, Eli had learned, meant that Cosmic Ice closed at ten o’clock flat on Fridays and Saturdays, though corporate policy forbade the refusal of any customer who entered the franchise before doors were locked. This meant that if the line were long enough, employees might end up mixing shakes and spading ice cream until well past the hour, as it did this night, at twenty-after-ten, when Lamar finally locked the door and bid farewell to a dallying gaggle of teenagers who wasted an overly-generous slice of time contemplating their flavor selection before leaving a less-than-generous tip in the Maxwell House coffee can next to the register. It would be yet another hour of cleaning before Eli had any hope of getting home.

But when Lamar untuned Z-100 from the FM radio, and replaced the Top 40 dreck with his own playlist of hip-hop and R&B standards, Eli felt encouraged. Though he had only worked at the store for two weeks, he’d already slipped into friendly rapport with a number of its myriad employees, including Daniela, the manager who always seemed to be exasperated by some facet of her private or professional life, whether her boyfriend, her mom, her other boyfriend, or the

store's owners. Lamar too seemed perfectly amiable, though Eli knew him only from a single other shared shift, when a monstrously overweight mother of three accosted him for overcharging on hot fudge, and Lamar swept in with poise and apology. "She's always trying to dime us," he told Eli after she left with her complementary pint of their Guilt-Free Vanilla Frozen Yogurt. "Let me handle her next time. She thinks I'm cute."

And even though the grind of this summer job was amply more grimy than the paralegal-assistant position his uncle had offered him, or the internship his twin sister Kim had secured at That Fashion Magazine We've All Heard Of in the City—jobs that probably did not require the scrubbing of toilets or the disposal of liquidy trash bags so heaped in sticky cream that to look at them would make your fingers adhere—Eli was feeling more validated with each shift that this position was the right choice. Which middle-aged lawyer would want to befriend him at his Uncle's firm? Who would stick an auxiliary cable into their iPhone to play "Hypnotize" on repeat at the law offices of Silver & Stein? Who, at eleven-fifteen, when the three-tiered cleaning process was complete, would ask him "any chance you smoke weed?" before hopping into his passenger's seat and directing him into West Dutchfield?

Granted, this was the exact kind of situation that his parents had always warned him against. You don't get into cars with strangers. You don't drive west of the Dutchfield tracks at night. Certainly you don't do drugs, even if you discovered just a few months back during Junior-Senior Skip Day that this *particular* drug was neither insidious nor addictive, but simply a fun way to pass time and kill brain cells. But in a biting, peremptory sense, Eli struggled to say *no* when the request presented itself, as if declining the offer would be to reject Lamar himself, and, in doing so, tell him permanently that he had no room for friends like him. And such was

certainly not the case. Besides, he had learned a lot about Lamar while laboring side-by-side in tight, muggy quarters for two six-hour shifts. Eli knew that Lamar grew up in West Dutchfield, graduated from Eli's rival high school not four years ago, and had since matriculated from the Culinary Technical Institute with a concentration in bread. *Bread!* What was more familiar than that? The grain of life. The staple of universal diets. What crusty peril could someone so closely associated with *bread* possibly threaten to a doughy eighteen-year-old boy?

The decision only leavened in validity as the evening waged, as Lamar directed Eli to the semi-duplex where the tallest man he'd ever seen off a basketball court slipped Lamar a bag of greens, and then to Amir's Deli, a West Dutchfield mainstay where Lamar purchased a single grape-flavored Dutch Master in which he could roll the thick, pungent contraband.

"Let me know how much I owe you for that," Eli offered cautiously as they idled in his coupe outside of Garvey Park, the smoking locale Lamar chose after Eli objected to lighting up inside his car. (Do-gooder Kim, after all, would make no small stink about the lingering stench of teenage hedonism).

"It's on me, brotha," he replied, licking the finishing seal on the fat blunt. "You my boy now, don't worry about it."

In a purely platonic yet nonetheless physical way, this aroused Eli, who certainly appreciated how dark the night was as the two ice cream scoopers bathed in the June stars between the playground and the softball diamond. "Yo, I'm so glad you were down for this," Lamar said as Eli took his turn puffing, inhaling the buoyant smoke with minimal coughing. He had crossed this milestone of pot-smoking just a few weeks back, when he and his friend Trevor shared a joint on Trevor's back patio, and to his own astonishment, Eli did not cough once

through the entire session. “I got like a sixth sense for tokers. I could tell when you started working at Cosmic that you smoked.”

“Thanks,” Eli replied, even though such an observation was not really any kind of compliment.

“But you’re probably really smart, right? I bet you’re really good in school.”

“Not really,” he said, fingering his shoelace. The marijuana had dissolved into his veins faster than he anticipated, and his brain already felt staid and syrupy. “My sister is like the smart one. She goes to private school, but I couldn’t get in anywhere, so I ended up just going to East Dutchfield.”

“What’s wrong with East Dutch?” Lamar asked. “Isn’t that supposed to be the good one?” This made Eli feel guilty.

“I guess so,” he said, “but my parents were a little freaked out a few years ago when the redistricting happened. You know about that?”

“Oh, I see,” Lamar laughed. “They didn’t like all us West-Side black kids coming up East Hill to raid your high school?”

“No! No, it wasn’t like that at all,” Eli panicked, afraid he had lost the trust of his cool new compatriot. “No, a lot of my best friends from high school came in from West Dutchfield. My sister’s a special case, I guess,” he said, although that was a bit of an overstatement. Many families from ritzy East Dutchfield sent their kids into private education after the redistricting. The twins toured five or six prep schools in the area, with performing arts options for Kim, science programs for Kim, renowned debate teams for Kim, and typical course selections for Eli. Kim had her pick of the litter, and decided on Meriwether Collegiate Prep, a converted

monastery hidden in a five-acre sylvan campus twelve miles from home. Eli was offered enrollment at only one private institution, The Holy Sacrifice School for Boys, but despite its insistence that religion was no longer imbedded in curriculum and that they had a number of church-non-affiliated students, the pong of Holy Sacrifice's anti-Semitic history lingered in the ether a little too redolently for his father's taste.

"I'm just playing with you," Lamar promised. "The redistricting sucked for everyone."

Eli wasn't sure what he meant by this, but in any case, the weed was now getting to his head, making him hyperaware and introspective as he bore witness to the vacuum of his own existence. He felt tired of talking, so he lay face-up on the picnic table and concentrated on the cosmos above. Lamar continued speaking, outlining some theory he had about education or something. Eli hardly listened, but felt comforted by the lull of his friend's rusty voice.

"I gotta get home," Lamar said after a few minutes, or maybe a few hours, the two units of time blurring in Eli's sugary conscious. "It's almost one and I have to open the store tomorrow."

"Oh. You need a ride home?"

"No, I can walk from here," he said graciously, tucking his lighter into his tube sock. Though he was exhausted and high and a little depressed, Eli sort of wished his new friend would stay a little while longer. He could imagine the two of them becoming even better buddies as the summer burned on, and in an instant, Eli saw himself as one of those super chill kinds of dudes, the kind that said *cheers* instead of *thank you*, who wore five-panel caps and casually had all sorts of colorful, diverse friends.

“Okay, goodnight then,” he said dreamily. “I’ll be in the shop tomorrow afternoon, so I’ll see you then.”

“Dope,” he replied. The two bumped fists before Lamar hopped a fence and disappeared into the heat.

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Eli couldn’t wait to see Lamar the next day and detail for him the tumultuous duration of his evening, how he swerved home at ten-miles-an-hour—so stoned that he slowed down at every green light—and how Kim was still awake when he finally made it, perched like some high-strung hall monitor in their living-room, armed and ready with an undue lecture about responsibility and gateway drugs.

But his partner-in-crime was noticeably absent from the shop when Eli got there, and even when he did arrive, several hours late, Lamar seemed sleepy and unenthused, far removed from the chummy smoking-mate Eli had engaged the prior evening.

“They demoted me, if you can believe it,” Lamar revealed some time later, as he and Eli shared a state-mandated work break by the dumpsters. “Didn’t know that shit could happen at an ice cream shop.”

“It’s happened to me before,” Eli half-lied. “I mean, like, forgetting to wake up for school or whatever.”

“Nah, I was awake. I just didn’t feel like opening up today.”

“I was thinking,” Eli had been thinking, “we could do another, I mean, hang out again after work like we did last night?”

“Oh, yeah,” he negated, “I don’t know about that.”



“Why?” he pressed, with such gusto that the words nearly punched Lamar’s face. “I mean, yeah. I get it if you’re busy. That’s cool.”

“No, it’s not like that. It’s not personal. You’re still dope in my book,” he said, which charmed Eli, who didn’t realize that Lamar had a book. “It’s just that, last night, on my way home, I got pulled over by a cop, and now it’s a whole thing. And I figure it’s best I don’t do any of that shit at least until my court date.”

Eli blinked, uncomprehending.

“What do you mean you got pulled over?” he asked. “You weren’t even driving.”

“Yeah, no shit, bruh,” he exhaled. “Stop and frisk. You know.”

He didn’t.

“You mean a cop just pulled you over on foot? Like, on the sidewalk?”

“I was jaywalking, technically speaking, cause they got mad potholes on the sidewalk over on Ellington. So I was walking on the pavement, and this cop car zips up. Just one guy in it, Officer Rodrigues. He’s like ‘Where you headed, bud?’ and I was like, ‘Just home, Officer,’ and he says ‘What you been up to tonight?’ and so I show him my t-shirt, like, ‘just working at the ice cream parlor,’ and he’s like ‘So late?’ and so, you know, at this point I can already tell the guy’s an asshole, but I gotta play it cool, so I just say ‘Well I got off at midnight, and I was hanging out with some friends after that...’”

Eli beamed at the word *friend*.

“So the cop is like, ‘Do you mind standing still for a minute?’ and I was like ‘I’m just walking home, Officer, there’s no need to get out the car.’ But he’s already put the car in park and he’s, like, getting out and coming toward me and he’s like ‘Spread you’re arms for me

please,’ so I do that, you know, cause I ain’t got nothing on me, and he starts patting me down, like I’m at the fuckin’ airport or something. And then he’s like ‘hold out your hands, palms up.’ And so I’m like ‘I ain’t done anything wrong, Officer,’ and he’s getting all rude and shit and he’s like ‘Do not talk back to me. Hold out your palms.’ And so he’s like scanning my palms with his hands, and he’s kind of sniffing me, you know, but still nothing bad. And then he tells me to turn out my pockets, so I turn them out, and for fuck’s sake the Dutch wrapper comes out. He’s looking at it up and down like it’s written in fucking hieroglyphics. He’s like ‘What is this, son?’ and I’m like ‘that’s a cigar wrapper, sir.’ And he’s like ‘You been smoking cigars tonight?’ and I don’t know what kind of answer I’m supposed to give, so I’m like ‘No, sir.’”

Eli had been gnawing at a particularly resilient hang nail on the corner of his index finger, and at last peeled it off with the slightest accompanying bit of skin, leaving the juncture of nail and finger the color of cherry sorbet. “So, what?” Eli asked. “He just assumed you were smoking weed?”

“Well it doesn’t exactly take the Special Victims Unit to figure it out,” Lamar said, with only a faint trace of humor in his breath. “He knew what was going on the minute he saw me, he just went through the motions ‘cause that’s what he’s got to do. Wrote me up a ticket in his car for *possession of drug paraphernalia and public intoxication*. Shit’s gonna be like two thousand dollars.”

“But that’s not...he doesn’t even have any proof! Don’t you get a trial?”

“Sure, if I want to roll the dice with the public defender. But that’s still like five hundred bucks to use. My cousin got S-and-F’ed a few years ago and he had to pay all these damn fees just for the dumbass lawyer the court gives you. The whole thing’s bullshit.”

Eli started stammering, trying but failing to string together the subjects and verbs necessary to portray his full indignation. But Lamar just said it for him: “Yeah, it’s fucked up. I don’t know what else to say. But I can’t smoke anything until the trial, ‘cause I don’t know if they’re gonna make me do a drug test or what.”

“Cops aren’t allowed to just do that. You have rights, you know.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Due process of law,” Eli intoned with a translucent question mark, fishing for other terms he learned from watching Kim rehearse for mock-trial. “Innocent until proven guilty.”

“Forget it,” Lamar sucked his teeth. “I mean, at least it’s not a criminal offense anymore. It could be worse.” He exhaled an imaginary puff of relaxed smoke.

“No, this is like, completely out of order,” Eli said, still trying to sound lawyerly.

“Beyond a reasonable doubt. We’ve got to do something.”

“Like what? They’re giving me a trial.”

“That cop should be reported, for, for, for...”

“Look, little dude,” Lamar said, establishing for the first time in their relationship a sense of condescending distance. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand this, but, this kind of thing happens all the time in West Dutchfield.”

“Well the West Dutchfield police are corrupt!”

“No, they ain’t,” he said, pulling his Cosmic Ice cap on backwards. “It’s not about West Dutchfield.”

“It’s got to be. I’ve never heard of something like that happening in East Dutchfield.”

“Look in the mirror, bruh,” he said, moving back towards the doorway. “This kind of thing runs deeper than East and West.” It took Eli a minute to understand what he meant. The exhaust vent from the store shut off, and there was a sudden simmery hush over the lot.

“What did you say the officer’s name was, again?”

“Rodrigues,” he said, a little exhausted by the conversation.

*Rodrigues*, Eli thought. *Could it be?*

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Trevor Rodrigues was a handsome eighteen-year-old with an inch-deep dimple on the right side of his boyish face and an earnest preview of blonde facial hair on the left. Even shrouded by the bushes in which he and Eli hid, trying and failing to ignite a sloppily-rolled joint several meters from his house, Trevor looked far more like his mother’s Murphy ancestry than the Rodrigues he inherited from his paternal grandfather. Even the S at the end of his surname—soft, sensitive, subtle—served as a sort of wink to the college admissions boards to whom he had presented himself as full-on Hispanic. “Try me,” that S sibilantly teased. “Pretend it’s not true.”

What was true, however, was that all four of Trevor’s grandparents came to America with crucifixes around their necks, the same crosschains that suffocated him in Catholic school until ninth grade, when the recent redistricting meant he had a chance to study at East Dutchfield High School. “My parents would never have let me go to West Dutch back when it looked like a chocolate factory,” he said to Eli when they were freshmen, a joke so stupid and lacking in nuance that Eli had forgotten to laugh.

But much like the S at the end of his name, the remark misrepresented Trevor Rodrigues' attitude towards his classmates of color, to whom he never intended any purposeful malice. Not even when he puffed "*If you're white and it's dark, get your ass out the park,*" an adage he unsheathed so effortlessly from his back pocket that Eli thought he must have practiced that morning. "Tell me you've never heard that one."

"You've mentioned it once or twice," Eli replied. "You shouldn't say things like that."

"Don't get all P.C. on me, bro. I grew up down here. We don't mess around in Garvey Park. You did what the rhyme says not to do, and you're shocked you got busted?" Trevor's lighter sparked, at last igniting the joint in his hand.

"I didn't get busted," Eli said, suddenly very put-off by the smell of smoke. "And he wasn't in the park when it happened. He was walking home and the officer stalked him down."

Trevor gave an indifferent shrug. "What's the headline, Eli?"

"It was your father."

"My dad's not black," Trevor smirked.

"The cop, asshole."

"Oh, word?"

"Yeah, and now my friend's gonna have to pay, like, a lot of money to get out of it. And he doesn't have that kind of money just lying around." Trevor passed the joint towards Eli's side of the shrubbery, but Eli averred.

"Lower your voice, bro. He's like five yards away." Eli periscoped his nose above the rim of the bush to see Officer Rodrigues, as spherical at the belly as he was in the shaven head, grilling steaks on his back deck. They'd only met a handful of times, since the cop's work

schedule was irregular, but in their sparing interactions, Eli had always found something distasteful about his demeanor. It wasn't condescension, really, but more a sense that he, Officer Rodrigues, always felt like he was being condescended to. It was the kind of peacockish, prophylactic defensiveness that Eli's father might refer to as "*goyish inferiority*."

"Can't you at least mention it to him and not be a douchebag?" Eli asked.

"How am I being a douchebag? I'm letting you smoke my weed!"

"Right! Do you not see how implicit that is?"

"You mean *ironic*, professor," Trevor corrected, and, feeling very impressed by himself, punctuated the revision by extinguishing the joint with his foot. "I'm not going to say anything to my dad 'cause that's his job. If I got stopped by a cop for having weed on me, my dad would beat the shit out of me and then make me pay the fine myself. So no, not gonna happen."

Trevor's tone, however patronizing, was not hostile towards Eli, and as they slipped out of the shrubbery and back into the Rodrigues backyard, he even acted like the whole conversation had never happened. Because to Trevor, it never really did. He would go on to enjoy the steak lunch his parents had prepared for them, go upstairs to beat his own score on *Grand Theft Auto*, beat his other joystick, and then head to sleep. In the morning, he would repeat the cycle, seldom thinking about Eli or the thuggish friends he was apparently making at Cosmic Ice, and when August came, he would be off to Massachusetts, where he'd major in something easy and evade alcohol poisoning on the weekends. As the grand scheme of Trevor's life zoomed further and further out, the time it took to tell his dumb friend Eli that his dad would never un-file a police report on an overt criminal would become so insignificant that it would hardly even seem to exist in his memory.

To Eli, however, the passivity only empowered him more. How could Trevor just accept what had happened as right? The least he could do is mention it to his father, see what kind of rationale the breadwinner could muster up for such an egregiously cruel miscarriage of his power. This anger brewed under Eli's belt until, halfway through lunch with Trevor and his parents, he just whipped it out on the table.

"How's the beat, Mr. Rodrigues?" Eli asked over macaroni salad.

"The beat?" the cop repeated with an arched brow. Trevor scowled.

"You know, like police work. Must be quiet these days."

"Maybe up where you live," the officer replied, his tone already stiff like a bulletproof vest. "Not all of us get to live on dandy old East Hill."

"Patrick," Mrs. Rodrigues nagged, flicking him slightly with her matte magenta fingernails. "Be kind to our guest."

"What? I'm just answering his question," Officer Rodrigues continued. "It must be nice to live up there, huh?"

"We're not really on East Hill," Eli informed him, referring to a scant, altitudinous section of East Dutchfield with the highest property values. No adult on East Hill would even consider sending their kids to a Dutchfield public school. "We're pretty close to the high school, actually."

"Well then," the officer passed, taking a gratuitously languid sip from his bottle of Coors. "Must be nice."

"Me and Eli used to walk to his house for lunch," Trevor added. "It was really just around the corner from school." Trevor had, knowingly or not, entered a strange appeal to prove

Eli's Upper-Middle-Class identity, and scrap the Upper-Class assumption his father had pinned to him.

"Eli's mother works-out at the Y," Mrs. Rodrigues donated for her part, referencing that Eli's parents were not members of *Optimal Self*, the stainless citadel of fitness where East Dutchfield's elite exercised. "You remember her, right Pat?"

"Sure," Officer Rodrigues grumbled, pushing a square-inch of well-done beef into his face.

"I was just asking," Eli continued, "because a friend of mine thought he saw you a few nights ago. Like, out on patrol."

"Wednesdays and Fridays I do night drives," Officer Rodrigues said. "Just to keep the streets clean. A lot of trouble-makers down in these parts, in case that surprises you." He shoved his hands into his son's hair when he said this.

"Any arrests?"

"Eli!" Trevor scoffed. "Shut up."

"Yeah, sometimes. When people break the law. Why? You need to report something?"

"Who wants Tofutti?" Mrs. Rodrigues asked.

"Eli's got a friend with legal problems," Trevor extolled.

"I assume you have lawyers in your family," Officer Rodrigues assumed correctly.

"They're probably better suited to this kind of stuff."

"Well, no, it's not quite like that," Eli twitched, feeling for the first time some nervousness. "I, uh...one of my coworkers at Cosmic Ice, he was walking home from work the



other night, and he said he got stopped-and-frisked, like, just on the side of the road. I was just wondering if that sounds like something that would happen.”

“I’m not really supposed to discuss that kind of thing,” he yawned, plying open a third bottle of beer. “But if I was, I would tell your friend to be more careful where he walks at night if he’s under the influence. That’s a recipe for arrest.”

“Yeah, but...and again, I don’t know really what happened, and I’m not really that good friends with him,” Eli spat, even though in his mind he wanted to think that they were very close friends. “Anyway, he said that someone was kind of following him in a cop car for a while, and then sort of put him through a lot of, um, motions, I guess, to find a reason to ticket him.”

“Listen, Eli—and Trevor, you too, ‘cause I don’t know what kind of bullshit you pull when I’m not around—but I would tell your friend, quite honestly, that if you look like you’re up to no good, the PD is going to assume you’re up to no good. And if you’re out that late just wandering West Dutchfield by yourself, you’re probably looking for trouble.”

*Well how ironic (or implicit?) is that,* Eli thought. *Couldn’t the same be said about the arresting officer?* But of course he didn’t have the balls to say so out loud. So he thanked his hosts graciously for the meal, and cycled back home, angrier than he was when he arrived.

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For a young woman of her intellect and esteem, Kim had little clout in the realm of tidiness, as evidenced by the basement floor she’d monopolized with poster boards, tubes of coagulated Elmer’s glue, and fat permanent markers, strewn so indiscriminately across the shag carpeting that Eli had to tiptoe around the mess like a landmine breaker as he approached the TV set to flip on his PlayStation.

“Seriously, Eli, can’t you do this anywhere else? I don’t want you making a mess of my posters,” she said, as she dipped a brush into a bowl of glue and made a mess of the carpet. Eli cocked his head to read the cutesy bubble letters on the sign. *Pray for the Plover*, it read.

“Thanks for asking,” she said before he could ask. “The piping plover is an endangered seabird, and the North Jersey Conservation Alliance is staging a gathering this weekend to raise awareness.”

“But why?”

“Because they’re an endangered species, I just told you.” She picked up her head for the first time and noticed Eli hovering over her. It was easy for her to get frustrated with her twin brother, so easy, in fact, that frustration was her bookmarked response to his inquiries before he made them. But she also recognized her parents culpability in Eli’s general incompetence and disengagement from the issues of today’s world. They did send him to East High, after all, with all those West Dutchfield kids. If she took a deep breath and just looked at him in the eyes, she could remember the small boy he once was and convince herself that he was still, in some way, just a child of six. And how could you get frustrated at an uninformed six-year-old? “We believe that human activity at Branch State Park might be exacerbating their condition,” she said in a more sated tone, before adding “*exacerbate* means to make worse.”

“Don’t you think all this paper is pretty bad for the environment too?” Eli asked.

“Couldn’t an online petition get the job done?”

“Well...” she began, before capping a Sharpie and throwing it on the ground. “Crap. I’m wasting my time. It doesn’t even look that good.” Eli sat down on the pleather couch adjacent to his sister.

“Hey, can I ask you something? Do you think it’s corrupt if a cop follows you for like a block in his car and then, like, pulls you over even if you didn’t do anything?”

“Why? Did you get pulled over? Jesus, Eli, Mom and Dad are going to kill you. And the way you left the interior of the car smelling? Don’t act like I don’t know that smell. I had to keep the windows open my entire trip to Livingston last weekend, did you know that?” He did know that. She had mentioned it twice.

“No, I didn’t get pulled over, but thanks.” Kim rolled her eyes. “My friend did, and he wasn’t even driving. He was just walking and a cop followed him for a while, and then pulled him over and made him turn out his pockets.”

“Oh shit,” she said, suddenly piqued by the story’s edgy turn. “That doesn’t sound like something that would happen around here.”

“It was in West Dutchfield,” Eli said mutedly. The blush in Kim’s face started to subside.

“Oh. Well. I guess that makes a little more sense. I mean, they do have *gang violence* down there, it could have been related to that.”

“It wasn’t. He’s not in a gang.”

“Was it Trevor?”

“No, it wasn’t Trevor.”

“That kids a slime-ball. And a bad influence on you with all that dope-smoking.”

“It was his dickhead dad. He was the officer, I mean, who harassed one of my friends from work.”

“In West Dutchfield?” Kim pondered again. “I mean, I don’t know what’s going on down there. What’s your friend like? Is he...” She awaited her brother to fill the gap.

“Yeah, he’s super nice, and he graduated from West High and went to culinary school.”

Eli purposely withheld the detail he knew his sister wanted. She pretended she didn’t notice.

“And he didn’t have any drugs on him or anything. Just the wrapper from a cigar he used to roll a blunt.” At this she scoffed aloud.

“Well there you go. If it was obvious he was breaking a law, I don’t really see what the problem is. I mean, that sounds pretty bad for your friend, but maybe now he’ll learn not to do that anymore.”

“Really? You’re not going to give me a speech about racism or something?”

“What race is your friend?”

“He happens to be black.”

“Oh, well, you didn’t mention that,” she said, even though she had assumed as much.

“Look: Yes, he might have been profiled for his skin color, but that doesn’t excuse what he did. Laws are laws, and you need to remember that the next time you hang out in West Dutchfield with Trevor and your new ice cream friends. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to start that online petition.” She jumped up briskly, leaving the mess she had drafted behind, and headed straight up the stairs to publicize her fear for a different endangered species.

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Eli saw his father at breakfast the next morning, but getting him outraged by the situation was a null pursuit. While the old man’s body was presently consuming Quaker Oats in the kitchen, his brain had already clocked in at work, and his response was accordingly placid. “Nice to see you’re taking such an interest in law,” was all he said. “Maybe you should have taken that internship with Uncle Howie after all.”

And then Eli was back at Cosmic Ice, on a day where it seemed everyone in Dutchfield wanted a milkshake and no one wanted to leave a tip. Lamar limped in around five o'clock for an evening shift, relieving stoic, aggravated Eli. Lamar sensed the attitude. "What's the matter, bro?"

"Nothing's the matter," he dramatized. "I'm just kind of pissed about what happened to you."

"What d'you mean?" he asked, pulling on his Cosmic Ice baseball cap. "You mean with the cop? Shit, I already forgot about that."

"I just think it's so effed up, you know?" Eli said, in too roomy proximity to a paying customer that Daniela had to give an artificial *I'm sorry about the noise* kind of smile.

"Yeah it's effed up," Lamar said, "but it's not your problem to handle. Don't worry about me, little man, I'll be a'ight." Eli hated that he had called him *little man*, as if they were no longer peers.

"I talked to the officer," Eli continued, ignoring his duties as Lamar blended vanilla bean and milk. "His son and I are kind of friends and I tried to ask him about it."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because it's unfair. He totally profiled you, and now you're going to have to pay all this money even though you didn't do anything!"

"Keep your voice down, okay little guy?" he said, once again invoking the age gap. He handed the milkshake to a ring-necked middle schooler and then dragged Eli to the back steps by the dumpsters, pungent like clam chowder in the soupy summer bustle. "Listen," he began, "I

appreciate how riled up you're getting about this, but don't go talking to cops and shit about my situation, okay? It's only gonna find its way back to me and make my deal even worse."

"But I was just—"

"Yeah, I know what you was just, and I'm thankful you tried to, but don't. That's the way it is. You ain't gonna change nothing by going around town complaining about some nigga who got S-and-F'd in the hood. A lot worse happens between niggas and cops in the wrong place at the wrong time, ya feel me? What you're doing now is just exacerbating the issue. You know what that means?"

"Yes, I know what *exacerbate* means," he grunted.

"So just leave it alone. I got cousins who can help me out with the fine, so forget it."

"It's just not right," Eli pouted.

"You know, if I knew you'd be such a goddamn pussy about this whole thing I wouldn't have invited you to smoke with me in the first place."

"Hey-yo! We got like hella people up here!" Daniela screamed from inside. Lamar reentered immediately but Eli, feeling beaten and betrayed by the person who called him "a close friend" not one week ago, ripped his hat to the ground, and stomped away from the shop in fury.

He marched straight for Alonzo's Liquor Store across the street, where he picked out a plastic handle of vodka and tried to stick it under his sweaty, fudge-stained t-shirt. When it occurred to him that there was no space, he just cradled the container like a baby, and marched straight out the door, unnoticed by the droopy-eyed woman at the counter.

From there, he walked downhill towards Amir's, the convenience store to which Lamar had directed him once upon a time, back when they were buddies, back when it seemed perfectly

safe to smoke a blunt out in the open in West Dutchfield after dark. At the counter, he pointed to the same grape-flavored Dutch Master that Lamar had purchased, but the clerk had his doubts.

“Can I see some ID, please?” he asked over rimless reading glasses.

“Isn’t this enough ID?” Eli said, holding up the stolen vodka.

“No.”

“Here’s my license. See? I’m eighteen years old.”

“No you’re not.”

“I will be in a few months.”

“Come back in a few months.”

Defeated, Eli paid for a bottle of lemon-lime soda and left with nothing else.

As the sun drowned into blackness, Eli waddled along the Dutchfield train tracks, swigging from the vodka and breaking the burn with Sprite. Though he wanted to think of anything else, all he could hear in his head were the broken records of Trevor, Officer Rodrigues, that bitch Kim, and even Lamar, all taunting him for giving a shit about something for once, all degrading him for trying to show some interest in something real. *Fuck them*, he thought. *All of them. Rude. Condescending. Ungrateful.*

Eli was sufficiently soused by the time he found the duplex house where he remembered Lamar bought their cannabis. Even through shuffling vision he knew it was the place, since he recognized a trio of women sitting on the porch, howling in laughter as he slogged up the steps.

“Boy, you lost or what?” one of them asked as he ventured the steps.

“I’m Lamar’s friend,” he slurred, hoping one of them would know what that meant.

“Honey you look like you been hit by a car,” another laughed.

“Go home. Ain’t no Lamar here.”

“I just wanted to buy some stuff,” he tried to say, though the words mixed like milk and vanilla as they shook from his mouth. “I can buy some here?”

The women started communicating with their eyes, determining which one of them was going to make this wrecked orphan their project. But before the determination could be made, the point-guard-sized man emerged from inside the house, nearly tripping over Eli in the process.

“Woah! Watch where you’re going, bro,” he said.

“Can you help me?” Eli slurred. “I’m looking for some, you know, stuff.”

“I don’t know what that means. Who is this kid anyway?” he asked the three women.

“We don’t know,” one said. “Drunk as hell, coming around here looking for someone named Lamar.”

“Oh that’s right,” the behemoth said. “You pals with Daryl’s cousin. Where he at?”

“He at work,” Eli grumbled. “But I just wanted to get a little bit for myself.” The tall dude looked him down, then looked at the women in their seats. Though he was not personally involved in the sale of narcotics, he certainly could have guided Eli inside and introduced him to his roommate who was, or, with equal ease, dupe him into trading all his cash for a bag of oregano. But Eli seemed so pathetic with his tie-dye shirt and his cheap-ass vodka, and he hadn’t the heart for such a stunt.

“Nah, man. Get out of here. Nothing to see here.”

“Please? I’m good for it. See, I got cash and everything!” He dangled his wallet upside-down, ejecting several cards and about a dollar in tip change.

“Boy, you a mess,” one of the women said as her friends giggled.



“Get the hell out of here, dumbass,” the giant repeated, before lifting Eli with almost no effort and dragging him directly to the curb.

Scabbed and wet from the grass, Eli shook it off and continued down the block towards Garvey Park, where he hoped perhaps some kids were hanging and might offer him a hit. But he never made it to the park. He was so boozed out of his brain cells at this point that direction ceased to exist. So he stumbled around, turning corners deeper and deeper into West Dutchfield, until finally he crashed, falling full-weight into a stranger’s mailbox and pulling it down with him to the cold, unforgiving earth.

~

Little time passed before the police car arrived, alerted by the homeowner that some rowdy teenager had collapsed in his front yard. Eli was still marginally conscious, for he heard the subtle siren as the car zipped up to the curb, heard the boots touch the street gravel and pitter-patter towards him.

“Wake up, son,” the officer said before kneeling to his level. “Party’s over.”

“Just arrest me, then,” he moaned. “Just put me in cuffs.”

“Jesus Christ,” the officer let out when he heard the boy’s voice. “Get in the car, Eli.”

~

The interior of the Dutchfield 2<sup>nd</sup> Precinct Police Department was alarmingly bright, framed by bluish-white fluorescent bulbs that were a public drunk’s instant enemy. Eli sat on a bench, nursing a plastic water bottle that Officer Rodrigues was kind enough to fetch him before calling his parents. By the time they arrived, both in flannel pajama bottoms and cotton sweaters, Eli had sobered up just enough to realize how fruitless his whole stupor had been.

“Yeah, we found him passed out on a stranger’s lawn, hugging their mailbox,” Officer Rodrigues explained to Eli’s bewildered mom and dad. “Drunk as a skunk with this by his side. Hope he didn’t lift it off you guys.” He handed the jug of vodka to Eli’s father, who accepted it with just the tips of his fingers, as if it were a runny diaper.

“No, we’re not big drinkers,” Eli’s dad said. “I don’t know what got into him.”

“Just a little teenage revelry, I suppose,” Officer Rodrigues shrugged. “I figure whatever friends he was with scattered once Eli passed out. Wouldn’t be right to book him and not the other little jackoffs, right?” Officer Rodrigues chuckled, and Eli’s father returned with a politely fake laugh.

“Well, we really appreciate you doing this for us, Officer,” Eli’s mother said. “Seriously, this isn’t like him at all. He’s been so responsible all summer with his new job and everything.”

“Yeah, Trevor too,” Rodrigues scoffed, as if to say *my kid’s also a moron*. “Boys will be boys, I guess. Just get him home before the hangover starts punishing him.” The officer led Eli’s parents towards him, but Eli sunk deeper into his seat. “Let’s get going, you little hazard to society.”

“No!” Eli protested, crossing his arms like a baby. “No, I’m not leaving.”

“Eli, don’t make this worse than it already is,” his father said. “Let’s just get a move on.”

“No, I’m not going,” he repeated. “What I did was illegal and I demand to be held accountable.”

“Eli Moses, what you did was ridiculous and so is the way you’re acting right now,” his mother stated. “Let’s go.”

“Drunken intoxication is a public offense. So is possession of alcohol by a minor. So is destruction of private property, and, and, intent to, um...to buy drugs! I broke all of those rules and I demand to be treated justly under the law!” Eli’s parents smiled obligingly at Officer Rodrigues, who stood there with legs splayed and arms crossed. “Arrest me.”

“Eli, I’m not going to arrest you. Just go home with your parents.”

“Give me a ticket!” Eli demanded. “Make me show up to court and pay a fine. I deserve it! I do!”

“That’s it Eli,” his father said, pulling up his sleeves as if to unleash the big munitions. “Two weeks without the car. Let’s go.”

“No.”

“Four weeks and no PlayStation, how about that?”

“No! Not until they arrest me.”

“For the love of Christ,” Rodrigues grunted, picking up Eli by the elbows and dragging him to the door. “Get the hell out of here already, you East Hill brat!”

But Eli kept screaming, and refusing, and walking back towards the precinct doors. Even once his parents had locked him in the car, he cried and kicked, like an infant forbidden a second scoop of ice cream. Even at home, where Kim was summoned to assist in pulling her idiot brother inside, to drag him across the threshold, to rip at his deteriorating Cosmic Ice t-shirt, to embolden the bruises and wounds he’d collected in West Dutchfield, to rip at his shorts just to get him inside his bedroom, he cried and he cried and he cried.

And he kept on crying until no one cared anymore.