



RESTRAINT

A CONFESSION

When their knees hit the floor I felt the collision in my heels. It was like when someone in my bowling league dropped a ball two lanes over. Brondyke pressed his weight onto Trevor. He bled on him.

I'd been looking out the window when the fight started. A darkening gray sky outside looked like it meant to turn purple and storm. It was the end of the day on Friday, toward the end of the school year, and the clouds made things dimmer and dreamier, like everyone was on the other side of mosquito netting. The window was closed, but the outside air leaked in. It smelled like spring, blooming and wet.

Curtis started it. Our middle school had a building-wide rule requiring alphabetical seating charts, so Curtis McRae sat behind Trevor Lewis in all three classes they shared. I was in the back corner of Brondyke's geography class: Zack Vanderlaan.

The two of them sat in the middle of the room, and I could hear the taunts from my desk. Kids used their fists to cover discreet grins as they stared at Trevor and watched his face for pain. Brondyke snapped his fingers. "Hey, eyes up here, folks. Let's get all the eyes up here." He was a rookie teacher straight out of Western, tall and tan, whom girls would talk about in the hall between classes. Sometimes he stayed for an hour after school playing basketball in the gym with a group of guys. Sometimes I watched.

He'd take his tie off and roll his sleeves up. He could dunk, so we respected him immediately.

But some in geography began to think Brondyke could hear Curtis taunting Trevor yet didn't do anything because he was afraid. "Curtis is big," said Chip Elkins. "He's not messin' with him." When the taunts came I watched Brondyke for a sign that he was hearing but ignoring them. I didn't spot one.

"How's your mom, Trev?" Curtis whispered. "Heard she dances at the Vu. Totally naked."

Trevor looked down at his notes, trying to concentrate, squinting a little to give the illusion of focus. He was skinny like most of us, with a blond crew cut and pale skin. Blue veins showed through his temples. Nobody believed the stuff about his mom, but nobody said so. And the taunts, which had started out random and scattered, had become more urgent as the school year's momentum pushed us toward exam week.

"Shit Stains, they let your dad out of the rubber room yet?"

Some kids said Trevor's dad was in the Kalamazoo State Hospital down the road. The Asylum. He'd been arrested for drugs once, so it was easy for some to believe. Shit Stains was a separate rumor. Someone said they'd seen Trevor use a locker room toilet two days in a row without wiping his ass. This report was suspect. There were doors on all the stalls. And who watches something like that anyway? Why hadn't we mocked *that* kid? But it became part of our middle school vernacular. "We had to work in pairs today and I got paired with Shit Stains." I'd said this once to Roy. He always called him just Trevor.

There were other taunts. Curtis claimed he'd stolen some pills from an uncle's medicine cabinet, and at lunch some day when Trevor wasn't looking he was going to drop them into Trevor's chocolate milk or applesauce. "Some will make you crap. Some will make you puke. Some might give you a heart attack. Never can tell, Trev." But I don't think Curtis ever did anything beyond words,

until that day when he used his sharpened pencil and the whole blister of harassment split open.

Brondyke passed out a worksheet, and we had to figure out the latitude and longitude of cities like Paris and Moscow. Trevor went frantically to work, resting his head on his left arm as he wrote. The room fell surprisingly quiet for a Friday. Pencils scratched against white paper. I didn't look up until the loud grinding of the pencil sharpener broke in. It was Curtis, standing at the front of the room in his bright red shirt, slowly cranking the sharpener and grinning at the class. He blew the tip of the pencil, brushed the point with his thumb, shook his head as if disappointed, and then sharpened it a little more before walking back to his desk behind Trevor.

Silence settled over the room again. I could hear Brondyke at his front desk chewing a piece of hard candy. He stood and walked out into the hallway. It stayed quiet for another couple of minutes before I heard a loud bang against a desktop. I looked up and saw Trevor rubbing his back, trying not to turn around. His sad, hurt eyes reminded me of Roy's. Curtis's face was red from holding back a loud laugh. He checked the door before poking Trevor in the back again with his sharpened pencil. Trevor jumped as if the lead was electric, his hands slapping the top of his desk and his knees knocking the underside. Curtis did it a third time.

Brondyke returned, striding swiftly back to his desk with a handful of papers. He sat down and began stapling them. Nobody was working anymore. We all stared at Trevor, whose face was buried in his arms. His pencil moved like he was working, but he wasn't. There were three little dimples on the back of his shirt that made a triangle. Each dimple had a gray dot in the center. When nothing happened right away, people's eyes began gradually wandering back to their worksheets. I leaned back and pressed my head against the wall. The bumpy cinder blocks felt nice and massaged my skull when I rolled it back and forth. Something crashed.

I turned around and saw Trevor's desk tipped over on its side.

Trevor stood in front of Curtis with a handful of his red shirt blooming from his fist like flowers. Then Trevor started hammering him. The rush of release was audible as his anger cracked free. Most of the punches landed on the top of Curtis's head, but a few caught his cheek and jaw. They didn't snap like the punches on TV, but they connected.

I never saw Brondyke coming up behind Trevor. He wrapped his arms around Trevor in a huge bear hug. Some of us stood up from our desks in shock. A couple of kids yelled in surprise. One kid said, "Sweet," but said it quietly.

Trevor twisted and flailed, still trying to get at Curtis. Then he started kicking at Brondyke's shins, stomping on his feet. He lifted his legs off the floor and kicked at the air. Brondyke's arms flexed so that the veins showed through. He had dark, serious shadows around his eyes, and next to Trevor's pale skin, I could see the difference between a boy and a man. While Curtis sat at his desk holding his jaw, snot blew from Trevor's nose. He went limp like a noodle, trying to slip right through Brondyke's arms to the floor. He gazed out at the rest of us, looking suddenly saddened that we weren't helping him. It seemed like he'd just give up and let Brondyke take him to the office.

Then he threw his head back. It smashed Brondyke's nose, kicking his own head backward and shooting a white flash into my eyes. But Brondyke still held Trevor tight. Later someone found a fine spray of blood over the papers on Brondyke's desk, but most of it poured straight down, over his chin and onto his clean white shirt. He started to bend at the knees, and I thought it was over—Trevor had floored him. But he was bending them so that they pressed against the backs of Trevor's knees. Trevor crumpled, their knees hit the floor, and Brondyke fell on top of him, his arms still wrapped tight in a violent hug.

Erin Bylsma ran out of the room, and everyone else stood now

in a little semicircle around the action. That was all we did. Trevor started screaming for Brondyke to get the fuck off him. It was the first time I'd ever heard fuck said to a teacher. Brondyke just whispered into his ear, the blood falling in rhythmic drips onto the kid's pale cheek. "Shh. Shh. Trevor, relax. Shh. It's okay."

Trevor's body deflated. Brondyke waited a few moments, then slowly loosened his grip, but Trevor tensed up and immediately began to kick. Brondyke put all his weight on him again until he collapsed a second time, deep into the carpet, exhausted. He cried. Spit bubbled over his mouth. Erin Bylsma rushed back into the room with Ms. Blue, a math teacher. Brondyke gently lifted Trevor to his feet and whispered something to him. Trevor nodded, rubbing his chest and keeping his eyes away from us. Brondyke had a smattering of blood over his mouth that made it look like a grotesque smile, a clown's smile. He guided Trevor slowly out to the hall with his open hand barely touching his back. Even from the back corner of the room I could see circles of blood on the floor that had turned the blue carpet black. I hoped that the janitors wouldn't be able to get the stains out. I wanted them there on Monday, like Purple Hearts, so all the kids who said Brondyke wasn't tough would be reminded of what he did and shut their mouths.

Charcoal clouds huddled on the near horizon. Lightning pierced them, but was too far away for the thunder to be heard. I walked down Howard Street, slowly enough to ensure that I'd get caught in the rain, fast enough that I knew Roy wouldn't catch me until I was a little ways from school. It was embarrassing to be with him in front of other friends. I heard him coming up behind me, slapping his feet and breathing hard. His bulky black trombone case smacked his knee as he ran.

"Zack, wait up."

