

Just Care

DUSTIN M. HOFFMAN

TACK LEANS OVER SIMON SALTAMACCHIA'S SHOULDER IN SHOP CLASS, close enough to bite his neck. The saw screams and sawdust spews into the air like a Michigan flurry. But no snow has fallen in weeks, in this February drought locked in gray. Simon's fingers coax a board through the band saw. He doesn't know how fucked he is, doesn't even know Tack smuggled himself into the shop. Simon remains blissful and stupid under his headphones, eyes protected behind safety goggles. Tack lets the sawdust sheet his face, dares a splinter to stab his cornea. Untethered fate, if there is such a thing. Tack doubts divine control, and he isn't afraid to test god's tolerance.

Nothing stops Tack. Certainly not the expulsion he earned four years ago for punching Mr. Henry in the jaw and stabbing William Demarco's hand with a pencil. He'd been curious if he could sharpen it enough to jam it all the way through. He couldn't, but it had been close. Now, after Hector snuck him back into the school, Tack's here to get the money he's owed, to remind everyone they don't get to stop worrying about Tack.

He edges his lips close as he can to the six-foot-three third-string quarterback's headphones before he flips them up and yells, "Pay up, motherfucker."

Simon springs off his stool, a scared boy in that giant man's body. He shrieks and the band saw garbles through his board. The whole shop class witnesses, and they surely take joy in watching the asshole who loves calling everyone a faggot cower. That's how these rich-kid jocks operate, all dicks punches and faggot jokes

because they're terrified they might be gay. Tack doesn't need to prove himself, doesn't need to talk about living at Hector's mom's place—sleeping across the room every night from his friend close as a brother, Hector's body breathing so quietly, so closely, ribs up and down, miracle lungs expanding inside.

What Tack needs now is the cocaine and the vial of LSD that Simon bought on credit. He'd left him his watch on good faith, a piece of shit it turned out, fake as this kid.

"What douchebag just ruined my mom's decorative wall sconce?" Simon says, gathering all seventy-five inches of himself to stand big, until he realizes who he's dealing with. "Tack, oh shit, man, I'm just kidding around. What are you doing here?"

"I've come to collect my five hundred dollars."

"Tack, you're an okay bro," Simon says, chuckling toward the watching shop class crowd, "but who are you to come at me here, in my house? You got nothing on me here. The principal works for my dad's dealership in the summer, half the teachers part-time for him."

A half-dozen of his buddies have circled. This is why Tack's always hated football. He's big enough, built denser than any of these boys, but the idea of a line of alphas protecting some quarterback's delicate tendons always seemed so pathetic. Tack would take on anyone under those bright lights, on those hundred yards of grass. No pads or helmet, just fists and teeth and blood.

"Give me my money, and I'll go."

"I gave you a watch, bro."

"This shit kernel?" Tack pulls it from his pocket—steel blue, supposedly Omega. He reaches behind and rubs the watch through his sweating ass crack.

"Come on, man. My dad gave that to me." Simon's face puckers. His bottom lip sucks up under his perfectly straight teeth.

"Your dad gave you a knockoff. It's not worth my taint sweat." Tack mashes the ass-wiped watch into Simon's nose. It falls to the floor, and Tack stomps it into cracked glass. Simon's crybaby face melts into murder, and he lunges. But he's a quarterback. He only knows how to be protected by his linemen and mom and dad and their orthodontists and regular paychecks and knockoff watches. His faithful linemen are stoned most games on Tack's coke and acid and meth and pot. Tack knows how to manipulate protection, and he easily dodges Simon's stumbling body that falls next to the smashed watch.

Tack flicks back on the band saw. Its jittering, rat-toothed blade begs to be fed. Tack will oblige. Simon stands wobbling, and Tack grabs his hair, slams his head against the band-saw table. He drops an elbow onto Simon's wrist, squeezes a finger free, Simon's right index finger, pink and perfect and loved into softness by Mommy and Daddy. Tack pushes it through the blade.

Blood hiccups out in a pink mist. The blade groans too loudly or Tack's ears ring too riotously or the witnessing crowd has gasped up Simon's screams. Tack can feel Simon on his face, his lips. He's freckled in spoiled rich-kid blood, and he laughs, because how else can he react to Simon's giant body crumpling to the floor, staring into the missing tip of his finger? His linemen have backed off, terror blanching their faces. Tack laughs at them, too, how little they can handle. This is just high school. It's just a fingertip. Half an inch. Just a bit of bone and skin. Tack knows he's not the devil because he sometimes wishes he was the devil. No fate. No devil. Only bodies and adrenaline. Meat to be carved.

They gawk at him, the whole shop class, the linemen and the burnout stoners and the poor kids. And there's the one lesbian, Sylva Brinks, who sometimes buys mushrooms from Tack, who wears the same oversized navy-blue Michigan hoodie every other day to hide her tits, to hide from boys, from these stares now staring at him, and Tack can't blame her. What a nightmare for every girl in this tiny town to have every move so studied and storied. But for Tack, there's value in the burning spotlight. Whatever he does next will become Alma legend.

Tack licks his lips, licks Simon's blood. He wipes a glob from his forehead, draws the fingers to his mouth, and sucks. Someone whimpers. The band saw whines. All stare. Tack says, "This is the risk when you fuck with Tack."

That fast, Simon is emptying bills from his wallet with his nonbleeding hand. A couple of the linemen, too, bowl crumpled dollars his way, but it's not enough. And this kid, this model citizen of pathetic pride and privilege, is the perfect example to be made. He grabs Simon's bloody wrist again, yanks him across the floor toward the saw. Simon fumbles inside his underwear and pulls out the vial of LSD Tack had sold him, what used to be one hundred hits, though there's no way to know how many micrograms are left, and the cocaine's still missing. Before Tack can return Simon to the saw for more carving, the saw's roaring goes dead. Tack turns to face the woodgrain of a baseball bat, outstretched toward his nose. Attached to the blond wood is Mr. Chuck's hairy arm and rolled sleeve.

"You're not in this class," Mr. Chuck says.

“He doesn’t even go here,” says one of the whimpering linemen.

“And you just attacked one of my pupils.” Mr. Chuck stabs the bat into Tack’s chest. “I have to defend these here boys.”

“Not all boys,” Tack says, pointing toward Sylva Brinks, who has continued to work on her chessboard throughout it all. The gazed-upon has no need to gaze, and Tack respects that.

“Fuck him up, Mr. Chuck,” another boy yelps.

“Identify your status,” Mr. Chuck says. “Alumni or dropout? My money’s on dropout.”

“Expelled.”

“I’ve known you minutes and already you don’t surprise me.” Mr. Chuck kisses the bat to Tack’s nose. And that’s a little too cute for Tack, this tough-guy posturing. He grabs for the bat, but Mr. Chuck takes a sloppy swing and smashes a snagged coat rack into pieces.

“Dang, Mr. Chuck, that was for my grandma,” someone shouts.

Tack waits for the next swing, but Mr. Chuck rests the bat on his shoulder and smirks through his mustache, exposing gray gums. “Aren’t you Christian Ely?”

“Fuck yeah he is,” Simon whines through his contorted weeping face. He clutches his blood-dripping fist. “And he’s going to prison for this.”

Tack reaches behind his back for something sharp, rusty preferably. His fingers find wood scraps, and a splinter shoots under his fingernail. The sting jolts through him, but he bites a chunk through his cheek to remain stoic and terrifying.

“How’d you get expelled?” Mr. Chuck asks. “How severe was your offense?”

“He sold the guidance counselor an eight ball and got busted,” someone says.

“No, he jizzed in the vice principal’s coffee,” someone else offers.

“Someone get me a goddamn doctor,” Simon says. “I’m mutilated.”

“He blew Willy Demarco in gym class,” another says, “back by the bench press.”

“Gross,” a lineman says, “I lift there like every day in fricking pud puddles.”

Sylva says from the back, “He stabbed Willy with a pencil, through the hand. That’s why they removed all the sharpeners and now we gotta use dull-ass pencils.”

“I’ve seen the scar. She’s right,” another idiot offers, and Tack is enjoying the

myth he's become. It helps him ignore the stinging splinter.

"I'm fucking dying here while you pussies talk about Willy's faggy hand," Simon says. "Call the ambulance. Call the cops."

"And I can tell them what I came to see you for," Tack says. "Maybe they search your brand-new used Silverado."

"Shit. Okay, not cops, but, like, I just don't think it's fair losing a finger," Simon says.

"I've heard enough." Mr. Chuck slaps the bat head against his palm a little too proudly, and Tack bets he made it himself, stayed up every night for weeks sanding it smooth as a baby's ass, his proudest accomplishment in a disappointing small-town teacher's life. "Into my office now, Mr. Christian Ely. And, Simon, get your bleeding finger to the nurse. Tell her you're an idiot and slipped on the saw. If your parents find out, they'll ship you to some private school where you won't see a girl again until graduation."

"You want this?" One of the poor kids pinches a dripping red clod up to Simon's face. His fingertip, it seems. He's probably hoping Simon's dad will reward him with a discount on a rusted pickup. One of the linemen snatches it from him and shoves the kid back to his work desk.

"Lucky find," Mr. Chuck says and then leads Tack to his office. He takes practice swings the whole way, like he hopes Tack will comment on the fine craftsmanship. But it's nothing special. No one in this school, in this town, is anything special. This is Alma, Michigan, where no one goes anywhere, as dead as the winter-burned yellow grass covering every lawn. This town stuck in forever winter is all bleached-pale and gray and dirt-stained, just like the people, like the kids in the shop class praying to get hired at Giles Tire Service for ten bucks an hour next to their dads since Total Refinery is shutting down and the rest of the factories have stopped hiring.

"How about this?" Mr. Chuck says after he closes his office door and mounts the bat on a handmade rack. "Maybe I let you sneak out of here, seeing as I know Gertie, your sweet momma."

The mention of his mom swells the splinter under Tack's fingernail. It throbs big as Mr. Chuck's bat. He'd like to stab it through this man's pupil.

"The room's mostly soundproof for the saws," Mr. Chuck says. "They gotta see me giving you shit, though. We gotta do some pretending."

Tack looks through the office windows onto the shop class floor. The linemen

stand in a row, arms knotted over chests, a cute show, as if this is a practiced football play. If Tack were to castrate every one of them and line up their testicles, they wouldn't reach even a single yard marker.

"How's Gertie doing these days?" Mr. Chuck screams with V-slanted brows and a deeply creased forehead. It's strange to have a conversation shouted.

"Haven't seen her since we went tubing down the Chesapeake in the summer of 1996." His face burns red as an apple. "She's great, a fine lady, that mother of yours."

Tack tries to remember a man like Mr. Chuck creeping around his house three years ago, when Tack was eighteen, those hairy arms digging through his fridge, that dandruff in his black hair speckling his couch, those calloused fingers inside his mamma.

"She's fucked one hundred men since you, I bet. Doubt she remembers you."

"I'm just trying to care here." Mr. Chuck continues his yelling: "You just slightly dismembered a mildly tolerated, dopey-as-a-dip member of our football team, so how about don't be an asshole?"

"I can't tell if you're actually yelling at me now or still doing it for show," Tack says.

"I don't know either," Mr. Chuck yells. "But we better keep this up a bit longer."

"Why?"

"Or that bleeding, whiny asshole and his used-Chevy-dealership daddy will sue us." Mr. Chuck points, and outside the window the scowling football team is studying them. Tack feels a wallop on the back of his head.

"Sorry, kid," Mr. Chuck yells. "Part of the show for those morons."

Satisfied by some teacherly violence, they disperse, all abandoning class in a group of clucking teenage testosterone. Only the poor kids and Sylva Brinks remain. They'll always be the leftovers of this town, and they smell their doom, its motor grease and sawdust mixed with Mr. Chuck's stale sweat. That doom tightens their robotic grip on their tools, on their work, the droning manual labor that Tack will rise above. He'll become more powerful than Simon's seedy car dealer dad. A little bit more money is all he needs to begin an empire selling drugs to a desperate town dying to escape their bleak lives for a two-hour buzz.

"Your mother once told me how she was sure you'd make something great of yourself." Mr. Chuck finally speaks in a normal register. His complexion has

calmed from ruddy to sun-starved pale. “But I sure don’t see it. A kid like you, what are you gonna do? What are you gonna be? You ever think about that? The future?”

“Are you a preacher or a teacher? So glad I ditched this place.”

“You were expelled, son. Don’t act like it was your choice,” Mr. Chuck says, wagging a finger. “But now you can choose. You can still be something good.”

“What’s good?”

“I’m not meaning to preach. I just care is all,” Mr. Chuck says lightly, kindly probably, like he’s some five-minute stepdaddy feeling compelled to shepherd this poor, depraved boy out of guilt for screwing his momma once. Tack would prefer fake screaming again. The truth is there’s no one left to care. This town has run dry on jobs and hope for those shop-class kids, whose parents can’t afford even clearance Kmart watches. So Tack will fill the void, will manufacture hope, will sell them their highs so he can climb over their shoulders and out of this pit.

Mr. Chuck reaches into his desk, pulls out a smooth wooden bangle, a black skull pyrographed in the middle. “Bring this to your mom. I made it. Tell her I was thinking of her when I did it.”

Tack knows she’d love it. That has always been her thing, pretty skulls, dark kitsch. He snatches it from Mr. Chuck’s desk and aims for the door. He’ll give it to her maybe, but he won’t tell her where it came from. It’ll be from him.

“And tell her...” Mr. Chuck’s words die in the air, and Tack grips the bracelet hard against his fingernail splinter, shooting pain all the way up behind his eyeballs. Don’t say it, Tack wills at this burn-out teacher who has no business knowing his momma but is probably better than most of the others. “Just tell her that, you know, she’s the coolest big badass gal I’ve ever known.”

Tack positions the bracelet over his knuckles, and then he rushes Mr. Chuck. He punches him in the eye too fast for him to lift a hairy arm in defense. The wooden bangle snaps and falls at the howling man’s feet.

Mr. Chuck whimpers from the floor. On his way out, Tack spies Sylvia Brinks the lesbian still working on her chessboard, sanding a soft song of shushing paper, and even though she pretends not to look, Tack knows she’ll get his story right when she tells the other kids. It’ll spread like lice through this town. They might come for him, but he’ll grow stronger, a darker shadow every time he gets retold.