



BACKWARDS

Todd Mitchell

Part I

Saturday, November 15

Bright-red tulips blooming—that's the first thing I remember. Only they weren't tulips. Their petals were drops of crimson, sinking into bathwater. It hit me that the drops must be coming from somewhere. Then I saw his wrists, and I realized that the red was blood. I didn't feel any revulsion or sadness. Instead, I was struck by how bright the drops swirling in the water looked. I wanted him to move his arms so there could be more pretty blossoms—a whole tub full of tulips, flashy as springtime—but he merely let his arms fall beneath the surface, coming to rest on his legs and turning the water pink. So much for art.

He wasn't naked. That seemed strange to me. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, and sneakers, all of which were soaked. It didn't look very comfortable—wearing wet jeans and shoes in a tub like that. He let his head rest on the porcelain edge, which also didn't look comfortable, and a small, rectangular blade slipped from his hand. Then he shifted, knocking several shampoo bottles over. His brow creased. Perhaps he wondered if he should pick up the mess, but he must have realized that his hands would drip blood onto the floor, so he left the bottles where they lay and closed his eyes.

Once he did that, I was able to get a little distance from him and hover above his body. If he was aware of my presence, he gave no sign of it. He was tall and gawky—too big for the tub, so his legs peaked like a child's drawing of mountains and his shoulders hunched. Pink water lapped halfway up his shirt, but his hair and face were still dry, and the knees of his jeans looked dry as well. I thought it must frustrate him not to be able to submerge his whole body in the warmth of the water. He seemed young—seventeen or eighteen—so it probably hadn't been that long ago when he'd been able to stretch out fully in the bathtub. I wondered if it surprised him when he discovered he didn't fit anymore.

An open bottle of aspirin lay beside the tub, and a

few white pills had spilled across the floor, dissolving in a puddle near the shampoo bottles. I pictured him downing a handful of aspirin before opening the package of razor blades. His sweatshirt was draped over the toilet seat like a tablecloth with two car keys resting in the center on a yellow sticky note. FOR TEAGAN the note said in blocky letters, slightly smeared.

He stirred and I felt a tug, as if I were a kite being jerked back to earth. He glanced through heavy lids at the pen on the edge of the sink. I didn't have much trouble guessing his thoughts—he wanted to write more on the note or write another, longer note. That's what he was supposed to do, right? Leave a note? But it was too late now because his shoes and jeans and shirt were already wet, and if he got out of the tub to get the pen and more paper, he'd drip pink puddles everywhere.

With a frustrated sigh, he lay back. Maybe he was crying, although I didn't see any tears. I had a hard time feeling sympathy for him. After all, what sort of person only leaves behind a sticky note with two smudged words and a set of keys? The whole scene really started to depress me. I tried to pull away and escape from the room, but I was yanked back again.

"What the hell, Dan!" called a girl's voice. The door-knob rattled. "Are you taking a bath? It's almost noon."

So the guy in the tub was named Dan. He struggled to lift one arm, but it flopped back into the water. His face looked as pale as the tile walls.

"I need to take my contacts out," continued the girl. "They itch."

Dan rolled his head from side to side and muttered a faint protest.

"Fine. Have it your way." The girl left, only to return a minute later to rattle the doorknob again. "You better not be naked," she warned.

After several seconds of rattling, the lock clicked and the door swung open. The girl stood in the doorway, holding the screwdriver she must have used to jimmy the lock.

Despite her dyed-black hair, slight frame, and pierced nose and eyebrow, the resemblance between her and Dan was striking. They both had high cheekbones and hazel eyes. Seeing his sister, I realized that Dan might be considered handsome, although right now he looked about as appealing as curdled milk.

The girl's expression darkened as she took in the scene. Dan's eyes had closed. If he was still conscious, he was doing his best not to look it.

"Very funny," muttered the girl. She must have thought Dan was pulling a prank on her. "If Mom saw you, she'd lose her shit." The girl shoved his shoulder,

but he didn't respond. "*Dan?*" she said, faintly at first. "Dan. Dan!"

Her toughness came apart like tissue paper as it dawned on her that he wasn't faking. Then her face creased and her mouth twitched. I hated seeing her break down, but I couldn't leave. I couldn't even look away while she collapsed, uttering a fragmented prayer of "God" and "Mom" and "Please."

My sense of things got blurry after that. I saw Dan's mom arrive. She fought back her initial horror and attempted to pull her gawky son out of the tub, but she couldn't lift him. She finally settled for raising his arms out of the water and wrapping his wrists in towels. Her face looked brittle. In a way, her choked reaction bothered me more than the sister's cries.

"Call an ambulance," said the mom, but the girl didn't move. "Teagan, call an ambulance!" she repeated.

The girl still wouldn't move, so the mom went to get a phone herself. Her voice sounded strangely detached, as if she refused to accept what she was saying.

After stating the necessary details, the mom returned with yellow dish towels. Dan's wrists had slipped back into the water in her absence, and the bath towels were soaking wet. She wrapped the new towels around the old ones, but it did little to keep the blood in. Still, she held the wet towels tight to Dan's wrists until the ambulance arrived.

The paramedics rang the doorbell several times before the mom went to let them in. Teagan stayed in the bathroom, frozen. One of the paramedics, a tall guy with a shaved head, had to physically drag her out so they'd have room to work in the cramped space.

I watched them step into the tub and hoist up Dan's body. The tall paramedic banged his knee on the tub spout and cursed. Pink water splashed onto the bath rug and spilled across the floor into the white-carpeted hall. The mess was tremendous now. I felt myself growing angry at Dan for causing it. It wasn't simply the stains on the floor that upset me, but the way his actions would affect his mom and sister, staining their lives, too.

The paramedics lay his body on the floor. Then the shorter one jogged to the truck, tracking bloody water everywhere, while the tall one put tourniquets on Dan's arms, cut through his jeans, and attempted to insert an IV. He asked how many aspirin Dan had taken. No one knew the answer.

By this point, I had to struggle to stay focused, but I kept watching because of the mom and the sister. I wished I could do something for them.

The tall paramedic pushed a gurney into the hall, but he couldn't get it through the bathroom door. They had to drag Dan's body out to load him up. Then they strapped him on. I doubted he had much of a pulse anymore. His

pale limbs jiggled as they rushed to wheel him to the ambulance.

Once outside, I tried to drift away. I wanted to float into the overcast sky and be free of this whole mess, but the images of what I'd seen became tight and heavy, tugging me back toward Dan. No matter how much I fought, I kept getting dragged closer to his pale, limp body. His bloodless lips neared, and he drew in a last feeble breath, drawing me in as well. Darkness surrounded me. I struggled, but there was no escape. When his breathing stopped, it felt like the door to a windowless room had slammed shut.

It was Saturday, November 15, but I didn't know that. I wouldn't understand the strange countdown of days that formed my existence until later. All I knew then was that I was alive, alone, and trapped in the body of a dead person.

Night

The first night was long—a gray, indefinite expanse of time. I couldn't see, hear, or feel anything. So I huddled, not moving, if a bodiless entity can be said to huddle. In my imagination at least, that's how I saw myself, my nonexistent arms wrapped around my nonexistent legs—a genie trapped in a jar for who knows how long.

There was no way to judge the passing of time. No change or differentiation between one moment and the next. No forwards or backwards. Just a vast gray nothingness. Until a scream broke in.

Friday, November 14

The scream tore through the darkness, trailing a stream of sunlight. I tried following the light out, but something kept me anchored. Looking down, I saw Dan's body in bed. He slapped the alarm clock with a meaty hand, then scratched the stubble on his cheek. Both his wrists appeared fine now—not a scratch or bandage on them. There wasn't even a scar where the cuts had been. That surprised me. Although his skin had a pinkish hue to it and he was breathing, in my memory he remained dead as a squirrel squished on the road.

I fought to pull away, but I was trapped inside him. Then the alarm screeched again. Dan buried his head beneath his

pillow. Brilliant. You'd think that when an alarm is blaring, the sensible thing would be to turn it off and go back to sleep. Instead, he kept pulling more blankets over his head. He even grabbed a sweatshirt off the floor and bundled it across his ears. The guy was like a tortoise trying to bury himself in dirty laundry. This went on for *way* too long, until someone pounded the wall and a voice I recognized as his sister's told him to "Wake the hell up!"

Dan fumbled blindly with the alarm's buttons for nearly a minute before dragging his head out from under his pillow and finding the switch. Then he sat up and rubbed his eyes. I hoped he would shower, because his hair reeked of stale smoke.

I sank into him, wondering why he smelled like the wrong side of a bonfire. The deeper I got, the more I could sense what he sensed. I heard his heart thumping inside his chest and felt the weight of his body on his bones. Beneath all those physical sensations, though, whispered something else. His thoughts, maybe? There were so many whispers braided together, it sounded like a river rushing over rocks. I drifted closer until the whispers swirled around me, tugging at me, but I couldn't discern what any one whisper said. There was just this general sense of his mood. He seemed irritated and sleepy.

I felt better keeping my distance from the whispers. With effort, I stretched my awareness far enough away

so that I could almost perceive Dan from the outside. He slouched on the edge of a bed that was set against one wall of a mostly bare room. There was a desk, a dresser, and a few shelves with books and some dusty football trophies on them. Drifts of wrinkled clothes cluttered the floor. I tried to look at the few posters decorating the walls, but most of what I saw, heard, smelled, and felt continued to be directed by him—as if I were stuck in a car, and all I could do was move around a little and watch things go by while he drove. He stared at a calendar hanging on the wall beside his bed. The top part showed a photo of a gazelle jumping over a crocodile. Below this it said *COURAGE: the ability to do something stupid and run like hell.*

All the days on the calendar were blank, except for a cluster toward the end of the month that had been circled with *Thanksgiving break—visit Dad* scrawled across them. Dan reached for the calendar, and his whispering thoughts grew louder and more anxious. For a moment, I expected him to count the days until Thanksgiving break or turn the page to look at December, but then he seemed to come to a decision. He lowered his hand and turned away. The whispers gradually subsided as he shuffled down the hall toward the bathroom.

I cringed when he reached for the bathroom door. I didn't want to see the puddles of blood, dissolving pills, and sickly pink stains on the rug again. No matter how

I fought to get away from there, though, it made no difference. I couldn't leave, and I couldn't stop him from walking. I couldn't even close his eyes or make him look in a different direction.

Dan pushed open the bathroom door and flicked on a light, blinking at the stark floor tiles and bright-white tub.

The bathroom wasn't exactly clean, yet compared to the bloody mess I expected, it appeared immaculate. No blood stained the rug or tiles, and there were no pills on the floor. Even the shampoo bottles Dan had knocked over were back in place.

Dan slid off his boxers and stepped into the shower. The cold tub stung his feet, but the water soon warmed, pelting his back with hot drops. He moved mechanically, rubbing shampoo into his hair. A tangy-sweet scent of grapefruit and bubble gum filled his senses while warmth trickled down his spine. I focused on the physical sensations, marveling at how all the tiny hairs on his arm lined up as water streamed over his muscles and pooled around his toes. However I got here, it felt amazing to exist, but Dan seemed indifferent to it all. Dead to the world.

He shut off the water, toweled himself dry, and got out. Then he went about his morning business, oblivious to me riding around inside him. Without access to his thoughts, he seemed like a walking corpse. A zombie.

I watched Dan dry his hair, put gel in it, wet it again, then gel it again, until he finally gave up and doused himself with way too much cologne.

“You done plucking your nose hairs yet?” called a familiar voice through the door.

“Just a minute.”

“Come on, Dan. You’re taking forever. I need to get ready.”

He ran his fingers through his hair one last time and opened the door.

The girl who’d discovered his bleeding body in the tub stood on the other side with her hands braced on her hips. She raised her chin and jutted out her bony elbows like a hedgehog trying to appear bigger.

“All yours,” he said, avoiding her gaze.

Teagan sniffed. “It smells like a country club in here.” She nodded at the bottle of cologne by the sink. “Have you been drinking that stuff again?”

I laughed, but Dan didn’t. “Very funny,” he grumbled.

Teagan crinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue. I was beginning to like her. In spite of her heavy black eyeliner, she appeared childish and nervous. I remembered how she’d come apart when she discovered her brother’s suicide. Beneath her insults and tough posturing, I saw the opposite—a girl who cared so much it scared her.

Dan didn't appear to notice any of this, though. He blew past Teagan and shuffled into the kitchen to pour himself a bowl of cereal.

Watching him spill cereal on the counter and dribble milk down the side of the carton repulsed me. Then the crunching. Slurping. Swallowing. The zombie seemed barely conscious of what he did. He ate out of habit, shoveling soggy bites into his mouth.

His mom bustled about the kitchen, but Dan didn't say a word to her. She wore a starched white blouse and business slacks. Although a little on the heavy side, she was still fairly attractive, with pale-green eyes and dark hair cut in a stylish bob. She held a bagel in one hand and a sponge in the other, eating while she wiped up the mess that Dan had made on the countertop. Then she put away the cereal box and the milk he'd left out.

"Will you go to the grocery store after school?" she asked, brushing crumbs off the table in front of Dan.

He didn't respond.

"Are you listening?"

"Yeah," he said, sounding like she'd interrupted him in the middle of composing a symphony. "You want me to go today?"

"Yes, today," said his mom. "We don't have anything for dinner." She tossed the sponge into the sink and dug

through her purse, pulling out a credit card. "Here. Just get what's on the list. Can you do that?"

"Yeah," repeated Dan. A caveman could have been more articulate.

"You have to make sure to get angel hair pasta, not the regular kind. And don't buy avocados if they're not ripe."

He took the card and set it on the counter.

His mom hesitated. Then she picked up the list and credit card and stuffed them into the front pocket of his backpack. "So you don't forget them," she said.

Teagan strolled into the kitchen a moment later and poured herself a cup of coffee. Their mom watched her—a mix of concern and disapproval playing across her face.

"You need to eat something for breakfast," she said.

"That cereal tastes like dog food," replied Teagan.

"I thought you liked this cereal."

Teagan rolled her eyes and sipped her coffee.

"At least eat something healthy at school."

"Are maggots healthy?" asked Teagan. "Because that's what they serve. Tricia found a maggot in her rice."

Their mom checked her watch and cursed. "I'm late," she said, turning to Dan. "Think you can give your sister a ride today?"

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not taking Teagan," Dan said in a quiet monotone.

"Why not?" questioned their mom, looking from Dan to Teagan. "Last time I checked, you both went to the same school."

"He doesn't want me to embarrass him in front of his friends," Teagan said.

"That's right," Dan replied. "Stay away from my friends."

Teagan's jaw clenched. She tried to look angry, but from the way her shoulders dropped, I could tell that Dan's words had hurt her. I wanted to punch him for being such a jerk. "Some of your friends are nice to me, you know," she said.

"Like who?"

"Like Finn."

Dan glared at his sister. "Don't talk to Finn."

"You can't tell me who to talk to."

"I mean it, Teagan."

"Why—jealous? Afraid he'll like me more than you?"

Dan scowled. "He probably only talked to you to make fun of you."

Teagan slammed her coffee cup onto the counter. "You're such a prick," she spat, and stormed out of the room.

Their mom sighed. I sensed this wasn't the first time

fight like this had happened. “I don’t understand why you can’t be nicer to her,” she said to Dan. “She looks up to you.”

“She shouldn’t,” he said.

Their mom grabbed her purse. “Teagan, you ready? Get in the car. We’re leaving.”

On the way to school, I kept thinking about how cruel Dan had been to Teagan. *You really are a prick*, I said to him, but if he heard me, he didn’t show it. He just ground his teeth and drove, barely looking at the buildings we passed or the leaves swirling along the sidewalk in the fall breeze.

After a few minutes, he pulled into the parking lot of a building that looked like a prison — brick walls the color of bread, slit-thin windows too narrow to crawl out of, and a complete lack of landscaping. Welcome to Jefferson High.

Dan turned off his car and stared at the front entrance, where his mom had probably dropped Teagan off just minutes before. In fact, Teagan was still there, standing near the flagpole to the left of the main doors, talking to a large girl in a billowy black skirt and black T-shirt. Dan didn’t pay much attention to his sister, though. Instead, he focused on a cluster of students gathered around a bell hanging from a bright orange archway.

Most of the guys huddled by the bell wore varsity jackets and baseball caps. They laughed and punched

each other's shoulders while a few girls lingered nearby. As I watched, it became clear that they all orbited around one guy in the center. He had straight hair swept casually across his brow and a lazy smile. Whenever he talked, everyone seemed to lean in and listen. I wondered what he said to captivate people's attention like that. Then the first bell sounded and students funneled inside.

The guy with the lazy smile caught Teagan's eye as she turned to enter. He said something to her and she smiled back, looking happier than I'd seen her all morning. Dan dug his fingers into his thighs, seeming upset by this, but I had the opposite reaction. *Good*, I thought. *At least someone's nice to her.*

School wasn't much fun. No one greeted Dan when he arrived, and a few people even snickered or whispered as he passed. The zombie shuffled on, ignoring them. Once he got to his first class, he tossed his backpack to the floor and slumped in the back row.

The second bell sounded and announcements were made. Then the teacher began class. After a few minutes, Dan nodded off. Asleep, he didn't do much to distract me, so I had time to question some of the things I'd seen that morning, starting with *Why isn't Dan dead?*

For that matter, what am I doing here? I wondered. *And who am I? And why can't I remember anything before waking up in the tub?*

More questions poured out, quick as water flowing through a crack in a dam, each one making the breach a little larger.

Am I supposed to be here? How long will this last?

The questions kept coming—a clamoring flood of unknowns. I had no answers to silence them. Nothing solid to cling to. It felt like my whole being might unravel and drown in uncertainty.

Am I crazy?

Dan snapped awake, perhaps sensing my panic.

He looked around, but no one seemed to be watching him. Then he rubbed the drool from the corners of his mouth and tapped his pen against his thumb. I focused on the sting of the plastic on his knuckle. The sharp, definitive sensation calmed me. It seemed to calm Dan as well. After a few minutes, he stopped tapping and dozed off again.

This time I narrowed my focus to one question. *Why am I here?* That seemed like a good place to start, because if I could figure out why I was here, then the answers to my other questions might fall into place.

I sorted through everything I remembered. The drops of blood turning the bathwater pink. Dan's body going limp. His sister and mom watching, distraught, while the paramedics wheeled him out. And then this morning he looked fine, like his death had never happened. Everything

was back to normal. Only it wasn't normal, was it? Things felt off. Out of place. So maybe I was supposed to fix something. That could be the reason I was here.

Class ended and Dan shuffled to a different room. He didn't talk with anyone in the hall. For most of the morning, he just zoned out in various classrooms, giving me time to think. Who knows—maybe he was thinking, too.

Dan didn't perk up until lunch. His chest tightened and his palms grew sweaty as he approached the avocado-green cafeteria. Apparently, food made him nervous. Students crowding the long white tables chattered noisily, and the air smelled of grilled cheese and chicken soup. The zombie stared at a table near the front where several guys I recognized from outside the school sat.

Were these his friends? Outwardly, he looked similar to some of them with their muscular arms, tight polo shirts, and athletic builds. He even had a varsity jacket like them, although he'd left it in his locker. Then the guy with the lazy smile who'd been nice to Teagan noticed Dan and waved.

I wanted to sit with him, but Dan's gaze slid to another table across the room where Teagan sat. After a few seconds, I realized he wasn't looking at his sister but at a girl with dark purple hair sitting across from her. His stomach fluttered and his heart began to race. I grew anxious as well, only it was a good anxious.

Even from a distance, several things about the girl

stood out. There was her hair, of course, colored a vivid dark eggplant shade, and her clothes—forest-green shirt, purple skirt that matched her hair, and striped leggings. And there were her eyes, intense yet wistful. Other people at the table kept looking at her, but she avoided meeting anyone's gaze. Instead, she looked at her hands and the door and the wall, appearing slightly removed from the rest of the students, as if she were the only person rendered in color in a black-and-white world and she was slightly embarrassed by this fact. For a moment, I thought the zombie might actually sit with her. Then she stood, set her tray on the stack by the trash, and headed for the side doors.

I wanted to follow her. Luckily, Dan seemed intrigued by her as well. He hurried out the back doors of the cafeteria, arriving just in time to catch her turning down a hall.

Dan looked over his shoulder warily before heading after her. The hall she'd taken was lined with student drawings. WHO WE ARE: SELF-PORTRAIT ASSIGNMENT read a banner hanging across the entrance. The girl paused near the end. She reached up for one of the drawings, only it was hung too high. She could barely touch the bottom inch or so.

"Cat," Dan said.

The girl startled. Her eyes flicked to his and narrowed.

"What are you doing?" Dan asked.

“Taking this down,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want people to see it anymore.”

Dan looked at the drawing. Most of the portraits decorating the hall were distorted charcoal sketches. A few took more rigid approaches, capturing an accurate self-image. But the one Cat reached for blew them all away.

Instead of a close-up of her face, Cat had drawn several versions of herself sitting around a table, having a tea party. She was a girl in a fluffy dress, sipping her tea at the head of the table, and she was the figure next to her in a jaunty top hat, looking slightly deranged as she poured cream into an overflowing cup. A small mouse version of herself peeked out of a teapot in the middle of the table, appearing wet and sad, one mouse ear flopping over her eye. Last of all, she was in the foreground, depicted as a girl with bunny ears looking away from the viewer, the jaw-length cut of her hair clearly matching Cat’s own. Hovering above the scene, like a horizontal crescent moon, floated a bright disembodied grin.

While everyone else had drawn shallow surface images, Cat had portrayed something far deeper. Fragments of herself, hidden in herself. A sudden, inexplicable sense of connection came over me.

Dan checked the hall before he spoke. “Did the cops catch you last night?” he asked.

“No.” Cat stopped peeling her portrait off the wall and looked down.

He studied her. A few freckles dotted her nose, and a diagonal scar ran like a small lightning bolt through the crease above her mouth. The thin, jagged scar made her top lip the tiniest bit crooked. I found this one imperfection to be unexpectedly beautiful. *She* was beautiful, although she didn’t appear to know it. Instead, she seemed self-conscious. Perhaps she thought Dan was staring at her scar in a negative way, yet that wasn’t how I saw it at all.

For me, the scar was one more sign of how different she was. And how brave. I wondered if every smile for her required a small act of defiance—a refusal to succumb to the scar that she thought marred her face. And I wanted to kiss her then. To kiss that perfect scar above her lip.

“Sorry about the house,” Dan said, jarring me out of my thoughts. He sounded nervous. Maybe he’d been distracted by thoughts of kissing her, too. After all, he *had* been staring at her lips. “If the cops question you, you can blame everything on me. I don’t care. I’ll tell them it was an accident.”

“Like it was an accident that you were there?” replied Cat.

“I was trying to help you.”

“I don’t need your help. You think you know me, Dan, but you don’t.”

That's not true, I whispered. I wanted to tell her that I knew her the way a bird knows the wind. The way a fish knows the river. The way a leaf turns to the sun no matter where it is in the sky. But only Dan got to speak.

"That's not true," he muttered.

Cat shook her head. "I can't talk to you anymore."

"Because of what happened at the house?"

"Because of everything."

"Cat, it's not what you think—"

"How do you know what I think?" she interrupted. "I remember more now. About what happened. What *you* did. Am I just a game to you? A broken trophy to add to your shelf?"

"What?" Dan hesitated. "No," he said, but his whispers increased, taking on guilty tones. *Had* she been a game to him?

Anger gripped me. Somehow he'd hurt her, and now he was making it worse. Hurting her more.

Cat must have caught Dan's hesitation as well. "Tell me this," she challenged. "Why now? Why did you suddenly become interested in me now?"

"I've always been interested in you."

"Bullshit."

"It's true," he said. "Do you remember in sixth grade, after my dad left and your mom left, those sessions we had to go to? You were the only one who really got it. The

only one who understood what I was going through. I've never been able to talk with anyone like that."

"Then why did you stop talking to me? For years, you barely said a word to me."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just—"

"I know why," she said. "You don't have to lie about it. It must have been hard being so popular." She bit her lip. It occurred to me that none of the versions of herself she'd drawn had her scar. In her portrait, she'd erased that part of herself.

"I can't believe how naive I was," she continued. "When you asked me to the party, I thought you might actually like me."

"I do," he said.

"You sure have a funny way of showing it."

"Look, about what happened . . . I know it's my fault."

"That's a stupid thing to say."

"But it's true," Dan said. "I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*?" A hurt laugh escaped Cat. "Is that supposed to make it better? I should smile now and forget it?"

"No."

"Good. Because I can't forget it. I won't." She drew a shaky breath. "Don't you get it, Dan? I don't want to see you ever again."

"Cat—" The zombie reached for her.

"*Don't touch me*," she said. "I mean it. Don't be nice to

me. Don't give me things. Don't even look at me. If you care about me at all, you'll leave me the fuck alone."

She glared at Dan, her intense gaze burning into him. Then her eyes softened slightly around the edges. My hopes surged. Irrational as it might seem, I felt she could see me, trapped within him. Why else would she stare at him like that after telling him to leave her alone? The zombie's pulse sped up. It was dizzying. Then Cat seemed to remember herself, and her anger at Dan.

She turned and yanked down her portrait. The corners ripped but she didn't stop. She crumpled up the drawing and retreated down the hall.

I wanted to call to her and tell her I understood—not simply the things she said, but the things she couldn't say. I would have given anything to be able to talk, but she kept going, disappearing around the corner. And the zombie didn't move.

For the rest of the day, I couldn't stop thinking about Cat. Whenever Dan changed classes, I clung to the hope that I'd see her again. I think he was looking for her, too. When his last class ended, he checked the hallways where the lockers were and circled the school a couple times, but there was no sign of her. He finally shuffled across the empty parking lot and drove home.

He didn't do much after that—just watched some TV until Teagan returned. Then he hid in his bedroom and searched the Internet, but I didn't pay attention to him. I kept imagining what I'd say to Cat if I could talk to her. How I'd chisel through the walls that kept us apart.

Eventually, the zombie flopped on his bed and stared at the wall. Just as he'd done that morning, he stretched his hand toward the calendar, only this time, he lifted the bottom pages. Two words had been etched into the dry-wall. No wonder he'd hung the calendar there. If his mom saw what he'd done, she'd freak. He dragged his fingers across the words, feeling the rough grooves and cuts that formed them. It wasn't until he pulled his hand back that I was able to read what they said:

SAVE HER

A shiver coursed through me. Or maybe it went through Dan and I was sensing his reaction. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that the message was meant for me.

The garage door pulled Dan out of his daze. He pressed the calendar back so it covered the words and listened to the sounds of his mom hanging up her coat. Her footsteps grew louder, stopping outside his door.

"Dan, where are the groceries?" she asked.

"I didn't have time to get them," Dan shouted back.

"I asked you to do one thing."

"It's no big deal. I'll go now."

His mom groaned. "It's too late . . ." Her voice receded, muttering to no one about how she was tired of having to handle everything on her own.

I felt bad for her. She didn't seem mean, just overwhelmed. The words beneath the calendar came back to me. *SAVE HER*. Except who did the "her" refer to? His mom? Teagan? Cat? And how was he supposed to save them? He couldn't even get the groceries.

Dan paced his room and glanced at the calendar again. Then he pulled out his cell phone, scrolled through the names to *DAD*, and hit *CALL*.

"Danny?" answered a man's voice.

"Hi, Dad."

"Listen, I can't talk right now. We're sitting down for dinner."

"Okay," said Dan.

There was an awkward pause.

"So is everything all right?" the voice on the other end asked.

"Yeah. I just . . . wanted to see how the weather is there," said Dan. "See what I should pack."

"It's pretty much always the same here."

"Sunny and seventy?"

"Blue skies every day," replied his dad.

"Nice," said Dan. "I can't wait to go outside and have some guy time."

Dan's dad didn't respond right away. In the background, I heard two young children calling for attention. I pictured him fending off chipper, well-adjusted kids. "Well," he started, returning to the phone, "it won't just be us guys. Marcy and the girls will be here, too."

"I know. But maybe we can go out alone sometime. Get away from things."

"On *Thanksgiving*?" replied his dad.

"Maybe another day?"

"We'll see." His dad sounded tired. "Keep in mind I have to work, okay? I don't get all those days off like you do. Speaking of which, I heard you got suspended."

"Who told you that?"

"Your mom mentioned it."

"Oh."

"Is that why you're not at football right now?" asked his dad. "They keeping you benched for a week?"

"No. I quit football."

"What do you mean you quit?" The phone crackled and the kids' voices faded. I pictured Dan's dad retreating to another room. "You're starting receiver," he continued in a terse, staccato voice. "You can't quit."

"It's just a game," said Dan.

“No, it’s not. Colleges really look at this stuff.”

“I wasn’t good enough for college ball.”

“That’s not the point,” said his dad. “It’s about being well-rounded. Showing character. Your team depends on you, Dan.”

Dan didn’t say anything for several seconds.

His dad groaned. “Here’s what you need to do. Call your coach. Tell him you changed your mind. Beg him to let you back.”

“I can’t,” said Dan.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to be on the team anymore.”

“Dammit, Dan. If you blow this, you won’t get a second chance. It will haunt you for the rest of your life. Understand?”

Dan slumped on his bed. “Yeah.”

“You’re smart enough to know better. Stuff like this goes on your transcript. It stays with you. Financial aid is very competitive. Even little things can mean the difference between being accepted into a good college and being rejected.”

“I know.”

“You can’t afford to mess up.”

“I know.”

“You’re better than this.”

Silence.

“So will you call your coach?”

“I guess.”

“Good,” said his dad. A kid’s high-pitched squeal in the background turned to crying. “I should get going.”

“Okay.” Another long pause. “Hey, Dad?”

“Yeah?” The hollow reply sounded just like Dan’s own. No mystery where the zombie had gotten his gift for communication from. The kid’s cries grew louder.

“Nothing,” said Dan. “I just wanted to say good-bye.”

“Bye, Danny.”

Dan ended the call and stared at his computer. I could hear his mom leaving for the grocery store. A few minutes later, Dan snuck into the garage. He pulled a dusty toolbox off the shelf and rifled through a mess of screwdrivers, scissors, and other tools until he found a yellow package of single-edge razor blades—like the ones I’d seen in the bathroom after he slit his wrists.

All at once, things started to make sense. The events I remembered and the events from today began to shift and fall into place. It wasn’t that Dan’s death hadn’t happened. It was that it hadn’t happened *yet*.

Dan pocketed the blades and turned to his car—an old two-door coupe that was supposed to look sporty but with its faded paint job and rusty wheel wells just looked sad. He started the engine. The garage door was closed, which made me think he might asphyxiate himself. Part

of me hoped he would, so I could be free of this whole mess. But after a couple minutes, Dan turned off the car and pulled out the keys. He pried them off the key chain. They were the same two beat-up keys I'd seen on the sticky note with FOR TEAGAN written on it.

Dan popped open the hood of the car. He stared at the engine for several seconds, then did what he could—checked the fluids, dug out a dirty funnel from a box on the shelf and added a quart of oil, touched a few belts, and wiped some grime off the battery with a rag. Satisfied, he let the hood fall shut.

In that moment, I almost liked him. I think he wanted to do something good, and in his mixed-up mind, I suppose leaving his sister his car was that. Granted, she'd probably never drive the damn thing. She'd probably even hate looking at it and remembering that he'd given it to her, because now I knew, with complete certainty, that tomorrow — my yesterday — Dan would kill himself.

Backwards

Todd Mitchell

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