

THE OTHER
SIDE
OF
PERFECT

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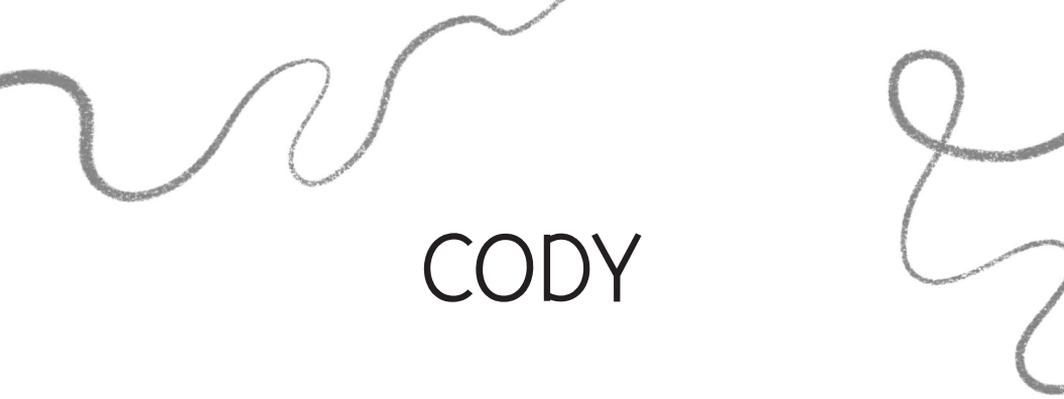
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CODY

Cody stares at his father's hands.

The hands tell how Dad is feeling. They let Cody know if trouble is coming. That's why he pays attention to them.

So far, things seem fine. The hands are busy, carrying a piece of pizza to his mouth. It's dinnertime. The two of them sit at the small kitchen table under the bare bulb.

Dad slides the last slice of pizza into his mouth, like a sheet of drywall into a truck bed. His jaws chomp up and down. His hands hover in front of his mouth. He licks them and wipes them on his jeans. He grabs the can of beer and lifts it to his mouth. He slurps, chews, swallows.

The pizza box is empty. Cody wants to get up, but the table is jammed against the wall, and he's jammed into the corner seat.

He can't leave until Dad does. And Dad isn't moving. He's drinking and talking.

He's telling another story about a guy named Joe from work.

"Did I ever tell you about Joe and the elevator?" he says, belching.

Cody shakes his head—which is a lie. Dad doesn't have many stories. He's told the elevator one before. It takes a few minutes. Cody tunes out.

The kitchen counter and floor are getting dirty. Cody reminds himself to clean tomorrow, while Dad is out. Dad says cleaning is for girls. Once he caught Cody on his knees washing the kitchen floor and kicked him. Hard. "Don't ever let me catch you doing that again," he said. Now Cody cleans in secret. Does Dad think a mysterious girl sneaks in? Does he even notice?

He's reached the point in the story where Joe steps into the elevator shaft without realizing that the elevator isn't there.

"They're all like that. It's the firewater."

Dad tosses away the empty beer can and goes on with the story. Cody knows what happened. Joe saved himself by grabbing the elevator cable and swinging to safety on the floor below. Which always struck Cody as cool and athletic. But Dad likes to make fun of Joe.

He's laughing now, his hands open on the table. They're like huge shovels, tanned brown, rough skinned. Knuckles like walnuts. Dirt under the nails.

There's a thin wedding ring on the left hand, the nearer one. Cody can't help smiling at the idea of Dad getting married. Wearing the suit, standing at the altar, saying the words,

kissing the bride. It's a funny picture. Dad and Mom getting married. Dad and Mom kissing. Dad and Mom doing anything together that didn't involve yelling or throwing things.

Funny. The way choking to death on dessert is funny. The way drowning in a bathtub is funny. The way being crushed by a piñata full of candy is funny. Something that should be good for you, that should be nice, something you look forward to—that thing turning out to be horrible.

Not funny *ha ha*. Funny *oooooh*.

“What are you smiling at?”

Cody snaps to attention. What's happening? What has he missed?

Dad's chair is away from the table. He's frowning like a thunderhead. His hands are on his thighs. Uh-oh.

“I was just, uh, thinking about Joe and the, uh, elevator.”

“I finished that story. Now I'm talking about me getting fired and Joe keeping his job. Joe telling me it's too bad I'm behind on rent. A drunken Indian feeling sorry for me. Think that's funny? Do you? Do you think that's funny?”

“I don't. I—”

“You got rocks in your head? Huh? Rocks in there, dumb-bell? Dumbhead? Bonehead? Dumb—rock—bone—”

He starts to sputter.

Cody is frightened. But Dad talking gibberish about bones

and rocks and bells is actually funny. Can you be scared and amused at the same time?

Yes. Yes, you can.

But not for long.

Cody stops laughing when his dad hits him.

“Don’t laugh at me!”

His face is as red as his hair. Fire red. His hands are not open anymore. They are clenched into fists. The one that hits Cody is the one with the wedding ring. It snaps super fast. Like a snake. Like a mousetrap. It catches him on the cheek—once, twice. His head rings like a bell. A dumbbell. *Ding-dong*. Cody sprawls against the back of his chair. Dad pulls him away from the table and hits him again. And again. Left fist, right fist.

“You laughing now?” he shouts. “Are you? Are you laughing?”

He pushes Cody into the living room. Cody staggers and falls to his hands and knees. He isn’t as scared as he was a minute ago. It’s too late for scared.

Dad’s never been this mad before. Cody knows he should do something. But what? No point in fighting. Dad weighs three times as much as him, and it isn’t all fat and beer. Dad’s arms are mostly muscle, with those huge fists at the end. What to do?

Apart from not laughing, that is.

Cody's mind is not racing. It's drifting. Like a scene in the movies that's slow motion and out of focus. What to do?
Whaaat toooo dooo?

There's Dad's fist at the end of his arm. Which makes it about an arm's length away. Here it comes. Now Cody's lying on his back.

There's Dad's shoe on the end of his leg. Which makes it about a leg's length away. Is that a thing?

Cody turns his head. There's the door. Think about that.

Think about going out the door. Think about doing that.

Here comes the shoe. Cody's world goes black.



AUTUMN

Autumn was scared.

It was a heart-pounding, cold-sweating, hands-shaking, bone-deep terror. She literally felt like her heart was going to pound out of her chest. That couldn't really happen, right?

God, she felt like she was about to have a heart attack. Maybe someone would find her, draped across her bed like some old-timey movie star in those black-and-white films her parents loved, dead in the Wonder Woman Underoos she stuffed into the very depths of her top drawer whenever a friend slept over. She could see the obituary now:

Thirteen-year-old girl found dead in her home of apparent heart attack, in superhero underwear, because she was going on her first date and her heart couldn't take the utter stress and anxiety of it all.

Text notifications kept going off. She threw herself across the bed to grab her phone.

Are you almost ready?

Mia. And no. She wasn't. Not unless Connor was okay with her showing up at his place in her underwear. Actually, from what she had heard about him, he probably was.

Oh God.

She had to be there in two hours. It seemed like a huge amount of time, but not in the circles Autumn found herself circulating these days. She was well aware that if she could just throw on a pair of jeans, leave her hair in a messy bun, and wear her glasses instead of the dreaded contact lenses that felt like they were constantly gluing themselves to her eyeballs, she actually *could* be ready in twenty minutes. But the thought of what her friends would say if she showed up without making herself look absolutely perfect, just to hang out at someone's house, catapulted her off the bed and into the shower.

There was a pretty lengthy checklist Autumn followed to get ready every morning, but prepping herself for a party was even more complicated. She shampooed her hair twice and then conditioned with the expensive Aveda conditioner her friends swore made their hair grow two inches a month. She stepped out of the shower, wrapped a blanket-sized bath towel around herself, and leaned across the counter to put her contact lenses in. She still struggled with them. How did anyone *not* blink

uncontrollably when they tried to stick something in their eye? But she had begged and pleaded with her parents to let her try them, and there was no way she was going to wear her dorky glasses outside the house unless she got pink eye or something.

On second thought, she'd definitely stay home if she got pink eye. Something like that could lose you your spot at the lunch table quicker than you could say, "Do you watch *Doctor Who*?"

Thinking of being at the get-together tonight as Connor's date made her suddenly wish for a raging case of pink eye. Probably not how you were supposed to feel about going out with the most popular boy in school.

Autumn studied herself in the mirror. Her face was clear. She thought she had nice eyes. And she'd always liked her long, dark hair, like her mother's. But in middle school, that wasn't enough anymore. Autumn blow-dried her hair in sections with a big round brush, then followed that up with a curling iron to get her stick-straight hair to fall in soft beachy waves on her shoulders. When that was perfect, she opened her makeup bag and started on her face. Her parents hated her wearing makeup, so the trick was to keep it as light and natural as possible. But she was going to a party. And on a date! She had to look especially good tonight. A little tinted moisturizer to make her skin glow. And since it was a party, she brushed some highlighter on her cheekbones and touched her eyelids with a little shadow.

Mascara on her lashes, and a quick slick of pink gloss on her lips. There. She nodded at her reflection.

Last, Autumn had to pick out her clothes. That was probably the most stressful part of getting ready. Autumn had never really been into clothes. She'd be perfectly happy slouching her way to school wearing a Spider-Man T-shirt, flannel pajama pants, and her scuffed Chucks, or throwing on an oversized comfy sweater for a party.

But that's not how girls like Autumn were supposed to dress.

Autumn had somehow managed to become one of the popular kids at her school. She wasn't even sure how it happened. But the popular girls did not wear Spider-Man T-shirts. The popular girls wore designer jeans and cute tops from Forever 21. The popular girls turned heads. And you didn't turn heads in pajama pants and Chucks. You didn't go out with guys like Connor unless you put an extraordinary amount of effort into your appearance.

It was absolutely exhausting being popular.