

THE PARENT LICENSE ■

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The clock in the Licensing Center is the kind they always have at school or the DMV: black digits pimped over a field of white. It tells 3:34 p.m. Seth DeBerg follows the clock's only color, the ceaseless second-hand, with its obvious color of red tape and its bloodletting speed. By now the ice in his McDonald's Diet Coke has melted into a pool of pale brown and there's a ring of sweat worn around the form in his other hand, the PL-514: *Application for Permanent Parent License and Special Adoption Exemption Transfer, Expedited Request*.

Josh tugs on his hand. "How much longer do we have to wait in line?"

"Shhh," Seth says. "You can sit in one of the chairs."

"Can I play Switch?"

"Mmmmmmaybe," Seth says, their private catchphrase. Seth shrugs, pinches Josh's nose. "All right. *Honk*."

Josh tenses like a cat about to sneeze. Then, with a nod to himself, he decides the nose honk was funny and bounces over to the seats against the wall. Then there's a fuzz sound coming through the intercom and the lady behind the glass announces, "now serving number thirty-seven."

"I have a PL-514," Seth tells her. "I was hoping I could do the interview today."

"You mean you didn't mail it?"

"They told me I have to file it in person. And if I did, I could have my Parent Interview the same day."

"That's PL-514A. This is a PL-514B."

“Well, I’m here. Can I file it? Can I have my interview?”

“Assumin’ you *meant* to file a 514B.” The lady of the glass flips it his way and gives him an scanning, insulted look like the hot air under his arms just wafted through the glass, hooked a right at her nose, then surged in a beeline through her nostrils. “You had a death in the family?”

“That’s what it’s for, right?” Seth looks at the clock again and—he could swear—the minute hand now points to 3:33 p.m.

“Two problems,” she says. “The boy in question—Joshua DeBerg—it says on his school file that he was caught drawing a breast during math class...”

“I’ve already talked to his teacher.”

“...and it says *two* breasts.”

“The usual, yeah.”

“This is while he was under your temporary custody?”

“Yeah. But I don’t think—”

“The other problem: you have an incomplete PL-1A dating back to January.”

“I filed that already. It went through. I still have the confirmation email.” Seth slaps the Diet Coke to the counter and the hard paper rim makes a cracking sound.

“That’s nice.” The lady of the glass mashes a button and a form prints in front of him. “You’ll have to fill out another PL-1A. Next?”

Seth plants himself next to Josh and holds the PL-1A against the particle board of the coffee table, writes carefully. Name

of child: Joshua Jacob DeBerg. Sex: male. Age: nine. Race. Race...Josh's mother was Korean-American and his father, like Seth, was white enough to model for a North Face catalog. Seth checks *Asian/Pacific Islander*. After he writes *deceased* under "Previously Licensed Parents (If Applicable)," his phone buzzes. Liz wants to know: how's it going? She told him that morning she would wait for his text with a bottle of champagne on ice. Seth stuffs the phone in his pocket. She'll hate that—it's against the rules not to respond to important texts—but he wants to wait until there's a more definite answer.

The lady of the glass buzzes him over. "Now you'll have to take this to the second floor."

"For the interview, I hope?" Seth cringes. He doesn't like that he has to fill in the blanks himself—on the forms, in conversation, in giving color to the foglike nothingness of the air. But Liz is ready to celebrate their impending engagement and has the champagne on ice, and besides, the guardians whom The System would assign Josh would crush him.

"Mmm. We have a playroom for children under twelve. You can leave little Joe there."

"It's Josh."

"Didn't I say Josh?"

He leads Josh down the hall where the lady of the glass pointed, hooks a right, and finds a playroom. It's more of a loosely-carpeted cell, with a vending machine in one corner and a tube-style television in the other. It's turned, for some reason, to Bloomberg. There is a woman rocking in a chair underneath it, and the ID on her neon lanyard says STATE SUPERVISOR, but she's half-asleep and doesn't rouse when a boy starts shooting Nerf darts at her. Seth looks at him. With that bowl cut and the braille of blackheads across his face, Nerf boy reminds Seth of his 7th grade bully, Terry Smith. It only takes two seconds to

recall the name, but the act of it makes Seth clench his teeth.

Seth always keeps two one-dollar bills in his pocket, so when he sees the vending machine, he hands one to Josh. “In case you want a soda.”

“You don’t let me have sodas at home.”

“It’s illegal. But, I don’t know. Guess it’s legal here.”

“Can we go home right after you’re done?”

“God, I hope so.” Seth looks at the clock. It’s the exact same model, and it’s 3:35 p.m.

In Mrs. Deirdre Levine’s office, his phone buzzes.

You didn’t respond, Liz says. No sex for a week. And the ice is melting.

She uploads a snap of the Argyle Brut. Most of the ice is floating now and the Argyle is leaning against the brim like the ass-end of the Titanic in a wine bucket. He types in:

Nothing yet. Waiting on the interview. I’m on a new floor, though. Progress.

Buzz.

Melting, Seth!!!

Three exclamation points. Def Con 3. He starts typing a response, but gets lost thinking about earlier in their relationship when he thought she was joking about the no-sex rules. She beats him to the buzz. She loves Josh and all, she says, but this is what’s best for him. Isn’t it? Alice is a better mom than she’d

ever be. They've had him for what, five months? And Liz just feels like roommates. With a 9-year-old. What does that say about *Liz*?

There's only time to finger in a thumbs-up emoji in reply. Liz won't like that, but it's too late—Mrs. Deirdre Levine is clopping into the room, stiffening, scanning him. She has cat-eye glasses and wears them without a hint of irony. There's no telling her age, but the pleating around her lips suggests decades of sipping Fiji from a safe distance. She sees the crinkled McDonald's cup in her garbage can and points. "That yours?"

"Uh, yeah." Seth shrugs. "It was Diet."

"You understand that there are to be no fast foods or fast food derivatives once you have your license?"

"So I read."

"Mm-hmm." She sighs, sits, then reads from her monitor. "Mr. Seth DeBerg. You just put in a valid PL-1A...I see we have references on file, blood work, STD tests, interviews with previous sexual partners, character witnesses, tax returns, pay stubs, credit history...it says here that the boy's parents are deceased, hence the form PL-514B. Car accident. Evan and Grace DeBerg."

"Yeah."

"Your siblings?"

"Brother. She was my sister-in-law."

"Mm-hmm. Mr. DeBerg, it's now my responsibility to perform your formal Parent's License Interview. Are you of sound mind, and do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"I do."

“Mm-hmm. Keep in mind, Mr. DeBerg, that if any answer you provide me today is not to my liking, I am duly authorized by the State of New York to deem you unfit as a parent which, in turn, will render you unfit to marry.”

“I understand.”

“Now—first question. What is currently in your refrigerator?”

“My refrigerator?”

“Right now.”

His phone buzzes, no doubt Liz tacking on another week of penance. He smiles at Mrs. Levine, feels for the side buttons through the khaki and culls it silent. “Sorry. My fridge? A water filter, I guess. Milk, cheese, eggs. Leftover soup.”

“Any fresh produce, Mr. DeBerg?”

“Mmmmmmaybe.”

Mrs. Levine looks at him.

“Sorry,” he says. “Just a little joke me and Josh have. Yeah, I think I have some baby carrots in there.”

“And if I were to send an inspector to your home tonight, he would verify every detail?”

Seth clicks his tongue. “Uh—maybe some cold pizza. Leftover macaroni and cheese. Josh likes it.”

Mrs. Levine types something into the computer, double-clicks. “And how do you know the adopted?”

“Josh. We covered that. He’s my nephew.”

“How did you meet your fiancée?”

“Does this really matter—”

“It *all* matters, yes.”

“All right. It was at a bar down on 44th.”

“How often do you drink to excess, Mr. DeBerg?”

“I don’t hang out in bars. Just because I was in a bar in that one instance doesn’t mean I’ll be a bad parent—”

“Mr. DeBerg, we don’t like to use the terms *good or bad* to describe parents. There are simply licensed and unlicensed parents.”

“—well, I don’t drink to get drunk, if that’s what you mean.”

“And when did you have your *first* drink of alcohol?”

“Are you really supposed to ask that?”

“A study once found that parents are likely to gauge the appropriate time to give their children alcohol by when they had *their* first drink.”

“I was eighteen.”

“Mm-hmm,” Mrs. Levine says. “And, at the time, was the legal drinking age thirty-one, as it is now?”

“Twenty-one. But I don’t see how any of this matters if we’re just going to transfer Josh over to my sister—”

“You might have a child one day, Mr. DeBerg. If you get married without a valid and permanent parent license, who’s to say

what will happen?”

“If you say so.”

“What is your sexual orientation, Mr. DeBerg?”

“I have a girlfriend.”

Mrs. Devine looks at him, pulls a bottle of Fiji up to her lips, and never breaks eye contact.

“That means hetero,” Seth says. “They let you ask that?”

“Mr. DeBerg, this is standard procedure. I assure you, there should be no personal overtone to these questions. Now. Including vaginal, oral, and anal sex, how many sexual partners have you had?”

“That seems pretty personal.”

“You can round if you like. Less than 5? Less than 10? Are you, as your appearance suggests, a virgin?”

Seth stiffens. Perhaps that’s a fair assessment—he’s wearing a Dwight Schrute short-sleeve-and-tie combination and still has his work ID clipped to the chest pocket. Junior Sales Associate. *As your appearance suggests*, though. An insult? A question? What? For a moment he wants to snatch the last of the remaining Diet Coke from her garbage can and drink it in front of her, but he can’t. Instead he squeezes the wood arms of the profoundly uncomfortable chair and realizes it’s not child-proof; there’s a nail head sticking out the side. He lets it go. “Not a virgin. Why? Do virgins do better on the State Approval Score?”

“Those numbers are proprietary to the State of New York.” Mrs. Levine looks away from the screen and slides the glasses down to the edge of her nose. He can see her eyes without computer glare now, and they’re foggy and pinkish, permanently sore from the strain of judgment.

“Mrs. Levine, if I can be honest—”

“You’re under oath, Mr. DeBerg, so I expect you to be honest—”

“Turn of phrase. I never thought of myself as the parenting type. I never asked to watch Josh. My sister, Alice—she’s the born parent. I’m sort of a grown-up boy. If you approve me today and authorize the transfer, you’ll be doing what’s best for him.”

“Not to mention serving *your* best interest as well.”

Seth shrugs. “Some situations are win-win.”

“Mr. DeBerg, my job today is to evaluate your potential as a parent, transfer notwithstanding. You say you don’t want children. That may change. Accidents happen. If you get married, however, that means the State of New York has to anticipate you as a potential parent. If you want to be married, you’ll have to stand to this scrutiny no matter what. So—please, let me do my job. Agreed?”

“What if I move to Georgia?”

“Excuse me—what *Georgia*?”

“North of Florida. Georgia. There are no parent licensing requirements there. I Googled it.”

“Nevertheless. It says here, Joe recently had some issues at school. Sketching out portions of the—to put it kindly, the female anatomy.”

“Again—Josh is his name. I saw them. He didn’t draw breasts. He drew four circles. Even those were barely within the lines. It was practically cubist.”

“Is that a *joke*, Mr. DeBerg? You shouldn’t take these concerns lightly.”

“I don’t.”

“Mr. DeBerg, have you ever struck another human being?”

The answer is easy, but Seth hesitates. His throat locks. A little air moves through. It was the same sound he made when he was in seventh grade, his head pushed down so close to the floor he could smell the linoleum, and he remembers Terry Smith above him in all his blackhead-pocked glory, kicking his shins, standing on his knees. He’d forgotten that. He’d forgotten how hot tears can feel when they come right from the eye, or the thunder-clap sound the locker made when it pinched his hair, chaining him in. The principal—come to think of it, his name was Levine, too—came upon him later that afternoon, saw Seth with his hair locked in the bottom of the locker, and gave him such a pitying look of irrelevance that Seth wondered if maybe he deserved the ass-kicking after all. That stuck with him. One Friday night in high school, when Terry Smith had forgotten the name *Seth DeBerg* and sat leaning at the top row of the bleachers, Seth thought how little it would take to send him over. Just a single shove. But he had determined never to fight back. It was too late by then anyway. By high school, life’s lottery numbers had already come sucking up the chute.

“No,” Seth says. “I never struck anybody. How could you ask that?”

“Were you ever bullied?”

Will it lower my score if I was?”

“Studies conflict. A recent one—I was just reading *Parent Licensing Today*—concluded that men with traumatic childhood experiences tend to transfer that same trauma to their children—”

He’s been holding his breath, but it bursts out of him. “I don’t care what the studies say. I would never raise a hand to Josh—his name is *Josh*—and I would throw myself into traffic before

I so much as had the thought. What's the matter with you people, anyway? What gives you the right to say who's going to be a good parent? You measure that by how many baby carrots I keep in my fridge? He draws breasts in class because he's a curious kid who doesn't even know why breasts are significant, and you want to put a permanent ink blot on his record. You know, the substitute teacher recommended therapy for that. Therapy. She didn't even know about his parents. She just wanted therapy for a nine-year-old boy who doodles. This was a 24-year-old woman whose chief experience in life probably comes from a mission trip to the good part of Guadalajara, and she thinks that just because she's the one sitting in the chair behind the desk that she can reduce one poor orphaned boy's entire psyche into a doodle, God dammit—”

“Mr. DeBerg. Please. Sit down.”

He does. His phone buzzes again. He wants to pick it up and tell Liz to pour out the bucket and put the champagne back on the shelf. Mrs. Levine is clicking the mouse into oblivion and her lips have puckered out so far they resemble a deflated, flesh-colored balloon, except there's a little smile in them. Then she produces a stopwatch from under her sleeve and clicks it.

“How long until I can re-apply?” he asks.

“Re-apply, Mr. DeBerg?”

“I failed, right? You're going to fail me.”

She looks at the stopwatch. “You did about average.”

“What?”

“You lasted about the average time before you broke. Don't be ashamed, Mr. DeBerg. There's something about parenting that brings out something ancient our brains, the fight-or-flight. I'd be more concerned if you didn't break. You're ready to see the

Parent General now, for the swearing in. Do you have time?"

Seth wipes the film of sweat on his cheeks and looks at his phone, swipes out the eight new texts from Liz, and realizes that yes, he has time. It's 3:39.

Several months earlier, at approximately 10:07 p.m., Evan and Grace DeBerg were driving home from a dinner party in Westfield. They were about to merge onto the 78 when a Semi rolled through a red light, through the passenger side, through Grace and halfway through Evan who, according to the examiner, technically survived long enough to die in the emergency room. The truck driver would survive to be charged with involuntary manslaughter, but he anyway survived, Seth thought, and the sentence would probably be light as far as manslaughter goes, so what did it matter? The half-asleep asshole still had his whole life ahead of him. The wrecking ball always survives.

The weekend became a kaleidoscope of uncertain decisions. What hymn did Evan want? Seth had heard of "Amazing Grace," so, sure. What did the will say? It was ten years old and gave guardianship of Josh to Seth. Why wasn't Josh crying and why was he staring at the wall? Was that worse than crying, somehow? Post-traumatic stress? Seth Googled it and obsessed over the conflicting answers until Liz made him stop. You'll never find out, she said. There's no mapping this out. Seth insisted that Josh needed to cry, but he wasn't sure if that was true, so he never said anything. Sunday ended with an afternoon funeral and the remaining DeBergs gathered at his sister Alice's home in Chatham.

After the torrent of the weekend subsided, they all played Monopoly, their old family Thanksgiving-home-from-college ritual. They used to get drunk and loud arguing about Free Parking, and dad would always come halfway down the stairs and shout

It's *Nine-Thirty!* with the righteous indignation of someone who genuinely thought that was late. Now Liz took Grace's spot and Alice's husband, Mark, took Evan's. There would be no parents to yell at them, no greasing Evan with 500s so his final decisions as Supreme Monopoly Justice went your way. The loudest sound was the stuttering of orphan dice on cardboard.

"Where's the car?" Seth asked. "That was always Evan's."

"That's okay," Mark said. "I'll take the top hat."

"Just play," Liz said. "You're obsessing."

Seth shook his head. "Did somebody *steal* the car? It's weird."

"It's an old board," Alice said. "It doesn't matter."

"It's not the same."

"No," Alice said. "It wouldn't be."

Alice was the youngest—chronologically. She dressed far above her age, all First Lady cardigans and hamburger bun hair, and her forearms were already meaty from a few years of lifting toddlers in and out of cribs. Mark, a stock broker in the city, was stiff, always wearing starched shirts; precisely the type of consistently tensionless man you'd want to marry your sister. Together they made good, boring parents.

Somebody won—Seth wouldn't remember who—and after Mark went to bed and Liz went to the guest room, Alice and Seth sat in the hand-me-down couch together. They stared at the TV that Alice kept, muted, on *National Geographic*.

"So we should talk about Josh," Alice said.

"Sure."

“I can take him. It’ll be the closest thing to his old family life. He’ll have cousins to distract him here, he’ll be in the same school district....I don’t expect you to help financially—”

“You’re maxed out, Alice.”

“What do you mean? Mark makes a good living.”

“No—I mean, with the kids. You’re three years younger than me and you have bags under your eyes.”

“Aw. Thanks.” She threw a fake punch in his shoulder. “That doesn’t matter. This is our nephew and he doesn’t have parents now. We’ll take him in. Gladly.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I know how Liz is about kids.”

“Well, they left him to me in their will. I was doing some Googling...I’ll get a temporary parenting exemption, but I can’t transfer him to someone else until I get the full thing. Then I can transfer him to you.”

“You know, Seth, you’d make a great parent. You’re great with kids.”

“That’s because I am one. He’ll do just fine with you.”

“Well, you’ve been applying anyway. To get married, right? Just transfer him to me and Mark when you can.”

“Thanks.” His phone buzzed.

“Who’s that?”

He twisted the phone around to show her the alarm registering *11:55*. “Liz says she can’t sleep unless she knows I’m in bed with her before midnight.”

“Come on. Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“What happens if you don’t go? Does she turn into a pumpkin?”

“She’s a good influence on me. She gives me discipline.”

“And under Mussolini, all the trains in Italy ran on time.”

“I’m not going to have that conversation if you can’t say something nice.”

“All right. She’s...pretty.”

They heard the swishing of socks on carpet that could only be one of Alice’s kids coming up the hall. Instead Josh came slump-shouldered into the room, pinching something small between his fingers.

“Hey, little guy,” Alice said. “Why aren’t you in bed? You need to rest.”

He only shrugged at her. He found his way to Seth, then moved his hand over him. He dropped something small and metal into his lap. Seth pinched it and held it to the shifting TV light of hippos v. crocodiles.

Then he saw it: Evan’s Monopoly car.

“My dad taught me Monopoly,” Josh said. “He always let me be the car. Sorry. I was gonna keep it.”

“No, buddy,” Seth said. “You keep it.”

“I *heard* you. You need it.” Josh shook his head, sniffed, then rubbed his face with the inside of his elbow. It left a streak of tears across the inside of his shirt. Then, dry, he turned and

shuffled back to the bedroom hall.

Alice smiled. “You sure you’re gonna want to give him up after five months?”

Mrs. Levine and Seth arrive at the third floor. There must be high turnover here, because the frosted window only reads PARENT GENERAL and above it, there only remain the hieroglyph remnants of the previous name.

Inside, the window is open, but there’s a hemp smell lingering in the air. The PARENT GENERAL is chewing gum behind his desk, his arms crossed, his gut testing the integrity of his Oxford buttons. Seth finds him familiar and wonders if he saw his photo on the government website during the application process. He doesn’t think so. He would recognize the fault lines of acne scars running through the beard, the puffy neck, the eyes bright and lifeless as marbles. PARENT GENERAL might have dyed his hair since then, because what hair remained close-cropped to his head is jet black, making the great spot in the middle of his horseshoe head as obvious as Jupiter’s. He looks like a human wrecking ball.

“Seth,” Mrs. Levine announces. “Dr. Terry Smith, Parent General of the 117th district.”

Seth freezes in place. He remembers where the acne scars came from. The braille of 7th-grade blackheads across Terry Smith’s face. *Doctor Terry Smith? His Terry Smith, a doctor?*

PARENT GENERAL.

It’s over.

Seth feels the various hydraulics of his limbs tangle inward,

dry, dead. His face, as he imagines it, is translucent and bloodless. He can hear the saliva crackling on Terry's tongue as he readies to speak. Maybe he won't recognize him. There's a second or two of flickering on Terry's face, then his bloodshot eyes go wide. "Seth DeBerg...DeBerg...no way! St. Ambrose Jaguars?"

Seth makes a pathetic wheezing sound that only technically pushes air through his larynx. "Yeah. Uh, yeah."

"Didn't recognize you at first. Ha! *You're* gonna raise a kid?"

Mrs. Levine steps to the desk and sets down the PL-514B. "Mr. DeBerg is actually here to get his full license, at which point he can transfer guardianship to his sister, Alice. She holds a license in good standing with the State of New Jersey."

"PL-514B," Smith says. "What's that again? Oh." He runs his fat finger down the rows. Seth can't fight the feeling of a horse at auction. "Let's see, let's see...income, taxes, good, good..."

"Isn't there some sort of bias rule—"

"That was a long time ago," Smith says. "Promise I'll be fair. Interviews, good enough...predilection for McDonald's. Hmm. I know the struggle. Recommended approval, signed Mrs. Levine. Okay. Good enough for me. Mrs. Levine, do you know of any reason this man should not be approved for a parent license in the State of New York?"

Mrs. Levine says, "I'd recommend regular refrigerator inspections. That should suffice."

Smith scribbles that on the PL514-B, then pulls a stamp from the drawer. "Regular...how do you spell 'refrigerator'... inspections...recommended. Good. All right, I think we're ready—oop, nope. What's this about the boy, uh, Joe DeBerg, drawing breasts in school?"

“Uh—”

“What?”

Seth coughs his throat clear, but the crackling is still there.
“I’ve talked to the teachers...”

“What’s that? Sorry, Seth—could you speak up?”

“I’ve talked to the teachers about it,” Seth says. “He’s on therapeutic probation. The substitute teacher is young. She was alarmed. But the school counselor said it’s nothing I can’t handle and normal for a kid his age who’s been through what he’s been through.”

“Yeah. Okay. I sign this and your sister gets custody, is that it?”

“That’s the idea.”

“I remember Alice. Nice kid. All right. Signed. Come back for a license update in two years. Otherwise, congrats. When you gonna tell Joe he has a new permanent home?”

“Oh—right away, I guess. He’s in the playroom downstairs.”
“Ha. So is my kid. Divorce, you understand. This is one of the days I gotta have him. You wanna go tell Joe together? That’s my favorite part.”

As the three of them round the corner on the first floor, they hear struggling and groaning sounds coming from the playroom. Either a debate on Bloomberg has lost all semblance of decorum, or there’s a fight going on. They open the door and find Terry Smith Junior standing on Josh’s legs and shouting at him to cry uncle. Neon lanyard lady is still comatose in the

corner and half-buried in Nerf darts.

“Mr. Smith!” Mrs. Levine shouts. “Get off that boy this instant.”

“Little orphan bitch.” Terry Junior struts around the floor when he says it, like a pro wrestling heel tweaking the crowd, then circles around and jumps back to Josh.

Mrs. Levine gasps. “General Smith?”

“Best to let boys sort out their natural pecking order. Saw a study.”

Seth barely hears this. He’s looking at Josh, at the defeated look on his face, and Seth feels the same pitying expression of Principle Levine blushing in his cheeks. Then the tape of Seth’s life fast-forwards. Seth finds his palm is cold, because there’s a can of Coke in it, and now he’s standing at the vending machine in the hall and he’s just put in his last dollar. He walks through the door again, through Terry Senior and Mrs. Levine, and he doesn’t hear any sound, as if someone muted Bloomberg. He doesn’t remember opening the can, but it’s open and fizzing. He’s standing over the kids and Terry Junior is looking up at him with his dumb mouth open.

Then Seth watches himself pour it all over the little shit’s head.

It soaks opaque through the YOUR MOM meme T-shirt until the words disappear. Terry Junior freezes on contact. The soda wets his hair, curves around his earlobes, and spreads down his pant legs until ending in a brown puddle on the floor. Seth shakes the last flecks from the can, tosses it to the ground. No need to worry about spilling. This is a new world and spills no longer matter. Seth lets out the kind of happy sigh that expels the air of thirty-five years.

The rest of them are silent. Terry Senior has an hourglass-cursor look on his face, though he seems to be mouthing *what*

the hell. Mrs. Levine stares at the clipboard but has no idea what to write. Josh squints up at Seth. Only Terry Junior seems to know what to do: he starts crying. The sound is shrill and sweet.

“He pissed his pants,” Seth says. “Wow. Would you look at that? Kid *pissed his pants*. What the hell, kid?”

Terry Junior begins to weep. There’s another moment of stillness there, until Josh pushes himself to his elbows and laughs. Only he knows how Seth jokes. Soon it’s the funniest thing Josh has ever heard.

“Seriously, kid,” Seth says. “Control yourself. You can’t go around bullying people if you’re just gonna piss your pants.”

The look on Terry Senior’s face has worn off, swept aside by a sweaty alcoholic blush. He goes for the approved PL-514B in Seth’s hand but Seth pulls it back, holds it up high, above his reach, then shows Terry Senior his back and tears the paper in two. This is a new world after all.

“Let’s go,” Seth says, and lifts Josh up. He leads him out the playroom, through the hall, out to the lobby, past the letter board signs pointing to every office in the building—Driving, Marriages, Parenting, Internet, Retirement, Trial-by-Combat Applications, Euthanasia Exemption Applications, and, in front of the only clerk without a line, Death Licenses. There had been a time just hours previous when all the official power of the lobby mattered to him. It no longer does.

“Does this mean I won’t have to live with Aunt Alice?” Josh asks.

“Mmmmmmaybe,” Seth says. “You still want to live with your lame-ass uncle?”

“Mmmmmmaybe.”

The phone buzzes in Seth's pocket:

Okay, I put the bucket away. You can't even respond to me now? EIGHT WEEKS.

His phone reads 5:02 p.m. now. Time has finally moved forward. He ignores whatever it is Liz said and types in:

You wouldn't want to move to Georgia with me, would you?

Winky-face.

"Who's that?" Josh asks.

"Just an ex-girlfriend," Seth says. He lets Josh go through first, then presses through the suction-clasp of the revolving door. The moment the rubber lip bursts open, he smells the sweet monoxide air of the city. There will be questions later—from Liz, from Alice, notices from the State of New York. But he's in the air pocket between sterilized air and natural world. It's cold, though, and he's thinking of somewhere warm. The world has its warmer places, its golden isles. Why hasn't he been there? He should have been there all along.

"Where do you want to go now?"

Josh shrugs. "Home?"

"It's about five. You hungry?"

Josh nods.

"Come on," Seth says. "I'll buy you a Happy Meal."