

A Dangerous World

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I went to visit Victor Shanks' parents because nobody else would. It wasn't bloody important enough, I guess, when a student went missing. Vanished into thin air.

I talked to Mike Perkins about it. As principal, surely he would've seen the importance – or at least the cheap political value, dammit – of reaching out to the Shankses in their time of need. To offer the school's help in tracking Victor down. At least to talk to some of Victor's friends, and find out if there might be a reason behind his disappearance.

But Mike Perkins just glared at me like the stupid first-year rookie I was, and slowly shook his head from side to side. "Victor Shanks will turn up again," Perkins said. "Besides, he doesn't have any friends."

Some of the other teachers even went so far as to offer good riddance to Victor Shanks. "Probably ran away from home. With parents like his, you would too." This from Carl Marshall, the industrial arts teacher, who knew Victor Shanks' parents. (Carl also reminded me of "Victor's little jingle," which he recited with a snicker – "Victor Shanks smells like skank" – like it was the cleverest thing he'd ever heard.)

The other teachers I canvassed weren't much help either. It's terrible that one of Fitzgerald High's one-and-a-half thousand students is missing; but we have the rest of them to worry about now, each one

going through their own individual phase, and their own set of troubles. We have to take care of them, too. Why worry about just one? Especially that one?

Elaine Jennings, geography, with her patterned knee socks and iron-gray hair pulled back into a ponytail, summed up my colleagues' collective attitude best: "It's strange. I can't say I'm really going to miss him."

A bunch of embittered old burnouts, all of them. I swore that would never happen to me.

"He lent me a pencil, once."

That was the best memory I could coax out of my 11A English class. From Kim Bates, who must chew six pieces of gum at once; you can see the rubbery white bolus – the size of a golfball – shifting from cheek to tongue to cheek again, pulling, stretching, stinking of mint.

I'd devoted the entire class to a discussion about the importance of school pride and community. "How does it feel when a fellow student goes missing? He's part of your school, after all. Part of your everyday lives. He sat right there." I pointed at Victor's desk, towards the back of the room. It was empty, but I could picture Victor sitting behind it, his long, brown, greasy hair framing his face; those long, almost oriental, almond-shaped eyes concentrating on a slip of paper on his desk. A picture he was drawing, maybe, a pencil poised in his hand above an endless possibility. Art. Dirt under his fingernails.

"Any thoughts?"

Someone in the back of the room coughed. A wristwatch alarm chirped. Victor Shanks smells like skank.

Victor Shanks lived with his parents outside of Brownsville, right on Washburn Road, a rural feeder route to the interstate. A shiny eighteen-wheeler roared behind me as I pulled into the Shanks' gravel driveway, behind an old red Ford pickup – hubcapless, gnawed by orange rust.

When I stepped out of my car, the smell hit me. The air hung thick with it: the oozy stink of spring, like a fruit cellar, or a wood floor that's just been pulled up in a musty old barn, revealing the dry earth below. The Shanks lived right on the northern tip of the Brownsville peat bog, a local geographic curiosity – a three-mile square site of rich organic rot and cattails, crisscrossed with a wooden boardwalk for student field trips and Sunday walkers.

The Shanks' house was tiny, lopsided; the once-white boards chipped and spotted with black stains. An upstairs window – Victor's room?, I wondered – was broken, and clumsily patched with a few crosses of duct tape, one end of which flapped in the breeze.

I didn't see a doorbell, so I knocked on the door. It rattled on its hinges.

The door swung open to reveal a skinny, nervous woman. I immediately recognized Victor Shanks' mousy brown hair.

"Mrs. Shanks?" I said.

She nodded, her eyes wide, rimmed with red; her face dusted with tiny flakes of dry skin.

"I telephoned. I'm Alex Place. Victor's in my English class."

I held out my hand to her. She lifted hers, tentatively. When we shook hands, it felt like holding a cool raw steak. The left corner of her

mouth twitched in and out of a nervous half-smile. She said nothing.

“Look pretty young to be teaching,” a man’s voice said behind her. A tall, skinny man with gangly arms, wearing an oversized red and black-checked flannel shirt, stepped towards us. His thick-framed glasses with coke-bottle lenses were dotted with fingerprints. “Look more like one of the students, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“I get that a lot,” I said. I’m twenty-four, but my height – five-three – still invites wiseguy comments from every bouncer, liquor-store clerk and movie-theater usher in the state. The superintendent in my building, Gus, a burly Korean War vet who’s going more than a little soft in the head, even calls me “little fella”.

Mrs. Shanks stepped back into the house, and Mr. Shanks came forward, holding out a giant hand at the end of a flanneled, scarecrow arm. “Joe Shanks,” he said.

“Alex Place,” I said, shaking his hand – pleasantly warm, after his wife’s icy palm. “Pleased to meet you.” I could see where Victor got his looks – not from his father, that’s for sure; but from his mother, who scurried off into the kitchen without a word.

“Well come on in, Alex. Make yourself at home. Might want to leave your boots on, though.”

I looked down at my shoes; they were flecked with black earth like coffee grounds, and smeared with dabs of muck.

Joe put his hand on my arm, and gently yanked. “I said don’t worry about it.” Then he gave a little chortle and led me inside the house.

The hallway was tiled in a thin linoleum, with ragged holes the size of quarters scattered randomly throughout, and years of muddy footprints worn right into the surface. The sharp, rotting smell of peat from outside permeated the inside of the house too.

I followed Joe's own boot-clunking footsteps to the living room. "That's what happens when you live next door to a swamp," Joe said with a laugh, reading my mind.

We passed the kitchen, where Mrs. Shanks held back three dirty, barefoot children, the oldest no more than ten, who wanted to see who the visitor was. "He knows Victor," one girl said. After we passed, I heard a loud "Sssshhh!", presumably from Mrs. Shanks.

The linoleum ended at the living room's edge and became a worn carpet – spinach green, and marked with translucent pathways that led to the furniture. Joe motioned to a threadbare gray couch. The legs were missing, so it rested directly on the carpet. I could imagine Joe waking Victor in the middle of the night to drive into town the night before garbage day, to load this very couch into the pickup and bring it home like the prize it surely was. Joe Shanks' smile glowing in the green dashlight of their pickup, and Victor fighting the urge to fall back asleep.

I sat down. The couch's material felt gritty, sprinkled with sand or sugar. The spaces between the cushions were stuffed with crinkly papers that looked like candy wrappers.

But what really caught my eye were the guns. A pair of hunting rifles, propped up against the wall in the corner.

"They ain't loaded, don't worry," Joe said with a goofy, big-toothed grin as I sat down. "It's just part of my job."

"What?"

He motioned to the rifles. "The guns. I work at the airport. Part-time."

"Really."

"As a safety technician, like. Those birds is dangerous. Fly right through the windshield."

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve heard of that.”

“Vic sometimes came with me to work,” his father said wistfully. “Pretty good shot himself.” I couldn’t imagine what kind of shot Joe Shanks was, with those googly eyeballs of his rolling around behind those thick, greasy lenses.

I cleared my throat. “Mr. Shanks, on behalf of everyone at Brownsville High, I want to assure you that we’re doing everything we can to find Victor. I want to set up a search committee, but I need your approval first.”

Joe ran his tongue along the inside of his cheek, like he was extracting a bit of stuck food from earlier. Then he said: “Cops did one already. Didn’t find nothin’.”

“I know that, but from what I understand, it wasn’t the most thorough search.” Mike Perkins told me two cops searched for about three-and-a-half hours, up and down the alleys and parking lots of the strip malls throughout Brownsville – like a missing teenager would hide out there. Those cops never checked the woods, either, or anywhere on the school grounds. They never checked this swamp, I thought, with a shudder. “I want to set up a search for the counties around here, too. Patterson. Mooney. Pinto Lake.”

“That’s Pin-der Lake,” Joe said with a grin.

“Pinder,” I said, my face warming. “I’ve only lived here since September.”

Joe leaned in closer; his eyes shimmering and watery under the thick lenses. “Lemme ask you something. You’re his teacher, right?”

I nodded. “One of them. I teach English.”

“Well, Teacher. How well do you think you know my son?”

I pictured Victor again. Sitting in the back row, doodling. Quiet. Never saying a word, as a matter of fact. Barely lifting his eyes off his desk. Besides, Victor doesn't have any friends. "Well, I know —"

Joe waved me off with a brush of his hand in the air. "You don't know what kind of trouble he gets into. How many times me and the missus have set up camp in the cop shop in Brownsville. He's a quiet one, when he wants to be. Got you fooled, I can see that. But he's probably got himself mixed up in something he can't get out of right now."

I pressed my hands together; they were sweating.

"But kids don't just disappear," I said. "Even sixteen-year-olds. It's been nearly two weeks now. What if something else happened?"

"Something else?" Joe said with distaste. "Well, I guess if something else happened, Teach, Victor could take care of himself. He's pretty independent, you know. Probably just striking out on his own. Getting a taste of life."

"But just to leave? Without finishing school?"

Joe smiled. "Listen, Alex. You're a college boy. This may come as a shock to you, but very few of us Shankses ever finish high school. It's just not in us. My daddy never did. I never did. And now Victor's doing the same. The kids in there," he said quietly, cocking his thumb down the hallway "they probably won't finish either. Victor's out making a living somewhere, probably. A few dollars, you know. His own place. Girls." The tip of Joe's tongue, a triangle of pink, darted out and slid slowly over his grinning lips. Then he slapped his thighs. "You know it, Teacher."

"Wouldn't he have called though? To let you know where he is?"

"Naw. He's an independent kid."

“It’s a dangerous world,” I said lamely.

Suddenly, Joe stood up. “Would you like to see his room, Teach?”

They dangled from a length of fishing wire that ran along the length of each wall. Gleaming silver blades: long, short, curved, straight, serrated. Everything from switchblades to gleaming butcher knives to jumbo hunting knives, to bowies, to some odd poker-like knives with three blades that came together at the tip. Five ninja throwing stars were embedded in the wall above the bed, and a long sheathed sword, curved like a tusk, was propped up in the corner.

“He collects knives,” a child’s voice said beside me. I looked down at a little boy, not more than five or six. He had brown hair like Victor and his face was covered in freckles. “One time,” the boy said breathlessly, “one time he cut my palm, Victor did, and then he cut his palm and we smooshed them together like this.” The kid pressed his hands together, like he was praying. He sneered.

Joe Shanks put his hand on the boy’s head, tousled his hair. “That’s because you’re brothers,” he said. “Blood brothers now.”

“Blood brothers!” the boy yelled, and ran out of the room. That’s when I saw the other children – six of them now – standing in the doorway, watching us.

“Victor’s the oldest,” Joe said. “That’s why we gave him a room of his own. He’s the only one. The rest of them got to share.” His eyes roamed thoughtfully, almost admiringly, over his son’s walls. The knives.

The children gathered in the doorway behind us. Disheveled, wearing t-shirts and ratty jeans; one child of about three not wearing anything but a crooked, bulging diaper. They stared silently at me, but

it wasn't just curiosity. It was also hostility, distrust – I could see it in their frowns. Like I was an enemy. An intruder.

“Does this look like the room of someone who'd be afraid of anything?” Joe said.

I didn't answer.

The ragged, steel-colored duct tape over the broken window slapped the glass.

Driving down Washburn Road, heading back into town, Joe Shanks' words rattled through my head: “Do whatever the hell you want to do, Teach.” A shrugged approval, but an approval nonetheless.

As I soundlessly listed off the next steps I had to make – including convincing Mike Perkins that this was even a good idea – I saw a movement by the side of the road, just at the edge of the ditch. A figure. A man.

Victor? I thought. But how...

I pulled over onto the gravelly shoulder and stepped out.

But the figure had darted off into the woods, weaving his way through the trees soundlessly.

“Victor!” I called, and ran after him.

It was tough running. My shoes kept squelching into the muck and leaves underfoot. I kept the figure in sight, though, as best I could. He'd run behind a tree, only to reappear from behind another, ten yards away. Like he had a secret tunnel he could slip down into, and re-emerge somewhere else.

“Victor! Come back!”

I heard a dull thud behind me, like an axe biting into a tree.

I wheeled around to an explosion of red.

Followed by darkness.

And then ringing.

The first thing I felt through the pain was the chilly water seeping from the muddy ground into my jeans. With great effort, I opened my eyes. Through my bleary vision, I saw the low tree branch that I'd hit, thick and wavering; an ancient arm.

I laid my head back down on the ground and shut my eyes again. My heart raced inside my chest.

I don't know how long I lay there. But when I opened my eyes again, darkness had fallen. Then I saw it. In the clearing in the trees, off in the distance. A little blurry, growing clearer. A glow – from moonlight, or something else, I'm not sure.

It was too dark to be a pond. It looked like a small lake of muck. Surrounded by cattails. Branches and something vine-like poked out of its grim surface.

And there. On the other side. Victor Shanks. Standing. Watching me. His mouth a straight line.

How I wanted to call out to him for help! To help. Me. Him. "Victor!" I whispered hoarsely.

Victor looked away from me and into the forest beyond. Then he stepped into the mucky pond, raising his arms up in the air, casting a long "Y"-shaped shadow over the clearing and through the woods. Slowly, Victor started to sink.

"But I care," I managed to croak when he'd sunk down to his knees. "I care."

When that muck reached his hips, I told him we'd find him. I promise.

When it sucked at his neck, I told him I loved him.

Then those almond eyes disappeared into the muddy earth. And I couldn't say anything at all. I could only watch through the scattered army of cattails, as those arms became forearms, then wrists, then white fingers, clawing at the night.

Bleary.

Too early in the year for crickets.

Only silence.

I awoke in Victor's bed, a stream of dirty sunlight filtering through the broken window, glimmering on his knives.

A little barefoot girl sat on the floor beside me. When I opened my eyes, she stood up and bolted out of the room without a word. I heard her footfalls on the stairs. Then whispering downstairs.

I was sore, my head pounded. I touched my head, and found it was tightly wrapped in stiff white bandages, a ring of it framing my face.

"Hey, the mummy wakes!" Joe Shanks said as he thumped up the stairs. He appeared in the doorway, wearing the same ill-fitting flannel shirt; his hair pressed down flat on one side, like he'd slept on it. "Good thing I happened by when I did. Saw your car by the side of the road, so I took a little walk in the woods. You were in pretty bad shape."

"Victor," I whispered, before choking dryly. Joe reached to the bedside table and a glass of water. He held it to my lips. It tasted like iron.

"Victor did this to you?" Joe said, putting the glass back on the bedside table. He shook his head slowly from side to side. "Naw. No way, Teach. Sure, there's lots of desperate types hanging out in these woods, especially with the warmer weather coming. Wish I'd been

there when it happened. I could've taken those sons of bitches out easy. Bang! Bang, bang!" Joe chuckled, then sighed thoughtfully. "But not my Victor. No way."

I slowly rocked back and forth. "I saw him," I managed to say, my voice startlingly full and loud. "In the swamp. The bog."

"Naw," Joe said. "Not Victor. That bump looks like you hit a tree."

I grimaced and touched my head again.

"Fixed you up pretty good, didn't she?" Joe said. "My wife. Better than any doctor. I'll drive you out to the hospital after, if you want."

Mrs. Shanks appeared with an old wooden tray. A plastic bowl sat on top, spilling over with rust-colored tomato soup. A stack of white crackers beside it.

"How come I never get breakfast in bed?" Joe said, and his wife smiled her nervous, twitchy half-smile.

I sat up in bed. After she laid the tray on my lap, I thanked her, and she scurried out of the room wordlessly.

I looked down. A light skin floated on the top of the soup. The crackers would be stale, no doubt. And a dirty spoon, encrusted with what looked like bits of old oatmeal, sat on the tray beside the bowl.

Looking at that spoon was all it took. I started to cry.

"Aw," Joe said, "come on and eat your soup."

I looked up at the knives that lined Victor Shanks' walls. Then I looked down at my soup spoon again.

"This is Victor's room," I said between sobs.

"He'll turn up," Joe said.

I shook my head. "He's gone."

"You're wrong, Teach. Victor'll be back."

Through my tears, I could see Victor's little brothers and sisters gathered in the hallway, taking turns peering around the corner of the door, to see the bloodied and bruised man lying in their brother's bed. One of them yelped – he's crying! – and Mrs. Shanks loudly shushed them.

Joe nodded sympathetically as I wept, and patted me on the shoulder. "Sure he will," he said. "You wait and see. Now eat your soup." □