Benny

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The medicine makes my hands shake. It makes my hands shake and my mouth dry and I feel like I can’t say a goddam word without sand pouring out of my mouth. Okay, that’s an exaggeration. It’s not like the Gobi in there or anything, but I tell you, I don’t have enough spit to lick my lips. I need water and I need it now.

The handwriting on my paper looks like my grandmother’s, or a reading from Richter scale. They said the pills were supposed to help my concentration, but I can’t focus on a goddam thing other than that stupid “I” that’s doing some dance on the page, and the fact that even gum can’t coax my glands to salivate.

Alright, hand up, bathroom pass, nice, cool. Take your time, Mr. Johnson. You always put the mister in front of my name, like it makes me older than a junior in high school, Mrs. Eldred, and I hate it, if we’re being perfectly honest. And I don’t appreciate that sympathetic look you give me every time I have to leave class. I’d say this all out loud if my mouth wasn’t so damn dry and my tongue worked at all.

The fluorescent lights bear down on me and I never really noticed the shadows it gives your face until after Benny died. It was maybe three days after I came back to school and no one would look at me and I didn’t want to see them not looking at me, so I looked kind of sideways at the walls and passed some windows on the classroom doors. I thought the Grim Reaper had come for me too. No, just me with shadows crawling out of my eyes and down my cheeks. The hollow places told me I needed to eat.

I still need to eat. No, drink. I see the water fountain down the hall, but I don’t want to chance anymore encounters with the shadows, and the bathroom is closer. The door opens and closes with a long whine and I am alone in this room that echoes and the focus in the pills get me all tuned into the sound my breathing makes. I’m grateful to that one kid that smeared who knows what on the mirror that used to
be in here, because then the administration decided that we should lose our mirror privileges.

I spin both the knobs on the sink to full power, the echoes a dull roar, and suck the water out of the spigot until I can feel it sloshing around in my stomach. Knobs off. Take breaths, in, out. Seven count in, seven count out. Repeat. Benny can’t do seven in, seven out. Maybe he should have. I should stop being so morbid.

That’s probably why my parents made me go see Dr. Torrence, back when there weren’t the ringing echoes of the empty bathroom, just a dull hum and a haze. Mom and Dad had said, son, we’re worried about you. Rumble, hum, rumble, hum. It was like being underwater and someone starts splashing on the surface, but you’re settled on the bottom. You’ve hit that place where you can get your whole body to touch the bottom of the pool, nearly impossible, but there you are and your elbows and head and calves have grown barnacles and you can’t move. It’s bad, you know it’s bad, but something in you won’t panic and you forget to know what it’s like to be up on the surface. You see the light slip away and the weight of the water crushes down on you, but you can’t move and you stop trying to.

The pills take off the weight of the water, but the light and the air elude me. Stuck at the bottom. Alone.

Benny would’ve said we should poke a hole in the bottom of the pool and then, for good measure, blow the whole thing to hell and ride the waves out until we reach the world’s end. That’s the kind of person Benny was. Benny ate a bug when we were eight, not because he was dared to, but because I was and he wanted to know what it would taste like. Beans, he said. Baked fucking beans, he added because he had also just learned that new curse word a couple days before and he wanted to try it out.

His mom washed his mouth out with soap. He said it tasted like cottage fucking cheese.
We all knew Benny was a liar and he was crazy. He was crazy, we said and laughed and wondered why we couldn't be more crazy like Benny, who all the girls liked. He liked to climb the highest trees at the park by the river and jump out to see if he could still land on his feet. Maybe he wanted to be a stunt man now, we'd say, like how he'd wanted to be a professional motorcyclist because to hell with school and grades and meaningless shit. Everything was meaningless to Benny. He started skipping school.

Seven count in, seven count out. Repeat. Let's make Dr. Torrence proud, prove to him that we can make it through the day. Goddam hands, stop shaking.

Leaves in the wind. It had been autumn. The frost choked out the last of the fall flowers and the kids blew swirling dragon breath into the wind. Benny started smoking cigarettes and burning little patches of grass with the butts. He seemed particularly spiteful in those moments. At that point he'd stopped cutting his hair and always looked out past you. Past me. But when he burned the grass, he had seemed almost there, like the grass was closer to what he wanted to see past our shoulders and through our heads.

There was a little path, he said one time, watching the ends of grass curl and smoke as he crushed his yellow butt into another clump. A little path he once traveled down when he was seven and crazy. Born crazy, man, born crazy. It led him to the river and he thought it'd be a good idea to live there instead of home where there were rules and mom and dad yelled at the dog like it was the dog's fault for being a dog. There he would make a fort and live off the berries on the brambles and could tie a rope to that one tree and swing out into the river, all limbs and unbridled shouts. He started digging a hole with a rock by the shore and thought about building a moat for his fort since all good forts have moats. The river crept closer, pouring into the holes, but Benny kept digging until he hit something hard and pulled it out of the mud.
and washed it in his river. A diamond.

That’s not a diamond, I told him. He rolled the stone around in his fingers and pinched the cigarette until it died.

Shit, man, I know that, he said, looking irritable all the same. It looked like it was taking him a lot of effort to be patient with me and my stupidity. I pressed my lips together. Go on, I said, what happened next?

Nothing, man, nothing, he said, shaking his head. I just thought it was a diamond and that I’d be rich. He smirked and let his head drop with an exhale before deciding it was time for another hit and pulled out his pack of cigarettes. I thought I’d buy a helicopter and fly down to Monty Park and surprise all of you guys. Be like a sultan or something. Move to Constantinople.

Constantinople’s not a thing, I told him. It’s Istanbul now.

Do you have to interrupt every five seconds? He took a long drag and blew it out, and pressed his index finger and thumb to the bridge of his nose. I wanted to go to Constantinople and buy a mansion and maybe let you guys visit me or buy you houses. I dreamed big things, like buying the moon and living there instead. But in the end, I decided to keep it. It was important, ya know? A Get Out of Jail Free card. But I was seven and thought, very prudently, I might add, that I should wait to cash it in. I’d wait for a day when my mom would make me eat vegetables and I could whip it out and say, goodbye mother, I’m buying the moon, where there are no brussel sprouts.

He laughed and then again, laughing at his own laugh. It was shallow, huskier now that he had started smoking and he ended up coughing and dropping the cigarette on his jeans with a shitshitshit.

I waited for him to get rid of the butt. He threw it at a trashcan and missed, shrugged and resumed his story. I held onto it for a long time, man, he said, turning the stone gently
like a kaleidoscope in front of his eye. A long damn time. I
didn’t tell anybody. I kept it in my pocket every day and when
Mrs. Jenkins would give me detention or I had to walk home
because my mom forgot to pick me up, I’d think about cashing
it in. But I kept it. I figured a worse day would come. It gave
me something, like hope that even if things got worse, I could
fly away.

And then I turned twelve and we learned in geology
about quartz and it took me a few weeks to accept that my
diamond was just a plain old rock. He pressed his lips together.

Are you okay? I asked. He was crying. Not in a
sobbing way or anything. He was staring at the ground, but
tears dripped from his jaw.

God, I need water. My head is killing me. Knobs turn,
water flows and runs down my chin. There’s a crack in the
porcelain sink.

Yeah, man, of course I’m okay. It’s a fucking rock, ya
know, but I kept it in my pocket everyday still. I don’t know.
Just because it was a rock, didn’t mean that it meant any less
to me. He shook his hair out of his eyes. I guess I stopped
believing at some point that it would do anything, anyways.
But it’s like how a kid doesn’t want to believe that Santa
Claus isn’t real. It’s not just that they think he’s real, but they
desperately want him to be real and even as adults, they can’t
let go of the lie and have to pass it on to their kids. I needed
that rock.

I could see the defeat weigh on his shoulders. Benny,
man, are you sure you’re okay? You haven’t been to school
in almost a week and me and the guys-

Listen, man. Stop. I’m telling you a story and you’re
interrupting and I’m tired and want to go home soon. Besides,
the sun is setting. I know your mom doesn’t like you to be out
when the streetlights come on.

What I’m trying to say, is I want you to take it.
The tiles on the bathroom floor are cold and I crawl into a stall so no one can see me pull a chunk of quartz out of my pocket. I shouldn’t have come back to school. Not yet.

You want me to have it? He shoved the rock into my hand and closed my fingers around it, looking me in the eyes for the first time in I don’t know how long. Grey eyes peeked out from behind the mop of hair and for a second there was a gleam of the old Benny, crazy Benny.

My hands wobble and the quartz skitters across the ground before I dive for it and hold it like how I held Benny’s sister’s hand at his funeral as they lowered the coffin into the ground and I stared past them, past their shoulders and through their heads.

But why?

Because I don’t need it anymore, he said, taking his hand off mine and shoving them into his pockets. The wind was picking up. The streetlights blinked on, illuminating the tear tracks down Benny’s face before he turned away from it. See ya around, man. He started walking. He turned right, away from home, towards the Tam Street Bridge that crossed over the river. A flicker of something stirred in my chest and I called, but wait! What am I supposed to do with it?

He was just a silhouette now. His voice echoed down the path, the leaves rustling under the words. Go buy the fucking moon, man.