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## Joelle Francht

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down at his little shoes and wondered who had made them.

“Vernor is just socially well-adjusted,” a smiling Mrs. DeSez said, squeezing back and letting go in order to pat his head. Taking charge, letting him know she was there. He gripped the side of her floral dress and looked down the long pew in front of him, now empty. A slender, auburn-haired woman had sat at the far end of it during the service, right in front of them, desperately trying to ignore the fact that her husband would not look at her. Every Sunday, she sang along from the hymnal in the most lovely soft soprano, but today her voice had sounded feeble and choked. Vernor found that he could not even hum along.

Mrs. Mills prattled on while Vernor’s mother listened benevolently, her dark curls bouncing as she nodded. If she had paid any attention to her granddaughter in general, or even just that morning, Mrs. Mills would have known for herself that Angelina became very distressed if she had to sit for very long in the center of the pew. She didn’t want to disturb the sermon so she sat in tears all the way through, squeezing past her oblivious grandmother at the very end to rush outside and gasp for air.

Vernor knew not to explain this to Mrs. Mills. He squeezed his mother’s hand, signaling that he would like to go now.

*What a charming little boy.*

Now Vernor was a rotund, pimply teenager, a great ruminating whale of a thing



—Joelle Francht

wanting nothing more than time alone with his own thoughts. Even now, that was denied him. Even now, Petey tainted his quiet hours with that voice like rubber sneakers on cement. As if he really needed a counselor to accompany him to the bathroom.

*Desez, I gotta GO!*

“God—” Vernor cursed into his pillow, feeling sorry immediately. He heaved a great sigh and fumbled for his flashlight beside him. The army green plastic was cool and dewy. It was later than he’d thought.

“All right,” he said, pulling on his sneakers and pausing to rub his eyes. “Go on.”