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9-MILE

On the streets of Compton Lakes, a young white male by the name of Enis Jashari was looking to make it in the rap business. Enis knew the only way to make it to the top was to perform various rap battles at the local teen center. Enis had six evenings to prepare for the big day.

Enis approached the ghetto like teen center in fear not knowing what to expect. The MC Emily Light handed Enis a sheet of paper, with the rap tournament bracket. Enis's first competition was a below average rapper named Colum Dell.

"Are you all ready??!!" yelled MC Light.

"WOOOOOOOOO" screamed the roaring crowd.

"First up we have hometown hero Colum Dell facing off against an unknown rapper named Enis Jashari. Let's welcome them to the stage."

Enis looked his opponent in the eyes as the DJ started the beat. Colum would start this rap.

"Enis why are you challenging me I don't know who you are. You are obese, how do you fit into your own car? In this competition you're not gonna go far. Gonna break your leg like you're Derek Carr."

"WHOA," the crowd erupted. Now it was Enis's time to shine. The beat started and he was ready.

"You don't get any girls you have no exes. Your broke ass can't even afford a Lexus. Why don't you do us all a favor and move to Texas." He dropped the mic.

"OH MY GOD WHAT A SAVAGE," the crowd yells.

"Enis takes round one and will move on to face Michael Hadaicher," said MC Light.

After the next six acts it was Enis's time to get back on stage and show the crowd what he was made of.

"Let's welcome back our winners of the first two rounds, Mike Hadaicher and Enis Jashari!" MC Light yelled to pump up the crowd. Again the beat started and Mike started to spit his bars.

"Get out of here and go back to your pizza place, your family looks at you as a big disgrace. I am the rabbit and you are the turtle in this race. Your rap ability is something I will erase. Oh Enis what is that sad look on your face? Looking like you're staring into blank space. Now we are going to switch up the rhyming here. I am the rap Shakespeare. Now why don't you do all of us a favor and disappear," Mike aggressively preached.

"OH MY GOSH," screamed the roaring crowd. Now it was Enis's turn to expose Mike about his deepest secrets.

"Mike I have to admit your rapping isn't bad. Back in the day you were my number one lad. Not having the connection we used to is quite sad, but at least I didn't get beat up by my own dad. Moving on to your basketball ability. You were benched by your coach because of your lack of agility. Or maybe it's because of your short arms, call that a disability. When I rap I spread tranquility, when you rap you spread instability," rapped the rich young Enis.

"Enis, Enis, Enis, Enis," the crowd chanted.

"Enis will be moving on to the semifinal where he will be facing Shkumdrizzy Elmazdawg," claimed MC Light. Enis took a break while the other battles occurred. It was now time for Enis to get back on stage.

"Let's welcome Shkumdrizzy Elmazdawg and Enis Jashari back to the stage!!" screamed MC Light. As the beat started Shkumdrizzy began.

"Yeah my real name is Shkumbin but let's talk about your brother Judin. You and him are a dynamic team, but the difference is you're fat and he's lean. You like boys it's part of your genes, and you're too obese to fit into skinny jeans. You think you are the rap Julius Caesar. You have buck teeth making you look like a beaver. At least me and my brother don't hang out in the freezer." rapped Shkumdrizzy.

"Drizzy, Drizzy, Drizzy, Drizzy," the crowd chanted.

The beat started and Enis began to flow.

"Yeah I'm flowing like the Niagara. Shkum just took his daily dose of Viagra. My skills are like magic, abracadabra. Switching up the flow like it's the Amazon. You are as weak as a baby fawn. In this rap game, I am a king and you are a pawn. I'm as beautiful as a swan, you're uglier than Lil Jon. Face it, you can't keep up in this rap marathon. The only time you're fast is during Ramadan. Bruh, you be looking like the Lucky Charms leprechaun," Enis gracefully spit.

"Enis is moving on!" exclaimed MC Light. The last round will include Enis vs. Chris "no knees"

Mancinelli. It was time for Enis to sauce no knees and become the rap god champion of Compton Lakes. He took the stage.

“Enis you will go first,” said MC Light.

“Yeah you’re probably gonna say my rapping is not great, or you’re probably gonna make fun of my weight. Or maybe the fact that I’ve never had a date. Or maybe because I’m a 49ers fan. Or the fact that I look like a 97 year old merman. Or maybe that I’m straight out of Afghanistan. Or that I have the intelligence of Tarzan. Face it Chris, you have nothing to say. Yeah I know I’m fat and could eat a whole buffet, but I’m going down in history like Hemingway,” rapped Enis.

“Enis taking the interesting approach and roasting himself. Now it’s Chris’s turn!” MC Light said as she pumped up the crowd.

“Uh, yeah, uh, uh, uh, I can’t think of anything,” said Chrisman.

“Choke choke choke choke choke!” screamed the crowd.

“ENIS WINS,” screamed MC Light.

Enis went on to produce eight platinum records over his career and was inducted into the rap hall of fame. This battle was the start of a great career.

THE LUNCH BULLY

“Fifteen more minutes until lunch kids, let's stick it out and pay attention!” yells Mrs. Reese. She is looking at the little boy who does not get the excited expression on his face when he hears the word “lunch” much like all the other second graders in her classroom. “Alright kids it’s lunchtime”

Ten year-old Jack runs up to little Michael, only seven, and takes his lunch yet again. Michael, with no defense, tries to talk it out.

“Jack you do this every day, I know you are hungry but I am too, why don’t you bring your own lunch,” says young Michael.

Jack admires Michael though; he just has a terrible way of showing it. Michael is not able to understand why Jack chooses him to bother. He watches as his brown paper bag filled with a turkey and cheese sandwich, some grapes, and a pack of red gushers (which are his favorite gummies) gets carried away along with a note from mom.

He goes to class after hiding during recess, his stomach is growling and his teacher asks him why. “Do you bring your lunch to school honey?”

The little second-grader shies away from the question and just nods his head in hopes that she won't interrogate him about what is going on. She gives a suspicious look but proceeds to walk away and begin teaching. She notices during her lesson that Michael can't even concentrate and walks over to her desk and discretely picks up a granola bar then walks it back to his desk. Michael looks up at her in shock, gives a slight smile then begins to eat. Mrs. Hannigan notices how fast the little boy consumed the granola bar and at that moment she knows something is wrong.

“Alright kids, class is dismissed. Have a wonderful day. Michael,” she whispers “would you mind staying for a minute?”

Michael looks to her and nods his head, he stays in his seat as all the other kids run out of the room. His teacher then asks him why he seemed so hungry after lunch. “Michael you can be honest with me. If something is going on and you do not have a lunch it’s okay.”

Tears begin to stream down his face as he confesses, “This boy named Jack...he comes up to me every day and steals my lunch and I can’t do anything about it because he is scary.”

Mrs. Hannigan looks to him and says, “Everything will be okay Michael. We can think of a way to keep your lunch for you. Maybe you will eat your food in here?”

Michael explains that he is too scared that Jack will find him after school and ask him where he was. She suggests more such as sending Jack to the principal or having an aid outside to watch him. Michael says he will think about it and she asks him to return in the morning to discuss it.

“How was your day Michael?” asks his mom.

“Mommy I’m hungry. Can we go get a snack?”

She looks at him slightly confused but answers with a yes as she heads off to Wendy’s.

“Can I get chicken nuggets and french fries?” he asks.

“Michael do you eat your lunch?”

“No” he begins to cry. His mom heads home with poor Michael crying while munching on his fast food. He comes clean to her and explains that for the past couple of months someone has been stealing his food at lunch and he has been too scared of the boy to tell anyone. He then explains that he met with his teacher and she wants to come up with a plan to help him.

Mom says, “How about I go with you to meet with her in the morning and maybe we pack two lunches, one for you and one for the boy.”

THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

John Lenny Bitz did not expect to wake up this morning to find a dragon lurking outside his window, but then again it was a Monday.

This creature was not here to make friends with John, and John, being the smart man he is, knew that already. He fought hard with the sword under his bed. John stood at 5'11 and the dragon stood at a good 200 feet tall. No matter. John fought the dragon with nothing but his strength, wit, and the sword.

The dragon swung at John with his giant hands, tried stepping on him with his huge feet, and tried burning him alive with his fire breath.

John was a smart man; he knew that his strength was not enough to fight off the beast from the outside. He had already cut off three scales, but there was no settling the beast. John also already lost all of his fingernails and his hair. He knew fire was not the solution to stop the beast, but only the strength and power of a man's fist through the belly would be enough to stop him. This task was not one for the faint of heart, but luckily John had no heart. John leaped into the mouth of the beast.

Stabbing, poking, slashing his way down the neck of the dragon, the hero got stuck. The beast's throat was closing in, getting ready to scorch John out of his throat. Using his highly evolved cat-like reflexes, he began to parkour his way down the throat, initiating some sick moves such as back flips and wall runs. The dragon had not experienced such intense movement and did not know how to stop this warrior. Finally John made it into the belly of the beast, ready to finish his Monday afternoon.

John clung to the outer wall, closest to the skin. Sword in hand, John raised his arm to strike, and fell tragically into the acid lurking in the beast's stomach. Not only was there acid, but fallen heroes who also tried to tame this beast.

"You will not succeed. If I have to suffer so do you," yelled one of the fallen men. The man had just entered the body recently because only his skin had been burned off from the acid. Slowly but surely, the acid will consume the man eventually. The man took off his right arm and began to swing at John. John swung his sword, cutting the arm that was holding the arm.

"Fool! You dare not try to fight me for I am in control here." The man called for his semi-dead friends to rise and join him in battle. John was only one man, but not just any man. He was John Lenny Bitz.

The acid began to wear away at his skin, but he did not give up hope. He began fighting off the zombie people one by one. It was worse than World War Z in the middle of the beast, but John, like Brad Pitt, struggled through. He knew to find the weakest ones and take them out first, leaving only the stronger ones to push through. He didn't have to finish off the stronger ones, just break through them and stab the lower end of the dragon's stomach. One by one they fell, but as one fell three more made a run at John, smothering him.

John's adrenaline kicked in, giving him strength to make his way closer and closer. The acid began to consume his left pinky-toe, so out of pure bravery he amputated it, helping him get closer to finishing his mission. As the wall was in poking reach, John grabbed the sword with two hands and shoved it through the dragon's stomach.

John reached his goal, but it was not enough. The acid people buried him alive and it turns out the sword John used was made in China, so the authenticity of his Lord of the Rings sword was illegitimate. The sword did pierce the belly of the beast, but it was not enough to finish him off. After the beast finished burning John's town, he flew away, with the legacy of the great John Lenny Bitz sticking out of his stomach.

THE LIE

Dorm rooms were much quieter, parties practically non-existent, and study groups came in masses. Exam month was in the air. This meant competition between Wendy and Todd.

Wendy spent time apart from Todd around this time of year. It was normal. Todd did the same thing. They would both study until their brains could no longer withhold information and then they'd report back to each other to compare scores.

So far the hypothetical scores were tied. This year's exam was the tiebreaker. Their unspoken competition heated up every time they took tests for school, played video games, or even putting puzzles together.

To Wendy's surprise, there was a text from Todd with a picture of him and a thick packet: *Just finished the 315 page study guide for Professor Wu*

The clench of her stomach was uneasy. She had only finished page twelve. Her other classes had her falling behind drastically. She replied quickly: *Finished that last week! Glad ur catching up :)*

The lie she sent to Todd delivered feelings of guilt. There was no way to finish this packet without not understanding it. Wendy quickly shuffled in her bag to find her packet then stared at it. Impossible. This meant she had to take the test a different way: the way that could easily direct her to expulsion. She couldn't do badly on it; it was not an option.

Todd, on the other hand was elated. He studied for all of his exams and was caught up; ready to boast in Wendy's face at how much better he did on the test than her. As he read his message from her, the feeling of guilt waded over him as a woman called his name back to bed.

The two stayed more distant than usual. Guilt crept through their veins every time they would occasionally see each other on campus grounds; a quick smile, then a turn in the opposite direction. It was as if they weren't even dating during exam month.

The next week, Wendy drove to Todd's house with the exam results. Her passing grade was more than what she hoped for, as it was the highest of the class, though she knew she did not deserve it. She didn't work for it, but she thought that maybe seeing Todd and bragging about it would ease her guilt by a fraction.

"Did you see the scores?" Wendy asked, passing Todd in the doorway without a proper greeting.

"What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be working?" Todd asked frantically, frustrated that he didn't look through the door's peephole to avoid Wendy.

She ignored his questions. "I got the highest grade, oh yeah!" she waved the papers in his face.

"I'm impressed, considering physics is the subject you're the worst at," Todd somewhat-congratulated.

"Now that that horrible test is out of the way and you passed with flying colors, maybe you can teach me where the heck I went wrong," he continued.

Wendy nodded in a hesitant and counterfeit agreement, though the pit in her stomach disagreed at the thought of Wendy being good at the subject at all. It was far from easy for her.

The guilt ate her up again and there was a long awkward pause. The two of them typically would be celebrating and boasting at the end of finals week, though this time their enthusiasm of seeing each other again seemed slightly forced.

"I will...but I really missed you. It's crazy how finals separated us for three weeks," Wendy spread her arms, hopefully changing the subject for good.

The hug was not an embrace like it used to be. It was as if two extensive family members who have never met each other were meeting for the first time.

"Let's play some video games," she spat, quickly dismissing the awkward vibes that hung in the air.

He stepped in front of the tips of her shoes and blocked the hallway to his room. "How about not," he fiercely retaliated.

The video games in his room were right by the bed which was being occupied by Milly, who just so happened to be Wendy's older sister, sleeping peacefully.

He saw the look of concern on her face and put her hands up in defense.

"I-I-I mean teach me some physics, please...I really didn't understand that hard word problem towards the end..." he changed the subject back, trying not to seem like he was hiding something.

The guilt rose up again and she felt her cheeks getting red.

"How about we hang out for now? I feel like I haven't seen you in years, Todd,"

"We could hang out later. I genuinely would like to understand how you got the last question... you should tell me about it over some dinner later."

This went back and forth until Wendy cried with shame, "I cheated!"

The tensions were surprisingly eased and Todd looked at Wendy with a small smile of disbelief and relief. “Thank God! I was cheating on you, too!”

Wendy’s eyes grew wider and her breathing grew louder as Todd’s smile receded. He realized he heard her wrong. She was talking about the exam, not their relationship.

THE NEW ADVENTURES OF A RICH YOUNG ENIS

In the olden times, at a milk company called AJ's Milk in Butler, New Jersey, Enis Jashari was a milk delivery man who had been delivering milk for 30 years. Recently, Enis's horse named Nick had passed away from oversized chest syndrome, so he went to town and bought a new one.

This new horse was not an ordinary horse. Its front two legs were way too short, but it was able to balance on its hind legs. Its physique resembled that of a T-Rex. Enis's new T-Rex horse needed a name.

"I know what to call you. I shall name you, Michael," exclaimed the rich, young Enis.

Recently, business has been booming for AJ's Milk, so they opened up a second facility in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. The workload became too hard and too much for Enis to bear alone.

"Phew. I can't do all this work by myself," said Enis. "I need a partner to help with all this smooth, frothy milk!"

"Have no fear for I am here!" shouted a mysterious man who appeared out of nowhere.

"Who are you, mysterious man?" said a puzzled Enis.

"I am the hope of the universe. I am the answer to all living things that cry out for peace. I am protector of the innocent. I am the light in the darkness. I. AM. ESTEBAN GARCIA! AND I AM HERE TO DELIVER MILK!"

"Whoa," said Enis.

From then on, Enis and Esteban began delivering milk together. However, they did not have a close relationship. As time went on, they began acting shady around each other.

"Hey Enis," said Esteban. "Why do you have orange paint and dirt on you?"

"That's none of your business, buddy boi. Why do I see something that resembles Vaseline on you?" replied Enis.

"Don't worry about it Enis," said Esteban.

One day, Esteban did not show up to work and Enis decided to see if he was okay or not. He rode his trusty steed, Michael to the Garcia residence. He knocked on the door. No answer. Rang the doorbell. No answer. Enis had enough and barged through the door, only to find Esteban on the floor smothered in Vaseline.

"What is the meaning of this?" shouted Enis.

"Sometimes when I am alone, I cover myself in Vaseline and pretend I'm a slug" said Esteban.

"Oh what a relief," said Enis. "I thought you were shady but it turns out you're a weirdo just like me. Sometimes when I am alone, I paint myself orange, dig a hole in my backyard, jump in the hole, and pretend I am a carrot."

From then on they became the best of friends and milk delivering casanovas til the end of time.

THAT KID

“All Rise” judge Delopa commanded. This case is a custody case between Donald Glover and Sharon Decker. The courtroom smelled like cleaning products and the carpet appeared as if it was installed yesterday. I was a juror who dragged himself out of bed because I would have a hefty fine otherwise. Donald was a young man in a disheveled suit walking into the courtroom was a sad composure. When Sharon stood, she had a sort of arrogant vibe to her. She came in a fur coat and a tight black dress. She had a blank countenance. Almost seeming as if she had been dragged to court like a child to the dentist. Ms. Decker was asked to testify for custody of the child. Her words were,

“I have the money to make this kid have a better life,” she claimed in a monotone voice. “HE is also a cheating, lying, scum-”

“Objection!” Donald’s Attorney exclaimed. “This woman is making false claims of my client’s morality.”

“Sustained” judge Delopa said in a firm voice.

“I’m just saying that he is unfit to care for this child. Thank you,” Ms. Decker spoke in a sour tone.

“Would you like to testify against these claims and make your case Mr. Glover?” Judge Delopa inquired.

“Yes your honor. What Sharon is saying is about the cheating is untrue. Our relationship was founded on distrust. We met once at a party and one thing led to another. A few months later we had a beautiful baby boy. “That Kid” that Sharon referred to is my wonderful son James. This love between us has faded, and while she is wealthy, she doesn’t care enough about James to spend her time with him. While I have a small two room apartment, I can offer so much more to James. Sharon’s maids will end up parenting James because she is always working. Even if James and I end up living in a cardboard box, it would still be a better home than him living with Ms. Decker,” Donald said with a shaky voice. His eyes became glossy as a tear ran down his clean shaven face. He looked up and took a breath trying to regain his composure. I glance over at Sharon. She looks down at the shiny finished table with a sort of sour face. Almost as if she knew everything that he said was true. After a deep breath he pleaded, “Don’t take him way, Please don’t take my baby boy.” After saying this he began to cry. There was not a single dry eye in the house.

The judge, the only one unaffected by the tear-jerking testimony, told the jury to make their deliberations and come back with a verdict. The jury walked into the courtroom and took their seats. This story seemed as if it were out of a lifetime movie.

“We the jury have reached the decision that Donald and Sharon will have joint custody. James will be living with Donald except during the summer.” The jury foreman delivered with a smile in his face. Donald leaped out of his seat with screaming with joy. Sharon looked at him and cracked a smile. She seemed content with the verdict.

SO I MARRIED A MASS MURDERER

“I would have never married you if I had known you were a mass murderer” were the words that lingered in Shaina’s mind. Every odd word and late night at work all made sense to her now. The once quiet, quirky, and cute Steve she fell in love with was no longer prevalent. Now here stood a dark mysterious man with love towards his fiancé but hatred towards the world around him.

Shaina’s light hair framed her face as the water rained down from the top of her shower head. Steve joined her minutes later but remained quiet. Her freckles and button nose opposed the sharp jawline and dirty skin of her husband. He caressed her shoulders making his way softly to her waist and planted an innocent kiss on her forehead.

“Please” she whispered as she backed away and stepped out of the shower. She threw on her soft robe and walked throughout the house with a blank mind. Her cold feet slid across the tiled floor which soon were tucked under her as she sat on her loveseat couch. She switched on the TV but instantly shut it off as the movie *The Lovely Bones* popped up. Images of her once adored loved one slid their way into her mind and she was overcome with absolute sickness.

The night came slowly and Steve snuck out the back door to finish up “unfinished business” as he told Shaina. She washed away the thought of his murderous hands with a bottle of wine and then made her way to bed. Shaina drifted into a light sleep and woke up slightly when Steve slipped into bed. He wrapped his hands around her waist and gave her a reassuring,

“I love you and would never hurt you.” They both stayed quiet until a deep sleep captured them both.

Shaina woke up with a jump, her hands and forehead covered in sweat and shaking in fear. This time, her dream wasn’t about her husband killing innocent people, but instead it was her.

“Get out of my bed” she insisted. She had been frightened by the images her subconscious put together, but oddly satisfied. Bewildered by her emotions, she lay back down and calmly fell back into a slumber that could not be disturbed.

The next week went by. Nothing out of the ordinary happened, although she could not help the flashes of her recurring dream that played through her head. She fell asleep every night only to be awakened by her nightmares. Her husband had become used to this new schedule and would always wake up with her to comfort her. He would repeat the same words every night, trying to calm her down,

“Babe I will never do anything to hurt you or our family. No matter what I’ll always be here to protect you.” Most nights Shaina would give him a hopeless grin but Steve was taken back when she answered differently one night.

“I’m not scared of you anymore, I’m scared of myself. I dream myself doing things I only imagine you doing, and what freaks me out is that... I enjoy it. I crave it.”

Steve sat there with nothing to say. The only response he gave her was a malicious smile that formed over his face.

THE DEAL
PART I: MASON

“Aunt Josie!”

I’m actually gonna go insane. How did we run out of rum? We had a whole fridge full just the other day. I bet that ... drank it all.

“What?” that she shouted back.

“Where’s my goddamn rum?” I screamed. I could actually feel my blood boiling I think.

“Didn’t ya finish it? No one but you drinks that filth!” her voice was quiet and muffled, since I was in the back of our trailer and she was outside.

“Filth!?”

“Yeah, you heard me right! Now can ya shut up? Lil’ May May is tryin’ to sleep!”

I collapsed on the couch and took another deep breath. How do I get more? Think, Mason, think.

A, B, C, D, E...

I heard that stupid little toy that Mayella always plays with. Just looking at her, I felt annoyed. That stupid little baby face, those stupid little baby hands, that stupid little baby. I remember when I first met the little piece of trash. Boogers and all. She was reaching out to me with her chubby little arms, probably asking to be carried or something. I don’t know. I just walked away and grabbed a bottle.

“I hate you,” I said to her. It just felt like it had to be said. Being the stupid little baby she was, she didn’t understand me. She actually tilted her head to the side. Mayella started crawling towards me, like some ugly creature from the wild, making those gross baby sounds. She was like a dog in a kennel, ready to be adopted.

Then it hit me.

“Aunt Josie?” I shouted in and out of the trailer. No response. She must’ve gone out or something.

I moved quickly to the back of the trailer, putting a jacket on and grabbing a backpack. I made my way back to Mayella’s crib. Her big ol’ eyes finally closed. Carefully, I picked her up and almost completely placed her into the bag, but obviously she has to breathe. Duh, Mason. So I kept her head out of it and closed the zippers up to her fat neck.

Luckily for me, the bus was just about to arrive at the stop near my trailer. Also, Mayella was sleeping the entire time so I didn’t have to worry about feeling drool on the back of my neck, or hearing her stupid little baby sounds. I could already see people giving me strange looks, but I just waved at them with a smile to make them think nothing was up. I hopped on the bus, sat in the front, and rode it all the way to the other side of town.

I’ve never really been here before, only once to save Aunt Josie from her abusive ex-boyfriend. Stupid idiot.

Looking around, I could tell that at least one person here would wanna buy a baby. Everyone seemed desperate. I saw a group of three guys huddled around a burning trash can, as if this 50 degree weather was actually cold. I asked them if they wanted to buy a baby; they asked me if I was crazy. I just flipped them off and moved on to find more people.

Just walking around here made me feel gross inside. Filthy streets and people. 95 percent of the people here looked like they didn’t know what a shower was. I saw a woman sitting on a worn chair, a boy, I’m guessing her son, standing behind her and picking at her hair. I saw a group of little boys sharing a water bottle. In the corner of my eye, there was a cat and a dog fighting over a weird looking piece of meat. But then I saw a couple sitting on their doorstep, with a couple of guys around them. I approached carefully.

“You guys want a baby? Her name’s Mayella,” I asked. I don’t really have time, so I got straight to the point. The woman damn near cried.

“Yes, yes!” she squealed and rose from the doorstep, reaching out for Mayella.

“For a price,” I said, taking a step back.

“Take everything!” she shouted. She went on to empty her own pockets, then her husband’s, and the other guys’ as well. She placed the crumpled ball of money in my hand.

This was a lot easier than I thought it’d be. I took the backpack off, removed Mayella, and handed her over.

“Thanks for doin’ business with me!” I haven’t felt joy like this in years. I waved good-bye and headed back to my side of town.

I entered the liquor store feeling like a millionaire. Obviously I went straight to the Royal Oak Trini-

dad Rum. Feeling those sleek bottles in my hands felt too good.

I went to the counter, paid for my gold, and left. As soon as I got home, I fell into bed with my three bottles. I felt exhausted; I guess from lugging that fat baby around. I had to pass out. When I woke up, Aunt Josie was at the foot of the bed, her arms crossed.

“Where’s Lil’ May May?” she asked with a blunt tone. Her eye was kinda twitching.

“Uh, maybe she went on a walk?” I responded. I mean, I had no idea what to tell her. I began to head to the fridge.

“Mason, where the hell is my baby?” she followed me.

I placed two bottles inside and opened the other one. I knew I had to say something to her, but I really didn’t want to. I tried blocking her out; I could hear her shouting from the back of my head.

“Can ya shut up already?” I said, finally turning to look at her.

“Where is she?” she said again.

“I kinda, uh, sold her.”

“MASON.”

“Uhh, sorry?”

“Go get my baby, or I swear to God.”

“Swear to God what?”

She removed her sandal and began to beat me with it. She’s much smaller than me, so it felt like a mosquito or something, but it was still annoying as hell.

“Can ya stop that?!”

Obviously, she didn’t stop. I swatted her hand away and trudged outside. I guess I gotta get this stupid little baby.

The disgusting side of town isn’t that hard to figure out when you get there. I counted my steps from the bus stop to the house that the couple and their buddies lived in. Hopefully they didn’t hurt Mayella or something. They seemed nice, I guess. You never really know with the outskirts.

I searched for a doorbell, but I was stuck using the door knocker. Surprisingly, the old metal wasn’t grimy.

Knock, knock, knock.

No response. I looked around, and the more I did that, the more I realized how miserable this area was. Lots of people didn’t have the right clothing for this slight breeze; people were huddled, all cold. I just wanted to get outta here already.

Knock, knock, knock.

But this time, a little harder. Suddenly, the door flew open wide. It was one of the guys standing beside the husband and wife, probably a brother or a friend or something, I don’t know.

“What’s up?” he said, casually.

“Uh, I was here just yesterday, with the baby?”

I tried focusing on the man who answered the door, but I could hear Mayella behind him. She was at the table with the couple, her face lit up; she was playing with some toys. For a second, I smiled. She was making cute little baby sounds, while the wife played with her, a bottle of milk in her hands. That giggle of hers actually kinda lifted my heart.

“Oh, yeah! I remember you, thanks so much, really. Andrea hasn’t been this happy in months.”

“Yeah, haha,” I trailed off, still paying nearly all of my attention to Mayella and her new parents.

“So, uh, you need something? You wanna come in?” He invited me, opening the door a little wider.

I paused.

“Hello?”

“Oh! No, no, I was just paying a visit. Tell your folks I say hello,” I quickly turned around and waved behind me, heading back to the bus stop. The seats on the bus seemed a little comfier, the people seemed a little friendlier, I felt different.

When the bus arrived back at my side of town, I almost didn’t wanna get off. However, I still got up, thanked the bus driver, and walked towards my home. Aunt Josie was there, obviously expecting a baby to be in my arms.

“Well?” she said angrily.

“She, uh, she didn’t make it.”

I could see Aunt Josie break right before my eyes. Her face progressively changed from a shocked expression to an extremely pained face. She was actually shaking before me. She threw every possible object at me. The tears were flowing endlessly, but I didn’t know how to tell her in any other way. Mayella was happi-

er. She was shouting at me, telling me to leave, her voice breaking in almost every word. I thought about the rum I bought, and wondered if I should go inside to grab each bottle.

I readjusted my jacket and walked back to the bus stop.

THE DEAL
PART II: MAYELLA

It was a warm summer evening and the windows in the trailer were propped open with wood. A slight breeze blew through the area, blowing the soft baby hair on Mayella's forehead away from her chubby face. There was an air of serenity, until the sound of grunts and loud rustling of bottles woke the baby from her slumber.

She rubbed her eyes and sat up a little, her fluffy brown hair sticking straight up into the air. She peered around in the darkness, eventually giving up and sitting down with the toys left in her crib. There was an old alphabet machine that played the alphabet song when a button was pressed. Mayella ran her little hands over the machine until she found the right button to start the song.

A, B, C, D, E...

She played with the toy, her small face lighting up in joy as she tried to sing along to the song. Her cousin, Mason, was in the room, grumbling and looking at the child, an obvious disdain in his eyes. The girl paid no mind though: she was too busy fidgeting around with her toys.

"I hate you," he spat out, staring straight at the child while she tilted her head.

Mayella, a baby of one year, did not understand what had been said to her, but liked the attention and so began to crawl toward him, cooing as she went. The look of hate on his face changed to pondering. He shouted to the other side of the trailer and out the door, but seemed dissatisfied with the lack of response and disappeared from view.

The child put down her toy and laid down her head, tired again and dozed off breathing deeply once more. Mason grabbed the baby and carefully lifted her up, with his other hand he held open a backpack and shoved her in until only her head stuck out of the top. Mayella, sleeping soundly, did not wake to this, and instead the rhythmic walking relaxed her further. He finally stopped off at a bus stop, and got on to get to the other side of town. There wasn't much of anyone on the bus, mostly late night stragglers and town junkies, but Mason knew what he needed to do. He looked at the homeless and late night walkers, thinking about who would want to buy the baby. At the next stop, Mason stalked out and approached a group of men around a trashcan fire and asked if they wanted Mayella. All they did was shoot him a dirty look.

He hated this area. The filthy streets and people made his feet want to walk faster through the unlit area. He felt hopeless, until he saw a group of people sitting on some dingy steps.

"You guys want a baby? Her name's Mayella," he inquired, turning around to show them the baby in his backpack.

The woman jumped up, agreed, and tried to take a backpack, but he stepped back.

"For a price," he clarified.

The woman emptied her and the man's pockets, along with those of some of the group around them. They handed Mason a wad of money, with a couple of dustmites and paper clips and the baby was traded. Mason walked away, and the group of people went inside the apartment whose steps they were sitting on.

Mayella awoke later to the sun, warm under blankets, and slowly sat up. She looked around at a room that was not familiar to her. Yellow walls, green curtained windows, white furniture, and a small chest of toys were in her view. She sat down and feeling confused, began to cry, letting out a glass shattering scream. Immediately two pairs of feet were heard shuffling as the man and woman from the previous night burst into the room. The man tenderly picked up Mayella and began to rock her softly, as the woman rushed from the room and came back with a bottle of milk and handed it to the man.

"Thanks Andrea," he said "Mayella should be calming down now."

He was right as the baby's cries began to quiet as she was more focused on drinking the milk. Andrea began to go through the drawers in the room and pulled out a small blue sweater and pants for the baby. After Mayella finished the bottle, Andrea took the child and began to dress her, checking the weather report and making sure it was not going to be too chilly outside.

"Noah, honey, let's go to the park today with Mayella, I don't want her, or us, to get cooped up in here. Plus the weather isn't too bad today."

She heard an agreeable grunt from the other room where he was presumably getting ready and they went to the kitchen for breakfast. Their friend Liam had also stayed over and he was just rousing out of bed. As they were all situated around the kitchen table, Noah frying some eggs, there was a knock on the door. At first, no one moved to answer it, too preoccupied with their own happy scene to care.

But the knocking returned more aggressively, and Liam got up and walked towards the door, still a

little tired. He opened the door to the man from last night.

“What’s up?” he asked, fighting off the final grips of sleepiness.

“Uh, I was just here yesterday, with the baby?”

Mason peered in, expecting to see a disaster. The kitchen was swathed in warm light and Mayella was with the woman, her face bright with laughter, playing with her toys. He turned and looked at the mother, adoration on her face as she carefully shifted Mayella’s weight and looked to the man who was cooking, pulling out plates for their meal. The man who answered the door was still talking to him.

“Yeah, haha,” Mason hoping his distracted response was correct, eyes still on the family in front of him. He had come to take the child back from the family, but his will was wavering.

The man had said something else. Mason couldn’t hear though, looking upon the scene before him he felt something in his heart.

“Hello?”

“Oh! No, no, I was just paying a visit. Tell your folks I say hello,” Mason stammered and quickly left, making his way to the bus stop, and eventually to his home.

Liam found this man strange, but paid no mind, as the smell of eggs and toast now became strong within the apartment and he was pulled back to the table by the laughter of the child, bright in the arms of her new family.

SECRETS AND LIES

Rebecca and Joyce have been best friends their entire life even despite their recent separation through state lines. Rebecca was finally flying from Florida to New Jersey for the holidays and to see her best friend with whom she had a lot of catching up to do.

“Rebecca!!” Joyce shouted across the terminal at her best friend who had just come off the plane.

Rebecca looked up surprised. “What are you doing here? I thought my dad was picking me up,” Rebecca said as she hugged Joyce.

“I thought I’d surprise you!” Joyce smiled as she took her friend’s carry-on. Rebecca slipped her ring off her finger and into her pocket then followed Joyce to her car outside.

“How’s the job?” Rebecca asked while clicking her seatbelt. “I can’t believe your dream from when we were twelve years old came true, you’re finally a manager!”

“Yeah...it’s goin--”

“I remember our stupid little promises we used to make,” Rebecca interrupted, “You promised yourself you would never work for your stepmother who put us through hell, even though she promised you that you would never find a job on your own. You sure showed her, and good thing too. How she treated us when we were little was inhumane.”

Joyce wiped her forehead and squinted to see the signs on the road, despite her gift of 20-20 vision. Rebecca looked puzzled and took her vibrating phone from her pocket.

“Hey! Yes, I’ll be seeing you later than I thought. Yes, Joyce picked me up. I know. Okay, I’ll see you there at 7:00. Alright, I love you too. See you later.” Rebecca looked anxiously at Joyce then put her phone into her bag.

“Who was that?” Joyce wondered.

“Oh just my dad. Meeting him for dinner tonight.” Rebecca felt uncomfortable and was relieved when she saw the red and blue mailbox of Joyce’s childhood home. Then she looked in the driveway and saw the black Mercedes she could never forget.

“Medusa’s here,” Rebecca cried as she unbuckled her seatbelt and flattened her skirt.

Joyce and Rebecca went inside and greeted the family who were ushering them to the lunch spread in the dining room. They all sat down and caught up like old times, even Joyce’s stepmother.

“So you seeing anyone these days?” Mr. Green asked curiously

“Pffft. No! Rebecca? Seeing someone? Never before the first five years at her job!” Joyce butted in before Rebecca said a word. “Do you remember anything about Rebecca, Dad?”

Rebecca picked up her fork and smiled as if Joyce had been correct.

Joyce’s stepmother excused herself and descended to the kitchen to the ringing landline. When she returned, she looked at Joyce and said, “That was Steve. He said there’s something wrong with inventory. Joyce would you want to come and give me a hand?”

“Ohhh Jane, you know I have no experience with that stuff!” Joyce squeaked as sweat dripped down her face. “Maybe someone who knows a little more about your business will be there and will be more of a help!” Jane, puzzled, looked at her husband in confusion, grabbed her coat and left through the front door.

“What was that ab--” Joyce’s dad started but before he could finish Joyce had clumsily spilled her wine on the table.

“Oh dammit! I am such a clutz!” Joyce exclaimed and the three of them began to clean up the table and bring the dishes to the kitchen. When they had all finished they relaxed in the living room and watched Family Feud just like old times. Then Rebecca’s phone began to ring and she left the room to take the call.

“Your dad sure does call a lot,” Joyce said with suspicion to Rebecca who was re-entering the room.

“Yeah, he can’t make dinner tonight,” Rebecca answered in disappointment. They all continued to watch the show when they were interrupted by the doorbell. Joyce’s dad stood up and got the door and welcomed Rebecca’s dad to the living room. Rebecca became uneasy but made sure she showed excitement when she saw her dad for the first time in many months.

“Hey kiddo!” he said to his daughter who embraced him with open arm. Then he, Rebecca, Joyce, and her father all went to the table and drank coffee and tea. They all began to reminisce on childhood memories and Rebecca told her dad all about her job and the new duties of her new promotion. Joyce began to sulk in her chair and made an effort to change the subject.

“Bummer you can’t make it to dinner tonight, Mr. Kelly. What are you going to do tonight Bec?” Joyce questioned Rebecca.

“Dinner? What dinner?” asked Rebecca's dad, but before any more questions were asked Joyce’s step-mother walked through the door with a briefcase in hand.

“Joyce, you left this at the office,” Jane said waving the briefcase in her hand. Joyce got up from the table running to Jane to quiet her and in doing so knocked Rebecca right off her chair. She got up and looked at Joyce, her stepmother and the briefcase. Then Joyce confused pointed at the engagement ring that lay on the ground.

They each pointed to the item that confused them and simultaneously said, “What’s this?”

LET'S CREATE A _____ DIAGLOGUE

- Tractatori:** "Let us hear your idea about how to control the population of our flourishing city."
Auctor: "I would propose a belief system my lord."
Tractatori: "So what, we just tell them to believe in something?"
Auctor: "It isn't really that simple. You have to convince the people that they are in control to manipulate them, so why not use the age old, best way to control people?"
Tractatori: "Well what would that be?"
Auctor: "A system of beliefs used to explain the scientifically unexplainable."
Tractatori: "And what would spawn out of this that benefits me?"
Auctor: "This belief system would use the guise of worship of a higher power to spread devotion towards our nation, and allow you control over all of the peoples of our growing city."
Tractatori: "Will I be able to rally my people to complete tasks for me using this system?"
Auctor: "Yes, of course. All that you would have to do is say that doing said task would appease the controllers of the belief system."
Tractatori: "But the controller of the belief system will be me."
Auctor: "Ah, yes my lord, but they will not know this."
Tractatori: "Why would they work for a belief system in which the leader is fictional?"
Auctor: "Because believing in this system will give hope to the people under it."
Tractatori: So it would twist one of the most powerful human qualities into a machine for my empire? Are you sure there are no dangers?"
Auctor: "The only danger is scientific thinking in the general population. Believe me, this has been played out before."
Tractatori: "I will be able to rally my people to war using this?"
Auctor: "Indeed"
Tractatori: "Levy massive amounts of taxes?"
Auctor: "Surely."
Tractatori: "Build lavish structures?"
Auctor: "If you claim it the will of your god, the people will do anything for you."
Tractatori: "Well how do you propose that I introduce these beliefs to my people?"
Auctor: "Simple. Build schools that teach these beliefs as fact, that also denounce scientific understandings of naturally occurring events."
Tractatori: "Hmmm.... I find this idea intriguing. What should the religion be based upon?"
Auctor: "Anything you wish my lord, as long as you can convince the people to believe it."
Tractatori: "This sounds good. However you will have to die I cannot risk having loose ends in my plans."
Auctor: "Please my lord, I beg of you, allow me to become a leader for your belief system instead!"
Tractatori: "Alright... as long as you recognize my word as the highest power in the world."
Auctor: "Anything for you my lord. Anything."

Literally 2 days later.

- Tractatori:** "I thought you said this would WORK YOU DIRTY MONGREL!"
Auctor: "My lord, it isn't my fault you chose for the highest power in your religion to be a SANDWICH!"

And then they both died to a revolution. The end.

Sandwich below.



Editor's Note: I would totally devour this sandwich given the chance.