

Sugarplum

Elementary schools make him nervous.

There's a smell to them, one he can't place. They're always too warm. Too cramped. Claustrophobic. He follows his wife Emma down the hall to the gym, dreading the Christmas concert. Already he's sweating.

He catches glimpses: little desks and smiling bookworms, the alphabet strung up like tinsel around the walls. Glimpses. He blinks. Glimpses. A promise ring stomped into the mud. A note passed from desk to desk. A cloakroom struggle. Two furious mascara-streaked faces. The bookworms grinning and leering, placing bets.

He stops and looks into one of the classrooms. Dark. Empty. A joke whispered into all the wrong ears. Slander carved onto the bathroom stalls. His arms hang, useless, at his sides.

He shakes himself. Continues. Christmas trees. Snowmen. Haikus as Americanized as French fries. He looks at the drawings of Santa and sees Mr. Claus in a striped tie stretching out a hand for him to shake and trying to sell him God. From the ceiling dangle huge paper snowflakes—snowflakes that could catch fire if he held them to a match, snowflakes that could burn the school to the ground where the ashes would sizzle in the winter air and steam.

You're not one of us anymore, you dirty slut.

Emma calls his name, leads him into the gymnasium. They sit and Emma squeezes his hand.

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And do you want to know what we do with sluts?

When the third graders come onstage, Emma gets the camcorder ready. Jamie is standing between her two best friends, scanning the crowd. She grins as she sees them. There is something conspiratorial about this class. A boy in the back row nudges his friend and they break into laughter. They are singing “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and all have antlers.

If you do...

Emma starts recording.

The music teacher who’s conducting has no idea what they’re planning.

“Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer...”

...Meet us here.

The grins on the faces of Division 11, Room 4 are bursting at the seams.

“They wouldn’t let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games...”

We dare you.

From outside comes the scream of a siren, so distant it’s almost a dream. It triggers the ringing of a phone in the quagmire of his memory. Hello? It’s me. Oh. I’m scared. Look, I don’t have time right now. They said—. I have to go. Wait. I have to go. Please? Click.

“Then one foggy Christmas Eve, Santa came to say...”

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There is one split second of silence which no one notices but him, for whom the world has stopped. In a moment of clarity, he sees radiant little faces, pink gums and gaps between teeth, he sees a panorama photo, he sees her face on the news he hears her name on the radio he smells her perfume on his jacket, and then time resumes and the third graders burst out,

Ten o'clock. Tomorrow.

“IN HIS UNDERWEAR!”

The gymnasium dissolves in chuckling. The music teacher turns to the parents with an exasperated smile and the class, their secret out, sings on.

He is shaking like a heroin addict who desperately needs another hit. He grips his chair.

This gym is killing me. As soon as he thinks this, the gym comes alive, its walls groan and shake themselves into motion, it sings along, a noise that grips his ears and twists them and digs its nails into his head. He hears screaming that no one else hears. He hears the slurred voices of the older kids who have shown up, their pupils dilated. He hears her last words, and the terror beneath them: *Pass the joint, asshole.* He hears the shattering of glass. The loud bluntness of skin tearing skin. Fist to face. Violence by the light of cigarettes. A ripe adolescent body blooming in bruises and blood, blooming like a flower that lasts only one night. Silence. Silence. Silence. Run! Run! Run!

There is so much innocent cruelty here, in this room. *We need to ask you a few questions.* So much naïve duplicity, so much that will be lost. So much that will rush to flood the gaps as naturally as permanent teeth growing in. *Where were you at ten o'clock last Saturday night?* So much to overwhelm these children who cannot imagine

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leaving home, for whom thirteen is old and twenty-one ancient, for whom forty-four is as far away as a round trip to Pluto. Inconceivable. *You were her best friend, right?*

Right?

Right?

Right?

Right?

By the time the Grade Sevens leave the stage and everything ends, he feels depressed enough to shove a .38 up his mouth and blow his brains out. But then the risers stop creaking, the walls stop singing, Jamie is in his arms talking non-stop, and he is heading for the glowing red EXIT, away from the memory of squirming consciences and defiant cowardice and the voice of the principal and the hush-hush pinching, the sealing of lips and secrets, glad to be walking past Mr. Claus who leans in and tells him to screw real estate, the God market right now is *hot*, man, *hot*—

“Did you like the concert Daddy?” asks Jamie.

The doors open and he steps outside and breathes so deeply that the cold punctures his lungs, like it did so many years ago on that absurdly cold June night when he realized that he could have saved her.

“Oh yes,” he says.

“Look,” says Emma, “it’s snowing.”

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They look up at the sky. Jamie hums “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”. He looks at his daughter and feels like crying. He looks at his daughter and wants her to stay like this forever. He looks at his daughter and wishes that Neverland were real. As if it were a prestigious boarding school. Because he would send her there.

Jamie closes her eyes and catches the first snowflake of the year on the tip of her nose.