

## Six Minutes

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I shift in my seat for the 11,000<sup>th</sup> time, staring at the clock above Mr. Grady's head. It's ridiculously loud, filling my head, taunting me. 2:54! My legs convulse beneath my desk. I'm like an over-caffeinated puppy in an invisible cage. This chair that's so hard, its edges like razors ready to cut into me, bleed me dry. I linger on the thought, running my finger along them. Could it be that easy? Metal on wood, sharp at the corner. Thick spools of blood dripping on gray linoleum. That would get me out of here. But I want to go *home*, not to some loony bin for teenagers who can't cope.

My stomach growls at the thought of home, where my mom will give me a bowl of chili with some corn bread, a little grated cheese on top, and everything will be all right. X-Box to my left, down comforter on my right, me kicking back in my chair with my chili. I haven't eaten today, in truth not much since Monday, when all hell broke loose. And over what? A fucking hemp plant?

Mr. Grady rambles on in chemistry-speak. I like this class, or at least I did all semester, but today his formulas enrage me. How can it

matter what the combination of mercury and zinc oxide yields when my life hangs in the balance? When a match has been struck and is about to be set against the paper-thin notion of my future?

My fingers tingle, numbness at the tips, my legs gyrating, knees against wood. No one seems to notice, which is fucking hilarious because these kids don't miss a thing. They've all got their blinders on now. Don't ask, don't tell, see no evil, hear no evil. A bunch of moralistic bullshit.

I consider the metal corner of my chair again, a self-inflicted wound, not a massive amount of blood, just enough. And then what? Would the school nurse offer me refuge? Fucking Ms. Tardy if you can believe that. Can you imagine carrying that around with you all through school? Anyways, she'd probably just paste a band-aid on and cast me off to Dr. Wolcott. Nine of my friends have already been pulled in. The captains of fucking everything. I saw a few of them afterwards. Skin the color of sand, eyes darting about like rabid animals. They told me what happened but their words didn't stick. Their eyes said everything.

My hands grow clammy as Mr. Grady writes a formula on the whiteboard. The figures, they're fuzzy at the edges, distorted by the whining fluorescents overhead. Mr. Grady turns and looks at me, his eyes sympathetic. I hold his stare. It seems to ease the shaking of

my legs. Am I imagining this, or is he on my side? My side, his side, their side? I thought we were all on the same side. What happened to all that booster club shit about Falcon unity, one team, forging the future together?

My throat's so dry, my tongue's expanding in my mouth. Mr. Grady returns to the whiteboard. 2:56! Just four more minutes and everything will be fine. Maybe I've overreacted. Maybe they'll spare me the humiliation, the pointed questions and ethical acrobatics. That's what happens when the "E" word is used. Expelled. Evicted. Forcibly removed from the only life you've ever known. Fucking gymnastics. Back flip, forward lunge, whatever the hell they want from you.

Unless you've got Al Pacino on your side. "You are a cover-up artist and you are a liar," the school dean railed against young Charlie. "But he's not a snitch!" Pacino spat back. Fucking awesome come back. *Scent of a Woman*. 1992. I wasn't even born yet but a good line transcends time. Pacino, he's a class act. He's fucking blind and depressed but he puts himself out there for a kid who doesn't have anyone else, smacking his blind-man's cane against the glossy wooden veneer of old money protectionism. "Charlie won't sell anybody out to buy his future!" Goddamn right, Charlie. His integrity is about all he's got, other than a badass spokesman.

I unclench my fist. My fingers feel better, almost normal. 2:58. Just two minutes to go. I take a deep breath, the formula on the board falling into place. I pick up my pen and begin writing it down. But what's that sound? Heels in the hallway, the horse-like prattle of a woman on the move. My chest tightens. I plea for the hands on the clock to move faster. The heels are louder now, on the cusp of the doorframe, and now a black shoe and a pale, fleshy leg.

Mr. Grady stops mid-sentence, his eyes catching mine for the briefest moment. Did everyone see it - the knowing exchange of imminent doom? Dr. Wolcott strides toward him, lips pursed, her grey bonnet of hair clipped at the chin. They stand together. There are no smiles, no exchange of pleasantries and Mr. Grady's shrinking. Right here, in front of the entire class. Fucking wankers, all leaning forward in their seats so they don't miss a word. Can't they see what's she's doing to him? What she's about to do to me? The bus is coming and they're about to throw me in front of it. You can feel it in the air, its diesel exhaust consuming all the oxygen.

Dr. Wolcott turns, her eyes boring into me. Everyone seems to be holding their breath. My heart thunders in my ears, a deafening roar. Her mouth moves, sounds filling the room. Oh, God. What will I say? Who will I be?

"Charlie?"

