

JARRETT KAUFMAN

It Doesn't Have to Touch You

This is winter. Kurt follows the homeless men through the falling snow and into the abandoned lumber mill. They take the dilapidated staircase to the third floor. The men huddle around a barrel fire. There are three of them. Kurt strips off his schoolbag. He unzips it, and he pulls out a sack of stale Rold Gold pretzels. He gives it to the old man they call Nelson. He and the other two—Mel and William—sit in the dark on rotted office furniture. They gobble the pretzels, and the fire flickers yellow light over their sallow, dirty faces.

“Kid,” Nelson says. He opens his hand. He shows Kurt the red balloon. “You want it?”

Kurt takes the balloon. He shoves it into his pocket, and he says, “Thanks.”

“Wait,” Mel says. He grins. His teeth are brown. “We want to trade.”

“That that that that’s right,” William says. He licks a pretzel. “I found it.”

“We want real food. We want good food,” Nelson says. “Can you do that for us?”

Kurt nods. He grabs his schoolbag and he says, “Yeah.” He leaves the lumber mill. He covers the entrance with a busted sheet of plywood. Then he hurries into the field of dead yarrow weeds and wet snow. He hustles across the frozen creek. He climbs the hill. Kurt starts down the alley for home. Less than a month ago, he and his mother, Jess, moved to Alton—a dirty factory town—from St. Louis. After Jess married her boyfriend, Terry demanded they move out of the city. Jess told Kurt she needed this. She said change is good. She promised that.

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Kurt opens the back door. He jiggles off his boots and skitters into the kitchen.

“Damn it,” Terry hollers. He blocks the hallway. His arms are crossed.

“What?” Kurt mutters. He takes off his schoolbag as he sits down at the round table.

“You know Jess worries. You know she doesn’t want you going to that mill.”

Jess caught Kurt at the lumber mill for the second time this week. She was driving home from work, and she saw Kurt crawling out a window. She pulled over and went after him. She pushed him in the car. There were dark circles around her eyes. She wore her dirty, wrinkled 7-Eleven work smock. Jess had worked a fourteen-hour shift that day. She had been working extra shifts because Terry had lost his job at Home Depot nearly a week before. “Why are you doing this?” she yelled as she got back in the car. Kurt tried to explain. He tried to tell her about the old men. But what he said was wrong. Jess wouldn’t listen. She shook her head. “No,” she said. She said that and she slapped him. When Kurt covered his face, Jess yelped, and she yanked her hair. “Just be a good boy for Terry and me,” she pleaded as she sped home.

Kurt takes off his coat, and the red balloon falls out his pocket. It lies on the tile floor.

“Huh?” Terry says. He nabs the balloon. He pulls on it. He stretches it.

Terry shakes out a Kool from his pack of cigarettes, and he lights it with a match. He takes a long drag. He smokes the Kool, inspecting the red balloon. Then he places the cigarette in a green ashtray. It was a wedding gift from his cousin, Ernie, who made it for the Drug Rehabilitation Art Program at Leavenworth. Terry takes a deep breath, and he puffs air in the balloon. He ties the lip into a knot. He grabs his Kool. Terry enjoys another drag. He exhales smoke, and he smirks at Kurt. He stabs the cigarette into the balloon. It explodes, and Kurt startles in the chair. Terry tosses the tangled and the twisted balloon on the table. He butts his cigarette out, and he opens the refrigerator. He grabs a Coors. Then he closes the door.

Terry sits down at the table. He opens the can, and the beer fizzes.

“Your mom needs a break. I need a break,” he says.

“Okay,” Kurt says. He stands, but Terry grabs his neck. He pushes him back in the seat.

“You’re just a damn kid. You *will* listen to me,” Terry huffs.

“I’ll be twelve this summer,” Kurt says.

“I won’t allow you to upset Jess anymore,” Terry says. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Kurt answers. “I do.”

“That’s right,” Terry says. He sips the Coors. “That’s right.”

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It’s 9:30 p.m. Kurt puts on his coat and eases down the hallway to the living room.

Terry’s passed out on the couch. This is where he sleeps now. He’s snoring. There are stinky cigarette filters piled in a plate on the coffee table. Terry’s Dell laptop is open. There’s a diagram of a Harley Davidson FXD on the screen. He wants to build his own bike. He told Kurt that. He wants to make it from salvaged parts he found at his Uncle Lee’s scrapyard. He plans to build the bike and drive it to Denver this spring. Terry was born in Colorado.

“I’ll do it,” Terry said. He told Kurt his plan the day he was fired from Home Depot.

Kurt said, “Okay,” and Terry showed him his travel route on the laptop.

Kurt sneaks to the kitchen. He collects his schoolbag off the floor and opens the refrigerator. He grabs the bologna, and he takes a jar of pickles, and he swipes the loaf of bread off the countertop. He stuffs it all in the bag. Kurt pushes out the back door. He returns to the lumber mill. It’s dark inside. He slogs the bag between the rusted saw machinery. He takes the staircase to the third floor where the barrel fire is still burning. The office is adorned like a house. There’s a ratty sofa positioned in the corner, and there’s a broken TV sitting on a milk crate. Kurt walks toward the bed. The mattress is surrounded by two cardboard boxes, and on each box, sits a broken lamp. Kurt moves closer. He sees that Nelson is lying on top of William. Nelson stirs from the covers, and he sits up. His eyes are bulged. He yells, “Hey,” and Kurt stumbles backward, spilling into Mel who’s crouched low to the concrete floor.

“Fuck,” Mel shouts. He is smoking a glass pipe. He isn’t wearing pants either.

“You bring food?” Nelson says as he rubs his eyes. He coughs, then hacks in his hand.

“Leave,” William says. He crawls off the bed. He grabs at the schoolbag. “Go go go go.”

Kurt dumps the food on the floor. He breaks for the door, and he tramples down the staircase, falling to his knees twice. He sprints out of the lumber mill. He runs down the alley. When Kurt arrives home, he slams the back door shut. He doesn’t care if he wakes Terry. He tears off his schoolbag and throws it and his coat onto the kitchen floor. He storms to his bedroom, and he dives in bed. He feels foolish. He feels betrayed. Kurt closes his eyes. He can see the old men. He can see Terry and his mother. They’re all scowling at him. They’re all so ugly with sorrow. That’s what Kurt thinks. He opens his eyes, and he gazes up at the ceiling.

Terry sulks in the bedroom. He turns on the light and says, “I know things didn’t turn—”

“You lied. Mom lied,” he says. “She only moved here because you promised—”

Terry looks riled. His face furrows. “How dare you,” Terry says.

Kurt rolls to his side. He moans. He shuffles in the bed and he moans again.

“Damn it,” Terry snaps. He takes Kurt by the arm. He pulls him out of the bed, and he stands him on the floor. “I hate when you act like this,” Terry growls. “You shit.” He clutches Kurt’s shoulders. He shakes him. “You *little* shit.”

“No,” Kurt says. He looks away, and he chokes on his sobs. “No,” he says. “No.”

“Stop,” Terry blats. He groans. He grabs Kurt. He hugs him. “Come on. Come on now.”

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The next day, Terry picks up Kurt at the bus stop after school lets out, and they drive the old Toyota Camry to St. Louis. He takes Kurt to eat dinner at a barbecue joint on the docks. They sit at a table next to a dirty window. The place is nearly empty. “I haven’t been myself,” Terry says

while they read the menus. He sighs. “I was wrong. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I’m—”

The waiter saunters over to their table. He sets down two glasses of cloudy water and arranges the silverware. Then he waits, holding the order pad.

“I don’t like barbecue,” Kurt says. He flips over the menu. He looks at it. “I—”

“What?” Terry says. “Who doesn’t like barbecue? You like barbecue.”

“I don’t,” Kurt says. “I don’t like it. Can I have ice cream? I want a milkshake.”

“No,” Terry says. He glances at the waiter. “We’ll have two Cokes and two briskets.”

The waiter scribbles this down as he goes back to the kitchen.

Kurt looks out the window. It’s snowing again, and the wind is whipping the flakes in sheets over the Mississippi River. Kurt watches a barge arrive at the docks across the street. The crewmen work in the heavy snow. They move the cargo with cranes and with forklifts. They load the crates that are labeled FRAGILE into all the trucks that are parked along the pier.

The waiter returns. He sets the briskets and the Cokes on the table, then strolls off.

Terry pulls the plate close. He smells the pork. “Oh baby,” he sings and begins to eat.

The front door opens, and a boatman from across the street scuttles into the restaurant. He calls, “Hey, doll,” to the lady bartender. He sits down at the bar. Kurt studies him. He listens to the man tell the bartender a story about how he caught a 150-pound catfish in a lake near some shanty parish in Louisiana. He says he caught the fish with a cane pole. He says that and the bartender laughs. The boatman calls the fish “Mr. Ballantine.” He moves away from the bar. He tells the bartender that he wrestled Mr. Ballantine onto the muddy bank. He says, “Like this.” The boatman throws himself around. He knocks into the bar top, and he bangs into the stools. He says that was how it happened. He smiles real big. “No, shit,” he hoots. “No, shit.”

“Here,” the bartender says. She gives the man a glass of frothy beer. “It’s on the house.”

The boatman gulps his beer, and Terry nudges Kurt and says, “Would you eat.”

Kurt rests his elbows on the table. He frowns, and Terry gobbles the brisket.

Kurt glances at the boatman and at the bartender. Mel worked on a boat like that man. He told Kurt about it the day he gave him old hush puppies from Captain D’s. This happened last week. Kurt found the food in a crumpled bag on the floor of his mother’s Jeep. So he took it to the lumber mill. Mel ate a hush puppy. He said he fished cod in Maine. He said it was a moral time back then. Kurt remembers this. Then he remembers last night. He recalls Mel’s hairy genitals and the glass pipe, and shame turns his face red. He looks at Terry. “What?” Terry says. He belches and picks his teeth. Terry pulls a clump of soggy pork out his molar. Then he eats it.

“Hey?” Terry says. He gestures at Kurt’s brisket. “Are you gonna eat that?”

Kurt scoots his plate to the side. Hey says, “No. I don’t like it.”

“What?” Terry says. He grabs the plate. “What do you know? What do you know?”

§

It’s dark now. Terry drives over the river on Highway I-70, and Kurt gazes out the passenger window. He looks at the Arch and at the buildings. The city is bright with lucent light in the night horizon. Kurt wishes his mother never met Terry at the Firemen’s Ball last August. He glances over at Terry. He sneers at him, and Terry reaches over and ruffles his hair. Kurt is sobered by a pang of guilt. So he stares out the window again. He looks at the full moon, and he presses his finger to the window. Kurt traces its shape over the surface of the cold glass.

When they get home, Terry pulls the Toyota in the garage. He asks, “Are we friends?”

“Yes,” Kurt says as they sit in the dark.

“Will you be my friend, and will you do me a favor?”

“Okay,” Kurt says. He goes for the door, but Terry hits the lock button.

“Promise me you’ll never go back to the mill?”

“Yeah,” Kurt says. His head lolls. “I promise.”

“I’m serious. I mean it,” Terry says.

“I know that,” Kurt answers.

Terry grabs the steering wheel. He says, “I think I’m cursed.”

“What do you mean?” Kurt asks.

“I mean that no matter what I do it never works out.”

Kurt jerks on his coat zipper. He moves the slider up and down.

“I won’t give up. I’ve got plans,” Terry says.

“Oh,” Kurt mumbles. He forces a smile.

Terry turns on the dome light and grabs a newspaper off the backseat.

“See?” he says and points at the classifieds.

Kurt looks. There’s an ad circled in red ink. It’s a custodial job.

“I’m gonna fix this. I will,” Terry says.

“I know,” Kurt says.

“You believe me?” Terry asks.

“I guess,” Kurt says. A car drives by. Its headlights flash in the garage.

“Your mom. She doesn’t believe me. She says I’m a leech.”

Kurt shrugs. He pulls on the door handle again.

“Forget it,” Terry says. He unlocks the doors, and they go in the house.

§

Weeks pass and Terry begins to sleep in the basement on a cot. He does this after he and Jess argue about bills. A few days later, they fight again before she leaves for work. That night, Kurt can’t sleep. He sits in the dark playing Xbox in his bedroom. It’s midnight when he hears Terry stumble in the hallway. Kurt turns off the TV. He bustles to bed, and he covers himself with the bedspread. He pretends to sleep as Terry opens the door and staggers in the bedroom.

“Get up,” Terry says. He reeks of beer. He points to the window. “There’s a fire outside.”

Kurt crawls out of bed. He tugs on his boots, and he follows Terry to the kitchen.

They put on their coats and hurry out the back door, and they tear across the hard snow. They tromp their way down the alley. There is smoke massing over the neighborhood. Porch lamps and garage lights flash on at the surrounding homes. People stare out their windows. Others stand in their driveways. Kurt and Terry see it. The lumber mill is on fire. Flames rage out of the windows, and fire surges out of the doors. Sections of the roof have collapsed. Yellow embers of burning pulp thread the frigid air. These glowing cinders scatter in the cold breeze, and they tremble across the night sky. All this fiery ash floats to the ground like lint.

There's an explosion, and fire covers the building. Frantic neighbors crowd the alley.

A man calls 911 on his iPhone, and a woman with night cream on her face screams.

It's Nelson. He scrambles out of the entrance flailing his arms around his head. His hair is lit up. It's burning like a road flare. Nelson drops to the ground, thrashing madly in the snow and in the weeds. Kurt's guts coil. He sees William next. He batters out the side door. His hands are on fire. Terry and the man who called 911 race down the snowy hillside. They tackle the old men. They get hold of them. They roll the old men in the snow until the flames are put out.

When Kurt breaks after them, Terry snarls. He shrieks, "No. Go back."

Kurt looks. Nelson's face is scorched black like soot. He is howling in pain as he frantically rocks back and forth. William is sitting in the sewage ditch. He holds out both of his hands, palms up, and he wails, "Oh oh oh oh." His hands look bad. They look like raw stew meat. The skin is peeled back to the knuckles, and the fingers are shriveled down to the bone.

Terry yells. He yells, "Please go. Please go now, damn it. Go right now. I mean it."

Kurt runs to the alley, and the woman with cream on her face says, "It's all right."

She takes Kurt in her arms. He hears more shouting. This time, it's Mel. He lurches out of the smoke. He keels face-down into the snow. A

man and a woman run to him. They drag Mel, by the feet, away from the burning building.

Kurt wants to leave, but his legs feel rooted to the ground. He grabs hold of the woman. He buries his face into the front of her green parka jacket to hide the tears that slide down his face. He squeezes her. He really squeezes her.

“Stop,” the woman says. “Stop it.” She elbows at Kurt. “Stop,” she snickers. “Stop it.”

Kurt jabs his fists into his pockets. He says, “I’m cold. I just want to go home.”

“Look,” she cries and the people gathered in the alley cheer. “They’re here.”

Ambulances and fire trucks surround the lumber mill. Teams of firefighters run the jet hoses to the building. They blast water onto the fire. A police officer is posted next to his patrol car, the door open, yelling into the radio receiver. EMTs work on Nelson’s head. Mel is laid out in the snow, and there is a blue coat folded over his face. William is still weeping. He is wandering about aimlessly in the sewage ditch shaking his burnt hands, calling out for Mel.

Terry slinks through the weeds. He grabs Kurt by the hand, and they walk home.

§

The kitchen is dark. Terry sits slouched at the round table. “Have a seat,” he says.

“Okay,” Kurt says. He shucks his coat off and reaches for the light switch.

“Don’t,” Terry barks. “Don’t do that.” He takes out his pack of cigarettes. “Just sit.”

Kurt sits down at the end of the table. Terry removes his coat, and he balls it up and sets the coat on the chair to his right. Then he fumbles a matchbook out of his shirt pocket. He tears one off. His hands are shaking. Kurt sees that. Terry strikes the match, and a burst of red flame shines his pale and his cold eyes from the dark. He lights a Kool. He smokes the cigarette with relish, and this is when Kurt notices the blood. It’s streaked across Terry’s knuckles like jelly.

“Are the men dead? I mean did the fire kill them?” Kurt asks. “I mean—”

“What?” Terry gasps. “No. They’ll be fine. The fire—it wasn’t as bad as it seemed.”

Terry butts the Kool in the green ashtray and trundles in the moonlight that slants into the kitchen window. He buckles at the sink. He gags, and he vomits, and Kurt hears the splatters. Terry turns on the faucet. He lets the water run for a while before he turns it off. He wobbles back to the table. He grabs Jess’s work smock and wipes his mouth with it. She left it draped over the chair. She told Terry to wash it for her. Kurt was eating Cheerios for breakfast. He heard his mother. She said, “Help me,” to Terry and she left for work.

Terry hurries to the bathroom in the hallway. He comes back with Pepto-Bismol.

“I saw the blood. I saw the blood. I saw everything,” Kurt says. “I saw—”

“You expect the worst, just like Jess. The truth is you don’t know *what* you saw.”

Terry sits at the table. He takes off the bottle cap, and he drinks the Pepto. He says, “I want you to listen to me.” Terry speaks in a low voice. He talks about the old men. He tells Kurt they’re lucky. He insists it. He says, “Think about it. Just think about it.” Terry explains. He says the old men will get to eat a lovely hot meal. He says they’ll get to sleep in a warm bed tonight, and he says they’ll even get to watch TV. Terry talks on, and Kurt listens to the words, and the words fill Kurt with a joyful comfort. He listens to the words, and he wants Terry to keep talking.

Terry swigs the Pepto. He slides the bottle across the table. “Drink it,” he says.

Kurt sips the Pepto. It feels nice and cool and fine in his stomach.

“This doesn’t have to be a bad thing. It doesn’t have to be like that,” Terry says.

“Yeah,” Kurt says as he hands the Pepto over to Terry.

“You understand?” Terry says. He caps the Pepto and leaves it on the table. “Kurt?”

“Yes,” Kurt says. “Yes. I understand. The old men will be fine.”

“That’s right,” Terry says. He and Kurt stand. “Come on. It’s time for bed.”

§

Kurt and Terry walk down the hallway and enter the bedroom. Terry turns on the light.

“Here,” Terry says as he draws the bedcovers back.

Kurt sits on the bed. He takes off his boots, and he chucks them on the floor next to the closet door. Terry lingers next to the computer desk. He opens a drawer. Then he closes it. He drifts across the room in a frenzied gait, and he collects Kurt’s boots off the floor. He places them neatly in the corner. Kurt crawls into bed. Then he covers himself with the bedspread. Terry sits on the bed next to him. He holds out his left hand. He examines it, and he rubs at the dried blood that is caked over his fingers and his knuckles. He does this until there is no more blood.

“You can tell me. Did you know the old men? Did you know the bums?” Terry asks.

“No,” Kurt says. He sees Terry smile so he says it again: “No.”

“Good,” Terry says. He laughs. “That’s good.” He says, “That’s really good.”

Terry turns off the light. He smiles at Kurt as he shuts the door, then leaves.

Kurt lies in bed. He moves around. He kicks at the covers, and he turns to his side. Finally, he tosses the bedspread to the side. He gets up, and he walks to the bedroom window. He looks outside. The lumber mill is still burning. The fire shines bright in the distance. The smoke is everywhere now. It hovers over the field of snow, and it rolls down the alley. The smoke creeps over the backyard. It’s almost reached the house. But Kurt doesn’t worry. He grabs the window drapes. He pulls them closed, and then he steps through the dark and back to his bed.