

**Everyday Monsters**  
**Robert Scott**

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Gordon Hesterman coughed a viscous lump into a tissue. His pudgy jowls and pasty neck reddened with the effort. Without looking he crumpled the sticky folds and tossed them into the trash.

June 12. Seventh period exam, last of the year.

The tardy bell rang; his students filed in. For what might have been the ten-thousandth time, Gordon listened to the toneless music of twenty-six teenagers playfully insulting one another or chatting about anything but their advanced literature seminar. They dug through backpacks for pens, pencils, bits of food, sticks of gum, plastic water bottles, anything to move the next two-and-a-half hours along.

... *gonna screw this up* ...

... *did not run it that fast. She was slower in the 400* ...

... *you suck* ...

... *borrow your phone after this? I gotta call my mom.* ...

... *wearing that dress we saw at X-Plosion* ...

... *just Tweet it, douche bag; I'll see it tonight* ...

... *go get something to eat later* ...

... *no shithead, I'm in the B's, near the front. You're a W* ...

Gordon stood beside the desk, his hands clasped loosely behind his back. He didn't raise his voice. 'I need your attention, please.'

A few students settled; most continued chatting.

Gordon waited.

He'd been teaching the seminar for the past nineteen years, had grown older. His students remained young, each of them a stark reminder of how far Gordon had trudged through the unforgiving desert of middle age.

'Hi!' Rod Carter called from the back row. 'How're you today?'

'I'm fine, Rod. How are you?'

*Rod. Nice kid. Bright. Going places if he ever gets motivated.*

'Almost outta here.'

'Not yet,' Gordon smiled. 'You're mine for the next couple hours.'

Rachel Wilson sighed. 'Do we have to sit in these rows, Mr. H?'

'Exam day,' Gordon said, a bit louder, reeling them in. 'But it'll be over before you know it.'

*Rachel. Sexy. Learned young to be cute before credible.*

'That's what I'm afraid of,' Mitch Bell said from a corner seat near the window.

'You'll do fine.' He reached for an intimidating stack of powder blue examination booklets.

'You survived Mr. Wallace's AP Euro exam?'

'I don't know if we survived.' Rachel said. 'All those Hapsburgs. Who could be expected to keep them straight?'

Gordon shrugged. 'They were a laundry list, weren't they? Yet, you lived through Ms. Washington's calculus test.'

A collective groan swelled from their ranks. 'Hmm . . . perhaps not.'

Gordon slid the booklets across his desk, clearing a corner. The old hickory creaked when he sat. He coughed again, balled another sticky tissue in a deft legerdemain, and slipped it into his pocket.

'You all right, H?' Maggie Compton asked.

*Maggie. Pear-shaped ass. Michelangelo couldn't have sculpted better.*

Gordon ignored her. 'Did Ms. Washington deliver that future-is-yours speech this year?'

'Sure did,' Rod deftly mimicked the calculus instructor. 'F of x minus g of x divided by the derivative of God knows what . . . ?'

'And did Mr. Wallace share his see-the-world-while-you're-still-young advice?'

'*Jawohl*,' Kyle Banks laughed from the second row.

*Kyle. Rachel's boyfriend. Luckiest Neanderthal at Jefferson Central.*

Gordon wiped his mouth, tried to hide the trickle of sweat behind his ear. Swallowing another coughing spasm, he drank a bit of cold coffee.

'How about you, H?' Meredith Swanson asked.

'What's that?'

'Any parting words of wisdom?'

'Me? Nah. I ran out of wisdom decades ago. At my age, wise words are slippery.' He stole a moment to take in the homogenized clutch of healthy, affluent, clear-complexioned, intelligent potential. A-Lit students were the brightest bulbs at Jefferson Central. Gordon rarely had to teach knuckle draggers, thugs, drug dealers, white supremacists, dropouts, gang wannabes, or any of the salad bar of youthful diversity in the Gen-Ed classes. He almost never drove home feeling washed out, emotionally exhausted, beaten up, spat upon, shat upon, whatever. His students showed up – *remarkable what a difference it makes*. They read ahead – *a rare, coveted tendency* – asked insightful questions, listened to one another, drew accurate inferences, and formulated cogent arguments about what they'd read based on the historic and cultural context in which the poems, novels, and stories had been written.

Their writing sucked donkey snot, but so did most everyone's, even Gordon's colleagues in the English department, some of them well onto the north side of fifty.

He had been blessed with five sections of A-Lit for the past eleven years, hadn't taught general population students since the English 10 class who'd affectionately dubbed themselves the *University of ADHD*.

A-Lit kids were a breed apart, nothing like the children's zoo gathered in classrooms down the corridor. Rather, A-Lit students came from educated families, parents with graduate degrees who understood the value of competitive sports, music lessons, hard work, setting goals, reading every day, and turning off the iPhone, iPad, iPod, iTouch, *iDon't care . . . just turn the goddamned thing off and read some Doris Lessing, for Christ's sake*. They stayed busy, stayed healthy, and stayed focused on the end goal: Tier I and Tier II college admissions, often with a side order of NCAA athletics. Not bad.

A-Lit boys played baseball, football, lacrosse. Their hair covered their heads – Gordon's did not. They ate like parolees at a Vegas buffet, but their stomachs lay flat, while their biceps, triceps, lats, and pecs threatened to tear through their T-shirts. They wore khaki and cotton or wool, said, 'please' and 'thank you' with irritating regularity, and did their best work through Edgar Poe, Mark Twain, Jack London, and Langston Hughes. They rarely gave a second glance to Longfellow, Holmes, Emerson, or Dickinson.

And sadly, not a one of them knew how to communicate with their female classmates.

A-Lit girls. Women. Young women. That's what they were, nothing *girl* about it. Gordon tried not to think about them: Rachel, Meredith, Maggie, any of the talent wandering in every day. A-Lit women wore shoulder-length hair, confounding, loose cotton blouses, *Victoria's Secret* bras, pornographic yoga pants or leggings, tasteful makeup, conservative earrings, and . . . thongs. They

wore thongs, the seductive t-backs often riding above the waistband of their leggings. They also played sports, piano, cello, oboe, and had not one thimbleful of appreciation for the innate power they wielded over the young men. Their bodies defied the laws of physics in a miraculous display of near-zero subcutaneous fat that none would appreciate until they turned thirty-five and had a good long look in the mirror.

Gordon swallowed the acrid tang in his throat. He coughed again, into his fist, and stared down at his shoes: boring, Republican dress shoes, brown with scuffs. He'd had them longer than these students had been alive.

The shoes helped. His head cleared.

'H, sure you're all right?' Rod again.

'Yeah . . . um . . . yeah, Rod. Yes, thanks. I'm fine.' He wagged the examination booklets like a flag. 'Let's get to it.'

'Wait, Mr. H,' Meredith interrupted, raising her hand like a fourth grader. A-Lit students didn't raise their hands. They'd been brought up well; they took turns, listened, constructed knowledge. Hand raising meant business.

'What's up?'

*Meredith. No need to study; just bring those breasts with you wherever you go in life.*

'Um . . . can we . . . you know, maybe have a few minutes to talk about the essays?'

'The exam essays?' Gordon feigned irritation. '*My* exam essays?'

Kyle Banks jumped in. 'Well, not the essays exactly, Mr. H, but maybe . . . some of the stuff that might be . . . *on* the essays.'

'Yeah' and 'yes, please' and 'just for a minute' rose around him like moles for whacking.

Gordon gave in. 'Fine, yes, all right,' he dropped the booklets on his desk, 'but just for a few minutes. You've got twenty multiple choice, five short answer, and a full essay to write today. I want you to have at least two hours; so everyone can finish a second draft. There's no such thing as one draft.'

'Great . . . that's great. Thanks, Mr. H.' Meredith leaned back in her chair, clearly relieved. Gordon looked away, couldn't have it start, not yet, not with nearly two-and-a-half hours left. He dared not look.

*Slut. I know what you're doing. Knock it off.*

'So what would you like to discuss in the last few minutes before your doom?' He pressed his watch to his ear, shook his wrist, then listened again, teasing them.

'Poe,' Rachel said. 'I know you've got a Poe essay on there. Right?'

'I may . . . you'll find out soon enough,' he said. 'But I'm happy to spend a few minutes on old Edgar. What about him?'

'Why he wrote horror when everyone else was writing . . . whatever else . . . you know,' Meredith said, ignoring the others and raising her voice slightly. She clearly hadn't studied as much for A-Lit as she had for calculus.

'Hmm,' Gordon took a water bottle from his podium, walked slowly between the rows, pressing the cool plastic against the inside of his wrist. He glanced down at open notebooks, sheets of neatly scribbled, highlighted pages. 'I think we can cover that pretty quickly, but I'm not going to do the work for you.' He reached the back of the room, crossed behind them, working the crowd. 'You know how I operate —'

'The right answer's out here.' Two or three spoke up in Pavlovian unison.

'Exactly!' Gordon grinned. 'The right answer, plenty of wrong answers, close answers, thoughts, evaluations, even a few insults . . . they're all out there. We just need to hone in on the right stuff.'

Rachel turned in her seat, watched him. She wore a slip dress that climbed to mid-thigh when she sat, a front-row kid as long as Gordon had known her. 'Poe was messed up, right? After his mom died and his adopted father, Allan, kicked him out and his wife died and all that?'

'Okay . . . and?' Gordon prompted. He didn't look at Rachel or her dress, preferring instead to twist and untwist the bottle's plastic cap.

*I'll see. I'll see in just a minute. No rush. We've got over two hours.*

'And he hated the Romantics and the Transcendentalists,' Kyle added.

'Yup,' Rod jumped in. 'Called them Frogpondians.'

'He did,' Gordon clarified. 'Poe held Ralph Waldo Emerson in particular disdain, and often imagined him leading his pack of supplicants around the pond on Boston Common . . . thus the insult: Frogpondians.' Gordon twirled his finger in a circle above Meredith's notebook as if stirring a bowl of soup.

'That's important?' Meredith scratched a note in the margin. 'We've gotta know that, right?'

*Racerback demi. Nice. Black with lace. \$51.50 online.*

'Dunno,' Gordon said. 'What else do you have for me? Clearly not just an angry father and an insult for Transcendentalism.'

Kyle spoke up again. 'He was poor, like dirt poor, and angry about it.'

'Why?'

'I know this one!' Rachel half rose, her hand shooting skyward. 'I got this . . . because of the copyright laws. There was no international copyright law –'

'So what?' Again, Gordon refused to look at her. 'Who cared?'

'Poe did,' she went on. 'Magazines didn't have to pay British writers for re-prints. So they stole all kinds of stuff from British magazines and books, and printed it here for free. I mean, why pay Poe for new stories when they could print Dickens for nothing. Right?'

Gordon glanced her way, briefly. 'Excellent. Yes, Rachel. That's excellent. But someone remind me, since we're having this pre-examination chat, why Poe held the Romantics in such low regard.'

Several took a half-hearted stab at it:

Kyle: 'Because he realized that we're all broken, fallible, you know? Loss unites us.'

Rod: 'Because he read the Lewis and Clark stuff, the fur traders' of the Northwest, and he knew that nature was out to get him.'

Mitch: 'Nature hated him. It hates everyone. Washington Irving – right? – Washington Irving wrote it into *Sleepy Hollow*. It's how we know Ichabod Crane's really dead.'

Maggie: 'He'd tried to do good things, but failed. Nothing about his life matched the poems Longfellow or Holmes had been writing. It's why we call it *Dark Romantic*.'

And Rachel: 'While other poets had great jobs and made bank, he was drunk and raving at people.'

Gordon backed until his shoulders pressed against the white board where he'd written EXAM TODAY in green dry erase marker. He pointed at each of them in turn. 'Yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes. Outstanding! We're ready. And for those of you who aren't, I suggest you move closer to Kyle, Rod, Mitch, Rachel, or Maggie and be prepared to cheat like crazy, because they've got this down. Now you all just have to hope that there's a Poe essay on the test and I didn't just ask about Melville or Hawthorne!'

Meredith raised her hand again, didn't wait for Gordon to acknowledge her. 'Why all the monsters, though?'

He stopped beside a poster of Oprah Winfrey holding a copy of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Oprah reminded everyone to READ. Gordon asked, 'Did he really write monsters?'

*Meredith. You know. You must know how it would be.*

'Yeah . . . well . . . yes, sure he did.'

'Were they? Think about Poe's monsters: *William Wilson*, the *Red Death*, *Berenice*, *House of Usher*. Any monsters there?'

No one responded. Finally, Rod said, 'They were the monsters he saw every day: Tuberculosis, young death, alcoholism, the sinister side of nature.'

'Right,' Maggie added. 'Like if he was writing today, he'd have stories about a pedophile priest, a drug dealer in a hoodie, the AIDS virus, global warming, or a rich white guy gambling with old people's retirement money. Rod's right: they were everyday monsters.'

*Maggie. That ass. God kill and bury me in that ass.*

'And monsters from nature,' Gordon added. 'I'll give you that one. Monsters from nature. Think about *Masque of the Red Death*. Why was Prospero hiding? Think about *Rue Morgue* and how it showed up again in Holmes's *Adventure of the Speckled Band*.'

Meredith flipped a few pages in her notebook, then finally looked up. 'Wait . . . I think I've got it. He was just –'

'Nope,' Gordon cut her off. 'If you've got it, write it down. Everyone ready?' He passed out two exam booklets to each student then gathered up a stack of photocopied tests from the podium. 'Please don't write on these; they're a class set.'

With desks in rows, Gordon might have simply counted off the correct number of exams and had each student take one before passing the others back. But he elected to move up and down the aisles again, dropping one test on each desk. He moved slowly, ostensibly to ensure that all phones, electronic tablets, and notebooks had been stashed away.

But that was a bullshit check; A-Lit students didn't often cheat, certainly not in the classroom.

Rather, he moved at a leisurely pace, hand delivering exams, because it gave him a chance to peek down a blouse or two, to savor a nubile neck line, to imagine himself running a fingertip over the taut expanse of flesh that plunged deep into those confounding, loose blouses that haunted him in the dark hours before the alarm beeped at 4:45 am. Gordon had memorized the bra pages of the *Victoria's Secret* web site, knew every model, every style. Demi, push-up, silk, cotton, racerback, satin, strapless, wireless, full coverage, he'd spent hours connecting bras to students, breasts to shapes to sizes to lift and all of it while imagining himself tracing with a finger one of those nubile neck lines down that breathtaking, soft acreage of flesh and beneath, just once. Not in his car – Christ, no. Pedophiles dragged kids to their cars. – rather Gordon would invite her to his . . . to his house, when his wife wasn't home, or maybe to a hotel room, someplace nice, downtown, one of the high rise towers near the river. He'd be nice to her; he'd tell her the truth. They'd talk, and they'd have wine, good wine with strawberries, and he'd be kind, and . . . well, he'd –

'H?' Rod interrupted. 'You missed me, Mr. H.'

'Huh?' Gordon snapped awake. Horrified, he realized that he'd been standing beside Meredith's desk, staring blankly down at the cleft between her tits as she wrote her name on the exam booklet.

*Racerback demi. Black with lace. \$51.50 online.*

Meredith didn't notice, thank Christ, or if she had, she decided to play it off as nothing. She'd leaned back in her chair not ten minutes earlier; she knew. By seventeen years, she knew. Of course, she did. As a 32, maybe a 34-D, she understood that leaning back like that was . . . well, it was an open invitation for anyone, even fifty-two-year-old teachers to have a look.

Meredith. 34-D. In *Victoria's Secret*, she might as well have been a film star: thin, pretty, athletic, yet with tits enough to make a train take a dirt path.

'H?' Rod again.

*Jesus Christ, Hesterman, get your shit together.*

‘Sure, Rod,’ Gordon managed. ‘Be right there. Sorry.’ He dragged a sleeve across his forehead; it came away damp.

In the back of the room, Gordon took stock of himself. Sweating, short of breath, with tingly numbness in his fingertips, pins and needles in his feet, he might have been having a heart attack. The corridor outside his classroom stretched for miles. A checkerboard-tile highway, it ran its course from a class discussion of Dark Romantic literature to a school board hearing to a summary dismissal letter and perhaps to a set of handcuffs and a stretch in the county lockup. He knew well that he ought to remain in the back, behind the desks, just plop down beside Rod Carter and sit out an inning or two. He could give the students time to get into their essays and give himself time to calm down.

He couldn’t permit himself to sit at his desk up front. That would be a mistake, an unforgivable and dangerous mistake.

But Gordon did.

Without taking any time to quiet his nerves, and before he could change his mind, Gordon pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and hustled – without looking like he was hustling – to his desk.

*And why not? I’ve got over a hundred finals to grade in the next two days. I might as well get started. No cause for alarm. No flag on the play. Just going to get started grading.*

His fingers shaking with unnerving palsy, Gordon opened the first exam booklet in the pile: Henry Carlisle from third period. He turned to the essay. The multiple choice and short answer questions he could grade anywhere. The essays demanded quiet attention. With two hours to kill, he’d make a dent in those. Yup, he’d finish the essays now, use them to keep his mind sharp and focused, to keep him from getting distracted, blurry or out of breath again.

He grabbed a pen, started in.

Quiet gathered about them as his students settled to work. Gordon detected an odd scraping sound from overhead. Something rustled through the crawl space above the ceiling tiles, sounding like a heavy blanket being dragged over a wood floor. The A-Lit kids didn’t notice it.

*HVAC’s messed up. Good thing break starts tomorrow. They can fix it.*

With Henry’s exam open and his pen poised to provide critical feedback, Gordon lifted his eyes, just his eyes. He’d read enough to know that Henry had written on Edgar Allan Poe’s influence on Arthur Conan Doyle, asserting that Poe’s story *Murders in the Rue Morgue* led directly to Doyle’s *Adventure of the Speckled Band*. Clearly, setting a homicidal orangutan loose on the streets of Paris was Poe’s way of demonstrating that no place was safe from the sinister and destructive force of nature. Fifty years later, Sherlock Holmes’s deduction that a massive deadly snake had been killing innocent victims inside a locked room was only more evidence that Poe’s influence had spread beyond . . . blah, blah, blah.

Gordon wore tri-focal progressive lenses. Sitting at his desk, pretending to grade Henry’s wordy, meandering essay on orangutans and homicidal snakes, Gordon silently blessed the genius engineer who’d perfected progressive eyeglasses. The upper edge of the lens, ground for distance, rested high on the bridge of his nose. This allowed him to use the bottom edge to read Henry’s claptrap about snakes as metaphors for nature’s dark side. But by raising his eyes, just slightly, Gordon was able to keep his head down yet still take full advantage of the upper edge of the tri-focal lenses to gain a clear, unfettered view beneath Rachel Wilson’s slip dress.

*She’s been a front-row kid as long as I’ve known her.*

Again, his breath caught on something unexpected and thorny. Gordon coughed through a convincing spasm, waved off students ready to dial 911, then returned to his grading, another sticky tissue full of whatever plague festered in his chest.

Head back down, Henry's essay still open, glasses positioned perfectly, snakes and orangutans busy murdering nineteenth century victims, Gordon slowly raised his gaze again, prepared this time for what awaited him between Rachel's thighs.

A petite yet tough lacrosse player, Rachel was about a size four. With no surplus of soft tissue on her thighs, there was nothing to keep Gordon from an uninhibited view. In most women, certainly middle-aged women, enough fat had collected down there to close those gates every time they sat down. Not Rachel Wilson. Rachel might only have tipped the scales at 110 pounds. With thin, wiry legs, her thighs didn't touch, even sitting, concentrating, scribbling longhand all she knew about Dark Romanticism.

And she wasn't wearing underwear.

At least, it didn't appear that she was, not from Gordon's vantage point.

He stared. He kept his head down and his pen moving, but his eyes didn't leave that neatly-trimmed pubis, naked – *Jesus-Christ-holy-shit naked* – there in Gordon's direct field of view, between Rachel's slightly parted legs, and on display for the next hour and fifty-three minutes.

*God, strike me dead. Jesus, kill me. Just kill me.*

Gordon dropped his pen, rose from his chair. He had to confirm for himself, had to know if his eyes were toying with him, convincing him that he'd found the lost treasure of El Dorado, or if Rachel had just been wearing dark panties in the size and shape of a teenager's vagina.

He exhaled hard, leaned on the desk until the ephemeral wave of nausea passed, then started a lap of the classroom. He planned to circle behind Rachel. Leaning forward in her chair, the clingy fabric of the slip dress would be pressed tight against her lower back. If she wore underwear – thong, granny panty, chastity belt, chain mail – he'd be able to see it wrinkling the smooth curvature of her backside in a thin, lacy imperfection.

*Panty lines. High schoolers can't abide panty lines.*

And since he was up and moving, Gordon figured why not have another go at Meredith's tits. Nearly two paragraphs into her essay, she'd not even look up. What the hell, in for a penny, in for a pound, in for a middle-ager's fantasy of willing yet uncertain teen flesh.

*You're a lecher, for pity's sake. Gordon, you're . . . you've got to . . . Jesus, just sit in the back. Sit by Rod and count the frigging ceiling tiles or pick your nose. Anything.*

Gordon Hesterman didn't stand a chance. He could no more have kept himself from that voyeuristic lap than perform brain surgery. Pen in hand to project some sense of pedagogical authority, he slid his left hand into his trouser pocket, camouflaging the beginnings of a confident, resilient erection.

*A boner to mine bauxite.*

He stopped at Maggie Compton's desk – *34-B, push-up, not bad, but God that ass*. Today Maggie had worn a sports bra, a decidedly uninspired look. Leaning over her desk, Gordon saw that she'd decided to address Poe's influence on Jules Verne, also not bad. She'd clearly paid attention in the past month.

'Looks good,' he whispered.

Maggie smiled. 'Thanks, H.'

*H. They trust you. They trust you enough to use your nickname to your face, without flinching. H. Mr. H. And what are you doing? Hub, H?*

Mitch Bell and Kyle Banks had decided to write on Hawthorne. Gordon approved. Old Nathaniel's embarrassment at Judge Hathorne's role in the Salem witch trials made for juicy non-fiction fodder year after year.

Then beside Meredith's desk and the racerback demi, just peeking out where she'd left one too many buttons unfastened on an exhausted denim shirt that might have fallen out of a Bruce Springsteen ballad. He didn't linger this time, though, had spent too long staring earlier. Rather,

Gordon sidled toward the back, his vision tunneling pleasantly as the dull roar in his ears intensified and the tumescence in his pants thickened.

*Decolatage. How does one spell that? Decollatage? Decolatagge? Dunno. Look it up later.*

Gordon circled behind Rod, who surprisingly hadn't written anything. Rather, Rod Carter seemed content to scribble notes in a confused concept map he'd drawn on a piece of scratch paper. Not caring either way, Gordon whispered, 'You all right?'

'Yup,' Rod smirked. Gordon considered this, then decided that was the perfect verb for it: smirked. 'I'm good, Mr. H.'

'Okay,' he said. 'Lemme know if you get stuck.'

Flanking the class, Gordon slipped down the second aisle, coming in behind Rachel who remained hunched over, writing furiously with her slip dress still hiked halfway up her slightly-parted thighs. Gordon pretended to check on everyone's progress, pointing out minor mistakes or answering clarifying questions. He paused longest at Brian Kellerman's desk, immediately behind Rachel, where he helped himself to a lingering examination of the petite student's lower back.

Nothing. Not a wrinkle.

*She's not wearing anything, not a stitch of underwear. Why would she? In that dress it would look ridiculous, like a Braille map of her ass.*

In a moment, Gordon was back at Henry Carlisle's *Speckled Band* essay, the crooked scrawl blurry in the periphery of his progressive lenses. Now, however, he slowly worked at his erection with his left hand while his right kept up the façade of grading Henry's grammar.

He took his time as the HVAC system wheezed and sighed above the ceiling vent like a steam engine.

Paging through the exam booklet, Gordon periodically checked the room, ensured that no one watched him, no one suspected that their A-Lit teacher, the man they loved and respected enough to call *H* without hesitation was masturbating beneath his desk while staring at the shadowy pubis of a seventeen-year-old student entrusted to him for a two-hour examination on nineteenth century American literature.

Gordon sweat through his undershirt, felt warm moisture in his armpits, across his chest, and down the shallow valley of his back. He didn't care. Too far along this road to perdition, he continued stroking himself, slowly, ever more slowly, hiding his facial expression from the class and working diligently to control his breathing.

When he came, he did it with his eyes open, rare for him. Gordon peered deep beneath Rachel's dress, imagined her welcoming him there, between her tan, olive-skinned legs, and he ejaculated a hot spasm of semen down the left leg of his boxers and along the inside of his thigh.

*Jesus. Jesus forgive me. What have I . . . what am I doing? Jesus Christ, forgive me.*

It was some minutes before he moved; he simply stared at Henry's indecipherable paragraphs, waiting for his breathing to slow, his sweat to dry.

'Mr. H?'

*Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit, and motherfucking shit!*

'Yes, Kyle,' he cocked an eyebrow.

Kyle Banks reddened, glanced around the room apologetically. 'Um . . . sorry, but can you . . . can I—'

'C'mon up, Kyle,' Gordon slid his chair farther beneath the desk, careful to hide the stained wet crotch of his khaki's. He made a show of adjusting his shirtsleeve, then ran it quickly across his forehead. Again, it came away wet.

An hour and twenty-one minutes later, Gordon stood with the soiled splash on his trousers pressed against the center drawer of his desk. Several seniors tried awkwardly to hug him, but he shouldered them away, promising instead to say good-bye at the weekend's graduation ceremony.

They thanked him, shook his hand, vowed to follow his Twitter feed – he didn't have one – and to friend him on Facebook the moment Dr. Peters confirmed them as graduates. Gordon smiled and nodded and promised and encouraged and you're-welcomed until the last of his advanced literature students disappeared down the corridor and into the gaping maw of their own, uncertain futures.

He slumped heavily in his chair, shoved a stack of exams aside, and dropped his face onto his forearm.

Gordon Hesterman wept.

He pulled himself together at 3:45, when Dave Wallace, the AP European History teacher invited him out for a few celebratory beers.

'Thanks, but no, Dave,' Gordon replied without getting up. 'In the past three days, I collected a hundred-and-thirty exams, all with essays . . . yeah, I know I'm an idiot, but I'm determined to teach them how to write . . . next time, okay?'

He ironed out the wrinkles in his voice when his wife called at 5:20, asking if he'd be home for dinner.

'Sorry, hon, not tonight. Gotta get these tests graded.'

With the stack of assessments untouched, Gordon clicked off his cell phone, rested his head on his folded arms and fell asleep.

He woke around 8:00 with dry trousers.

As much as he knew better, he convinced himself that he could still smell the musty aroma of coagulating sperm rising from his crotch. He trudged past the department office to the faculty bathroom. A custodian was busy cleaning the Men's; so Gordon used the Women's. No matter. Only he and the janitorial staff would be around this late.

He rolled out two feet of brown paper towel that had the complexion of gritty sandpaper, dumped the works in cold water and proceeded to clean the vestiges of semen from his thigh. The chill slapped him fully lucid, and he mentally tallied his sins of the day: coveting children, exploiting children without their knowledge or consent, self-stimulation while staring unabashedly at what amounted to illegal child pornography, self-stimulation in a public school, self-stimulation while acting as *en loco parentis* to twenty-six minors, and finally abusing the trust placed in him by the parents, the board of education, the superintendent, his principal and the faculty and staff at Jefferson Central High School.

With his pants sagging about his knees, his boxers tugged halfway down, Gordon forced himself to lean close to the mirror and look long into his face. After a minute or two, he turned away, hiked his boxers over his dimpled, flaccid penis, and ran water to wash his hands.

Through the HVAC overhead, he heard a dry rustle, like wind in a scatter of autumn leaves. Gordon jumped at the sound, having forgotten the janitor next door.

*A mop. Calm down. It's just a mop.*

He tucked in his shirt, fastened his belt, and checked his clothes in the mirror. He didn't make eye contact with himself again, couldn't manage it, not yet. Outside the department office, Gordon thought he heard the same feathery rustle, a faint scraping above the pressboard tiles. He stopped, listened intently for a moment, then shrugged it off as one of the creaks and groans no one

heard over the din of 2,700 teenagers. He stole one of Jackie Taylor's Cokes from the department fridge and returned to his classroom.

Near the top of the seventh period stack, Gordon found Rod Carter's exam booklet. He'd seen Rachel's but hadn't opened it. He couldn't read her essay, no more than he could stare himself down in the restroom mirror.

*Just give her a B+. 88%. That's fine. There's no need to read it.*

Settling into his chair, Gordon took a swallow of Coke, reveled in the cold blast of carbonated sugar, then flipped through Rod's test.

By the top of page two, whatever color remained in Gordon's face drained away. He dropped the stolen Coke; it bounced once beneath his chair, then toppled, spilling bubbly fluid in a brown puddle.

Rod hadn't responded to the essay question. Rather, the young man had written a brief note:

Dear Mr. H.

By my calculations, I can take a zero on this exam and still pass for the year with a B, maybe a C+. Either way, I'm not answering your bullshit essay question. I'm not doing anything else for you ever again.

You're a pervert, Mr. H. I'm sitting here watching you, and I can't describe how shocked and disappointed I am. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I like you. I've enjoyed this class, but I think someone needs to know. Someone needs to deal with you.

You want us to write about Dark Romanticism and about the destructive side of nature while you grab your dick and check out the girls in class. I'm not going to do that, Mr. H.

I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm not going to write this essay for you.

If nature is truly sinister, then it's coming for you.

Give me a zero. I don't care anymore. Please know that I'm already trying to unlearn everything you taught me this year.

Rodney Carter

Rage hit Gordon's bloodstream, flooding him with stark, brightly-polished fury.

With Rod's exam crumpled in his fist, he howled and dragged both arms across his desk, casting to the floor over a hundred powder blue booklets, a dozen textbooks and novels, countless files, pens, office supplies, and a ceramic mug his daughter, Katie, had made for him in preschool. The exams, files, and books drank up the puddle of errant Coke, ruining scores of badly written essays about man's fallibility. Katie's mug, a clumsy atrocity of 3-D art burst in a scatter of rainbow-colored shards.

Gordon collapsed to his knees; his pants soaked up their share of soda. He gathered a handful of ceramic puzzle pieces and tried vainly to reassemble the coffee mug. His mouth hanging open, he finally managed a breath and wailed in despair. The momentary blast of anger drained across the tiles, and he rolled onto his back, weeping too loudly to hear the delicate scrape and sandy rustle coming from the corridor.

On the wall, Oprah seemed to glare down at him, disapproval clearly evident behind her smile.

By 9:30, Gordon had collected himself well enough to call Rod's parents.

He dialed from his desk extension, waited.

'Hello,' a woman's voice: presumably Rod's mother.

Nothing.

'Hello? Is anyone –'

'Hello,' he interrupted. 'Mrs. Carter? Sorry . . . I'm sorry to be calling so late . . .'

'Who's this please?' she asked.

'It's Gordon Hesterman, ma'am. I'm Rod's English –'

'Yes, Mr. Hesterman,' her voice rose. 'Oh, let me tell you how glad I am you called. Tom and I have been meaning to call you for months, but you know how things get, how busy, and there's never time, and the next thing you know it's June, and he's graduating, and we never got around to it.'

'Oh, that's fine, ma'am,' Gordon said. 'Please don't worry about it.' He drew an interminable breath, braced himself. 'Mrs. Carter, the reason I called . . .'

'Yes?'

'Um . . .'

 Gordon dragged a fingertip across the weary wood of his desk, imagined himself dragging it across the taut expanse of tan skin –

'Mr. Hesterman?' Rod's mother prompted. 'You there? Is everything okay?'

Gordon found his voice. 'Yes, yes, certainly. Listen, I'm just here tonight thinking back over a few things this year, and I realized that I, too, was remiss that I never called you. I'm sorry about that. It's obvious from teaching your son that you and your husband have worked pretty diligently to end up with a young man as . . . well, as . . . I dunno. He's a great kid, Mrs. Carter. It was my pleasure to have him in class, ma'am, and I know he's on his way to great, great things.'

Rod's mother didn't answer right away. Swallowing down the lump in her throat, she took a second, then responded with such an enthusiastic ration of gratitude and bullshit that Gordon nearly vomited the few swallows of Coke he'd managed before dropping the can. Dragging and re-dragging his finger over the desktop, he finally lanced a paint-stained splinter deep into his fingertip, the same fingertip he'd planned to slide sensually . . . he let it go, sucked the blood droplets clean while listening to Mrs. Carter prattle on.

Gordon pressed the splinter into the soft pad of his fingertip. He welcomed the jagged bolts of pain that momentarily paralyzed his hand and wrist.

Ten minutes later, he hung up. Unaware of entirely what he'd said, what Mrs. Carter'd said, Gordon pushed his forehead hard against his desk. A headache, a gold medal winner, came hull up on the horizon. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly against the burgeoning pain.

He hadn't been able to tell Rod's mother.

*Because you deserved it, asshole. Get used to disrespect.*

In the drawer, he found a plastic bottle of Ibuprofen, dumped five pills into his hand, then tossed them into the trash. He pressed the splinter farther into his finger, wanting to feel it scrape against bone.

Gordon woke at 2:12 am to the sound of steam escaping a teapot, waves retreating down a beach.

He leaned into the space beside his computer where he knew from experience that he could catch the draft from the ceiling vent.

Nothing. The air had been turned off. Why not? The school year ended eleven hours ago. Graduation was scheduled for Saturday on the football field. There'd be no need for air conditioning until the seniors showed up for their robes.

'What's that?' he called.

No one answered.

'Donny? Glenn?' He tried the custodians, checked his watch. They'd have clocked out at 11:00. 'Guys? You still here?'

Again, the light brush of wind in dry leaves, fingertips across a sanded plank.

Gordon examined his own finger in the lamplight. The irregular length of wood had caused the soft tissue to redden deeply. He gave it a gentle squeeze, releasing a droplet of ivory-colored pus that he smeared onto his already soiled trousers.

The noise again, closer this time, in the room.

‘What’s that?’

His classroom resonated with the sound, whatever it was, scraping down through the HVAC system, causing the pressboard ceiling tiles to vibrate audibly. ‘What the hell?’ he started, then understood.

A senior prank.

They’d got him once before, ten years earlier, when they’d stolen his mailbox, filled it with dog shit, and hoisted it up the flagpole.

Not again.

‘Guys? Rod? Is that you? Are you there? I’m still here; so I hate to burst your bubble, but you can’t get away with it tonight. There’s still an adult in the building.’

He considered his chair, his desk, then called, ‘Guys?’

Again, nothing save the bristly scrape of wool socks on a hardwood floor.

‘Hey!’ Gordon braced the chair, climbed onto his desk, and reached for the square tile overhead. ‘Guys, I’m coming up. I’ve got you. It’s no use; you ought to clear out of here before you get into real trouble . . . anyone up there hear me? Rod? Rod Carter? You there?’

With the contents of his desk cast across the floor, his A-Lit exam booklets soaked in spilled soda, his trousers stained with dry semen, pus, and blood, Gordon climbed onto his desk. Pain flared in his head, chest, and fingertip. He shoved the pressboard tile back then thrust his head into the darkened crawl space above the classroom, three feet of no man’s land filled with electric cables, Internet wiring, plumbing pipes, and air conditioning vents.

‘Who’s up here?’ he asked, blinking to acclimate his vision. ‘What’s going —’

The snake struck hard, biting simultaneously into Gordon’s left eye and cheek. He screeched, grasped wildly at his face, tried to fall backward, just collapse from his desk to the floor.

The snake didn’t allow it. Emerging from the ambient darkness with unimaginable speed, it bit him again, yanking Gordon forward by his eye socket, as if in an effort to pull the terrified English teacher bodily into the crawl space.

‘God! God, please! Jesus, help me! Help!’ He shouted, frantic.

Gordon’s cries were cut short; the snake coiled in an oily blur about his throat, closing off his airway and slowly crushing his larynx.

The dying man flailed at the creature, pulling fruitlessly at the wiry muscle wrapped twice, then three times about his neck. It didn’t budge. As big around as a man’s leg, much thicker than Rachel Wilson’s youthful thighs, the heavy-bodied serpent finished its work quickly, choking the life from Gordon Hesterman. The bones in his neck snapped audibly. He heard them. Capillaries in his eyes burst, discoloring his sclera and causing him to see the maddened, homicidal creature in shades of crimson. Bulbous curds of mucus – Gordon had been coughing it up all week – rose from his chest to clog like tapioca beneath his vocal chords. His last words – a plea to Christ for mercy – emerged as a damp squeal, the sound of a soul consigned without warning to Hell.

Gordon’s life ended without fanfare. His final involuntary twitch, little more than a spasm he might have experienced during a covert orgasm, caused one of the dead man’s conservative dress shoes to kick backwards, just far enough to drop Rod Carter’s crumpled exam booklet onto the floor. It landed beneath the desk in a puddle of spilled Coke, soaking just enough of the sticky beverage to smear the page and obliterate Rod’s defiant letter.

The snake still throttling him, Gordon Hesterman's body dangled like so much khaki and cotton laundry.

The 5:30 am custodial crew, led by Donny Margolius, found Gordon hanging above the inexplicable wreckage of books, papers, and cola-soaked A-Lit exams. Donny quickly locked the classroom door, ordered the rest of the crew not to touch anything along the English corridor, and then called Dr. Peters. Donny had only used Dr. Peters's home number once before, five years earlier when one of the hand dryers in the bathroom had caught fire. Shocked at the news, the principal thanked Donny for his quick thinking and asked the custodian to wait until the police and paramedics arrived.

'Will do, sir,' Donny said, peering through the narrow, shatterproof pane in the classroom door. 'But honestly, sir, I think Mr. Hesterman needs a priest, not an ambulance.'

'Is he moving at all? Did you try CPR? Anything?'

'No, sir,' Donny said. 'He's dead, sir. He hanged himself.'

'How can you tell from outside the room?'

'Three tours in Vietnam and thirty years as an X-ray technician,' Donny explained.

'Well, where is he? What's he . . . I dunno. What's -'

'He's hanging, sir, above his desk, looks like he pulled down some Internet cable, a length of coaxial or T-1 line. It's tied pretty well around his neck.' Donny pressed his face close to the glass, squinted to improve his vision. 'Yup, that's . . . well, that's . . . no question, sir. Mr. Hesterman killed himself. I'm sorry.'