

The Corridor

Robert Scott

‘Did you plagiarize that paragraph or not?’

‘No, I’m telling you. I didn’t.’

It’s warm in here, muggy, humid, whatever they call it, stuffy. The low ceiling, painted Arctic winter, yellow lockers – too narrow to accommodate a freshman; I checked – I’m back in high school.

Yellow lockers, Arctic winter ceiling, checkerboard tile hallway, I’m in the front hall at Newburgh Central High.

Newburgh, New York. Something happened here. The lockers remind me; they’re doing it on purpose. A blonde woman sidles past while there’s still room to move. The air in her wake carries the faint tang of river water.

My ninth grade teacher waits in front of me. She’s irritated about my *To Kill a Mockingbird* essay, convinced that I plagiarized a paragraph on Scout’s character as a metaphor for something I haven’t given a shit about in twenty years.

I told her then that I didn’t plagiarize it. I lied. I want to tell her again now, lie some more. But I can’t. This place is odd, gives me tip-of-my-tongue, tip-of-my-brain syndrome.

I remember the woman in the car: Carrie, Christie, Krista something. The Newburgh-Beacon Bridge. A summer night, muggy, whatever they call it, humid, must be July or August. The Del-Vikings sing on the radio, some AM station out of Manhattan, a shitty signal on a humid night. In neat, bippity-boppity, four-part harmony, they beg her to *come and go* with them. So she does.

CarrieChristieKrista takes a long slug of something from a bottle. Not brown liquor. Clear. Vodka’s a good guess. She takes that slug then unfastens her jeans.

Jean shorts. Cutoffs. 1970s attire. Cutoffs, with pink panties beneath, I only get a glimpse of those. Days-of-the-week panties, pink, Thursday.

Why only a glimpse and not a long look?

I’m driving.

Behind me, the crowd presses forward. There’s nowhere to go. This hallway’s packed with people. I can’t call it a line, per se, even a queue – great word; it’s on the wall at the funeral parlor: *queue up to see the body*, if they ever find the body. We’re more a clutch, a gathering, all pressing toward the end of the corridor. I’m trying not to press too diligently because my ninth grade teacher’s in front of me, and I don’t fancy rubbing against her backside, an ass I ridiculed beneath my breath for the better part of ten months.

When was that? 1970? ’71?

Facing us, near the end of the corridor, a woman sits at a ramshackle hickory desk, an old ‘60s model, like Mrs. Whatsername, *Mockingbird* lady, had in her classroom on the second floor.

In Newburgh. Scratching at the inside of my brain, Newburgh, New York, 1970-something, 1980-something. I was 14. I was 14 when I cheated on my *Mockingbird* essay. I was older, 28, 38 – it ended in an 8 – when it happened.

It . . .

Pink Thursday panties. I take a peek as she tugs them down. They join the cutoff jeans in a wrinkly toss near the firewall. We’re in the car, my car, in Beacon, New York, headed west for Newburgh. The Del-Vikings want her to *come and go* with them. She sings along, horrible voice, a voice that might’ve halted westward expansion if she’d been in Kansas singing Del-Vikings songs. Ugly voice. Beautiful in the overhead highway lights, near the prisons. Two prisons, one on each side of that pot-holed macadam ribbon. Interstate 84 in Beacon, there’s a men’s correctional facility

on one side and a women’s on the other. They face one another across the interminable comings and goings – not unlike a Del-Vikings song – of Interstate 84. Two prisons, one pair of pink panties, an ugly singing voice, and a trim, heartbreakingly sensual vagina, pasty white with platinum curls, above summer-tan thighs.

In my memory, I hear Johnny Milkshake, imitating Curley, ‘Hey Mo! That pussy’s gettin’ away. Better close the back gate! Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk.’

In Beacon, just across the river from Newburgh.

Newburgh, in 1985. Or 1995. It ended in a 5, because I ended in an 8. Eight cylinder, V-8, Eight ball keyring, cassette tape adapter for an 8-track player in the old radio. 8 something or other.

Thirty eight. I’m thirty eight in 1995.

My car, a ’77 Ford Thunderbird. Powder blue with faux leather, vinyl swatches on the roof, just above the miniature porthole windows in that back seat. Not much of a back seat, no good for CarrieChristieKrista and me. She isn’t a big woman, but we’ve gotta find a better place than the back seat of my car. A motel will do, the No-Tell Motel of Newburgh, out on 52 somewhere. There’s gotta be one cheap, \$39.99 for the night.

But we don’t need the night.

She’s already out of her shorts.

She swigs again from the Vodka. I think it’s Vodka –

– and Mr. Lomax pushes into me from the side, near the yellow lockers. He’s upset, looking for someone. But he can’t get anywhere. None of us can. This hallway’s jammed to overflowing, and that woman at the desk, she’s still talking with the boy.

I know him, even from behind.

There’s a boy at the desk; he looks to be about eleven.

(He’ll be eleven next Thursday, but you already know he doesn’t make it to next Thursday.)

He’s roly-poly fat, short, with a crew cut, and I can hear him all the way back here, even with Mr. Lomax pressing into me, shoving, looking for whoever stole that watch, the nice one, a waterproof model like SCUBA divers wear.

He’s pissed. ‘And I swear to Christ, when I catch the bastard who did this . . . I’m having him arrested!’

The roly-poly kid – Down Syndrome; that’s what they call it – he’s trying to communicate with the woman at the desk. She’s got stacks of forms, NCR paperwork, a Maxwell House coffee can filled with a tiger trap of neatly sharpened pencils. She’s asking him questions I can’t hear, not with Mrs. Mockingbird bitching about my essay and Mr. Lomax promising to have the thief arrested.

I can’t hear her, but I hear him.

His grunts and gestures, I understand them. That was earlier.

1969. January.

On the river, playing hockey with Pete, Johnny Milkshake, and that kid from Third Street, the pug-faced boy in the red hat and matching mittens. We teased him mercilessly, because he only had figure skates. His family couldn’t afford hockey skates.

I never confessed that mine had been passed down from my brother. We couldn’t afford hockey skates either. I simply wouldn’t wear figure skates, my ego again.

But they’d bought figure skates, the cheapos from K-Mart, along with the matching hat and mitten sets they always kept right by the entryway, especially in the week or two before Christmas.

Grab-n-go bargains, that’s what my mother calls them. But she’s not here, not yet.

Third Street turned us, focused our collective animosity. And why not? We’d been ribbing him all morning about his skates; –

‘C’mon Third Street! Let’s see a double axel! How about it, Peggy Fleming! Give us a toe loop!’

– he’s the one, not me, he started picking on Pudding.

No, his name wasn’t Pudding. That’s just what we called him. I think his name – I know – I think his name was Brian O’Dell, the Down Syndrome kid from Benson Avenue. He used to follow Johnny Milkshake around all weekend, liked to watch us play hockey on the Hudson, down where Broadway T-boned the river.

I didn’t start it. I was there, but I didn’t do anything. That pug-faced kid, Third Street, he started busting on Pudding just to get us to lay off his limp wristed figure skates. He picked on the crazy fiddler. What a shitbag. Who picks on a Down Syndrome kid? Pudding. He just wanted to be around Johnny Milkshake, didn’t give a damn about anything except chasing after Johnny.

But we laid into him.

It wasn’t even fun. Not really. Because Pudding didn’t get it. He didn’t understand that we were having at him. He just laughed with those God awful teeth and that chubby, dumb-all-over smile on his face, as if he truly loved everyone in the world.

And he did.

And it wasn’t my fault.

It was our fault.

It isn’t my fault. I don’t care about Mrs. Mockingbird, and Mr. Lomax can bugger himself. But Pudding wasn’t my fault.

Third Street did it. He started on Pudding, skating around him in ever tightening circles, making the poor bastard turn faster and faster in his yellow Wellingtons.

I remember those goddamned Wellingtons as clear as anything in my life. I hated those boots. Yellow, like the lockers in this corridor. Strange the way they make the colors match, even the ceiling.

But anyway, Pudding’s spinning and slipping, spinning and slipping. He was still laughing, but you could see that he was getting too dizzy, and then Third Street . . .

Or maybe it was Johnny Milkshake. Yeah, Johnny . . .

Or maybe it was me.

Yeah, maybe.

Skated over to the puck, the one frigging hockey puck we had, and slapped it far out onto the ice, toward the Beacon side and those prisons.

Yeah, maybe that was me.

And said, ‘Hey, Pudding! Stop messing with Peggy Fleming there, and go get our puck. Wouldja?’

And Pudding didn’t know any better. Neither did we.

We laughed. Johnny Milkshake slipped and fell – but not quite yet – not until that exact moment. Third Street laughed in an appalling wheezy chuckle that I will hear bouncing off the walls of my skull for the rest of my life – well, except when I’ve smoked a bowl or two of good weed, Columbian Blue, the best shit money could buy in the ‘80s.

But I hear Third Street’s appalling laugh, like a soul consigned to Hell, and I watch Johnny Milkshake skate toward our goal, a milk crate. Pete has taken off one of his gloves. I can’t remember why, but Johnny’s skating right toward it, doesn’t see it, because he’s watching Pudding in those absurd yellow Wellingtons as he grunts and shuffles onto the ice, chasing our puck. And I laugh to myself, because I can’t wait to see Johnny Milkshake on his ass, as soon as his skate hits Pete’s glove. So I’m watching Johnny and not paying attention to Pudding or Third Street.

And for some reason, I check my watch, a waterproof model like SCUBA divers wear. And it’s 10:37 on a Thursday morning in January, 1969.

Johnny Milkshake’s skate slides over Pete’s glove, and he loses his balance.

He’s funny, always has been, and while he’s waving his arms frantically, he gets us all laughing. He shouts, ‘Hey Mo! I’m goin’ down! I’m goin’ down!’

And he’s on his back, still waving his hands. The muted whoosh as his snowsuit strikes the ice, all at once, masks the sound of the slushy frozen Hudson River swallowing Brian Pudding Down Syndrome Love Everyone O’Dell for ever.

I simply look up – at 10:37 on a Thursday in January, 1969 – and Pudding is gone.

The line doesn’t move. It hasn’t moved in a long while. I’d check my watch, but I don’t want Mr. Lomax to see it.

Behind me, two lawyers argue about paperwork, important documents in a corporate merger, that hasn’t been filed by the deadline. They blame one another in loud voices, and begin to shove. But there’s no room for shoving. Their business is ruined, their reputation in tatters, because their competition’s copy of the same paperwork appears to have been filed on time, costing them tens of millions for a clerical error.

What they fail to realize is that I’m sleeping with the clerk of the court, an attractive blonde named CarrieChristieKrista something, who adores oldies stations and drinks a bit too much Vodka from time to time.

Oh, and she wears days-of-the-week panties. Thursdays are always pink.

The lawyerly shoving devolves into close-quarters fisticuffs. One of them misses and lands a solid right onto old Mr. Lomax’s temple. He doesn’t seem to notice.

It’s warm in here, muggy, hard to breathe.

Confusing.

The woman at the desk rises from her chair, stares disapprovingly along the corridor.

We’ve been here a long time. Others file in behind us. What had been hundreds are now thousands, all trapped in an Arctic winter hallway with a checkerboard tile floor and lockers just wide enough to fit a Geometry textbook.

More press from behind; I’m pushed against my ninth grade English teacher. Mrs. Mockingbird’s ass is broad, not quite airport runway material, but I’m confident I could parallel park my old ’77 T-Bird on there with space to spare. And it’s soft, bouncy, not taut like CarrieChristieKrista’s.

Soft, like tapioca.

Pudding.

He washed up in Jersey City four days later.

I didn’t sleep well again for eight years, not until I discovered Columbian Blue marijuana. God bless Columbian Blue.

I’m smoking it now as I drive that same ’77 T-Bird and peek over, rhythmically timing my glances to align with the rise and fall of light across the passenger seat. CarrieChristieKrista is masturbating – *come and go with me!* – in my front seat, while I tug from a blunt of Columbian Blue and she sucks on a Vodka bottle. The radio bops along, seemingly bringing the entire Universe into synchronous accord with the Del-Vikings, the passing sodium arc stalks illuminating that heartbreakingly sensual vagina, winter white, almost Arctic white, between those July-tan thighs. She swears she’ll come before the end of the song, before we reach the west end of the bridge, before Newburgh. She’s reclined in that bucket seat, using both hands, the Vodka bottle forgotten on the floor behind us, sloshing cheap Popov’s onto my threadbare carpets. I’ve made a shit-ton of money on a merger – I lied about a filing; CarrieChristieKrista helped me – and we’re celebrating, headed for the No-Tell Motel out on 52 near Orange Lake. It’s only \$39.99 a night. CarrieChristieKrista moans, offers up a weak shout. Both hands going, digging a damp path through those platinum curls. Arctic winter white. Her head’s back, her mouth open, a wrinkly handful of pink Thursday panties now pushed hard against the firewall by her slutty, inexpensive pumps.

And we’re on the bridge; the lights come more frequently now, illuminating the front seat of my Ford as if it were day. I watch, can’t take my eyes away.

The Del-Vikings dare her to finish before we reach the other side.

I take another long hit on the Columbian dangling stupidly from the corner of my mouth.

CarrieChristieKrista gives an honest-to-Christ shout. I encourage her. Why not? It’s a party after all. I’ve made a shit-ton of money, lying about a filing I intercepted in the county clerk’s office. And all it cost me was a half ounce of my favorite weed, a fifth of Popov’s, and \$39.99 for a night at the Route 52 No-Tell Motel.

I’m ironed firmly against Mrs. Mockingbird; the lawyers tussle behind me. I don’t want to be here, my crotch conveniently rammed against her airport-runway ass. Side stepping the few inches of available space, I shift to my left, inadvertently bump into the woman there. She’s young, about thirty, Plain Jane, but pretty.

She wheels on me. ‘Did you send that O’Dell boy onto the ice, young man?’

My mother.

My mother in 1969.

I’m home. She’s standing over me, not comforting as I weep, lie, wipe runners of snot from my nose, lie some more, and weep some more, before lying again.

‘No, mom! I wasn’t even on the ice when they started. I wasn’t . . .’ I sob into my coat sleeve, leaving it soiled with tears and milky snot. ‘I was up on the bench, tying my skates. I didn’t even hear what they said to him! I didn’t do anything!’

‘Pete’s father said you hit that puck way out there, told that retarded boy to go fetch it. Is that true?’

I lie again. ‘No. I wasn’t down there.’

She doesn’t believe me. She didn’t in 1969, and she doesn’t now.

I want her to protect me. She doesn’t. She can’t, not in here.

The muted, sodium arcs illuminating CarrieChristieKrista’s platinum pubic hair and Arctic winter vagina all at once grows brighter, too bright.

‘That pussy’s gettin’ away! Better close the back gate! Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk.’

The blunt falls from my mouth, lands on my left wrist, in my crotch, where I’ve been slowly stimulating myself to a German-engineered erection. The ash burns a spot just forward of my old dive watch, the one I heisted from Mr. Lomax’s store.

The truck swerves; its horn is Old Testament loud behind its high beams.

I turn wildly right then left, trying anything but knowing we’re doomed.

CarrieChristieKrista screams. We’re through the Jersey barrier and airborne.

I hear nothing as we fall toward the river. CarrieChristieKrista isn’t buckled in, and I’m vaguely aware of her Botticelli-perfect ass, floating above the center console, pressing against me – not unlike Mrs. Mockingbird’s airport runway

– but just for a moment, because we only require a moment to fall, nose-first – those T-Birds were all engine – toward the river. The Hudson. Not where Pudding disappeared, but upriver about a mile.

Close enough.

River water tastes like lake water. That coppery, algae, slow-cooked flavor gets in my sinuses and festers into infections abloom with seaweed, blue-green cells the forensic pathologist will use to confirm that I died upon impact. There’s plenty in my sinuses, but none in my lungs. I taste it, don’t breathe it.

I lose track of CarrieChristieKrista. Too bad. I like her. A troubled woman, but not unkind. And beautiful. That doesn’t count for much in this queue, but it did once. Beauty. Having it makes a difference. Just ask anyone who doesn’t.

Mr. Lomax promises to prosecute to the fullest extent of the law.

Mrs. Mockingbird promises that I’ll never get a master’s degree if I keep copying shit from the encyclopedia.

The lawyers promise to kill one another. Pistols at dawn.

And my mother promises that she’ll get to the bottom of these lies I’ve been telling. About Pudding. About that hockey puck.

And where did I get that watch?

At the desk, the woman – she’s got an unsightly mole on her face. Jesus, how does anyone go through life with a mole like that on their face? – gestures for the roly-poly kid to stand. She points through the mass of people crammed in here, at me.

Rolly poly, love everyone, big smile, big smile, big smile kid – Brian Pudding O’Dell – grins that love-everyone grin, and nods.

‘That’s him.’ For the first time ever, his speech is clear, neatly enunciated as if by a stage actor.

I understand him and want to shout, ‘Way to go, Pudding! That was great. You’re really coming along!’ But I can’t. I can’t shout, can’t shove, can’t move in this God-forsaken crowd.

Yellow lockers. Who paints lockers yellow?

But then I see Pudding’s boots and realize. I remember.

I feel it, him, take me about the waist, around my throat, beneath my arms, and yank me – not with the force of a ’77 Ford crashing nose first into the Hudson – but with enough gumption that I’m nearly out of breath as I’m dragged bodily through the collected dead, to the front of the line, to the ramshackle desk.

Others complain:

‘Why does he get to leave?’

‘Hey! We were here first!’

‘Not fair. This isn’t fair. I wanna talk to the manager.’

‘Who’s in charge here?’

And similar bullshit.

Near the front, I’m dragged past Pete, Third Street, and Johnny Milkshake. They try to get my attention.

Pete calls, ‘Hey Eddie, is this Hell?’

Johnny Milkshake, in his best imitation of Curley, shouts, ‘Hey Mo! I’m goin’ down! Waaaaay down!’

And Third Street asks, ‘Why’s he get to go back? Why not us?’

I’m beside the desk, just for a second.

Mole Face asks Pudding, ‘This him?’

And Pudding replies with perfect clarity, ‘Yes, he’s the one.’ To me, he adds, ‘That’s checkmate, Eddie.’

Checkmate. Mate. Ate. I end in an eight. My end.

The implacable strength, his invisible grasp takes me again, and I’m away. I try not to think about Third Street’s question: ‘Why’s he get to go back?’

But it plays over and over in my mind, an old record album with a scratch:

‘Why’s he get to go back? Why’s he get to go back? Why’s he get to . . .’

I’ve been in line for what feels like an eternity. I know that’s cliché, but time is awash here; verb tenses misbehave. My car from the seventies, my dope from the eighties, my mistress from the nineties, and Pudding, he’s from the sixties. What is this? Where’s he sending me? How is it that only my mistakes, fears, and lies are plungered into this corridor with me? This corridor with a

ceiling the color of CarrieChristieKrista’s vagina, lockers the color of a dead child’s boots, and the checkerboard tile floor, well, that looks like –

I drift above the checkerboard tile floor of the examination room. I can’t reach it, dunno why. A woman – she’s blonde, pretty, late thirties – sits in that God awful OB-GYN chair. There’s a nurse or a radiologist; again, I dunno, spreading that goopy shit on her pregnant belly. The blonde has that perfect amalgam of nervous excited anticipation, spackled over with a healthy dose of terror that only parents appreciate. She’s not too old for children, but old enough that they do the double, triple, and fourple check with the goopy thingy and the fuzzy black-and-white screen where all children look exactly the same: a bald possum caught in a storm drain.

She and the technician chat excitedly, and I can see from here – I’m not a pervert; she’s got her sweats tugged down – that she’s wearing pink panties.

Days-of-the-week panties.

I can’t remember why, but that resonates with me, as if I dreamed it. But I’m stupid here, drunk with all the possibilities ahead for this woman, her baby, her life.

She’s blonde, late thirties, in a yellow T-shirt hiked over her ample belly. That means something.

But I’m losing my connection with those recollections. They’re fading like mist over a river. I used to know what river, but that’s gone now, too.

‘Better close that back gate! Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk.’

A doctor enters, a woman with a mole on her face. Her inexpensive pumps clickety-clack on the checkerboard tiles. She carries a clipboard, means business.

I pick up a little of what they say; eavesdropping’s difficult.

Doctor Business: ‘. . . have the results of your amniocentesis, Mrs. O’Dell. Carrie, is it?’

Mother: ‘Krista. Krista O’Dell.’

‘Sorry, Krista.’

‘Is it bad news? Please tell me it isn’t bad news?’

‘That all depends on you, Krista. You see, your fluid tested positive for Down Syndrome. It’s a cognitive-developmental disability that leaves –’

Mother’s face contorts. She fights it pretty efficiently. ‘I know what it is, Doctor Lomax. I’m familiar with Down children.’

Doctor Business rudely checks her watch; it’s one of those waterproof models SCUBA divers use, a nice one. She says something. I miss it.

The grasp. Pudding has me again. I’m falling, not fast like a Ford dropped off a suspension bridge, but slowly, like a chubby, eleven year-old kid into icy river water. I fall, contract, try to lie my way out of it, but forget why, and just accept where I’m going. I fall into a smear of that goopy shit they spread on pregnant women’s bellies.

And through.

It’s warm in here, muggy, humid, whatever they call it, stuffy.

My remittance. No, my penance.

I know how this kid is going to die. Where and when.

I am going to die in that river. Again.

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