

Drosophila

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Please note, this work includes content related to blood, dismemberment, and mental illness.

“This has nothing to do with the mitochondria being the powerhouse of the cell.” Mr. Lorence folded his hands in pride. “This is real science. You are real scientists. Having a little faith in yourself can go a long way.”

Karmen rolled her eyes but Ellie was at the edge of her seat. She flung her notebook page over wildly and scribbled like she had never taken notes in her life. Mr. Lorence was getting good at enticing one of the girls and ignoring the other – twenty minutes into office hours, and Karmen was already fading out of focus.

A clock on the opposite wall hit every number with a loud click. Mr. Lorence watched it circle in silence for a long time, then exhaled through his nose and sat back in his chair. “Any other questions?”

A far-away hand inched up.

“Forrest?”

“Could you explain again what a sex-linked trait is?” Forrest’s pencil eraser found his lips, rolled around between them, and caught on his teeth. He, too, had been hanging on every word, *as diligent as always*. Out of everyone here, Mr. Lorence was most eager to see Forrest. His brightest student, and also the most elusive.

The professor gave a quick smile and pushed out of his chair. “Think of a sex-linked trait just like you would with your autonomous traits.” He slid over a stick of chalk. The powder clung to his fingers like

white paint. He could hear Forrest ardently taking notes as he scratched out the Punnett Square. But he paused. “Sorry, guys. Third day without coffee. I meant ‘autosomal.’”

“We knew what you meant.” Forrest had a sunlight to him that Mr. Lorence could feel crawling on the back of his neck. He swallowed.

“The female has two X chromosomes and the male has an X and a Z chromosome.”

“A Y chromosome.”

Mr. Lorence quickly erased the mistake. Chalk got on his sleeves. “Gosh, you’re right. Something is up with my brain today.”

“Maybe you should just drink some coffee,” Karmen grumbled. *He was ignoring her.*

“You can have some of mine.” Ellie inched her cup toward the edge of the table. Mr. Lorence laughed, beat the chalk off his hands, and shook his head.

“Thank you, but it’s about self-improvement. Just like you’re all doing by being here.”

Forrest grinned. Mr. Lorence, swallowing the lump in his throat, stood for a long time, watching him.

“Sorry, where was I?” The professor whipped back around. “Right. In this case we’ll assume we’re talking about an X-linked trait.”

“Are there Y-linked traits?”

“There can be.”

“Can you have both?”

“For male organisms.”

“And what does that do?”

“You don’t have to worry about that yet.” Mr. Lorence glanced at the boy over his shoulder, but it was a dangerous mistake. Forrest was blinking those sugary green eyes, endless as a great big open field, emblems of his youth and yet – *timeless*. Lorence was already starting to sweat. He quickly looked away.

“But if you’re interested, I’ll put up an article on the class page.”

“Thank you, professor.”

“Is there a reason we put the X before the Y?”

Ellie scratched the sentence out. He could hear the pencil lead grinding into the paper, over the margins, up and down the red and blue lines. It was like a cat locked behind a bedroom door, a bird at a window, nails against dry skin. “Mr. Lorence?”

He stammered, “Sorry. No, it’s just how we write it.”

“I heard it’s because the X chromosome came first, evolutionarily speaking.” Karmen almost said it in a hiss. *He was supposed to be ignoring her*. “You know, because women came first.”

“Perhaps.”

She scoffed. “You’re the professor. You tell me.”

“How could I? I wasn’t there.” Lorence pulled at his collar. He swore he asked to have the air conditioning fixed in this classroom.

“Well duh, but like, don’t we know that? From genetics?”

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. He felt the chalk grinding against his face. He climbed into his chair.

“Isn’t that, like, your job?”

“Please, Karmen.” Forrest blinked those lovely green eyes again. The professor’s chest tightened at the sight. “Mr. Lorence, sex chromosomes?”

“Damn it, sorry.” He shot back up, but his knee struck the desk. Ellie’s cup rattled, fell, and spewed coffee all across the table. Lorence lept back.

“Ellie!” Karmen yanked her computer away.

Coffee poured onto her lap. “What the hell!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” She scrambled to her feet. Forrest ran for tissues. Ellie tore the red jacket off her arms and threw it over the spill.

“Don’t use that! It’ll stain!”

“Here.” Forrest swept her jacket away and emptied the tissue box onto the table. Ellie tossed them sloppily over the mess. Lorence had his back pressed to the chalkboard, watching.

“Always a shame when coffee spills,” he said, so calmly. Sweat was running down his face, pooling in his cupid’s bow, between his eyebrows, and under his chin. He soaked through his button up. “Especially now that I’ve stopped drinking it. I just know how sad it is.”

None of his students replied. They were working like bees, but the coffee was spilling over the lip of the table. Lorence watched it drip, drip, drip onto the carpet tiles and color them brown, transforming them back into what they once were: just dirt on the floor of an ancient cave, where primates huddled their meager bodies around an open fire. What were these students, if not huddled? Hunched over hot smoke and dripping with sweat—*are they not beasts? Reeking of soil, the smell of coffee rotting in the carpet tiles*—and he decided, then, that the earth would taste like coffee.

“Mr. Lorence?” Forrest glanced at him over his shoulder, *and it was a dangerous mistake*. The professor couldn’t peel his gaze away from the dripping coffee, the puddle on the floor, the soaked tissues the color of filthy bathwater.

“Such a shame,” Mr. Lorence said. His skin was crawling around on his bones, organs slipping around each other, tongue tracing the gaps in his teeth. He rubbed his fingers together and he could feel the chalk grinding away at him.

“Are you okay, professor?”

“Just fine.” His voice shivered. “I think I’ll just... close my eyes for a minute.”

He breathed the scent of soil and let them shut. The throbbing in his skull subsided. His exhales steadied. The running sweat slowed. The air became cold, crisp, quiet. He imagined the earthy taste of a homemade espresso, the burn of a boiling pot of brew, the clatter of his teeth on the rim of a mug. The blue one from his old house, with the big white F on it – his husband’s favorite. Lorence would steal it from him and it’d make him laugh. *He missed that laugh.*

He missed sound altogether. The room had become too quiet – quiet enough to hear his exhales, in and out. Lorence opened his eyes. His locked jaw fell. Fresh blood covered every inch of the classroom. And all of them, *everyone*, was dead.

Once upon a time, Mr. Lorence sat in the same place his students do now. He walked the same campus grounds, stood in the same lecture halls, got himself into the same trouble; but that was more than twenty years ago. With a notebook and a blue pen in his hands, he sprinted to every class—sometimes Frederick told him that he put more effort into looking studious than actually being studious. Maybe Frederick was still right, now that Lorence was a professor. Maybe if Frederick was still here, he’d look at Lorence’s students and decide that they had exactly what Lorence was always missing.

Today, the professor spent his weeknights in office hours with Ellie Price, a student that would have been just like him, maybe, if he had spent his college years studying. With spindles of corn-colored hair pouring over her notes and a nasty habit of chewing her nails, Ellie was here because she needed it. He knew nothing of her, except that she was the last good thing keeping him company anymore.

“Do you think you were born to be a teacher?” She asked him once. He laughed and gave a handsome shrug.

“I was probably born to be many things.”

Ellie Price was now dead. She was laying face-down at the table, her ringlets sucking up the halo of blood drifting out around them. It dribbled off the end of the table and polka-dotted her white skirt. Her toppled coffee cup, its mess bandaged by a flurry of tissues, was still rolling back and forth. He watched her chest for the movement of her lungs, but there was nothing. Her hands dangled to either side, fingers blue with ink.

She was not the only one—all three of them were scattered around the room like fallen pawns. Karmen was sprawled under the table and Forrest was curled up on the floor just before Lorence’s feet. The air was sour and metallic, the scent of flesh just beginning to rot. A breath shivered between the professor’s lips. The clock on the opposite wall hit every number with a loud click, and because it kept the silence out, Lorence could almost pretend they were all just sleeping.

He couldn’t keep pretending, though, when he lifted his hands and found them bathed in blood.

“Did you become a professor because you like to teach?” Ellie asked another time.

Mr. Lorence laughed, shrugged, and said, “No.”

Once upon a time, a group of students found Lorence on the roof. It was the first stretch of May in his sophomore year and the sky was murky with rain. He remembered, vaguely, that every now and then lightning would crack through the clouds and—for an instant—the earth would glow. It was like light catching the crisp edge of a clean knife, or perhaps the beam of a surprise headlight before two cars meet head-on on a midnight road. Maybe if he harnessed it through the center of a magnifying glass, he could fry a hole right through the roof on which he stood and he would go tumbling down into it. *Alice in Wonderland*, and why shouldn’t he be Alice? A whirl of wet petticoats plummeting down, down, down.

But they found him, his fellow students, meandering on the roof of the natural sciences building. Buck-naked and gasping with laughter—they told the police he was “out of it.”

Frederick drove him home. He said nothing about the puddles of water Lorence was letting soak into the leather seats. He knew, perhaps, that there was nothing to be said. Lorence wondered if that night would be the night that Frederick finally dumped him at the hospital and left him forever. Frederick probably knew this. He sighed, “I promised to marry you one day, remember?”

He should have said, “*I thought I told you to take your meds.*”

Mr. Lorence did not recall forgetting to take them this time, though. If he could use it to explain the mass of dead bodies all around his classroom, he would have – but the silence was becoming palpable and the blood decorating his clothes like a Jackson Pollock argued that this one was definitely his fault. The tremor in his hands was so violent that he could barely undo the buttons of his shirt, but he had to be rid of his clothes. He was sweating so much that he looked as though he had stepped out of a tropical rain storm. His graying hair matted to his forehead.

When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw Forrest’s body first. The boy’s eyes were so neatly closed, hands folded on his stomach like they had been placed there, blood coming up through the hole in his sweater. Lorence gagged and covered his face with his chalk-powdered hand. His stomach felt inside-out, tangled around his heart like wrapping paper made of worms. He breathed—in in, out out—through puckered lips, but nothing could settle the racehorse in his chest pounding against the walls of his rib cage. He could hear it over the clock, over his own breath, over the sound of streaking chalk as he wrote it all out.

THIS WAS NOT YOUR FAULT

Mr. Lorence worked his ass off to get here, *for Forrest*. Even if Lorence was an alumnus, they still waltzed up and down his resume looking for reasons to turn him out. Alas, they were short-staffed and he was the only smart option, despite a few professors from his time remembering him as somewhat of an “unfocused” student. He knew Forrest would only take biology with the best professor, so he wrestled for respect and garnered the best student reviews in his department; and when the green-eyed boy stumbled into his class this semester, Lorence knew nothing else stood between the two of them. Until he met Karmen Encarnación.

She failed his class once. She was not going to fail again.

Barely gathering his resolve, Mr. Lorence dragged her body out first, his heels digging into the carpet and hands hooked under her forearms for a better grip. Her black hair fell over her face and whipped back and forth. Belly-up, the blood pulsing out of her chest puddled in the folds of her shirt. He laid her flat beside Forrest and pulled the edges of her blouse up to keep the blood from falling onto the carpet. *Karmen was coming for his job*. He took the rest of her hair and piled it onto her face so he didn’t have to look at it. *She was going to take Forrest away from him*.

She showed up to the professor’s office hours with her parents the first time. Her mother was on the education board and would cut him from the staff faster than he could draw a Punnett Square if he didn’t pass her daughter. Her father was a silent bloke and let the blackmail happen. Mr. Lorence would have hated him most, if he had never met Karmen Encarnación. But, he happened to spend his weeknights in office hours with her and every one of her pointed jeers, threats, and libels.

"You're wasting your time trying to teach me. Just give me the A."

The blood was starting to overflow. He took Ellie's loose jacket and soaked it up.

"You may not even like being a teacher, but my mom can ruin you. She'll ruin your life."

A knock on the door. Lorence was so knee-deep in the fever dream that he thought he must have imagined it. He beat at the chalk on his pants, used Ellie's jacket sleeve to wipe the sweat running down his face, grasped Forrest by the opposite arm and attempted to move him. Another knock.

"Professor Lorence?"

His stomach sank. He dropped Forrest's body. His heart began to throb so hard, he swore the stranger could hear it.

"I know I'm late to office hours..."

He put his hands over his chest as if it would muffle the sound.

"But can I still join?"

He stumbled and hit the back wall. His head smacked the chalk tray. He grit his teeth. It was too late now.

"U-um..." He fell forward onto his hands and knees and attempted to stand. His fingers left bloody prints on the carpet. "W-we finished early today."

"I'm sorry, I can't hear you that well."

Lorence growled through barred teeth. His knees shook and his shoulder hit the wall on his right. "We... finished..."

He grasped the handle, flicked off the lights, and cracked open the door. The young face of an unfamiliar student beamed through the gap, but quickly shriveled away. Lorence feigned a smile.

"We finished early today, love. Sorry about that."

"Oh, that's okay." Their breath hitched slightly. "I'll see you next week then."

"Take care." He ever-so-gently closed the door again, flicked the lights back on, and let his head fall hard against the wall.

Once upon a time, Mr. Lorence was caught in a flight of fancy. Frederick Smyth, a tall-and-dark type positioned at the very front of Lorence's genetics class, was the sole object of all of his desires. He would never have guessed that one day, he'd end up marrying the man. And, in the same breath, would end up losing him.

Having double-checked for passersby in the hallway outside, Lorence quickly resumed his work. He lolled Ellie over the back of her chair and dumped her out on the floor. He fixed Forrest's hair. He straightened up Karmen's clothing after the blood had stopped flooding out of her. Like lining up corpses on the dirt to be buried, children in a shared tent at a summer camp, soldiers on side-by-side cots overseas, *beasts. And were they not beasts? Pills and coffee, chalk and carpet tiles.*

Lorence gasped. *Carpet tiles.*

They used to picture all the ways they could love each other. Right at the end of class, Frederick would make his grand move: descend the stairs and sweep Lorence into his arms, dip him as though finishing a dance, kiss him under the fluorescent lights. Or they'd skip class altogether—run away into the woods, chase each other around the trees, throw out a picnic blanket on the dirt and make love in the patterned sun. Sometimes Frederick pretended to be the more daring type, wrapped in leather; he'd hunt Lorence down in the night and corner him in an alleyway, kissing him hard against the red brick. And his proposal—*Lorence would never forget it*—was just so unorthodox: he'd woven a ring out of grass blades he plucked from the courtyard, and asked Lorence to marry him on a ridiculous whim. And even though Lorence said no at first, Frederick promised he'd marry him anyway, someday. And he did marry him, someday.

And then he left him.

Lorence knew he would, eventually, when his unstable mind melted into their stable world, and Frederick wouldn't be able to tell the difference anymore.

He said, "Don't wait."

Lorence thought he wouldn't.

With such careful precision, Mr. Lorence began peeling up the carpet tiles to expose the ancient hardwood floor beneath them, and – as sweat tumbled from his hair, down his forehead, and off the end of his nose—ran a hand through Forrest Smyth's hair. *Frederick's son's hair.*

He said he wouldn't wait for him, but – *perhaps he was waiting.*

Presently, Lorence spent his weeknights in office hours with everyone else except Forrest. Many times, he pushed the idea. "*Perhaps it would do you good?*" But there's no believable way to convince a straight-A student to seek extra help. Lorence watched Forrest in class, studying his face, memorizing the way he laughed and the way he wrote and the way he pursed his lips when he was thinking – *just like his father.* He did all the same things in the study session, but now Lorence could hear his voice too. All the same big words, always too many big words. A genius that forgot he was a genius. Lorence wondered if he had finally fallen into the deep end. He didn't even want Forrest in his class, except to look at him. Now he had seen too much.

Those green eyes were like time machines.

He shook his head quickly, fell back against the wall, held his knees tight against his chest. *And what,* altering his route to match that of Forrest's on his way to afternoon lecture? Asking the other professors for little glimpses into the rest of Forrest's in-class behaviors? The way he imagined himself walking Forrest to all of those classes, helping him carry all of those textbooks, kissing him on the forehead and whispering, *good luck*—as if Forrest ever needed luck. He was just like his father, and was

too good because of it. And Lorence said he wouldn't wait, but here he was, *waiting.*

And he couldn't help it—he combed through Forrest's hair again. He left chalk dust on the boy's cheeks where his fingers grazed. On his eyelashes, his chin, his lips. All the way down his pale, pale throat, slipping under his t-shirt. His fingertips circled the open wound in the child's chest, and he swore it might be big enough to fit his hands inside – reach in, peel back his ribs, and grasp at his still heart. And *why,*

he thought,
shouldn't he?

He took his hand back quickly, held it up in the light, felt the blood run down his forearm. *It was still warm.* He shook his head violently again. *But Forrest was still dead.*

He pushed himself back into a crouch over the three corpses, studied them silently for a moment, then settled it in his mind. *It did not matter anymore.* He sighed. *They needed to disappear.*

After breaking down and neatly dissecting one of the office chairs, Lorence managed to fashion together a sort-of crowbar from the metal post of the seat. Piece-by-piece, over the next hour, he laboriously tore up three planks of the old wood; and to his joy, he discovered at least a foot of hollow space underneath. The room was starting to smell of bodies, of blood, of roasting coffee evaporating under the hot fluorescent lights. Sweat made his hands slick and the tool would slip back against his fingers every so often. Now he, too, was bleeding all over the floor, but he dried it off on Ellie's jacket and kept working. Finally, he tirelessly managed to carve a small cave into the floorboards—big enough to fit three bodies through if he folded them right. The hardest part was over.

First was Karmen. Lorence figured if she laid closest to the ground, he'd smell her the least while she rotted—*the worse the beast, the stronger the scent.* In the end, perhaps she won anyway: he no longer

got to spend his days gazing into Forrest's big green eyes, almost thankful that there was one thing about the boy that distinguished him from his father. Mr. Lorence shook away the sad thought and grabbed Karmen by her ankles, dragged her over the pit, and began forcing her in.

But the first problem became, of course, that the hole was not big enough. After shoving her in chest-deep, he realized her shoulders were too broad to fit. She remained that way, erect in between the floorboards, head hung over her collarbones while he paced in search of ideas. He considered, first, cutting her arms off, but he had nothing sharp enough, nor the time to hack at solid bone. He decided then, with a sigh, that breaking her shoulders was the best option. So, after painfully hoisting her back out of the pit, he laid her body on its side, folded her shoulders together in front of her chest, and brought down all of his weight on top of her. Like stomping down through a pile of snapping tree branches, he felt all of her bones crunch under his knee – ribs, shoulder joints, arms; and just like that, she was small enough to fit.

He did the same with Ellie. Dragging her body forward and rolling her onto her side, he broke her shoulders in like a cardboard box and gently slid her under the floorboards. Forrest was last, of course, because if Lorence had to be closest to any corpse it would be his. He sat with the body for a few minutes first, bringing it into his lap so he could study it. The coil in his black hair, the freckles on the bridge of his nose and the column of his neck, his subtle brown lips, his – now closed – earthy eyes. *Forrest was not Frederick.* The boy looked nothing like his father. In a way, maybe this lightened Lorence's heavy heart. Frederick left him, once. Forrest never had the chance to leave him too.

With a soft sigh, Lorence pushed the body onto its side, positioned his knee on top, and, as he broke it in, gave the boy a very small kiss on the temple. And he thought, then, that he'd be burying his own

broken heart with the corpse.

After neatly storing all three students underground, Mr. Lorence replaced the carpet tile, whipped out a clean trash bag, and threw away everything else. Ellie's red jacket, all of their notebooks and backpacks, the spilled coffee cup—which he took a very quick sip from first, remembering that Frederick used to say *caffeine was never a good substitute for his medication.* He spent the final hour with paper towels and bleach, dousing the scene. He stole baking powder from the chemistry lab next door and soaked the blood and coffee out of the carpet. Last in the bag was his own bloody, soggy clothing; and he threw it in and tossed the bundle to the side.

But then it all caught up with him: the deafening silence, the big gaping hole in the room where three students once sat. He paused and stood, breathing in the chemicals from his labor, wondering if bleach is what loneliness smells like. The sour burn of nonexistence, the aftertaste of a spilled coffee he could no longer see, the hollow echo of his own presence in such an endless expanse of nothing.

He spun around. He read, *THIS IS NOT YOUR FAULT*

He thought—for a very brief moment—if maybe he, all along, was the beast.

But then there he was again, Frederick in the back of his mind, promising to marry him someday. And although Lorence knew little else about love, he knew Frederick wouldn't have married him if he didn't love *all* of him. And by extension, maybe Forrest would forgive him for what he did. Maybe he was down there now, forgiving him.

Mr. Lorence shook his head to clear the thought, and realized he was running out of time. He stuck his head out the classroom door, and after finding the coast clear, he snuck down the hall to wash up in the bathroom. It was like stepping from a sauna into an ice bath. He gasped at the freeing chill scrambling across his bones.

The sweat on his torso had turned to salt. He dabbed it with a wet paper towel. His gray hair was stuck to his forehead. He dunked it under the faucet. He turned his final attention to his hands. With a pump of soap and a gentle motion, the blood came running from his fingers thin as rain. He dragged his hands around each other so softly—feeling the way so many hours of corpses peeled from his flesh, how so many years of craving the touch left swells of anticipation under his fingertips. He whistled something, a tune he was making up to pass the time. He wondered if he closed his eyes, he could picture Frederick there, running his hands up and down Lorence’s arms, breathing on his neck, holding him. If he’d whisper something, maybe. Whistle a pretty song in his ear. Tell him how much he missed him, how much he loved him, *how he was sorry*. Lorence wondered if he would believe him. He wondered if he’d forgive him.

He leaned in close to the mirror and studied the blood speckles on his cheeks, an excellent contrast beside his sugary green eyes.

“Don’t wait for us.”

Once upon a time, Lorence was standing in the doorway of their home, begging Frederick to come back inside. Frederick shook his head only once, sighed at his husband, and squeezed their son’s hand. Lorence’s breath shook, so violently.

“I can get better,” he sobbed, *“for him.”*

Frederick sighed again, bent to scoop Forrest up into his arms, and said, *“Don’t wait.”*

But for his son, Lorence knew, he would wait.

Lorence trembled at the thought. And he would have closed his eyes, but he realized that the blood was not coming off. He grabbed another pump of soap, rubbed it harder between his palms, dunked his hands under the faucet, but nothing. With every wave of water, blood splashed against the sides of the basin. He scrubbed under his nails, wriggled through every groove in his fingers, all the way

up to his elbows. But it didn’t matter how long he stood there washing, the stain was not coming out. His breath was starting to pick up, eyes darting to the mirror and back, mirror and back. He could see it every time he looked up: blood all the way up to his biceps, spattered all across his chest, brutal constellations. He pumped out more soap. He scratched so hard that his skin could come off in his hands. Layer, by layer, by layer, he unraveled in the sink, but it didn’t matter. He could still see it. He could see it everywhere. With a snarl, he faced himself in the mirror again, but froze. Gone was the gray hair and the lonely old face. It was him, twenty-two years old again, standing in the bathroom of his old house. The checkered tile and the white shower curtain. Forrest’s crayon drawing hanging on the wall. He screamed.

He kicked open the door and tore down the hallway. He was back in the college laboratory. The lights were still brand new, the carpet just installed, the wall paint fresh and the whole building smelled of it. He slammed against the classroom door and fought to get it open. His dripping hands slipped over the doorknob. He rammed himself into it until he fell through. His body hit the floor. He grasped at it as he crawled. One by one, he tore up every carpet tile. *Rip, rip*, the glue coming undone. *Nothing*. His arms and chest burned. He ripped out another. *Nothing*. He pounded his fists against the floorboards, screaming through the crevices, as if dead bodies could yell back. *Nothing*. His breath ran so fast through his throat that he could feel it peeling off in ribbons. His voice became weak. He collapsed, clawing at his hair, rocking back and forth. He wanted to hear Forrest’s body under the floor. He wanted so badly to hear him. But there was nothing. He tried to yell, but he’d emptied the last of his voice. He sobbed into his knees. His exhales echoed in the empty room. He rocked in the silence, tears soaking through his clothes. *Soaking through his clothes.*

“Mr. Lorence?”

He opened his eyes again. The fluorescent lights briefly blinded him. He shook the glare away. And Forrest was there, holding tissues soaked in coffee, grinning sweetly.

“No need to cry over a spilled latte, professor.”

“Oh,” Lorence chuckled a little, and in lifting a hand to his cheek, realized his face was wet with tears. His breath trembled and he quickly wiped them away.

“Honestly, if you miss it that bad, just go get some.” Karmen rolled her eyes again, although this time, she almost seemed to smile. “There’s a Starbucks, like, right across the street.”

“We should go study there instead.” Ellie beamed. She helped Forrest shovel the mess of tissues into the trash. “You can come with us, Mr. Lorence.”

“Ah, my boss wouldn’t like that very much.” He winked at her, but he couldn’t stop looking at his son. The tired knots of curly hair, the pretty green eyes, the smile that, although his other father may have earned, still looked just like Lorence’s. He nodded, “You three go on ahead.”

“We’ll bring you something back.” Forrest swung his bag over his shoulder. The other two followed suit, pushing their chairs in. Mr. Lorence sat down at his desk, winded.

“Thank you, professor! I’ll see you next week!”

Ellie waved as she left. Karmen trailed after silently, and third was Forrest.

“Bye, Mr. Lorence.”

“Oh, Forrest?”

The boy stopped in the doorway. His hair parted over his eyes. “Yes?”

Lorence’s breath hitched in his throat. There were a million things he wanted to say. A million little secrets, a million moments of lost time. But Forrest was a man now, and had done that entirely without Lorence’s help. And that, alone, was enough to steady the professor’s heart. He sighed. “Just a black coffee is fine.”

“Of course.”

“And I loved having your input today, although I can’t say you really needed the extra help. You seem plenty capable already.”

Forrest smiled, “You think so?”

“I do.” Mr. Lorence folded his hands in front of him. “So you don’t need to come back, if you don’t want to.”

“I think I’ll skip it then. Thanks, professor.”

“My pleasure.”

The boy left with a nod, and closed the door. And the longer Lorence stared at it, the more he understood. *Frederick was always right*. His episodes would keep coming, worse than this. The fantasies and hallucinations, just rain before a thicker storm. And it was better, then, *for Forrest’s sake*, that the door remain closed—as badly as it may have ached.