

THE CRUELTY

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WALKER
BOOKS

*For Jana,
the fearless one*

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“Part of the reason for the ugliness of adults,
in a child’s eyes, is that the child is usually
looking upwards, and few faces are at their
best when seen from below.”

George Orwell

CHAPTER 1

The boys are waiting for the beheading. They sit raptly, like impatient jackals, waiting for the blade to fall. But if they'd bothered to read the book, they'd know it wasn't coming. The book just sort of ends. Like a movie clicked off before the last scene. Or like life, really. You almost never see the blade coming, the one that gets you.

Our teacher, Mr. Lawrence, reads the words slowly, stroking that awful little patch of beard under his lower lip as he paces. The soft drumbeat of his footsteps on the linoleum floor – heel-toe, heel-toe – makes it sound like he's trying to come up on the words from behind. *“As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the world.”*

The footsteps stop when Mr. Lawrence arrives at Luke Bontemp's desk, and he taps the spine of the book on the kid's head. Luke is texting someone on his phone and trying to hide it beneath his jacket.

“Put it away or I take it away,” Mr. Lawrence says.

The phone disappears into Luke's pocket.

"What do you think Camus is talking about there?"

Luke smiles with that smile that has gotten him out of everything his entire life. Poor Luke, I think. Beautiful, useless, stupid Luke. I heard his great-great-grandfather made a fortune selling oil to the Germans and steel to the British during World War I and no one in his family has had to work since. He won't have to, either, so what's the use of reading Camus?

"Benign indifference of the world," Mr. Lawrence repeats. "What is that, you think?"

Luke sucks air into his lungs. I can almost hear the hamster wheel of his brain squeaking away beneath his excellent hair.

"Benign," Luke says. "A tumor or whatever can be benign. Maybe Camus is, you know, saying the world is a tumor."

Twenty-eight of the twenty-nine kids in the class laugh, including Luke. I'm the only one who doesn't. I read this book, *The Stranger*, when I was fourteen. But I read it in the original French, and when Mr. Lawrence assigned an English translation of it for our World Literature class, I didn't feel like reading it again. It's about a guy named Meursault whose mother dies. Then he kills an Arab man and gets sentenced to death, to have his head cut off in public. Then it ends. Camus never gives us the actual beheading.

I turn back to the window, where rain is still pattering, the rhythm of it pulling everyone in the room deeper into some kind of sleepy trance. Beyond the window I can see the outlines of buildings down Sixty-Third Street, their

edges all smeared and formless through the water beading against the glass, more like the memory of buildings than the real thing.

Though we're discussing the last part of *The Stranger*, it's the opening lines of the book that always stuck with me. *Aujourd'hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas.* It means: Today, Mother died. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know.

But I do know. I know exactly when Mother died. It was ten years ago today. I was only seven at the time, and I was there when it happened. The memory of it comes to me now and then in little sketches and vignettes, individual moments. I hardly ever play back the whole memory start to finish. The psychologist I used to see said that was normal, and that it would get easier with time. It didn't.

"What's your take, Gwendolyn?" Mr. Lawrence asks.

I hear his voice. I even understand the question. But my mind is too far away to answer. I'm in the backseat of the old Honda, my eyes barely open, my head against the cool glass of the window. The rhythm of the car as it bounces down the dirt track on the outskirts of Algiers is pulling me toward sleep. Then I feel the thrum of the tires over the road slow and hear my mother gasp. I open my eyes, look out the windshield, and see fire.

"Gwendolyn Bloom! Paging Gwendolyn Bloom!"

I snap back to the present and turn to Mr. Lawrence. He holds his hands cupped around his mouth like a megaphone. "Paging Gwendolyn Bloom!" he says again.

“Can you tell us what Camus means by ‘benign indifference of the world’?”

Though part of my mind is still back in the Honda, I begin speaking anyway. It’s a long answer, and a good one, I think. But Mr. Lawrence is looking at me with a little smirk. It’s only after I’m speaking for about twenty seconds that I hear everyone laughing.

“In English, please,” Mr. Lawrence says, arching an eyebrow and looking at the rest of the class.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly, fidgeting with my uniform skirt and tucking a strand of my fire-engine-red hair behind my ear. “What?”

“You were speaking French, Gwendolyn,” Mr. Lawrence says.

“Sorry. I must have been – thinking of something else.”

“You’re supposed to be thinking about the benign indifference of the world,” he says.

One of the girls behind me says, “Jesus, what a pretentious snob.”

I turn and see it’s Astrid Foogle. She’s also seventeen, but she looks at least twenty-one. Her dad owns an airline.

“Enough, Astrid,” Mr. Lawrence says.

But I’m staring at her now, drilling into her with my eyes. Astrid Foogle – whose earrings are more valuable than everything in my apartment – is calling me a pretentious snob?

Astrid continues. “I mean, she drops in here the beginning of the year from wherever and thinks she’s all superior, and now, oh, look, she’s talking in French, not like us dumb

Americans. Just *look* how sophisticated she is. Queen of the trailer park.”

Mr. Lawrence cuts her off. “Stop it, Astrid. Now.”

A few of the kids are nodding in agreement with Astrid; a few others are laughing. I can feel myself trembling, and my face is turning hot. Every synapse in my brain is trying to force the reaction away, but I can’t. Why does anger have to look so much like humiliation?

The guy sitting next to Astrid, Connor Monroe, leans back in his seat and grins. “Check it. She’s crying.”

Which isn’t true, but now that he said it, it’s as good as reality in the minds of the other kids. *lolololol gwenny bloom lost her shit and cried in wrld lit #pretentiousnob #212justice*

The school bell in the hallway rings and, like a Pavlovian trigger, sends everyone scrambling for the door. Mr. Lawrence holds his book up in the air in a sad little attempt to keep order, shouting, “We begin again tomorrow, same place.” Then he turns to me. “And you’ll be up first, Bloom. You have all night to meditate on the benign indifference of the world, so come up with something good. And in English, *por favor*.”

I nod that I will and gather up my stuff. Outside the classroom, Astrid Foogle is at her locker, surrounded, as always, by her disciples. She’s doing an imitation of me, a monologue in fake French, her shoulders hunched, nose squashed with her index finger.

My eyes down with the proper beta deference, I slide by her and her friends on my way to my own locker.

But Astrid spots me; I can tell because she and her friends go silent and I hear the heels of their shoes – *they're Prada pumps, you little sow* – accelerate toward me, her friends just a pace behind.

“Hey, Gwenny,” she starts up. “Translation question for you. How do you say ‘suicide is never the answer’ in French?”

I ignore her and keep walking, hoping for a sudden fatal stroke – hers or mine, doesn't matter. The heat radiates off my face, anger becoming rage becoming whatever's stronger than rage. I can only imagine what it looks like. I fold my shaking arms over my chest.

“Seriously,” Astrid continues. “Because someone like you has to have thought of suicide from time to time. I mean, why wouldn't you, right? So, *s'il vous plaît*, how do you say it, Gwenny? *En français?*”

I spin around, and the words come bursting from my mouth. “*Va te faire foutre.*”

Astrid stops, and for a half second – no, less than that – fear snaps across her face. But then she realizes where she is, in her kingdom surrounded by acolytes, and the real Astrid returns. She arches her beautifully pruned eyebrows.

One of her friends, Chelsea Bunchman, smiles. “Astrid, she just told you to go fuck yourself.”

Astrid's mouth opens into an O and I hear a little gasp sneak out. “You little piece of trash,” she says, and takes a step closer.

I see the slap while it's still in midair. I see it, but even so, I don't do anything to stop it. Instead, I cringe, shrinking

my head down into my neck and my neck down into my shoulders. It's a hard slap – Astrid really means it – and my head twists to the side under its force. The nail of one of her fingers catches my skin and stings my cheek.

A crowd is forming. I see the grinning faces of Luke Bontemp and Connor Monroe and maybe a dozen other students staring wide-eyed, less in shock at what they've seen than in glee. They're standing around Astrid and me in a semicircle, as if in an arena. This is entertainment, I realize, a time-honored kind. I take note that Astrid didn't punch me, didn't kick me, didn't pull my hair. She very calmly, very deliberately, slapped my face. It was the upper-case-*L* Lady slapping the lowercase-*m* maid.

Instead of slapping her back – and, who am I kidding, Gwendolyn Bloom would never slap back – I close my eyes, the humiliation like the winds I remember from the Sahara, hot and hard and lasting for days. An adult voice orders everyone to move along, and when I open my eyes, there's a middle-aged teacher whose name I don't know standing there with his hands in the pockets of his khakis. His eyes travel from Astrid to me and back again.

“What happened?” he asks Astrid.

“She told me to – I can't say the word. It was a curse word, *f* myself.” Her voice is demure and wounded.

“Is this true?” he says, looking to me.

I open my mouth, about to rat her out for slapping me. “It is,” I say instead.

★ ★ ★

L'Étranger, the title of the book we're studying in World Lit, is usually translated into English as *The Stranger*. But it could also mean *The Outsider* or *The Foreigner*. That's me, all of it – stranger, outsider, foreigner. I'm technically an American. That's what my passport says. But I wasn't born here and, until the start of junior year this past September, I had lived in the United States for only eighteen months, right after my mother was killed. We – my dad and I – came to New York so he could take up a post at the United Nations, which isn't too far from my school, Danton Academy.

There's no way in hell my dad could have afforded a place like Danton on his own. But my father is a diplomat with the Department of State, and private school for us diplobrats is sometimes one of the benefits. Depending on which country you're in, that private school might be the only good school for a thousand miles and you're sitting in class with the son or daughter of the country's president or king or awful dictator. That happened to me once. The asshole son of an asshole president sat next to me in my math class. He wore shoes that were made specially for him in Vienna and cost five thousand dollars a pair, while kids were starving in the streets just beyond the school's stucco walls.

Not that it's so different at Danton. The kids here are the children of presidents and kings and dictators, too – just of companies instead of countries. Most of my classmates have always been rich. Usually, the only poor person they ever meet is the foreign kid who delivers their groceries for them or brings over the dry cleaning. My dad makes what

would be a decent living anywhere else in the world, but to the kids at Danton we're poor as dirt.

Sitting on the bench outside the assistant director's office, I fuss with my uniform skirt – God, I hate skirts – pulling at the hem so that it falls lower on my black tights, flattening out the little pleats. The uniforms are an attempt to equalize us, I suppose, but there are no restrictions about shoes. Thus, wealth and tribal loyalties are displayed with the feet: Prada pumps and Gucci loafers for old money versus Louboutin flats and Miu Miu sneakers for new money. I'm one of the irrelevant two-member Doc Martens tribe. Mine are red and beat-up, but the other member, a quiet artist's kid from downtown who's tolerated by the others insofar as he's a reliable source of Adderall, goes with polished black.

Not that if I suddenly showed up in Prada it would make a difference. I don't look like Astrid Foogle, or any of them, really. I'm too tall, too thick-waisted. Nose too rectangular, mouth too wide. Everything some kind of too. My dad and my doctor say I'm just fine the way I am – say it's hormones, or muscle from all my years of gymnastics. Everyone's built differently, don't accept anyone else's definition of beauty, et cetera, ad nauseam. But it's their job to say things like that. So I color my hair at home with the very finest CVS store-brand dye, lace up my Doc Martens, and pretend not to care.

When the assistant director finally steps out of her office, she's all patronizing smiles and fake concern. Mrs. Wasserman is her name, and she's forever wearing a cloud

of perfume and sugary joy, as if any second she expects a cartoon bluebird to fly out of the sky and land on her finger.

“How are we today?” she asks as we go into her office.

“Amazing,” I say, sinking down into a chair upholstered in blood-colored leather. “Just perfect.”

Mrs. Wasserman steeples her fingers in front of her as a signal we’re getting down to business. “I’m told that you’re facing some interpersonal challenges with one of your classmates.”

It’s all I can do to not roll my eyes at her euphemistic, bullshit tone. The thing is, 95 percent of this school is made up of kids who are very rich and very WASPy. The 5 percent who aren’t are either here on scholarship or because their parents work at the UN. The others don’t like us Five-Percenters, as we’re known, but we help people like Mrs. Wasserman pretend Danton Academy is something other than an elitist bitch factory.

Mrs. Wasserman consults a file folder. “Do you go by Gwen or Gwendolyn, dear?”

“Gwendolyn,” I say. “Only my dad calls me Gwen.”

“Gwendolyn it is, then,” Mrs. Wasserman says with a cookie-sweet smile. “And is what it says here correct, Gwendolyn – you tested out of the AP exams in, my goodness, five foreign languages?”

I shrug. “We move a lot.”

“I see that. Moscow. Dubai. Still – quite a talent.” She runs her finger along a line in the file. “Must be tough,

having a stepfather in the State Department. New city every couple of years. New country.”

“You can just say ‘father.’”

“Sorry?”

“He’s not my stepfather. He adopted me when he married my mom. I was two.”

“Father, yes. If you like.” Mrs. Wasserman shakes her head as she makes a note on the paper in front of her. “Now to why you’re here: Danton is a safe space, Gwendolyn, and we have a zero-tolerance policy on emotionally abusive behavior.”

“Right. Just like the handbook says.”

“That includes cursing at faculty or students, which means when you swore at another girl in French, you were in violation.”

“Astrid didn’t understand a word of what I said until Chelsea Bunchman translated it.”

“The point is you said something hurtful, Gwendolyn. Whether you said it in French or Swahili it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters if she didn’t understand it.”

“That’s just semantics,” she says. “Do you know that word, ‘semantics’?”

“The study of what words mean. Which would seem to apply.”

I see the muscles in her face tighten. She picks up a pen and holds it so tightly I think it might break. “I understand it’s the anniversary of your mother’s passing. I’m sorry to hear about that,” Mrs. Wasserman says gently. I can see the idea of it makes her uncomfortable, makes her wonder what

to do with me. Punish the girl because of her *interpersonal challenges* on the anniversary of her mother's *passing*?

Mrs. Wasserman coughs into her hand and continues. "The normal consequence for swearing at another student is a day's suspension. But under the circumstances, I'm willing to forgo that if you issue a written apology to Miss Foogle."

"You want me to apologize to Astrid?"

"Yes, dear."

It's an easy out and the obvious choice. I lean back in the chair and try to smile. "No thanks," I say. "I'll take the suspension."

It's still raining, the cold kind that might turn to snow later. March is bad this year, no sunshine at all and not even a hint of spring. Just skies the color of steel and the stink of New York's own garbage soup running through the gutters. Black SUVs are lined up at the curb, Danton Academy's version of school buses. The very richest kids use these – private mini limos that pick them up at the end of the day so they don't have to suffer the indignity of walking home or taking the subway.

I'm headed for the station a few blocks away. I don't have an umbrella, so I pull up the hood of my old army jacket. It used to be my mom's from when she was a lieutenant way before I was born. When my dad and I were moving a few years ago – Dubai to Moscow, maybe, our two most recent posts – I found it in a box. My dad got teary when I put it

on, so I started to take it off. Then he said it looked good on me, told me I could have it if I wanted.

My mom. I'd been avoiding the subject all day and mostly succeeded until World Lit. Hard not to think about it when you spend an hour talking about Algerian justice.

The rain patters against my face, and it makes me calm. A guy with a black-and-green kaffiyeh around his neck shelters beneath the awning of his gyro cart on Lexington just outside the subway station. I order my food in Arabic – a gyro with everything, I tell him, and don't be cheap with the lamb.

He squints at me with a surprised smile, and I wonder if he understood me. My Arabic is rusty as hell, and the formal kind no one really speaks except on TV.

"You Egyptian?" he says as he takes a pair of tongs and starts arranging pieces of lamb on a pita.

"No," I answer. "I'm – from here."

I get variations of that *are you x?* question a lot, though. My eyes are umber brown, while my skin is a pale, translucent sheath pulled over something else – brass under tracing paper, a stoned boy on the Moscow subway told me once. What *x* is, though, I have no idea. My mom's not around to ask, and the dad I call dad, because he is my dad legally and in every sense but one, says he doesn't know. My bio father's name isn't even listed on my original birth certificate from Landstuhl, the American military hospital in Germany where I was born.

"Special for Cleopatra," the man says, tossing on some

onions and smothering the whole mess with the bitter white sauce that I love so much I would drink it by the gallon if I could.

On the subway platform, I devour the gyro. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. Maybe getting slapped like a peasant does that to you. I'm waiting for the N or Q out to Queens. I wish a train would come already. I wish it would come so that I could put some physical distance between me and this island and the memories Camus dredged up.

Just then, as if I'd willed it to come, the Q train screeches mournfully to a stop in front of me. I shoot the soggy tin-foil-and-paper wrapping of the gyro into a trash can and climb on board.

Most people hate the subway, but not me. It's a strange, wonderful thing to be alone among the hundred or so other people in the car. I pull a book out of my backpack and lean against the door as the train shoots through the tunnel under the river toward Queens. It's a novel with a teenage heroine set in a dystopian future. Which novel in particular doesn't matter because they're all the same. Poor teenage heroine, having to march off to war when all she really wants to do is run away with that beautiful boy and live off wild berries and love. Paper worlds where heroes are real.

But as the train screeches and scrapes along in the dark, rocking back and forth as if any moment it might fly off the rails, I find myself suddenly unable to follow the story or even translate the symbols on the page into words. The memories just aren't going to let me get away this time.

They demand to be recognized, insistent as Astrid's slap.

Today's my dad's birthday. The worst possible day for a birthday. Or rather, the worst possible day *because* it's his birthday. That's how it happened, ten years ago today. Coming back from the birthday dinner his work friends were throwing for him at a restaurant in Algiers.

I have to think about it, right? It makes you sick if you press it down inside, right? Okay. No more fighting it off. Go back there, I tell myself. Live it again, I tell myself. Be brave for once. Ten years ago today.

My mother gasps as we round a corner; the sound of it wakes seven-year-old me from sleep. I look out the windshield and see fire. I make out the faces illuminated in the light of a burning police truck. They're men, a dozen, twenty. Mostly bearded, mostly young, their skin orange in the glow of the flames. We've stumbled across something that doesn't concern us. A beef with the military police that's gone in the mob's favor. But the men are made curious by us newcomers, and they peer into the windows of our car, trying to make out the nationalities of the faces inside.

My mother yells at my dad to back up. He shifts into reverse and looks over his shoulder and guns the engine. For a second, the Honda shoots backward but then jerks to a stop. There are people back there, my dad shouts. Run them over, my mom shouts back.

But he won't. Or maybe he will, but he doesn't have time. He doesn't have time because a glass bottle shatters on the roof and liquid fire cascades down the window on the

driver's side of the car. A Molotov cocktail is what it's called, a bottle of gasoline with a burning rag jammed in its mouth. The poor man's hand grenade.

The rule taught to diplomats about what to do if a Molotov cocktail breaks over your car is to keep driving, as far and as fast as possible, until you're out of danger. A car doesn't really burn like it does in the movies. It doesn't explode right away. It takes time. And time is what you need if you want to stay breathing.

But the crowd gets closer and something happens, something that makes the car stall out. My dad tries to restart the engine, but it just turns over and over and over, the ignition never quite catching. My mother's door opens, and she yells at the man outside who opened it. She doesn't scream; she yells. Yells like starting her car on fire and yanking open her door was very rude and, by God, she'd like to speak to whoever's in charge.

I don't see what happens next because my dad is reaching over the seat and unbuckling my seat belt. He pulls me like a rag doll into the front with him. I remember how rough he was being, how much it hurt when he yanked me between the front seats. He clutches me to his chest like he's giving me a big hug and leaves through the same door as my mom, the door that's not on fire.

Blows from clubs and bats rain down on him. I feel the force of the blows traveling all the way through his body. He's taking them for me, or most of them. Three or four strikes land on my legs, which are sticking out in the open

from beneath my dad's arm. I try to scream in pain but can't because my dad is pressing me into his chest so hard.

My dad doesn't stop running until he's away from the mob, and I'm dangling over his shoulder and he's turning around for some reason, turning around and running backward. Then I go deaf because the pistol he's firing is so loud. It's like the end of the world is happening two feet from my head. He fires again and again and again and again. My vision narrows to almost nothing, then disappears altogether as I black out.

Fourteen stab wounds to the chest and neck. That's the official cause of my mother's death. That's what the report from the autopsy says, and that's what my dad told me when I was old enough to ask him about it. I was nine years old, or maybe ten, when I asked. But there was more, of course. Stuff that happened to her in the time after she was pulled from the car but before she was stabbed. Stuff my dad said he'd tell me about when I got older. I never did ask him about the other stuff, though, and he never brings it up. It's probably easier on him if he doesn't have to say it, and it's probably easier on me if I never have to hear it.

We're in Queens now, and the subway rockets out of the tunnel and into open air. It lurches around a corner, the wheels screaming like demons, so loud I can barely hear my own thoughts. I squeeze the bar above my head tighter so I don't fall over. My body bends with the momentum of the train. Then it slows and its wheels shriek on the wet tracks as we come up on Queensboro Plaza, all gray industrial buildings and new apartment towers and brightly lit shops with

windows advertising lottery tickets and cigarettes and beer.

I hoist my backpack on my shoulder as the train stops and bolt out onto the platform, leaving the memories to slouch and hobble after me. I take the stairs two at a time, then three at a time, a race to the bottom. When I reach level ground, I needle and veer through the slow and old taking their sweet time until I push through the turnstile. Guys out on the sidewalk in front of the shops whistle and catcall after me.

I start running and keep running. I bolt across a street and a yellow cab swerves and honks. I run until my lungs burn and I'm soaked with rain and sweat. I run until the blind rage has washed me clean, rid me of hope. And for the first time, on this afternoon alive with neon signs and stars, I lay my heart open to the benign indifference of the world.