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Biology

LAST NIGHT, someone from my hometown posted on Facebook to say that our eighth grade biology teacher, Mr. Reynolds, had died. There was a link to the local funeral home's memorial page, where I stared at a picture of Mr. Reynolds as I remembered him twenty-five years previous, his thick, black-rimmed glasses and buzz cut, his hair so blond it looked white. He had gray eyes. His face was always red, not like a rash but like a tint to his skin.

My boyfriend asked me why I was crying, though he didn't look up from his book. I was someone who cried a lot, over the slightest things, but what was strange was that I didn't realize that I had been crying. And once I noticed it, I thought more about Mr. Reynolds. His first name was Franklin, and there was a time when I would call him by that name. And I cried and I cried, and finally Bobby said, "Oh, God, what's wrong? What is going on, Patrick?" and he held me, and I put down the tablet, and I didn't say a word because I didn't know what to say. Because nothing I said would have made sense to him. It wouldn't have made sense to anyone else in the world. The only person who would have understood was dead.

In eighth grade, like every single grade leading up to that year, I was unpopular. I was too fat for sports and I had all these weird habits, little tics, that, even though everyone in our town had grown used to them, kept me from getting close to anyone. I cried sometimes if people smiled at me too long. I grunted a lot when I was reading to myself. I was an island, but not far enough away from this huge body of land that was the rest of my town, so I could easily feel the separation.

Since I was about eight or nine, I'd been updating and revising this card game I'd invented called Death Cards. It was this big stack of index cards, and most of the cards had interesting life events like graduating high school or winning an astronaut scholarship or having sex for the first time. But there were also death cards that featured people dying in horrific, graphic ways. Nobody would play the game with me, so I just played against myself. By eighth grade, there were more

than four hundred cards in the game. I couldn't stop playing, finding my way to whatever kind of life I could have before I died violently.

And, whatever, but it was clear to most kids that I was effeminate, too sensitive, which suggested something was deficient in my makeup.

And Mr. Reynolds was famously weird. He lived with his mother. He'd been in Vietnam, which wasn't weird, really, but there was a long-standing story that one time a car in the school parking lot had backfired and Mr. Reynolds had immediately sprawled on the floor, his face radiating panic, and the principal had to come convince him to get back up and keep teaching. My cousin, who was eight years older than me, said he'd been in the class when it happened, but he was such a fucking liar, so who knew. Mr. Reynolds was very shy and quiet, and students often talked over him when he was teaching. He drove this tiny little foreign car, and the driver's side door was a completely different color than the rest of the car, and he'd duct-taped the rear bumper, but sometimes it would loosen and drag across the asphalt parking lot. Every day he wore short-sleeved shirts, weird plaid, and olive green chinos, and ugly brown loafers. He was freakishly tall, which seemed to embarrass him, and he didn't take advantage of it in order to make himself seem imposing. He just looked stretched out, like a cartoon character.

But I liked listening to him, the way he talked about this kind of bird where the babies fight each other to the death in order to be the one who gets the food from the mother. One time he brought in this weird slug and told us about how its mouth was like sandpaper and it could tear out the eyes of a baby bird, or something like that. He talked about egg wars, where different bird species tried to fuck each other over. Maybe eighth grade was the bird year, or maybe Mr. Reynolds just really loved birds, but he seemed embarrassed by the sections that talked about human biology, our own weird bodies, and so he focused on animals, the natural world, the horrific shit that all living things did just to keep themselves alive.

I made straight As in his class, sometimes even drew pictures of dead animals to support my short-essay answers. And he would mark each one with a very detailed drawing of a thumbs-up symbol. "Good job," he'd whisper to me as he passed by my desk, handing back tests. He would stoop down and gently place the test right in front of me, and I'd feel dizzy a little. His class preceded the pep rallies or assemblies that happened every Thursday afternoon, and he said that, if I wanted, I could stay

in his classroom, that I had his permission to skip the pep rally. I thought maybe he'd heard about the fact that in seventh grade someone tripped me, or probably I just tripped on my own, and I fell down the bleachers and fractured my wrist. But I was happy for the respite.

He'd pull out weird taxidermy from the cabinets in his classroom, rodents and reptiles that looked so shabby that I wanted to set them on fire. I asked if he made them, and he said he'd bought them out of a catalog. "I had high hopes for myself when I started teaching," he told me, his voice so soft and deep at the same time. He never had stubble, the smoothest face I'd ever seen. "I knew I wasn't an academic," he continued, "and I wouldn't be a scientist or anything like that. I barely passed college. But I thought I'd be a good teacher."

"You are a good teacher," I told him.

"I don't think I am," he said.

"You're my favorite teacher," I said.

He just smiled and then showed me some bones that he said he thought were a raccoon's.

There were these girls in my class, badasses, and they played basketball and dipped and wore these huge earrings that looked painful as shit. And they burned Mr. Reynolds alive if he gave them an opening. They talked about his car, how ugly it was, how slow it was. They said sometimes they saw it parked out in front of their houses and they figured he was spying on them, trying to see them naked. They said he looked like a giraffe.

"C'mon now," he'd say, getting flustered.

If I'd had a gun, if I knew how to get a gun, I would have murdered everyone in the classroom.

I guess he'd been a pretty great basketball player in high school, had led the team to a state championship, but the girls asserted that he couldn't keep up with them. They talked about this all the time, how they'd wear his ass out on the court. And he'd shake his head and talk about how sharp an eagle's talons were, the violence they could do to a human body.

Pretty soon, I started eating my lunch in Mr. Reynolds's classroom. I'd sit at my desk, and he'd sit at his, and we'd eat in silence, me chewing on some rubbery ham sandwich. He always brought a thermos of soup and a package of peanut butter

crackers. Afterward, he'd drop an Alka-Seltzer into a cup and drink that because he said his stomach wasn't great. I asked him about his car, and he chuckled. "The kids hate that car, don't they?" he said.

"Why don't you get a new one?" I said.

"They cost a lot of money," he said. "And I like that car. It's a kind of science project, I guess, just seeing how long I can keep it running."

I kind of understood him, and then he said, "This might help you, Patrick. If people think you are strange, different, they can be cruel. They look for instability, an opening. My car, it's not me, is it? It's just this piece of metal that I drive to work every day. But people can look at it and laugh, and they think it hurts me, but it doesn't. Because it's not me. If you give people something easy, they'll take it. And sometimes, that's all they need."

I thought about how there were so many other things about Mr. Reynolds that the kids made fun of, but I still knew what he meant. I reached into my backpack and pulled out my huge bricks of index cards.

"Now what is this?" he asked, curious.

"Death Cards," I told him.

"Is this maybe your thing?" he asked, a little smile on his face.

"I think it could be," I said.

I showed him how it worked. There were four stacks: Childhood, Young Adult, Adulthood, Old Age. For each stack, there were life events, with death cards mixed in. The object was to draw four cards from each stack without getting a death card. If you got a death card during Young Adult, then you looked at the life events up to that point and that was the sum total of your life.

"What happens if you make it all the way through the game without getting a death card?" he asked. I couldn't believe he was taking it seriously. I was shaking a little.

"You still die, but you die in your sleep," I told him. "Peacefully."

He seemed to like this possibility. And so we played. Mr. Reynolds won a spelling bee, and escaped from a kidnapper, and rescued a puppy, and got a dirt bike for Christmas, an amazing childhood. He made it all the way to his second card of Adulthood before a business rival poisoned him. This seemed to please him. "This is a good game," he said.

"I play it all the time," I told him.

He reached into his desk and pulled out a blank index card. He drew a sketch of

a man, a cartoony version of himself, standing in front of a chalkboard. He wrote "Become a junior high science teacher" at the top, and then he slipped it into the middle of the Adulthood deck.

"I hope I never get that one," he said.

"Maybe that's like your own secret death card," I said, and this made him smile and turn a brighter shade of red.

In the section on evolution, things got a little weird. Our town wasn't that far away from where the Scopes Trial had been, which always embarrassed me. Mr. Reynolds outlined the details of evolution, how it worked. Kima Walker, one of the most beautiful girls in the school, said, softly, kind of sad, "I know that I did not come from some monkey," and I waited for Mr. Reynolds to destroy her. My parents both worked factory jobs, my mom had dropped out of high school and my dad never went to college. But they were smart people. They told me about evolution when I was so little, and they told it to me with such happiness. I think they liked the idea that you could be something but turn into something else. Around that same time, I asked them about the Bible, and my mom just shrugged. "Just stories," she said.

"Do you think we evolved from monkeys?" Jeff Jeffcoat asked Mr. Reynolds, who seemed to think about it.

"Well," he said softly, "evolution takes place over thousands of years, these slow incremental changes. For us to evolve from monkeys, the world would have to be much older than we suspect that it is. So I'm not sure that evolution is fully proven. There are certainly verifiable instances of it, but I think it requires more analysis, maybe more than we can do in the lifespan of human beings."

I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. Kima Walker looked so happy. The whole class seemed to take Mr. Reynolds and place him in a better part of their consciousness. The rest of class that day went so smoothly. I barely listened. I took out an index card and drew a picture of a gorilla stabbing a human being with a huge spear. I wrote "Mishap at the Zoo" at the top.

My disappointment with Mr. Reynolds, and the other students' truce with him, ended a week later when Marigold Timmins, who played power forward on the girls' basketball team, told Mr. Reynolds, after she'd made a D on a quiz, that she could destroy him in a game of one-on-one. Mr. Reynolds had been writing some notes on the chalkboard, and I watched his body stiffen, his hand just hovering there.

"You think you could beat me?" he asked, and it looked like he was talking to the chalkboard, about to fight it.

“I could,” she said.

Mr. Reynolds turned around. “How much do you wanna bet?” and the class went, “ooooohhhhh,” and Marigold said, “Twenty dollars.”

“Let me see the twenty dollars,” he said, and Marigold said, “Let me see if you have twenty dollars,” and the class went, “ooooohhhhh” again. Mr. Reynolds reached into his wallet, fucking Velcro, and slammed a twenty on his desk. Marigold reached into her purse and counted out ten ones and a five. “That’s all I have,” she said, and Mr. Reynolds said that was just fine.

“Patrick,” he said, and I got scared. “You hold the money,” and so I got up and waddled around the room to get the money.

“Let’s go,” Mr. Reynolds said, and he walked into the hallway. It took a few seconds, some giggling, but soon we all followed him, down the hall, out of the main building, and into the gym.

The gym teacher, Coach Billings, seemed perturbed to have us in there. His class was playing badminton on one half of the gym.

“Franklin?” he asked Mr. Reynolds. “You doing a science project in here or something?”

“Jimmy, I need to use that half of the court for a demonstration. It’s all about”—he paused, trying to think of something—“physics and whatnot.”

Mr. Reynolds went to get a basketball, and Marigold was stretching.

“Can’t have those shoes on the court, Franklin,” Coach Billings said apologetically, and Mr. Reynolds just kicked off his loafers, peeled off his socks, and walked onto the court. “We’ll play to five,” he said, “one point per basket. Make it, take it.”

I know for a fact, one-hundred-percent, that I was the only person in that gym who wanted Mr. Reynolds to win. Marigold’s boyfriend had called me a queer one day when he saw that I had a handkerchief that had little roses embroidered on it.

Marigold took the ball from Mr. Reynolds and started dribbling to her right, looking to blow past Mr. Reynolds, but he stayed with her, and when she went for a lay-up, he swatted it away so easily that the whole class seemed to groan at the same time. In his bare feet, toes as long as fingers, he ran down the bouncing ball and immediately put up a weird set shot that came from his hip, and he buried it easily. “One-zero,” he said, and Marigold looked puffy and angry.

Mr. Reynolds scored three points as easily as possible, even hitting a skyhook over Marigold’s ineffective defense. When he got the ball back, Marigold dug in, scuffed her sneakers on the squeaky floor, and Mr. Reynolds faked a shot. In that

second, he dribbled past her, wide open, and he leapt into the air. It looked like he was going to dunk it, but he just didn't quite have the height, and so he bounced it off the backboard at the last second and the shot fell through.

The class hooted and hollered, and Marigold was crying. Mr. Reynolds came over to me, and I handed him the money, and he put it all in his wallet. I could not believe that he was taking Marigold's money; I thought that would be illegal. Mr. Reynolds calmly put on his socks and loafers, and we all marched back into our classroom and sat in silence until the bell rang a few minutes later.

"That was amazing," I told him, the last one out the door.

"I've not been that scared in a long time," he said, huffing a little, his teeth chattering.

I thought about what kind of life card that would be, but it seemed too complicated, too much text to write to explain it.

We were playing Death Cards in his classroom one day during lunch, and I made it all the way through the game without drawing a death card. Mr. Reynolds had fallen into a pool and drowned as a child, but he seemed happy to watch me accumulate experiences on my way to a quiet death.

When I was done, I shuffled the cards again, but Mr. Reynolds said, "Not a bad life."

"I didn't have sex though," I said. There were sex cards interspersed through the decks, though the pictures I drew were just fancy hearts.

"It isn't necessary for a good life," he said. I felt like we were friends, and I wondered if Mr. Reynolds had any other friends. I knew that I didn't.

"Have you ever had sex?" I asked, and he blushed, but he didn't seem angry with me.

"Yeah," he said finally. "In Vietnam. It was awful."

"It was?" I asked, and he nodded.

"It was a kind of, like, a payment situation," he said. "All the guys did it and they really wouldn't leave me alone until I did it too. I hated it so much."

"But never again?" I asked, feeling so sad.

"Nope," he said. "Never came up again. Never went looking for it again. Never felt like I needed it."

"And you feel like you've had a good life without it?" I asked. I needed to know what my life could be like.

“I haven’t had a good life,” he said, looking right at me, his eyes kind of watery. “But it wasn’t because of sex. It’s like your card game, Patrick. You just pick cards and you can’t really control it.”

“But you only get to play the game once,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “that’s true.”

“Maybe that’s why we like this game,” I offered.

“Maybe,” he replied.

“Do you believe in heaven?” I asked.

“It doesn’t seem scientifically possible,” he said. “I don’t even know if I’d want there to be one. Whoever made earth, made heaven, too, right? So who’s to say that heaven would be any better?” He seemed to not even register that I was there, that I had a body and was right next to him. He seemed like he was staring into some black hole.

I reached over and touched his hand. “You’re a great teacher, Franklin,” I said.

He smiled. “Thanks, Patrick.”

The next part of the story, I don’t even want to tell it. It’s not the important thing, but it’s necessary. Latisha Gordon, who was the star player on the girls’ basketball team, a point guard who could score in waves, was impossible to shake off when she played defense, could dribble like a playground legend, challenged Mr. Reynolds to another game of one-on-one for twenty bucks. And Mr. Reynolds said no. Latisha wasn’t even in our class; she had study hall that period and just came in because she was friends with Marigold. I imagine that they had been planning this for weeks and weeks.

Finally Mr. Reynolds said OK, and I gathered up the money, and we all marched into the gym. And Latisha scored two quick baskets, but then Mr. Reynolds came back with two of his own, and then he went for a lay-up and came down weird and his ankle just snapped.

He didn’t even make a noise in reaction. We heard that snapping sound, like a tree branch breaking off, and then it was just silence. And then we all saw Mr. Reynolds’s ankle, turned the absolute wrong way, and he was holding his leg with both hands, kind of elevating it. And then kids started screaming, so loud, so sustained, and one boy threw up in the bleachers, this soupy vomit running down and dripping to the wooden floor under the bleachers.

Latisha didn’t even look at Mr. Reynolds, just jogged out of the gym, afraid

of getting into trouble. I wanted to run to Mr. Reynolds, to hold him, but I was paralyzed. Mr. Reynolds had drawn a death card, such a bad one, at just the wrong time. The money was in my hands, getting sweaty and warm, and I ripped it up into tiny little pieces, and I threw it down, and a few pieces fluttered around and got stuck in the vomit.

Coach Billings finally went over to Mr. Reynolds, and then an ambulance came, and they carried him out of the gym, and the principal was standing there, looking so confused and so angry, and Marigold was trying to explain what had happened. The bell rang for the next class, and I still didn't move. I just sat in the bleachers, and I stayed there the rest of the day, and I was so invisible in that school that no one even noticed. I just sat in the bleachers and cried.

That night, back at home, I drew about forty new death cards, just awful, awful scenarios. I surprised even myself. I didn't put them into the decks. I just made it a single deck, all on its own, and I turned them over one after the other, nothing but death, nothing but humiliation. I did that all night, didn't even sleep, and when I went to school the next morning, Mr. Reynolds wasn't there, and this old lady was our substitute. When we asked about Mr. Reynolds, she said he was on medical leave and would be gone for the rest of the year.

"Was he fired?" Marigold asked, and she seemed sheepish, a little guilty.

"Heavens no," the woman said. "He'll be back next year."

I found Mr. Reynolds's address in the phone book, and on Saturday, I rode my bike the nearly six miles to his house, my body covered in sweat even though it was still cold out, the last bit of winter. My thighs hurt so bad and my stomach was cramping. The bike was something I'd outgrown and then shown so little interest in that my parents never bought me a new one. But I made it to Mr. Reynolds's house, his car parked in the driveway, and there was no going back now.

His mom answered the door, ancient but surprisingly sturdy, really tall, even though she was hunched over from age. She had been a teacher at the same middle school, English, but that was way before my time. My mom didn't even remember her.

"Yes?" she asked, a little afraid of this fat kid with long eyelashes. I wondered if anyone besides the two of them had been in the house in years.

"Is Mr. Reynolds here?" I asked. I reached into my backpack and showed her a box of Russell Stover chocolates that I'd bought with my allowance. "I have a get-well present for him."

“Oh, how sweet,” she said. She turned around and walked back to her recliner and picked up this big book, which I remember was a biography of Sammy Davis Jr., and simply said, “He’s in his room at the end of the hall.”

The house smelled clean, like lemon, and everything was in its proper place. I had imagined mold and cat piss and mounted deer heads everywhere. But this was an ordinary house, a little nicer, actually, than the house I shared with my parents and younger sister. I knocked on the door, and Mr. Reynolds said, “Mom?”

“It’s Patrick,” I said. There was a long pause, and then he finally said, “OK, come in.”

He was sitting up in his bed, a mystery novel on his lap. There was a big desk in the room that had all these science books neatly arranged on it, lots of notes. He had a framed, signed poster of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar on his wall, and some Audubon prints that were really beautiful and looked expensive. On the nightstand was a plate with peanut butter crackers and a glass of tomato juice.

“Patrick,” he said. “What are you doing here?” He seemed embarrassed to see me. He was wearing old-fashioned pajamas and a knit cap for the cold.

“I brought you this,” I said, handing him the chocolates.

“Oh, that’s really nice of you,” he said. He looked at me for a second and then back at the chocolates. “Would you like to eat some?” he asked, and I nodded. He ripped off the plastic film and we each ate about four chocolates, chewing the nougat in silence.

“Are you OK?” I asked.

“I will be in a while,” he said. “No permanent damage, surprisingly enough. The doctor says the bone will actually be stronger at the break than it was before once it heals.” I tried to look at his legs, but they were under the blankets.

“And you’re not in trouble?” I asked, and he blushed.

“The principal says that I can’t play basketball against my students for money.” He paused, thinking about things. “I can’t play basketball with them even not for money,” he then said. “And I’m on a kind of probationary period. But no, not really. It’s hard to get fired, I think.”

“That’s good,” I told him. “I miss you in class.”

“Well, I miss you, too,” he said, and then I just started weeping. I don’t even know why, but the sight of him there, broken, so accepting of his sad life, it made me want to die.

“Patrick,” he said, reaching out for me. He touched my face, which made me feel better.

"I don't know what to do," I said, hiccuping, "I'm a freak. I hate my life."

"You are not a freak," he said.

"I'm gay, I think," I told him, the first time I'd told anyone, "but I don't even know if I'm gay, really. How would I know? There are only about three other boys in the school who are gay, and I don't even know if they know that they are gay. And I'm just stuck here."

"If you're gay," Mr. Reynolds said, "it is not a bad thing. OK, Patrick? It's not."

And then I looked up at him, still crying. "Are you gay?" I asked.

He looked pained but seemed to consider the question. "I don't think so," he finally said. "At one point I might have been, but I kind of missed that window. I don't think I'm anything, Patrick."

"Could I kiss you?" I asked, fumbling for something, trying to figure my way into my own life.

"No," he said. "You do not want your first kiss to be with me. It will be something you think about every single time you kiss another person."

"Please, Franklin?" I asked. Was this the reason that I'd even come here? I had no idea. I didn't know exactly what I was doing or saying.

"Life does not always have to be bad, Patrick, but maybe right now it has to be for you. But get out of here, go to college, a college in a big city or with a lot of students, and then maybe you can figure this out. Maybe you can find happiness."

"But maybe I never will," I said. "Maybe this is it."

"Maybe," he admitted, "but just try, OK? Just try."

I sniffled, trying to gain some composure. "OK," I told him, and he smiled.

"Do you want another chocolate?" he asked me, but I said that I thought my stomach was hurting. He put the chocolates away and regarded me with tenderness.

"Did you bring your Death Cards?" he asked, and I nodded because I never went anywhere without them. I reached into my backpack and produced the stacks, held together with rubber bands.

"Could we try something?" he asked me. He took the first stack of cards, and he went through them, removing every single death card from the deck. He took the next stack and did the same, and I took a stack and removed the death cards. I finished removing all the cards from the last stack, and we stared at them, spread out over the quilt on his bed. There were so many ways to die, I realized, so many ways that things would just stop and never start again.

Then Mr. Reynolds drew a card, and he held it up for me, and it made me smile. He had won a baby beauty pageant. And then I drew. And then he did. And we did that all afternoon, without the possibility of death, an entire life, and then a life stacked on top of that, and then another life stacked on top of that, until there was nothing but life, always happening, never stopping. And I held his hand at one point, and I thanked him again, and he just nodded.

I never saw him again after that. I moved to the high school the next year, and I nearly killed myself, but I held on to the part of me that I wanted to keep. And I made it out of that place, which wasn't even a bad place really, or no worse than any other place for someone like me. And I got to somewhere good. I didn't evolve, nothing like that. I just held on to myself and found a place where I could keep living. And eventually I stopped thinking so much about Mr. Reynolds because thinking about him meant thinking about that time in my life. And he just sat there, in this tiny little part of my heart. And he never changed either.

And now he was dead. And there was no way that I could explain it to my boyfriend. He would not know how those cards worked, the sensation of drawing them, each time wondering what awful thing might appear, and how much of a relief it was, even if it was ordinary, that you were still here, still in this world.