Squish

I'm sitting at a desk in the basement with my father, the radical anarchist I call Paul, and rainwater is beginning to seep through the shag carpet and wood panels that line the walls. I can see how hard it is raining because there are three windows just below the ceiling that align with the base of the backyard patio. It is raining so hard that water reaches a quarter way up the windows and if I were to open them the water would pour into the basement.

"Do you think they'll hold?" I ask Paul, who is standing at the workbench.

"You know that weather guy, the one with the 'stache, that little shit said there was a 20-25% chance of rain today, and now look at this." Paul sets the blowtorch down on the steel table and points to the window on the far right side of the basement. "You just can't trust them. They should give me that job. That's a job I could do, I'll tell you that right now." He stares at the window like it's going to tell him something.

"I think you have to go to school for that."

"Yeah, well I could."

"I doubt it."
"You just know it all. You think I'm just some old ass that can't accomplish anything anymore. I'll tell you right now, I could go get that degree and do twice as good as that guy with the 'stache." He picks up the blowtorch and yawns as the flame pours out.

"Why don't you?" I regret asking this faster than I say it. It's one of those questions, one of the thousands of questions, which will lead him into a rambling tangent about the human condition or something or other. I can see that Paul is thinking because he is standing motionless except for his right pointer finger that is squeezing the trigger of the blowtorch. He is tall and thin like he has been stretched too far and the light from a small silver lamp that sits just to the left of a set of wrenches on the workbench is reflecting off his scalp to expose his thinning hair like bare trees on a snowy hillside.

"You know why. It's because I'm not one those—" Before he can continue, I kick the beer can at my feet and watch as it spills into the shag carpet, turning its color from a nauseating yellow to dark brown.

"I'll go get some paper towels." I stand from the desk and head towards the staircase, which is wooden and deteriorating and scales the left side of the basement. I do not look at Paul, but I can feel his eyes on me. The carpet at my feet is beginning to dampen and it makes a slight squish with each step. I hear the sound of butane and flame meeting again and turn to stare at Paul's illuminated face as I cautiously walk up the staircase with light feet as to assure the stairs will not collapse.
The whiteness of the first floor temporally blinds me as if I'm in some sort of snowy tundra. It is a huge, open space with a single window. The window is so large that it takes up the entire back wall of our house. The rain cascades down the window, making it difficult to see outside. There are three other walls, all white, that climb dozens of feet until they meet the bottom of the second floor. The front door stands twice as tall as me and is industrial with metallic paint that has begun to rust. When people come over, which they rarely do, they comment on how modern our house is. The architecture and furniture are sleek and minimal, but the appliances and electronics are far outdated. There was a time when this place felt like home, but now there is only this dull, nostalgic afterglow that just barely holds onto me.

I head towards the kitchen, which is built into one of the four corners, hoping that we have paper towels, even though I know we won't. The stove and dishwasher are shiny black with silver handles and knobs that have not been touched since my mother left and started dancing in the early 1980s, nearly a decade ago. I can see the rain in the reflection of the stove as I search the white cabinets for anything that will soak up the beer. The most useful thing I find is an orange beanie hat that somehow made its way between a bag of potato chips and canned soups, so I take it.

"Grab me some cheese!" Paul's voice flushes out the basement door. Cheese, chicken nuggets, peanut butter, and rice cakes make up the majority of his diet. The cheese he eats comes in cans that he squirts into his mouth like whip cream. He goes through something like six cans a day. Our refrigerator, which matches the stove and dishwasher, is so loaded with canned cheese that when I open the door
bottles of the stuff fall out. I pick them up and place them on one of the shelves and take a different can of cheese because maybe they are like sodas and will explode if you shake them. I suspect this is not the case, but I will not take the chance.

I open the basement door, which is like the front door, and am hit in the face by the stench of mildew and burning metal. The air is thick and I feel it coat my throat as it seeps into my lungs. If you're down there long enough you get used to it, but reentering can be difficult. I suppose it's one of the reasons Paul never leaves.

Paul is standing in front of his chaotic web of newspaper articles and pictures of Jimmy Carter, the person he hates most. He draws an X over the former President's face and returns to the workbench to build. To the right of the Jimmy Carter collage is a large corkboard with dozens of pictures of my mother, all purposely and meticulously placed. They span well over twenty years, from their first dates to just before the meltdown. I will often find Paul staring at the corkboard.

"You got my cheese?" He has one hand on his left hip and the other squeezing his chin, which is abnormally pointy.

"Yeah, I got your cheese."

"Give it to me."

"You sound like an addict."

"Give me the goddamn cheese and stop fuckin' about. I have my cheese and your mother has her dancing and you're just going to have to deal with it." He sets down the blowtorch on top of a bunch of items scattered across the workbench and
extends his arms towards me. I toss him the cheese and it hits his hands and then his face and then the floor.

"God fucking dammit Nathan!" He rips off the plastic lining with his teeth and starts sucking back some cheese.

"It's traumatizing to watch you eat that stuff."

"I don't have time to deal with you right now." His mouth is full of the yellow sludge, which further distorts the last remnants of the transatlantic accent that had once been his most pompous and defining characteristic.

"You and I both know that thing's not going to work."

"Oh it'll work, and it'll finally show him." He again looks to the window and then goes back to building his makeshift explosive, which I know will not work. He has built dozens of these over the past few years, but he is so deluded that his finished products are no more than scrap metal and superglue.

I sit down at the desk and wipe the beer stain with the orange beanie. The shag carpet is so saturated with rainwater that there is no purpose in doing this. There is a red bookshelf next to the desk that contains hundreds of Paul's favorite books and "important" documents. The bottom of the bookshelf sits just a few inches above the shag carpet, and I can tell by his constant glances that Paul is beginning to worry about them.

"What are you doing?" His tone is more accusative than curious.

"I'm wiping up the beer."

"Is that my favorite hat?" His nasally voice becomes stern and assertive.

"I found it upstairs, so I doubt it."
“That my favorite hat,” he sets down the blowtorch and takes a step towards me and points to the orange beanie, “you’re cleaning up your mess with my favorite hat!”

“Alright, I’ll wash it.” I have never seen him wear this hat.

“Wash it right now.”

Directly to the right of the workbench is a washing machine with a dryer sitting atop. I haven’t seen anyone use them since my early childhood, but Paul is insisting that I use this one instead of the one upstairs because he wants to wear his favorite hat as soon as it is clean. There is no detergent, so I open the lid and put the beanie in and turn one of the knobs to a setting whose label has become unreadable. The washer makes a noise that sounds like an MRI machine and then begins the washing cycle. I sit back at the desk on the opposite side of the basement and get back to writing. I am writing my college application essay about Paul, who is erratically building a bomb a few yards behind me. I am conflicted on leaving home because Paul is unfit to live in this house without supervision, and my mother is as gone as him. Even if I get in, I doubt that I will leave.

“Nathan.”

“What?” I set down my pencil and look over my shoulder to Paul.

“Toss me the cigarettes.”

“You want one?”

“Give me the pack.”

The desk has four large drawers, two on each side, which are filled to the top with unfiltered Pall Mall cigarettes. The man whose books take up the majority of
the bookshelf called them a "classy way to commit suicide." About once a month, Paul will send me to the Tobacco Warehouse to buy $700 worth of unfiltered Pall Mall cigarettes. Before I turned 18 was the last time Paul left the basement, nearly 8 months ago.

"Toss me the fucking cigarettes."

I toss him his cigarettes and they hit his hands and then his face and then the floor. He picks them up and takes one out and puts it in his mouth and takes the blowtorch to the tip of the cigarette. The washer, a few feet to Paul’s right, is beginning to rumble and the sound is so loud that I can no longer hear the blowtorch.

The rainwater now reaches halfway up each of the three windows that align with the base of our backyard patio. Through the sound of the washer and the rain it is hard to hear my thoughts, so I have only written a few sentences. The prompt says to, "Write about the person who has had the greatest influence on you."

"Do we have any napalm?" Paul yells over the noise.

"No, we don’t have any napalm."

"Well why the fuck not?"

"Because this isn’t Vietnam."

"Don’t joke about this kind of thing, this is serious."

"Why would you think we have napalm?"

"Because I need napalm."

"Even if we had napalm, which we don’t, I wouldn’t give it to you."

"So you’re hiding it from me then?"
"No."

"You're lying to me."

"Paul, we don't have any napalm."

"Fine," he drops his head and goes back to welding pieces of metal together.

In our town there are three people who are referred to as the crazy people, two of them being my parents. They are Paul, the American flag guy, and The Dancing Lady. They fascinate people in our town and when they see one or all of the crazies they become excited and laugh with their friends and speculate as to how they have managed to get to this point in their lives. There is an aura of mystery surrounding each of them, Paul more so than the others. The American flag guy is an overweight middle-aged man who runs around town in nothing but neon pink short-shorts and an oversized American flag attached to a 7-foot poll. If you drive around town for an hour, you will probably see him. How he manages to stay overweight is part of his mysterious aura.

My mother, more commonly known as The Dancing Lady, is a 55-year-old blonde who dances everywhere she goes. She lives in a small apartment somewhere by the train tracks in the center of town. I know this because I have seen her dancing in and out of the building. The dancing started as a coping mechanism around the same time Paul's demise began and like Paul she became increasingly more insane, and so I now find myself with a mother who I haven't made eye contact with in over five years. She wears a yellow athletic jumpsuit with massive headphones connected to a Walkman, which I find ironic, considering she never walks. When she is in the
grocery store, she dances. When she is eating a sandwich, she dances. When she is talking, she dances. She is always dancing.

In there respective states of delusion, both my mother and father have escaped reality, crawling farther away from their problems with each day, and so it is me that has to face them. While the American Flag guy and my mother, The Dancing Lady, publicly revel in their craziness, almost comfortably, Paul sits in this basement with his disillusioned thoughts and dreams. I am stuck between both forms—the publicly insane and the privately insane. But I am the one who people point to at the gas station. I am the one kids laugh at at school. I am the one with the crazy parents.

Paul is wearing the white lab coat he worked in for 20 years. Paul Roden is embroidered in black lettering just below the patch that reads, “Three Mile Island”. There is nothing that infuriates Paul more than being called Paul Van Roden in situations that only require his first and last name to be said. People will often ask if he is Paul Van Roden, the Paul Van Roden, to which he will reply, “Van is my middle name, you fucking idiot.” Being that he rarely ventures outside, people will ask me if I am Paul Van Roden’s son, the Paul Van Roden’s son, to which I will reply, “Van is his middle name, you fucking idiot.” After the meltdown, the name Paul Van Roden was seen on thousands of televisions and printed in every major newspaper across the country. It was bad enough that he, being the head engineer, was blamed for the catastrophe, but the name mishap pushed him even farther into darkness. The investigation that followed Three Mile Island’s meltdown found Paul to be
responsible, and, on national television, President Jimmy Carter stated that Paul Van Roden’s poor supervision led to the stuck valve in the pressurized water reactor that initiated the meltdown.

“Paul,” I’m yelling over the noise of the washer, “you’re going to have to leave the basement if you’re going to kill this guy.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I’m just sayin’.”

“Yeah, well say less.”

“The bomb’s looking really good.” It isn’t.

“Thanks.” Paul takes a broken watch and blasts it with the blowtorch.

I know his bomb will not work, but it entertains me to talk with him about it. In Paul’s mind, Jimmy Carter will be dead by 7 pm tonight. The Carter Center, Jimmy Carter’s non-profit, is holding a fundraiser at a local hotel for research to eradicate Guniea worm disease from the face of the planet. A noble conquest, one Paul hopes to destroy.

The shag carpet has become completely saturated and there is now a full inch of water spanning the basement. Paul is so entranced by his blowtorch that he has yet to notice the books at the bottom of his bookshelf are beginning to be submerged.

“You should probably move your books.”

“They don’t matter anymore.”
“Well what should we do about this water?” The sound of the washer has become so obnoxiously loud that I am screaming.

“Grab the vacuum!”

“And do what with it?”

“Vacuum the water.” Paul sounds confident, like he has just said something brilliant.

“I’m going outside.”

“It’s pouring out there.”

“No shit.”

Smoke from unfiltered Pall Mall cigarettes clouds the room and I feel the need for clean air. I trudge through the water and by the time I reach the staircase my shoes are waterlogged.

The fresher air of the first floor fills my lungs as I stare out the window. There is a sliding door built into the right side of the window that leads to the backyard, a wild mess of overgrown shrubbery and towering pine trees that threaten to collapse. There is no thunder, no lightning, just the rain, and so I decide to embrace it. I enter the watery void and am immediately soaked. The raindrops are the size of marbles and almost hurt. I walk down a small rock staircase to find that our backyard has become a wetland. When I step onto the grass, my foot sinks into the mud up to my ankles. The three windows that align with the base of the backyard are on a slight decline; a watery mix of dirt and plant parts has accumulated at their base. Every few seconds a dull flash of yellow light illuminates
the murky water surrounding the windows. The last thing I remember is a single flash brighter than the others.

I awake on my back in the center of our backyard to the sound of sirens and muddled voices. The rain has stopped and there is a women kneeling beside me.

"Can you hear my voice?" She asks.

I nod and realize I am wearing a neck brace.

"How do you feel?"

I scrunch my shoulder blades, extend my fingers, flex my quads, and make circles with my ankles.

"Try not to move too much if you're not sure."

"I'm fine."

"On of scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your pain?"

"I'm fine."

"1 to 10."

I sit up and the woman puts her hand on my back as if to guide me back down.

"Really, I'm fine."

I wipe some sort of black soot with a grainy texture from my eyes that I assume to be residue from the blast. The backyard is filled with medical personal and police and firemen who are aimlessly standing around. I already know that Paul is dead because there is an occupied black body bag sitting atop a white stretcher just outside an ambulance that squeezed through the side porch opening, which
now has deep tire marks carved into it's once beautiful garden. The three windows that used to align with the base of the backyard patio is now a large hole with jagged and blackened edges. The rainwater that had accumulated in our backyard now fills the basement. Glass and concrete is scattered throughout the surrounding area and when the sun reflects off the glass it creates a series of blinding flickers that cause me to raise my hands to my eyes. The woman recognizes my realization and puts her hand on my shoulder in some type of comforting gesture.

"I'm sorry," she squints her eyes and squeezes her lips together with her right cheek making a little dimple that creates the sort of half frown people make when they don't know what to say.

"I honestly didn't think it would work," I say to her in a voice that just barely squeezes out. These types of situations are awkward for everyone involved—me being the victim and everyone else just wanting to put this in the back of their minds and go back to their families, who are still alive, in all likelihood.

"What?" She looks at me and takes her hand off my shoulder and cocks her head like a confused dog when you spell out W A L K instead of saying it.

"He was building a bomb to kill Carter." This statement is apparently shocking to her.

"As in President Jimmy Carter?"

"Former President Jimmy Carter."

The woman looks to the police, almost instinctively, like she has been conditioned to notify law enforcement when she hears of a possible presidential
assassination. "It was the washing machine," again she puts her hand on my shoulder, "it exploded."

"That makes more sense than the bomb."

"I don't understand this bomb thing," she moves her hand slightly along my shoulder blade and I can feel the outline of her wedding ring.

"I just told you, he was building a bomb to kill Carter."

"Well it didn't cause the explosion."

"Yeah, I could've told you that."

I stand from the ground with the women's eyes still fixated on my face like I'm going to explain to her exactly what she wants to hear, but I won't. The air has that post-rain smell that fills my nostrils with earthiness as I walk towards the bag that holds my father. When I reach him, I do not stop walking. My fingertips tips lightly brush along the bag as I head toward the front yard, where I hear people's voices, and the sound of my nails against the thin rubber is crisp and fleeting. The street outside our driveway, my driveway, is packed with people, as if this is some type of spectacle. Their faces look at me and the sound of the crowd grows with each explanation of who I am or what had happened, all of which pure speculation.

"Are you Paul Van Roden's son?" A man in a suit with a microphone in his left hand and a camera behind his back is looking at me, and the crowd has gone silent in anticipation of my answer. I scan the crowd for no reason but to delay, and I see my mother. She is just behind the crowd, who are keeping a safe distance from her, and she is rhythmically swaying her body in a way that creates a beautiful slow motion effect. As they stare at me, I stare at her. "Are you going to answer the
question?" The man in the suit takes a few steps forward, and now the microphone is just inches from my lips. My eyes remain fixed on my mother and I hope, for only a moment, that she notices me. As I feel the eyes of dozens, I notice just one more pair, a pair I haven’t felt in years, and I see my mother standing still, no longer dancing and intensely looking at me like she hasn’t in years, and I look back at the man in the suit.

"Van was his middle name, you fucking idiot."