

Erase the Days

“We’re supposed to run,” Grant says.

It’s dinner. We eat at the small round kitchen table underneath the multicolored rustic light fixture, which casts a warm rainbow glow. This is where Family Time is served. Also, it’s Taco Night. Classical music is playing from our iWhatever on the countertop. My wife likes to keep it on when we eat. She says the music is nourishing. Like, maybe with it in the background we’ll have a more inspired conversation. She didn’t use that word, *inspired*, but it’s what she means. I find it distracting. When a song comes on that I know, I can never quite remember the composer or the title of the tune. For me it’s all Mozart and Beethoven. To Grant I say, “That’s it? Run?”

“Yeah, if there’s an active [REDACTED]. Also, avoid eye contact.”

“Eye contact?”

“With the perp.”

“Perp?”

“Dad, yes. It’s short for perpetrator.”

“I know. It’s just that—”

“They got a pamphlet,” Heather says.

“I’d like to see that.”

“It’s on the kitchen counter. Beside the bills.”

“For homework we’re supposed to write how we feel about [REDACTED].”

“Feel?”

“Dad, come on. You need to get your hearing checked.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just . . . how you *feel*?”

“Maybe you could write a poem,” Heather suggests.

“How do you feel about them, Dad?” Grant has this habit of shredding his paper napkin into tiny bits in his lap when he eats. “What poem would you write?”

I don’t want to talk about it, and I certainly don’t want to write a poem. Not ever and especially not during Family Time at the table with the salsa and guacamole.

Just thinking is bad enough. Of the children. Any one of them could have been Grant. My son. We gave him my wife's maiden name. And the parents of those kids? No, no. I don't think so. Not going to discuss.

Of course, it doesn't matter that I don't want to talk about it. Everyone else does. Radio, television, newspapers, movies, computers, smartphones—pinging, whirring, infinitely ricocheting words, words, words, enough to make you numb. And images. Don't forget what it looks like. Digitally remastered. Everything crystal clear. Pictures so sharp they slice retinas. Best to pinch eyes shut.

"What do you think I should do if something like what happened at that school happens . . ."

In the aftermath, teachers have been asked to prepare their classes. To bring ■■■ into the classroom as an *idea* in order to protect kids if they become a reality. As they did at that school, as they could in Grant's fifth-grade class.

"It won't," I say.

"Say it does."

"You know how small the odds are? Infinitesimal."

"It's more common than you think. The teacher showed us the statistics. Numbers don't lie."

"Fine, it's bad. I get it. Talking about it doesn't help."

"We can't do nothing, Dad."

"Are you sure? Have we really even tried to do nothing?"

"We don't have to have this conversation tonight," Heather says.

"I don't want to have it tomorrow either. Let's just not talk about it. Ever. Not at the table and not at school. Maybe the best way to keep ■■■ out of the classroom is to keep them out *completely*. Never say a word."

"Yeah right," Grant says. "As if."

A part of me feels like launching into the speech I would have given if I had gone to the PTA meeting this week. That's usually my wife's jurisdiction; Heather's a much better P than I am. If I did go to the next one and was given the opportunity to offer my two cents, I'd say, "Let's keep ■■■ relegated to the textbooks." I'd use that word, *relegated*, to show that I meant business. I'd talk loud and clear. Put a little boom in my voice. I'd say, "Let parents talk—or not talk—about ■■■ at home."

Let's not overreact. Times have changed, but a child's innocence has not. Isn't it up to us to protect their vulnerability? To show them all the good in this world? There is still good in the world. *They* are what's good. Let us not forget that. Let us not taint them with the horrors and atrocities of our contemporary moment. What happened at that school . . . abominable. I don't presume to know what could or should have been done to prevent that kind of arbitrary senselessness. But let's not abandon reason now. Let's not frighten the kids."

That's what I would say, if I did want to talk about it. Heather reported that the PTA decided the school should—*must*—do something. So they've initiated a plan of action. Better safe than sorry, blah, blah. If there's a fire, kids are trained to stop, drop, and roll. Tornado? Line up in the hallway, curl into a ball, and protect your head. Now, in the event of an active-█ situation they're supposed to run. That strikes me as wrong on many levels, but I refuse to bring it back up. Instead, to Heather and Grant, I try to boil it down. I say, "It's like this: Not talking + Not thinking = No more █ in school. Problem solved."

"That's fuzzy math."

"Fuzzy how?"

"Well, if you don't talk about or think about cockroaches, it doesn't make them disappear. Pass the sour cream."

"Pass the sour cream, *what?*" Heather says.

"Please. Pass it, *please*, Mom."

"When you were a baby, we didn't talk or think about them," I say.

"He's not a baby anymore, Al."

"No, I know. That's not the point."

"Did you know," Grant says, "that for every single cockroach you see, there are like a hundred that you can't see hiding in the walls?"

"I didn't know that," Heather says. "That's interesting. The bug man was here last week."

"Exterminator," Grant corrects.

"Touché," Heather says. She doffs a pretend cap in his direction.

"But Grant's got a point," I say, "with his cockroach metaphor."

"It's not a metaphor."

"It could be, though. Let's say you're not talking about *actual* cockroaches."

"I am. I read it in—"

“Pretend you’re not. Think of cockroaches as [REDACTED]. For every *actual* [REDACTED] you see, there are thousands, maybe millions of representations of them on television, in the movies . . .”

“Dad—”

“ . . . on video games, cartoons . . .”

“Dad, I was talking about actual cockroaches.”

“ . . . in textbooks. And now for homework. You see? [REDACTED] are in our heads like cockroaches in the walls.”

“That’s more of a simile,” Heather says.

“Like or as = simile,” Grant says.

“Yeah, but the idea is still sound. If your mind is a clean house, you have nothing to fear. Unless, of course, you do. Like at that school. That was nobody’s fault except, obviously, that one rotten apple. For every bad one of us, how many good are there?”

“Are we talking about [REDACTED] or apples?” Grant shifts his eyes to his mother.

If you were to take two blue morpho butterflies, mash them into tiny balls in your fists, and cram them into my wife’s orbital cavities, you’d have her eyes. The irises have a cerulean hue and swirl with flecks of ebony.

“You should use a simile in your poem,” Heather says.

“Yes, but—” I say, with more to follow, when Grant shoves an enormous triangle of taco into his mouth. There is an explosion of sound as he gnashes. It’s enough to drown out the classical music I don’t recognize.

“It’s Brahms,” Heather says, even though I didn’t ask. “You can hear him in the strings.”