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AARON GORANSON

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*COLLECTING WATER*

Mathew can't sleep. He lies in bed staring at the ceiling. It's night. A light from the street reaches inside, casting strange shapes across the room. He follows the edge of a rectangle as it rises along the wall then bends at the ceiling and narrows to a point like a knife.

He hears the TV downstairs. The sound of talking that ends with a burst of sitcom laughter. The channel changes. A car screeches around a corner as the siren of a police car chases in pursuit. The channel changes again. The voice of a man reading the news, then back to murmurs and laughing.

At school today, after lunch, in the hallway where the lockers are, Tess was showing her water collection: five plastic bottles with water inside. Each bottle labeled with where they came from: a pond, a river, a puddle, the bathtub, her kitchen faucet. She included the dates, like Miss Cleary requested for extra credit. The labels were even typed and correctly spelled. Mathew knows Tess is going to get an A. She always does.

The assignment was to collect samples of water to study under the microscope. Miss Cleary showed in class, with the lights off, two slides through a projector beamed on the blackboard of two drops of water.

"What do you all see?" she asked, leaning over the projector. The shadow of her curly hair invaded a corner of the frame. "Can any of you recognize those bacteria in the slides and what we've been studying in class?" Mathew saw bubbles, scratches, blobs floating in both slides, like stars in the night sky.

It was a science project, meaning it took time and was due in two weeks. That day is tomorrow. The weeks are up. Mathew could explain to Miss Cleary his situation. My father left in the middle of the night. We are still in shock, I'm trying to cope. He's told it to other teachers before. Their faces sadden, they nod their heads. Is everything all right? I understand, take your time. Ask, if you need any help.

But recently their eyes look through him. They ask more questions. How long since he's been gone? Have you seen the school counselor? Maybe we should talk to your mother?

He turns his head and looks at the table next to his bed. He can see resting on top the last thing his father gave him: a silver pen. He reaches over and holds it above his head. It's heavy in his fingers, expensive to grasp. At the end of it is a small button he pushes. A red light comes on.

"Hello, my name is Matt. Testing one...two...four...five." There's a silence then another voice. "Spy pen. It's used for keeping secrets." It's his dad's voice. The light blinks

indicating the recording is at an end. He rewinds and plays it again.

Dad had given it to him one night when he asked for help on his homework. His father was sitting at the kitchen table going over bills. Give me a few minutes he said. Mathew waited, thinking how adults needed a few minutes before starting something else. He wondered about all the thoughts in their heads; so many like papers swirling in the wind. After a few minutes, they could capture it all and put it in order. It was something he wished he could do now, that he didn't want to wait to be a grown-up for.

As they went over his homework, his father crossed out numbers, scratched in answers with a silver pen. At one point, Dad asked him what was nine times four. Mathew didn't know. Dad made him recite the times tables and as Mathew spoke, Dad put the pen up to Mathew as if it was a microphone. When they finished he hit a button and the pen recited the answers they had spoken. "You'll remember them better now," Dad said. He asked his dad where he got it. It was from work. He pointed to a small logo etched on the side. "Don't play it in school. You'll get in trouble."

He listens to Dad's voice again in bed. He sounds small and distant. He doesn't want to explain why his homework isn't done tomorrow.

Mom is lying on the couch in the living room, her legs curled underneath her, as Mathew walks downstairs. She's dressed in black stretch pants and a large buttoned shirt, the top buttons undone. "Not sleeping?"

"Can't," Mathew says.

"Why not?"

Mathew sits at the other end of the couch. "I don't know."

Mom looks back at the TV. It's a late night talk show. The host is a man in a suit speaking to a woman in a dress of glitter and blonde hair. "You can stay up with me for ten minutes, then you have to go to bed. I'm going to go to the kitchen. Something to drink?"

"No thanks."

She leaves and comes back with a glass of water, then folds herself back on the couch.

"Now where did you grow up?" The host says. The woman in glitter says she was from Chicago, her mother was a flight attendant and her father was in advertising. The host says a joke that Mathew can't understand. The audience laughs.

"What's keeping you awake, Mathew?"

"School."

"What's happening at school? Did something happen today, you're not falling asleep in class again?"

He shakes his head. He doesn't know how to tell her the truth. "Miss Cleary gave us a project."

"You like her. You tell me she's nice."

“How did your parents meet?” The TV says. The guest says on a plane her mom was a flight attendant on. The host makes another joke about mom asking if her dad would like coffee, tea or me. Mathew hears the words mile-high status followed again by laughter.

“She gave us this project to do on water.”

“That sounds interesting. What about it?”

“We are supposed to get different types of water. Tap water, rain water. Stuff like that.”

“So, why are you worried? That’s easy to get.”

“I’ve only got two so far.” He has the glass of water in his hand, and he hopes it rains the next morning.

“How many do you need?”

Mathew says five. She asks when is it due. Tomorrow.

“Why haven’t you done it?”

Mathew doesn’t look at her. He keeps looking at the woman in glitter. She’s smiling the whole time, not worried about anything. She’s sitting in a deep chair, laughing about growing up.

“I don’t know,” he says.

Mom fastens the top buttons of her shirt. “I heard you answer the phone this morning.”

“What phone?”

“This morning as we were getting ready for school. That sales credit card call asking for your parents.”

Mathew remembered. He was in the living room tying his shoes and getting his books together while Mom was feeding Karen in the kitchen and Sal was in her bedroom. The phone rang twice, Mom yelled for someone to get it. Mathew picked it up.

“What did I say?”

“You said no one was home.”

“I did?”

“I overheard you. They asked to speak to your parents.”

“So.”

Mom uncurls her legs and her feet touch the floor. “You said they should call when Dad gets home from work.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“I heard you, Matt. You haven’t done this water thing because Dad isn’t here to help you? Is that it?”

[end of excerpt]