



LAUREN WATEL

HAPPINESS SUCKS

As president, founder, and sole member of the Inman Middle School Future Ethnographers Society, Damien Furnish-Moore felt duty bound to advocate for the use of qualitative anthropological methods among his eighth-grade peers. To this end, he had repeatedly urged Mrs. Knight, his social studies teacher, to incorporate ethnography into the curriculum, and she had, in due course, obliged him. During the month of March, students in the class were required to observe, interview, and write a report about their families, documenting their characteristics and customs.

Damien's obsession with ethnography had erupted at the beginning of the school year, replacing his seventh-grade love affair with investigative journalism. At the time, he was serving as publisher, editor-in-chief, and star reporter of the *Ipswicher*, a neighborhood newspaper he had launched during the previous Christmas break. Having recruited a phalanx of writers,¹ he printed a monthly issue and hand delivered it to the thirteen families on his street, as well as select households in a nearby subdivision.

As part of a series he called "Careers Uncovered," he had interviewed his mother about her job as an anthropology professor. The ethnographer, she told him, was a lot like a foreign correspondent, living among distant peoples and trying to understand them—an insider and yet, at the same time, always an outsider. A participant-observer. *That's me*, he had thought with an intoxicating surge of recognition and discomfort. A *participant-observer*. A month later he printed the last *Ipswicher*, declared the paper defunct, and began poring over his mother's copy of *Tristes Tropiques*.

¹ His best friend, Adam Glass, (humor pieces); Adam's older sister Gwen (editorials); and the Brand twins (Bradley and Chance, sports and culture, respectively).





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How many members in your family? Name them, including yourself. What are their ages? What roles do they have within the larger family structure (e.g., “mother,” “stepfather,” “half sister,” “pet,” etc.)? List each person’s occupation.

There are 4 members in my family:

1. *Martha Moore, 41 yrs, mom + wife, anthropologist, Emory University*
2. *Peter Furnish, 43 yrs, pet dad + husband, epidemiologist, CDC*
3. *Damien Furnish-Moore, 13½ yrs, son + brother, 8th grade student, IMS*
4. *Delilah Furnish-Moore, 97 days, daughter + sister, baby*

Mrs. Knight paced in front of the board, brandishing a stub of chalk like a switchblade. “How do you tell the story of your family when you yourself play a crucial role in that story?”

A pained yet defiant silence hovered over the room. Damien raised his hand. Mrs. Knight peered at the rest of the classroom’s inhabitants as if searching for vital signs. With a small huff of disapproval, she scrawled the word “emic” on the board in boxy capitals. “Anyone besides Mr. Furnish-Moore like to take a stab?”

Desks creaked; someone coughed; someone else (Adam, probably) made a timid, flatulent sound. On the other side of Damien, Amelia “Ifeelya” Seymour, a pale, shapely girl with pink hair, scratched a question mark into the corner of her desk with a safety pin, glancing every now and again from beneath her bangs at Damien. He contemplated telling her the answer² so that she could impress Mrs. Knight and bolster her participation grade, but instead he stared out the window with a wistful expressiveness, as if he yearned to be investigating the coming-of-age rituals of indigenous peoples in

² “Emic” describes an account of a behavior or belief as told from the native or insider’s point of view (i.e., the type of writing done by a participant-observer), as opposed to “etic,” which characterizes a description of a behavior or belief by a “culturally neutral” outsider.





Costa Rica instead of fraternizing with his hormone-addled, half-wit peers.

“Remember, my lovelies, when you neglect the reading, you’re not letting me down, you’re letting yourselves down.”

From the assembled rows, a collective moan indicating world-weariness and remorse, mostly feigned. Damien forced himself not to smile.³ After a lengthy discourse on “emic,” Mrs. Knight distributed a fieldnotes worksheet with questions about kinship structure, physical geography, and rituals. Damien slipped his worksheet into a fresh manila folder; Adam sketched a well-endowed naked female in one corner of his; Amelia Seymour folded hers carefully at the bottom, licked the fold, tore the paper at the crease, and fashioned the remaining square into a swan, which she contemplated for one impassioned moment before crushing it with a pen-tattooed fist.

Damien watched Amelia shove her notebook into a faded military-style courier bag. She had developed early and was said to have psychological problems. On one side of her chin was a scar like an open parenthesis; a thin, black earphone wire snaked down her chalky neck before disappearing under her collar. To conceal her burgeoning womanhood, she wore a denim jacket and striped scarf over a dress that resembled a tattered lamp shade—this ensemble above a pair of combat boots. Under the pretense of asking Mrs. Knight a question about her grading rubric, Damien swiped an extra copy of the fieldnotes worksheet, which he snuck to Amelia as he passed by her desk.

After school, while Damien and Adam were finalizing plans for the weekend, she appeared suddenly at the bike rack like an angry specter, a light wind lifting her bangs off her forehead. “Severe weather alert,” Adam muttered and pedaled off. Damien mounted his bike. Amelia stared at him, unsmiling. Damien leaned down to tuck his right pants cuff into his sock, an agreeable ache flickering in his belly. When he looked up again, she was in retreat, walking backwards, still staring, hands shoved into her pockets, boots seeming to float clunkily just above the low-clipped weeds.

³He had read the assignment twice.





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Describe each family member and how he/she functions in your family. If you want, you can use an everyday object as an analogy. For example, if your family were a house, who would be the foundation, the porch, the roof? Remember, these are called jottings. Just write what comes into your head. No revision necessary!

Let's say my family is a machine. Like a lawnmower or something. Mom's the engine. Meaning she makes things run, like most moms, but she has a job, too. She knows all our doctors, the lady who cuts our hair, when school meetings are, what we need at the grocery store, and every crucial thing. All that. So if Mom's the engine, I guess Dad's the cutting blade, because he does a lot of the work, too, not like most dads. I mean, Adam's dad doesn't do anything but go to his job and ride his bike around the neighborhood. Dad helps out Mom all the time. They share everything. Like when they wheel Deli around in the stroller, they either take turns pushing or they push together. I'm sorry, but that's taking sharing a little too far. Okay, so Deli is the pull-string. Why? Because right now she's the start-up point of the machine. What I mean by that is, everybody's really focused on her, like she's the center of the universe, but that's the way it's supposed to be with babies, right? It was like that with me when I was a baby, or so they tell me. But anyway. What part am I in the old lawnmower? Maybe I'm the leaf bag. The throttle? Not sure how that would work. Maybe the handle. I don't know. Nevermind.

For pointers about writing fieldnotes, Damien consulted his mother's copy of *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, but after a page or two he found the miniscule typeface off-putting and the academic prose rather dry. Instead he studied passages she had marked, as well as her checks and comments in the margins. Soon he discovered, on a dog-eared page, one particular sentence,⁴ which she had underlined twice

⁴ "The ethnographer, then, stays at least a partial stranger to the worlds of the studied, despite sharing in many aspects of their daily lives."





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and beside which she had printed the word “YES.” Having committed this line to memory, he began carrying a folded sheet of paper in his back pants pocket, a pencil tucked behind his ear, in order to scribble as unobtrusively as possible various jottings describing *initial impressions* of his family’s culture, as well as *key events or incidents*. For some reason, Damien didn’t tell his parents about the project. The omission produced in him a slight, creeping guilt; according to Emerson et al., however, “all social life involves elements of dissembling, as no one ever fully reveals all his deeper purposes and private activities.”

Describe your family’s physical geography (i.e., your house). Where do you live? What is your neighborhood like? What does your house look like? Which is your favorite room? What rooms do your family members use most often? Least often?

The Furnish-Moore domicile (do I get extra credit for using advanced vocab?) is located at 107 Ipswich Place. It looks like all the other houses on the street, big, wooden (ours is green, Adam’s is tan), two stories, huge front porch, columns, a garage, you know the drill. You can tell our house from the others because Mom hung Tibetan prayer flags across the porch and we have a lot of wild flowers native to Georgia planted in the front yard, which I heard Mrs. Glass call “quaint” one time and it didn’t seem like a compliment. But whatever. Our neighborhood is what you would call nice and safe, but really I think it’s a little boring. I know my parents think so, because they had a lot of adventures in cool foreign countries like Costa Rica, where Mom used to do her fieldwork before they had to come home and settle down when Mom got pregnant. My favorite room in the house is my room. My parents recently started letting me lock my door, which Adam thinks is necessary for privacy’s sake once a kid turns thirteen and I agree. We spend a lot of time in the living room—that’s where we read and play cards and have family time and I do my homework. We don’t use the family room much. The TV’s in there, and I’m only allowed to watch TV a few hours on weekends. Adam says my parents are fascists with all their rules, but I told him that’s impossible, they’re just liberals who want me to go to a good college.





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The boys were babysitting Delilah, which they often did on Saturday nights to earn extra money.⁵ While Adam rifled through the grown-ups' dresser and heated up a frozen pound cake he had smuggled in from his house, Damien fed Delilah a bottle, changed her diaper, read her three *Spot* books, popped her pacifier in her mouth, and set her up in her vibrating bouncy seat on the faded oriental rug in the living room. He also stashed paper and a pencil under the sofa, in case he should wish to make notes at some point during the evening. After the boys ate the cake, Adam extracted a deck of cards from a pocket in his cargo pants. He shuffled them repeatedly, with the expertise of a Vegas blackjack dealer. "My dad got a new touring bike," he said, fanning the cards along the table and flipping them over, face up, face down, with a fingertip.

"Another one?"

"I know. The guy's so restless. Ante up."

Damien tossed a penny onto the coffee table. "He just likes buying stuff. A lot of dads are like that."

"Not yours. Your parents aren't that into stuff, except for organic crap. Oh, and your dad's awesome pen." A penny from Adam.

"You know, he thinks you have good taste because you keep saying how much you like it. What a kiss-up."

"Hey, that sucker's a limited edition Montblanc Hemingway. Super pricey."

"Whatever."

Delilah spit out her pacifier, whimpering and waving her arms about; Damien wiped it with his shirt and inserted it back into her mouth.

Having dealt two hands of five-card draw, Adam peered at his cards. "He should give you that pen."

"Why? It's his."

"I don't know, 'cause you're always writing stuff down. Like now, for instance. Please tell me you're not taking notes about me for that dumb project."

⁵ Peter Furnish had proposed payment of \$5.00 hourly for each boy, which Adam had haggled up to \$15.00/hour (the going rate for his sister Gwen, who was in high school) split between them. "Two boys for the price of one girl," was his clinching slogan.





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“Of course I’m not.” He had just scribbled, *Adm thnks d shd giv me hs pen*, on the slip of paper.

“You’re going to be a professor or something when you grow up. Everybody thinks so. Professors love expensive pens.”

“Expensive pens are stupid.” Damien threw a nickel into the kitty.

“They’re cool. But your dad’s pen’s a ballpoint. My dad says real men use fountain pens.”

“Real men use rifles, don’t they?”

Adam shrugged, slid a nickel across the table. “You should just take it. You’re so good, he’d never suspect.”

“But I don’t even want it.”

“Your dad owes you,” Adam informed Damien, dealing him two cards, “because of the accident.”

“What accident?”

“The baby, what else?” He dealt himself a single card. “All I can say is, I’m glad my mom’s done with having babies.”

“You think Deli was an accident?” Trying to ignore his friend’s expression of incredulity, Damien glanced at the painting hanging above the couch. It depicted a pair of women with wolf heads and naked human bodies; they sat in wooden chairs like the ones at school, their thighs folded to their chests, one of them stretching out an arm as if she wanted to touch her friend on the knee. The artist, his mother’s best friend from college, had given it to Damien’s parents as a wedding gift.

“Dude, you’re the one who told me you were supposed to be an only child.”

Damien had a pair of eights, two kings, and a queen. “True. But my parents never said it was an accident.” He added three more pennies to the kitty.

“There’s no way they’d tell you.” Another nickel.

“They always tell me the truth; it’s our family policy. Remember when we asked our moms what ‘fuck’ meant?”⁶ Four pennies.

⁶ “When a man puts his penis in a woman’s vagina.” —Martha Moore

“Ask your father.” —Jennifer Glass

“You’re too young to know, but if you say it again, you’re grounded.”
—Doug Glass





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Adam rolled his eyes, flicking a dime into the pot. “Okay, fine, your mom’s cool and mine isn’t—this is common knowledge. But I’m telling you, with something this big they couldn’t risk it. Too dangerous. I mean, what if you got pissed at Deli when she was older and told her she was an accident and, like, destroyed her self-esteem and everything? They’d never forgive you.”

“Whatever. You’re an imbecile.” Damien folded, marveling, as he had on many occasions, at Adam’s talent for making trouble. The baby was no accident. If his parents hadn’t wanted a baby, they wouldn’t have had one. Adam revealed his cards—he had a pair of threes—with a smirk, collected his winnings, and no more mention was made of accidents.

And yet, the next evening, while his parents took their after-dinner constitutional, pushing the stroller in tandem, Damien unlatched his father’s briefcase, heart reeling in his chest. He slipped the pen from its leather slit as if collecting insurance against some distant future misfortune. He would return it, he promised himself, as soon as he had completed the social studies assignment.

Observe your family tomorrow morning. When do you wake up? What is your morning routine? Do you eat breakfast together or separately? Who prepares the food? When do you leave for school? How do you get to school?

I wake up at 6:30 a.m. sharp. Deli’s awake, too, crying like a little puppy. Mom + Dad’s door is closed, but I can hear them laughing. After I get dressed, I get Deli out of the crib and change her diaper and heat up a bottle of frozen breast milk. Mom says I’m a natural, whatever that means. Mom + Dad finally show up around 7:15, still laughing. Mom cooks pancakes from scratch. I feed Deli a bottle, because Mom is cooking and Dad’s helping Mom and touching her hair and her shoulder and her back and sneaking kisses, what a dork, I never really noticed it before but he always does this when she cooks, like he’s seeing her for the first time in forty years and she’s smiling so much it’s kind of, well, I don’t know. Dad usually leaves the house first, then me (I ride my bike to school with Adam),





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then Mom, but Mom's on maternity leave until the new nanny comes from Finland. When Dad gets his briefcase, he notices his pen is gone. He asks Mom if she saw it anywhere and she says no, and he's shaking his head, he's sure he remembers putting it in his briefcase and Mom says don't worry, if you can't find it you can buy another one, that's what money's for, and Dad says you're right and kisses her again and hugs her like he's going on a long trip except he's just going to the office as usual.

Mrs. Knight asked the class to divide into groups of three to discuss the initial phase of their research. "Share any unusual data with your discovery-session partners," she called out from her desk. "And yes, Adam, I'll take your phone until the end of class for safekeeping."

After pretending to shove it down his pants, Adam surrendered his phone. Damien glanced through his fieldnotes with a sigh. He was having second thoughts about putting his father's embarrassing kitchen affections in writing; according to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, such moral conundrums were common among participant-observers.⁷ Amelia Seymour pushed her desk slowly toward Damien's until the two were touching. Meanwhile, Moses Nelligan had sidled over and slouched himself across the edge of Amelia's desk.

"Adam's our third," Damien informed Moses, glancing at Amelia for confirmation. Amelia shook her bangs over her eyes as if closing a curtain, and Mrs. Knight directed Adam to join a twosome from the chess club.

"So, you guys discover anything interesting?" Damien inquired.

"Yeah." Moses scratched an armpit. "This project sucks."

As he stared with mild loathing at Moses's prominent Adam's apple, Damien imagined his gaze transmitting a powerful invisible laser beam, which would burn a tiny hole through Moses's voice box, thereby rendering him permanently incapable of speech.

⁷ "But these field researchers too experience moments of anguish, of uncertainty about whether to include intimate or humiliating incidents in their fieldnotes."





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Moses patted the hair above his forehead, glancing hotly at Amelia Seymour. “How about you, More-Furniture? You find out anything heavy?”

“Well, my dad . . .” Damien nearly said, *My dad touches my mom a lot, but he thought better of it.* “My dad’s always helping my mom with the cooking and stuff.”

“That’s weird,” Moses said.

“You’re weird,” Damien retorted.

“Great comeback.” Moses imitated Mrs. Knight’s contemptuous yawn. “Dads are supposed to pretend to help. That’s what my dad does. He told me a guy should always try to look busy when he’s near the kitchen.”

Amelia removed a paper swan from her dress pocket and began unfolding it, eventually revealing her second fieldnotes worksheet, which was blank. “My mom doesn’t talk to my dad,” she whispered to her bangs.

“Women can be so cruel,” declared Moses.

Damien felt an urge to peel back Amelia’s bangs so that he could see her eyes. “Why not?”

She opened her mouth, a small, moist, quivering pinkness that reminded Damien of a sea creature, and Mrs. Knight’s voice boomed into the room. “Adam Glass, will you kindly give Ingrid back her phone and find your way to Mr. Cargyle’s office? I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see you again so soon.”

For a moment after the door closed, the classroom reverberated with an edgy silence, but the chatter of discovery-session sharing soon resumed, albeit with an Adamless deflation of spirit. Concealing his phone underneath his desk, Moses began a game of Tetris. Amelia picked up a pencil, flipped over her worksheet, and on it sketched a small figure: a boy with shaggy hair and over-large high-tops—a decent likeness of Damien—and a curvy girl dressed in a lamp-shade dress and combat boots, and beside her a door, half open, and an arrow pointing from their feet to the open door. Damien peered under his desk at his high-tops, which did appear rather comically long compared to his relative height, though his mother had assured him he would soon catch up to them. “Cool drawing,” he murmured to Amelia, but she was gone, the classroom door yawning on its hinges.





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He found her a few minutes later, in a shady far corner of the empty playground, leaning against the fence. "I left the classroom without permission," he said, a little out of breath.

"You'll probably get in trouble. Mrs. Knight will totally notice you're gone." Amelia frowned on one side of her sea-creature mouth.

"She didn't notice *you* were gone."

"That's different. You're good."

Damien sighed at the accusation. "So why doesn't your mom talk to your dad?"

"I don't know." She kicked the fence with the toe of her boot. "Maybe she doesn't love him anymore."

"Why not?"

Amelia shrugged. "She's bored, I guess. Adults get bored and fall out of love. Don't you watch tv?"

"My parents aren't bored at all. They're, like, happy."

"Your parents are happy? For real?"

He nodded, fingering the pen inside his pocket.

"Wow." Amelia tugged the hem of her dress over her knees. "Must be kind of cool to have happy parents."

He wanted to say yes. Yes, it was great having happy parents, wasn't it? Of course. Great. But not altogether. Not really. Because their happiness was a kind of fog, invisible but palpable, and when they were in it they couldn't see out of it, couldn't see anyone except each other. The fog had surrounded them ever since Damien could remember, and he had been watching them through it, watching them lost inside it, though they never seemed afraid, the way he had felt when he had gotten lost at the mall when he was seven, because they liked it there inside the fog, and they wanted to be lost together, perhaps more than anything.

When he opened his mouth to speak, his throat began to ache and tears welled in his eyes; he swallowed and swiped at his eyes with his sleeve, shaking his head like a dog shaking off water. Amelia dug into a pocket of her dress and handed him a crumpled handkerchief with a small green *a* embroidered in one corner.

"So, it's all rotten," she said, "even if your parents are happy."

"Yeah." Damien cleared his throat, spat on the ground. "Happiness sucks."





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Describe a day after school. What are your rituals (e.g., do you have a snack, watch TV, do homework, help out around the house, etc.)? Who prepares dinner? Who sets the table? Does your family eat together? Who cleans up?

Today when I get home Mom's sitting at the kitchen table and Deli's taking a nap. So I just ask my mom, I don't know what comes over me, if Deli was an accident, and it's so weird, because what she does is, she smiles this ugly smile and she puts her hand up to her mouth, like she's slapping herself, and she says it depends on what you mean by accident and I'm like wow, Mom, I thought you knew what accident meant. And then I get this feeling in my stomach, like somebody cracked an egg in there, and I run to the bathroom and lock the door and I can hear Mom outside, even though she isn't making any noise. Then Deli starts crying and Mom leaves. When my dad gets home, he and Mom say they want to talk to me about Deli, but I tell them no thanks, I'd prefer not to, and they say okay, maybe later. Then Dad starts asking me all this stuff about Adam, like if he's gotten into trouble for stealing, and finally I see he's trying to figure out if Adam stole his stupid pen. I tell him I'm feeling sick to my stomach and have extra homework and I go up to my room and lock the door, but I don't do any homework. Basically what I do is, I open the window. In the backyard this bird is attacking Alpha, Brad and Chance's cat. Alpha's big and mean. He kills squirrels for pleasure. So let me tell you, that's one brave bird. I stay in my room until bedtime, so I don't know who sets the table and who prepares dinner and who eats it and who cleans it up and I really don't care.

“You take a turn,” Damien said, letting go of the handle. The stroller coasted down the hill toward the cul-de-sac.

Adam took over, steering with one hand. “What’s *she* doing here?”

“Who?” As soon as they had walked out the door, Damien had spotted Amelia lurking at the top of the Brands’ driveway.

“Come off it, I know you saw her.” Adam waved at Amelia, who ignored him, twisting a corner of her dress in her fist. “Is Ifeelya Seymour your girlfriend?”





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“Not even,” said Damien.

“But she’s stalking you.”

“That doesn’t make her my girlfriend.”

“Yeah, but it does make her super creepy.” He shoved the stroller toward Damien. “Come over when you get rid of her.” Sauntering toward his house, Adam flipped Damien the bird behind his back.

As soon as his front door slammed shut, Amelia appeared, grasping the handle of the stroller, the knobbed knuckles of her right hand lined up beside Damien’s left. She gently turned the stroller, and Damien, around and began walking back up the hill. “Let’s get out of here,” she said.

They strolled in tandem out of the subdivision and through the neighborhood, Damien letting himself be carried along, block after block, as if by a strong current. He checked on Delilah, who was sleeping, one cheek pressed against her pacifier, her hairline damp with sweat. The sidewalks bristled with kids—kids on their bikes, kids with their backpacks, kids trooping along in clumps, kids yelling and shrieking, dragging their jackets behind them, their hair in their eyes. As the stroller approached, the kids parted, then closed ranks once the stroller had passed. The outer edge of Amelia’s right hand occasionally made contact with an amazed strip of skin just below Damien’s pinky. Amelia stared fiercely at the sky, as if she were awaiting fate-altering messages from an orbiting satellite.

They emerged on Highland Avenue, now striding briskly past the shops and restaurants at University, at Amsterdam, at Virginia, at St. Charles, now crossing Ponce de Leon and heading away from familiar territory, without stopping, without speaking. Damien’s feet began to ache. Amelia’s cheeks were flushed; the pink of her mouth glistened in the twilight. They stopped at Buddy’s, where Amelia disappeared inside the store and Damien sat on the curb next to the stroller and watched a panhandler approaching people as they filled up their cars, asking them for money and getting turned away, again and again. Damien’s parents gave a dollar to anyone in need because, they said, they had plenty and felt obliged to share. When Delilah began to cry, Damien lifted her from the stroller, settled her in his lap, and inserted her pacifier. He felt sorry for her, this wriggling innocent who probably was already seeing her parents through a mist,





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sheer and pale as glass, though she didn't know it, didn't know that over time it would thicken into fog.

After a few minutes, Amelia appeared, a bottle of Orange Crush in each hand. She sat down beside Damien, handing him a bottle, and made silly faces and noises at the baby through her bangs.

"Look, she smiled at me." Amelia ran a hand over Delilah's fuzzy, dark curls.

A horn blared; several others answered. Then shrieking brakes, tires squealing over the pavement, the dull crush of metal on metal. A smell of scorched rubber wafted over them. The panhandler ambled over, holding his hands in front of his chest in an attitude of preemptory surrender. He was neatly dressed in khakis and a button-down shirt, threadbare at the collar, and black penny loafers, pennies inserted into both slots.

"My car broke down," he said, motioning vaguely toward the street, "and I'm stranded. Can you spare some change?"

Damien started to reach for his pocket, but he had left home without money.

"I don't see any car," said Amelia.

The panhandler looked around, openmouthed. "Oh, right, my car's not here. It broke down a couple hours ago. I've been walking a really long way."

"So have we." Amelia set her bottle on the ground, opened her hands. "See? No change."

"Well, how about a sip of that Crush, cutie pie?"

She appraised him with her half frown. "Get lost, or I'll start yelling *pedophile*."

"We need all our money," Damien said, his voice cracking, "for the baby."

"Ha-ha," said the panhandler.

"I'm serious." Damien lifted the baby, turning her right and left. Heat throbbed just behind his eyes. "She's cute, isn't she? Looks just like her mother."

"No way. That's y'all's baby?"

Damien nodded with his eyes closed, the way his father did when he was considering grave matters. "Our parents kicked us out, so we have to raise her all by ourselves."

"Damn, tough break."

"Tell me about it. We haven't even finished high school."





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Damien kissed Delilah gently on the forehead, adjusted her pacifier. “Maybe you could spare *us* some change.”

Amelia, peering at Damien through her bangs, reached for him but stopped, her hand suspended just above his knee.

“And really, you should apologize to my girlfriend.”

“Sorry, no offense meant.” The panhandler fished a crumpled dollar bill out of his pocket, handed it to Damien, and headed back toward the pumps, offering Amelia a final affecting wave.

Damien and Amelia sat in silence, the baby asleep again, slumped against Damien’s chest, Amelia’s hand slowly floating down to Damien’s knee, where it alighted with a frenzied hesitancy, like a frightened bird. She picked up her Crush with the other hand, blew across the mouth of the bottle a few times, making a sound like a distant ship.

“Way to get rid of him,” she finally said. “But can you imagine, us raising a baby?”

The sun had plunged below the horizon, the streetlight on the corner a pale glimmer. As the patch of curb where they were sitting fell into shadow, Damien could barely see Amelia’s hand on his knee, but its damp heaviness seemed to grow, minute by minute, until it sheathed his entire leg and he could no longer distinguish the touch of her body from his own.

“She’d be better off,” Damien whispered into the fog.

Study your family tonight as they go about their nighttime routine. How do they spend the hours after dark? Do you do your homework, watch TV, read, surf the Internet? What time is bedtime? Who enforces the rules?

Tonight after dinner I have to clean the garage for a couple of hours because Mom found Dad’s pen in my lunch box, not to mention that I stayed out past dark with Deli yesterday without leaving a note. They say they don’t understand me all of a sudden, why did I put the pen in the lunch box when I knew Mom would find it, instead of giving it back, but I don’t say anything because what’s there to say? I spend the rest of the night in my room, instead of in the living room like usual, mostly because Dad gets out the video camera and starts filming Deli and Mom and I’m just not in the mood. I do my other homework





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and write this and look out the window for the bird but she's probably sleeping. Bedtime is at 9, but I'm going to call Amelia at 10, we have a plan, and I'm going to talk to her as long as I want, maybe until midnight. Who enforces the rules? My parents, who else, but how will they ever know? Once they're in their room and the door's closed they can't hear anything.

Underneath his desk, Damien clasped his fieldnotes, which, out of habit, he had topped with a cover sheet and encased in transparent plastic. It was Friday afternoon. Birds chattered in the treetops and a squirrel scurried beneath the hedge outside the classroom window and the sun gleamed invitingly in a seamless blue sky. Amelia glanced back at Damien from the front row, where Mrs. Knight had ordered her to sit for the remainder of the year, and Damien's stomach clenched and unclenched.

"Well, my darlings, it's that time again." Mrs. Knight sat on the edge of her desk, rubbing her hands together. "If you have more than one page to hand in, please make sure your notes are clipped together. Adam, will you do the honors?"

Adam unfolded himself from his desk with a languorous yawn and made his way around the room, thanking each student in turn as he grabbed the proffered fieldnotes. When he reached Damien's desk, he held out a hand. "Cough 'em up, pretty boy."

Damien shook his head. Raising an eyebrow, Adam continued on to the next desk.

"Mr. Furnish-Moore, is there a problem?"

"No problem, Mrs. Knight. I just can't turn in the assignment."

"Why not? Do you need an extension?"

"No, I don't think I do."

Mrs. Knight cleared her throat. "I'd like to speak to you after class, Damien."

"No, thank you, I have other plans."⁸ He met her gaze calmly, though his heart crackled in his chest. "Maybe another time."

⁸ He, Adam, and the Brands had agreed to meet after school for a game of high-stakes Texas Hold 'em, after which he intended to walk to Amelia's house and try to kiss her, both activities violating the agreement with his parents that for the next month he would devote himself solely to academic and/or civic pursuits.





Watel

Mrs. Knight blinked once, twice, hand fluttering to her mouth. “Please report to Mr. Cargyle’s office,” she said in a tight voice, gesturing toward the door.

Damien stood, still clutching his fieldnotes. Mr. Cargyle would send a note home; his parents would express their disappointment in patient tones while grounding him for an indefinite period, perhaps well into adulthood. He could hand in the assignment now if he wanted to, even now, apologize for everything and redeem himself, score the A, keep his record spotless. As he walked out of class, the entire room watched. At the end of the hallway hung the sign-up sheet he had made advertising the Future Ethnographers Society, with its photograph of Costa Rican villagers and its single signature. The bell rang; doors flapped open one by one, the hallway filling with the shouts and laughter and rocketing bodies of so many partial strangers. Damien rolled his fieldnotes into a thin tube, lifting it to his eye, and gazed through it as if sighting a faraway foreign shore.

