

T.J.

*by George Ding*

Will never told me that his father died. I found out just like everyone else. One day he was fucking around in history class, making paper airplanes out of his textbook and throwing them when Mrs. Lawrence wasn't looking, and the next day he was gone. Mrs. Lawrence, who was a piss-poor orator, stood in front of the room, twisting a piece of chalk nervously between her fingers, and muttered something about a heart attack and our prayers.

The next day Will was back in class, laughing and throwing shit as if nothing had ever happened. But at lunch he handed each of us—Sean, John and myself—a plain white envelope sealed with a plain white sticker. He never mentioned his father and none of us were willing to bring it up.

Will's father was a former CIA operative who served in Eastern Europe during the end of the Cold War. He took a desk job in D.C. when Will was born and retired a few years later. When I met Will in Ms. McAllister's third grade English class, his father was just another stay-home parent who took us out for ice cream on the weekends. Using the fake passports his father had collected, Will and I would play "Spies," assuming the identity of his father's alter egos. I was a former Russian intelligence officer named Victor Ivanovich and Will was the famed East German physicist Dr. Heinrich Stein.

For a while it was just me and Will. But the two of us met Sean and John in middle school. Sean had the biggest TV I had ever seen. Both of his parents were doctors so he always had the newest toys and the best games. John was a quiet kid but had a hell of a work ethic. You could always count on him to do the work, so if you were up late procrastinating, ten minutes with John before class and you'd be set. I remember joking with Will that the four of us formed the perfect gang: if Will was the muscle and I was the reason, then Sean was the money and John the brains behind it all.

The four of us went to a high school called T.J.; its full name is long and unimportant. It's a magnet school in Northern Virginia and rated one of the best high schools in the nation. The average SAT score of T.J.'s graduating class hovers around 1450, a full 400 points higher than the national average. It's a school that emphasizes performance and success above all else. The year Will's father died, we were seniors. We had taken all our tests and sent in all our essays and were just waiting to hear back. The feeling that your life was distilled down to a bunch of numbers and bubbled-in letters overwhelmed us. When I heard that Will's father had passed away, I remember thinking that maybe life was truly meaningless after all.

When I got to Will's house, most of the guests had left already. Will and Sean were on the front porch smoking a joint.

"You're late," Will said. He handed me the joint and I took a long drag.

"Sorry, dinner went a little long."

Just then, John's car pulled up in the driveway. John stepped out, wearing his Blockbuster polo and nametag. He fumbled with the nametag as he walked up to us. Will glanced at him.

"You missed the hors d'oeuvres, but there's still some scotch left."

John shook his head. "I didn't come for that. I wanted to see your mom." He made for the door but Will blocked his way.

"You don't want to see her."

"It's not about what I want. I came to offer my condolences."

"I'll take your condolences."

"Will, come on," John said, pleading.

Will stared at him for a second, then moved out of the way.

"Suit yourself."

We found Will's mother slouched in the recliner, the same puffy chair Will's father claimed whenever we came to watch movies. But now there was only this thin, wiry woman, her gray hair strung back into a tight bun, eyes darting this way and that but never settling. John sat down across from her and her eyes shifted toward him.

“Ms. Avery,” John said, and her eyes moved again. She squinted, frowned.

“Who is it?” she said, raising her arms in front of her but grasping only air.

“It’s me, John.”

“John?” She said it as if she had never heard the word before.

“Will’s friend.”

Her posture relaxed. “Oh yes. Will. He should be back any minute now.”

Will had already come in and stood on the other side of the room shaking his head.

“Told you,” he said, and motioned for us to go.

John looked deep into Will’s mother’s eyes, searching for any part of her that he still recognized. “Ms. Avery, I’m so sorry,” he said, but she did not seem to hear.

Outside, Sean was on the phone. I could tell he was talking to his girlfriend Julie. There was a certain ingratiating tone his voice took on only when he talked to her, like he was constantly trying to smooth things over.

“What do you want from me Jules? It’s a wake for Christ’s sake. I can’t exactly get up and leave.” He saw us coming out and ended the conversation. “Look, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you later. Love you.”

As we came down the steps to the driveway, John said to Will, “Are you sure your mom is going to be all right? Maybe you should take her to see someone.”

A dog barked in the neighbor’s yard. It was Marci, Mrs. Henderson’s old grey terrier. Both the dog and its owner had seen better days. When Will and I were spies, we used to pretend that Marci was a guard dog and run like hell whenever she chased us.

Presently, Will told Marci to shut up.

“Will, I’m serious,” John said. “I think your mom needs help.”

Marci kept on barking. Will stared at John and looked like he was about to say something, but instead he grabbed a few rocks from the gravel driveway and threw them at Mrs. Henderson’s house.

“Shut up you fucking mutt,” he screamed.

A window on the second floor flew open and Mrs. Henderson yelled from it: “William Francis Avery, what in God’s name do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m sorry Mrs. Henderson,” Will called, making his voice sound as apologetic as possible. Will turned to the rest of us and muttered something under his breath. We all stared at him, unsure of what to do. Will unlocked the door to his father’s car.

“Get in,” he said.

We drove to the strip mall parking lot that was our old haunt. It was the place we spent restless nights, doing anything but homework, although John would secretly bring his and do it when we weren’t looking. It was there that we lit up the night before the SATs and it was there that we set ground rules for racing through standardized tests. Will’s best time was eight minutes on a sixty question exam where he bubbled in all C’s. But because he did so well on the other sections, he still ended up in the ninetieth percentile.

Will took out a case of beer from his trunk and I rolled up another joint. We sat there talking about college, of all things, and what our greatest memories of high school were. It was scary to think that soon it would all be over. Four years of our life became three or five or ten envelopes that we sent out to California, Georgia, Texas.

Will wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father and planned to join the Army, then work his way over to Intelligence. Though his grades weren’t amazing, Sean’s father had graduated from Harvard and his mother from Johns Hopkins, so he was gunning for those two. John’s family wasn’t exactly wealthy so he tried for any school that would offer him a scholarship. And me? I was more or less in the same boat as John.

While we were talking, a cute brunette walked past us, and our conversation dropped off. That’s what we were like back then. Will seemed to know her though, and called out: “Stephanie?”

The girl stopped and turned around.

“Will? How are you?” She walked over to us and gave Will a quick hug.

I recognized her now. Stephanie Richards, member of the dance team and vice-president of the homecoming committee. Someone you’d see in a lot of yearbook photos.

“Want a drink? A smoke?” Will said, holding out a beer.

Stephanie looked back at her car, hesitating.

“Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

“I live all the way in Falls Church,” she groaned.

“That’s right near me,” Will said. “It’s no problem at all.”

And maybe it was the alcohol or maybe it was his nonchalant attitude, but Will convinced Stephanie to come along. A smile spread across her face like she knew she’d regret coming with us, but wanted to anyway. The five of us drank and talked for a while, then got in the car. Stephanie sat in the back, scrunched between John and me. Her skirt kept riding up as she squirmed back and forth, revealing a patch of smooth skin. Will handed her a joint.

“So what do you want to be when you grow up Stephanie?” Will asked. “A doctor? A lawyer?”

She finished a sip of beer and said, “Nope. A biologist.”

“Isn’t that a coincidence? That’s what John here wants to be too.”

Stephanie glanced at John, who gave her a timid look.

“I think I remember you from AP Chem,” she said.

John shrugged and Stephanie leaned forward, craning her neck to the driver’s seat. “What do *you* want to be when you grow up Will?”

We all thought we knew what Will was going to say: *A spy, a soldier, a man like my father.* But he just licked his lips and said, “I don’t know. Rich, I guess.”

Once we were back in his neighborhood, Will slowed down and parked the car by the side of the road. The wheels slid off the asphalt and onto the mud. Night had fallen and a chill came over us. Stephanie was pretty wasted. She giggled at nothing in particular and kept leaning against me and John for support. So when Will said, “Will you gentlemen please excuse me and Stephanie for a moment?” we all knew what was going on.

Sean, John, and I got out and closed the doors as Will climbed into the backseat. We walked down the dirt shoulder, away from the car, which began to shake. There was something so wrong about the situation. We had done some crazy shit before, stolen

donuts from a dumpster, hurled eggs at houses, lit a bunch of fireworks on the lawn of a Korean girl we hated, but nothing like this.

We waited on the shoulder for a good five minutes. Above the gusts of wind, a faint moaning could be heard. John was the first to speak.

“What’s wrong with Will?”

“Nothing,” Sean said. “The guy’s in mourning.”

“I’ve never seen anyone mourn like that,” I said.

“And what would *you* know about it? The guy’s pissed. And I would be too if my friends blew off my father’s wake.”

“I was at work,” John was quick to point out.

Sean turned to me. “And what’s *your* excuse?”

“I was studying,” I said.

“You’re fucking with me right? You were studying?”

His eyes were judging me. I knew that I could never take it back, but I said it anyway.

“Not everyone’s father can buy their son into college.”

John was stunned. Instead of responding, Sean got up and walked back to the car where Will emerged from the backseat, shirt unbuttoned, smoking a cigarette. Will gave Sean a high-five and Sean climbed into the car, closing the door behind him. Will walked over to us as the car began to shake again.

“How was it?” I said, barely able to keep the venom from my voice.

Will shrugged and puffed on his cigarette. He looked at the trees around us, stripped of their leaves and left bare.

“Will, what the fuck are you doing?”

Will turned toward me, his manner completely relaxed.

“I know you weren’t late because dinner ran long.”

He looked into my eyes to see if he was right and there was nothing I could do to hide it.

“It was my father’s wake.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Will took a drag on his cigarette. “You remember that summer when he took us all camping? It must have been eighth grade.”

“I remember, Will,” I said. “We went up to Appalachia with nothing but a tent and he taught us how to survive.”

“He wouldn’t even let us use matches,” Will chuckled to himself. “I rubbed my hands raw trying to light that grass.” He turned his palms up and looked as if he could see those scars. And I remembered the wild berries we picked, the shallow brook that was our drinking water, and the tales Will’s father told us over the warm, smoldering campfire. At long last, Will said, “I wish we could go camping again.”

John looked like he wanted to say something but Sean called from the car. Will tossed his cigarette aside and started back. John and I followed him. John looked like he was about to lose it.

“I don’t know what’s happening,” he said.

I sighed and said, “I don’t either.”

Back at the car Sean and Will lit up another smoke. I stuck my head through the open door. Stephanie was slipping her panties on. When she saw me she covered her breasts and shouted for me to close the door.

“Get rid of her,” Will said, motioning with a flick of his head to Stephanie, who was clambering out of the car on the other side. She had trouble standing and almost fell over. I rushed over to help but she frowned and pushed me away.

“I’ll walk home,” she said, and stumbled toward the road, jacket dangling around her shoulder.

“Bye,” Will said. “I had a great time.” She flicked him off.

The four of us got back into the car, John and I in the backseat. It smelled of sex so we kept the windows open.

For a long while no one said anything. Sean took out his phone out and started texting. Will kept taking swigs out of an unfinished beer can. *It’s almost over*, I told myself.

After ten minutes I started to get worried. We should have been home by then and Will’s driving was taking us on and off the road.

“Let me drive,” I said.

“Fuck off, I’m fine.”

“Do even you know where you’re going?” John whined.

“Yeah, it’s a left up here right?”

Will turned the car so sharply it pinned Sean and John against the doors. Sean looked at Will with concern for the first time.

“Are you fucking crazy?” John said. “One of these days you’re gonna—“

All we heard was a thump, then the car jumped, and the four of us were thrown forward by the force of the brakes. I slammed into the driver’s seat and Will hit the horn, sending out a loud shriek that pierced the night. Sean was the first one out.

The front of Will’s car was red. The blood gleaming of the chrome finish looked unreal, like acrylic paint used in a movie. There were bits of fur and flesh caught in the jagged parts of the grille, and on the pavement about a foot away was Marci’s prostrate body.

“Holy fuck,” Sean said.

That was about all you could say. Will walked around and surveyed his car.

“There’s shit all over my bumper.”

Marci whimpered. She tried to move between spasms, her front paw clawing at nothing.

“What are we going to do?” John said, gripping his hair.

Sean didn’t say a thing. I kneeled to see if Marci was okay. She was bleeding from the back of her head onto the pavement. The blood drained through the tiny crevasses and stained the edge of my shoes.

Will went back to the car and returned with a gun. I recognized the revolver from our spy adventures, which inevitably led us to his father’s study, where the guns he had used hung high above his bookshelf, polished and behind glass. The bullets he kept in a separate drawer, the key to which remained on his person. Now all those things belonged to Will, and as he stood there with the gun in his hand, loading a single bullet into the swing out cylinder, I knew Will had seen his father do the exact same thing.

“What the fuck are we going to do about this dog?” John screamed, on the brink of tears.

“Fuck her,” Will said. “She’s Mrs. Henderson’s mutt.”

John dropped to his knees and buried his face in his hands. He was hysterical and I was afraid he'd throw up. Sean paced around, hands locked behind his head. His figure crossed the headlights and cast long shadows on the dark road.

Will walked over to Marci and started to drag her by her hind legs. There was a stifled cry and a dry, scraping sound.

"For Christ's sake, Will. Pick her up," I said, but he didn't listen. I pushed him aside and took Marci into my arms. She twisted and I felt the warm wetness of her seep into my sleeves and turn cold. Will and I walked twenty paces into the woods and I laid Marci down in a ditch filled with fallen leaves.

John got up and started yelling, the tears choking his voice, "You can't do this. We have to call the police," but Sean stopped him, saying simply, "We'd be in a hell of a lot more trouble that way. A dog isn't worth it."

And as soon as he said this other dogs in the neighborhood began to bark.

"Do it now," I said. "Before somebody comes." I was surprised at the coldness of my words.

John cried against the side of the car. Sean looked on from afar. And Will, as calm as I had ever seen him, raised his arm and took aim.

"Goodbye," he said, and pulled the trigger.

There wasn't much blood. Marci's body jumped as if jolted by an electric shock. Smoke rose from the hole in her head as a steady stream of blood issued forth, staining the leaves underneath before sinking into the ground. Will emptied the chamber, dumped the used casing onto his hand and stuck the gun into the seat of his pants. John was still convulsing but there were no more tears. He stood up, took off his own jacket, and placed it over Marci. He took some dirt and spread it across her body. We all watched him do this, and then we followed Will back to his car.

That was the last night we all spent together.

A few weeks later our acceptance letters came. Will got into West Point, just like he'd always wanted. Sean made it into Harvard, though Julie wasn't as lucky. Last I heard John went to some private school in New England. One day, I got a letter from him asking if I ever thought about that night. I never wrote him back.