

“The only polemic more fruitless than semantics is American politics.” –Unknown

Derek Butler hated everyone. In his warm leather chair with pronounced indentions, he stared out the back corner window, facing the raised horizon populated by ponderosa pines and Lombardy poplars and blue spruces, and pulled his blanket, a red and green afghan that’s stitching had unwound in several places, higher on his chest, although, once he let go, it quickly slid below his waist. It was a freakishly beautiful day outside in Strawberry, Arizona, where the temperature, slightly high for an early May day, implored persons to be outside, galvanizing and fraternizing, politely questioning and anxiously laughing. Derek Butler had once said, and I quote, Strawberry “is a stupid, stupid name” (Butler 3/23/14). From the unshaded window, whose tan cloth blinds were pulled back on each side, a block of sunlight dropped upon Derek, creating a square of light on the floor around him, inside the larger rectangle of shadow on the

carpet. Before the concrete row of vegetation outside the window, the deserted two lane street had a single rusted dumpster, evidently from the unmarked parking lot attached to the building, fixed horizontally across the street, blocking both lanes. Derek Butler was eighty seven years old and planned to die thirteen days ago.

The room was dim and congested, heated from many active bodies meandering about. There were shouts and cries, pleas and knees. I distinctly smelt shellfish, but that could have been from when I snuck through the kitchen at a nearby Red lobster earlier in the day, so I don't know. Derek's shadow, a compressed figure shaped like an unwound Rubik's cube, laid to his left on the floor. He rubbed his palm across the side of his liver spotted head, pulling his loose skin taut, and then exhaled from his nose and mouth, shaking his head in general disappointment. Derek was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but after his father decided to quit his job at the toll booth and open a seaside Asian-Mexican fusion restaurant, he moved to Honolulu Hawaii, a place desperate for Asian-Mexican fusion restaurants, with his family when he was eight, and soon took up surfing, where he quickly became a Star, winning multiple regional and national competitions, until he turned thirteen, and had his heel stung by an electric eel, an injury that left him with a permanent limp. Derek liked Pepsi better than Coca Cola and, before he fell asleep at night, counted backwards from twenty seven, his favorite number. A red Lego piece struck him on the left cheek, but, like usual, he pretended not to notice. Because it was Candy Cane's quotidian thirty minute period of funtime playtime, all thirty eight children, twelve boys and twenty six girls, ran about the dusty carpet. Someone was banging a wooden spoon against a steel pot. Despite the noise, if one listened closely, which I totally was, you could hear the a/c, a brand new system fixed on the plaster ceiling above the window, softly purring. Another Lego

piece hit his cheek, rolled down his oatmeal stained brown bowling shirt, and landed in the center of his afghan. Weathered wooden telephone poles formed a line in front of the trees.

Thus far, for the past two months, Derek hated his stay at Candy Cane daycare, a daycare run by his former daughter-in-law in the aforementioned town of Strawberry, which was two hours north of Phoenix. When he was firmly asked to leave Sunny Days Dementia Care, after he was caught tampering with a urine sample to cover up that he was the propagator of Chlamydia in the west ward, the nurses, both male and female, wheeled him outside, where his former-daughter-in-law helped him into her old Volkswagen van and drove him to Strawberry, a place he hadn't visited since he buried his son fifteen years ago. His former daughter-in-law decided he would spend his last hours around the precocious youth in Northern Arizona, at the progressive daycare center she had started with his son, drowning him in the refreshing salty water of childhood, which she believed would rejuvenate a sense of life and understanding in her former father-in-law.

When the third Lego piece hit him, he stopped counting the horse flies circling the distant dumpster, turned his head left, and stared at the expected culprit, one Ben Bentini, a five year old boy who insisted on making farting noises into his inner elbow whenever an adult said hello and who claimed to prefer hot wheels to real cars because hot wheels have better interiors. Ben Bentini would go on to conduct tours for Korean speakers through the Guggenheim museum in New York City. Derek smelt of Gold Baum and warm plastic. Because of his low ranking in the bullying social hierarchy at Candy Cane Daycare, a place not immune from such social constructs despite its progressive curriculum, Ben Bentini, although much larger than other students, was terrified of his classmates, and thus, for some reason I'm unsure of, arbitrarily decided Derek Butler was lower than him on the prolix social hierarchy. My point is that Ben

Bentini laughed at and harassed and said I'm not touching you when very close to touching Derek Butler because he had no one else to do such things to and knew they had to be done. Derek Butler, grunting, threw the most recent Lego piece, a green L shape with chocolate residue, at Ben Bentini, hitting him square on the nose. In front of Derek, on the concrete windowsill, a red ant scurried back and forth. The room, as a whole, smelt of sweaty feet and L'Oreal tear-free shampoo, excluding the shell-fish, which I really don't think anyone else smelt.

After being struck by the Lego piece, Ben followed his usual routine, covering his mouth and crying, even though he didn't think it hurt very bad. Derek, however, didn't wait for the reaction, but turned back to the window, pulled up his blanket, and watched the lint flakes flutter like frozen sparks in the apricot afternoonlight. Derek had the habit of moving his mouth in a mumbling motion but not intending to say anything, which he now did. Surprisingly, after the throw, his shoulder felt better than before, but his worn rotten teeth, grinding atop each other, hurt. The daycare, which was a converted old pharmacy that Derek and his former-daughter-in-law, Tina, who had a bachelor's degree in hotel management and had never eaten a peach, lived in, had shadowed blue wall paper of airplanes and spaceshuttles with sundry Crayola crayon marks from four feet and below.

The children continued to laugh and play, pushing and shoving, building and deconstructing. Derek watched a dusty shard of a ripped garbage bag slide across the daycare's empty dirt parking lot, pulled by a weak wind. Across the street, the immense vegetation, the blank blue sky's façade, quivered. Derek hated Ben Bentini. He hated his curly blonde hair, like he had once had, and his white unwrinkled skin, and his giant brown eyes, which, unlike Derek's, always seemed close to falling out of his face, coruscating light off their irises. Derek's eyes were pressed deep inside his face like a demented gingerbread man. He hated that the

dumpster's lid across the street was open. He hated that all these kids, the ones jumping and laughing and clapping, were at daycare, instead of bettering society by working in a steel mill somewhere. He blamed their parents, who he had never met, and decided he hated them too. Derek had so much hate, a back-bending amount, that he squinted tight enough to hurt his face.

Sinking his long purple fingernails into his sticky palms, Derek started to gently shake, hating his stupid wheel chair and the stupid stupid sound the a/c made. He hated the timorous leaves across the street, seeming to wave at him, and yet they didn't even know a god damn thing about him. Although Derek wouldn't tell you this, I'm sure that, beyond hating tangible objects, an abstract hate for hate itself was present. Still, though, since Derek hated questions more than anything else, I'm not able to say what spawned such hate. Derek didn't envy Ben Bentini's crooked right incisor, which crossed over his front teeth and often had a red stain on it. When Derek grew tired, he pulled threads from his afghan, but, from where I was standing, I couldn't tell if he was pulling the strings, or trying to adjust the blanket. To the left of the window, the only window in the daycare's right room, a framed worn picture of *The Cat in The Hat* hung from the wall, with its bottom left corner torn off. The room had fluorescent lights, currently off, with trails of dead insects inside the grungy panels.

Derek didn't have dementia.

He was sure of it, and I was too. The dementia accusations started some eight years ago, when his former daughter-in-law, visiting at his golf course condo in Scottsdale, found him unwilling to speak. Because Derek had taken a vow of silence, he couldn't explain why he wouldn't respond to her questions regarding the date, which he knew was October 14th 2003, or his middle name, which he knew was Grant, and since he considered writing a violation of his vow, he couldn't relate this via letter or sms or email, so he simply sat and listened. Derek had

never golfed. What? Why did he take a vow of silence, you ask? I'm not sure there was one specific event. But if I had to speculate, which I probably shouldn't, but I will anyways, I think it came from his highly researched theory that everyone was too stupid and self absorbed to communicate, as in, he felt that after he turned sixty, no one ever listened to him, but just smiled and nodded, so he decided not to speak, to not engage in such pointless inactivity, and save his energy for better things, like thinking about his funeral. As of now, he didn't want to have one, but if he did, he decided James Brown should be played at the ceremony. The funeral's only rule, or two, made lucid through bolded signs and knights of Columbus warnings, was no dancing or laughing/smiling. The guests could only sit and stare at his disfigured face, remembering that they should have listened to him when they had the chance. Derek tried to clear his throat, but his mouth was too dry. A child screamed. Someone said, "Shhhh."

A wet paper glob struck his cheek. Derek pursed his lips and shook his head. The top of his scalp, where a single frail hair wavered, had a steep fold of loose white skin. Derek weighed one hundred and fifteen pounds. Lately, Derek had taken to reliving every sexual experience he had ever had. Most of these, at least the last twenty, had all occurred during his stay at Sunny Days Dementia Care, where being the strong and silent type had truly proved beneficial. As he looked out the window, he remembered when he fucked Cynthia, a seventy three year old widow with dementia who loved the smell of toothpaste and had published a book on renaissance architecture in French. He recounted their weekly Sunday trip to Eloy, a small town two hours south of Phoenix, where they went to Skydive Arizona and had picnics of cold cuts and egg salad, watching the skydivers who successfully landed. After he had eaten his second egg salad sandwich, he wheeled over to Cynthia, who sat on a sunbleached picnic table. They stared at each other for two minutes in silence while, behind them, parachuters landed in the large

buffalograss plain. She stood up, walked behind him, and pushed his wheelchair into the parking lot, behind the van, and gave him a blow job. Another glob of paper hit Derek in his acute nose covered in blackheads.

He closed his eyes, remembering when she removed her front teeth, which she had knocked out four years earlier in a motocross accident, and repeatedly slid the tip of his pasty penis into her mouth's small gap while he rubbed her thin white hair. Although it was July, Cynthia had been wearing a loose green sweater with sparkly snowmen on the front. After the blowjob, Cynthia had hoisted up her long denim skirt, climbed atop him, and vigorously rode him beneath the omniscient sun, causing the wheel chair to shake and creak in the gravel parking lot. Outside the window, Derek watched a cardinal land atop the dumpster, turn its head, and then fly into the foliage. Derek twisted his face, remembering how hurt he was that Cynthia had refused to look at him during copulation, as her loose vascular buttocks smacked against his decrepit hairless thighs, and how she left, without saying anything, after ten minutes. He decided that he hated Cynthia too. When the third spitball hit Derek on the neck, he lost his shit. In Bombay India, one Biraj Singh, a thirty two year old woman who only ate the red Starburst and claimed Facebook was for superficial relationships, sat at her cluttered desk squished with other cluttered desks, where she answered outsourced phone calls for Microsoft regarding customer complaints while looking at her wallet sized photo of her daughter, Nilaya Singh, who refused to wash her hair more than once every other week and had braces. Breathing from his mouth, he ripped the blanket off his lap, grabbed the small wrench he had taken from Tina's garage yesterday, and threw it at Ben Bentini.

The daycare was two-thousand and two hundred square feet, made of weathered hickory wood panels, and had cracked slate roof tiles. The chimney was made of antebellum brick. To

the left of the daycare, about ten minutes up the road, depending on how fast you drove, was a truck stop, and several minutes past that, again, varying with driving speed, were diffuse houses and trailers where the family's of Candy Cane's students resided. There were jagged purple mountains.

The wrench struck Ben Bentini in his stomach, where he had a chocolate milk stain. That wasn't the problem. The problem, rather, occurred when Ben Bentini, who had already loaded another spit ball and had the straw to his mouth, fearing the wrench spinning end over end towards him, inhaled, and thus began choking on the spitball, and while the wrench hitting him certainly didn't help, sending him toppling onto a three foot high Lego construction of the Pantheon, the real damage had already been done. To worsen circumstances, the eagle clock, an antique cookoo clock Tina had restored, sang the United States' national anthem over the surfeit of not-uhs and bouncing balls and sneezes, which meant it was one p.m., which meant it was time for their quotidian Socratic lesson, where Tina opened the class to internal debates, usually centering on iPhones v. Androids. The eagle clock was in the left room, above the maplewood table with tiny plastic stools around it, on the opposite side of the front green door where Derek sat. Derek, cautiously turning back towards the window, saw the children, some with pig tails and one with a mohawk, almost all with white skin but one with dark, jovially exit the room, skipping and clapping, and turning the corner on their left. Derek stared out the window, biting his chapped bottom lip. A crocodile shaped cloud tumbled past the sun, dimming the room. He could hear Ben's gasps over the pitter patter of tiny shoeless feet walking across the beige linoleum floor. Although the floor hadn't been mopped recently, the linoleum's wax scent was pervasive. Ben Bentini, whose pupils had widened, rolled on the carpet, squishing and kicking various Lego pieces. He could be faking it, Derek thought. And, besides, what was he supposed

to do? He couldn't speak and he was in a wheelchair, he said to himself, pulling at the threads of his afghan. A bumblebee slammed into the window in front of Derek, landing on its back on the windowsill.

The day care's occupant's exodus quieted, as the door to the back room closed, and Ben Bentini, who had recently stopped rolling, gasped louder, placing both hands on the front of his neck. Derek looked at Ben, and then out the window, where a lone bicycle tire rolled through the dumpster's immense eastward shadow, and then back to Ben. A door opened, and he heard a woman, sucking her gums, say "...but then I sold everything I owned and..." before another door slammed shut. Derek, huffing and puffing, weakly wheeled to the dim patch of carpet where Ben lay. As he left the island of sunlight, his chained shadow vanished, never to be found, by me at least, again.

With his greasy hair resting on diffuse Lego pieces, Ben Bentini tapped his heels on the ground causing his Power Ranger sneakers to alternate between blue and green and red and his mouth, now ajar, had faint gurgling noises extending from it like gu gugu arguu and over and over and his feet started to click faster so his shoes kept changing colors, but his hands, no longer searching the vast carpet at his sides for help, pulled on his white Arizona Cardinals t-shirt that was two sizes too big, pulling it down and down, as if that would somehow help and still making the gu gugu argu sound while staring at the ceiling but now his eyes which before were flick flick flickering had turned white and rolled back in his head but the room's dimness hid these minute details, even the little bit of spittle collecting at the right corner of his mouth dripping down his chin to his neck.

Derek, scratching his chin, looked across the room, at the large windows covered by yellow vinyl blinds, where a large shadow of a bowling pin shaped person stood on the other

side, and then reached down from his wheelchair, grabbed Ben's right foot, and shook it.

Nothing.

And Ben's head shook from side to side and his chest heaved up and his back arched and he repeated the motion three times and then he tried to roll to his right, to try and get up and ask Tina for help but he couldn't because, from his overturned eyes, the room's walls jumped up and down like motorized slinkies while the ceiling indented and lowered to a single point inches away from his face and the floor became a trampoline sinking down and things were turning dark like like darker than dark, and the small piece of paper lodged in his throat began to feel like a seed growing at a rapid pace where its roots reached through his throat and into his stomach and pulled at his heart whipping his lungs and then wiggled through his nose and springboarded off his brain while push push pushing the back of his eyeballs and so then he remembered the time his mom had told him with her microphone held to her throat that if you swallowed, that if you swallowed water melon seeds a tree would grow in your stomach and he wondered who put the seed in his paper because he just really wanted it out.

Although there wasn't any light in the room, when Derek saw Ben Bentini's face turn red, an oozing scarlet, he dove from his wheel chair, landing uncomfortably on his elbows and knees on several sharp ended Lego pieces, and tried to push on the boy's solar-plexus. Because Derek was a life guard for thirteen years after his surfing accident, he had been well trained in CPR and the Heimlich, but due to his lack of strength, and his poor positioning on the floor, his attempts to dislodge the paper by striking the child proved futile. His only option, it seemed, was to yell for help. A small stream of spit left Ben Bentini's mouth and landed on Derek's wrist. Derek became upset, frustrated, mad at Ben Bentini for taking him away from his window, where he could contemplate his hatred for the world and sexual endeavors in peace. Derek

wished someone else was him. Even if he would scream, after remaining silent for fifteen years, he doubted his voice would work.

Decades ago, when Derek Butler was a lifeguard at the Honolulu Wave Rider Resort, a strange thing happened. Like his usual shifts, Derek sat in a high weathered wood stand, allowing him to watch over the resort's large diving pool. It was early in the morning, maybe seven, and the only person at the pool, on the plastic beach chairs lining the cracked slate sides or in the water, was an old truncated man wearing a USA flag print speedo. Derek wore aviator sunglasses, a small red bathing suit, and a thin line of zinc on his nose. He lost his hair at an early age and thus wore a panama style hat on the job. He often spent his time, which he had done that day, watching the perimeter of palm trees, forming a barrier between the pool and hotel rooms, shake and whistle, and guess when their shadows, stretching across the pool area like crooked bridges, would flip directions. It was a winter month, but if you weren't from Honolulu, you wouldn't have known it. While Derek stared at the palm trees, leaning back in his splintery seat, he always wrapped the string attached to his whistle around his finger, and then let it quickly unravel, repeating. It wasn't windy, but the pool's transparent blue water, reflecting the sunlight in white patches, bubbled and ebbed against the pool's side tiles. Every few minutes, the pool's filter, overflowing with water, made a burping sound, as its top lifted up. For some reason, one he doesn't remember, he hadn't thought anything of the man's dead man float, but after several minutes, when Derek dragged his eyes across the water to see the opposite side's palm trees, he blew his whistle to remind the man of the firm no dead man floats rule. Derek smelt like tanning oil and his sunglasses reflected everything he saw. Wedgies were a problem. Because it was early, none of the surrounding pool chairs had their blue cushions, but a neatly folded red towel with seashell print lay on the first chair on the left. The man kept floating. He blew his whistle

again. When the man didn't respond, Derek hopped down from the life guard stand, limped over to the right edge, where the man was closest to, and blew the whistle louder and louder, occasionally shouting that dead man floats were strictly forbidden because of the confusion they caused, making it difficult to know whether someone was drowning, or simply pretending to drown. A series of bubbles popped at the pool's surface. He jumped into the water, swam underneath the man, and lifted him out of the pool, laying him across the ground. Despite being fully capable of performing the necessary procedures, Derek had started hitting the man in the chest, causing him to spit up water, and yelled Help!Help! with his sunglasses on.

And now, as he lay on his back next to Ben Bentini, who kept going gaa arg gaha, he stared at the ceiling, where he thought he saw blotches of green and purple light, and yelled Help! Help! And with his throat cracking, feeling cobwebs melt away, he yelled louder, and louder, Help! Heeeellpp!