

Ethel lost it once. In the narthex of the Cathedral to Saints Peter and Paul, she bent over, releasing guttural heaves that sounded otherworldly, cries that echoed throughout the lofted space above them. That's when Jay finally translated their mistakes. "They're staring at us again, Mom. We don't fit in here." He was right. That slight head-cocking, the pursed lips, the raised eyebrows—these were not the gestures of welcome. They had been misreading the body language of discomfort.

Providence had seemed an obvious choice. Having sharpened their English skills in the years prior to their relocation, they'd felt informed—confident, even—in at least that decision. They were adaptable people—the Kennedys—but demonstrating such acumen was rarely the result of enjoyable circumstances. They'd clung instead to their deliberateness, making elaborate productions out of the few choices still left for to them to make: names, outfits, hometowns. It was America's archived dominance that first attracted their attention—its fabled ripeness of opportunities seeming perfect for their son. And the path that steered them to Rhode Island—it seemed almost divine. You can imagine their disappointment, then, when they couldn't track down God. They had counted on a certain contiguousness to His benevolence—that their proximity would assure them at least His ear if not His kind hand.

They had formulated and rehearsed an irrefutable pitch, they reckoned, highlighting their incongruous blend of meek steadfastness, but He was just impossible to find. They tried, too. They followed their newly acquired standard operating procedures for recovering lost things—flipping over couch cushions, posting flyers on street poles, offering a moderate yet attractive reward—but such efforts eventually proved their futility. Beyond learning the apparently neighborly custom of checking in on the operational status of one's refrigerator, related phone

calls did little more than introduce them to the odd collection of names that once held dominion over their recently assigned phone number.

They did follow some decent leads. They visited His innumerable houses scattered all over Providence and even the surrounding communities—Scituate, Rehoboth, Pawtucket. Some were colossally impressive (some not so much) but He was never home, a troubling detail that troubled no one but the Kennedys. Their neighbors appeared entirely at ease, amused even by his consistent absence. None of their respondents could recall a specific event, recent or otherwise, that involved actually seeing Him there. For a brief moment the Kennedy's believed He must have taken up rock climbing. People would look upward as they steadfastly suggested He was around, but they laughed off their attempts to schedule an appointment.

No one else shared their concern about God's potential abduction. Some extended research revealed a generally accepted indifference towards God's constant sneaking around. As far as they could tell, it bothered very few people that He hadn't made an appearance in a good millennium or two. That's just how he rolled. The Kennedys did feel a little foolish, however, to learn that (beyond a few accidental food-stain Jesuses and some hotly contested encounters with a certain scam-artist-turned-prophet) no record existed of God actually stepping foot in the U.S. And they had felt so certain choosing Providence.

Eventually the Kennedys had to reassess. They had tried, at first, to simply adjust their behavior to better fit these learned norms, but such new skin hung awkwardly. Besides, their search had upturned too many stones. After bemoaning their constant isolation, they suddenly felt known by everyone in Providence. They could no longer escape the awkward exchanges spurred on by rumors of their loosely dangling sanity. No matter how apathetic they acted, someone had encountered the original version of them—too zealous even for an American

audience. After some serious R and D, they opted initially to move next to Nazareth, but their visas were denied. They weren't that eager to learn another set of languages anyway, so they settled eventually on Paradise, Nevada.

It wasn't what they were expecting, Paradise, but they weren't about to make the mistake of acting on assumptions again. And there was something comforting in the noise, the lights, the proximity to the airport. It reminded them a little of home. Besides, the desert seemed like a safer choice. They rented a two-bedroom apartment above the bike shop on Swenson Street. Ted got a job there too—his knowledge of far more complex machinery making him an easy hire. Ethel vacuumed the endless carpets of Terrible's Hotel Casino—her English finally coming in handy. Jay was left home alone most afternoons, assigned the task of reconnaissance work to assure a smoother assimilation this time around.

Jay enrolled himself in a summer school of sorts, taking up membership in a makeshift middle-school gang that patrolled their block. He spent his afternoons milling around with a collection of the kids living above and behind the shops that operated on their block: Deandre from above the laudromat, Chen from the nail salon, Ricardo from behind the theatre, and Hannah. The others still harbored reservations about her membership, none too keen on the idea of a girl in their gang, but Hannah's parents owned most of the block that employed their parents and kept a roof over their heads. That, and she could get them into movies for free.

That was the summer of *Cowboys and Aliens*. The blockbuster camped out all summer in the one-screen theater that abutted the Kennedy's west wall. Jay's bed reverberated with the buzz of Dolby surround sound, amplifying the soundtrack that rocked him to sleep each night. After countless supplications, Hannah finally caved and got the five of them tickets to a matinee. Jay laughed the first time he saw it, mistaking such embellishments for comedy. The cowboys

on screen seemed excessive—their costuming, their hardened expressions, their physical prowess—all a far cry from the Americans he had encountered. And the aliens—Jay found it all a little too imaginative to take seriously.

Jay had developed a heightened awareness, at that point, of his peers' mannerisms. That they weren't similarly raucous with belly laughs made him nervous, so he toned it down, letting escape only the quickest spurts of laughter, but even these occasional and uncontrollable outbursts still earned him their derision. He left the theater with a bruise on his upper arm that aligned perfectly with Ricardo's fisted knuckles. His silence for the duration of the film was less a product of courtesy and more the result of his confusion at this miscommunication, the constant replaying of events in his mind overshadowing the story playing out on the screen beyond his eyes. His friends were obliging, taking great pride in Jay's ability to illustrate their much vaster intelligence—as if *The Sandlot* had loaned them their own Smalls for the summer. They sat him down on the stoop of the abandoned dollar store and walked him through his mistakes.

“You can't just laugh,” Chen explained. “It's disrespectful.”

“I'm sorry,” Jay started. “I didn't know I was offending anyone.” He attempted to manage the tension between his desire to earn full inclusion and this rare opportunity to seek answers outright. “But it just seemed so unrealistic.”

The others shared a look of concern. “Well, yeah...but still...”

“I don't get it. Is there a legitimate alien problem in America?”

Deandre laughed and shook his head. “Of course not, but there could be.” He was enjoying this opportunity to try on adulthood, having borrowed the posture of his own father. “And you don't want to be on the wrong side of that fight.”

The lot of them looked down in a gesture of grave foreshadowing, almost hoping for the day that they could defend their country so courageously. Hannah, recognizing a rare opportunity to assert her masculinity, chimed in. “If I could just get my hands on some laser guns, right?”

The other boys nodded, but Jay just shook his head in confusion. “Laser guns? But all you’d need is a cup of water.”

Deandre threw his arm around him. “You say the craziest shit, man.”

“Wait,” Chen’s imagination was percolating, “maybe he’s on to something.”

And he was. Jay had given them the possibility of intergalactic warfare. His incoherence turned into an epic summer of battling unsuspecting aliens. Their posse took on the demeanor of outlaw cowboys as they sauntered over to the strip, water guns at the ready. Jay was a quick study. He absorbed the distrust and disregard necessary to be a top-notch vigilante. In all truth, he was the best at pointing out the aliens. His compatriots trusted him to decipher the telltale signs—the quirks and countenances of beings working too hard to disguise their inner alien.

Certainly, he never pointed out actual aliens. Imagine the scene that would have created. Mostly he just looked for sweaty types with kind eyes—the kind of eyes that permit a certain degree of exploitation. Their victims were usually thankful for the temporary relief from the oppressive heat anyway, so they would shriek and giggle as they played out the motions of extra-terrestrial death, entertaining the local youth with an added flair of Shakespearean exaggeration. The best victims would flail and gag atop the scattered call-girl calling cards that tiled the sidewalk.

Jay knew the types to avoid too. He learned to identify men whose anger festered in the carriage of their shoulders and women whose beauty could slide off their real faces when wet.

He knew they would fight back, and peace was undeniably indispensable to maintain this summer-long war he was now orchestrating. He was successful too. That's why he was so caught off guard when he mistook a tired bachelor's caustic wit for a sense of humor.

Jay's released brigade seized upon this walking hangover, dousing him with a thoroughness that saturated the button-down shirt attempting to escape from his pants. Their target's initial reaction was clichéd—his choreography borrowed equally from both the Matrix and Spiderman trilogies—but he lacked the heart needed to die properly. His actions were tired and impatient. As if recognizing his predictability, he suddenly sagged out of character and looked up at his attackers—his eyes falling into the direct path of Jay's concentrated stare.

“Wait,” he said. His voice was firm, convincing enough that the troops lowered their weapons. He occupied John Wayne's best strut as he circled vulture-like around Jay. “Why aren't you shooting?”

“I...I'm...I do the recon.”

“Recon, huh? So you haven't been shooting at all then?”

Jay shook his head.

This stranger had found his character. He suddenly held them captive, not with weapons or physical prowess but simply with his demeanor. He finished his approach and fluidly took possession of the squirt gun dangling submissively at Jay's side. “Then why is your gun...” he pointed it directly at Hannah's forehead and pulled the trigger “...empty.”

Jay saw the plot shift in the refocused eyes of his former compatriots. Their shared visage of betrayal made him feel so alien. His protestations were futile but he continued to offer them as they seized his limbs and hoisted him for execution. They almost believed his

supplications. Jay flailed with the intensity of a method actor, as they marched towards the Excalibur fountains.

They never loved Jay more than in this moment as they carried him Cleopatra-style to his death. This gift he had given them—this best summer ever—was culminating now in that scene repeated in all their favorite films, when the hero extended the travails of his heroics in hopes of milking every ounce of glory from this apex of his life. Like sucking the richness of a chocolate milkshake through a stirring straw, they slowed their strenuous journey, marching him snake-like through the cheering and jeering lines of gamblers and revelers that shared their path. Arms aloft, they shared looks of satiated agreement; they would have to find a way to express their gratitude for Jay's flourishing theatrics. Then Chen nodded, and they tossed him in.

At first they thought Jay had landed on a spigot of some sort as the fountain immediately bubbled to life, but the sizzle and steam wafted an unidentifiable smell back upon their small crew. The water gripped Jay's flesh, holding him in a caustic back float, forcing him to stare into the eyes of his assailants. He didn't expect the fear he saw—not a fear of him, but a fear for him—an attempt to understand why he would do this to himself. Even more, though, he wasn't expecting to recognize their absolution—to see no ownership over this tragedy that hissed and seethed before them.

It was here, if anywhere, that Jay figured he would see God. Instead, he saw forgiveness—not of him, but for themselves. They didn't need God anymore. He saw regret too, but it was for some lost friend they'd never really met, their grieving for someone they didn't really know. The sudden accumulation of pain was too much for Jay, who lost his hold of the form he was trying to maintain. He released his humanity and became himself, alien in that

moment of weakness, floating exposed and foreign before he shriveled up and dissolved into the spray of the fountain.