

The United Colonies Council for the Betterment of Culture and Society

Linklater paces at the front of the classroom holding a coffee mug, eyes on us – his detainees for the afternoon. He views after-school Detention oversight as his duty. He’s told us as much. It’s a rite of passage on the winding road every teacher travels down, is how he puts it.

“Along the way, my friends,” he says, “maybe you’re a little better for the experience of my kindness.” This elicits muffled laughs, and an outright *Ha!* from Stevens, who’s across the room, orbiting Evans’ desk, as he’s been doing for the past five minutes while getting up the nerve to talk to her. He fidgets with the waistband of his wrinkled green cargo pants. He never wears a belt, but always tucks in his shirt.

“No reaction today, Wallace?” Linklater says to me.

But Evans distracts me. I’m wondering if she knows what I did. I have conflicted feelings about it—I’m sure I did the right thing, even if it landed me here due to the rules governing all UC citizens: *You must report malfeasance of a fellow citizen, but be prepared to answer for your disloyalty.* It is a contradiction left unexplained by the State. This is Evans, though, and my feelings for her threaten to cloud my judgement. By the time I turn to Linklater and respond with a shrug, he’s already moved on.

“Pens and notebooks out,” he says, placing the mug on his desk. “Come on, sit down, Stevens.” Linklater has worn the same thin, striped tie for the third day in a row. It’s got shades of blue and gray in it, like the flag. “Somebody close the door, please. Miss Evans? Thanks. Okay, everyone look up here.”

As he begins to write the Topic of the Day on the whiteboard, he's interrupted. "Mr. Linklater," Mason says. "I need a pen."

Linklater stops, turns toward the window side of the room, and stands completely still looking at something in the distance. It's a little after 3 o'clock. Outside, the windless, sunny weather has stirred up a very hot May afternoon. We'll be here for a full two hours, unless idiots like Mason get under Linklater's skin forcing us to stay longer. He turns his head to Mason, who's in the front row, as usual. "Why, Mason? Why?" He says this quietly, as if he's greeting a family member at a wake.

"I don't know, Mr. Linklater."

"Don't know what, Mason?" He steps to Mason's desk. Linklater is a big man. And tall. I'm six-one, and he's easily got three inches on me. He stands over Mason breathing audibly, as if he's working up the energy to respond to Mason's inane behavior.

"I don't know what you mean," Mason says. "I mean, 'why' what?"

I think, *Oh, God, Mason, no*. I'm in the same row as he, five seats to the rear, the last in his row. The eight detainees in the room go cold with silence. Linklater's initial quiet approach toward Mason's stupidity is morphing into a stronger, less patient one. His face reddens, and his posture is that of an angry bull ready to jump at a wounded toreador.

"I have *seven* children, Mason, did you know that?" Linklater slowly breathes in through his nose, and out the mouth – a relaxation technique I assume is taught to all high school teachers – I know my parents do it all the time.

"Yes, Mr. Linklater."

"And, detainees, their names are...?" He looks across the room, hands on his hips.

We all stand, and recite from memory: “Daniel, Francine, Frederick, Marshall, Matthew, Taylor and Timothy.”

“Very good, detainees. Sit,” he says. “How old is little Taylor Linklater, Mason?”

“She’s six, Mr. Linklater.”

“Correct, Mason. Six. Funny thing about my six-year old, Mason. She’s never forgotten her pen when she knows she needs it. In all my years as a father, as a teacher at The Great Academy, as a member of our United Colonies military crushing our enemies to the north and south, I understood the importance of preparation. *Preparation*, Mason. Do you know that term? Is that something you’ve heard?”

“Yes, sir”

“Oh! And where would you have heard that, Mason?”

“Here, sir.”

“Here?”

“Well, I mean, from you, Mr. Linklater. You’re pretty adamant about...”

“Adamant? Did you say ‘adamant’?”

“Yes, sir...”

“Mr. Mason, what do you know about ‘adamant’?”

“Sir?”

At this point Linklater turns his back to Mason, walks toward his desk at the front of the classroom. Then he turns around, casual like he’s not going to allow Mason to ruin his day. “Why are you here, Mason?”

“Why?”

“Yes, Mason.”

“You mean, why am I, like, alive?”

“Heavens, no, Mason,” Linklater says, amid laughter from the class. “That philosophical brainteaser will remain unanswered today. No, Mason. I mean, why are you here – today – in this classroom?” He sighs heavily.

“Oh! Well, I got Detention.”

“*Jesus*, Mason,” I say.

“*What?*” He says, looking at me as if he’s ready to jump up at me.

“Stop acting like a *douchebag*,” I say, defiant.

“Quiet, Wallace!” Linklater shouts. He approaches my desk and stands over me for a moment before turning back to Mason. I smell the coffee he’s been drinking. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, and he’s got tremendous, thick forearms and wrists. I’d do a hundred nights Detention for those forearms. “Continue, Mason. You *‘got Detention,’* for what?”

“Oh, right. Okay, well,” he says, now turning to the rest of us, as if he’s suddenly decided he’s going to really tell this story. “I told Perkins his dad’s car was a piece of shit, right? And also, his dad is lazy and doesn’t really, you know, contribute enough to, you know, everything.” He’s smiling now, reveling in the glory of his tale.

“‘Everything’, Mason? Could you be more specific, please?”

“Oh, well, you know. It’s like, Perkins’ dad? He claimed he was injured? So he didn’t really work much – if at all. I’d say he never worked, actually.” Mason says this, as if it’s common knowledge. He’s now earnest in his account of the events that led him here, like he’s sharing a truth we can all learn from.

“Yes, keep going.”

“Well, so then Perkins’ dad finds out what I said. And, this morning? When he’s dropping off Perkins at school? They see me. So, I figured they wanted to basically yell at me, or whatever. But they jump out of their piece of shit car, made *God-knows-where*, probably in some foreign country, and chase after me, side-arms un-holstered. So, I shot Perkins’ dad in the head with my Glock.”

“And?”

“*And*, sir?”

“Where did this happen?”

“Oh! On Academy grounds!” Mason smiles.

“Exactly, Mason. On. Academy. Grounds. Any weapons fire on Academy grounds, for whatever reason – even for what may appear to be a totally justifiable act, as was the case here – is...”

“A clear violation of Academy code,” we all say together.

“A clear violation of Academy code,” he repeats, nodding, “and punishable with five nights of Detention.” He holds up five fingers, moving his chiseled arm back and forth slowly to ensure we all can see. “I believe I’ve made my point. Now, who’s got an extra pen for our Mr. Mason?”

A hand goes up on the other side of the room.

“Evans! Great, thank you.”

Evans walks the pen over to Mason, and delivers it as if handing him a trophy. Like Stevens, Mason can’t talk during this short encounter. He doesn’t even thank her—but I shouldn’t talk. If crushes were storms, mine for her would be tornadic. It’s not just that she’s a beautiful model, or that she walks with long, drawn out steps and perfect posture.

She's also nice, smart, famous and smells incredible. It's like, when she walks by she leaves behind a scent, which immediately goes to the part of your brain where comfort and happiness exist in a state of complete harmony. Evans models for the State – specifically, the United Colonies Council for the Betterment of Culture and Society, aka UCCBCS, which pretty much runs the world, as you know. Besides billboards of her smiling face, with the quote, “UC for me, UC for you, UC forever!” you no doubt have seen her in the UC Journal, modeling Blue and Gray clothes; or on Channel 1's daily news feed in the opening shots waving the Blue and Gray flag, bright smile on her face, while superimposed with scenes of our UC Army razing another Mexican village or our Navy kicking the snot out of another Canadian seaport. My dad told me there was a time when the UC was friends with those losers. I can't imagine.

But, one thing I don't need to imagine is what Evans did to be here today. Because I saw her drive into a neighborhood downtown we all know has been rumored to have anti-UCers. I was shocked. She parked her car, went into a house and spent at least a half hour. I wasn't spying on her, I just happened to be nearby. Anyway, later I turned her in to the Vice Chancellor's office. If she knows it was me, she's not letting on.

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“Up here,” Linklater says, standing at the whiteboard, pointing to what he's written in black marker as our topic of the day. He says it aloud: “What Can I do Better?” He knocks one knuckle on the board for emphasis. “Okay, what am I asking you to write about today? Anyone?”

No one raises a hand, and that's fine with Linklater. He'll wait all day before he gives in to our silence. He walks to the windows and cranks open the two closest to my

desk. Then, I swear, he looks over at me for just a second, doesn't say anything, and then walks away. A warm breeze enters the room, bringing with it the high-pitched sounds of insects in the trees. There's also a truck off in the distance, maybe more than one.

"Mr. Linklater?" It's Mason, raising his hand, twiddling the pen Evans gave to him. "You mean, 'What can I do Better' like at school?"

"That's an idea." Linklater walks to the board and writes. "Other ideas?"

"At home?"

"Okay." He writes 'home'. "Someone else?"

"Friends and neighbors?"

"Very good. Next? What are we missing? Come on, now." He's poised to write something specific.

"The State." Evans says.

"The State! Yes, Evans!" Linklater writes it, underlines it three times, circles it twice and then turns to us, pointing to the board. "That's the topic, isn't it? What can I do Better for the State?"

"But Mr. Linklater," Stevens says. "Isn't the State supposed to *do* for us?"

"That's part of the equation, of course, Stevens. So, let's talk about it. Let's name some things the State has done for us." With his back to the class, he readies himself to write. "Evans?" he says, energized. He doesn't turn around. "Start us off."

As we wait for her to speak, the sounds from outside grow louder – vehicles are close by. I don't see anything out the window, but parking for the Academy is on the opposite side of the building.

"Well, sir," Evans says. "The State builds walls to keep us safe from intruders."

Linklater writes, pressing the marker against the whiteboard so hard, you can almost sense the tip of it breaking off. All this, while ignoring now what are clearly the sounds of numerous vehicles pulling up to the Academy.

“The State ensures we eat healthy food,” Evans says, her voice cracking a little bit. She speaks slowly, enunciating each word. She must hear what’s going on outside. “And we don’t abuse alcohol or drugs. Um, and also, through efforts of the UCCBCS, we easily identify criminals and send them out of the United Colonies for…” she trails off. For several seconds, but for what seems like a minute or more, Evans says nothing. She doesn’t look away from Linklater, whose renowned patience is in full display. He’ll wait her out until she restarts.

“The boats, sir!” I say. I look over at Evans, but her head is pointed downward toward her desk. Sounds of footfalls in the hallway grow louder.

“What’s that Wallace?” Linklater sounds annoyed by my lame attempt to help Evans.

“The boats – the incarceration boats out on the ocean.”

“Let her *finish*, Wallace!” Mason shouts.

“Jesus, Wallace!” Stevens chimes in.

“Let her finish,” someone else says.

“Well,” I say, and I look over at Evans. Does she know it was me? “I was just thinking that it’s a good addition to what we’re saying.”

“Thank you, Wallace,” Evans says, now smiling at me. I’m so far away, I can’t be sure, is she crying? She is a beautiful mystery.

“Yes, Wallace, thank you.” Linklater says. He’s still energized. The footfalls have stopped, and someone is shouting in the hallway not far from our classroom. “And those ships,” Linklater says, “hundreds of them, packed with the worst of the worst, wandering forever, out to sea, up and down our coastlines, outside our border-walls, never to dock, no matter the weather or circumstances. Think about that, people. The State provides for your safety.” Linklater pauses, looks toward me. “What else?” I’ve seen that look before. I know where Linklater is going with this topic. And why there’s activity outside. I can’t recall on my worst days feeling as bad as I do now—and this is all my fault.

“Evans,” Linklater says, but still looking at me, smiling. “You have a story to tell. Why are you here?”

A knock on the door. Linklater walks toward it and keeps talking. “Why,” he says, unable to contain his contempt, “are you sitting with this rabble, this group of malcontents? Tell us, Evans, what Detention-worthy act you inflicted upon society.”

He opens the door, and eight UCCBCSers file in, fully loaded with weapons, their blue and gray uniforms tailored to accentuate their perfect physiques. They breathe heavy, as if on a training run. Sweat beads down their faces, and none of them makes eye contact with the room. One of them hands Linklater a sheet of light gray paper, but Linklater doesn’t even look at it.

As he turns and walks away from them, one of the visitors grabs Evans.

“No!” Stevens says, jumping up.

BANG!

Stevens is down, face first, blood pouring out of a head wound forming a dark red pool on the tiled floor.

Linklater eyeballs me as he walks back to the whiteboard. One of the visitors cuffs Evans without incident, and she follows two others, who drag Stevens out. His shirttail has become untucked, and his feet create a path of blood out the door, which closes softly behind them.

I avoid looking at Linklater. Mason too. He may act like a clown, but he knows what's up. Disloyalty is disloyalty, and despite the fact I paid my debt to the State by being here in Detention, Mason is enough of a hard ass to take it a step further. He won't ask me why I turned her in – he'll just start shooting.

Outside, there's a breeze, which will be better for the UCCBCSers. They need a break from the heat. After a couple minutes, the sounds of their vehicles pulling away is all there is. Then silence.

I wonder how Evans is feeling. She's headed for the coast, and after today will never feel dry land under her feet again. I try to have sympathy for her, but I know that's just my crush talking. She's getting what she deserves.

“Wallace!”

When I look up at Linklater, he says, “How old is little Taylor Linklater?”

“She's six, Mr. Linklater.”

“Good, Wallace. Good. Just making sure you're still with us.”

I'll need to deal with Mason and that Glock soon enough. I've got my sidearm ready. Let him come.