

The Greenwich Ascetic

On Friday morning, before he had finished his first cup of coffee, Mr. Hamilton began in again on the mice. “They’re still there, Maggie.” Mrs. Hamilton, hearing neither a question nor a command, said nothing as she continued washing the pot she had set out to soak. Mr. Hamilton turned toward his wife and spoke louder. “I can hear them scratching.”

“No you can’t,” she said, setting the pot aside with a glance toward her son, who sat on the counter reading *The History of Religion*, book one. “You couldn’t have. I had someone set traps around the hall closet and in Jeremy’s room.”

“Who?”

“Some man from—”

“Jer, did you hear anything?” Mr. Hamilton watched his son shake his head. “Does this mean you’re still mute?” Jeremy responded without looking up.

“Todd, don’t forget about dinner with the Harmons,” said Mrs. Hamilton, interrupting her husband’s growing irritation. He continue to eye their son.

“Well at least he’s not dressed like a beggar anymore. What’d you say, honey?”

“Dinner. I want you here by seven, at the latest.”

“Ok.”

“Please? I hate waiting with company.”

“I said yes. What are we having?”

“Cauliflower gratin, those potato and leek cakes you liked last time? and an orange and fennel salad I want to try out.” Mr. Hamilton made a face. “Amy’s a vegetarian. And so is Jeremy, I think. You’ll be home by 7?” It was a question and a reminder.

“I’ll be home—”

“Unless we want to cancel. Maybe we should, actually, with Jer—“

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mr. Hamilton said. “He’s eating again, isn’t he?” Mr. Hamilton turned to his son. “You’re *eating* again, aren’t you?” Jeremy grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl beside him and bit into it.

Satisfied with this answer, Mr. Hamilton said, “I’ll drive Jeremy today, if he’s going.” Mrs. Hamilton turned around in surprise and then looked at Jeremy, who nodded. “Let’s go then.”

Friday, Oct. 25	Apple; <i>asteya</i>	~7:30 am	Dad	n/a	10
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The prior Sunday, as they were preparing for bed, Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton had fought over how to treat their son’s behavior. “We have to be on the same page, Maggie. A consistent stance.”

“Stance on what? Put them on the couch please.” Mr. Hamilton was tossing throw pillows onto the floor. “We don’t even know what he’s doing because *he. won’t. tell. us.*” She sighed loudly and turned down the bed.

“What I mean is... we just can’t *encourage* it, implicitly or otherwise. What do you think he wanted at the fabric store?”

“I don’t know. That’s just the point.”

Mr. Hamilton sat on the exposed corner of the mattress and shifted into the sheets. “But you *do* know it’s just to further his...his *fixation.*” Mrs. Hamilton knew her husband meant bullshit. He never referred to their son’s recent lapse into Eastern religion without the rolling eyes of quotation marks, which Mrs. Hamilton only noticed once she stopped doing it. Her skepticism had become laced with worry after Jeremy’s first wordless week.

“He hasn’t been eating much at all. I just don’t want to make things worse.”

“I guarantee you’ll find an empty bag of Onion-O’s and one or two missing dishes behind his bed. He won’t starve. He’s a teenage boy.” Mr. Hamilton settled into his pillow and grumbled about stashed food and mouse nests. Mrs. Hamilton turned to the mirror.

“You can’t be mad at me about the store, Todd. He *asked* me. With words. You heard him.”

<i>Sunday, Oct. 20</i>	<i>“Can you drive me to the fabric store?”</i>	<i>~11 am</i>	<i>To mom; necessity</i>	8	8
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Both parents had visibly reacted to Jeremy’s voice that morning, and Mrs. Hamilton assented, explaining that she was “going there anyway.” She did so quickly as she felt the quicker glare of her husband. She knew his patience had long worn through.

“What are you getting?” he said as she went for the keys. Mr. Hamilton said this to the television, but he knew they both knew better than to expect another word from Jeremy. Mrs. Hamilton closed her palm into the uneven edges of the keys as she said, “Pillow backs.” She stitched needlepoint sometimes.

In the car to the store, Mrs. Hamilton turned on the radio to fill out the purposeful silence. Before that morning’s single utterance, she hadn’t heard Jeremy speak in eight or nine days. She felt guilty she could not recall the exact date he stopped speaking, his last full sentence. She remembered him talking about the silent old monks he had learned about in History, remembered not so much the content as the fact that he was freely speaking and about something he actually liked. She remembered him saying the new teacher, Mr. Spintz—or Spence—was smart. And she remembered the day she noticed he was actively not speaking. Jeremy never answered a question he didn’t like, but one afternoon Mrs. Hamilton tried four times to engage with her son

before finally asking, “Are you not speaking?” He had nodded. “To me specifically?” He had shaken his head.

At Jennifer’s Fabrics, Mrs. Hamilton watched as her son struggled to bring a bolt of white cotton, about his size and build, to the cutting table. He held up four fingers to the lady holding the blade, who asked, with almost imperceptible disdain, “Yards?” Jeremy nodded. Mrs. Hamilton said nothing, and she did not offer to pay at the register. His total was \$4.29. He had to have chosen the cheapest fabric, Mrs. Hamilton confirmed as she furtively felt the coarse cotton. He could not possibly be thinking of wearing it on his skin.

On the way back, encouraged by his earlier statement, she finally asked: “What’s this about, J?” Jeremy looked at her blankly before he returned the passing phone poles, which he ticked off in closed-mouthed clicks of his teeth.

The next day he came to breakfast wrapped entirely in white.

<i>Sunday, Oct. 20</i>	<i>Material purchase (\$4.29)— aparigraha</i>	<i>~11:30 am</i>	<i>Jennifer’s fabrics; robes</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>10</i>
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“So, you’ve decided to continue,” Mr. Spence said to Jeremy on Monday, after a second’s eye contact and bemused glance at the new robes. He had asked Jeremy to stay after class, even though Jeremy usually lagged behind unprompted. Breaking silence with the World History teacher was permissible, as Mr. Spence was as close to a spiritual guru as Jeremy could find in Greenwich, Connecticut. “Certainly aren’t the most *fashionable* garments, unstitched white robes,” Mr. Spence continued. “But I suppose that’s the point entirely.”

Mr. Spence paused, as though he had summoned Jeremy only to add his sartorial opinion to the pack. Then he added, “I think it’s brave of you, doing this. Regardless of whatever your

classmates or anybody says.” Jeremy’s face remained blank but he felt an inward fortification of purpose, a glow of sorts that he imagined might lay somewhere along the path to Enlightenment.

“But—now, don’t think I’m saying it’s wrong,” he began, adding the disclaimer as he watched Jeremy fade back onto his heels. “*But...* the silence, the robes... I don’t know if you’re doing anything else, but even the most devout of monks only take such vows for short periods—a couple of months. And you’re just fourteen.”

“I *know*.” Jeremy said, visibly scalded by the mention of his age.

Mr. Spence grinned and continued, “I know you know. I just want you to *know* you don’t have to, you know, dive in all at once, is what I’m saying. And if you’re interested in religion you should look into all different sorts. Here.” He selected two large books from the shelf behind his desk and gave them to Jeremy. “*The History of Religion*. That’s a good place to start.”

“I have, Mr. Spence. All sorts,” Jeremy said. “We read Siddhartha in class and I’ve been reading these articles about modern Jainists. And I’m trying to find an English translation of the *Kulpa Sutra*.” Mr. Spence exhaled loudly. His student was missing the point. Jeremy then asked, “Are you religious?” Mr. Spence paused, unsure of the motivation behind and thus wary of the question.

“That’s a tough one, Jeremy. And I’m not sure I’m allowed to answer it. But I do think there is value in knowledge of religion, and I will say there are many religious tenets I follow—some consciously, others unconsciously. We all do. And that’s what I’m saying. You don’t need to wholly subscribe to one. Do you remember what *anekantavada* is?”

“Of course.”

“Then practice it. Multiplicity of truths: there’s value in almost everything. I’m saying you can find what fits *you* and—”

“But I have, Mr. Spence—I mean I’ve been forced to, with school and my parents and everything. I’ve been looking into... theravada—is that right?—in Buddhism?—so I can eat whatever’s given to me, though that’s a lot like the Jainist asteya don’t you think?—and the Desert Fathers...a lot of it I’ve had to improvise. Honestly I shouldn’t even talk to *you*, aparigraha and all.”

“Read the books. There’s more to Jainism than self-denial. And it never hurts to know more.” Mr. Spence considered whether this was actually true as Jeremy nodded, shoved the book in his bag and left without saying goodbye.

<i>Monday, Oct. 20</i>	<i>“I know”; emotional control (ahimsa)</i>	<i>after 7th per.</i>	<i>@ Mr. Spence</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>10</i>
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Monday morning Mr. Hamilton had refused to drive his son to school. “Not looking like that.” Jeremy’s all-white outfit looked like a mix between a poncho and a bathrobe—a head hole he had crudely cut into the middle of a single panel, which folded lengthwise over his knotted collarbone and was tied together at the waist with a strip cut from the front hem, apparently. It was uneven and almost three inches shorter than the back. On his feet he still wore black Adidas. “He looks like a—You look like a mental patient... Or a woman at the spa.”

Jeremy sat at the kitchen table and drank a glass of water. “Cereal, honey?” Mrs. Hamilton asked. Jeremy shook his head but she had already turned to get a bowl from the cabinet.

“I’m serious. We’re not taking you, Jeremy.” Mr. Hamilton looked at his wife as he said this. “Not until you cut it out with this crap.” There was a moment of silence—Jeremy certainly wasn’t going to fill it—and Mrs. Hamilton found herself again torn between her two boys. She

cleared her throat and said, “Todd, I invited the Harmons to dinner on Friday. You can make it, yes?”

“Friday?” Mr. Hamilton said, like there were two of them. “Friday. That should be fine.” Mr. Hamilton pulled on his coat and snapped his briefcase shut. “I haven’t seen Thomas in a while actually.”

“Oh good. I’ll confirm with them then,” she said as her husband kissed her cheek goodbye. “Jeremy... will...you be here Friday?” Jeremy nodded his head.

Without turning to look at him, Mr. Hamilton said, “Jer, do you mind if we use your sari for the tablecloth?”

“Todd,” Mrs. Hamilton said as her husband chuckled. He kissed her goodbye again and closed the door on her admonishing smile. Mrs. Hamilton stayed by the window and waited until she heard the car accelerate down the drive to grab the keys. “Are you ready for school?” Jeremy looked confused and then nodded. “Are you absolutely sure you don’t want to change first? We don’t have to tell Dad.” Jeremy responded by turning away and grabbing his bag. “Well I’m not taking you without a coat. You’ll freeze out there.”

<i>Monday, Oct. 20</i>	<i>Coat; aparigraha</i>	<i>~7:45 am</i>	<i>Mom</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>1</i>
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As he drove Jeremy to school for the first time in a week, Mr. Hamilton wondered whether he should say something about being glad to see his son back to normal, almost, or about the day before, or “bye.” But Jeremy barely looked at his father during the drive and left quickly once they got to the parking lot, swinging the door shut on any final opportunity for discussion. Mr. Hamilton stayed in the drop-off zone and watched his son blend in with the rest.

It was working, he decided. Jeremy was in real clothes again, and he was eating. Speaking would follow.

Jeremy's classmates noticed the reversion to normal clothes as soon as he entered first period. It was just as it had been when he had premiered the robes four days prior: stares and fingers and hand-cupped giggles. No one had tried to spill on him, yet, but the din intensified as he took his seat, like he was walking closer to a nest of hornets. The previous day's episode had clearly not gone undiscussed, and Jeremy sought to keep his face expressionless as his cheeks warmed.

At first, Jeremy's peers had taken little interest in his vows, mainly because they had no reason to notice them. Jeremy had never spoken much in the first place, save the occasional one-liner when he disagreed with someone. But when he had answered Ms. Carrey two weeks before by writing on the chalkboard instead of speaking—"64"—and then been sent to the principal's office for refusing to read his role as Cassio in English, word spread of his silence. As if part of an organized campaign, Jeremy's classmates called after him—"Jeremy! Hey Jeremy!"—with the more eager ones adding a shove or a condiment-covered slap on the back. Jeremy's teachers took one of two opposite approaches to his silence: Mr. Miller, Ms. Carrey and Mrs. Witt called on him continually, and the rest ignored him. Mr. Spence was the exception. He said nothing when Jeremy said nothing; he allowed written answers to count toward class participation; and when he noticed Tom Harmon sticking Jeremy in the back with a pencil, trying to elicit a noise, Mr. Spence sent Tom in the hall and told the class, "You might learn something from Jeremy. It'd serve most of you best to keep your mouths shut a little more often."

During his second day of In-School-Suspension (this time he had refused the part of the Duke), Jeremy decided it would be most prudent to answer in as few words as possible, and so

avoid a parade of administrative sit-downs that would only frustrate his vows further. Still, he was careful to record every transgression within a black notebook that he divided into columns: DATE, OFFENSE, TIME, CONTEXT, NUMBER, and #.

<i>Friday, Oct. 25</i>	<i>"49"</i>	<i>1st per.</i>	<i>Asked—Ms. Carey</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Friday, Oct. 25</i>	<i>"Krebs"</i>	<i>3rd per.</i>	<i>Asked—Mr. Miller</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Friday, Oct. 25</i>	<i>"I'm fine now, thanks."</i>	<i>5th per.</i>	<i>Asked—Ms. Sharpe</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>

Jeremy had come home from his first day in the robes with a ketchup stain behind his shoulder; Tuesday it was dirt along the right side; Wednesday, a beige stain on the lap and across the chest. Mrs. Hamilton wondered if her husband had been right.

So on Thursday, after she again dropped Jeremy school to where he invariably awaited ridicule, Margaret Hamilton decided to go into her son's room. "To look for stashed food," she told herself. That very morning, in fact, Mr. Hamilton had said, "We need to get on top of this before they nest," with a look to his wife that "we" meant her. Once inside her son's blue walls, however, she was forced to admit the mice were just an excuse to look for answers.

Jeremy's room was practically spotless. His former decorations—the movie poster for *Battle Royale*, the picture of them at the Adirondack House from a few years back (that had been a present)—were gone. All lay bare. Near the desk she paused to pick up a piece of white cloth draped over the side of the trashcan. It was a misshapen circle, the head-hole her son must have cut out that Sunday. She pocketed it without quite knowing why and then went to his computer. She leaned over and placed her hand on the mouse. It was open to a page on "Mahavira."

She stared at name—"Mahavira," "Mahavira," "Mahavira"—until it grew fuzzy at the edges. She did not know whether she wanted to read on or not. She did want to understand her

son, but she knew that doing so would be to encourage him, or so her husband had said. (“We just ignore it. All of it. Okay?”)

Mrs. Hamilton skimmed the introductory paragraph: “Jainism...pursuit of spiritual awakening...severe penance and meditation.” She sat at the computer for a half hour, exacerbating her worry with each link and sub-link. Finally, she closed the laptop and stood up, turning toward the bed (“I guarantee you’ll find a bag of Onion-O’s). But it was stripped and missing pillows. (“...Jainist monks sleep on the floor without blankets...”) It was then that Mrs. Hamilton noticed the tiny scratches on the baseboard. She knelt down to look closer, thinking her husband might have been right about the mice after all. However, the marks were lined and slashed in fives, carved as uniformly as possible in nineteenth-century pine. As Mrs. Hamilton pulled the bed back she saw that they encircled it from the foot to the headboard. 5, 10, 15... Mrs. Hamilton was at 85 when the phone rang.

Jeremy was in the hospital. He had fainted in fourth period.

<i>Thursday, Oct. 24</i>	<i>Physical control</i>	<i>4th per.</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>
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“Jeremy?” Mrs. Hamilton’s voice came from the back of her throat as she walked into her son’s hospital room, where he rested on a papered bed. He was eating a slice of pizza.

“He’ll be fine, Mrs. Hamilton,” the doctor said. “Low blood-sugar, likely. It can happen with kids in puberty—growing so fast. Just need to give Jeremy here a good meal tonight.” Mrs. Hamilton smiled and thanked him. “Has this happened before?”

“No, never,” Mrs. Hamilton said, her eyes developing a veneer of tears as she looked on her son. The doctor signed the discharge papers and wished them both well. He left the room, and Jeremy tried to get off the bed. “Stop,” Mrs. Hamilton said. She began crying in full, and

Jeremy rested a tentative hand on her back. “What is this...about? You *have* to answer me. You *have* to. Why aren’t you eating?” Jeremy said nothing, though the sight of his mother’s tears made his throat clench. “I learned about ... *Mahavira*?” She said the prophet’s name like an exotic cuisine she worried might be too spicy. “I don’t care about the clothes or silence—I just... I just want you to be *safe*.” Jeremy nodded. “We’ll—I’ll—have to tell your father, of course—but he doesn’t have to know everything.” His mother squeezed his hand as she did her eyes, staunching the coming streams. “And I saw the marks by your bed.” Jeremy shifted on the waxed paper.

“They...” Jeremy’s voice was dry. “They mark the Jainist calendar.”

Mrs. Hamilton tried to read his face as well as she could through tears and asked, “Promise that’s it?” Jeremy nodded. “Well you have to stop. Your father would—“ She blew her nose. “—pitch a *fit*. That house is his pet.” This was true. Mr. Hamilton had persuaded his wife to buy a Victorian house “with History” rather than “one of those plastic ones” which now surrounded their History. He had spent the better part of the next three years beginning renovation projects that inevitably ended in expletives and a hired professional.

That had been eighteen years ago, she realized—before Jeremy was born, even. Almost two decades had passed since she and Todd had moved here, outside of the City, somewhere it would be “better to raise a family,” as they had told friends and family and each other many times.

Mrs. Hamilton still felt uncertain about her son’s explanation as they left the hospital, and she was anxious about again being in the position of lying to her husband. She would make sure that Jeremy ate—that much she could do—and the rest would follow, she hoped. This had to be a turning point. Mrs. Hamilton certainly knew that things swept under rugs don’t just disappear—

she was the only woman on her street to clean her own house, thank you very much—but she hoped that, in this case, they might. Teenagers go through phases. She and Todd had told each other this many times as well.

Before Jeremy could get out of the car, Mrs. Hamilton grabbed him by the arm. “Jeremy, look at me.” He looked up. “Promise you’ll stop this.” He looked away and nodded.

<i>Thursday, Oct. 24</i>	<i>“They mark the Jainist calendar”</i>	<i>~2pm</i>	<i>Mom</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Thursday, Oct. 24</i>	<i>Lie (satya) — x2</i>	<i>~2pm</i>	<i>Mom</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>20</i>

Jeremy arrived early to seventh period on Friday and walked straight for Mr. Spence’s desk. He hoped he could show Mr. Spence how far he’d gotten in the book and how much he’d learned. He also hoped to explain away what his teacher might have heard about the day before. He would say “passed out” and not “fainted.”

“I have to finish grading these before the end of the day, Jeremy,” Mr. Spence said without looking up. “You can take a seat and look ahead to chapter fourteen. Roman Empire.”

“We’re done with the Eastern stuff?”

“For now, Jeremy. We’ll be back soon enough with the Opium Wars.”

“Is there anyway *we* could...continue it—or you could, like, recommend... I’ve been reading that—“

“I don’t have time right now, Jeremy,” he said. “Please just go to Chapter 14 of the class book.” Jeremy took his seat and tallied the marks in his journal. His back still smarted from the ones the night before, but their reminders were comforting.

At home, Ms. Hamilton entered her son’s room for the second time that week. She drifted by the desk and swept the top of his dresser with a finger; but it wasn’t until she again pulled the

bed from the wall that she got what she came for: 105, 106...107. She tried to remember where they'd ended before—had he added any?—but she couldn't tell. But she remembered her son's promise the day before and decided to trust it. She spent the rest of the afternoon planting tulips. They do best in the cold.

After class Jeremy approached his teacher's desk. "Jeremy...it's probably better if we don't meet like this any more."

Jeremy stood back, ordering his face to remain still as his stomach fell. "Why?" Mr. Spence sighed and looked at Jeremy, who knew his teacher must have heard about the day before and connected the dots.

"I can't be part of this anymore."

"Part of what I—"

"You're hurting yourself, Jeremy."

"What?"

"Yesterday... You don't know what you're doing... You're too young...and your parents are worried and—"

"Did... You talked to my parents?"

Mr. Spence said nothing but this was enough to make Jeremy slam the door as he left.

<i>Friday, Oct. 25</i>	<i>emotional control (ahimsa)</i>	<i>7th per.</i>	<i>Mr. Spence</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>10</i>
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Jeremy arrived at dinner in his white robes. He had changed quickly and deliberately when he got home, sat in his room until he heard the door. His parents would not ask him to change in front of company. It would make a scene.

“Jeremy! The Harmons are here!” Jeremy could hear his mother’s company voice, high and enunciated, like she was on the phone or stage. “Honey?” Jeremy paused at the top of the stairs. He could see his mother at the landing, filling the empty space of hellos as she extended her arms for their coats. Mr. Harmon’s voice boomed loud as Jeremy descended. “Is Todd here?”

“He should be soon ... He got held up at the off— hi, honey.” Their eyes flicked over his robes.

“Well *look* at this guy,” Thomas Harmon grinned wide and extended his hand to Jeremy, who took it quickly. “I like the outfit, Jer. Tom told us all about it.” Tom Harmon was standing to the side of his parents, his smile turned up at the side.

“Hey Jeremy.”

“We haven’t seen you in *so* long.” Nadina Harmon was leaning forward for a hug, but she kept her head up and craned away, wincing as she patted his back and kissed the air beside his head. “You’ve definitely grown.” A lull ensued as Mrs. Hamilton finished hanging their coats.

“Can I get wine for anyone—Thomas? Red?”

“Let’s open one of the ones I brought.” He raised his hand, his fingers wringing three bottles by their necks.

Mr. Hamilton came through the door as his wife was apologizing for him again. “*There* he is... Now we can eat.” Her voice was wet with forced good-humor, her smile thick and pressed as she watched her husband exchange greetings. “If you want to go into the dining room? I’ll get the cauliflower out of the oven.” Her eyes narrowed as the Harmons followed Jeremy out of the room.

“I’m sorry honey—“

“I *asked* you.” From the other room they could hear Thomas Harmon insist Jeremy sit beside him. “We’ve been waiting for almost an hour.”

“Half hour. Can we eat? And why the hell is Jeremy back in the robe?”

“Todd, please don’t say anything.”

Everyone, Jeremy included, ate their plates of potato, fennel and cauliflower, but only Nadina Harmon had seconds. “This is delicious, Maggie.” She meant it sincerely, but it sounded like an aside, her direct attention focused toward her husband, who opened another bottle of wine. She and Maggie had already retold their favorite stories past friendship—“We really do need to see each other more”—and they had done the same for Jeremy and Tom, who nodded and chimed in, respectively. Now, Tom checked his phone as Jeremy continued sitting in silence.

The elder Thomas Harmon, as the dinner progressed, had undertaken an increasing load of the conversation, so that, as he opened the third bottle—“I won’t tell you what it cost”—he was mostly speaking and responding to himself.

“I’m good, thanks.” Mrs. Hamilton put her hand up as he tried to top off her glass. “Would anyone like some coffee with dessert?” She began collecting plates.

“Could I have some tea?” Mrs. Harmon said. “Earl grey, if you have it. Thomas, coffee? He’ll have some coffee.” She issued a single laugh. Mr. Harmon ignored her and refilled the two sips Todd had taken from his glass.

“Jeremy, Tom, you boys should have a taste—Maggie, Todd, you don’t mind do you?” He was up before they had time to respond, returning moments later with two fresh wine glasses,

which he filled to tasting size, plus a count. Mrs. Hamilton looked nervous, Mr. Hamilton amused.

“Thomas, I don’t think...”

“Only a taste, Maggie. And only in our houses, boys... *Tom*.” He winked at his son as he pushed a glass in front of him, then Jeremy. “Now this is a *Barolo*—from the *Piedmonte* region in Italy—tastes much more like a French wine, though, in my opinion—a Bordeaux, or burgundy. Could use another year, maybe. I bought a crate.”

“Now tell me what you taste—”

The younger Tom Harmon broke into a bit, swirling and sniffing and sipping. He spoke with an exaggerated drawl. “I taste....*oak* and new shoe?” The adults laughed, Thomas Harmon loudest of all.

“You know there *are* some leather notes in there—good nose. Go on Jeremy, taste it. You won’t get in trouble.” He laughed for everyone, and Jeremy looked to his mother for help. But she left to put the kettle on the stove, and his father spoke up.

“Jeremy’s a monk now.”

“Is that so? Bah! The monks practically *invented* wine—”

“He’s... a...” The table turned toward Mrs. Hamilton, who came back from the kitchen, drying her hands with a dishtowel. “Jainist? It’s a school...thing. For history.” Mrs. Hamilton was skilled at including only the portions of truth that could form an appropriate, if not entirely honest, story.

“Tom aren’t you in Jeremy’s class?” Nadina asked.

“Yeah, they’re crazy. We’re done with them though. They beat themselves for stepping on ants—”

“It’s actually a pacifist religion, I read, I think,” Mrs. Hamilton looked like she was trying to convince herself.

“Well I don’t know how *that’s* possible without any wine or sex—” Mr. Harmon guffawed loudly at his suggestive remark. “Last chance, Jer—that’s a fifty dollar sip in front of you.”

“I’ll take it,” Tom said. The adults laughed anxiously—*boys!*—and Jeremy nodded toward his glass. As Tom reached for it, however, his fingertips hit the sloped siding and the glass tipped over, sending a stream of wine onto Jeremy.

“Oh! Shit—shoot!” Tom apologized and reached for his napkin as Jeremy stood up, a scarlet stain running from his torso to his lap.

“It’s fine, Tom,” Mr. Hamilton spoke up and, with a slightly wine-glazed grin, added, “Maybe it’ll be ruined once and for all now.” Everyone laughed, even Mrs. Hamilton, nervously, and Jeremy walked from the table. “No one excused you, Jeremy.” But he left without a word, rinsed his plate and listened to his parents make excuses for him.

That night, Mr. Hamilton heard the mice again, scratching through the walls.